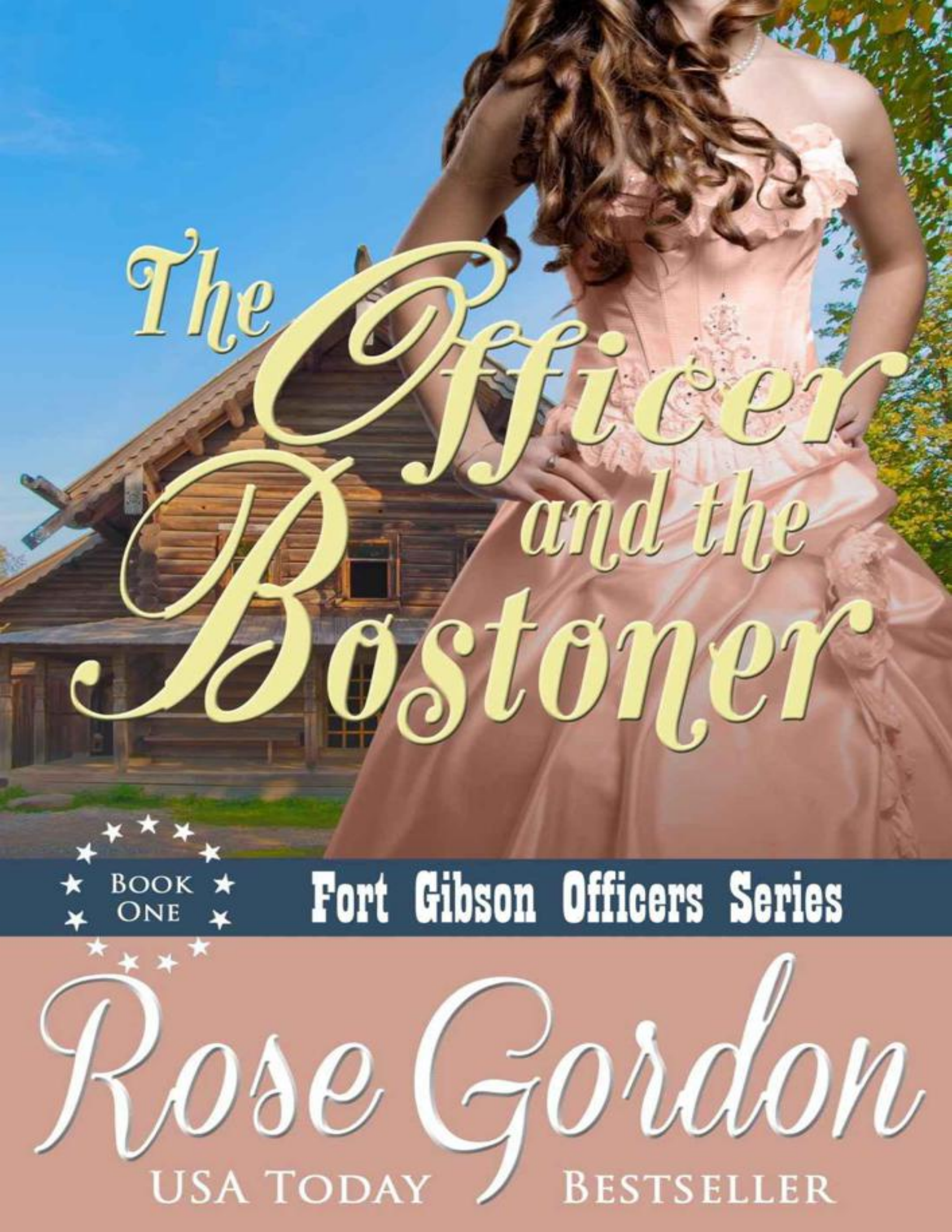


A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a strapless, light pink, ruffled dress, stands in front of a rustic log cabin. The cabin has a wooden roof and a small window. The background is a clear blue sky with some green foliage on the right.

The Officer and the Bostoner

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
★ BOOK ONE ★
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Fort Gibson Officers Series

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Rose Gordon
USA TODAY BESTSELLER

This book is a work of fiction. All names, events and locales are a product of this author's imagination. If any name, event and/or locale did exist, it is purely by coincidence it appears in this book.

This book may not be reproduced by any means, including but not limited to, mechanical, Xerox, digital, auditorial and/or in print.

If you obtained this copy illegally, please respect the author and her time enough to purchase a copy.

THE OFFICER AND THE BOSTONER

Copyright © 2013 Rose Gordon
Cover image copyright © 2013 Lily Smith
All rights reserved.

Amazon Edition

Published by Parchment & Plume, LLC
www.parchmentandplume.com



OceanofPDF.com

The Officer and the Bostoner

ROSE GORDON

OceanofPDF.com

~Chapter One~

May 1845

Allison Pierson willed her breakfast to stay in her stomach where it belonged.

Unfortunately for her, neither her breakfast nor the stagecoach driver cared about her stomach's revolt. She pressed her hand over her churning stomach and squeezed her eyes shut. *Just a few hours longer.*

Beside her, a blonde-haired woman wearing a pale yellow cotton dress with a dirty and torn hem, who'd spent the majority of the trip from Boston mending one article of clothing or another, ransacked her bag, causing the stagecoach to jerk and sway more than it had before.

"Mama, I'm squished," the sewing lady's young son pouted, kicking at Allison's shins as if that would make her move over and allow him more room.

"Reuben, stop that," his mother admonished for no less than the hundredth time since leaving Boston and at least the sixth time just today. There was no doubt about it, by the time she arrived in Santa Fe, her legs would be covered with the most lovely mural of blue and purple bruises.

"Hold me!" he demanded.

"I can't hold you just now," his mother explained.

The boy pushed out his lower lip and crossed his arms. "But I can't see out the window!"

"Oh, all right." His mother put down her sewing and pulled him up onto her lap.

One might think there would be a little more room for Allison on the seat now that the little boy was sitting on his mother's lap; but one would be wrong. Instead, Allison had less room as she pressed herself firmly against the side of the stagecoach to avoid being kicked in the thigh—or worse, in her stomach—by the little boy's dirty, bare feet.

But it didn't matter. The stagecoach was too small and the boy so wiggly, those feet hit her anyway, leaving her pale pink traveling dress

covered in brownish-gray smudge marks and her tired body aching more with each blow.

Had she still been in Boston and about to see one of her friends, she might have cared how she'd appear when she arrived. But as it was, she was in a stagecoach rolling over the uninteresting terrain of Kansas, moving ever closer to her destination: Santa Fe.

A picture of what awaited her there flashed in her mind. Nicholas Parker, her intended, had sent her a drawing of the house he'd bought for them when he'd moved to Austin more than six months ago. During those months—especially the last two weeks, while traveling—it had been that drawing that had gotten her through.

A horse's whinny rent the air and Allison snapped her eyes open. She breathed a sigh of relief. The stagecoach was pulling to a stop in front of a little red and white stone building.

Allison nearly knocked the stagecoach driver to the ground in her hurry to disembark the torture device she'd become all too familiar with these last few days.

"Miss Pierson!" Mary, her maid and traveling companion, called in a high-pitched, nasal tone so loud even the poor stagecoach driver winced. "I insist you get back into the stagecoach this instant."

Allison ignored her. Mary and Allison had never gotten along very well, and following Mother and Father's deaths, Mary had become less discreet in expressing her dislike. She'd only agreed to accompany Allison on this trip because Father's close friend, who Allison had grown up calling Uncle Liam, had paid Mary a year's worth of wages and promised to terminate her employment upon Allison's safe arrival in Santa Fe with a letter of highest reference.

Still ignoring the shrill demands rolling off Mary's tongue, Allison shook out her wrinkled skirt and lifted her hand to shield her brown eyes from the bright sun. With only one road, several large fields and not more than a handful of stone buildings, this township looked remarkably different from all the others they'd stopped at. She dismissed the thought. As long as she could find a general store to buy some mint for her stomach and a privy, the town would do just fine.

Squinting, she read the sign on the building closest to her: Commissary. Excellent. She walked over and grabbed hold of the doorknob. It didn't turn. But her stomach did. Grimacing at the pain in her gut, she made a fist

and banged on the door. Thankfully, her bangs were loud enough to drown out Mary's angry commands and condescending reprimands. Truly, who had a care if Mary made a spectacle of herself in the middle of this town? In ten minutes, they'd all be gone; and in a matter of a few days, Allison would never see any of the other travelers again, either.

A minute passed. Then another. It was becoming quite clear that nobody was going to open the door, so she took a step back and scanned the little row of three buildings closest to her. If her nose was to be believed, the next building over was a bakery. Allison took a few steps in that direction, and with each step, her roiling stomach only confirmed that, indeed, the next building was a bakery.

With a deep breath that did nothing to settle her stomach, Allison opened the door and was immediately greeted by a cloud of snowy white flour and the slight shriek of a flour-covered baker.

"Pardon me," Allison said with a slight cough. "Can you tell me when the commissary will open?"

Not stopping in his work, the heavyset baker continued to knead his dough. "If you need to buy something, you need to go to the sutler store. It's back that way." The baker jerked his head backward as he continued to knead the large ball of dough in front of him.

Allison's eyes shot to the window directly behind the man and looked for the store he'd suggested, but all she saw was a wide field and a long row of what looked like connected log cabins with two story towers on the corners. "Thank you," she murmured to the humming baker before excusing herself.

With a sigh, she started across the thick field that led to where the baker had indicated she'd find the sutler store, taking note of the oddly placed buildings between here and there; a little stone building here and a wooden cabin there. All around was tall, thick, itchy grass. She gritted her teeth and picked up her pace as best she could to get through it. Heaven only knew what lurked between the blades.

Fortunately, the ground closer to the buildings didn't have such high or thick grass. In fact, most of the grass was gone or only appeared in patches.

The exterior walls of the buildings showed nothing but long, dark logs with single two-paned windows set eight to ten feet apart. Most of the windows were open, allowing a slight breeze to blow against the tattered, uneven curtains inside. Not that it would matter too much, she thought. It

was hotter outside than she imagined Hell would be; she could only imagine how hot it must be in those rooms.

Spotting a little alley between the two-story building and the long building to her left, Allison slipped through, then paused. A long log cabin with dozens of windows and half as many doors was on either side of her. Each was connected to other long cabins, so that together they formed a perfect square. She shivered. From now on when someone spoke about the city of Jericho and its mighty walls, she'd know exactly what it might feel like to live within such an enclosed fortress.

The long cabins to her immediate left and right had only one story, while the two far rows that made up the other sides of the square were two stories high, each with a set of two staircases positioned between every set of doors. Each row of what could only be termed as apartments was joined to the perpendicular row by a giant square tower that was taller than the rest of the buildings and had several odd-looking platforms just under the eaves. They almost looked like the lookouts that castles in the middle ages had from what she had read.

But the strangest thing about the sight before her was that right in the middle of what she could only consider to be "town square" was a cannon! She did her best to close her unhinged jaw and shook her head. What kind of people were these to have a cannon on display in the middle of their town?

A sharp whistle to her left jerked her from her state of shock. She licked her lips and turned her head to the man who'd whistled, only to have terror steal over her at the sight that presented itself: a man with dirt and mud all over his face and unkempt hair, wearing only a pair of stained, tan trousers, was standing in a room that had a grid of bars for a door and was leering at her.

He reached his hand through the bars as if to touch her, and instinctively, she took a step backwards. Then another.

The dirty man laughed, revealing a row of missing and rotting teeth.

Not wishing to see any more of this vile man than she already had, Allison clutched her purse as tightly to her chest as she could and, keeping herself as far away from him as possible, walked past the jailed man and in the direction of what she hoped would be the sutler's shop.

The unmistakable sound of the husk of a broom scraping a wooden floor stopped Allison mid-step. She looked to the right and relief coursed

through her. The little room to her right looked exactly like the general stores she'd seen in Missouri.

"Sir," Allison called, stepping inside his store.

A graying man with a tanned and wrinkled face looked up from where he'd been sweeping the floor and blinked.

Odd. "Sir, I'd like to buy some peppermint, please."

"How did you get here?" he asked, his gray, bushy brows knitting together.

"On the stage." She pointed in the vague direction of the stagecoach.

"The stage?" Frowning, he set his broom in the corner, walked to the window positioned at the back of his store, peeked his head through the hole, and looked in one direction, then the other. "I don't see no stage."

"My peppermint," she prompted.

The man came to stand behind his counter, then crossed his arms and quirked a brow. "And what will you give me for it?"

"A coin."

He chuckled, then reached for a little glass jar of mints on the shelf beside him. "Yer in luck. I have fifty cent's worth left."

"Very well, I'll take a nickel's worth, please."

"No trade." The old man shook his head and set the jar of peppermints down on the counter in front of him.

"What do you mean, no trade?"

He shrugged. "I mean I ain't sellin' ya a nickel's worth. That's what I mean."

"Why not?"

"Because I ain't. The price is fifty cents."

"Fifty cents for all of it?"

"Aye."

"Very well, I don't want all of it. I just want five."

"All right, ya can have five—for fifty cents."

"That's thievery," she exclaimed. Were she in Boston, this wouldn't be a problem. She'd just pay the swindler his price, then remember never to return to his store again. But this wasn't Boston, and she had only eight dollars and fifteen cents that had to pay for all of her meals and lodging until she reunited with Nicholas in Santa Fe next week. She couldn't afford to spend fifty cents on a few mints.

The old man shrugged. "Man's got to make his livin' somehow."

“And stealing is your method, is it?”

“Selling,” he corrected, idly spinning the jar of her much-needed peppermint in front of him—taunting her with it. “I’m a trader, ma’am. You give me what I want and I give you what you want. Seems an honest profession to me.”

“Unless what I want to give doesn’t match what you think I ought to give. Then you refuse to trade, thinking I’ll relent and agree to pay that horrendous price you’re asking. But that’s where you’re wrong. I won’t.”

The shopkeeper shrugged and, much to the dismay of Allison’s lurching stomach, put the jar of peppermint back onto the shelf along the back wall by his window. “Say, isn’t that the stage ya said ya rode in on?”

Allison craned her neck to see out his window just in time to glimpse the coach she’d come in on rolling down the road.

Terror shot through her, and pushing aside the queasiness that was threatening to overtake her and reduce her to nothing more than a boneless heap, Allison ran out of the back of the store, along the row of rooms, past the jail where the shirtless, leering man was licking his lips and making kissing noises at her, past a man on a horse, and in the direction of her coach. “Wait! Wait!” she yelled as loudly as she could.

A cloud of dust filled the air in front of her, but she didn’t stop her pursuit.

Lungs burning and eyes stinging from the dust, she ran after the stage. “Stop!”

But the stage kept rolling down the dirt road, heedless of her commands. The only sign that someone had even heard her cries for help was the sight of a hand—likely Mary’s—as it reached out the window and waved to her.

Desperate and tired, but not going to give up without a fight, Allison bent down and grabbed a stone from the middle of the dirt road and hurled it at the stage. She missed. She scooped up another and continued her run after the coach, waiting for just the right moment to throw it.

Energy waning, Allison threw the rock.

Breathing heavily, Allison stared with wide eyes as the rock flew through the air. With every second that passed, the rock got farther from Allison and closer to the stagecoach. And then... And then... Then, it hit...the ground.

Allison sank to the dusty, rocky ground, defeated. Tears she'd somehow managed to suppress until now filled her eyes as silent sobs wracked her body.

"Don't be so glum. That was an excellent throw," a stranger drawled from the direction of the commissary. "Keep practicing and I'm sure you'll be good enough to join the first official rounders team when we start one here at Fort Gibson. We'll be able to beat the boys at Fort Supply in short order with you on the team."

His casual tone and glib remarks were enough to spark her anger. Taking to her feet and steeling herself to look every bit the Boston lady her mother had raised her to be, Allison inclined her chin and said, "You may find this laughable, but I do not."

His easy grin didn't fade a bit. "I'm sure that if you were me, you'd find it quite humorous, indeed."

She pursed her lips at the way he mimicked her accent and speech. She shook her head. He was a southerner, likely one who could not be confused for a gentleman. To him, she was nothing but someone to make sport of. Not that she cared overmuch. He could have his fun at her expense now. That was fine. She'd be gone from this abominable little town soon enough. She just needed to get her fare from the shopkeep and book a seat on the next stage.

"I'm not the most educated man in town, but I don't think you're going to catch them by walking in the wrong direction," the insufferable man said, falling into stride beside her.

It was moments like this Allison wished she had her parasol. This infuriating man might benefit from a tap on the head.

"Sir," she called to the shopkeeper as she stepped inside his little shop.

The swindler closed his cigar box and looked at her companion.

"Mornin', Wes."

The handsome, brown-haired, blue-eyed man next to her tipped his wide-brimmed hat and the swindler bit the end off his cigar, then spit the tip on the floor with a disgusting *pffft*. Then, without a single word, he wet his lips and brought his cigar to his mouth.

"Sir, I demand you book my passage on the next stage," Allison said, as the older man struck a match and lit his cigar.

A puff of smoke filled the air in front of her. "And just how do you expect me to do that?"

Allison closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the words of her mother repeating in her head: *Don't get angry in the presence of a gentleman; it's not proper. If he or anyone else provokes you, smile and rephrase your request. Remember to keep your voice quiet, calm and even.* And if that doesn't work, use big words to trick him into doing what you want him to do, she would always silently add to herself, recalling how her Aunt Thelma had manipulated Uncle Liam.

"Sir, please retrieve your stagecoach log book and pen my name, Allison Pierson, on the register for the next departing stage; thank you."

The old man pursed his lips together, held up one finger, then bent down to reach for something under the counter. Straightening, he dropped a large, chapped leather book onto the counter, causing a small cloud of dust to fill the air in front of her.

The store owner then flipped the book open and licked his fingers. Using his damp thumb and forefinger, the man casually flipped through the pages, humming as he went. About halfway through the book, he stopped and retrieved the broken quill lying in the middle of his counter. Licking the end of his quill first, for whatever reason, he then began scratching out what appeared to be the sloppiest version of her name she'd ever seen.

"Very good," she said, beaming. "And just when can I expect the stage to be here?"

He shrugged. "I don't rightly know, but when it arrives, you'll be the first one on it."

Beside her, the man the store owner had referred to as Wes guffawed.

Allison pursed her lips at him. He *would* find that statement humorous. At the sound of the store owner clearing his throat, Allison turned her attention back to him and his outstretched hand. "Yes?"

"That'll be ten dollars, miss."

"For what?"

"Your fare."

~Chapter Two~

Captain Wes Tucker tried to contain his laughter as the brazen beauty next to him argued with Charles about his role in her missing her stagecoach and why *he* should be the one paying her inflated fare. The longer the two argued, the more fired up she got. Soon, her face would be as red as a branding iron.

He let his eyes do a thorough sweep of her. She was a pretty thing, she was. Auburn curls, brown eyes that sparkled more and more, the more excited she got, and porcelain skin that made her ruby lips stand out. The men around here would likely trip all over themselves when they glimpsed her.

His gut knotted.

That was the last thing she needed. The men who lived here were not the sort she'd do well to know. Stationed here by the United States Army to help keep the peace between the Indian tribes and the occasional traveler, many of the men stationed here hadn't laid eyes on a beautiful woman in a long time. Sure, there were officers' wives, but none were as pretty—or vulnerable—as the one standing next to him. Nor were any of the young “ladies” who passed through a few times a year offering companionship.

A loud clap yanked Wes from his musings. He blinked at where Charles *had* been standing, then followed Miss Pierson's gaze to the closed door at the back of Charles' store.

Wes chuckled. “Seems Charles has decided he's heard enough of your griping.”

She turned those sparkling brown eyes on him, her lips pressed into a fine line.

“Don't let him bother you too much. He's abruptly closed up shop on me before, too.”

“Is that what you call it?”

He nodded. “Charles is real temperamental.”

“I'd say.”

“Come with me. I know a place where we can get something to eat.”

“I don't want to eat, I want—”

“To get on a stagecoach,” he supplied for her.

“Just so.”

He forced himself to look away so she wouldn’t see the humor he was certain was shining in his eyes. Not once in the more than eight years since he’d left Charleston had he heard anyone speak the way she did. He placed his hand on her arm just above her elbow and steered her in the direction of the commanding officers’ cabins. “I hate to be the one to tell you this—although I’m fairly certain Charles already told you and you didn’t believe him—but you’re not going to be gettin’ on a stagecoach anytime soon.”

“And why is that?”

“Because there won’t be another one headed to where you want to go for at least a month.”

“A month?” she squeaked.

“A month,” he confirmed. “And if you found that shocking, I’ll wait until you’re seated to frighten you with the rest of my news.”

She wrenched her arm from his hold. “I’ll have you know I am not some simpering Southern Miss who has to carry smelling salts because she’s prone to swooning. I am a sophisticated young lady from Boston. So if there is something you need to tell me, Mister...”

“Tucker.”

“Mr. Tucker, then get on with it so I can be about my business.”

Wes crossed his arms. “And just where is that business going to take you?”

“As far away from you, that blasted general store, and this unsightly town as possible.”

“And just how do you mean to flee?”

She inclined her head an inch. “However I can.”

Wes poked out his lower lip and nodded his head. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this plan of yours, haven’t you?”

She swung her purse at him. “Do you get great enjoyment out of mocking others?”

“No. Only you.”

A sound of vexation emerged from her throat. “Would you go away, please?”

He frowned at her. “Now why would you want me to leave?”

“Because you’re annoying me.”

“Am I now?”

“Yes, and you were before, too.”

A sharp bark of laughter passed his lips. “We shall rub along nicely, indeed.”

She scowled at him. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?” he asked, lifting his hands in the air the way Mr. Meyer in Charleston always did when being escorted from the saloon by the marshal.

“You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“Oh, you mean imitating your Yankee talk?”

“Yes, that.”

“If I promise not to do it again—” *today*— “then will you have lunch with me?”

She sighed. “I see no other choice.”

“That’s the right attitude,” he said. He led her down the street until he came to Colonel Lewis’ quarters. Wes had known the Lewises ever since he’d joined the Army at eighteen. Colonel Lewis had been his first commanding officer at West Point. It was on his recommendation that Wes was sent to Fort Gibson along with the Lewises upon his graduation four years ago.

“Good morning, Wes,” Mrs. Lewis greeted, wrapping him in a hug.

As it was a habit engrained in him from growing up in South Carolina, he returned the older woman’s hug. “Is Mrs. Ridgely not here, too?”

Mrs. Lewis waved him off. “She had to step out for a moment to retrieve more fabric.”

Wes nodded. No matter, he could let Mrs. Lewis introduce Miss Pierson to her later. “Mrs. Lewis, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He turned his eyes to the brown-eyed beauty he’d brought with him and ignored the slow heat crawling up his face.

“Miss Pierson,” she said with a curtsy before he could introduce her.

He lowered his head to hide his grin at the way she curtsied to her as if they were making some great introduction at a fancy dinner and not in the middle of a secluded military fort that was surrounded by—and infiltrated with—savages.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Mrs. Lewis said, casting Wes a quizzical look. “And to what do we owe this honor to?”

“She was on that stagecoach that rolled into town earlier.”

Mrs. Lewis' eyes went wide. "And why wasn't you on it when it rolled out of town?"

"Because I was being robbed."

Wes jerked to attention. "Robbed? Where?" He thought it had been her bargaining with Charles that had delayed her.

She turned her cold eyes to him. "At your friend Charles'. He was trying to swindle me into paying fifty cents for five peppermints."

Wes waved her off. "That's just what he does. Next time you need something from him, I'll show you how to barter. It's quite a game, you see."

"No, I don't see, nor do I wish to see him ever again."

"Ah, but you will," Wes drawled. "Mrs. Lewis, do you think you can give us a minute or two to talk privately?"

The graying woman looked back and forth between Wes and Miss Pierson. "All right," she said uneasily. "But I'll be just outside should you need me."

Wes opened the door for Mrs. Lewis and then pulled out a chair for Miss Pierson. She may like to think herself sophisticated; and she may be considered such in her circles; but the news he was about to give her might scare the wits out of her, sophisticated or not. And if it did, then she wasn't quite as sophisticated as she'd have him believe.

"I thought we came here to have lunch," Miss Pierson said, sitting down in the chair he'd pulled out for her.

Was it just him or had there been a slight hitch in her voice? He sat down in the wooden chair opposite her. "We'll have lunch, don't you worry about that. But for now, I need you to listen carefully."

"All right."

Wes ran a hand over the stubble that covered his chin, racking his brain for just how to put this so she'd understand the situation, but not panic. He blew out a breath. "Miss Pierson, I do believe you'll make a beautiful bride."

She jumped out of her chair. "Mr. Tucker, has the heat gotten to you?"

"No. But if you don't do as I say, something will be getting to *you*—and it won't be as kind as a bit too much sun."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, moving toward the door.

Wes took to his feet and reached for her arm to stay her. "I know. But that doesn't make it any less true." He raked a hand through his brown hair. "Miss Pierson, the way I see it, there are three ways out of here."

She cocked her head to the side. "I'm listening."

"The first one is the stagecoach."

Miss Pierson heaved a sigh. "Well, it's quite apparent I've already missed that option."

"I know, I just wanted to remind you it was an option."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you in a moment." He flashed her a quick grin. "The second option is not advisable."

She glared at him.

"You could steal a horse and ride away."

She pursed her lips and stared at him as if he were addled for suggesting such a thing.

"But I wouldn't recommend that method, either. People 'round here take horse thievery seriously. It's a hanging offense, wouldn't you know? Just last summer—"

"And what is my third option, Mr. Tucker?"

"You could walk." He dropped his gaze down to her shoes. They weren't heeled or bejeweled as he half-expected them to be, but being white leather half boots that couldn't possibly have more than a quarter-of-an-inch thick sole, they were still unsuitable. "You'll either wear a hole in the bottom of those or have a nasty blister before you reach the Indians."

She started. "Indians?"

"Indians," he confirmed with a quick nod. "I don't know what that drunkard who was driving your stagecoach told you, but you're in Indian Territory."

Her eyes doubled in size. "Indian Territory as in where the government has moved hundreds of thousands of Indians?"

"Very good. You must enjoy reading the newspaper with your morning meal."

She frowned. "How did we get here? I thought we were in Kansas."

Wes shook his head. "Your stagecoach driver took a wrong turn somewhere around Freedom, Missouri, and got off of the Santa Fe Trail and onto the Texas Trail. Huge difference."

“Freedom?” She cast him a dubious expression. “We were in Freedom three days ago. How did he not know he’d taken a wrong turn until now?”

“Don’t ask me, I wasn’t the one driving.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sir, do you have a serious bone in your body?”

“Don’t rightly know. But what I do know is, unless you want to be captured by the Indians, you’re staying right here in Fort Gibson until the next armed stagecoach comes through.”

“Stay in this outlandish place a month? Absolutely not.”

“Oh? Do you think you’ll take your chances against a tribe of Indians, then?”

“No. We’ll take our chances against a tribe of Indians,” she said with a dazzling smile.

“Pardon? Who exactly are you including in this ‘we’?”

“You and me,” she said easily. She adjusted her frilly, pink shawl, still smiling in a way he was certain turned many heads in Boston. But they weren’t in Boston.

“And why should I do that?”

“Because I need to get to Santa Fe.”

“Then you can wait for the stagecoach to take you.”

“What am I supposed to do until then?”

“Marry me.”

~Chapter Three~

As far as marriage proposals went, Allison was certain that had to be the most unromantic one ever issued.

“I mean no offense to you, but my desire to marry you is unmeasurable.”

He grinned. “Well, I knew you were attracted to me, I just didn’t realize how much.”

What an arrogant man he was. “That was not intended as a compliment.”

“That’s all right.” He crossed his arms and leaned back against the edge of the table, an easy smile on his lips.

“You’re enjoying yourself way too much.”

“And you’re not enjoying yourself enough.”

“Mr. Tucker, almost three weeks ago when I boarded the stagecoach in Boston, I believed my destination to be Santa Fe, not Indian Territory. Now, after one ill-fated barter with your thickheaded friend, Charles, I missed my stagecoach and you’re telling me that I have to stay here, in a town that I don’t know with no clothes and few funds, or be captured by Indians. I’m sorry to inform you of this, but having fun and enjoying myself are not priorities to me right now.”

His blue eyes, which had been alight with laughter only a moment ago, grew dark and shuttered. “I’m sorry. You’re right, of course. I should have been a little more sympathetic to your situation.” He went to the worktable, grabbed a loaf of freshly baked bread, and set to work slicing it. “Why don’t you sit down and I’ll make us some sandwiches.”

Her stomach lurched at the mention of food. Had it not been for her stomach, she wouldn’t have missed the stagecoach in the first place. She sighed and sat down. Perhaps a little food was what she needed. Since leaving Freedom three days ago, their meal stops had been infrequent and lacking. Now she knew why.

“Miss Pierson,” Mr. Tucker said, turning around to face her. He set a sandwich down in front of her, then grabbed his plate in one hand and hooked his finger through the handle of two tin cups of water and joined her

at the table. "I hope you can forgive my cavalier remarks earlier. My intent was never to make light of your misfortune."

It wasn't? It sure seemed that way to her. "It's all right, Mr. Tucker. I'll just send word to Nicholas and then see if one of the boardinghouse owners will rent me a room until he can come."

"Nicholas?"

She blushed. "Nicholas Parker, my betrothed."

"No wonder you didn't jump into my arms when I proposed," he muttered.

Despite herself, she smiled. "Well, there's that, and the fact that I don't find you nearly as charming as you find yourself."

"But you do find me a little charming, don't you?" he asked between bites.

"Maybe a little," she admitted, unable to meet his eyes. It wasn't his fault she was having one of those days that should be reserved only for the worst sort of criminals. Had they met at another time and place, she would have found him to be rather charming and handsome. Heat rose in her cheeks.

"Would you be willing to go for a walk with me after lunch?"

"I can't. I need to send word to Nicholas and work out an arrangement with one of the boardinghouses."

"How about if I go with you?"

Actually, that was a good idea. He was a citizen here. Not only would he know right where the post office was, but he'd also know the owner of at least one of these boardinghouses. Perhaps having him with her would be a good thing. "I'd be delighted."

"Good, and in the meantime, why don't you tell me why you gave up the highfalutin life of a Bostoner to travel out this way?"

"We're not Bostoners," she said before she could think better of it. "We're Bostonians."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Pardon me, my lady," he drawled in the thickest, mock New England accent she'd ever heard. "I'll try to be more refined from now on."

"See that you do," she quipped in return; then she shook her head at his grin.

"Now that we have it settled you're a Bostoner soon-to-be a Santa-Fayain, why don't you tell me why you'd leave such class and society to

travel the plains and take up in the dusty clot they call Santa Fe?”

She nearly rolled her eyes at his ridiculousness, but since she was certain that was the reaction he wanted from her, she just shrugged.

“Nicholas left to go to Austin last year to start up a bank. He’s just meeting me in Santa Fe because he claims it is the fastest, most comfortable route to get there.” She shrugged and twisted her lips in irritation at his logic about taking the northern route to avoid the heat. She’d have gladly suffered the heat to avoid this recent change in itinerary. She sighed, nothing to be done about it now. When she noticed Mr. Tucker was still looking at her intently, waiting for an answer, she said, “While I might not enjoy the surroundings so much, I’ll enjoy being in his company.”

“He must be quite a fellow for you to leave your home and travel across the country.”

“He is,” she said with a wistful smile. “He’s very intelligent and handsome. Oh, and always the best dressed with not a piece of lint on his coat or a hair out of place; and the most skilled dancer you’d ever see grace the ballroom.” She shook her head ruefully. “He was one of the most sought after men in Boston, both for invitations and by fathers who’d like to have him marry their daughters.”

Mr. Tucker grimaced. “He sounds charming.”

“Oh, he’s that, too.” She bit her lip to keep from grinning at the way he scowled.

“And you found him so irresistible and charming that you gave up your entire life back East to marry him?”

She nodded once. “Something like that.” He didn’t need to know that she really hadn’t had the option to stay without feeling like she was living off charity. Not that it mattered. She loved Nicholas well enough. He wasn’t overly attentive to her by any means, but he’d always seemed interested in keeping her content.

“If you’re done pining over your suitor, we should be off.”

His words stole her from her thoughts and she blushed. “But of course.”

“Have a good day, Mrs. Lewis, Mrs. Ridgely,” Mr. Tucker called to each of the women who were sitting on a bench out by their shared garden, nodding as they left Mrs. Lewis’ home.

Mrs. Lewis raised her eyebrows in interest and both ladies waved.

Mr. Tucker ignored their reactions and led Allison to the log buildings that made a large square, then nodded in the direction of a little store across the square from Charles' store. "That's where we're going."

As they reached the door, she nearly fainted when he had the foresight to open it for her.

The inside of the building was dark and dusty. Very few furnishings were scattered around the dank room.

Mr. Tucker walked over to the desk in the corner and came back with a piece of paper, quill and ink.

"Thank you," she murmured, taking the paper from his hand. Quickly, she penned a letter to Nicholas explaining her situation and asking him to take the next stagecoach to come rescue her. She blew the ink on the paper dry, then folded it, and sealed it with the wax candle Mr. Tucker handed her. "Now who do I give this to?"

Mr. Tucker plucked it from her fingers. "Me." He walked across the room and dropped her letter into the shallow basket at the end of the desk where he'd gotten the pen and paper from. "It's in the mail," he said with a grin.

She frowned. "Will that go out tomorrow?"

"No."

"The next day, then?"

He shook his head.

"Then when will it go out?"

"In two weeks."

"*Two weeks!*"

"The post doesn't run in these parts like it does back East. We get a mail carrier 'bout once a week—if the weather's good. He carries the mail all the way from St. Louis to Santa Fe, then turns around and comes back. Since you're needin' to get your letter to Santa Fe, you'll have to wait to send it until he's travelin' south again."

"And that won't be for another two weeks?"

"Exactly. He was just here this morning. Had you arrived an hour earlier, you would have been able to send your letter. But as it is—" he shrugged— "you'll have to wait."

Of course. "Well, then, when he passes through again—in the southerly direction—I'll just ride to Santa Fe."

"And how do you reckon you'll do that without money?"

She bit her lip. Once again he was right, drat him. She only had eight dollars and fifteen cents in her purse. That wasn't nearly enough to cover room and board for two weeks. Even if she worked doing some light cleaning around the boardinghouse, she'd likely still owe money. Not to mention her fare.

That's why he'd said it'd be a month before she'd be able to leave. Well, that wasn't true. It wouldn't be a full month. She mentally calculated the time when she'd be able to send her letter to Nicholas—two weeks. Then a week later, when the mail coach was making its way back, Nicholas would be coming. Well, only if he got the letter and could catch the stage before it left. She wouldn't even *think* of how long it would be if he didn't. On the positive side, if it all worked out the way she imagined, it wouldn't be the month Mr. Tucker had led her to believe, only three weeks—but it was close enough.

“Shall we go see about your lodging?”

“Of course,” she said as smoothly as the lump in her throat would allow.

He nodded and offered her his arm.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked when he steered her through a little ally between two of the buildings. “All the boardinghouses were back that way.” She pointed to the main part of town that they'd just left.

“I don't think you fully understand just where you are,” he said, his voice flat, emotionless.

“What's that to mean?”

He didn't answer her. Instead, he led her to an open field where dozens, if not hundreds, of men were lined up, marching. “Come along. I'd like to introduce you to the eligible bachelors of Fort Gibson.”

“I have no interest in taking a suitor, Mr. Tucker,” she said with a frown.

“And you're not. We're shopping for a husband for you.”

She gasped. “I think not. Have you forgotten I am engaged to Mr. Parker?”

“No. And I'll wager your new husband won't be allowed to forget that fact, either.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you remember earlier when I said you'll make a beautiful bride?”

Of course she remembered when he'd made that ridiculous statement.
"Yes. Why?"

"Because you're about to get married."

"I am not." She wrenched her arm from him.

"If you want to stay here, you are."

She crossed her arms. "I might be a woman, but I am plenty capable of living alone."

"And just where do you think you'll do that? In the barracks?"

"The barracks?" She glanced over at all the men dressed in their tan and blue uniforms as understanding washed over her. "Do you mean to tell me this is a military town?"

"A fort, to be more precise, but yes."

Unease similar to what she'd felt earlier this morning settled into her stomach. "Is everyone in this town in the army?"

"Everyone but Charles."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Working." He stood at attention in front of her and saluted. "Captain Wes Tucker reporting for duty, ma'am."

She glanced at the soldiers in the field. "It seems you're a deserter to me," she quipped weakly.

He grinned. "Actually, today is one of the two days I've had a respite in the past year."

"Oh."

"Come along, and I'll introduce you to the unmarried officers."

She closed her teeth over the inside of her lip to keep it from quivering. "Is that necessary?"

"Yes." His tone quiet. "There is nowhere for you to stay here unless you marry."

Allison's chest constricted and she searched his face with her eyes. "You're being serious."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded once. "It is the law here that any unmarried lady shall have precisely one week to choose a husband, or one will be assigned for her."

Her eyes widened as the blood began rushing to her toes. "One week?"

He nodded once more, swallowing. "If you'd like, I can show you the paper that states this." Her mind spun and she shook her head numbly as he reached for her limp hand, enclosing it in his and continued to speak. "Miss

Pierson, you've been deserted in a military fort full of men— men who haven't set eyes on a pretty woman in a long time. Besides there being no room for you—unless you wish to sway Charles to allow you to stay in his store with him or share a bedroom with the Lewises—it's not safe for you to remain unmarried, even for a week."

She sucked in a sharp breath and shivered as the seriousness of his words and expression sank in. "But what of Nicholas?" she asked on a shallow breath.

Mr.—no *Captain*—Tucker came to stand in front of her. "I can't speak for the others, but I'll give you my word. If you marry me, I'll keep my hands to myself and petition the circuit judge for an annulment when Mr. Parker comes to claim you."

~Chapter Four~

What was he saying? Ten minutes in the company of this highfalutin woman and he'd been transported back to Charleston. He grimaced. It had been all the social standards, insincere interest, and money which had prompted him to seek entrance to West Point and join the Army as an officer.

Wes had never been impressed by money—his father's or anyone else's. By the time he was old enough to join the army, he was so tired of living under the restrictions and demands his father's wealth had put on him, he'd gladly given up his life of privilege along with his father's promise that one day he'd own the family business and had joined the army.

And now, he'd just opened his mouth and offered to make one of *them* his wife.

Though she was fine to look at, Wes had no trouble envisioning what she'd be like as a wife. From the frilly lace along the neckline of her traveling dress down to the unsuitable, and dare he say, ridiculous looking shoes she wore, she had spoiled and frivolous stamped all over her.

"All right," she said, stealing him from his thoughts.

He repressed a groan at her acceptance of his ill-conceived proposal and nodded once. "Very well."

"Where's the church?" she asked.

He snorted. "There ain't one."

"Oh."

"Come on. If we hurry, we'll catch the chaplain before he leaves the blacksmith's," he said as he led her back toward the barracks.

"This doesn't look like a blacksmith's shop," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

Wes shook his head and walked over to the shabby four-drawer bureau against the wall opposite the set of two bunks. "You're very perceptive, Miss Pierson." He closed his hands around the scratched and dented knobs of the second drawer from the top and gave it a hard jerk, grimacing as the drawer screeched open. "I'll just need a few minutes to change into my uniform, and then we may go."

She sighed. "Is that necessary?"

"Yes," he said, not bothering to look at her. He slipped the gold buttons of the dark blue coat, or coatee as those of his rank were expected to call it, that he was wearing.

"Have you no modesty?"

He shrugged. "No, I can't say that I do." He peeled off his coatee and began to unbutton his shirt. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her turn around, her cheeks growing pink. He would have chuckled if he didn't feel so bad for her *Nicholas*. If she became this squeamish seeing a man remove his coatee, the poor man would have a very disappointing wedding night.

He quickly removed the remainder of his off-duty attire and pulled on his undershirt and tan duck trousers. He pulled the cord to tighten the waistband then slipped the pewter button through the buttonhole before grabbing his dark blue coatee. Sensing her discomfort, he quickly fastened the eight gold buttons running down the front of his coatee, snatched his shako (or in other words, his overly tall stovepipe hat) from the top of the bureau, then fastened his gun belt around his waist and slipped his revolver into the holster.

"Let's be off," he said, lightly pressing his fingertips into the small of her back. He bit back a grin at the way she stiffened at his touch.

"Where are we going now?" she asked when he steered her away from the big square of buildings that made up the barracks.

"To the blacksmith's shop." He guided her through a little alley at the corner of the barracks between the fort's jail and where they kept the animals. "When not preaching on Sundays, Chaplain Malone runs the blacksmith shop."

An odd smile bent her lips. "Have you ever heard of Gretna Green?"

"No."

"It's a place in Scotland where— Oh, never mind. I doubt you'd care."

He whistled. "Beauty *and* brains."

She cast him the worst scowl he'd ever seen.

"That'd be more effective if your lips weren't twitching."

At that, her horrible scowl vanished, replaced by the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen, robbing him of his breath.

"Now that's a nice look for you," he said when he was certain he could speak smoothly and not embarrass himself. "You should wear it more often."

“I will. When Nicholas gets here and carries me away from this—this —” She waved her hand around, gesturing to the open plains he’d come to call home, her nose wrinkling in disgust. “Then I shall wear it all the time. The whole way to Austin, in fact.”

A tight knot formed in his belly and bitterness filled his mouth. She was just like all the young ladies he’d been introduced to in Charleston. “And let me guess, your *Nicholas* is going to whisk you away to his mansion in Austin where all you’ll have to do each day is get dressed and decide which dinner party you wish to attend?”

“You act as if that’s the most dreadful fate imaginable.”

To Wes, that *was* the worst fate imaginable. “Don’t you worry, you’ll be back to wearing your fancy dresses and drinking tea all day soon enough.” At the rate their afternoon was going, this infuriating woman might not have to wait for her precious Nicholas to come save her; much more of her condescending attitude and he’d brave riding through the endless miles of the Indian Nations just to be rid of her.

“Good day, Captain Tucker,” Chaplain Malone greeted, wiping the back of his sleeve across his sweaty forehead.

Wes nodded. “Chaplain. Can you spare a minute to conduct a wedding?”

A slow smile spread across the other man’s face. “Sure thing.” He dropped his hammer and brushed his hands off on his trousers. Chaplain Malone walked across the room, presumably to retrieve his prayer book. “I didn’t know you was gettin’ married.”

“I didn’t, either,” Wes mumbled.

Beside him, Miss Pierson, soon-to-be Mrs. Tucker, sighed.

Chaplain Malone came back with his cracked leather prayer book and turned to Miss Pierson. “Can I have your name, miss?” he asked, the color in his cheeks growing to match his ruddy nose.

“Allison Pierson.”

“Very good.” Chaplain Malone flipped open his prayer book and might have begun reading about the sanctity of marriage had Wes not stopped him.

“Can we skip that and get right to the vows, please?”

“Eager, are ya?” Chaplain Malone chuckled and waggled his eyebrows.

Eager was one way to put it. But not for the reason the older man was insinuating. “Just get on with it, would you?”

Chaplain Malone flipped to the back page of the book, where he'd long ago scribbled down the correct vows, and cleared his throat.

Five minutes later, Captain Wes Tucker was looking into the dark brown eyes of Mrs. Wes Tucker and having the damndest time deciding whether to kiss her or not.

Allison was terrified. Not only did it look like this handsome stranger just might kiss her, but she was powerless to stop him. All through the ceremony, she'd been unable to do anything other than stare at the man with whom she was about to enter a sham marriage.

She'd already thought him to be handsome, in a rugged sort of way, with his tall build that brought him a good six inches above her five-foot-seven frame, laughing eyes, and lips that had no resistance to turning up into the most breathtaking smile she'd ever seen.

But staring at him now in his full military uniform, he looked different. Perhaps it was how much taller, broader, and more intimidating he looked dressed in his dark blue coatee with what seemed like an endless row of bright gold buttons, imprinted with eagles, that bisected his midsection. His face looked grim with a set jaw and blue eyes that appeared as hard as stone, partially shielded by the brim of the hat he wore. She couldn't be certain, but from where she stood, she'd guess that hat had to be at least seven-inches high: a stovepipe hat, as the gentlemen in Boston referred to the top hats that were unseemly high and had a circular circumference rather than an oval shape. Above the brim, on the 'pipe', was a piece of metal shaped like a golden eagle, then two thin stripes made out of patent leather, and a chin strap fashioned out of the same shiny material. At the very top of his hat was a golden clip, of sorts, that held the long quill of a bright red, curving cock feather.

He was magnificent.

And now he was leaning toward her.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted a fraction, just in time to have his warm lips press against hers. He pulled away and winked at her.

She gasped at his boldness. At least that's what she tried to convince herself. She was merely shocked he'd been so bold as to kiss her, then smile and wink as if it'd been some grand jest. It had nothing to do with the way her lips tingled in a manner they never had following one of her kisses with Nicholas.

“Come along, my darling dear,” he called, moving toward the door.

A slow heat crawled over Allison’s face. “Thank you,” she murmured to the blacksmith and then followed her husband to the door. “Where are you taking me now?” she asked when he started walking away from the blacksmith’s shop, but not in the direction of the barracks.

“To the commanding officer’s quarters,” he said simply.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the little row of log cabins that appeared to be multiple apartments connected by covered walkways. They’d dined in the cabin on the right, as it was Mrs. Lewis’ home, if she remembered correctly. Her husband, Captain Wes Tucker—or Wes as she thought it best to call him now—swung open the creaky door to the apartment on the left, revealing a room as large as the formal parlor in her parent’s home. However, in Boston, the parlor had been decorated with gold wallpaper, two royal blue sofas with mahogany arm rests and an upright piano, which occupied the corner of the room. By contrast, this room was nearly bursting with enough furniture to furnish a parlor, study and dining room. In the corner, there were even cabinets and shelves that appeared to hold cooking supplies. A door positioned in the middle of the back wall likely led to their bedroom.

She sighed. It’d be hard growing accustomed to such cramped quarters, but she’d just have to make do. She’d only be here a few weeks anyway, she reminded herself as she walked over to one of the two windows in the room. Besides, at least this room was bigger than the one he’d taken her to when he’d changed. She cringed at the memory of the room that couldn’t have been any larger than the closet she’d used in Boston.

One thing was for certain: the furniture arrangement in this room would not do. She walked over and rested her gloved hands on the back of the faded, threadbare sofa, then pushed. It would be much more functional if—

“What are you doing?” Wes asked, his voice laced with humor.

Allison froze. “I was moving it up against the wall.”

“Put it back, please.”

“Why?”

“Because this isn’t your house to rearrange.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, as long as I’m living here, I’ll decorate the way I want, and if you don’t like it, then you can stay somewhere else.”

“You’ll be staying somewhere else, too.” He held up a little brass key and waved it back and forth.

“You mean this isn’t our apartment?”

He shook his head. “It’s my superior’s apartment. And while he’s always been kind enough to allow me entrance whenever I please, I highly doubt he’d like for me to bring my new wife here to set up house with him. Now, move that sofa back where it came from so we can go get my things and move into our room.”

Allison swallowed and lowered her face so he couldn’t see her blush. *Our room.* She shoved the sofa back to its former position and then scampered out the door.

“It’ll just take a few minutes to gather my belongings,” he said, joining her outside.

She nodded. Why was it when it came to telling her important information, such as they were in someone else’s home, this infuriating man waited for her to make a fool of herself, *then* gave her the pertinent information—usually in the form of one of those glib remarks that he seemed to spew quite frequently?

“Will the quarters we’ll be staying in be similar to that?” she asked, gesturing to the apartment they’d just left.

A sharp bark of laughter passed his lips. “Not quite.”

She frowned. “A touch smaller, perhaps.”

He eyed her askance. “Yes, a touch.”

“Why do we not get to stay in one of those?” She glanced over to another set of adjacent cabins that shared a walkway. “Surely they’re not all occupied.”

“No,” he agreed, “just these two. General Ridgely and his wife live in that one and Colonel Lewis and his wife live in the one next to it. Those two—” he pointed to the other set of cabins— “are empty at the moment. We don’t have a lot of commanding officers here right now, but if they come, that’s where they’ll live.”

She nodded her limited understanding and kept pace with him as he walked back toward the barracks. “And what exactly are you?”

“A commissioned officer.”

“A commissioned officer?” That meant absolutely nothing to her.

“I am an officer, but I’m commanded—or commissioned—about, I don’t do the commanding.” He flashed her a grin. “At least, not yet. One

day, I will, but I haven't been around long enough to earn that role."

"So then you're told to march and shoot on command?"

He chuckled. "No, I tell my men to do that and expect that they will. But I take my orders from Colonel Lewis and prepare my men to be ready to handle whatever it is that Colonel Lewis needs us to do."

"Oh, I think I understand now." She stepped over a slightly raised plank on the boardwalk. "So you still sleep in the barracks but have better living accommodations than the privates?"

"Yes."

Relief flooded her. She wasn't sure if she could manage sharing such small quarters. Of course, she would if she must, but that little room he'd taken her to earlier was hardly what she'd consider suitable for an officer and his wife. Her relief was quickly stolen when a low whistle rent the air, causing Allison's skin to prickle. Allison looked to her left in the direction of the whistle, and the private who'd been the creator of such a noise had the nerve to grin at her. Instinctively, she drew closer to Wes. He might have the uncanny ability to annoy her with his carefree demeanor, but there was something about his broad and confident stature that spoke of strength and safety, which were both things she suddenly felt in need of.

As if sensing her unease, Wes put one arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. He nodded to each of the soldiers as they walked past.

"Come in here with me," he murmured, opening the door to the room he'd taken her to earlier.

She stepped inside and immediately wished she hadn't. Three other men were in the room, all in various states of undress. One man with coal black hair and eyes so dark brown they nearly matched it, sat on the bunk closest to her with his coat off, wearing only a dingy white undershirt and tan trousers. Another man, who had brown hair and sky blue eyes, was bare-chested, sitting on the other bunk. The third man, with black hair and pale bluish-green eyes, sat on a rickety chair and had his booted feet propped up on the end of the bunk closest to him. He still wore his coat, though it was unbuttoned and gaping open, exposing a thin white shirt that clung tightly to his rippled muscles. She blushed.

"Allison," Wes said, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close to him. "Allow me to introduce you to a few friends of mine." He gestured to the man closest to them. "This is Second Lieutenant Jack Walker, but we

all just call him Jack as we're not sure if he's earned his rank." Wes put his hands up to deflect a hat that the man hurled at his head. "Anyway, he's been here at Fort Gibson a little more than a year, and barring anymore stupidity, he'll stay with us a while longer."

The men laughed and Jack shook his head, his dark eyes alight with laughter. "Don't believe everything Wes says."

Wes directed her attention to the lanky, bare-chested man sitting on the other bunk. "That's First Lieutenant Brice McCorkle. He came here straight from West Point just last month."

Lieutenant McCorkle raised a flask in her direction and took a swallow.

"He doesn't say much," the officer sitting in the chair said. He stood and straightened his coat. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Captain Grayson Quinn Montgomery, but the pretty ladies call me Gray."

"The homely ones, too," Wes added helpfully.

Allison made her eyes go wide. "And which category are you implying I fall into?"

Wes' face flushed red and Gray clapped him on the back. "I do believe he has finally met his match."

"And just who is his match?" Jack wondered.

"Allison Pier—Tucker," she said with a heated blush.

"Pardon?" all three of the strangers said in unison.

Wes cleared his throat, and if she wasn't mistaken, he got an inch taller and his chest puffed out more. "Her name is Allison Tucker. She's my wife."

"Your what?" two of the three said in unison.

"My wife," Wes clarified. "She just arrived today from Boston."

"Arrived?" Gray said in a tone that might suggest he was looking for more details.

Apparently Wes didn't feel the need to share the circumstances of their marriage with his friends and she had no urge to, either.

"So she's a mail order," Lieutenant McCorkle suggested.

Wes grunted as if he were neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the man's charge.

"A mail order, eh?" Jack said, nodding his approval and favoring Allison with an intent and slightly lingering glance. "As usual, Wes has all the luck. The only men I've ever heard of who ordered brides from back

East have ended up with some very unattractive, albeit sturdy, wives. She has to be the prettiest one by far.”

“You’ll have to excuse Jack here,” Wes said not a bit apologetically. “He’s always wondered what it’d be like to wear a pirate’s eye patch, and if he doesn’t stop leering, he’ll get his chance to find out.”

Jack threw his hands up into the air. “Ain’t nothing wrong with looking, is there?”

“When you’re looking at my wife, there is,” Wes said in a low tone.

A shiver skated up Allison’s spine at his protectiveness. But in a moment, it was gone. She wasn’t really his wife. Well, she was, but only temporarily.

Wes turned toward the bureau in the middle of the room and yanked open the drawer. Allison winced at the sharp, high-pitched squeak it made. Inside the drawer were a variety of items: stockings, gloves, rolled-up trousers, a short comb with no more than five teeth, and half a dozen other trinkets. Holding his left arm against his chest, Wes pulled the objects from his drawer and piled them into the little cradle he’d created.

“Here,” Allison murmured, going up on her toes. She released the leather chinstrap from his hat, then removed it and turned it over so he could place some of the smaller objects inside.

“That’s not what it’s made for,” he said, frowning.

“And here I thought you were a sensible one...” She winked at his friends and tried not to laugh when she discovered that her words had brought grins to Gray’s and Jack’s faces while poor Lieutenant McCorkle couldn’t close his mouth.

Wes shook his head and grinned, placing what looked like miniatures along with a few other valuables inside his hat-turned-bucket. When he was done, he closed the drawer with his hip, then walked over to the head of the bunk closest to her and dropped the items in his arms onto the flattened pillow before lifting the top of the bedpost off and removing whatever he’d stored there.

“So *that’s* where you kept it,” Jack said, with a chuckle.

Wes nodded and shoved whatever he’d pulled from the bedpost into his pocket.

Jack turned toward Allison. “We officers get paid forty-five dollars a month. Wes has been saving his pay for as long as I’ve been here. He ought to have enough by now to buy you some real nice things.”

Allison blushed. Wes wouldn't be buying her anything, but they didn't need to know that.

Wes gathered his things again and walked to the door. "Night, fellas," he called. "We have a big day tomorrow, so get some sleep."

"You, too," one of his friends called back with a chuckle, while another whistled.

"Don't mind them," Wes murmured. He led her down the boarded sidewalk that went in front of the row of officer's apartments, then up a wooden staircase. "Married officers sleep upstairs."

She did not think it was possible for her to be surprised by the sleeping quarters she would find upstairs. But surprised she was, and not in a good way. It was no larger than the one he'd taken her to downstairs. Except in this one, there was only one bed, not two. At the foot of the bed was a narrow chest about as wide as her foot was long, made from pine and covered with scratches. Along the wall across from the bed was a crude fireplace and right next to that was a little table that had the right dimensions to also pass for a desk. And in the corner was a wooden rack with four cracked and slanting shelves, devoid of any items except dust.

Wes opened the chest that apparently had three rusted hinges and retrieved a chamberpot, water basin, pitcher and a few dented tin cups. He set them on the dusty floor and then went about putting his clothes and belongings into the chest. "Do you have anything you'd like me to put in here?"

She looked down at her purse and a wave of emotion washed over her. This was it. Everything she still owned was right here with her. Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked them away before Wes could notice. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go to bed now."

Wes looked out the window at the sun that was still fairly high in the sky and shrugged. Standing, he stripped off his coat and started working on the fastening of his trousers.

Allison cleared her throat.

He continued undressing himself.

She cleared her throat again, louder.

Wes lifted one dark eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Just because I expressed an interest in going to bed, doesn't mean you have to, too."

He scoffed. "Yes, I do."

Panic seized her. "You said this was an in-name only marriage until Nicholas can come for me," she said unevenly.

"It is. But I still have a reputation to uphold with my men."

Her face flamed. By morning, everyone would think she'd been intimate with Wes. She cleared her throat and sent a pointed look to where his hands were still on the fastenings of his trousers. "You're not..."

Wes exhaled sharply, then turned around. "Please remove whatever you think is necessary, get into bed, and pull the blankets over your eyes since the sight of the human form offends you so."

Allison swallowed nervously. Right. She had to get into bed, too. Just to be sure he wasn't able to see her; she turned her back to him, too, and divested herself of her traveling dress, then climbed into the bed. Not so silly as to pull the covers over her eyes, she pulled them to her chin and then turned away from where he'd be undressing.

A moment later, his warm body settled in beside her.

"Don't worry," he whispered, "I won't touch you."

She nodded, too nervous to speak. An overwhelming rush of emotions consumed her. Unfortunately, she couldn't decide if she was more scared, nervous, uncertain, disappointed or just simply sick to her stomach.

~Chapter Five~

Wes was out of bed and dressed before the sun came up, no more rested than when he'd crawled into bed the night before. He turned his head over his shoulder one last time to glimpse his sleeping wife and then quietly slipped from the room. The best part of living in the middle of the vast prairie was the endless skies above. Long ago, he'd made it a habit to go for a morning ride as the sun came up.

He made his way down to the stables; nodding his greeting to the privates he passed. Though there wasn't a full cavalry division stationed here, the United States Army had seen fit to outfit all the commanding and commissioned officers with horses. He'd always favored a horse appropriately named Midnight due to his coal black coat and eerie ability to sneak up on a man.

Whistling to himself, Wes saddled Midnight, then opened the door and led him out to the courtyard. Though it was already May and the days had a tendency to feel hotter than an oven, this early in the morning wasn't too hot yet to ride.

"Good boy," he crooned, leading Midnight through the narrow passageway between the jail and the southeast blockhouse and into the open fields.

Wes paused just long enough to take in the beauty of the canvas in front of him. Orange, purple, red and even a bit of blue painted the sky. He mounted Midnight in one quick, fluid motion and urged him to go with his heels.

Midnight sprinted forward, running at full speed in the direction of nothing at all. Wes held tightly to the reins and grinned at the way the wind felt against his face, ruffling his hair. While it was imperative to always show his men the best example of being properly attired and ready for anything, his rides in the morning were the one time of the day when all that ceased to matter. All of the present responsibility, the past memories and the future uncertainty were left in his bunk, right alongside his shako.

He pulled the reins a fraction, signaling Midnight to slow his pace. The sky above him was magnificent, and so was the endless land all around him.

In every direction he turned, all he could see was the natural landscape. No cabins or tents. No fences, roads or stagecoaches. Nothing but grass and trees. He'd never seen anything so serene and beautiful until he'd joined the Army. Charleston was a growing city with new businesses opening up with each passing year. Horses, wagons and carriages littered the streets and everyone was in such a hurry, never taking a moment to appreciate the simple things.

A little flock of seven birds flew overhead. Wes watched them until they were mere specks against the painted sky. Making a kissing sound with his lips, Wes urged Midnight in the direction of the barracks. It was always fun to ride at a breakneck pace away from the barracks, but going back, he liked to go slow and take his time.

"Mornin', Captain," Chaplain Malone called as Midnight passed the blacksmith's shop.

Wes nodded to the man and continued on to the stables where he unsaddled Midnight and rubbed him down.

Breakfast would be ready soon. He'd best go wake his sleeping bride. He shook his head at the thought. When he was a boy, his mother and father had made sure to emphasize the importance of a man of his means marrying well. They'd love Allison. It was quite clear she was from a wealthy family and would have no trouble playing the lofty role everyone expected of his wife.

"Allison, are you awake?" he asked, easing the door to their little room open.

A ray of bright sunshine poured into the room and hit his sleeping bride right in the face. She sure was a pretty one, he'd give her that. Her mahogany hair was beautiful all pinned up during the day, but seeing it now, unpinned and fanned across her pillow— He jerked his gaze away. She was the absolute last woman he needed to be having such thoughts about.

He cleared his throat. "Allison."

Allison sighed something in her sleep.

"Allison," Wes called a little louder, taking a step in her direction.

Her eyelids fluttered open and then she blinked at him. Clutching the blanket they'd shared last night to her chest, she swallowed visibly. "Yes?"

"Breakfast will be served in about ten minutes."

She nodded and then stared at him.

He returned her stare. Wasn't she going to get up and get dressed?

She cleared her throat.

"Yes?"

"Don't you plan to leave while I get dressed?"

A low heat touched his face. "Of course, I'll just be right out here," he said, jerking his thumb back behind him. Then without wishing to let on to his unease, he gave her a slight nod, picked up his shako and strolled outside to wait.

Twenty minutes later, Allison still hadn't emerged. Truly, there was no reason for it to take so long to get dressed. All she had to do was pull on the dress she'd worn yesterday. It wasn't as if she had a wardrobe full of gowns to choose from and a jewelry collection to search for something to match.

But despite his slight annoyance, he'd used his self-control and hadn't barged in there and demanded she hurry or he'd help her get dressed—yet.

He pursed his lips. Sharp sounds of forks scraping against metal plates as the men ate downstairs floated to his ears and his stomach growled.

"Hurry up in there," he barked, rapping on the door with his knuckles. "If we wait much longer, all the warm food will be gone."

"I'm coming," she said, swinging the door open.

Wes swallowed. Even wearing the same dirty and wrinkled dress as she'd worn yesterday, she was beautiful. "This way," he said, gesturing to the staircase in front of them.

Downstairs, he led her to the dining hall, where all the men stopped eating and whistled, grinned, nodded, waggled their eyebrows or did some other annoying gesture to taunt the newlyweds.

Allison's cheeks turned pink at the reaction from the men. Wes put his hand on the small of her back and bent his head close to her ear. "Don't worry about them. They're just jealous."

"Come bring that new wife of yours down here," his friend Jack called from the far end of the second table.

Wes guided Allison down the aisle and held the chair out for her before taking his seat next to her. A moment later a scruffy-looking private plunked two metal plates in front of them, both filled with a scoop of pale yellow, jiggling eggs. Allison scrunched her nose and Wes chuckled.

"Eat up, lady," he said, handing her fork to her. "This is a good meal."

"A good meal?" Her eyes were still trained on the eggs in front of her and her tone full of disbelief.

“Yes,” Jack agreed, shoving a giant forkful of the slimy scrambled eggs into his mouth, “one of the best.”

Wes tried not to wince at the truth of Jack’s words. He turned toward Allison. “Eggs are rare. We have to trade with the Indians for them when they come to trade—which isn’t often.”

“I see,” she said, though her expression implied she didn’t see anything at all. She turned her fork over in her hand so the prongs were pointing downward, then with a very uneasy movement, poked at her eggs and lifted a small bite to her lips. She quickly swallowed and immediately brought her napkin to her mouth; whether to wipe away an imaginary crumb or hide her reflexive gag, Wes would never know.

“Good, aren’t they?” McCorkle asked around a mouthful of eggs.

“Of course,” Allison said. She picked up her cup and took a generous swallow of coffee. She grimaced and lowered the cup back to the table with a thud louder than she’d likely intended.

“Ain’t you gonna eat?” McCorkle asked.

Allison shook her head. Wes had a momentary pang of sympathy for her. It had taken him a full year to get used to the meals they served here. Were she his wife in truth, he’d suggest that he buy all the equipment necessary for her to cook their meals over the fire in their room. But she wasn’t his wife, and there was no use in getting accustomed to better cooking, only to have to resort back to this slop after she left. Besides, a highfalutin woman like her probably didn’t even know the first step in how to boil water. His own mother sure didn’t. Why would Allison be any different?

He shook his head. “Eat up,” he said; his voice rough. “It’s a long time until lunch.”

“I think I’ll manage until then.” Her soft voice and the way she so carelessly pushed her plate away irritated him.

“Many men here would give a week’s wages for that plate of food,” he said in a low tone. “I’ll not have it said that my wife wastes her meals when rations are so few and the food supply so low.”

Allison’s brown eyes met his. “Then give it to one of them.”

“No, it’s yours. You need to eat.”

“Sir, I don’t know who you think I am, but I will tell you this: I am not your child to be told what to do and when to eat. I can decide for myself what I do and do not wish to eat.”

Wes' face grew warm. He didn't want to eat it. He wanted her to eat it. She may not know it now, but this was likely the best meal she'd eat before returning to her fancy life. Grumbling, he cast an eye to his curious friends, then slid her plate of eggs over and devoured them.

When he was done with his—and her—eggs and had drained the contents of his tin cup, he stood and said, “Shall I take you to where the other officers' wives spend their day, my lady?”

Allison frowned at him, presumably because she didn't like the honorary styling he'd given her due to her tendency to act like one of the stuffy, spoiled aristocrats from England he'd heard about. As if realizing her look of disapproval did nothing to cow or shame him, she looked around the room, her eyes narrowing. “I hadn't even noticed that none of the other officers' wives joined us for breakfast,” she observed.

“That's because most of them cook for their husbands,” he muttered under his breath. “Come along, then. We'll have to stop by and see Charles first, and then I'll take you to Mrs. Lewis.”

“Must we?”

Wes held the door open for her. “Must we what?”

“Go see your friend Charles?”

“Do you have another dress or two that I don't know about?” he asked, lifting a brow.

She scowled and shook her head. “Do we have to buy a dress from him?”

Wes nearly choked to death on his own tongue. Patting his chest with more force than was necessary, he said, “No. And we won't be. You'll be making anything you want to wear around here.”

A shadow crossed Allison's face. “All right.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You do know how to sew, don't you?”

“Of course I do!” She cleared her throat. “It is rude for you to even suggest otherwise.”

He would have laughed at her look of outrage were he not skeptical she was lying. He sighed. “Do you truly know how to sew?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. Too quickly.

“Uh huh. So I can buy you material and you won't waste it?”

“Waste it?”

“Yes. Waste it, just like you wasted your breakfast.”

Her lips thinned. “It did not go to waste. You ate it.”

“Yes, but I won’t be able to wear any poor attempt at a skirt you manage to create with this fabric.”

Her cheeks grew pink. “Have no fear; your money will not be wasted. I am an expert seamstress,” she said before marching in the direction of the sutler’s store.

Wes was not far behind.

“Charles,” Wes called, opening the door to the sutler’s shop for her. “Show me your cheapest fabric, please.”

“Pardon me?” Allison said, halting right in front of him in the doorway.

Wes walked around her and over to where Charles kept the bolts of fabric. “Oh, and my lady will be needin’ some thread, too.”

Charles grabbed a bolt of fabric from the bottom of the rack in the corner. “Will she be needin’ a pattern, too?”

Wes shrugged. “I reckon she might.”

“*She* is right here,” Allison said, coming to stand by them. Her eyes met the bolt of rough and somewhat see-through fabric in Charles’ hand and her upper lip curled up. “Put *that* away right now. I’d sooner wear the dress I’m wearing now until it becomes rags than wear a dress made of that.” She reached for the corner of the fabric and rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger, her scowl growing deeper. “What is that, burlap?”

“Aye,” Charles agreed heartily, “the same as the sacks of oats in the stable.”

Allison released the fabric and met Wes’ eyes. “I will not be made to dress in rags.”

“And what would you prefer to wear, my lady?” he asked, for no other reason than to appear to be interested.

She pursed her lips and it was all he could do not to grin at her. “I don’t know. I haven’t looked at his selection yet.”

“And you don’t need to.”

“Why not?” she asked, a challenge in those brown eyes of hers.

Undeterred, he met her eyes. “Logic,” he said simply. He gestured to the shelf of fabric behind him. “There is nothing in this store as fine as the satins and silks a fine Bostoner such as yourself is accustomed to wearing. So the way I see it, there’s no use in wasting money on a more expensive fabric that you’ll complain about just as much as the cheapest.”

“And you’re in a position to tell me what I will and will not be comfortable wearing, because...”

He snorted. “Because I’ve known women like you. And unless you’re dressed to the height of fashion in all the most expensive fabrics, you’ll find something to complain about.” Not to mention, she’d probably use at least ten yards before making something that would only have to be marginally altered by one of the other officers’ wives.

Allison’s hard eyes bored into his and she looked as if she might have a hot retort to spew at him, but she didn’t. Instead, she broke his gaze and looked over at the bolts of dark fabric on the shelf. “Do you have any other colors?” The hopeful note in her tone was hard even for Wes to miss and a slight pang of remorse for his harsh words came over him.

“Not that a spendthrift like you would understand this, but those other colors cost money. And money is something most of the men out here don’t have,” Charles blustered with a scowl.

Allison sucked in a sharp breath and Wes’ annoyance with Allison completely evaporated, replaced with the oddest urge to punch the offending man. Alternatively, he turned to Allison and with a calm he didn’t feel said, “Why don’t you go wait outside?”

Wait outside? What was she, a troublesome animal he didn’t wish to contend with?

She opened her mouth to protest, but something about the stony look on Wes’ face kept her words from tumbling out.

With a huff, she spun around and walked out the door.

Irritation bubbled inside of her. What had made Wes transform from the easy, carefree man she’d met yesterday into someone irrational? Certainly it wasn’t because she hadn’t been able to choke down those inedible eggs. Or what about the way he’d looked at her as he commanded her to leave the store? He looked almost murderous. But only ten seconds before that, he looked like he was softening...

She shook her head. He was a mystery, that was becoming clearer and clearer each time they spoke.

Allison dug the toe of her white leather traveling shoe into the dirt. What was taking him so long?

A small group of soldiers drew nearer and she quickly sidestepped out of their way and bumped right into the hard body of her husband, nearly knocking her over as she misstepped and struggled for balance.

Wes' strong arm reached around to steady her, bringing her body flush against his firm chest. "There you go," he murmured just above her ear.

Allison tipped her face up to look at him and cast him a weak smile. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," he said, his voice gruff and thick and his blue eyes growing intense.

"Wh—what?" she stammered, her heart hammering in her chest. Why was he looking at her thus? Moreover, why did his stare make her feel as if three dozen butterflies had just been let loose in her stomach?

He cleared his throat then shoved a sloppily folded pile of burgundy fabric in her direction. "Don't waste it," he barked.

Allison took the fabric and without thinking—or breaking his gaze—brought the soft cotton against her chest. "Don't worry, I won't."

"Good." He jerked his eyes away from hers and then gestured to the commanding officers' cabins. "Shall we?"

A slow smile crossed Allison's lips and she peeked up at this strange man who'd become her husband. His face was relaxed. His eyes intense. His voice soft. All of these a stark contrast to the man she'd seen inside the sutler's store. Yes, there was no denying it; he was a mystery indeed.

~Chapter Six~

Wes tamped down his unwanted desire for that infuriating woman he now had to call his wife. Never before had he met such an irritating, intriguing, and desirable creature. He shook his head to remove all thoughts of her.

Willing his mind to temporarily forget about her and all the havoc she could potentially wreak on his life, he wrenched open the door to the large office that the commissioned officers shared and stalked across the room to his desk, ignoring the way his face heated as he walked past the other officers, already in their seats.

He sat down, removed his hat and ran a hand through his dark hair, sighing. His eyes aimlessly wandered around the four desks that were pushed together in such a way that two men sat next to each other, and the other two men sat across from them. It was designed this way to save space, and it was because of this arrangement that he'd become friends with Gray, Jack and McCorkle. Had they just bunked together at night, they might have just known each other in passing due to how little time they actually spent in their room. But since they spent all day sitting together or commanding their men together, they'd forged a friendship stronger than iron.

"Good mornin' again, Wes," Gray greeted as he walked in a few moments later.

Wes nodded to the man, taking note of the unusual look on his friend's face. Was he surprised to see him or something?

Gray walked across the room to where his desk was positioned across from Wes'. He pushed open the curtains to let in enough sunlight so he wouldn't need to burn the candles, but not enough to flood the room with heat as the sun rose higher in the sky. He plopped down in his chair and then mindlessly shuffled through a tall stack of papers, peeking up at Wes at approximately five-second intervals.

Wes sighed. "Yes?"

"Hmm?" Gray asked, a little too innocently.

Wes almost rolled his eyes at his friend's horrible attempt to act nonchalant. "What is it you have to say?"

"I don't have anything to say. I think you do though."

"And what is that?"

Gray set down the stack of papers he'd been pretending to look through. "Your wife."

Wes shrugged. "What about her?"

Gray's green eyes bore into him. "To start with—"

"Why didn't you tell us you were getting one?" Jack asked.

Wes' eyes shot to Jack. When had he come in? He cleared his throat. Then again. "I didn't think it was anyone's business." He immediately turned his head to the side and rubbed his fingers across his neck where an itch had suddenly developed.

"Really?" Gray drawled. "You thought it best she just turn up one day without you making any arrangements?"

"Yes. I didn't want to cause a stir among the men." At least that part was the truth.

Gray leaned back in his chair and eyed him skeptically. "Something's not right about all of this."

"Well, once you sniff it out, let the rest of us know, would you?" McCorkle said, taking his seat at the desk adjacent to Wes'.

Wes shook his head. Strong, brave, and for the most part, honorable, McCorkle was an excellent addition to the United States Army, making any man proud to serve beside him. His one flaw, however, was that he never was one who liked to give anything a lot of thought. He preferred to take orders rather than ponder what they should do next. And on a few occasions, when he hadn't waited for orders or nobody was around to give them, he'd acted solely on impulse and never on intellect. Many times Wes wondered just why McCorkle wanted to be an officer as opposed to a private, where his muscle-to-mind ratio would have been better served.

"Well, don't think about it too hard," Wes said, turning his gaze back to Gray. "It'd be a shame if you hurt yourself over something as trivial as this."

Behind Wes, one of the other officers sniggered and Gray pulled a face. "You just wait. I know you're up to something."

"Prove it," Wes said flippantly, inwardly praying Gray wouldn't. While he trusted Gray and Jack with his life—and Allison's—he wasn't sure if the

others could be trusted were they to know she wasn't really his wife. At least with the pretense that they were married, she was safe. But if someone were to find out that she was just pretending to be his wife until her intended came to claim her, she'd be vulnerable and his protection would do her no good. His heart squeezed slightly at the thought. Then, just as fast as the worry and pain came, Wes shoved it away. Nobody was going to find out. Nor should he care so much if they did. Truly, he needed to put her out of his mind and treat her as nothing more than a passing annoyance!

"Captain Tucker!" Colonel Lewis shouted.

Wes' head snapped in the direction of the doorway where his superior officer stood, a grim look on his face. "Sir?"

"Captain Tucker, I suggest you get a tight rein on your thoughts and rid them of your pretty new wife for a moment. We have a serious situation on our hands."

Paying no mind to the smug looks on both Jack's and Gray's faces, Wes stood at attention and saluted. "Ready for orders, sir."

"At ease, soldier," Colonel Lewis said in his usual soft voice. "I need you and Officers Walker, Montgomery, and McCorkle to do some investigative work for me."

"Yes, sir," Wes said, saluting.

"Very good." Colonel Lewis handed Wes a stack of papers, then scratched his jaw while Wes read them first and then handed them to Jack and Gray.

"You cannot be serious," Jack burst out, piercing their commanding officer with his stare.

"I am," Colonel Lewis said, his lips twitching.

"What?" McCorkle asked, reaching for the papers Gray held in his loose grasp. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the sloppily written lines of their orders.

"Are you sure this is a task that requires officers present?" Gray asked, his typical cool reserve well in place.

Colonel Lewis nodded once. "Certain."

Wes suppressed a groan that was identical to the one that escaped Jack.

McCorkle, who'd just finished reading their orders, handed them back to Gray and adjusted his hat. "What are you waiting for, boys? Let's go. Orders are orders."

“That they are,” Colonel Lewis agreed as a traitorous grin spread across his lips. “You boys had better be off. The sun’s getting higher in the sky, and you don’t want to still be out there in the hot sun, overseeing dinner being slaughtered, at noonday.”

Allison took a deep breath to steady her nerves.

Was it her imagination or was the cabin on fire?

She threw a glance over her left shoulder. The graying Mrs. Lewis and thin, pale Sarah Ridgely, General Ridgely’s wife, were both sitting in rocking chairs, their needles zipping in and out of the fabric in their hands. Behind them, a small, but contained, fire lit up the fireplace. She peered at the kitchen area. No smoke in there, either.

Releasing another breath, she turned her attention back to the fabric laid out in front of her.

Breathe. Just cut a straight line. That’s it. You can do this. She clenched her eyes closed. *No, I can’t!* she wanted to scream.

“Do you need any help, Allison?” Mrs. Lewis asked, breaking into Allison’s thoughts.

“No, ma’am. I just wanted to make sure...” She trailed off and bit her lip. *Just cut.* Tightening her grip on the shears, Allison began to cut.

Slow at first. Short, concise clips.

“It’ll be straighter, if you hold the fabric up at an angle and just glide the shears across,” Sarah said helpfully, as she tucked a ringlet of her dark blonde hair behind her ear.

Tentatively, Allison lifted the fabric, and with a prayer, pressed the V of the shears against the fabric and started to glide. She went slow at first, getting the feel for it, then sped up as she got more comfortable with it.

“Oh, Allison,” Mrs. Lewis began, “did you forget to—” Her words died on her tongue as the loud sound of fabric splitting rent the air.

Allison’s eyes flared wide. She somehow had turned the heavy fabric and now she was cutting at a sharp diagonal. Too scared of what might happen if she were to stop, Allison guided those cutting shears all the way down to the edge of the fabric.

Tears pricked her eyes. What had she done wrong?

“Allison? Would you like some help?” Mrs. Lewis asked, concern filling her voice.

Yes! “No,” Allison said, shaking her head. She couldn’t accept help from Mrs. Lewis because then Wes would know she’d lied about being able to sew. She closed her eyes. Why had she lied about such a silly thing as knowing how to sew? She wasn’t his wife. She didn’t have to impress him with her womanly skills.

Yes she did. Why, she’d never know. Perhaps it was pride or a longing to show him that he had underestimated her in the worst way. But no matter what it was, she’d wanted to prove to him she was far more capable than he gave her credit for.

Allison stared down at the fabric. It was too late for this piece now. It was already cut, but perhaps her dress could still be salvaged, thereby proving to her husband that she wasn’t one who wasted things. An idea sprang into her head.

Forcing a smile, she stood and discarded the scraps. “Looks lovely, doesn’t it?” she asked of no one in particular.

Neither Mrs. Lewis nor Sarah spoke, they just stared at the fabric she’d termed lovely with their mouths slightly agape.

Allison waved her hand through the air. “Don’t worry. I meant to do that. Wearing skirts that form points in the front and back has become all the rage back in Boston.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Lewis said as a wistful look came over her face. “I didn’t know that.” She sighed. “It’s been so long since I’ve been home, I have no idea what’s fashionable anymore.” She sighed again. “And probably by the time I make it back, they won’t be in style any longer.”

“You’re likely right,” Allison murmured. Seeing as how such a ridiculous cut wasn’t in style *now*, it wouldn’t be whenever it was that Mrs. Lewis left here. Sighing, she knelt down to do the only thing she could do now: cut the other side of the skirt panel to match. Thankfully, she’d made it a good three-fourths of the way down the skirt before losing control of her shears. She shook her head.

“Here,” Sarah whispered, “you might need these.”

Allison looked up and nearly groaned in frustration when she saw what Sarah held: a little ball with hundreds of sparkling straight pins poking out. “Thank you.”

Sarah winked at her then went back to sewing.

Thirty minutes later, Allison had made all the appropriate cuts to form a skirt with the most unusual and idiotic design. She sighed and laid the

fabric down with one panel on top of the other; next, using the ball of spikes Sarah had handed her earlier, she did her best to pin the two pieces together as straight as possible.

Then she stared at it.

But it didn't magically sew itself together as she'd hoped. It was waiting for her. Waiting for her to do something, to be more precise.

With a hard swallow, she picked up the spool of thread and unwound a few feet. Satisfied, she snipped the thread, then grabbed the package of needles that was on the table nearby, and prepared herself to thread the needle.

In her left hand, she held the needle straight up and down, with the eye pointing toward the sky. Then with her trembling right hand, she tried to push the end of the thread through the hole. She missed. It bent. She missed again. The end looked as though it was now fraying and sweat formed on her brow. How difficult could it be to thread a needle? Just push the thread through the hole!

She bit her lip and tried again, but her unsteady hand moved either the thread or the needle or both just in time to miss it.

Her palms grew clammy and she tried again.

"Mrs. Lewis," Sarah asked from behind Allison, "might you go get some of those cookies you were talking about earlier? I bet Allison would love to try them. It might be a nice reminder of home for her."

"Oh, I bet you're right," Mrs. Lewis said. She set her sewing down and all but leapt off her chair.

No less than a second later, Sarah's slender fingers were taking the needle and thread from Allison's hands.

Without any slowness or hesitation, Sarah threaded the needle for her. She then fiddled with the thread for a minute and handed the needle back to Allison. "You're at the easy part now."

She took the threaded needle and stared down at it, her cheeks burning. "Thank you. I've never sewn before."

"I know."

Allison flushed hotter. "It's not like that. I just never learned. See, back home, my mother always took our things to a seamstress."

"There's no need to explain anything," Sarah said, resuming her seat. "We can't all be good at everything."

"I know that, but—"

“But nothing.” She poked her needle back into the fabric in her hand and started sewing again. “Now, get to sewing. I am eager to see how this dress of yours will turn out.”

Allison tried not to let on to her discomfort. Sarah knew as well as she did that this dress would be completely unwearable by the time she was finished with it. She was certain of it.

Forcing herself not to grind her teeth, she took a deep breath and brought the tip of her needle close to the fabric. This was it. Soon these two pentagonal pieces of fabric would be stuck together. Forever.

Blowing out one final breath, she poked the sharp needle through the hard fabric, noting how much more difficult it seemed for her to push it through than either Mrs. Lewis or Sarah. Dismissing the thought, she used her other hand to grab the end of the needle and pull it through. Then she turned the fabric over and frowned. Where should she enter the fabric again? She bit her lip. Not too close to the last stitch or it’d take her a week to reach the end. Deciding a finger’s width seemed reasonable, she pushed the needle through again, grimacing at the way the sharp end dug into her finger.

For more than two hours she sewed. She poked it in one side, using her poor, red-tipped thumb to push the needle through, then turned the fabric over and pulled it the rest of the way through. Finally, she’d reached the end of the long straight part of her skirt. Not quite sure just what she’d do about the diagonals that made a point, she left those for later.

“Are you done?” Mrs. Lewis asked with a sparkle in her eye.

Allison rubbed her thumb and forefinger together, trying to soothe the hurt caused by repeated pokes from the needle. She reached forward for the cutting shears she’d placed on the table next to her after cutting the fabric. “Yes. I just need to sever the thread.”

“I know you’re excited to be wearing a dress like you wore back East, but don’t forget to tie off the thread first.” Sarah’s voice was quiet and sweet, holding not a hint of annoyance or condemnation for Allison’s lack of knowledge.

Allison’s eyes went wide. “Right.” She looked down and pulled the needle and thread a little tighter. She hadn’t given herself much thread to start with, so knotting what was left wasn’t going to be easy.

She twisted the thread this way, then that, and formed some sort of a sloppy knot that looked like it could hold, then cut the thread.

Determined to prove to Mrs. Lewis, Sarah, Wes, and most of all, herself, that she *could* sew, Allison picked up the spool of thread and ignored the way her tender fingers protested as she held the needle in her left hand and the thread in the right and attempted to rethread the needle to sew up the other side.

Ten frustrating minutes later, she nearly jumped for joy. Her needle was threaded and she hadn't had to seek help from Sarah to do it.

Just as she poked the thread back through the fabric to start the torture all over again, a loud trumpet sounded, scaring Allison half out of her wits.

"Lunchtime," Mrs. Lewis said, placing her sewing down in the little basket beside her chair.

~Chapter Seven~

“Where’s your new dress, wife?” Wes asked as he walked through the door of the Lewis’ home and saw her seated on their sofa.

Allison jumped at his words, then immediately dropped her skirt into the basket at her feet. “It’s not finished yet.”

“It’s not?” he asked, feigning shock.

“Of course not. It’s impossible to sew up a dress in a matter of a day.”

“Hmmm.” He knit his brow and looked her up and down. “I thought you were an expert.” It took all the self-control he possessed not to crack a smile at the way her shoulders stiffened at his words.

“I am. But these things take time.” She idly rubbed her blistered fingers together as they left the Lewis’ residence and made their way back to their room.

The simple gesture along with seeing the sores on her hands gave him a new respect for her. She had no idea what she was doing but had pride and determination to keep up the charade. She might not end up with a suitable dress, but she would certainly have his respect. He tore his gaze from her raw hands and focused on the boardwalk in front of them. “Well, if an expert like you says it takes time, then I shall just have to wait a little longer.” He opened the door to their room for her. “Will you be wearing it tomorrow when I come to get you, then?”

“No.”

Ignoring her strained answer as best he could, Wes walked over to the crude fireplace and gathered a few twigs together in the middle. “Oh?” he queried casually as he lit a match and threw it on top of the kindling.

“I already told you, these things take time. I don’t want to rush and make a mistake.” She went over to the pitcher of fresh well water he’d brought up before going to get her and poured it into the small metal pot he’d bought to heat their water.

Didn’t want to make a mistake? He nearly snorted. More likely she was hoping that either a dress would magically appear or she could stall so long that her suitor would be back to collect her before she actually finished her ill attempt at one. “I see.” He grabbed two logs and placed one on either

side of the little fire he'd created. "Allison, is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

"Actually, there is."

He bit back a smile. "Yes?"

"You're building that fire all wrong."

Wes craned his neck around to see this peculiar woman. "I beg your pardon?"

"That log—" she pointed to the short log on the right side of the fire—"needs to be closer to the fire."

Wes frowned. "No. I don't think it does."

"It does if you want your tea to be warm."

Standing, he grinned at her. "Well, m'dear, if that's the case, then I can honestly tell you that I find absolutely no fault with the fire. I like my tea cold."

"Cold?"

He nodded and pulled out his daily ration of coffee beans and placed them on the table. "That's the way we South Carolina folk like it, I'm afraid. But if you're of the mind to make me a hot beverage, coffee will do nicely."

She wrinkled her nose up, presumably at the memory of the coffee she'd sipped this morning. She bit her lip and stared at the small pouch he'd put on the table.

"Of course, I like mine a certain way. I'll show you." He walked over to her and untied the bag of beans.

Wes picked up a small handful and smashed them with the butt of his revolver. "When the water boils, put this, just like this, in there to brew the same way you'd brew tea."

Allison frowned at him, but heaven help him if he knew why.

Shrugging, he resumed his seat on the edge of the bed and removed his shako, boots, and then his coatee.

Without so much as a glance in his direction, Allison bent down to attend to the fire. He grinned at the way she moved things around, creating a larger flame.

He shook his head and mindlessly undid the cuffs on his sleeves. "Did you enjoy your time with Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Ridgely?"

"Yes, they're both very nice." She placed the pot onto the fire. "Thank you for introducing me to them. I have no idea what I might have done

without their company today.”

“Perished of tedium, perhaps.”

A small sputter of laughter passed her lips at his suggestion, just as he’d hoped it would. “Probably. There isn’t much to do around here, is there?”

“No.” He moved up the bed to lean against the flattened pillows. “It’s fairly quiet and simple here.”

“Yes, I’d noticed.”

“I’m sure you have.” He closed his eyes. He didn’t know about her, but he hadn’t slept well last night and being out in the hot sun this morning had made him even more tired. Dinner wouldn’t be served for another hour, which provided the perfect opportunity for a small nap. “Every so often, there’ll be a ball,” he murmured, locking his fingers together and placing them behind his head.

“A ball?” Her tone was drenched with doubt.

“Yes, a ball,” he countered, forcing himself to open his eyes. “As it would be, every two months or so, we have dances with the Cherokees.”

She shook her head, causing two tendrils of her long, dark hair to fall loose around her face. “I swear, you are the least serious man of my acquaintance.”

“Then you need to spend more time with—” He cut himself off before he made such a foolish suggestion. The last thing she needed to do was spend more time with anyone, especially Gray. “Believe it or not, I was being very serious about the dancing. I wasn’t here when it started, but every two months or so, the Indians will come to trade goods. While they are here, they want to dance.”

“And you actually dance with them?”

He couldn’t tell if that was surprise or disdain he sensed in her voice. “Yes. In case you have not noticed, there are very few females around there. We men do enjoy some female companionship, when possible.”

Her face turned red and she dropped her eyes. “I didn’t realize...never mind.” She turned her attention back to the pot of water. “It’s not that I was criticizing them or any of you, I was merely surprised the Indians would want anything to do with the Army, that’s all.”

He laughed and shut his eyes again. “They probably don’t. But they still have to trade with someone. Besides, this ball isn’t quite what you might think. Back East people go to balls to socialize with friends and seek

a spouse, if necessary. This ball is about business, keeping peace and making trades. If one of those squaws were to be harmed by one of our men, it wouldn't end well. Not—”

“Wes!” Allison shrieked.

Wes snapped his eyes open and nearly laughed at the sight of the pot in the too large fire. Boiling liquid bubbled over the side and onto the fire, putting it out and creating a huge billow of smoke as it hit the hot coals below. He pushed himself out of bed, grabbed the closest item of fabric to him—which just so happened to be his coatee—and reached into the fire to grab the pot's handle. After he pulled the pot out, he set it down on the table and dropped his coatee on the bed again. “Your water, my lady.”

Her wide eyes collided with his, making him want to laugh all the more. Instead, he whistled as he returned to his spot on the bed and rested his eyes once more. Except this time, instead of closing them all the way, he just lowered his eyelids and watched Allison as she swallowed convulsively on her way to open the little window above the table. With her back to him, she reached for the coffee bean. Before he could tell her that one bean would only make enough for his single cup and that she could use the rest for any tea she might have had with her in her purse, something had already been dropped into the pot. His coffee would be weaker than he was accustomed to, but that was all right; he would casually inform her next time.

She scooped up his coatee and shook it in the air to help push the smoke out the window.

He scrubbed his cheeks with his fingers. He'd need to make a stop at Charles' tomorrow during lunch and get some supplies for their home. His coatee was not a suitable replacement for a towel.

“Your coffee is ready,” she murmured a few minutes later, extending a cup to him.

He sat up and took it from her. “Aren't you going to have some?”

“No, thank you.”

He lowered the tin cup toward his lap. It had been so long since he'd been home; he'd nearly forgotten that coffee was not a drink most consumed. Apparently, a decade or so ago, President Andrew Jackson had gotten coffee and sugar added to the soldiers' rations, thus making it a popular drink among those in uniform but still very rare and often disliked by those without said uniform. While the army gave every soldier a ration

of coffee each day, Charles' was often fresher. Perhaps he'd have to buy some from him tomorrow when he went to see him. "If you'd like, you can dump what's left in the pot out and boil some water for your tea."

She slapped her hands on either side of her face with a resounding *pop*. "And waste it? I think not."

Wes chuckled and took a drink of coffee. Then he slowly lowered the cup from his lips and ran his tongue over his gritty teeth. "You did use the paper, didn't you?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"The paper?" Her eyes darted over to the table where the thin paper he'd placed the crushed coffee bean on top of was right where he'd left it and her face turned the color of a beet. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize..."

Wes set his cup down on the floor beside the bed. "It's all right. And here I was concerned that the coffee wouldn't be strong enough because you used only one bean for the whole pot." He grinned at her. "As we both now see, you proved me wrong on that point, so stop fretting."

She buried her face in her hands, but not before he glimpsed a bit of a grin on her lips.

"Besides," he continued, "now you can dump that out to make your tea and it won't be considered wasteful, but rather, a great favor to us both."

~Chapter Eight~

Allison hoped beyond all measure that Mrs. Lewis would once again invite her to stay for lunch today. As it was, last night's dinner in the dining hall followed by this morning's breakfast had been horrible. Of course she'd done her best to choke it down, but not enough to survive on.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lewis, Sarah," Allison greeted as she walked into Mrs. Lewis' home.

"Allison, come sit," Sarah said, patting the cushion next to her.

Allison sat and fought the urge to groan when Mrs. Lewis used her toe to slide Allison her sewing basket, where that awful attempt at a skirt sat folded on the top, mocking her. With a sigh, she leaned down and picked it up. She held onto each corner and lifted it high into the air to look at it, scowling.

Sighing again, she lowered it to her lap and stared at it. She had no idea what to do with it now. The skirt part was obviously the easier part of the gown, but even it hadn't come together as nicely as Allison would have liked. Truth be told, it wasn't really "together" at all. It would seem she hadn't tied the thread as tightly as she should have when she'd reached the end of each panel. Now the seam was gaping open, mere touches away from completely falling apart.

Refusing to sigh yet again, she pulled the loose thread from the fabric, too embarrassed to meet the gaze of either of the other women in the room.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Lewis said a moment later. "I've done that a time or two, myself."

Allison looked up at her and offered a wobbly smile.

"Once it starts unraveling...you just have to pull it apart." She shook her head and reached over to pat Allison's arm. "It's not as if there is anything else to do during the day."

"Indeed," Allison mumbled, despite the undeniable truth that she'd never finish this blasted skirt, no matter how long she was here.

She tossed the unneeded thread on the floor and reached for the spool. This time, she pulled off more than she thought was necessary, then took a

deep breath and lifted the needle in one hand and the thread in the other. Then tried in vain to thread the needle.

A few minutes later, she dropped her hands and rubbed her eyes. She was hopeless.

The sound of rhythmic stomping pulled her from her thoughts, and she craned her neck to look out the window, where four rows of men were lined up marching. Off to the left was Jack, commanding them.

He called out orders and his men did what he said: halting, marching in place, marching forward, turning, halting again, saluting, turning left, then right. He called out command after command and his men did exactly as he instructed them to do.

Just as quickly as they'd marched into her view, they were gone, and she was left to give her attention back to her skirt.

Just as she dropped her gaze, she heard a shout. It was a familiar voice and her eyes shot up: Wes.

Now, it was him and his men in front of the window. Shamelessly she watched him, just as she had Jack. But this time it was different. Before, her ears had been listening to Jack's commands, and her eyes had been on his men. This time, her ears were listening for Wes' commands, and her eyes were firmly on him and his broad form.

Of course, she'd noticed his dashing looks and broad form before, but she'd never so brazenly stared. Usually when she saw him, he was trying to take something off. She blushed. Though not what most would find overly erotic or enough to warrant a blush, she'd glimpsed his tan, thick, muscled forearms yesterday when he'd rolled up his sleeves. Of course, had she continued to watch him, she was sure she'd have seen a lot more. But considering he wasn't even her husband in truth and she should have never seen more of him than his face and hands, it had been quite...quite...intriguing.

"Admiring your bridegroom," Mrs. Lewis said with a giggle. "I remember the first few days after I married Colonel Lewis. The day after my wedding wasn't so exciting, but a few days later, I'm sure I had that same wistful look on my face when I saw him."

"One that might suggest you craved a sandwich?" Allison blurted.

"No, one that might suggest I craved something else," Mrs. Lewis countered with a wink.

Ignoring the way her cheeks flooded with heat, Allison shook her head and forced herself to turn her attention back to her sewing. She couldn't tell Mrs. Lewis that their marriage was an in-name-only marriage. That wasn't fair to Wes. He'd been benevolent enough to offer her his name and had been nothing but kind to her, besides. When it came time for her to leave, she'd let him tell his friends whatever he wanted.

She swallowed hard and tried again to thread her needle.

Mrs. Lewis' giggle was *not* helping.

Allison looked up at the woman. "Yes?"

"It's almost lunchtime. Perhaps you'd like to dine with Captain Tucker today instead of with us," Mrs. Lewis said, winking.

Allison's stomach growled. "No, I'd really prefer to eat here." She forced a smile. "That is, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind you eating here; but it doesn't take an hour to eat," she said, winking again. Did the woman have something in her eye? "There'll still be plenty of time to spend with your husband before he has to go back to work."

Allison and Sarah exchanged looks. Mrs. Lewis must have taken some medicine that loosened her tongue.

Mrs. Lewis heaved a sigh that even a deaf man would have a hard time ignoring. "I don't know how to be any more discreet. I once lived in those cramped officers' apartments with walls so thin you can hear your neighbor speak. Noonday is the best time to have some time alone, if you take my meaning."

Allison took her meaning and her face felt like it was on fire.

Beside her, Sarah just shrugged. Yesterday, Sarah had mentioned that she'd married General Ridgely two years ago. By then he was already a commanding officer, so she never had to live in the barracks as Allison and Mrs. Lewis had.

"Thank you," Allison murmured at last. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"Very well," Mrs. Lewis said, reaching up to push a fallen lock of her gray hair behind her ear. "It's almost lunchtime now. I've got everything laid out in the kitchen. If you two would like to start preparing it, I'll be back in a moment. I just need to run an errand."

Allison didn't care what Mrs. Lewis' errand was. She'd set her skirt down as soon as she'd heard the word "lunchtime" and was off her bottom

at “prepare”.

Trying not to seem too forward, she went into the kitchen and started assembling sandwiches.

Sarah joined her soon.

Then so did Mrs. Lewis. “Allison dear, won’t you turn around and greet our lunch guest?”

Cautiously, Allison turned around to meet the laughing blue eyes of Wes. She shot Mrs. Lewis a look, which the cracked woman promptly ignored.

“Captain Tucker, as our guest of honor, why don’t you have a seat right here?” Mrs. Lewis patted a seat that put him in perfect view of the back of where Allison was working.

Allison turned back to the sandwiches and nearly gasped when Wes had the nerve to say, “I don’t mind if I do. The view is quite lovely.”

Had he really said that in front of her friends? Sarah’s chuckle assured her that he had.

Allison quickly finished making their plates and set them on the table, then sat where Mrs. Lewis directed her: right by Wes. Of course. Although it made sense. He *was* her husband.

“You really were craving a sandwich,” Sarah commented when Allison was the first one done.

She blushed at Sarah’s remark, and then again, when Wes pressed his entire thigh against hers. She gave him a startled look but couldn’t read the look on his face.

“Now that you’re done, and Wes is almost finished, perhaps you two would like to spend some time outside,” Mrs. Lewis suggested.

Allison narrowed her eyes on the older woman but was spared having to say anything when Wes spoke up, “Actually, there’s someone I need to see before I meet back with my men.” He brushed the crumbs from his fingers and stood. “Thank you for inviting me for lunch, ladies. I shall have to stop by again sometime.”

“I wonder what he has to do that’s more important than spending time with his new bride,” Mrs. Lewis said with a sniff.

Whoever it was he went to see must not have said all they needed to say to him at lunchtime, Allison thought with a frown, as she glanced up at the clock for the fifth time since the bugle had sounded, indicating training was done for the day. Blessedly, so was her torture, she thought, looking

down at her tender fingers that were covered with scratches and pricks. She'd only managed to sew one seam of her skirt today. At first, she was frustrated; then, she became annoyed and impatient; and finally, by the time she was nearing the last six inches, she just wanted to put it down and cry. Her hands hurt so badly and she had to be the slowest, sloppiest woman to ever hold a needle.

Allison bit her lip to take her mind off that blasted skirt and how tired she was from all the sewing she'd attempted. She contemplated walking back to their room alone, but with all the men wandering around, she'd rather wait for Wes. While she'd probably be just fine, she felt better at his side.

Fortunately, she was spared from having to ask Mrs. Lewis if she could be a permanent guest in her home when a knock came at the door.

"Captain Montgomery, Lieutenant Walker," Mrs. Lewis greeted, opening the door wide enough for them to come inside.

Both men entered and removed their hats.

"Allison," Jack greeted. "One of Wes' men was involved in an altercation a bit ago that resulted in him needing a bit of medical attention before some legal attention, and Wes—"

"Has asked that we escort you to your home," Gray cut in, casting his friend a strange look.

"He sent you both?"

Jack nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am," at the same time Gray flashed her a wolfish grin and said, "Perhaps he was afraid if you spent some time alone with just me, you might throw him over for me."

"Or perhaps he thinks it requires both of you to offer the same amount of protection he alone can," Allison teased.

"I think he just wanted to protect your reputation," Colonel Lewis said quietly, walking into the room. "If just one was seen escorting you to your room, there might be suspicions, but with both..." He shrugged. "Had I known Wes needed to stay late, I could have walked you home—seeing as I'm an old man now and nobody would give seeing the two of us alone together a second thought. But since these two are here, I think you're perfectly safe to allow them to escort you home."

"Of course." Allison scooped up her shawl and put it around her shoulders, then cast a scowl at the miserable skirt that she wanted nothing more than to throw into the fire. She then made her way to the two men,

who each held an arm out for her, and stood between them, placing her hands respectively on each of their extended elbows.

“How are you enjoying Wes?” Jack asked, as soon as they were out of the Lewis’ house.

“I believe what this dimwit means is how are you enjoying being *married* to Wes?” Gray said before she could answer.

She blushed, then cleared her throat. “Actually, he’s been very nice and attentive.”

Gray chuckled. “He has, has he?”

“Give him time, he does have his faults,” Jack informed her.

“And so do you,” Gray retorted.

“That’s fair enough,” Jack agreed. Then he dropped his voice to a stage whisper, “But no one has as many as Gray.”

Allison shook her head. “And what are Wes’ faults?”

She half-expected them to say that he smoked, or snuffed, or drank—of course he’d have to have engaged in all of those habits on the quiet since she had yet to witness him doing anything of the sort—so she was rather surprised when the words, “His feet stink worse than a dead opossum,” came out of Jack’s mouth.

She sputtered with laughter. “I’m sorry, but I imagine yours do, too. What with wearing those leather boots all day in the hot sun and all.”

Gray shook his head. “While that’s true, Wes’ real problem isn’t so much that his feet are surrounded by a bad odor but that he refuses to take his socks off. I’ve been bunking with him for six years—four here and the last two at West Point—and I think, other than when having a bath every other week, I’ve only seen him remove them once. And that was only because he got bit by something on his ankle and wanted to investigate it.”

Allison shook her head. “Perhaps he’s afraid of misplacing them?”

“Perhaps,” Jack agreed. “But if he’d get past that fear, your room might smell a bit better.”

“I haven’t noticed anything.” And that was the truth.

“Ah, that’s because you’re still in the honeymoon stage,” Gray informed her helpfully. “Give it enough time that you’re not so enamored with him, you’ll see his faults.”

“That won’t happen,” she said automatically.

Gray let out a whistle and grinned. “Yes, you, Mrs. Tucker, are definitely in the honeymoon stage.”

She blushed. She hadn't meant to imply she loved and was enamored with him so dearly that she'd always think he could do no wrong. She'd been speaking more that she'd be gone soon, therefore, wouldn't be around to witness Wes' deplorable habits for the remainder of her life. But they didn't need to know that. She cleared her throat and looked ahead to the pile of overflowing crates in front of the door to her room. "What's that?"

"It looks like Charles made a delivery," Jack said.

Gray bent down and picked up one of the wooden boxes, and Jack picked up the other. Allison peered inside the one Gray held: two small towels and two larger towels, a new set of sheets, candles, a lamp, a carafe. Odd. She looked over at the one Jack held, which she suspected had more of the same, and shook her head. Why had Wes bought all of this?

"Shall we take it inside for you, or would you rather we continue to hold it while you inspect it?" Jack asked.

Allison nodded numbly and reached down to pick up the rolled-up rug that was leaning against the wall. "Bring it in, please; and I'll try to find a place for all of it."

"Finished that dress yet?" Wes asked as he walked into their room.

Allison's lips stretched in a way that could be taken as a grimace or a smile. "No, but I'm getting closer."

"I'll just bet you are," he said, trying not to laugh at the skirt he'd glimpsed laying on Mrs. Lewis' sofa earlier today. He discarded his hat and removed his coatee. He loved the way she'd turn red and then pretend to avert her eyes as if it made her uncomfortable to see him remove his clothing in her presence. Just to scandalize her more, he removed his shirt.

Though she didn't say anything, her skin flushed scarlet. "Would you like some coffee?"

He blinked at her, then glanced around the room, noticing towels where they hadn't been before, foodstuffs, some of which he doubted they may ever actually eat, on the shelves and other additions. Charles must have made his delivery while Allison was here. His mouth watered: fresh coffee.

"Yes, I'd love some."

Allison cast him a wary smile and went about making him some coffee.

Wes studied her as she moved around. Something wasn't right; but what it was, he didn't know. "I see that Charles came by," he said for no

other reason than to make idle conversation with her. Perhaps if she was talking, she might let slip what was wrong.

“He did,” she murmured as she went about her business at the table. “I put everything away, except this—” she picked up a little brown parcel, then tossed it at him— “I have no idea what it is, so I don’t know where it goes.”

Wes knit his brows and opened the paper. Then choked on his own tongue. “That carnal devil.”

“Pardon?” She turned her quizzical eyes on him, then frowned. “What is it? I asked both Gray and Jack, but neither would tell me.”

Wes choked again. “You showed this to Jack and Gray?” he asked, smacking himself on his chest with his open palm.

“Yes, they walked me home and helped me carry everything in.” Her frown deepened. “It would seem that your friend Charles finds it acceptable to leave someone’s purchases out in the open.”

“Are you sure then that Charles left this, and it didn’t come from Jack or Gray?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Her tone and look were unreadable. “They both watched me pull it out of the box, then started coughing and choking the same way you did.”

“Gray?”

“Yes.”

That was surprising. With how much Gray talked about sheaths and the necessity of wearing them, he’d have believed it was Gray who’d slipped this into the goods from Charles.

“What is it anyway?”

Allison’s question drew him from his thoughts and brought him up short. How exactly did he explain it, or did he? He shrugged. It was better he explain it than allow her to embarrass herself by asking someone else. “It’s called a sheath,” he said as evenly as he could despite the warmth creeping up his face. “A man wears it over his penis so he doesn’t contract the pox and so his partner doesn’t contract a spawn.”

Now it was Allison’s turn to choke and have her face flush crimson. “Oh, I see.”

Wes closed the brown paper back around the sheath, then tossed it down on the bed next to him. “If you haven’t already noticed, there are no children here. Any of the officers’ wives who become pregnant here don’t

stay. With the extreme heat in the summers and the unusual amount of snow that can come some winters, this crudely built fortress is not ideal. Nor is it possible to get the necessary supplies in a timely manner. While we are part of the United States Army, it seems more often than not, they have forgotten about us. Our rations never arrive on schedule, neither does our pay; and if we try to order anything we might need that wouldn't come on a routine schedule, it takes roughly a year to receive it. Not to mention, the Indians. Charles—or Gray—or whoever included this was only trying to be helpful.”

“I see,” she said, still not looking at him. “But if it was so important, wouldn't they have assumed you already had one of those?”

“No. I know this might come as a surprise to you, but the majority of the men here have never been with a woman. At least not since coming here,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “They might like to, but the only women we ever see regularly are the unmarried Indian maidens; and only a fool would try to sleep with one of them without the benefit of marriage.”

“Not all of the men here have always been here,” she pointed out.

“No, they haven't. But the majority of the forts west of the Mississippi River are isolated, and even some just east of the river. Occasionally, there'll be a group of travelers made up of loose women and one or two men that will come by. If a man has enough money and a strong stomach, he might get his chance then.”

“And how often do these guests come to town?”

“Two, sometimes three, times a year. They'd probably come more often if they got more business, but even men who've been deprived have some standards.” He shook his head. “Not all, mind you, but most of us.”

“I take it you don't think Gray has any standards,” she said, turning to face him, a tin cup in her hand. She handed him the cup.

“No,” he said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “For as much as I respect the man in all other matters, he spends far too much time with the prostitutes when they come to town.”

She blushed but didn't say anything as she looked for a place to sit. She reached for a chair to pull over, but he moved his legs, opening up a place for her to sit on the bed next to him.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” he murmured, blowing on his coffee. He studied her above his coffee cup. She looked tired and perhaps a bit anxious. “Just

because the sheath is here doesn't mean I plan to use it."

"I know that."

"But they don't," Wes surmised. His words confirmed by her slight nod. "It doesn't really matter what they think, does it? Is it any different than the first night you were here, and I stayed in here with you rather than going out to socialize?"

"Well, now it's different."

"Different?" he asked, bewildered. "How is it any different? If you knew they already thought we were, then why does it matter if they continue to think so?"

"Apparently, they didn't think so." She gestured to the package. "Now they'll *know*. Or think they do anyhow," she muttered.

He stared at her. He might not know her well, but he thought he knew her well enough to know this couldn't possibly be what's upsetting her. "If you think they didn't already think we were being intimate, think again. A sheath is just a more reliable method to prevent what I mentioned earlier. Pregnancy can still be prevented, but it's not as clean nor as enjoyable, I shouldn't think, as it is with a sheath. So stop worrying. To their minds, nothing is happening in this room tonight that hasn't already happened the two nights before."

Her face flushed a dark red, giving him a momentary pang of guilt for his words. But only temporary.

"You're not going to be afraid to see them tomorrow now, are you?"

"I suppose not," she said with a shrug.

He nearly sighed. As he'd expected that wasn't what was really bothering her, but what it was, he couldn't place. He lifted his coffee to his lips and took his first sip.

He'd consumed an array of unrecognizable and barely edible food over the course of his eight years in the army. There was very little he considered intolerable. But the coffee she'd made him sure came close.

Wes lowered the cup and gulped down the vile liquid in his mouth.

"Wh-what's wrong?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Nothing," he rasped, looking around the room in vain for something to get the disgusting taste out of his mouth.

"It's not nothing," she countered. Her brows furrowed. "What's wrong? What did I do wrong?"

Wes' eyes collided with hers. Were her eyes glistening? Confound it all, she was on the verge of tears. Putting the memory of the taste from his mind, he brought that blasted tin cup of the grime she called coffee to his mouth and drank every drop. "Nothing's wrong," he said with an exaggerated sigh that he hoped hid his shudder. He used the back of his hand to wipe the moisture from his lips. "Thank you. That was very tasty."

"Do you want more?"

Before he could think to school his features, he felt his eyes flare wide.

"You didn't like it," she said flatly, her lower lip had a slight quiver that hit him squarely in the heart. "I—I made it just how you told me. I obliterated the bean with a heavy object, then kept it in the paper when I soaked it in the water. What didn't I do?"

Roast the bean first. "Nothing, Allison, you did everything just the way I told you to."

"Then why does it look as if you're about to shoot the cat?"

He quirked his eyebrow and was about to assure her that the mistake was his. He hadn't informed her that any coffee beans that came from Charles wouldn't be ready for consumption without roasting them first. But before he could speak, he caught sight of the one thing that could make a man weak in the knees and ruin even a paid jester's good humor: tears.

Just one or two at first, then streams of teardrops started racing down her cheeks as if they were in fear her eyelashes would puncture them.

Without thinking, Wes reached for her and pulled her into his arms. She surprised him when she didn't protest and buried her face against his chest. She didn't say anything and silent tears poured from her eyes onto his shirt.

~Chapter Nine~

Not since her parents died, had Allison slept as peacefully as she had that night in Wes' arms. Perhaps it was weariness from traveling for so long. Or being abandoned in this forsaken place had finally fully sunk in, and so had the understanding that if Nicholas didn't come back for her, she'd have to stay forever. Or the realization that she was terrible at everything she attempted that Wes and others expected her to be good at.

Whatever it was, a flood of emotions had finally caught up to her and she'd let her guard down, then done the one thing she'd vowed never to do: make a spectacle of herself with tears.

Not that Wes had said anything to her about it, as she half-expected him to. No, he just pulled her close and held her, which, while a very sweet gesture, was just as bad as if he had mocked her. She couldn't deny he was charming with his easy grin and quick wit. Now it would be even harder not to notice all of his endearing qualities—not that she thought for one moment she'd be able to anyway, considering how much Mrs. Lewis and Sarah liked to chat about him.

A lively bugle call filled the air and Wes jerked slightly.

Allison went to roll off of his large body, hoping that if she did so fast enough, he might forget that she'd lost control of her wits and cried herself to sleep in his arms. But his arms tightened, keeping her there.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked, his voice rough and uneven from sleeping.

"Much better," she said quickly. She made a move to roll over, but Wes didn't release her.

He ran one hand down her back in an action similar to how he'd soothed her last night as sobs had racked her body, and he brought the other hand up to run his fingers through her hair. "Good. So then you're ready to face the world and finish your gown today?"

She nearly groaned but caught herself smiling instead at the giant grin that split his face to accompany his teasing tone. She playfully swatted at his shoulder. "I suppose. Though it will be very nice to not have to wear this one every day." Not that she thought for one minute that would ever

happen. Her progress was like that of a snail in a footrace. It seemed there would be a good chance of Jesus returning sooner than she finished that gown. She sighed and then started when she noticed Wes' intense gaze.

"We should probably go down to breakfast. I have a few things to do before I meet my men today. Can I join you at Mrs. Lewis' for lunch again?"

"Of course." Allison stood and smoothed her gown, peeking at Wes from below her lashes as he dressed.

After breakfast, Wes escorted her to Mrs. Lewis' and left immediately after announcing to the room, "Allison is so excited to finish her gown that she begged to come early."

Allison was tempted to refute his teasing charge but just shook her head and picked up her skirt. It was a while before Mrs. Lewis and Sarah joined her. Making idle chitchat with them, she finished resewing the left side, this time making sure to make the stitches close enough together that it wouldn't come apart again.

She did her best to tie the thread off at the end, then lifted it into the air to admire her not-so-handiwork, scowling. It looked awful.

"Ain't that a pretty skirt," drawled a deep voice from the other side of her skirt.

She immediately dropped her hands, and her skirt, to her lap and turned her scowl to where Wes had his face pressed to the window screen, grinning at her.

"What do you want?" She blushed. She hadn't meant for that to come out so sharp.

Wes appeared either not to notice or care. "Ladies, we're about to have shooting practice out here. You might want to shut this window."

"Shooting practice," Allison echoed. "Here?"

"Well, not actually at the house, no, but my men will stand in a line out here and shoot down there." He pointed his finger to her right toward some distant place she couldn't see from where she was sitting. "It could get loud."

"And smokey," Mrs. Lewis added, standing.

"And vulgar," Sarah whispered in Allison's ear as they watched Wes walk away and to his men. "Everyone claims it's sailors who have filthy mouths, but they clearly have not visited the soldiers here at Fort Gibson."

“Surely not Wes?” Allison blurted before she could stop herself. To hide her embarrassment at asking such a forward question, she plucked her needle from her skirt and began sewing the hem at the bottom.

“No, not Wes,” Sarah agreed with a small burble of laughter and a shake of her head. “He’s one of the only true gentlemen here, but on occasion...” She shrugged. “It’s expected, of course, but not to worry, Wes does not have the same reputation that many of the men have.”

“Oh.” She accidentally pricked herself with the needle and winced.

“He’s a good boy,” Mrs. Lewis put in. “Not like those three rascals he’s friends with.”

Sarah waved a hand through the air. “Oh, they’re not so bad. They’re just not as mature as Wes.” She turned to Allison. “Really, dear, if you’ll excuse *me* for being vulgar, I must tell you that you have yourself one hell of a husband.”

“Sarah,” Mrs. Lewis burst out, her lips twitching.

“You can’t say that it’s not true,” Sarah challenged.

“No, I can’t,” Mrs. Lewis agreed.

Neither could Allison dispute such claims. He’d been very good to her since she’d come; helping her with this, escorting her around, offering her protection. And then of course, there was the way he’d treated her last night. He’d certainly had several opportunities to take advantage of her, or worse, but he hadn’t. Even when he teased her, it wasn’t in a malicious way that made her feel bad about herself, but lighthearted. He would certainly make someone one hell of a husband, as Sarah put it. She tried to push past the little hint of sadness that it wouldn’t be her. Not that she should be sad about such a thing. She barely knew the man! A few days in his company didn’t staunch all of her old feelings for Nicholas. She was merely drawn to Wes because he was here and he was being polite. Once Nicholas came back for her, she’d forget all about Wes and her feelings for Nicholas would rekindle. She was sure of it.

“I first met Wes when my husband, George, brought him and a few other cadets over to dine at our house after they’d proven they could shoot a gun and hit the center of the target,” Mrs. Lewis gushed. “Most of the boys who’d passed George’s test and came to dinner were either extremely rough—and to be frank, quite frightening—or they had manners more refined than mine. Wes was different. When I first glimpsed him, I thought he’d be one of the more burly ones who’d make it necessary to order new plates and

furniture after he left. However, he wasn't as careless as the others his size, but neither did he act all stuffy." She shrugged. "It's hard to explain. He was just comfortable to be around. Well, you already know that since you married him."

Allison nodded silently and glanced out the window to where Wes was walking around to each of his men and correcting their form or answering their questions. She'd just never considered it before, but Mrs. Lewis was right. Despite Wes' tall, broad build, he *did* make people around him comfortable—including her.

"Say, you never did tell us how the two of you met," Mrs. Lewis said with a slight frown.

No, she'd been able to avoid the topic the past few days. "He's protective," she blurted, hoping that listing one of Wes' good qualities would make Mrs. Lewis forget her question.

"Especially when it comes to you," Sarah said with a snort. "John, my husband, told me that yesterday when Billy Fremont dared to ask Wes how he was enjoying your wares, Wes told him if he ever so much as looked at you again, he'd strip him of his rifle, both the one that shoots bullets and the one that shoots his seed."

"He didn't!" Allison burst out, trying not to laugh. Her mother had once explained what would happen after she married and her imagination was conjuring up all sorts of images.

"He did," Mrs. Lewis agreed, giggling. "George had to threaten Wes with a week in the stockade if he were to go through with it."

"Only a week?" Sarah asked, shaking her head.

Mrs. Lewis shrugged. "I suppose that's probably because everyone around here would like to divest Private Fremont of his privates."

Allison laughed at her jest, but when her eyes drifted back to Wes, all of her humor was gone. Colonel Lewis was stalking over to him, his face hard and his posture stiff.

Unease settled in Wes' chest as Colonel Lewis approached.

"Send these men to march with McCorkle's and meet me by the southeast tower," Colonel Lewis said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Wes did as he was commanded, then walked over to where Colonel Lewis wanted him to wait for orders. If his suspicions were correct—and oh

how he wished to be proven wrong for once—his day was about to be filled with many unpleasant discoveries.

This unease was compounded when an unusually quiet Jack and grim-faced Gray joined him, followed closely by Colonel Lewis.

Wordlessly, the four men huddled together.

“Boys, I need you to ride the Texas Trail with me this morning.”

“The Texas Trail?” Jack asked with a swallow.

Wes nodded his understanding, his stomach knotting. The Texas Trail was one of the quickest but most dangerous trails along the frontier. Intended to be a cattle trail for Texas ranchers to get their cattle to Kansas and Missouri faster, the Texas Trail went right through the center of the most populated part of Indian Territory. And anytime they’d had to go investigate along the trail, they always found the same thing: death.

“Has there been an incident?” Gray asked, his voice quiet, almost reverent.

Colonel Lewis pulled a folded square from his pocket and showed it to the men.

The specific markings were unreadable to them, but the images were clear. Another group of settlers or travelers had gone where they shouldn’t and now they were dead.

“We’ll go investigate,” Wes said, taking their only clue of where to look from Colonel Lewis.

Nodding, Colonel Lewis said, “I’ll be conducting inspections of your men today. That should keep them busy while you’re gone. When you get back, I’ll be waiting in my office for a full report of your findings.”

Without another word, the three walked to the stables and saddled their horses, making sure to grab rifles and shovels, too. In the four years Wes had been there, he’d only been assigned such a task three other times. None of those three times had brought him pleasant memories or peaceful sleep. Instead, they served to remind him just how dangerous it was to live out here.

The first time he’d gone, he’d taken some of his men with him, thinking they could help. They didn’t. Instead, they became furious with what they saw, and he had a hard time keeping them in line. A week later, he had to have them moved to another fort after he and Colonel Lewis overheard two soldiers planning a surprise attack on the Cherokees for what they’d done. They were here to keep peace, not create war. If the Indians

were caught in the act of hurting someone, it was the soldier's duty to do whatever necessary to stop it. But hunting them down afterwards only created more trouble. The best way to handle this type of thing was to take precautions to make sure there wasn't an opportunity for an attack.

"Which way should we ride?" Jack asked, mounting his horse.

"South," Wes said before Gray could offer his suggestion.

"You seem rather certain," Gray mused.

"That's because I am," he bit off, wishing to be proven wrong. But he knew in his gut that wouldn't happen. One look at those hieroglyphics had confirmed Wes' fears: that stagecoach driver who'd come through town driving the stage Allison had arrived on had been too drunk and belligerent to heed Wes' advice, claiming it would take him too long to go back to Freedom, the way Wes told him he needed to go. He'd continued to ride south along the Texas Trail and now he, along with anyone else still in the stage, was likely dead or as good as dead. His stomach lurched and he swung up onto his mount, doing his best to look impassive.

In silence, the trio rode south. Just how bad would this be? Were they all in fact dead? Or had some been spared their lives? Once before the Cherokees had taken two travelers prisoners, and the Army had bartered for their freedom. Perhaps, they'd done that again this time.

He tightened his grip on the reins. There was no use in concluding anything until they knew the full details.

An hour passed. Then another. Then finally, they crested the top of a small hill and came to an abrupt stop.

In the middle of the path before them was an overturned carriage, splintered and breaking apart. A door was missing from the side and shards of glass littered the dirt, sparkling like dozens of diamonds as the mid-day sun hit their sharp, jagged edges. From where he sat, mounted on his horse, all that was visible was the destruction of the carriage. But he knew better than to think that was the extent of it. That was only the beginning.

He didn't even have to look to know that someone hadn't survived this unscathed. The smell of decaying flesh in the hot sun burned his nose. Vultures and other hungry birds flew overhead, not deterred at all by the three men who were clearly still alive.

Wordlessly, the three swung down off their horses and trudged over to the carriage.

Nausea swirled in Wes' stomach as acidic bile rose in his throat, filling his mouth with the vile substance. He swallowed and grimaced as it burned his throat again on its return to his stomach.

Beside him, Jack wiped the back of his sleeve across his slightly parted lips. On the other side of him, Gray looked unmoved. He wasn't though. He couldn't be. Nobody could be here seeing and smelling this and be unmoved—least of all Gray. But he only knew this because he'd seen Gray react this way before. When Gray was troubled or uncertain, he'd put up a facade so strong it was almost believable. Almost.

Not wishing to offer assurance to his friend and make him uncomfortable, Wes continued his quiet walk to the overturned carriage. With each step he took, it felt as though his feet had grown five pounds heavier until it was near impossible to move them.

Finally, he rounded the side and swore under his breath.

Never before had he seen such a massacre. Lifeless, bloodied bodies were sprawled out in front of them, surrounded by rivers of dried blood that had stained the dirt crimson.

There were four of them lying there. Three were women. Two looked to be middle aged or older, and the remaining one couldn't have been older than Wes. Next to her lay what looked like a little boy about five.

Nausea roiled in his gut and Wes averted his eyes, looking for something nearby to cover their faces with; but nothing had been left. Like other tribes, Cherokees wasted nothing and killed only for purpose—not for fun. Likely they'd bring these ladies' clothes and other belongings to trade next time they came to barter. The thought made bile surge in Wes' throat again. This time he was unable to contain it and spit in the high grass.

"Throats," Jack croaked, drawing attention to the way the throats of all of the passengers had been slit.

"Scalped, too," Gray said without a hint of emotion.

Wes took a deep breath, but it did nothing to calm his nerves or steady his gait as he walked forward. The only one missing from this scene was the stage driver. He blew out a deep breath. If he'd tried to run, his body wouldn't be far.

Pausing, Wes squinted his eyes and did a quick survey of the tall grass that skirted the sides of the trail but didn't see anything. He resumed his steps, then stopped. A hand was reaching out from under the side of the

stagecoach that was lying on the ground. He swore. An inch up from the hand appeared to be some fabric, presumably a sleeve.

Wes whistled to catch Jack and Gray's attention, then beckoned them over with his hand.

Together, the three hefted the carriage up just enough to confirm the body underneath was dead.

"He must have been dead before they arrived," Jack commented.

Wes nodded.

"Or shortly afterward," Gray added, using the toe of his boot to point to a gun nearby.

Wes kicked the dirt in the direction of the dead man's face. "You no good, yellow-bellied coward," he mumbled. "If you weren't already dead, I'd kill you myself for being such a coward and leaving three women and a little boy that way."

With the lack of grace and reverence due a dead man, the three released their grip on the carriage and let it fall back where it had been.

"At least this happened after Allison arrived," Jack said quietly.

Wes' eyes shot to his friend, but he couldn't form a coherent thought. It was devastating that this had to happen at all, but he couldn't explain just why his heart hurt a little more at the mention of his imitation wife's name. Had she been here— had she made it back to the stagecoach in time—

He couldn't even finish the thought. She might not actually be his wife, and he might have termed her as nothing more than a passing annoyance with frivolous habits not so long ago; but for a reason he couldn't begin to explain, the idea that he could have met her this way and not seen her fiery and full of life made his blood turn to ice.

"Right," he said, hoping they didn't notice how gravelly his voice was. "And to think she wanted me to be her sole escort to Santa Fe," he grumbled under his breath, kicking the stagecoach that was on top of the spineless coach driver for good measure.

Just then, something hit the ground.

Wes bent to look under the stage to see what it was. Nothing really, just a little brown leather bundle. He reached for it and took a peek inside. Folded papers. He plucked one out.

My Dearest Allison,

The winter is mild, but my heart is most cold without you here with me in Austin—

Wes tore his eyes away and scowled down at the leather pouch in his hand. Why was it the Indians had to take lives and leave unimportant nonsense like this? He would have scoffed at the absurdity had the circumstances been any different. It was clear that even the Indians knew what was of value and what was useless. He'd always heard they only took what they knew they could use. Apparently they didn't even deem the letters worth the fuel for their fire.

With a grunt he stuffed the letter back into the pouch with all of the others that Allison had thought to save, then walked over to his horse and set the leather pouch on the saddle and grabbed his shovel.

Joining Jack and Gray, the three dug five shallow graves off the side of the road.

Each alone with his own thoughts as they dug and the sun rose all the way to the middle of the sky.

Just as the sun was beginning to drop in the western sky, Wes threw the last scoop of dirt on top of the grave of the little boy, then dug in his pocket for his handkerchief. He swiped it across his sweaty brow before shoving it back into his pocket and mounting his horse.

~Chapter Ten~

Wes was unusually quiet as he came into their room.

Not that she was overly surprised. She hadn't seen him since Colonel Lewis approached him while his men were conducting shooting practice. He hadn't come to lunch as he'd promised, and Wes didn't seem the sort to break his word. Then, when the day had been over, it was Colonel Lewis who walked her home. Not Wes. Not Jack and Gray. Colonel Lewis—a man who would hardly say a word when she asked where Wes was. Though his mouth didn't speak, his hard eyes and tight jaw said enough: something very bad indeed had happened.

And now seeing Wes, she was certain she was correct.

The man who'd joined her in this room the last three days had been full of energy and quick remarks—no matter what had transpired between them the day or night before.

But not today.

Today he was subdued and looked considerably more tired than he had in days past. His blue eyes, lacked that sparkle and warmth she'd grown to expect, replaced instead with cold indifference or perhaps even worry?

If not for the hard set of his face, she might have tried to break the tension by teasing him about having a rough day filling out paperwork or commanding his men to march, which were the job obligations the other officers' wives had told her the officers did. But instead, she poured him a cup of the tea that had arrived with the coffee yesterday.

"Thank you," he said, taking it from her and gulping a hearty swallow.

She frowned. He hated tea. Something *was* wrong. But what? If they knew each other a bit better, she'd prod him for details. She set her pot down and nearly scoffed. When had that ever stopped her from being inquisitive? "Is something wrong, Wes?"

"It's not for you to worry about."

Her frown deepened. "Yes, it is, I'm your—" She cut herself off before she made fools of both of them. "Wes," she started again, "I know we haven't known each other that long, but we've known each other long enough for me to know that something is clearly bothering you."

“You’re right. There is,” he admitted. He set the tea she’d given him down on the table, then reached for her hands and pulled her to him. “I’m glad you weren’t a better throw.”

She furrowed her brows. “What?”

He didn’t say anything, just squeezed her hands a fraction tighter, then let her go. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather not join the others for dinner tonight.”

Since she didn’t enjoy the meals they were often served, she couldn’t complain; though she desperately wanted to know what had transformed Wes from the glib man who normally greeted her into this shuttered and withdrawn shell of who he usually was. “Did you want me to go get plates from the kitchen?” she wondered aloud.

“No. I don’t feel like eating much; and I know if you brought us each a plate, I’d have to eat yours, too.”

Allison stared at him, uncertain. Was he trying to be insulting or was that just a poorly thought out statement? His next words gave her answer the sought.

“I purchased some dried fruit, nuts and jerky from Charles on my way in tonight. You might not like the jerky, but I’m sure the dried fruit and nuts will be more to your liking than undercooked salt pork.” He pulled three little packages of brown paper wrapped around food from the inside pocket of his coatee and handed them to her.

“Thank you.” She unfolded the paper that was wrapped around the nuts and gave him a small handful, then picked up a few for herself.

The peanuts were delicious. Positively delicious. They tasted a bit older than they normally did, but she’d become so hungry, they tasted fit for a king. Next, she opened what she assumed was the jerky. There were several large, thin sheets of what appeared to be dried meat. She’d never seen anything like it before and handed him one of the sheets, then did her best to pull the second sheet in half. But it was hard and no matter how firmly she gripped the top with her left hand and tried to jerk her right hand in the opposite direction, it just wouldn’t pull apart.

Wordlessly, Wes reached for her jerky, pulled it right in half as if he were merely ripping apart an unwanted piece of parchment, then he handed it back to her.

She took it and brought it to her nose. It smelled spicy and rugged. Rather like Wes in a way. Pushing that thought from her mind, she put the

end of the jerky in her mouth, clamped her teeth down and pulled her head in one direction while pulling the end of the jerky in her hand in the other direction. She severed the piece and Wes let out a small chuckle.

Smiling at her victory, she chewed the piece of jerky, which really wasn't so bad. She took another bite and debated if she wanted to ask exactly what animal it was she was eating. As the flavor filled her mouth, she decided against it. It was better not to know.

She finished off her piece and opened the next paper with the dried fruit. She picked up a few pieces and extended them toward Wes.

He put his hand up to stop her. "No, thank you. I bought those just for you."

"I can share," she insisted, pushing her hand in his direction.

He gave her a terse nod, then accepted the pieces of dried fruit and ate them.

"Thank you," she said after she ate her fill and wrapped the remaining food back into their papers. "I hope you're not angry with me for not eating more of my meals downstairs, it's just—"

"There's nothing to explain. At least not something I don't already understand. It took me a while to grow accustomed to army food, too." A shadow crossed his face and he reached down to untie his boots. He kicked them off, then reached for his pillow and fluffed it what little it would fluff.

Allison sat lifeless, unsure what to do as Wes made himself comfortable on the bed. Then, just as she was beginning to wonder if she should join him on the bed or not, he reached out to her again.

She stood and put her hand in his, letting him pull her toward the bed.

Still holding her hand, he moved over to the side and gently guided her to lie down next to him. He rolled on his side to face her, his hand still holding hers. Instinctively, she reached up with her free hand and idly combed her fingers through his hair. The setting sun allowed her to still be able to see him and the distant look in his eyes. A look she'd do just about anything to make go away.

Last night he'd held and comforted her when she needed it; and though she had no idea what was wrong with Wes and doubted he planned to tell her, she'd be damned if she didn't offer him the same comfort and affection when he needed it.

OceanofPDF.com

~Chapter Eleven~

As hard as he tried to fight sleep, Wes' eyes would grow heavy and shut—only to allow for a gut wrenching image to form in his mind. He jerked awake, taking note of how Allison's fingers curled into his hair when he did.

She opened her uncertain brown eyes.

He held her gaze, but that's all he'd do. He couldn't think of how to tell her what had happened to the stage. He squeezed her hand, resisting the urge to take her in his arms and hold her again as he had last night. She'd trusted him then. Not saying he didn't think she trusted him now, but it was different. She'd *needed* to be held then. Every fiber in his being might be screaming to take her in his arms and hold her, assuring her everything would be fine; she was safe. But that was him and his own selfishness wanting to do that. She didn't even know to be upset; and for as much as he might like to hold her again, he wasn't enough of a cad to purposely upset her just to do it.

She resumed that torment of running her fingers through his hair, twirling it, and scratching his scalp; but no words were spoken.

The sun completely drifted away, leaving them at the mercy of the sliver of moonlight that was shining through their window. Her hand stilled in his hair and her eyelids shut. He didn't know for how long, but he stared at her sleeping form as best he could see her until exhaustion finally overtook him.

After a time sleeping, he woke and went for his morning ride, something he hadn't done the day before because he hadn't wanted to let go of Allison.

He rode Midnight hard and fast across the prairie, trying to put everything from his mind. He pulled Midnight to a stop and took in a deep breath before turning him around to walk back. From the corner of his eye, something flashed. Curious, he walked over to where the flashing had been, his stomach knotting with each step. It was as if there was some sort of gravitational pull to the flashing object. A pull he could not break.

Nearing the object, he saw a stream of blood and torn garments. He looked farther ahead. There was a lifeless woman with dried or drying blood covering her face. Ten feet to the right of her there was another. He turned his horse but froze in place when he saw another. Then another. Everywhere he turned there was a dead woman and blood. Blood was everywhere. He dropped his gaze to the ground and there was even blood under his horse. His heart pounded wildly in his chest, and he urged Midnight to run; but the horse didn't budge.

He grabbed his revolver from his waistband and cocked it. He'd never shot a person before, but heaven help him, he'd do it.

A twig snapped behind him and he jerked his head around to see who had joined him.

It was Allison. Still dressed to perfection without a drop of blood on her, he took her in momentarily, swallowing convulsively. "Run," he barked.

"Wes?" she questioned, stepping closer to him.

Panic built in his chest. "Run!" he repeated.

"Wes?" Her calm voice only made him panic more. Did she not understand what all the blood was about?

"Allison, run away. Go as far away as you can and hide," he commanded.

"Wes." She took a step toward him, then another, and then suddenly he began shaking. "Wes," she said a bit louder. "Wes." She placed her hands on his leg. "Wes."

He shook his leg to shake off her hold, but instead of letting go, she clung and started shaking *him*.

"Wes! Wes!"

"Allison," he yelled in return. "Stop shaking me, you insufferable woman, and go away."

"I would if you'd wake up," came her calm voice.

Wes was bewildered, still trying to shake her loose as the fog lifted and the endless prairie and bloodied bodies started to evaporate until there was nothing left but him and Allison.

She was no longer at his feet, but her face was now even with his and her hand was in his hair as it had been last night.

He reached up to confirm he wasn't imagining it and his hand closed over hers. He blinked his eyes open and met her soft brown ones. "Sorry,"

he said unevenly.

"It's all right," she said, scratching his scalp once with her nails. "Would you like to talk about it?"

He closed his eyes for an extended blink. "No." A commotion from outside caught his attention. "Has the bugle already sounded?"

She nodded against the pillow. "About ten minutes ago."

Wes closed his eyes and groaned. "We'd better get up."

Neither made a move to do so.

He shot her a quick grin. "You have a dress to finish." He chuckled at the scowl that came over her face.

"Right, and you have men to instruct how to hit a target."

"Among other things," he muttered as a memory of just how bad a few of his newest soldiers were at hitting a target the size of a door. He was sure that even Allison could have hit that target, but not some of his men. As for their marching, there was still work to be done there, too.

But those things didn't seem so important right now as he looked into the wide eyes of the woman lying next to him. What would it take to make her stay with him? And where did *that* thought come from? She was pleasant enough, and even more pleasant to look at, but what had happened to inspire him to want to make her stay? Was it that he couldn't imagine the embarrassment or questions from his friends about having to give up the larger room he'd grown accustomed to sharing with her and having to go back to sharing not only a room with three other men but also a bed with Jack? No. He didn't owe them any explanation, nor would he offer one. He'd just gloat about the time he got to spend away from their absurd company.

Perhaps then, the reason he wanted her to stay was so he could protect her. That seemed logical. The way she'd described her intended made him sound...peculiar, almost too feminine. He might not be completely unable to protect her, of course. He might just not be as masculine as Wes or the men Wes had been in the company of for the last eight years. She'd said he was in investments of some sort. That kind of job required a man to sit on his hind quarters for hours on end each day. He shuddered. He had his share of keeping records and updating logs that kept him at a desk for two hours each day. He couldn't imagine how painful it would be to have to be there more than that.

He inwardly sighed and continued to stare into Allison's unblinking eyes. None of that really mattered. Frankly, he couldn't place exactly why the thought had occurred to him, but now that it was there... He'd already planned to make her life a little easier yesterday at lunch but had been unable to when Colonel Lewis had sent him out to investigate. He forced the memory of what they'd found from his mind and settled for thinking of the surprise he had waiting for Allison over in his office. Today. Barring any other unpleasantness, he'd meet her for lunch today and see if his gift was met with as much excitement as he'd hoped.

"All right, my lady, that's enough lying around. We must be about our duties," Wes said.

Allison gave his hair a playful tug and pursed her lips in the worst expression of annoyance he'd seen her try yet. "True ladies don't have any duties."

"And you'd know this because you were a true lady in Boston?"

"No. But I met a few who were visiting from England, and they said all they did all day was sew and embroider."

"Duties," he said with a nod. "One of which you need to learn and the other you need to hurry up with." He glanced down at her crushed and dirty gown. "Do you think you'll be done with your sewing today? I have a surprise for you tonight and I'd hate for you not to have a pretty gown to wear for the occasion."

"In that case, you'd better know now so you're not disappointed, but I'll be wearing this gown tonight."

And for the rest of your life if he had to hazard a guess based on the progress he'd seen. "At least you look pretty in it," he said without thinking.

"Thank you." The blush that stained her cheeks made his own embarrassment at saying such a forward thing worth it. She rolled over and took to her feet.

Wes couldn't fathom why, but he already missed the closeness of her body and the way she'd touched him all night. Just another reason he had to find a way to convince her to stay. He ran his hands over his face and rolled out of bed. This was going to be a long day.

If Allison thought she was frustrated yesterday with her sewing, she discovered she hadn't seen real frustration until today. Yesterday she'd

sewn up the hem along the bottom of her dress so the fabric wouldn't fray and unravel. At least that was something helpful for the dress. Today she had to somehow cut more fabric to make the upper portion of her dress. Sleeves. Bodice. Back. Shoulder pieces. Cuffs. All she could do was stare at the fabric in front of her and try not to let the other ladies know of her distress.

"Perhaps you'd like to borrow my pattern?" Sarah offered.

Allison grinned. She'd forgotten all about the pattern Wes had bought her. "No. I have one. I was just thinking."

"Oh, for the modifications you plan to make to the top so it matches the progressive skirt?" Mrs. Lewis asked innocently. Apparently the woman believed Allison to be the expert seamstress she claimed to be who was bent on perfection, thus the reason she took so long. Or Mrs. Lewis knew the truth but was too afraid of hurting her feelings to say anything.

Allison nodded wildly at the suggestion, then dug in the bottom of the blasted sewing basket she'd been using until she found the pattern. She really wasn't sure the best way to do this. Perhaps if she just laid out all the pieces and pinned the paper on the fabric, it'd be time for lunch. She could cut them out this afternoon... Then, she'd worry about tomorrow when it got here and, in the meantime, pray a miracle transpired.

Suppressing the scream of aggravation she so desperately wanted to let loose, she began about her work.

Just as she shoved the last pin through the paper and fabric, a loud *rap, rap, rap* came at the door.

Allison jumped up. "I'll get it."

Mrs. Lewis and Sarah lifted their brows at her, but she didn't care. She welcomed any kind of distraction, answering the door notwithstanding.

It was Wes.

"Come in," she said.

He did just as Mrs. Lewis and Sarah came over to join them.

"I have a gift for you," he said, handing her a large package from behind his back.

"Why?" Her face flushed. It was rather uncomfortable to be receiving a gift from him in front of her friends, and because of their soft gasps and winks, she'd only made it worse with such a stupid question. He'd mentioned he had a surprise for her, but thought he'd said he'd give it to her tonight.

“I wasn’t aware that I’d do time in the stockade for bringing my wife a gift. But if that’s the consequence—” he reached for the package that was in her hands, turned his head to the side, twisted his lips and closed his eyelids to mere slits, then abruptly let go— “no, I think you should still have it. If I must spend the night there for giving my wife a present, I’m sure it will be worth it when I get out.”

Her eyes widened. Then his did when he realized how the others might have taken his words.

He removed his shako and raked his hand through his dark hair. “Open it.”

Allison set the parcel on the table and reached for the ends of the twine. She’d never been one to refuse gifts; but this one felt strangely like a bundle of folded fabric; and the last thing she wanted was more fabric. He’d made such a fuss about her not wasting the fabric he’d already bought her. If he bought her more, it *would* be a waste.

Feeling three sets of eyes boring into her, urging her to open his gift, Allison took a deep breath and pulled the string to release the knot. Forcing a weak smile, she reached tentative fingers to the top part of the paper and opened it, and just as expected, her eyes collided with a piece of white fabric.

“What is it?” Sarah asked.

“I—I don’t know,” she said honestly. It was certainly an article of clothing, but it looked strangely like it had a pocket.

“Hold it up,” Wes encouraged.

Allison picked up the garment, watching in amazement as it unfolded in front of her. “A shirt?”

Wes grinned and took it from her. “I know it’s not what a Bostoner like yourself is used to seeing young ladies wear, but I thought perhaps you might be willing to make an exception.”

Allison nodded numbly; still not sure she’d comprehended what he’d meant.

As if reading her mind, Wes said, “Mrs. Lewis, would it be all right if Allison slipped behind your dressing screen and tried on the skirt she’s made with this shirt? I’m not sure I bought her the right size, and if I didn’t, I’ll need to go back to see if I can find another.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Lewis said, beaming.

Allison swallowed past the hard lump that had formed in her throat. The miracle she'd so desperately needed had just happened, and once again, it came in the form of one Captain Wes Tucker.

OceanofPDF.com

~Chapter Twelve~

Wes knew buying her a shirt to wear with her skirt was only a temporary solution. She still needed a wardrobe; and it was apparent that while her pride might still refuse to believe it, she was not going to be able to make herself a suitable set of clothing—especially if he could convince her to stay here with him.

“Mrs. Lewis, I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Anything for you, Wes.”

Wes hid his grin. Mrs. Lewis had almost been like a second mother to him since he’d joined the army and met her at West Point. “I heard a rumor day before yesterday that a ball is scheduled for the middle of next week. As you know, Allison doesn’t have a suitable gown—”

“Say no more, it would be my pleasure to make her one.”

“Thank you,” Wes said, a measure of relief washing over him. “If you don’t mind, could this be our secret? I’d like to surprise her with it, if possible?”

A smile split Mrs. Lewis’ wrinkled face. “If I were twenty years younger, I’d have married you in an instant. You don’t worry about anything. I’ll have her dressed like a queen. Let me go see what all I have that I can use,” she said as she scurried away toward a large chest at the end of her bed.

“Mrs. Ridgely,” Wes said, favoring the other woman with a smile. He didn’t know her quite as well as Mrs. Lewis. General Ridegly—or General Rigid, as some of them referred to him behind his back due to his rigid stature and strict, formal mannerisms—had only been sent here a year ago and was the other four officers’ commander. He wasn’t overly familiar with General Ridgely’s officers, as he preferred to be stricter with his men than Colonel Lewis was. His wife, however, was a stark contrast to his rigid indifference. What Wes had seen of her, she seemed very sweet and often found ways to make others aware of their mistakes not by condemning someone for them, but rather by taking a more subtle approach. She’d probably already surmised what Wes had about Allison’s sewing skills, so

there wasn't any reason not to be blunt. "Would it be possible for you to make her a gown, too?" he blurted.

She walked over to where she'd been sitting earlier and lifted up what she'd been working on. "I started one for her yesterday. It should be done tomorrow or the day after."

Wes could hide his grin no longer. "Thank you. I am sure she will appreciate it far more than the shirt I bought for her."

"Don't discount yourself, Captain," Mrs. Ridgely said, laying the gown back in its earlier spot. "I've been sewing as fast as I can to finish this gown for her, and now I'll be able to slow down and make sure I do it right. Besides, I know you haven't courted too many young ladies, but I've never seen one as excited about a gift as she was after you explained what you meant for her to do with it."

Wes' heart skipped a beat. He knew she'd looked a bit apprehensive to open it, then confused when she realized it was a shirt. But he'd been a bit uncertain if she was really as excited as she appeared about having it. Mrs. Ridgely's confirmation was just the encouragement he needed.

He idly scratched his jaw and debated if he should ask her if Allison ever spoke of him or gave any indication that she might like to stay, but Allison emerged before he could decide if that would be prudent to ask or make him seem like a besotted fool.

"Would you look at that?" he drawled.

Allison ran her hands over her abdomen, then down her hips where the top of her skirt hung loosely. "I fear that I've lost a bit of weight since I took my measurements."

"That's all right," he argued. "I'll see if I can find you a belt and perhaps Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Ridgely can help you put some loops along the top. They're both experts at attaching and refashioning them, when you consider how many their husbands have busted over the years."

"He's right about that," Mrs. Lewis said, shaking her head ruefully.

Wes took a step toward Allison. "How does that shirt fit?" There really wasn't a reason to ask that. He could see just as well as everyone else that it hugged her breasts perfectly, but he had the strangest urge to touch her shoulders and run his hands down her arms. He stepped behind her and brushed his hands over her sleeves to straighten out the imaginary wrinkles, then fixed her collar. "It looks like a good fit," he said hoarsely, coming back to stand in front of her again.

“Thank you,” she said, not meeting his eyes.

He wondered what that was about but didn’t wish to embarrass her by asking in front of her friends, so he settled for just telling her that she was welcome. “I’ll see if I can find a suitable belt.”

Allison bobbed her head in understanding, then went back behind the dressing screen to change.

When she finished, they had a quick lunch. Then it was time for Wes to go back to work.

“You wouldn’t happen to have an extra belt in the store room, would you, Jack?” Wes asked as he dropped into his chair.

Jack lowered the paper he’d been reading and narrowed his eyes. “First a shirt two sizes smaller than normal and now a belt? Have you contracted some sort of disease?”

“No, you dimwit,” Gray said, joining them. “It’s quite clear *he’s* not the one wearing them. What I’d like to know is if his wife knows he’s trying to outfit her like a soldier.”

“You ain’t really thinking to dress her up like one of us and disguise her as one of your men, are you?” McCorkle asked, his blue eyes wide, presumably because of all the rules—both spoken and implied—such a thing would break.

“Why the hell would he do that?” Gray asked with his usual bluntness as he dug into one of the deep drawers he and Wes shared.

“I don’t know. Ask Tucker. He’s the one who is outfitting his wife like a soldier,” McCorkle said.

Wes, Gray and Jack exchanged looks. *This* was the harm in joining conversations late—and being a bit of a simpleton at times.

“As it would happen, all of the Boston ladies are currently wearing shirts tucked into their skirts rather than full gowns. I just thought that since she was separated from her luggage, I could help her out by obtaining the shirt so all she had to make was her skirt.” At least that last part was partially true, so he wasn’t completely fibbing.

“Speaking of her luggage,” Gray said, tossing on the table that blasted leather case Wes had found the day they’d found the overturned stage.

Wes refused to let his face burn as he cleared his throat, forced a scowl and snapped it up. The truth was, he’d rather die a slow and painful death than to admit he was holding onto a bundle of letters full of love and admiration meant for Allison—written by another man. Ignoring, Gray’s

imploring stare, complete with a lifted eyebrow and curious eyes, Wes tucked the offending parcel under his arm and chastised himself for not hiding it better. He'd been sharing a desk with Gray for more than two years now and had never once seen the man open up their drawer. Now, he'd just have to find a better hiding spot for it for the time being. In truth, he *should* bring it up to Allison and give it to her. It was rightfully hers to have and the letters were meant for her, but for a reason he couldn't quite put words to, he wasn't ready yet to give it back.

"It won't be so fancy, but I'm sure I can find something," Jack said. He leaned back in his chair, taking the front two legs a good six inches off the floor, and folded his hands over his abdomen. "Say, Allison doesn't happen to have any sisters who might come visiting anytime soon, does she?"

Wes hoped not. "I don't think so. Why?"

"I was just thinking I could use a wife, that's all."

Gray snorted. "With a statement as flattering as that one, I'm sure you'll have one in no time."

Jack frowned and brought his chair back to the floor with a thud. "What? It's no secret that being a married man has some advantages. For one, I no longer have to share a bed with Wes. If I got married, you two—" he pointed to Gray and McCorkle— "wouldn't have to share a bed any longer, either."

"And while that sounds like a blessing and a double boon, since you won't be in the room any longer, either, that is not a reason to get married."

"Well, that's not the only reason," Jack argued. "There are other advantages that Wes gets to enjoy."

No, at present Wes wasn't enjoying the other advantages of marriage that Jack was alluding to, either. Not that he'd ever admit that to them.

"Then find some private time and take care of *those* needs yourself," Gray said flippantly.

For as much time as Gray spent with the prostitutes when they came to town, one would think Gray would understand Jack's motives in that regard.

"Jack, I don't know if anyone in Allison's family plans to come visit her—" mainly because he didn't know just who her family was or what relations she might have, but these three didn't need to know that— "but now isn't the best time to be thinking about a wife. Allison has had a very hard time adjusting to the lack of creature comforts. You might have better

luck sending off for a bride when you get moved to another fort that's not so isolated."

"There's plenty for a lady here," Jack argued. "It's just your lack of imagination and protectiveness that has kept Allison from enjoying her time here."

Wes frowned. "Would you care to explain yourself? It's not as if I can just have her wander around the fort during the day. She needs to be with the other ladies."

"Of course," Jack agreed. "But as soon as you're done for the day, you escort her to your room, then to dinner, and then back to your room. Then we see her again at breakfast and that's it. Have you considered that even though we're just men and can be a bit crass at times, she might enjoy playing cards with us or going out to the bonfire?"

Wes couldn't believe his ears. Any idiot knew those were not activities in which a lady would like to participate.

"Do you plan to take her out tomorrow afternoon to see the rounders game?" Gray asked, saving Wes from having to respond to Jack's stupid suggestion.

Wes started. He forgot that tomorrow was the men versus the officers. "I don't think so. I don't know if she'd have a good time."

"Yes, because condemning her to a life of sewing and other domestic pursuits is far more enjoyable than sitting out in the sunshine and watching a game," Gray commented.

Well, when put that way... Gray had a point, though. Just because the other ladies didn't care to watch the games didn't mean that Allison wouldn't find it enjoyable. "I'll see if she's interested in coming. If she is, I'll be sure to bring her. As for your suggestions—" he turned his eyes toward Jack—"I don't think those are what I'd consider to be suitable alternatives."

Jack shook his head. "Wes, I'd think she'd probably find anything away from your solitary company a suitable activity."

~Chapter Thirteen~

“Did we get another delivery?” Allison asked when they reached the top of the stairs near their room.

“It sure looks like we did. What do you think it is?”

She cast him a slightly annoyed look. “It looks like a bathtub, but I wasn’t expecting to see one outside our room.”

“Do you not think that army men bathe?”

“Well.” She shrugged. “I didn’t know. None that I’ve seen have looked very clean.”

He chuckled. “That’s because most either don’t care or haven’t had a chance to use the tub yet.”

She grimaced. “Everyone uses the same tub?”

“No, not everyone. Some share. Some don’t.”

“Who will we share with?”

The grin that spread his face could only be described as wolfish. “Each other. I got General Ridgely’s approval today for us to have our own tub.”

“Was this the special occasion you’d mentioned I’d need the new dress for this morning?” she asked, lifting the shirt and skirt draped over her free arm.

“I’d hoped so. But even if Ridgely hadn’t approved of us having our own tub, it was our night on the schedule to use the officers’ tub.”

She squeezed Wes’ arm. “Thank you. I am in desperate need of a bath, but I feared...” She shrugged.

“Now you shall have one, and then you will have some fresh clothes to put on afterwards.”

“Thank you,” she said again, coming up on her toes and pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. Before she could think of why she’d done that over something as simple as making arrangements for her to have a bath, she let go of his arm and walked over to examine the tub. “You will bring it inside for me, won’t you?”

“No, I don’t think I will.” He poked his lower lip out and shook his head. “I thought you’d bathe out here and enjoy the view of the fort—of course all the men will be enjoying the view, too.”

“And just where will you be?”

“Standing right here, getting the best view of all.”

A shiver skated down her spine at his words, and doing her best to school her features, she simultaneously shrugged and sighed. “Well, if that’s the way it has to be, go get the water.” Frankly, she was so desperate for a bath, the idea that Wes would see her taking one almost didn’t bother her at all. Almost. The only reason that it didn’t bother her was that if he were in the room with her, she knew he would be mindful enough of her vulnerability to distract himself with something else. But was that what she really wanted him to do? Of course it was! A proper young lady didn’t wonder what a man’s reaction would be at seeing her naked! Nor did she even think about asking him to help her in and out of the tub, and most certainly not to help her with her hair.

“I wasn’t serious.” Wes’ gentle tone pulled her from her wandering thoughts.

“I know.” She winced at her uneven turn, then cleared her throat. “I just got distracted...”

He unlocked the door and pulled it open for her, then used his back to hold open the door while he lifted the tub. “Don’t worry. I’ll be a perfect gentleman, I promise.”

She didn’t doubt that; but would she remember to be a perfect lady?

Pushing the wicked thought from her mind, she entered the room and waited for him to come in so she could close the door.

“Can you get the fire started?” Wes asked.

Allison set her new clothes down on the bed. “Of course.”

“All right, you start it, and I’ll go down to the well and get you some water.” He picked up the metal pail that came inside the tub and made a move to walk past her just as she took a step toward the fire. His thick arm brushed straight across the softness of both of her breasts. The color in his cheeks heightened. “I’m sorry,” he said, then left.

She assumed his rough reaction hadn’t necessarily been because her breasts had brushed him, as she’d slept atop him with her breasts pressing against his body for hours and hours the other night; but rather, like her, he was feeling the discomfort of the coming moments.

She dismissed the thought. It wouldn’t be so bad; she wouldn’t let it. Allison knelt down and repositioned the firewood in the fireplace, then lit the kindling and blew the small flame until it caught. She almost smiled.

How ironic that growing up in Boston she'd never learned to sew or embroider or cook because someone was always there to do it for her, but she'd learned to build and stoke fires. Out of necessity, of course. She could have rung for someone to come to her room to do it for her, and while waiting, she might have frozen half to death some winters. It took her a while, but she eventually did learn how to make a fire.

Perhaps sewing would be the same way. If she'd just persist, perhaps she'd learn. And if she learned... She bit her lip to stanch that thought immediately. Wes was charming and handsome and he'd make a good husband. But he couldn't be hers. She'd already made a promise to Nicholas. A promise that wasn't easily broken, she thought with a grimace. Besides, Wes probably didn't want her to stay anyway.

She tossed another log on the fire, and just as the flames were starting to grow, Wes came in with two pails of water. He set them down next to the fire, then pushed this log and moved that log, creating a much larger flame almost instantly. Apparently her fire-building skills still needed some work. But at least she'd gotten it started and hadn't embarrassed herself completely.

He moved the metal buckets right in front of the fire, then walked over to the dining table, shrugged his coat off and placed it over the back of one of the chairs. "It shouldn't take too long for it to heat up. The water that comes out of the wells around here is never very cold."

Allison nodded and took a seat in one of the wobbly chairs. "I can wait here and bathe alone if you'd like to go to dinner."

An unreadable expression came over his face and he reached for his coat.

"I didn't mean it like that," she blurted. She sighed and racked her brain for how to explain what she'd meant. "I'm not trying to run you out of your own home. I just thought you might like to eat dinner with your friends tonight, since you weren't able to last night or the night before."

He stared at her for a minute and then released his hold on his coat, a hint of uncertainty still shadowing his face. "I asked Jack to bring our plates up here. I thought we could have dinner together. Alone."

Now, it was her turn to stare at him. She didn't know why she was staring at the unusual man she was sharing her time, life, and even her bed with; but she just stared at him anyway. Did he like being alone with her? Sure, he spent time each evening alone with her, teasing her about the

progress of her dress or lying next to her in silence as the sun faded away and they drifted to sleep. But with the exception of his subdued mood yesterday that resulted in a meal of dried goods and her fit of vapors the night before, she assumed he'd rather eat with his friends.

"I can have him take it back downstairs when he arrives. Or better yet, I can just go down there and eat now," he said, grabbing his coat again.

"No!" She jumped to her feet and reached for his arm. "No. I was merely surprised that you'd wish to eat alone with me. I just assumed you tolerated my presence because you didn't have a choice."

"I don't tolerate your presence," he said, his voice a mere whisper. "I'm a man, Allison. I don't speak in a special code, nor do my actions suggest one thing, but mean something else. If I didn't like you being here or I thought you were bothering me, I'd have gotten you your water, then excused myself. Now, if you don't want me here, that's a different matter entirely."

"No." She licked her lips and tucked a tendril of her dark hair behind her ear. "I do want you here. I just didn't know you wanted to be here—and not just because there's about to be a naked woman in here."

His eyes widened a touch and then his arm stiffened. "No. And that's not why I wanted to stay."

"I know." She grinned. "If you were that concerned with having my innocence, you'd have taken it long before now."

He took a step toward her, closing the gap between them. "And what makes you think I'm not interested in having your innocence?"

Her breath caught. "Are you?" What a silly question to have asked. She knew him well enough by now to know that he was only saying that to her to be scandalous and see her reaction. "Please forget I asked that."

Something flickered in his eyes, then they shot to something beyond her left shoulder. "Your water appears to be ready."

Allison forced herself to turn around and look at the bit of steam coming off the top of the two pails of water.

Wes picked up a towel and went over to the pails. He grabbed the handle, and using the towel as a layer of protection between the hot pail and his hand, he dumped the water into the tub he'd positioned just a few feet away in front of the fire. Then he did the second. It didn't fill the tub entirely, but it was more than half full, which was plenty of water to bathe in.

“Thank you,” she murmured as he set the pail back to the ground.

He nodded to her, then lay down on top of their bed. “Your water is ready when you are, my lady.”

Allison wasn’t sure why he’d said that or had such a sarcastic tone after what he’d said only a moment before. Wes, she was learning, was more complex than he’d like her to think. She resisted the urge to throw a glance over her shoulder to see if he was watching her and unbuttoned the front of her gown, then slipped it off her shoulders. It felt so good to be out of its confines, knowing she wouldn’t have to put it back on shortly. She stepped out of the puddle it made on the floor and peeled off her stockings, then reached for the hem of her chemise and with one swift motion pulled it over her head and dropped it on the bed behind her.

“Do we have any soap?” she asked as a belated thought just as she sank into the steaming tub.

“It’s on the nightstand,” Wes said thickly.

“Do you think you could—”

Before she’d even finished her question, a tanned hand holding a round, white cake of soap in its open palm appeared in front of her.

She took the soap from Wes; then just as quickly, a little square of cloth was pushed in her direction. She took that, too.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His voice sounded different than usual, strained perhaps.

Ignoring the way her skin tingled with awareness that he was in the room with her and could even be watching the back of her as she bathed, she spun the soap in her hands then proceeded to wash herself.

It felt so great to sit in a steaming tub and wash off the dirt that had collected on her person over the past three weeks, but what of her hair? She turned her head just enough to catch sight of Wes. He was lying on the bed, hands fisted at his sides and staring at the ceiling.

She turned her head back, put her ankles up on the front lip of the tub, gripped the sides and scooted her bottom toward the end. She tried to move slowly so not to dump water out the sides; but all thoughts of that were gone when she slid, and despite her hold on the tub, her entire upper body fell into the water with her bottom on one end of the tub and her head under the water on the other.

A hint of panic settled in her chest and she tried to pull herself up. But with wet hands on a slippery metal surface, very little upper body strength and the back of her knees unable to gain purchase on the end of the tub, all she was able to accomplish was an excessive amount of thrashing.

Suddenly, two strong hands gripped her under her arms and pulled her up from under the water.

“Thank you,” she gasped, swiping at the rivulets of water that were coursing down her face.

Wes handed her a towel to wipe her face. “Dare I ask if that was intentional?”

Allison crossed her arms over her breasts and scowled at him. “I was trying to wet my hair so I could wash it.”

He pursed his lips and studied her hair. “Looks all wet to me.”

She swatted at his thigh. “Would you—”

“Wash your hair for you so you don’t accidentally drown yourself? I’d be happy to.” He knelt down behind her, then reached for the towel he’d handed her to dry her face with. He folded it in half, then from behind her, draped it over the tub in front of her. “There, that should cover you well enough so you can uncross your arms and relax.”

Allison leaned her head back and peered up to watch him as he made a thick, creamy lather from the cake of soap he’d given her to use earlier. He was every bit the gentleman Mrs. Lewis and Sarah claimed him to be—even with the top three buttons of his shirt undone, offering her a generous glimpse of his tanned chest. She swallowed and turned her eyes away.

A moment later, his hands were on her head with his strong fingers digging into her hair and spreading the soap through her strands.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head into his hands. He ran his fingers through her hair and massaged her scalp in a way that made her want to sigh in contentment. His touch was firm yet gentle as he continued to spread the lather over her thick hair.

“Time to rinse,” he said in a voice she hardly recognized as his.

At his urging, she sat up and bent forward a bit.

He pulled the towel in front of her off, lowered the edge of the pail he’d used to heat the water into her bath, then slowly poured the water over her head, running one hand through the swath of hair he was rinsing as he poured the water. It took about twelve partially-filled buckets to rinse all of the soap from her hair.

“I think it’s all out. Out of your hair, that is; but your water looks like milk.”

“Perhaps you’d like to drink it, then?” she teased to help release the tension of the room.

“I’ll drink most anything these days, but I do have to draw the line at soapy bathwater.” He was still kneeling behind her and reached one of his large hands around in front of her. “Would you like some help out?”

She grabbed his hand and with a hard swallow, she stood.

Wes must have taken to his feet at the same time because he was standing right next to her and helping her out of the tub in an instant. He bent down, snatched up the towel he’d set beside the tub and handed it to her.

She gladly accepted the towel and stepped aside to wrap it around herself.

She assumed he would empty the tub and get fresh water for his bath, so she was caught off guard when she heard the unmistakable sound of water splashing as a body was lowered into the tub.

Allison turned to face him. His thick arms were stretched out on either side of the tub and his hairy chest was exposed to her gaze; his head bent back and rested over the side of the tub.

“Did you not want hot water?”

“No, this is just the right temperature.”

“But it’s nearly cold.” It had taken him no less than forty minutes just to wash her hair.

He muttered something that sounded oddly like “not cold enough”, then grabbed the cake of soap, and began scrubbing his arms. “Do you plan to watch me, then?”

She blushed. “No. I was just looking for my chemise.” She took a step forward and picked it up, then turned around. She quickly pulled it over her head and ignored the way Wes chuckled as she struggled to pull the towel down, which was now acting as a buffer between her and her chemise.

“Modesty can be such a chore, can’t it?”

She spun around to face him. “Unlike you, I don’t think everyone who happens into my private room has earned the privilege to see my person without proper covering.”

“And how does one earn such a privilege, I wonder.”

Well, he marries her, of course. But she couldn't say that. That might have worked on Nicholas when he'd tried to push the boundaries of what was acceptable before marriage. But that wouldn't work with Wes; he'd already married her.

"While you keep thinking up the answer to that, you might wish to turn the other direction. I'd hate for you to take advantage of my loose morals and exercise your privilege of seeing me unclothed merely because we share a room."

Shame—and perhaps a bit of mortification at her childish words and actions—burned in her face. She already knew she could trust him. He'd been nothing but thoughtful of her pride and gentle with her in every regard; not to mention he'd probably already glimpsed more of her bare skin than she might like to believe. "I'm sorry, Wes. I don't mean to seem so childish. I know our circumstances are different than most, but I am intended to another man. If he thinks I've been untrue to him, he might renege; and if that happens—" She choked on a sob as the reality set in: if Nicholas cried off, she'd have nowhere to go, and that would be the least of her problems. Wes was only being kind enough to offer her his name until Nicholas came back to claim her. His generosity could not stretch on forever, nor could her heart.

Wes was everything she'd ever imagined in a husband, but she wasn't truly what he wanted in a wife. Nor what he needed. He needed a woman who could sew and cook. One he didn't have to protect from the hardships of the frontier life or for whom he had to procure items at every turn just so she could have *something* to eat and wear. One that made his heart pound in her presence the same way Allison's pounded when Wes was around.

~Chapter Fourteen~

Wes stared at Allison as she stood there staring blankly at the bed, biting her lower lip, just as heedless to his naked state as he was at the moment.

What was she thinking about? Was she afraid he'd abandon all of his earlier attitudes and begin pursuing her, thus stealing her away from that perfect prig she was engaged to? If that was her fear, she had much to be worried about. Wes had often been termed persistent and stubborn, qualities that came right along with his Ellis bloodline, and that was exactly what he was. He had no plans to give up so easily. Frankly, if Allison was afraid that her precious Nicholas wouldn't want her any longer if he suspected she was no longer chaste, that was half the battle. He wouldn't have to worry about a jealous suitor. All he had to do now was convince Allison he could be all the things her current intended was to her—even if they both knew he couldn't.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. If she truly wanted the high society life, he could give her that, too. He might not enjoy it, but he could take her back to Charleston if that's what it took to have her.

A knock at the door behind him startled them both, and instinctively he grabbed his revolver from his gun belt that he'd set beside the tub and stood, the gun pointed at the door. Allison's laughter pulled him from his intense who-dares-to-sneak-up-on-me-I-shall-kill-him instinct that had been ingrained in his mind since his first year at West Point. He dropped the gun, since it was obvious their guest had no intention of making himself an intruder, then grabbed the only other clean towel they owned and wrapped it around his waist.

"That must be Jack with our dinner," he said for no real reason at all. He padded to the door and opened it just far enough to receive the plates.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Jack who'd come bearing food, but Gray.

"I see I came at the perfect time. You're both cleaner than the plates your dinner was served on," Gray said.

Wes moved a little more in front of the door in an effort to shield Allison better. "I see you also brought a belt with which I shall beat you,"

Wes replied with a pointed glance at the belt draped over Gray's left arm.

"I didn't realize you held such eccentric interests," Gray said easily.

Wes grimaced. Leave it to Gray to turn everything he said into something sexual. "Just give me the food, please."

Gray handed him the plates of food, then draped the belt over Wes' arm.

Wes and Gray exchanged nods, and then Wes took a step back and closed the door with his foot.

"I'll take those if you'd like to get dressed."

Wes handed the plates to Allison and let her take them to the table while he opened the chest and looked for his other pair of trousers, which he immediately pulled on, followed by his socks. He briefly considered not donning his shirt but decided not to be completely uncivilized during dinner. He was trying to woo her, after all.

As usual, Wes ate his meal, then the majority of hers that she couldn't choke down. "Perhaps if you asked Mrs. Lewis or Mrs. Ridgely, they might help you learn to cook. Then you wouldn't have to starve."

"I'm not starving," she protested.

He chuckled at her blatant lie. "Oh, and have you been sneaking pieces of jerky while I've been at work?" Her eyes widened and he chuckled again. "I bought it to be eaten. Go on, then."

She bit her lip and her eyes went to the shelf where the jerky was. Then as if she were no longer shy about starving herself half to death or she'd been tapped on the bottom with a hot branding iron, she was off her bottom and over to the shelf.

Wes pushed their plates to the side of the table and walked over to the tub. He hoisted it up and walked to the window near the table. Pulling back the curtains, he hollered for Privates Smith and Ferguson to move out of the way, then poured the soapy contents of the tub out the window.

Wes set the tub on the floor and pushed it into the corner, then picked up the hairbrush he'd bought from Charles the other night. He gripped the handle and stared down to where he was idly moving his thumb over the bristles. Taking a deep breath, he said, "If you'd like to sit down by the fire and eat that, I'll brush your hair for you."

Her wide eyes shot to his and he jerked his gaze away. It was bad enough he kept offering to be her maid, did she have to look at him like that?

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I get these awful tangles sometimes.”

“No, I don’t mind. I wouldn’t have offered if tangles made me cower in the corner.”

A smile bent her lips and she walked over to the fire and sat down on the little rug she’d decided needed to go there with her side facing the fire. It was a little warmer over there than he’d like, so he removed his shirt and set it down on the edge of the bed. He put one of his legs on either side of her and pulled her closer to him to nestle between them.

He reached the brush up and sank it into her thick, mahogany hair, then gently glided it down. It went all of three inches and got stuck.

“It might work better if you start at the bottom, then work your way up,” she murmured.

Wes heeded her advice and moved to the bottom of her hair. He’d enjoyed touching it earlier when he’d washed it and was surprised she’d allowed him to brush it but had no reason to complain.

A few minutes passed in comfortable silence, broken by a stray giggle from Allison.

Wes stopped mid-stroke. “Do you care to share what you find to be so humorous?”

She shrugged. “Just something Jack said, nothing very important.”

“Normally nothing he says is of any importance,” Wes muttered. “But since it made you laugh, I have to wonder what he said.”

“It’s nothing really,” she said dismissively.

Wes combed his fingers through the section of hair he’d just finished. “I’m sure compared to anything I say, he did say nothing; but it was clearly something to you or you wouldn’t have remembered it or be laughing about it now.”

“He said your feet stink,” she blurted.

Wes froze and blinked at the back of her head. She was certainly beautiful and intelligent, but *that’s* what she was thinking about at a time like this. He could scarcely believe it. In fact, he didn’t. “Did he say anything else?”

She shook her head and he resumed brushing her hair. “He just said that you never take your socks off and that they stink like a dead opossum.”

“And when did you and Jack make time to get together and gossip?”

“When he and Gray walked me home the other day.”

Wes tried not to let himself get excited at the way she'd referred to their room as "home" and continued to brush her hair. "I don't know why you'd pick now to start thinking about some nonsense Jack spouted—"

"Because your sock-covered foot is right here next to me," she said, gesturing to where his foot was, right beside her and covered in his thick, black sock.

"I see. Well, Jack must not pay very good attention—"

"What about Gray? He agreed with Jack."

Wes closed his eyes so he wouldn't give in to the urge to roll them heavenward. "Did they say anything else?"

"Not really."

"Why do I have a hard time believing that?" he muttered. He sighed and continued to brush her hair. "Not that it matters, since you seem to think Gray and Jack are suitable sources for information about me, but I do change my socks. I just don't take them off and recline in my bare feet as they're wont to do on occasion. But I do change them."

Allison patted his thigh. "Wes, I didn't mean to accuse you of being slovenly. I saw you remove your shirt before you started brushing my hair. When I noticed you were wearing your socks, it reminded me of what Jack said, and I just found it humorous that you'd remove your shirt before your socks."

"I know you weren't trying to accuse me of being a complete hog. You did just see me bathe." He shot a glance to his left foot. "I never even thought they'd noticed. I don't know who'd bother to look at another man's feet."

"Jack," she supplied helpfully.

"Jack," he agreed with a chuckle, then added, "And Gray, apparently." He continued to wordlessly brush her hair.

"So why is it that you don't like to take them off?"

"Because I don't like to wear my boots without socks." He gripped her hair just above the little knot he'd discovered and held it—and his breath—as he worked loose the tangle. "In my first year at West Point, I'd earned a spot to go on an outpost by doing a series of tasks that generally only those at the top of their class in their final year could perform. While we were gone, this horrible storm rolled in. It rained so hard I couldn't see six inches in front of my face, and the river we'd been hiking close to began flooding. At one point we were walking through water that was waist deep. After

more than thirty-six hours, and with no sign of the rains stopping, we found a little cave a few hundred feet up the side of a mountain, where we tucked inside and made a fire.

“As anyone who’d just spent the last thirty-six hours hiking around in wet leather boots and soaked socks might do, I took them off, wrung out my socks and set everything out to dry by the fire. I checked both my socks and boots before bed, and they were still wet. Not so wet they were dripping, mind you, but wet enough that I knew they’d be too cold to wear. So I turned them to help the other side dry and went to sleep. The next morning, when I went to claim my footwear, my socks were missing completely and my boots were three sizes too small. I assume the boots shrunk due to the elements, but my socks didn’t wash away, of that I’m certain.

“But as every soldier knows, you survive with what you have available—and I didn’t have the socks I’d come with available, nor the ones I’d packed in my knapsack. Of course I had my suspicions about who’d stolen both sets and knew the reason was just to provoke me into making a scene and proving to Colonel Lewis that I didn’t deserve to be there. I refused to make a mockery of myself that way and laced those boots as if they were made to fit my feet. I had to wear them for seven days before returning to the school where I was able to get another pair of socks.”

“I’m sure you gained their highest respect,” Allison said with a hint of something that sounded almost like wonder or perhaps pride.

Wes shook off the thought. He had to be imagining that. “Yes, I suppose I did gain their respect, right along with a set of nasty blisters and cuts.”

“You’re fortunate you didn’t get gangrene or some other infection and lose one or both of your feet.”

He ran the brush through her smooth hair. “I never said that I didn’t...”

“Didn’t what?”

“Get an infection,” he murmured, moving over to another section of her hair. “Of course the doctor said it would hurt at first, but in a week, I’d feel better, then picked up this saw that had more teeth than a family of bears—and sharper, too—in his right hand and my foot in the other, and brought the saw toward my toes.”

Allison stared down at his foot, then turned her head over her shoulder to look at him as if she couldn’t decide if he was telling her the truth or not. He bit the inside of his cheek. She had no idea how right she’d been when

she'd claimed him fortunate for not getting an infection and losing one or both of his feet. He'd gotten an infection, but the doctor had been able to clear it without amputation being necessary. Either way, he had no intention of ever wearing boots without socks again.

She shook her head and closed her delicate fingers just above his ankle, bringing him back to present. "You do know that I don't have plans to separate you from your socks as you sleep?"

And what of my heart, do you promise not to separate it from my body by leaving? He blinked to clear the thought from his mind. He couldn't let that happen. He had to convince her to stay. "And if I somehow manage to lose them after their removal, will you walk across the square and get another pair from Charles?"

"You only have one pair?"

"Don't worry about that, right now. Would you be willing to spare me the pain of having to wear my boots without socks and get me another pair?"

She turned and repositioned herself so her hip rested right near his groin. "I suppose so, yes. For as long as I'm here anyway."

Her words were the equivalent of punch to the gut. *As long as I'm here.* No matter, he still had time to convince her to stay. "While I thank you for your promise to not steal my socks and the offer to fetch me a new pair if mine go missing, I must inform you that my feet have entrusted me with their virtue; and I've made a promise to them that only my wife will be able to see them in all of their handsomely scarred glory."

He'd hoped his ridiculous claim would at least elicit a small measure of laughter from her; instead, she shocked him all the way down to the tips of his toes when she pressed a kiss to his cheek and said, "I suppose that's just another thing I'll have to add to my list of envies I'll forever harbor against your wife."

~Chapter Fifteen~

Had she really just said that *and* kissed him? His wide blue eyes and slightly slack jaw told her that she had indeed. Trying not to appear too impatient nor wanting to allow him an opportunity to ask her to explain herself, she pushed to her feet and smoothed her chemise.

“Thank you for brushing my hair. I think I’ll go to bed tonight without braiding it, so it can continue to dry.” Then, without another word, she climbed up into their bed and waited beneath the covers for him to snuff the candles and join her.

It was only a matter of minutes before his warm body came to rest beside hers.

She loved how warm he was and how safe she felt lying next to him.

Earlier, when he’d said those scandalous remarks about wanting to claim her innocence and having her stay with him, she’d dismissed them as just that: scandalous remarks. He couldn’t possibly care that much for her—he hardly ever saw her. Not that it mattered. She was engaged to Nicholas and he’d come for her soon enough.

But just for now, while darkness engulfed them and the heat of his broad, powerful body kept her warmer than a blanket ever could, she could close her eyes and allow herself to dream that he was the one she’d marry. That his earlier remarks had been true. That he could one day love her. That he’d always be there to help her wash and brush her hair until they were both too old to move.

She squeezed her eyes tighter. She was promised to Nicholas and that wasn’t a promise easily broken. There was too much involved in her promise... Besides, they suited just fine. Wes would one day find a bride that suited him better than she ever could. It was better this way. It had to be.

“Wes?”

Wes froze. “Yes?”

Allison sat up in their bed and lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the bright ray of sunlight that was streaming into the room from the break in

the curtains. “Where did you go?”

“I went out to ride Midnight.” Wes walked over to her and sat on the edge of the bed. “Are you ready to get dressed for the day?” A grin split his face. “You’ll get to wear something new.”

She returned his grin, but probably not for the same reason. While she loved the idea of wearing something new, she loved even more the fact that what she was putting on was a gift—of sorts—from Wes. “I don’t think I’ll even need help.”

Was it just her or did he look a bit disappointed about that?

Nonsense. She was imagining things.

Allison got out of bed and slipped into the shirt Wes had bought her. After she buttoned it, she stepped into the skirt. “Actually, I might need some help after all.”

Wes was over to her side in an instant.

“Mrs. Lewis put some sort of latch back there, but I don’t know how to fasten it if I can’t see it.”

Wes shooed her hands away from where she’d been holding the two parts of the fastening and quickly secured her skirt. “It looks very...er...stylish,” he said, his hands still on her waist.

“Are you referring to the cut?”

“Yes. It’s very interesting.”

She nearly snorted. Interesting was one way to put it; an awful reminder of her terrible sewing skills was another. “Yes, well, it’s how the ladies in Boston like to wear their skirts—”

“Ah, so you’re still a Bostoner, are you?”

She shook her head at his teasing tone. “Yes, I’m still a Bostonian.”

Wes gave the worst exaggerated sigh she’d ever witnessed. “Still so proper. I was hoping a few days out here in the wilds might have changed that. I guess not. Perhaps you need more time.”

A shiver skated up her spine and she forced herself to turn around. *This* was the problem with Wes. He oozed charm and said all the right things—sadly, only a fraction (if that) of them could possibly mean what she wanted them to mean. “Have no fear, Cap’n Tucker, I imagine by the time I get ready to leave here, I’ll be speaking like the rest of you.”

“Good, it’ll be an excellent way for you to remember us by.”

And that confirmed it. Anything that might be taken as a genuine compliment or an indication that he’d like her to stay was always countered

with a statement such as that. And blessedly so. It wouldn't do any good to return to Nicholas still in love with Wes. She nearly snorted again. It was already too late for that. She was helplessly in love with him, but it would make it much easier to go when the time came, knowing that he didn't return the feeling.

Swallowing, she shoved her feet into her shoes. "I suppose we'd better go eat so I can get to Mrs. Lewis'. I need to ask her to help me learn to cook a thing or two, so I'm not a bag of bones, or worse, food for the crows, by the time Nicholas gets here."

He gave his head a slight nod. "Right. Well, do you think you might perish if you have to go one more day picking at cold beans and eating jerky? I promise to buy you more this afternoon."

"No," she said slowly. "I guess not. Why?"

"Today I don't have to work, so I thought you might like to spend some time outside of Mrs. Lewis' parlor. But if you'd rather sew and cook—" he gave a half shrug— "I certainly understand."

"Hmm." She tapped her index finger against her cheek. "That's a hard decision. On one hand I could spend the day wishing I was somewhere— anywhere—else, or I could—"

"Well, if you're going to spend the day with me wishing you were somewhere else, then you'd best just go to Mrs. Lewis' right now," Wes teased with an overdone frown.

"No, I think I shall torture my husband and his friends with my annoying presence today."

"I don't find you annoying—nor will today be torture. At least not for me and you. I can think of a few privates who will be tortured."

"Oh?"

"Oh." He returned, grinning. "Come along. You'll have a good time, I promise. And if you don't, I shall return you to Mrs. Lewis' care post haste."

That won't be necessary. She had no idea what Wes planned to do with her today, but short of making her touch a dead animal or forcing her to eat all the food on her plate, nothing could make her want to spend time away from him if she didn't have to. Not that she disliked Mrs. Lewis and Sarah's company, she didn't; but she liked being around Wes more.

Wes reached for her hand. "Let's go."

"Don't you need your coat and hat?"

“No. Today I don’t have to wear the coatee or shako.”

She nodded then followed him from the room to the dining room, where she ate her toast and his for breakfast.

“So...?” Jack said, drawing the word out and turning to look at Allison, who was sitting across from him.

Allison cast him a quizzical look at the same time that Wes said, “She’ll be there.”

Jack grinned and slapped the table with such force all of the plates and cups on the table clattered.

“This morning, not tonight,” Wes stated flatly.

Jack’s grin faded, then he shrugged. “The day is still young. You might change your mind.”

Allison looked to Wes to explain what they were talking about, but he seemed to have formed an unusual fascination with his plate.

“Say, Allison, have you ever volunteered at a hospital or clinic?” Gray asked, lifting his tin cup of coffee to his lips and taking a sip.

“No. Why?”

“No reason,” Gray said, his lips twitching.

“No, there has to be a reason,” she argued.

“Oh, there is,” Jack agreed, not bothering to hide his smile. “A few months ago— Ouch!” Jack abruptly scooted his chair back with a screech.

“Sorry, Jack, didn’t know your foot was there,” Wes said with all the innocence of a four-year-old found sneaking treats from the kitchen.

Gray, who was seated on the other side of Allison, thus too far out of reach of Wes’ wayward foot, set his tin cup down on the table and spun it twice. “I asked only because you might need to brush up on your nursing skills this afternoon.”

On the other side of her, Wes seemed to be choking on a piece of food—or at least that’s what he’d like her to believe. She’d been in his company long enough to know exactly what he was about. “And why would such skills be needed?”

“Now, nobody said, you’d *have* to exercise your medical knowledge,” Gray said easily. “It just might be a good idea if you know how to tend to a man in pain that you start devising a plan.”

Allison chanced a glance at Wes who wore a resigned expression, even though his cheeks were as red as her skirt. “Is this a story you’d prefer to tell me—in private, perhaps?”

“No.” He waved his hand through the air. “They can tell you; then I can correct their errors later.”

Gray’s sharp bark of laughter stole her attention. “Wes here hasn’t been allowed on the field since May, when he spilled his blood all over the dust and subjected us all to have to see his bare backside.”

Allison whipped her head around to see Wes. She tried not to laugh at the mental image Gray’s words had conjured up as she lifted her eyebrows and said, “Which part would you care to elaborate on?”

“Neither,” he grumbled. He sighed and ran his large open palm across the table in front of him. “Jack, do you have anything to add?”

“Other than some of us weren’t fortunate enough to *only* see your bare arse? No.”

“You’re the one who volunteered to help stitch him up,” Gray pointed out. “I told you not to, but you volunteered.”

Stitches?

“You only warned me of that because you get ill at the sight of blood. And there was no denying that there was a lot of blood.”

Blood? Allison turned her eyes back to Wes, this time not on the verge of laughter. “Will you elaborate now?”

Wes’ gaze locked with hers. “I don’t think I need to.” He shrugged. “They’ve told you all of the crucial parts.”

“Except the one about how you started bleeding...oh, and lost your trousers.”

“I didn’t actually lose my trousers. Someone—” he shot a peeved look at Jack— “thought it best to tear them to see the extent of the injury. As for the injury itself, it was minor and not so important,” he said with another shrug.

“Yes, it is,” Jack argued excitedly. “That’s the best part!”

“You’d be the one to think so,” Wes muttered. “You weren’t the one shot in the ass by an incompetent man who supposedly didn’t know his gun was loaded.”

Allison gasped but was stopped from asking any questions when Jack spoke up again. “I’m not incompetent. Private Rucker asked that I look at his gun. He said it was jammed. How was I supposed to know the fool had it loaded?”

“Usually, when a gun is jammed, it’s because the bullet is stuck,” Wes retorted.

“I didn’t know that. He just said the cock wasn’t working.”

“I’m sure his wasn’t,” Gray muttered, garnering a piercing look from Wes. “I was just talking about the man’s gun, Wes. What are you thinking about?”

Allison knit her brow but neither thought to inform her of what they were implying, nor did she care overmuch. “How is your...uh...wound?” she asked, unable to stop herself from letting her eyes wander to the general vicinity of where she suspected he was hit.

“My wound is fine. But Jack here might wish to be careful what he says or he might be the one who ends the day having a bullet pulled from his flesh—and if I have anything to say about it, it won’t be his—”

“All right, boys, let’s go,” Lieutenant McCorkle interrupted, walking up behind them and slapping Wes on the back.

Wes shook his head, then turned his attention to Allison. “Are you ready?”

She cast a glance around at all of the men. “Are you sure I should come. I don’t want to be in the way.”

“You mean you don’t want to get shot?” Lieutenant McCorkle asked, clapping Wes on the back again.

Wes reached up and grabbed the man’s arm. By the look on the younger man’s face, Wes’ grip had to be quite tight. “We’ll meet you outside.” After the younger man left, Wes shot pointed looks at both Gray and Jack.

Neither seemed to pay him any mind.

Wes sighed and turned his body in his chair so he could face her fully. “You have nothing to fear by going out there with us. We’re going to play a game.”

“You got shot playing a game?”

“It was an accident,” Gray said helpfully.

Wes scowled at him. “As Gray said, it was an accident. Guns have nothing to do with this game. The gunshot came from someone who wasn’t even playing at the time.”

“So I’ll be able to play without fearing for my life?” she teased.

“This is more of a game where you watch,” Jack explained, drawing her attention.

“Oh, so it’s more like a race where the jockeys ride and everyone else sits and watches?” she said, praying nobody would detect the

disappointment she felt. For it was of little doubt that Wes would also be a spectator, thus she'd have to sit alone. Actually that might be a good thing. A smile pulled on her lips. Watching would give her the perfect opportunity to stare shamelessly at him without anyone thinking anything about it.

Wes wanted nothing more than to reach over and smack his friend. And he didn't know why. Rounders was not a game for those of her sex, but the disappointment he thought he'd glimpsed on Allison's face made him wonder if this was a good idea after all.

At least she was smiling now.

"We all spend time as spectators," Gray said a moment later. "In fact, the majority of those playing are spectators in a sense, and we all spend roughly half the game watching others play."

"That's true," Wes agreed, shooting Gray a thankful look for the first time in recent memory. "It's actually fun *being* the spectator."

"Wes, I don't mind, truly." Her grin returned. "I've already formed a plan for exactly what I plan to 'spectate'."

Two sharp whistles rent the air.

"I suspect she'll see the bullet coming for your arse before it actually makes contact," Jack said.

Wes expected Allison's face to turn red and her jaw to drop at his forward statement; but she surprised him yet again when her laughter filled the air, and she said, "Wes has been kind enough to offer me his protection while I'm here. It's the least I can do to return the favor."

~Chapter Sixteen~

Allison could hardly believe she'd spoken those words, but the roar of laughter that filled the room around her confirmed she had said such an unladylike thing.

The grin that split Wes' face and caused the corners of his eyes to wrinkle stole yet another piece of her heart.

She forced herself to stand. "Well, boys, do you plan to play your game or shall I observe you all sitting in here instead?"

Jack jumped to his feet, saluted her, then started toward the door. Gray shook his head and took his time getting up to leave.

Once they were both gone, Wes took to his feet, slipped his hands around hers and pulled her toward him. "I want you to know right now that if you need me for anything—you get hot, you're not having fun and would rather go sew, you want something to drink or you'd like to eat— all you need to do is call my name and I'll come right over to you."

"Do you not want to play?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"No, I want to play," he rushed to say, then squeezed her hand as a strange look came over his face—one that might suggest he was uncertain or torn, perhaps. "I just want you to have a good time."

"I will." She squeezed his hands this time. "And if I don't, I'll be sure to make you pay handsomely later."

"Then I suppose I'll have to do whatever I possibly can to make sure you enjoy yourself."

"Exactly."

"Are you two coming," Gray hollered, leaning his head back inside the dining room.

"Yes," Wes barked at his friend, scowling.

Wes let go of Allison's left hand, then intertwined their fingers of their hands that were still touching.

She looked up at him from beneath her lashes, but he gave no sign of noticing how her heart was pounding and her blood was racing at such a sweet, intimate gesture.

Outside, they walked to a little field about five hundred yards north of the barracks to where a large group of men stood. Some were holding long, rounded, thick sticks and others were tossing small balls up into the air—or throwing them at each other.

“Wes!” Colonel Lewis called, making a waving motion with his hand.

“Here,” Wes said. “I want you to sit right here on this barrel.”

Allison read the word painted on the side of the barrel that came way up past her waist. “You want me to sit on a barrel full of ammunition,” she said flatly.

“No. I want you to sit on a barrel that used to have ammunition in it. Now, it holds all of our game equipment when we’re not using it.” Without allowing her a chance to protest further, he placed his strong hands around her waist and hoisted her up onto the barrel, bringing her so high she was nearly eye to eye and nose to nose and lips to lips with Wes.

There was a brush across her lips so quick, so soft, and so perfect it caught her off guard, and she couldn’t reason who’d been the instigator: him or her. Then, she blinked, and all she could see was the broad expanse of Wes’ back as he walked toward Colonel Lewis.

She jerked her eyes away and flushed. Then she cleared her throat and fixed her eyes on the men in front of her.

“I see it’s true,” Gray said with a chuckle.

Allison turned to face Wes’ friend. “What’s true?”

“That Wes puts you up on a pedestal.”

She flushed again. “Actually, I think it’s a barrel.”

“Either way, he seems to fancy you quite a lot.”

Allison couldn’t stop the smile that spread her lips at hearing those words.

Gray walked away to join the other men, who were now dividing up. Some men went out into the large field, while Wes and his friends got in a long line on this side of the field. The other men, the ones who she assumed were spectators like her, sat in the grass off to the left of where a man with a large, wooden club stood.

“Let’s play!” hollered Colonel Lewis.

Lieutenant McCorkle gripped the club in his hand, then turned sideways, squatted, and brought the end of the club back to rest on his right shoulder.

The man with the ball wiped his brow, lifted the ball up over his head and backwards, then brought his arm forward and released the ball, sending it sailing through the air right at the man with the club.

Lieutenant McCorkle swung his weapon, missing the ball entirely.

Laughter from the men watching and yells of encouragement from his team members filled the air.

“Take your time and watch the ball, not your bat,” Wes yelled to him.

Lieutenant McCorkle nodded and the fellow standing behind him tossed the ball back to the man who’d thrown it to start with.

Just like last time, he wiped his brow, brought the ball back, then threw it as hard as he could right at the man with the bat.

Lieutenant McCorkle swung.

Crack!

Cheers filled the air as Lieutenant McCorkle ran to where a man was standing by an old sack, then stayed put.

Jack was up next. He walked out to where Lieutenant McCorkle had been standing just a few moments before, picked up the bat and gave it a practice swing before taking a step forward and resting the bat on his shoulder, assuming a similar stance to what Lieutenant McCorkle had done.

The man on the opposite team threw the ball and Jack swung, knocking it far into the field. He got to the same place Lieutenant McCorkle had and stopped. Lieutenant McCorkle now stood by another bag. If she had to guess, she’d say when Gray hit the ball, they’d all move one.

And just as she’d predicted, that’s exactly what happened. Now someone stood on each of the bags and it was Wes who was walking out to pick up the bat.

Groans, partially drowned out by laughing and whistling from the onlookers, could be heard as he took his stance.

Allison considered tearing her eyes away from where they were fixed on his backside, but she had made him a promise hadn’t she?

CRACK!

A sound akin to lightening striking rent the air, followed by loud cheers and clapping. McCorkle ran to the spot where Wes had once been, then a moment later came Jack, followed a few seconds later by Gray, and then came Wes!

There wasn’t a single unsmiling face on his team; but there were plenty from the opposite team as a breathless soldier came running back toward

the group with a ball.

Another officer walked up to collect the bat and play his turn. When they'd first taken teams, Allison hadn't paid much notice to the lack of men on Wes' team. Now she realized they might have less, but they clearly weren't lacking talent.

Several more men came up to take their turns. Some made hits on the first time; some didn't. Some men made it to "base", as they were calling it; others didn't. But nobody hit the ball like Wes, and for some reason, she took a little measure of pride in knowing that her husband was the most talented on his team.

After about fifteen minutes, someone called a third out, whatever that was, and the two teams switched places.

The next set of men were just regular men, she assumed by the way the crowd had styled them. When Wes and his group had been up, cheers of captain or lieutenant had been yelled. This time, they were shouting and cheering for the man's name, not his rank.

The rounds of one team batting the ball and the other trying to catch it or throw it to a teammate who could tag them or the bag with it to get them "out" continued for almost two hours as the men alternated their positions and the score was yelled out.

Allison had never thought of herself as a competitive one, but she loved the idea of Wes' team winning—if only by one point.

It was Wes' turn again. He walked over to the bat and, just as he had so many times already, hit the ball for all it was worth, and then ran.

The men on his team who'd been waiting on their respective bases ran toward home; then came Wes, who stopped mid-stride as he was about to reach home and grinned at her.

Her heart stilled—and so did her body. Then her eyes widened. Without realizing it, she'd been just as noisy as the group of men in front of her, shouting his name and kicking the barrel she was seated on with the heels of her shoes.

She put her palms up, shrugged her shoulders, and grinned.

He shook his head ruefully, then jogged home—the poor man who'd been made to fetch the ball he'd hit still hadn't made it back.

A moment later, Wes was at her side, his breathing labored. "Is everything all right?"

She stared at him as if he were addled. "Of course it is. I'm having a great time."

"I can tell."

She might have had it in her to be embarrassed, but considering all of the other things she'd let slip in his presence the past few days, cheering for him wasn't so bad.

"All right. I just wanted to make sure you were having a good time. There's only a little left. Then I'll spend the afternoon with you." He looked up toward the sky and frowned. "I'd thought to take you on the horses, but we might have to settle for a game of cards if those clouds don't go away."

Allison looked up. She'd been having such a good time she hadn't even noticed the clouds. "I'm game for playing cards with you, but only if you promise you're not as good at cards as you are at this."

"Not to worry, rounders is the only game I'm any good at." He tucked a long tendril of her hair behind her ear. "I'd best be getting back over there."

Allison watched him go, unable to keep herself from grinning at the back of him as he walked away. He was truly a handsome man, inside and out.

A raindrop landed on her hand, and she frowned up at the sky. It was dark with thick, gray clouds hanging overhead. Hopefully they could hold off just a while longer.

Colonel Lewis and General Ridgely took their turns, and so did two of the other officers, the last of whom hit his ball straight into the open hand of the man who guarded second base.

"Out!" yelled the scorekeeper. "That's three. Time to switch."

The opposing team took their turns and scored enough points to put them three points ahead of the officers before it was time to switch again.

Resuming their batting order, two officers Allison didn't know had to take their turns first. The first made it to base and the second struck out. Then it was Lieutenant McCorkle's turn to go.

Allison held her breath. He wasn't as good as Jack, Gray or Wes. His chances of hitting the ball and taking a base were just as good as his chances of striking out.

He swung and missed. Then did it again. They already had one out. They couldn't afford another so early in the inning. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened. Lieutenant McCorkle swung and missed for a third time in a row.

“You’re out,” the scorekeeper shouted.

Allison breathed a sigh of relief. Jack was next, then Gray. Both of whom wouldn’t have a problem getting at least one base.

Which they each did, leaving a man on every base when it was Wes’ turn again. Before she could question what anyone might think of her, she shouted and cheered with the rest as he walked from the line toward the bat.

But he didn’t stop at the bat. He kept walking—straight in her direction.

She stopped cheering and knit her brows. “Wes, is something wrong?” she asked as he approached.

“Sure is.” He closed his hands around her waist and lifted her off the barrel.

“Wes, what’s going on?”

“You’re going to play.”

Allison dug her heels into the ground. The score was tied, and if the group of spectators were to be believed, this was the last time the officers would get a chance to bat. They needed to score as many points as possible. They wouldn’t do that if someone who didn’t know how to play took a turn. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’ll make your team lose.”

“Nonsense.” He pushed his bottom lip out into an overdone frown.

“And if you do make us lose, who cares? It’s just a game.”

She scoffed. “One that apparently is taken very seriously around here to hear these men cheer.”

“Are you coming to take your turn, Wes? It’s starting to rain,” called one of the officers.

“Oh, give him a minute,” Gray hollered. “He has to get a kiss for luck so he can hit another ball a mile out.”

“Carry on, then,” the first officer yelled, leading Allison’s cheeks to burn despite the rain that was now sprinkling down on all of them.

“Shall you join me, or will I have to forfeit my turn and make us lose?” Wes asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Will you help me?”

Wes’ eyes did a slow sweep of her body, sending tingles down her spine as they went. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Allison licked her lips and allowed Wes to escort her to where she’d have her turn to bat the ball.

Ignoring the shouts from all of the men, demanding to know what was going on, Wes picked up the bat with one hand, then used his other hand to turn her how he wanted her to stand.

Around them, the men out in the field and the ones sitting on the side started laughing; meanwhile, the officers were either so stunned their slack jaws wouldn't allow them to form words or they were yelling at Wes to stop this foolishness and take his turn.

Wes paid them no mind and came to stand behind Allison, pressing his body firmly against hers.

She pushed the thought from her mind before she allowed herself to get too distracted and truly did cause them to lose.

"Relax," he whispered in her ear, his lips so close she could practically feel them searing her skin. "When the ball comes toward you, you're going to swing. Like this." He moved their arms in the motion of swinging. "Do you think you can do that?"

As long as he was holding onto her, she could. She nodded. "But how do I know when to swing?"

"You watch the ball."

"But what if I miss or I swing too late?"

"Shh. Stop worrying about that, I'm right here. I'll tell you when to swing."

"Tell me?" She craned her head around to look at him. "Aren't you going to swing with me?"

He gave his head a simple shake. "No. I want you to get your turn to play. I'll just tell you when to swing. All right?"

She swallowed nervously. "I don't think I can."

"Sure you can," he coaxed. "No, turn like I had you—" he moved her back into proper position, his warm hands searing her skin through her shirt — "all right now, just wait until I tell you to, then swing."

"Are you ready now, Captain?" the man with the ball called, humor evident in his voice.

"Yes, sir, Private Jackson," Wes said in his usual calm, teasing tone, releasing his hold on Allison and taking a step back.

Private Jackson's eyes widened when he realized Wes intended for Allison to bat unaided, then he gripped the ball in his hand, pulled it over his head and spinning forward on his right foot, brought his hand forward and released the ball.

Watching the ball sail through the air from the safe haven of her barrel seemed so easy. But now that she was standing right where it was flying, it wasn't nearly as fun. The ball was coming closer—right at her, and she squeezed her eyes shut and held onto the bat for all it was worth.

“Now,” Wes called.

Whoosh.

She missed.

“Strike one,” the scorekeeper yelled.

Allison's face heated.

“It's all right,” Wes said softly. He came up behind her and helped her find her position again. It was hard for her to pay attention, however, with his warm body pressing against the length of her backside. “You need to relax your arms. They're too stiff.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be sorry, just relax a little. The ball isn't going to hit you. I'll be right here to pull you back if I think it'll be too close.”

She wanted to ask how he'd known what she'd been afraid of, but decided against it. No need to draw any more attention to herself than they were already getting.

“There you go,” Wes murmured as he helped her widen her stance and covered her hands with his on the bottom of the bat. “This time, swing like this—” He swung with her, slow and deliberate giving her a feel for how she should swing the bat. Then he did it once again, faster this time.

In front of her, Private Jackson grinned like a jackal as he tossed the ball up and down in the air, preparing to throw it, if she had to guess.

Suddenly, Wes released her and a chill passed over her at the way she suddenly felt bereft of his touch. Or perhaps that was the increasing rain. She didn't have much time to think about it because Private Jackson resumed his throwing stance and prepared to toss it at her.

Then he did.

It flew through the air straight at Allison.

She closed her eyes again but refused to keep them that way—opening her right one just a sliver. Not much, but enough to see the ball flying toward her faster than a horse could run. She quickly closed it back and squeezed her eyes to prepare for the hard hit she knew her face was about to receive.

“Now!” Wes shouted.

With a slight squeal, she swung the bat forward only to have either used too much muscle in her swing or thrown her balance off because it came to rest with a not-so-gentle *thump* on her upper arm, followed swiftly by the *smack* of the ball being caught by the man standing behind him.

Then, of course, came the scorekeeper's booming voice, "Strike two."

"Wes, get her out of the game," yelled Lieutenant McCorkle. "You can impress her later. If we get one more strike, that'll be three outs and we could very well lose."

Allison winced at his words, for they hurt far more than where she'd hit herself in the arm with the end of her bat.

Wes turned her around to face him. "Don't listen to him, Allison," he said, drowning out the other men who were agreeing with Lieutenant McCorkle, saying that Allison needed to go.

"I don't want to cost you the game," she protested.

"You won't."

"What about your pride? If I don't hit this last one, your team will be out."

He eyed her curiously. "Do you not think you can do it?"

"You know that I can't," she said weakly.

He brushed a fallen tendril of her hair from her damp forehead. "I bet you also didn't think you'd survive your time here without starving to death first—but then you tried jerky and dried fruit."

She nearly blushed. It was only because of him that she'd managed to not have her stomach eat itself.

"I bet you also didn't think you'd ever wear anything other than the dress you arrived in," he said with a chuckle. "Don't deny it, either. I might not know much about sewing, but I know enough to know that you're not the expert seamstress you'd have had me believe inside Charles' store."

Her face burned. "You're right and it was only because of you that I have something else to wear."

"No," he corrected. "I didn't sew your skirt. You did. I might have suggested you wear it differently than the way you'd intended—but you made it. Just like you can do this, Allison. I know that you can."

A million things ran through her mind, one of which being that if the look in his eyes was any indication, he was trying to tell her something else. Something not related to rounders at all. She wet her lips, screwing up the nerve to ask what he'd meant—

“Now, go give it one last try.”

She started. “You won’t mind if I strike out and your team loses?”

He turned his lips into an overdone frown and shook his head. “No. I’d rather we lose, and you to have had a turn rather than us win and you only being able to sit from the sideline.”

“Wes, hurry up and find the nerve to tell your wife she can’t play and get on with it. The rain is picking up,” a voice called, not taking one drop of her newfound excitement at Wes’ earlier words.

Wes seemed completely unaffected by the man’s words, but must think that she was for he said, “Stop paying them mind. This has nothing to do with them. This is about us. Now, this time, if you must close your eyes, that’s fine. Just hold the bat like this—” he put her arms into an awkward position unlike the first two times.

“Wes, this feels silly.”

“Why? You’ll be more likely to actually hit the ball this way. Is that not what you want? Do you *want* to get us out?”

She nearly giggled at his tone. “No. But neither do I want people to think I only hit it because I cheated.”

As if seeing her point, he moved her arms back the way they were before. “All right, hold it like this and try to keep your eyes open—just a little.”

She swallowed her unease and allowed him to move her completely into stance.

He moved her left leg out a little and her right one back; then ran his open palms along her back and up to her shoulders where he straightened them. Holding her still, he bent so close to her ear she could feel his breath against her skin. “Don’t forget, Allison, I don’t care if we win or lose, so have fun. Please?”

Allison nodded. It was all she could do. She couldn’t remember him ever styling her by her name. Not that she thought he hadn’t; surely he had and she just couldn’t remember it. But she’d forever remember the soft, silky tone in which he’d just addressed her as Allison and not ‘my lady’.

“All right, Jackson,” Wes hollered, releasing her; by some miracle she did not collapse into the puddle she thought she might, but instead held position as Wes said those simple words: “She’s ready.”

Private Jackson didn’t even try to hide his amusement at the situation, knowing his team was about to win. The men in the field seemed to have

just as much confidence in Allison as Private Jackson because they all looked to be grinning and shaking with laughter.

Private Jackson wiped the rainwater from his face, something Allison hadn't even noticed had covered hers, too, then threw the ball at her again.

Keep them open. Keep them open. Keep them open... Despite the ball sailing toward her and the rain that was now starting to fall more rapidly than before, she couldn't and closed them, leaving only a sliver open—just enough to see the ball. She willed herself not to close off that sliver as she'd done last time. If she did, then she'd be swinging blindly, which seemed to result in no hits—only strikes. She had to do it this time.

"Now!" Wes commanded.

Refusing to blink all the way to clear her rain-blurred vision, Allison gripped the bat as tightly as she could and brought it forward.

There was no *whoosh*, the distinct sound of a strike.

There was no bruising hit to her shoulder followed the smacking of the ball colliding with a man's hand.

There was no *crack* to indicate a ball well hit.

The only sound was a slight *thump*—rapidly followed by shouts she couldn't understand.

She dropped her eyes to the ground and a whole six inches in front of her sat the ball.

"Run!" someone shouted.

But she couldn't. She was too amazed she'd hit the ball to think, let alone run.

"Wes, I hit it! I actually hit the ball!" she shrieked, turning to face him and his broad grin, then before she knew what she was doing, she leapt into his arms.

Wes' strong arms came around her just then, catching her to him; then his grin faded and his blue eyes clouded with what could only be termed as raw desire as a thin sheen of water covered his face and drops fell steadily from his angled chin.

Her breath caught at the sight of him, uncertain.

Uncertain, she might be, but the determined look on his face told her that he knew exactly what he wanted and when his lips met hers, she knew it was exactly what she wanted, too.

Other than the quick brush of their lips this morning, the only other kiss they'd shared had come the day they'd married. But even it was nothing

compared to this one.

His warm, soft lips covered hers and moved on top of—and in between—hers. She mirrored his actions, heedless to the audience they had.

Nothing could make her break their kiss. Nothing.

The crack of lightning rent the air and Wes pulled back, a strong intensity in his eyes.

Suddenly, a strong current of cold water hit Allison.

The light drizzle was over; the clouds had opened up; and now it was a downpour.

“Shall we finish the game?” one of the men on the opposite team asked.

“I don’t care what you all plan to do,” Wes said raggedly, as he moved to scoop Allison up into his arms at a better angle, then dropped his voice so only she could hear, “the only home I plan to run to at this moment is my own.”

~Chapter Seventeen~

Wes heard the noise that surrounded him, but that's all it was: noise.

In front of him, looking up at him with her wide brown eyes and kiss-swollen lips stood Allison, and no matter what was being said around him, he couldn't tear his eyes away from her.

He wanted her.

All of her.

Now.

The fate of the game could go to rot. All he cared about was in his arms.

Unable to form the words he so desperately wanted to say, he scooped her up again and made a direct path to their room.

Allison seemed not to mind, for she didn't say anything, nor did she so much as break eye contact with him as he carried her across the now soggy field, to the barracks, up the stairs and to their room.

He set her down and immediately brought his lips back to hers.

He'd kissed her passionately outside, but not as passionately as he'd have liked.

Wes brought his hands up to cup her face and held her lips to his, taking it as a sign of encouragement when she dug her fingers into the back of his hair as if she were holding him to her, never wanting to let go. Just the same as he felt for her.

Wes took a step back and swallowed. The rain had soaked through both sets of their clothes. While he didn't mind that his felt cold and clung to his wet skin, he rather liked the sight her once-white, now translucent shirt afforded him as it clung to her pert breasts.

He closed the gap between them, bringing his body flush against her chest and kissed her again.

She sighed his name and he took the opportunity to move his tongue into her mouth.

Her hands tightened their grip in his hair, her fingers now twining between the wet, curling locks.

Wes brushed the inside of her cheek with his tongue, then moved it across her teeth and tongue to do the same action on the other side, at which she showed no protest. Just as he was about to pull back, her tongue came into his mouth, which he gladly accepted, making no move to hurry her along from her exploration.

When at last she withdrew, Wes pulled back. His breathing was heavy and strained, similar to the way the fall of his trousers was straining against the force of his erection and the way Allison's hardened nipples and seemly swollen breasts were straining against the front of her soaked blouse.

Swallowing convulsively, he fought his desire, along with the urges that came with it, and reached forward to the top button on her blouse. His eyes locked with hers. She showed no signs of uncertainty or hesitation as he slipped the top button free. Then the next.

He unfastened the front of her blouse, then let it fall open in front of her. He let his gaze travel slowly from her eyes to her heaving chest. As he already knew, she'd worn her chemise under her shirt this morning; but that garment, which was naturally thinner than paper and just as flimsy, seemed almost nonexistent as it melted against her skin, allowing him a delightful, unobstructed view of her breasts.

He'd be lying if he didn't admit that he'd glimpsed them last night when she'd slipped in the bath, but only for a mere second as his mind was on keeping her from drowning. Even still, he'd glimpsed them in the water, but it was not nearly as satisfying as it was right now when she knew and was allowing him to see her this way.

Wes met her eyes again and reached his hands up to slide her wet shirt off her shoulders and allow it to fall to the wooden floor at her feet with a soft tap.

He brought his hands back to her shoulders; and just as he was about to move them to her breasts, her hands came up, and with shaky fingers, she began to unbutton his shirt.

He stilled and let her, then removed his hands so she could push it from his shoulders.

She lowered her lashes and ran her fingertips over the expanse of his shoulders and chest. A hint of a smile touched her lips when his abdominal muscles twitched beneath her touch. She pressed her palms flat against his hardened abdomen and ran her hands back up to his chest, spearing her fingers into his tangled mat of chest hair.

Echoing her movements, Wes placed each hand flat against her sides, just above her hips, then moved them up her body to settle on her breasts.

Her breath hitched and she met his eyes.

Holding her gaze, he gave her breasts a slight squeeze. A gasp passed through her parted, pink lips. He squeezed again, a little more firmly this time. She gasped again, igniting his blood.

Wes repositioned his hands and ran his thumbs over the crest of each breast.

Allison's body jerked, then she pressed her breasts more firmly into his hands in what he took to be permission to continue. So he did. He brushed them both again, pressing harder this time; then moved his hands again and closed his thumb and forefinger over the hardened peaks.

Allison made an incoherent sound of pleasure as her face flushed and she bit her lip.

Wes gave her breasts one final caress, then released his hold and grabbed the fabric of her chemise. With quick, unsteady jerks, he tugged it free from the waistband of her skirt, then pulled it over her head.

He took her in again, admiring her full breasts and perfect nipples.

If he wasn't already harder than the iron barrel of his revolver, this would have done it. She was magnificent and her shapely breasts were begging for his touch. Who was he to deny them? He moved forward and shaped her breasts, growing more determined and emboldened as she thrust them into his hands and sighed softly with each caress.

He bent his head and brought his lips to hers, capturing them.

She wound her arms around his neck and kissed him back, mirroring his actions and gasping his name as he massaged her breasts. Continuing their kiss, he trailed his hands down her abdomen to the belt that held her skirt in place and quickly unfastened it.

Her heavy skirt fell to the ground, leaving her clad in her pantalettes.

Wes moved his hands up and down her slightly chilled back, pressing her body ever-so-slightly more against his. He doubted she'd noticed how cold her skin was from wearing that cold chemise. But he saw no reason not to warm her up for a moment, if he could, before moving his hands back to the front of the ties that secured the garment that shielded her most vulnerable areas.

He broke their kiss and pressed his forehead to hers, dropping his eyes to look at the string before he ruined everything by getting it into a tight

knot.

He pulled this string, then that, forcing himself to think about what he was doing and not get distracted by the way her fingers danced in his hair, scratching his scalp, or the way her breasts bounced just a little in his line of sight with each breath she took. He released the knot and stood frozen as the cloth slinked down her legs to fall at her ankles, revealing to him the triangle of brown hair that hid the core of what made her a woman.

“Wes,” she whispered.

Wes put his hands on her hips and kissed her again. This time, holding nothing back and not allowing her to hold back, either.

Breaking their kiss, and silently vowing to continue where he’d left off, he picked her up and brought her to the bed; then his lips were back on hers and his hands began roaming her body, touching here, squeezing there. His fingertips brushed over the nest of dark hair that rested between her legs and he almost came undone when she bucked her hips invitingly.

She wanted this just as much as he did.

He kissed the corner of her mouth, then across her cheek, and down to her ear while he moved his hand beneath her curls to the warmth that was underneath.

Allison rolled her head to the side and sighed. Pressing openmouthed kisses to her neck, he continued to explore her womanly core then slowly eased a finger inside of her.

She shivered and her body tightened just a fraction around his invasion. This wasn’t exactly what he’d intended to do; but if she liked it, who was he to argue? And clearly, by the way her body had reacted to his, including how she pressed herself more against his hand, she liked this—and if Allison liked it, he would continue to touch her this way. He slowly glided out, then back in. Then again and again until he found a steady pace that made her gasp his name and clutch his shoulders.

He continued moving and was rewarded a moment later when her skin grew warmer, almost to the point of hot, under his lips and her breathing lost all sense of rhythm and came in short, uneven bursts. He sped his movement, leading her to dig her nails into his skin as her hips moved to meet his thrusts.

“Wes,” she panted, her voice hitching mid-word.

Wes didn’t say anything in response, just moved his mouth further down her chest, taking as much of her breast into it as he could.

“Wes,” she said again, this time the word sounded as if it were ripped from her throat; and perhaps it was, for as she said it, the fingernails of her left hand dug into his shoulder and her right hand gripped his hair so tightly he thought for sure she was going to scalp him. Then suddenly her body stiffened and her intimate muscles clenched around his finger.

He slowed his movements, then withdrew completely. He propped himself up on one forearm and waited for her to catch her breath and open her eyes again.

“Sorry,” she said, releasing the loose grip she still had on his hair.

“It’s all right,” he told her in a broken whisper before dropping a kiss on her lips. He touched her swollen lips with the pad of his index finger, then trailed his hand along her skin from her lips to her chin, then down the column of her throat to her chest, where he descended the valley between her breasts and didn’t stop until he reached her feminine curls. “It was well worth it, I’d say.”

She blushed as he’d hoped she would. Then a seductive grin took her lips and she moved her hands to his waistband, where she struggled with his belt, then the buttons. His heart pounded in his chest and his blood simmered with excitement again at just seeing her hands that close to him and knowing she was as eager for him to remove his trousers as he was to have them removed.

Her fingers continued their task, inadvertently brushing his erection as they worked, exciting him more than he thought was possible.

The blood pumping down to his erection at a rapid rate urged him to push her hands away to speed this up and claim her as his. But the few drops that were still making their way to his brain wouldn’t let him. She’d allowed him the opportunity to touch her everywhere he pleased. He could certainly wait a few minutes.

Blessedly, she slipped the last button, freeing his erection from his trousers.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of his torment; only the beginning, he realized when her delicate hand closed around his length. He groaned. Then again when he looked down to confirm he was not imagining things. He wasn’t. Her hand was most certainly wrapped around his shaft. And now she was moving it.

He gritted his teeth and encircled her wrist, staying her. “It won’t last as long this time as it will in the future anyway; but if you don’t stop that, it

won't even happen."

She knit her brows and gave him a squeeze.

"I mean it," he said on a groan. "You need to stop right now or we'll both leave this room for dinner just as virginal as we were when we entered."

"Oh," she said with a blush. "I didn't realize."

"What, that I haven't sampled the wares of those who passed through?"

"No," she said, tightening her grip on him, then releasing it. "I knew you wouldn't be so vulgar as to do that. I just assumed you'd have sowed your wild oats before coming here."

"No," he bit off, trying to think of anything other than her touch.

"You'll be the first woman I ever claim—and the last," he added with a grunt.

Her hand stilled and a strange expression came over her face.

"Allison?" he rasped.

She released his erection and reached for his shoulders. "I'm ready."

He stared at her. "You might have been a minute ago, but I'm not so convinced of that now. Is something wrong?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. Only a very obtuse man could have missed the waver in her voice.

Wes framed her face and tilted her head so she'd meet his eyes again.

"I promise I won't hurt you." At least not more than he had to.

"I know that."

He was doubtful that she truly believed him or her face would have changed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I know that you'll be gentle with me."

"You do?"

A slim smile took her lips. "Yes, Wes. I'm trusting you with my body, aren't I?"

"Yes." He drew the word out; still not sure what was putting that distant look in her eyes. He squeezed her hip and kissed her lips, hoping to reassure her of whatever it was that had put distance between them. "Do you not want this?"

"No, I do. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything," she rushed to say.

"Then why aren't you more excited?" he said, before he could think better of it.

“It’s nothing.”

“Yes, it is,” he ground out. “Allison, will you just tell me what I did or said that made you go cold?” Before he’d even finished that sentence, he had his answer: she didn’t believe him earlier when he’d told her that she’d be his last conquest, in addition to his first. “Allison,” he started again, reaching for her hand and intertwining their fingers. “I meant what I said. I have no intention to be unfaithful.”

“Wes, please don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make promises we both know can’t be kept,” she said on a sob.

Wes’ muscles tensed. “Do you think so little of me that you think I’d be unfaithful to my wife?”

“No, but that’s just it, Wes. I’m not your wife.” Her voice cracked and she blinked rapidly. “I know and understand that one day you’ll marry another and I’ll be nothing more than a fleeting affair you had along the way, so can you please not make this any harder by promising your lasting devotion?”

Fleeting affair? “Is that all you think of this—of me?” He hadn’t meant for his tone to be so sharp but couldn’t find it in himself to feel an ounce of sympathy for her when she winced at his words.

“Wes, it’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?” he snapped, rolling off to the side.

“Wes, please.”

“Wes, please what?” he mocked. “Please offer me everything you have, so that I may take everything you have to offer without—”

“Stop that,” she interrupted, frowning. “You’re not the only one giving something of yourself.”

“Oh?”

“Does my virginity mean nothing to you?”

“No,” he said, bitterness filling his mouth.

“No?” She crossed her arms over her chest as if to hide herself from him, not that he had the slightest bit of interest in seeing her body now. “Is it not the greatest gift a woman can give the man she loves?”

He laughed hollowly. “It is, but not when she intends to sleep with another. Then it makes her no better than one of the women who travel through here every few months offering female companionship.”

She blanched at his cruel words, but he didn't care. He couldn't force himself to care enough when she'd just rejected him so coldly. "I don't see why you should care so much, since you intend to do the same."

"When did I ever say that?"

"You didn't have to. You and I both know—"

"That we're married."

"Well yes. But not in truth."

"No," he agreed through gritted teeth. "Though I foolishly believed that was about to happen."

"I don't know why," she said sharply.

He stared at her. "You do, too, know why."

"No. All I know is that I was about to give myself to the man who I love, who I foolishly believed for a moment might love me back."

He continued to stare at her, dumbfounded. Had something happened to her brain during her orgasm that had affected her ability to reason? "I do love you," he said simply.

"Then what is the problem?"

"The problem," he began slowly, "is that your earlier words implied that you planned to sleep with me tonight and someone else—" he had no desire to say that other man's name— "for the rest of your life."

Her eyes glistened with tears. "That's how it has to be."

"Like hell it does," he growled. He rolled away from her and buttoned his trousers, then forced himself to sit on the opposite edge of the bed with his back facing her.

"I made him a promise, Wes."

"And what of me, Allison? Does the fact that you were about to give me your honor mean nothing to you?"

"You know that it does," she choked. "I love you, Wes; but I can't remain married to you. I've promised my hand to someone else."

"Then why share your body with me?" he demanded, his chest constricting painfully.

"Because you're the one I want."

He looked at her from over his shoulder. "Then why do you still intend to keep your promise to him? You made one to me, too; or have you forgotten that?"

She sat up and grabbed a pillow to shield herself. "That's not fair and you know it. I made that promise to you because you said when Nicholas

came back for me that you'd grant me an annulment. I didn't expect to fall in love with you."

"Then I don't see the problem. You're already married to me; he'll understand."

"Perhaps he will," she allowed. "And I know that I must tell him and be prepared for the consequences. But I must honor my word."

"No. That's not it. You know as well as I do that he won't want to marry you if you're no longer chaste. You implied as much just last night. Why do you really keep insisting on marrying him? What does he have that I don't, Allison?"

"Wes, it's not like that—"

"Isn't it?" he challenged. "Is it his money, Allison?" He hated the way that sounded almost as much as the bile that filled his mouth.

The way she paled at his words and stammered to form some sort of rebuttal only confirmed his suspicion.

He didn't hear whatever mumbling excuse she thought to offer him over the sound of his blood thundering in his ears. *Money*. That's what it had come down to. He could tell her of his family's wealth, he supposed. But what good would that do? She might change her mind and accept marriage to him, but not for the right reasons. She might say that she loved him, but apparently it wasn't enough.

Wes stood and walked over to where his shirt lay on the floor.

"Wes, is it not enough for you that you'll forever hold my heart?" Allison asked, her voice a strangled whisper.

"No," he said, shoving his arms through the sleeves of his damp shirt. "It's not. Knowing that I hold something as fickle as your affection means absolutely nothing to me when I have to lie in bed at night knowing that another man will get to hold you."

~Chapter Eighteen~

Wes stared at the blank wall of the cabin in front of him.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting at his desk and he didn't care.

Not that there was much left to care about, he thought darkly as he let his gaze flicker down to the floorboard just to the left of his desk he'd pried up and stuffed that tied leather bag full of Nicholas' letters. His gut clenched, both in memory of what they'd found that day but also knowing that Allison had kept all of Nicholas' letters—and now he was the one keeping them. She'd probably want them back, and now that he truly knew where he stood with her, he needed to give them back to her.

He swallowed. He wasn't ready to face her yet. But when he was, he'd bring every one of those blasted letters for her to pine over.

Just not yet.

Some time ago the call that marked dinner had sounded, but he didn't feel like eating. Actually, he didn't feel anything at all, except perhaps numb, if that indeed was something one could actually feel. He'd always thought numb meant without feeling... Not that it mattered. Nothing did now that he knew for certain there was no chance of a genuine marriage between them.

"What are you doing in here?"

Wes forced a stiff shrug. "Why aren't you playing cards with the others?"

"It's my night to be in the lookout."

Wes nodded sadly. He remembered those long, tedious nights of keeping watch up in one of the four towers in case the Indians tried to attack. General Ridgely had seen reason and had exempted Wes from continuing in the rotation now that he was married. The truth was, the lock on the room the married officers were given wasn't enough to hold a dog out if he were determined enough. While Wes trusted his friends wouldn't cause Allison harm or leave her undisturbed in his absence, he didn't believe the same to be true for the majority of the other soldiers. She was an

attractive young lady. One who was vulnerable and upon whom it would be easy to prey.

“Wes?”

Wes started again. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Did you say something?”

Gray fell into the chair opposite Wes, obstructing Wes’ view of the oh-so-fascinating wall. “Is something troubling you?”

“No.” Wes did his best to force a smile, but even knew that was futile. “I’d better go back upstairs.”

Gray steeped his hands in front of him. “I see. Though to be quite truthful, after your public display earlier today, I—along with everyone else who lives around here—thought that’s where you’d be until tomorrow morning.”

Wes’ face heated. “Some of us are capable of spending time outside of the bed, Gray.”

“I never said you weren’t,” Gray returned. “I just find it strange that it’s nearly time for bed and you’re sitting at your desk instead of with your new bride. So I’ll ask again, Wes; is something wrong?”

“Nothing you’d understand,” Wes muttered, twisting his lips bitterly.

“Ah, then perhaps you should make a trip to see Dark Moon. I’m sure he has some herbs that can help with your problem.”

Of course *that’s* the first thing Gray would think was the problem. For Gray and the type of women he associated with, that had likely been the only problem he could comprehend. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Gray frowned. “Don’t be so offended. Many men suffer the inability to —”

“Don’t say another word,” Wes snapped. “Nothing is wrong with my ability.” It was his willingness that was the problem. Sure, he could have had Allison this afternoon and a hundred more times before the man she planned to marry came back for her. But for what purpose? Only to lose his heart to her more?

“Wes,” Gray said softly. “There’s no reason to be ashamed or embarrassed.”

Wes clenched his jaw. “I’m not. I have nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about.”

“Are you sure?” Gray quirked an eyebrow at him. “There is a very attractive woman up in your room right now, probably even warming your bed, and you’re down here in a hard, rickety chair talking to me.”

Wes sighed. Now that he'd been discovered, he needed to go back upstairs before anyone found out she was alone. "Now, that you mention it, Gray, I should be headed back upstairs."

Gray's frown deepened. "You don't sound nearly as excited about doing that as one would think you should be."

"Leave it alone, Gray."

"No." Gray's sharp tone gave Wes pause. He'd known the man close to eight years and had never heard him speak with such an edge to his voice. "Does she not enjoy your...attentions?" he asked, his voice back to normal now.

Wes scoffed. She'd enjoyed his attentions all right. "It's not that."

"Then do you not like hers?" Gray asked, picking up a leather bound book from his desk.

Wes stared at the man. Had the heat this past summer gotten to him? "Is such a thing even possible?"

Gray tossed the book down, sighing. "Wes, we've been in close quarters with each other for several years now. I know almost everything about you." He narrowed his eyes. "I even saw that you had dust in your eyes the entire time we rode back from the Indian attack the other day, despite the fact that not a speck got in them on the way out there." He shot Wes a sideways smile. "There's nobody else here to hear whatever it is that you have to say; so just tell me what's bothering you and maybe I can tell you how to fix it."

"I don't think that's possible."

"You don't know if you don't tell me," Gray hedged.

No, he didn't. Nor did he really wish to admit to Gray that everything he'd told him since Allison had arrived was a lie.

"Tell me this, is your sitting here brooding a sign that perhaps Allison might be entertaining offers from the other men about camp?"

"Must you speak of her as if she is a sack of grain to be acquired or bartered for?"

Gray cocked his head to the side. "I see that I was wrong—at least partially. It seems by your strong reaction that your feelings for her are quite strong. Does she not feel the same way about you?"

Wes scowled at him. He hated it when Gray did this. Likely, it was what made him so sought after by the ladies. He might have a glib tongue and often said things that were inappropriate, but when it came to deeper

matters, particularly those involving females, he gave his words, and theirs, a lot of thought. Too much thought if you asked Wes.

“She does. Or so she says.” Wes released a deep breath and swiped his open palm over the smooth surface of his desk. “But it’s not enough. I’m not enough.”

Gray’s impassive face only annoyed him further. “And this matters to you?” Gray asked.

“Because she doesn’t intend to stay.” Wes threw his hands into the air. He’d said this much, so he might as well tell Gray the rest. “Allison was not my betrothed or the mail order bride I let you all believe. The stage that brought her here was bound for Santa Fe, where her rightful betrothed is waiting for her. The driver got lost and they ended up here. While the driver was getting directions from me, Allison got off for some reason and he left without her. I’d taken the day off that day because I’d just come back from a three-day ride out to the Creek reservation and I was tired. As I was walking out to check on my men and make sure they were following McCorkle’s commands, I saw her and convinced her to marry me until she could get word to Santa Fe and her intended could come back for her.

“It was the only solution I saw at the time to keep her safe while she stayed here. I didn’t intend for—” He broke off and shrugged.

“She still plans to return to her original suitor?” Gray asked for what Wes assumed was clarification.

Wes nodded.

“Is it possible she might be carrying your child?”

“No.”

“You do know those sheaths aren’t without fault.”

Wes forced himself to meet his friend’s eyes. “I know that.”

Gray nodded as if he took Wes’ meaning, which was a good thing, because the last thing he wanted to do was actually say the words that he hadn’t lain with his wife in the biblical sense. “Have you tried to change her mind?”

“Yes. And I thought I had, but—” he shook his head as an overwhelming sense of sadness came over him at the memory of her telling him that she’d give him her innocence and her heart but didn’t intend to stay married to him— “I guess my efforts weren’t good enough.”

“And just what were your efforts?”

Wes sliced his hand through the air. “Those are unimportant. I didn’t word that correctly. Apparently, my efforts were good enough; it’s just me who isn’t.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Then don’t,” Wes said with a lopsided shrug.

“Wes, you are one of the most likable people I’ve ever met. The men assigned to you are glad to be under your command, and they never grumble, no matter what you ask them to do.” He snorted. “Even Mrs. Lewis has admitted that were she a few decades younger, she’d have been the one to pursue you.” He shook his head. “So I can’t believe that she finds you lacking anything.”

“Well, she does,” Wes said bitterly.

“What?”

“My name isn’t Nicholas. I don’t have blushing debutantes flocking toward me in the hopes that I’ll afford them a moment of my time. Nor do I have pots of money to count all day and spend without a care.”

“You could,” Gray said.

Wes swallowed. “I know that. And I thought I could give her that if that’s what it took, but I can’t. That’s not who I am, Gray. I hated every minute I spent wearing lace and ruffles.” He cringed. “I hated being made to dance with this one and kiss the hand of that one. I don’t mind dressing in my finest from time to time to dance with the squaws, but I can’t do it every night of the week again. I just don’t have it in me. I joined the army to escape that life and make my own way in this world, even if it reduced me to meager, impoverished living conditions.”

“Did Allison tell you that she couldn’t accept your position in life?”

“No. She didn’t have to. She’s spoken about her precious *Nicholas*—” he couldn’t stop himself from sneering at the man’s name— “wonderful social qualities and booming business in Austin.”

“So, you’re telling me that she loves you, but is marrying him for practical purposes?”

Wes nodded. That summed it up very well.

“Do you think it’s possible that the reason she feels she has to marry him isn’t because she’s truly some money-hungry, materialistic, spoiled brat, but because you treat her as if you think she is?”

“What’s that to mean?”

Gray pulled a face. “I was there at breakfast that first day when you said something to her about not wasting her food, then grumbled that you had to eat it for her. I also heard from Charles about the conversation regarding buying her fabric. And—”

“That’s enough,” Wes cut in, a lead weight lowering on his gut. “I take your meaning, and for once, you’re absolutely right.” Not once had Allison asked him to buy her anything or intentionally wasted anything other than the awful food she was served. He’d been the one to accuse her of being frivolous, based solely on where she was from and what he assumed to be true of a lady like her.

Nausea swirled in his stomach. This was all a mess of his own creation, not hers.

Wes ran a hand through his hair and stood to leave. But before he could go, he knew what he needed to do. If he wanted to start anew with Allison and have a fighting chance with her, he needed to be honest with her and give her back something she deserved—those blasted letters. Even if she didn’t choose him, she deserved to have the letters.

With a sigh, he bent down and pushed on the floorboard until the other side lifted, then scooped out the letters, restored the floorboard, smiled at Gray and said, “Thank you, Gray.”

Not that he thought for one minute that Gray had any interest in what was in that bundle in his hand—he’d probably already deduced what they were based off their previous conversation—and if he needed any further convincing, it was there when he smiled smugly and in a teasing voice said, “You’re welcome.”

~Chapter Nineteen~

Allison lay paralyzed as Wes finished with his shirt and left the room.

Why was he so upset? *She* should be the one upset. She was offering her virtue to a man she couldn't have, even knowing full well that they could never be together. And yet, it was he who acted as if he were the one of the pair having his heart crushed by a thousand-pound boulder.

She had no illusion that she could stay. She had nothing to offer him except her body, which given enough time, he'd probably tire of and wish he'd married a woman who could at least cook and sew.

A painful knot formed in her throat, choking her, and blinding tears stung her eyes.

How could she have ever believed everything between them would be simple?

Because Wes was a man. One who didn't seem to truly need her, at that.

She rolled onto her side and reached for the top edge of the blanket, then jerked it free from the underside of the mattress where Wes had tucked it so tightly when he'd made the bed. She pulled the blanket over her and brought her knees up toward her chest as sobs wracked her body.

She'd ruined everything.

Wes thought her the lowest kind of woman. Not that she could blame him. In her moment of weakness, she'd abandoned all reason and logic, allowing her heart to make her decisions. Ones she knew full well she could never fully honor. All she could give him was her innocence and her love. That's all that was safe to give. For if she stayed, how would he not grow to resent her when he had no choice but to pay other ladies to make her dresses or take her around in unfashionable rags?

What of their meals? His were included as part of his salary; hers were not. He hadn't been unkind enough to directly say anything to her about the amount she was costing him by not eating her portions and making him eat them. But he didn't have to. His light-hearted jests about her wasting had been enough of a reminder.

She remembered that he received a decent salary, She also remembered that he'd pulled a considerable amount of money out from his bedposts when they'd first married, but eventually, he'd run out of funds. Then what? He might not be so heartless as to ridicule her for her role in driving them to poverty, but they'd both know it was her and, what he considered to be, her wastefulness that had bankrupted them.

Not that any of that really mattered. In time, hopefully before they ended up living under a tree somewhere, she could learn to cook and sew. Perhaps not as well as most women, but well enough to get by. But what of the other debt? The one she'd owe Nicholas for breaking their contract. He and her father had been business partners and somewhere along the way, she'd been thrown into their business arrangements. Her hand in marriage as compensation for something. If she broke the arrangement, she'd owe Nicholas money. Money that neither she nor Wes could ever have.

She squeezed her eyes shut; but it didn't hold in the tears as she'd hoped and they began to spill from her eyes in two steady, salty currents.

No, it was better this way.

It had to be, for it was the only way.

"Allison?"

Allison jerked at the sound of her name on Wes' lips. She blinked her eyes open, which was hard to do, considering they were practically pasted closed from all the tears she'd shed.

The room was completely dark now except for the small flame that topped the candle Wes held. She moved to sit up and clear her thoughts, but remembered she was naked and decided instead to pull the blanket closer to her.

"If you'd be kind enough to excuse yourself for a moment, I'll dress, and then we can go to bed." She knew it was childish to be so modest after she'd practically thrown herself at him earlier, but now it was different. Then, she'd felt excited by his touch and so helplessly in love and now she felt like a fool.

"Your clothes are still wet," he murmured.

Allison pulled her blanket closer to her. "I don't mind if they're damp. I just need a moment or two to put them on, please?"

Wes brushed away the hair that had fallen over her forehead with his long fingers. "They're not just damp, Allison. They've been sitting in a pile all afternoon with no chance to dry." He placed the candle on the nearby

table and removed his shirt. “It’ll be far too big, but at least it’s dry.” He set it down next to her, then walked to the end of the bed and started picking up her sodden clothes. Without a word or even a glance in her direction, he started spreading her clothes out to dry by the fire.

Apparently this was as much privacy as he was going to allow her.

Swallowing her pride, she sat up and quickly donned his shirt, then adjusted the blankets and fell back against her pillow.

She stared up at what she could see of the wooden support beams overhead, waiting.

What would he say when he joined her?

Or would he join her?

That was absurd. He had to join her. There wasn’t any other choice unless he planned to sleep on the floor—which she highly doubted he’d choose to do.

She closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm her anxiousness.

A moment or so later, the mattress dipped.

Allison steeled her spine and waited for him to say something to her.

But he didn’t.

He just lay there next to her, his breathing just as deep and even as hers—hypnotizing almost.

Sleep threatened to overtake her once more, but just before she fell into that comforting abyss, a warm hand closed around hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

~Chapter Twenty~

“Wes?”

Allison wasn't sure if she'd actually spoken his name aloud or if she just thought she had.

“Yes?”

Allison sat up in the bed and blinked her eyes to let them adjust to the very low light that was filling the room. “Did I oversleep?” she asked.

“No. I like to get up early when I can and go for a ride. I didn't mean to wake you, just go back to sleep.”

“Wes, I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. I—”

He pressed his finger against her lips to stop her words. “Say no more. I think we both said things without thinking of how they'd be interpreted.”

Frowning, Allison pulled his hand away. If he thought to imply that she'd spoken irrationally or without thought and would change her mind, it would be best to make herself clear right now. “Wes, while I'm hoping that was your way of apologizing for calling me a whore, that wasn't exactly what I wanted to say.”

“Then why don't you come for a ride with me and explain?”

Temporary paralysis took hold of Allison again. Even after everything that had happened and all they'd said to each other yesterday, he still wanted to spend time with her?

Wes held his breath in anticipation. He hadn't meant to invite her to ride with him. He still needed time to think of what he'd do next. To his mind, he still had almost two full weeks before the arrival of Mr. Perfect and Wealthy.

“A-all right. I'll go.”

He was just about to reach for her clothes when her gasp rent the air and made him freeze.

“Where did that come from?”

Wes' eyes flew to the leather pouch he'd found. Swallowing, he said. “I found it.” That was true enough.

She nodded mutely. “Where.”

“On the ground.”

She didn't say anything about his evasive sarcasm, just stared at him and swallowed uncomfortably. “How long have you had it?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. A while.”

“Did you...um...did you read what was in there?”

Relieved she hadn't pressed him for more details on how he found it, he shook his head. “No. Not really.”

“Not really?”

He shrugged. “I read two lines of one and had to stop reading before I got a stomachache from all of Nicholas' sugary sweetness.”

Her face blushed. A beautiful sight to behold; how unfortunate it was because he'd mentioned her former suitor.

“You can reread them all when we get back. But if you wish to go with me, you'll need to dress now.” He picked up her clothes and laid them on the bed next to her. “Do you need any help?”

“No,” she said with an audible swallow. “I'll only be a minute.”

Wes sank into a dining chair and crossed his ankles to wait while she got herself ready.

“All right, I'm dressed,” she informed him a few minutes later.

Wes pushed to his feet and led her down to the stables. “This, is Midnight.” He ran his hand down the stallion's thick, black mane.

Allison copied the gesture. “His hair is so soft.”

Wes grunted his agreement, then led Midnight from his stall. “Are you ready to mount?”

Allison dropped her hand and cast a pointed look at Midnight's back. “I'm ready, but is he?”

“We'll have to ride him bareback,” Wes explained. “The saddle isn't large enough for both of us.”

“Do you not want me to come?”

Wes was caught off-guard by her question and tensed. “What makes you think that?”

“You just missed two opportunities to make a jest.”

“I did?”

“Yes,” she said in a voice that sounded hard and forced. “You asked if I was ready to mount.”

“And?”

“The Wes I met here last week, and even spent time in the company of up until yesterday afternoon, would have added a sarcastic remark on the end of that, such as, ‘or do you intend to keep checking Midnight’s mane for tangles?’.”

“So because I didn’t ask if you were done running your fingers through Midnight’s mane, you’ve drawn the conclusion I don’t want you to be here?” he asked flatly.

“Well, there’s that. But then you said we’d have to ride bareback because the saddle wasn’t big enough to hold the two of us.”

“And what did you expect me to say?”

She gave an overdone sigh as if she were genuinely uncomfortable but didn’t want him to know. “I half-expected you to follow that statement with a remark about how you could saddle him up for me, but only if I intended to sit on your lap.”

“And do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Want to sit directly on my lap?”

“No,” she blurted. “Please forget I said anything.”

Wes frowned at her. “I don’t think that’s possible. You did just suggest that you’d like to ride Midnight perched upon my lap. How could I possibly forget that?”

“I only said that because— Just forget it.”

Wes bit back his grin. He hadn’t intended to frustrate her, but now that he had... She’d been right though. He likely would have said those very things—or something even more shocking to her—had things been different yesterday and he not so distracted thinking about her and their current situation.

As it was, he didn’t know where he stood or how to fix it.

He gulped down the uncertainty that threatened to choke him and helped Allison onto the horse. He handed her the reins so she’d have something to hold on to, then closed his fingers around Midnight’s bridle and led him from the stable.

The sun wasn’t hidden as far behind the clouds as it normally was when he began his ride. That was all right; they just wouldn’t ride as far.

They cleared the barracks and Wes swung up onto Midnight’s back. He reached around Allison for the reins and guided Midnight in the usual direction he liked to go, then nudged him to go a little faster.

Midnight lurched forward, causing Allison to nearly lose her balance and fall against him.

“Sorry,” she murmured, attempting to straighten.

Unfortunately, her movements resulted in her rubbing her soft backside directly against his groin.

“Stop that,” he practically snapped, placing a staying hand on her waist.

“I’m just trying to sit up,” she argued. “How was I to know you were going to make the horse run before I was ready?”

He supposed she didn’t. “Place your hands on my thighs and use them for leverage if you must readjust.”

She did just as he’d suggested, only furthering his torment, because now not only was her bottom *still* rubbing against him, but she was also squeezing his upper thighs. Next time, he’d make it clear he meant for her to grip his knees.

Eventually, she regained her former position—the one where she sat straight up and thrust her perfumed hair just inches in front of his nose. When the hell had she had time to perfume herself?

“I wasn’t trying to tease you, Wes,” she said a moment later.

Wes momentarily tightened his hold on the reins. “I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Of course. A fancy lady like yourself wouldn’t know anything about how to excite a man while pretending to get more comfortable on his horse.”

Based on what he could see of the muscles in Allison’s neck in the low sunlight, he believed she’d stiffened. “That’s not what I intended. I didn’t even know I was doing that.”

A small wave of shame came over him. She’d always been very genuine in her actions toward him, even if it meant saying things to him that he never believed she’d say. To accuse her of something so vulgar and untrue wasn’t fair. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t a very fair accusation for me to make.”

“It’s all right,” she said with a stiff shrug. “It’s no less than I deserve after abandoning my morals and throwing myself at you yesterday, I suppose.”

“Is that how you see it? Throwing yourself at me?”

Silence, broken only by a distant bird singing its morning song, was her only answer.

Wes slowed Midnight to a trot. "Allison?"

"I would have gone through with it," she said in a broken whisper.

"I know that." But it wasn't about her fulfilling the unspoken promise they'd made to each other when their kiss had become more than just a kiss and he'd begun undressing her. It was about the promise she didn't intend to fulfill—the one far more valuable to him than just having her yesterday.

"Wes, I love you."

Those soft words hit him harder than a cannonball. "Then why do you insist on doing so from afar while sharing another man's bed?"

Allison sucked in a harsh breath. "Would you please take me back to the barracks?"

"No. Would you please answer my question?"

"No."

"Shall we play a game?"

She shook her head. "No."

"I'll go first. Is the reason you want to marry Nicholas because he's better at rounders than I am?"

She didn't answer, so he lifted his knee and nudged the side of her soft bottom. "N-no," she said with a little squeal of surprise.

"Is it that he's more handsome than me?"

"No."

"Charming?"

"No," she said with a sputter of laughter. "Nobody could compare to you in that regard, Wes."

He was flattered, but not deterred. "Is it because he's more refined than me?"

She sighed. "No."

"Wealthier?"

She hesitated. "No."

Wes' gut clenched at her tone. Tightening his hold on the reins, he steered Midnight back toward the barracks.

"Is it my turn now?"

Wes ignored her and nudged Midnight to go faster. He'd gone back to their room last night with the hope that Gray had been right and her preoccupation with wealth had merely been his perception. Now he knew

otherwise. It wasn't enough to make him completely give up on her. He loved her too much to just walk away now, but it did not make him eager to spend another minute in her presence right now. He had to find a way, without resorting to his inheritance, to convince her to abandon her infatuation with her former suitor. And if she didn't, then all would be lost. His heart constricted at the painful reality that was likely to become his own. He still had time, he reminded himself, as he nudged the horse forward.

"Wes, must we ride so fast?" she asked, her hands fruitlessly groping for purchase on his thighs.

He gritted his teeth. Then suddenly, she gripped the section of reins in front of her and pulled Midnight to an abrupt stop, leading his jaw to collide with the back of her head in the most painful way.

"That was not a good idea, Allison," he barked; he instinctively moved his fingertips to his lips to check for bleeding, then to his jaw to see if it was swelling.

"I had to do *something*," she cried. "You weren't listening to me."

"I heard you just fine," he bit off, then licked his lips. "I chose not to answer."

"Why is it that you get the choice not to answer my questions, but I have to answer yours?"

He shrugged, even though he knew she couldn't see the gesture with her back to him. "Perhaps because I've already found out enough about you to know that anything I might say in answer to your questions won't change anything between us."

"And how did you reach this conclusion?"

"Because your answers told me so."

"I said no to everything you asked," she burst out.

"But you didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean what?" She made a sound of aggravation, and before he could react, she threw her left leg over Midnight's head, then tumbled to the ground in the most undignified heap.

Wes was off the horse in a second. "Are you all right?" He reached for her, only to be swatted at.

"I'm fine," she hissed, refusing his offer of help. She got up and dusted off her skirt, then folded her arms across her chest. "I don't like being made to talk to someone who I can't see."

“Then you should have asked me to help you off the horse.”

“Oh, and would you have helped me down the same way you’d have returned me to the barracks when I asked or responded to me when I asked you a question?”

“That’s different.”

Allison lifted her chin a notch. “I don’t see how.”

“It just is.”

“I see. You’re using the same logic you applied when deciding by all of my no answers that you have nothing more to say to me to determine that there’s a difference in how you would have reacted had I asked you to help me dismount versus when you’d ignored me before when I’d asked you to do things.”

He blinked at her. If he understood what she was saying correctly, she thought he was an illogical thinker. But he wasn’t. “The difference is that jumping down from a horse the way you did could have gotten you hurt. If you would have asked, I would have helped you down. I refused to return you to the barracks because you only demanded it to escape my presence and avoid answering my questions. The matters are different entirely.

“As for not answering your questions,” he shrugged, “I already told you there wasn’t a reason for me to do so. You’ve made it quite clear that you find Nicholas superior to me, so why should I bother to waste our time by answering your questions?”

She blanched. “So now it’s a waste of your time to so much as talk to me?”

“When what you have to say will only cause more hurt and not change the outcome, yes.”

“I don’t understand you, Wes. You already knew—”

“Yes, I did,” he cut in, not wanting her to remind him once again of what he already knew: she hadn’t changed her mind and she still intended to marry her precious Nicholas. “And damn it all, it’s my fault.”

“Your fault what?” she pressed.

“Nothing. Now, if we’re done arguing, I’d like to help you back onto Midnight, so we can return in time for me to meet my men.”

“No.”

“No?” He released a pent up breath. “Allison, I don’t have time for this. I have to get back.”

“Then just answer my question.”

“Which one?” he asked flippantly.

“How is it that I told you that you were more handsome and charming than Nicholas and that I love you, and yet you get angry and accuse me of saying you don’t compare to Nicholas. Why is it that you don’t believe me?”

“It has nothing to do with that.”

She knit her brows. “Then what is it?” Her voice cracked in the middle of her demand. “I said no to everything you asked.”

“But you didn’t mean no.”

“No, I didn’t, Wes. I have to admit. I think he’s the best rounders player to grace this country,” she said with a huff.

“It’s not that and you know it.” He crossed his arms. “I asked if you cared about his wealth.”

“And I said no.”

“Your voice might have said no, but your hesitation and tone said yes.”

An uncomfortable silence engulfed them.

“Wes, I—I—I...” She sighed and fisted her hands into her skirt. “I didn’t mean for it to be this way.”

He kicked a rock with the toe of his boot. “It’s all right, Allison. You don’t have to explain,” he said, just as much to spare her pride as his own. “Now, are you ready to go back or would you prefer to walk?”

“I’m not going anywhere until you listen to me.”

“Fine. Say whatever it is you think is so important.”

“Wes, I love you. I really do. I love you more than I ever thought was possible. But it has to be this way. I’m not what you need.”

“Is that so? Or is it that I’m not what you need?”

She shook her head violently and clasped her hands in front of her.

“No. You are. You’re all I need, but I—I am not the wife you need.”

“And because you claim to love me, that makes you qualified to decide what’s best for me?” he asked in a tone dripping with sarcasm. He shook his head and twisted his lips. “What about what I want, Allison? Does that not matter? Do you think you know my own mind better than me?”

“What do you want, Wes?”

“You.”

Her lips formed a perfect O and her eyes shone with what he thought to be happy tears at his admission, but then her face fell in a way that might

suggest she was about to spout off a reason that his feelings for her didn't matter..

Before she could say anything further to trample his pride, he said, "I've answered your questions, so if you're satisfied, I'd like to return to the barracks now."

OceanofPDF.com

~Chapter Twenty-One~

The tension that filled the air surrounding them was enough to choke them both to death. Or at least Allison. With her back to Wes as they rode at a breakneck speed, she couldn't see his face, but she had an idea of what she'd see: a scowl darker than thunder.

She swallowed uncomfortably. "Wes?"

No response, not that she'd actually expected one.

"Wes?" She sighed at his lack of response again. It wasn't that she didn't want to stay married to him. It was that she *couldn't*. He just wasn't allowing her the opportunity to explain that. Not that she believed she could find the right words to do so anyway.

The barracks came into view, and so did an incredible amount of horses and soldiers she didn't recognize.

"Whoa," Wes said soothingly to the horse as he pulled Midnight to a stop. They sat there for a minute, and then Wes clicked his tongue for the horse to move again.

Neither said anything as he unbridled Midnight and saw to the horses needs, only intensifying the tension between them more, if such a thing were even possible.

"Let's go," he barked.

"Where?"

He shot her a peeved look as if she should be able to read his mind.

Just then, the booming voice of Colonel Lewis floated to their ears loud enough to block out even her own thoughts. "Captain Tucker, get out here, now!"

Allison's eyes widened. She'd never heard the soft-spoken Colonel raise his voice. She chanced a glance at Wes. His jaw was clenched and a muscle in his cheek was ticking.

It was evident that now wasn't the time to be argumentative or ask him questions, so she kept her mouth closed. She had the strangest urge to reach for his hand but didn't know if that would be more reassuring for him, or her, and decided against it.

They took four steps forward before the large door at the end of the stable swung open, revealing a stony-faced Colonel Lewis alongside—*“Nicholas,”* she gasped.

Every muscle in Wes’ body contracted at once. Not because Colonel Lewis was angry. He’d been on the receiving end of his wrath a time or two and knew the man, though usually quiet and mild, could get his dander up over small things that could be easily fixed. No, the reason his muscles were knotted tighter than a hangman’s noose had nothing to do with Colonel Lewis and everything to do with the man standing to his left. More specifically, Allison’s reaction to him.

“Allison,” the immaculately dressed man with yellow trousers and a white coat said, coming over to her. He lifted his hat, which was just as white as his coat, from his head with one hand and lifted Allison’s hand to his lips with the other.

Wes jerked his eyes away. The last thing he wanted to see was this man placing his lips on Allison’s knuckles. Instead, he had to meet the cold eyes of a disgruntled Colonel Lewis.

Unlike the other times Wes had spiked his ire, it was rather clear this wouldn’t be so easy to explain.

“H-how did you get here so soon?” Allison asked, then cleared her throat.

“As soon as I got your letter, I came,” he said. He lowered his eyes to take in her shirt and skirt. “And not a moment too soon, I see.”

“Did you hire a mob to get you here?” she asked with a slight hitch in her voice.

He giggled. Yes, *giggled*, leading Wes to snap his head around to face the man. “Don’t be silly, the Army escorted me. That’s how I found out where you were in the first place,” he explained.

“And just how is that?” Wes heard himself ask; though why he was interested in the man’s answer, he couldn’t explain.

The man put his hat back on and, not releasing his hold on Allison’s hand, which Wes couldn’t help but notice, turned his head to address Wes. “When General Bridges came to my home, he brought Miss Pierson’s letter with him and said it had accompanied the supplies that had been sent down from here.”

McCorkle. That's who was in charge of overseeing shipments that were sent and received from the other forts. Checking the outgoing post for missives that needed to be delivered was just a courtesy; one that most who had that position honored. It had been so long since he'd done it, he'd forgotten that fact; besides, how was he to know supplies were about to be sent to Fort Marcy? He pushed the thought from his mind. This was just another setback, albeit a rather large one, but there was still time to convince her. She still needed him to sign the papers, didn't she?

"Of course I couldn't leave my intended stranded in some godforsaken fort surrounded by Indians, so I slipped enough coins into the right hands, and *ta da*, here I am!"

"Yes, here you are," Wes muttered under his breath as the odd little man turned back toward Allison. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said that he was refined. He was. So much so that Wes was certain he'd only met one other who was just as *particular*. He shuddered at the thought. His money must mean a great deal to her if she was willing to marry a man who clearly was only using her to help his image among his peers.

Ignoring the way every muscle in his body tensed to the point of pain, Wes forced his feet to carry him forward all the way out of the stable and across the courtyard, heedless to Colonel Lewis' demands for him to halt.

A month in the stockade as punishment for disobeying orders was fine with him. It couldn't possibly be any harder than to see the woman he loved being doted on by a man who saw her only as a tool he could manipulate, not someone he could love.

Allison stood frozen in the barn, her eyes unable to look away from the sight of Wes' retreating back. Was that it, then? Was he truly walking away from her?

Her heart sank. Could she blame him? She'd pushed him away.

"Allison," Nicholas's soft tone drew her attention. "Now that I have reclaimed what is mine, I think it's time we collect your things and tell Major Rawlings we're ready to start back to Santa Fe, then onto Austin."

"We can't. Not yet."

"Not yet?" He knit his brows. "What do you mean?"

Allison licked her lips and shot a glance over to where Colonel Lewis stood, shamelessly staring at them. "It's not as simple as just leaving, I'm afraid." She looked to Colonel Lewis again. Hadn't he told Nicholas of her

marriage to Wes? Perhaps not. “Do you remember the gentleman who was just in here?”

“You mean the barbaric-looking giant who abducted you to go riding? Yes, I saw him and he’ll be dealt with. I’ll make sure of it myself.”

Allison frowned at him. “Not too harshly, I should hope. He is my husband, after all.”

Nicholas’s face went whiter than his coat. “Your what?”

“Colonel Lewis, can we have a moment alone?”

Colonel Lewis shook his head. “No,” he said in his usual soft tone. “I have no idea what is going on here, and until I can make sense of just who is what to you, I’ve made it my responsibility to act as your guardian.”

His words would have melted her heart had she not been so frustrated—mainly with herself. “Nicholas, as I stated in that letter, I was stranded here. As you have already noticed, there aren’t exactly a lot of ladies present. Three of us, to be precise. The other two were married and there wasn’t anywhere for me to go, so I...uh...married Wes.”

His jaw dropped. “You married a stranger because you didn’t have a place to stay?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” she persisted. “I had to stay somewhere until you could come for me.”

“Is that so?” He crossed his arms. “And you’re telling me you couldn’t have stayed with one of the other married ladies?”

“I—I hadn’t thought about that,” she said. “But—”

“No, you probably weren’t given the time to, were you? He took advantage of you, Allison. He saw an opportunity and took it.”

“Now, see here,” she hissed, her face flushing with embarrassment. “Wes isn’t the kind to take advantage of anyone. There wasn’t any place for me to go, and if he hadn’t married me, I’d have been at the mercy of all the men here.”

Nicholas gave a bark of hollow laughter. “And you believed him? Surely there was somewhere for you to go.”

“No, there wasn’t. The only two other ladies who are here don’t have a lot of extra room. Besides, it would take away from their own privacy to have another person sleep in the room with them.”

“So without asking them, you willingly jumped in bed with a stranger?” He clenched his hands at his sides, his face growing redder than the cock feather that decorated Wes’ hat. “Two years we courted and you

refused to share my bed; but you jump into bed with a stranger after only a few hours.”

His words stung more than if he'd slapped her cheek. “It wasn't like that. He— We—” She straightened her spine. “Actually, believe what you want. You will anyway.”

His lips thinned. “We can address the state of your chastity when we're alone. Right now, we need to find a way to dissolve this marriage.” He turned his head toward their guest. “Colonel Lewis, do you know how to dissolve this—this—travesty my simple-minded intended created for herself?”

Colonel Lewis frowned and allowed his eyes to travel from Nicholas to Allison then back to Nicholas. “I am not at liberty to dissolve this union, but I know of a man who is. He's in Fort Smith, so it should only take two or three days to get him here and get matters settled.”

“I suppose that will have to do,” Nicholas said with a huff. He turned back to face Allison. “Is there nothing else you might be able to put on? You know how I feel about my intended being seen in beggar's clothes.”

Allison looked down at her shirt and skirt. They weren't as fancy as the things she'd worn in Boston; and the craftsmanship of the skirt wasn't as good of quality as it would have been had she hired someone to make it for her; but she'd become quite attached to the freedom the costume gave her, not to mention the idea had been Wes'. She swallowed. She'd certainly made a mess of things where he was concerned.

Nicholas clearing his throat reminded her of his question.

“Unfortunately, all of my clothes were still on the stage, and the dress that I was wearing at the time isn't in any better condition than this one.”

“That's all right,” Nicholas said with a wide smile. “You can just stay inside until it's time to leave for Santa Fe.”

~Chapter Twenty-Two~

Walking into the room where Mrs. Lewis and Sarah were sewing wouldn't have been so hard if her legs didn't feel as though they weighed a thousand pounds each. As it was, it took all of her strength to walk with Colonel Lewis to his home. She couldn't even force a smile to greet the other ladies as she took her seat and waited for the colonel to return with the few personal affects she'd left in the room she and Wes had shared. Colonel Lewis had asked her if she wanted to collect them herself, but she'd declined. She'd let Wes gather them for her for she couldn't force herself to go back into that room when everything she'd come to know and fall in love with here was now spinning out of control.

"Are you feeling well, dear?" Mrs. Lewis asked, cocking her head to the side in concern.

Apparently she didn't know of the morning's events. She would by tonight though. Allison was certain of it, she thought as she tried to swallow yet another sob.

"You're just in time. Sarah was just about to start preparing the meat for dinner."

Allison furrowed her brow. How was that good fortune? She knit her brow even more when Sarah said, "I was?"

"Yes, you were," Mrs. Lewis said in a strange, almost strangled voice.

"Oh, right!" Sarah jumped from her spot on the sofa. "I quite forgot. Would you like to help me, Allison?"

Allison tore her eyes away from where Mrs. Lewis was smiling as if she had something to hide. "Of course. I'd love to help you."

Sarah just beamed, seemingly as uncertain of what Mrs. Lewis was doing as Allison was.

Together, they went to the kitchen, where a brown package sat on the worktable, presumably the meat they were about to prepare.

Allison swallowed her nerves. She'd never seen raw meat before.

"Don't worry," Sarah murmured as she poured some water from the carafe into the basin. "If you've ever sat down for a meal in the dining hall, what's in this package is no worse."

She tentatively opened the package and nearly laughed. Sarah had been right. “The only difference between this and what they serve us each night is that the chunk residing in the middle of my plate has a hint of black along the edges and a mountain of salt on the top.”

Sarah scrunched up her nose. “Well, you take note of what I do to this and you’ll thicken your husband up in no time.”

What was left of Allison’s feigned humor faded. It wouldn’t matter if she became the best chef to ever prepare food, Wes would never eat anything she’d make. “I’ll be sure to watch carefully,” she forced herself to say.

“Is something wrong?” Sarah asked as she dipped the chunk of meat into the shallow water of the basin.

“N-no.”

Sarah removed the meat, then dipped the other side. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know you’re just as bad at lying as you are at sewing?”

Allison’s face burned.

Sarah plopped the piece of meat down on a nearby plate. “Here. Pat this dry while I look for what we need next.”

Allison obeyed, and she hummed, hoping it would keep Sarah from asking her anything else.

“That won’t work,” Sarah said, plopping three little unmarked, glass bottles down in front of her.

Allison quieted and turned the meat over to dry the other side. “Am I doing it wrong?”

“You know that you’re not doing anything wrong where the meat is concerned. But you’re doing a great wrong by pretending otherwise.” She took the towel from Allison and set it down. “I think that’s good enough. You still want it a little moist or it won’t absorb anything.”

Allison picked up the first bottle, uncorked it and took a sniff. “Mmm, what is that?”

Sarah laughed. “You really haven’t had any good cooking in a while. That’s just black pepper. Unground, of course.”

“Oh.” Allison recorked the bottle and set it down.

“Did you and Wes have a row?” Sarah’s question almost made Allison laugh. Almost.

“I suppose you could say that,” she admitted. She absentmindedly spun the bottle of spice, trying to force her attention onto anything other than the way her chest hurt.

“All couples have quarrels. The two of you will work it out. Just give it time.”

“You’re very optimistic,” Allison said. She did her best to force a wobbly smile as the pain of seeing Wes walk away from her so easily sliced through her.

“One who is certain can be optimistic.” Sarah poured some of this herb and a dash of that spice into a little bowl. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Allison. I don’t think there is anything to be worried about. Whatever has happened will be forgotten soon.”

Allison shook her head. “Not this.”

“Well, perhaps it won’t be forgotten so soon, but it will certainly be forgiven.” She grabbed the third bottle of spice and poured just a hint of it into her hand, then tipped the bottle and put some back in before dumping the rest into the bowl. “I know that General Ridgely and I are older than you, and our marriage might not be what some would consider exciting, what with me marrying a man fifteen years my senior. But these past few years have taught me many lessons, and I’d be happy to offer you advice if you’ll tell me what’s wrong.”

“I—I can’t.”

“It seems your lips and tongue are working just fine to me.”

“Sarah, I don’t know how to explain it.” She wiped her eyes. “I love him, but I can’t have him.”

Sarah gave her a queer look then dipped the slab of meat into her bowl of herbs. She flopped the meat around a bit then put it back on the plate and dumped the remaining seasoning on top. “Didn’t you already marry him? I might be wrong, but I think that makes him yours.”

“Only temporarily.”

Sarah rinsed her hands and dried them, then reached for Allison’s wrist and pulled her over to the table. “Sit here while I get you some water. You’re not making any sense.”

Allison reached for Sarah’s arm to stay her. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but that’s how it is. I didn’t come here as Wes’ mail order bride or his betrothed in some other way or anything else you might have heard or thought. I came here by accident and Wes was kind enough to offer me his

protection by way of giving me his last name.” She took a deep breath. “It was only supposed to be temporary, just until I could get word to my betrothed, who was to meet me in Santa Fe and take me to his home in Austin.” She dashed away the tears that were now spilling out of her eyes. “When we met, I thought Wes was handsome and charming and had a kind heart to make such an offer. We both knew it would be temporary. I never expected to fall in love with him.”

“How is this a problem? Not so long ago, most couples married because of circumstances and grew to love the other by weathering the storms of life together. This is no different.”

“Did these couples have a third person join their marriage?”

Sarah’s brows knit, and then her eyes lit with understanding. “Is *that* what the commotion was this morning?”

Allison nodded. “I knew he’d come for me, and I took every chance I could find to remind both of us of that; but I think I secretly wished he wouldn’t really come.”

“Does Wes know this?”

“He knows that I love him.”

“Allison, I think you’re making this into a problem that isn’t real. Just tell your suitor that you’re a married woman now and that you’ve made a vow to another that you intend to keep. He cannot force you to dissolve your marriage. Your contract with him might have existed before you married Wes, but as far as I can see, your marriage to Wes has made it void.”

Allison bit her lip. That was true enough, but did it alter *everything* in their contract?

“Go to him.” Sarah’s soft voice brought her from her fog.

She released her lower lip from her teeth, then licked it to soothe the pain. She’d been so lost in thought she hadn’t even realized she’d been biting her lip. “What should I say?”

Sarah looked at her as though she’d just asked the stupidest question. “How about, ‘I’m married to Wes and I won’t be signing any annulment papers, so you can just go back to Santa Fe right now?’”

Allison sputtered with laughter. “I can’t say that. It’s too forward. He’ll...he’ll.”

“He’ll what?” Sarah cut in. “Know you have no intention of marrying him and leave?”

Allison licked her lips. If that was his reaction, she'd be thrilled, but she knew that wouldn't be how he'd respond. He needed to marry her. He'd given up his life in Boston, where eligible young ladies swarmed after him, for Austin, a town just starting to grow and boom, where he'd likely have a hard time finding a suitable lady within marrying age that still had all of her teeth and a sturdy constitution—or at least that's what his letters had said when he'd written her, declaring it was time for her to come so they could be married.

He'd never made a huge fuss over her or any public displays to show his feelings for her, but in private, he'd always pressured her to marry him. It was only because of her parents' deaths and her required mourning period that she hadn't married him in Boston.

He was a gentleman, thus had a hard time showing his feelings, but they were still there: he wanted to marry her and she doubted that her marrying someone else would put him off completely. For if it had, he would have called off their arrangement when he assumed she was no longer a virgin—

“Allison?”

She started. “Sorry, I was just woolgathering.”

“Is there a reason you're still here and haven't gone out to speak to him yet?”

“You mean am I hesitating on purpose?”

Sarah nodded.

“No. I—I—I don't know what to say.” She swallowed. “How to word it.”

“Would you like me to go with you?”

“No,” Allison blurted. She forced a slight smile. “I mean, no. I'll go myself.”

“This is what you want, isn't it?”

“Yes,” Allison said without hesitation.

“Are you sure? I know I haven't known you for very long, but I've never seen you show a single hint of weakness, even if that meant spending several days sewing a dress you knew would never come to fruition.”

Sarah was right. Allison wanted to stay married to Wes more than anything, and there was only one way she could do that: she had to swallow her nerves and inform Nicholas of her decision. Then pray he'd understand and be lenient.

“Nicholas?”

Nicholas spun on his heel to face her. “Allison, what a surprise to see you. I thought for sure you’d still be in that cabin, all locked away and out of sight.”

Allison fought to keep the scowl off her face. It was quite clear he didn’t approve of her wardrobe or find it fitting for the wife of an important businessmen like himself. How fortunate for him, she didn’t intend to be his wife. “I wanted to come out here and talk to you now that we don’t have an audience.”

Nicholas, who’d been standing with his arms crossed, under one of the covered walkways near the watchtower, frowned at her but stepped aside enough to allow her to come stand near him. “What is so important that you wished to embarrass both of us by coming out into public like that?”

She ignored his remark. In Boston, she’d found his quick wit and dry remarks charming, but for some reason, she didn’t see them that way any longer. It could be because they were directed at her, or perhaps it was because, indirectly, they were criticizing all the people she’d come to care about since coming here. Either way, it only strengthened her resolve to tell him of her wish.

“Nicholas, I don’t wish to have my marriage annulled.”

“Pardon?” he asked, his voice soft, belying the look in his eyes.

Allison shifted her weight and took a deep breath. “I—I married Wes, and I plan to stay married to him, if he’ll still have me, that is.”

Nicholas snorted. “He’d still have you.” Then, all humor vanished from his face and tone. “But he won’t. You’re mine, Allison.”

“According to the law, I’m his wife, not yours,” Allison pointed out. She fisted her hands into her skirt and steeled her spine. She’d never spoken to him thus; she’d never had a reason to. But she’d witnessed other young ladies or even some boys who had spoken to him in a way he’d thought was out of line, and they always walked away with a bright red handprint across their cheek.

He took a step toward her and she flinched. He looked angry enough to slap her, but perhaps it was because there was a chance of someone witnessing it that he didn’t. “According to the law,” he began, his voice turning to steel, “your father signed a contract. One that means you are mine, if not yet by exchanging vows before a Man of God, certainly in

every other regard. Not to worry though, I'll make sure we take care of that formality and the one that follows before we leave this place."

She recoiled. She'd known that sharing his bed wouldn't be nearly as exciting as those moments of passion had been with Wes, but with the hardened look in his eye that matched the darkness of his face, she knew it'd be nothing less than painful torture. "No." She shook her head vehemently. "I don't care what the papers say. I am his wife. I promised myself to him. I will not get the marriage annulled."

"So then you have the money to break our contract?"

"No, I was hoping you'd—"

He cut her off with a sharp bark of laughter. "You hoped I'd forget the whole thing, did you?"

She swallowed and nodded. "Yes."

"There's a lot I could do with twenty thousand dollars, Allison. And frankly, being married to you isn't worth that much, but I know I'd never see a dime of it if you married that impoverished fool, Captain Tucker."

He wasn't entirely wrong. Wes would likely do everything in his power to pay that off if that's what he must do, but he'd die trying. That kind of debt would take more than an entire lifetime to pay off. Their chances of ever having any kind of future together would forever be clouded with such an exorbitant debt that they only had because of her. She could never live with herself, knowing Wes would work himself into an early grave trying to repay that. She knew he would, but he didn't deserve that. Tears pricked her eyes.

"That's what I thought," he said. "Now, go back inside before anyone sees you."

"I hate you," she hissed, then clutched her skirt and started running blindly in the direction of the Lewis' house, stopped only when she collided with a hard surface at such a speed she was knocked to the ground.

"Whoa there," came Wes' soft voice.

She blinked her eyes to clear them and looked to where she was practically lying on top of him. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."

"Yes, I know that." He brushed her hair from her face.

Her tears came more rapidly at his gentle gesture and she tried to gain her feet.

Ever the gentleman, Wes helped her to stand, a question in his blue eyes. One she couldn't answer.

“Thank you,” she said, brushing out her skirt. “I must go now.”

“Is that it then, Allison? Do you truly intend to annul our marriage and leave with him?”

Allison could hardly form a word over the emotion building in her throat. “Yes.”

He let out a deep breath and shook his head, his hands fisting at his sides. “This isn’t a game, Allison. Colonel Lewis has already ordered Jack to find four men to ride out to Fort Smith. They’ve left already and will be back by nightfall tomorrow at the latest. Then, the next day, everything will be done. Is that what you want?”

What she wanted and what she’d have to do were two entirely different things. “Why are you even speaking to me? The last time I saw you, you couldn’t wait to get out of my sight.”

He pressed his lips into a tight line. “I might not like the fact that my wife is influenced so strongly by money, but I do recognize that if I don’t put my pride aside and tell her how I feel about her, I might truly lose her.” He raked his hand through his hair and blew out a deep breath. “I don’t want that to happen, Allison. Now, tell me, do you want to leave with him or do you want to stay here with me?”

“Him,” she croaked, though they both knew it was a lie.

“I don’t believe you,” he countered. “If that were true, you wouldn’t be here crying.”

“Stop!” She swiped the tears coursing down her cheeks. “You’re only making this harder.”

“No,” he corrected gently. “You’re making this harder by not admitting I’m who you want.”

“Fine, I admit it, Wes,” she cried, clenching her hands into fists. “I love you, Wes. I don’t want to marry him. I want to stay married to you.”

Wes’ strong arms wrapped around her and brought her against his firm chest. “Then stay.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

He gritted his teeth. “Yes, you can.”

“No—” she shoved at his chest to put distance between them— “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Allison squeezed her eyes shut to dam up her tears. “I can’t explain it.” For if she did, she knew he’d try to talk her into something foolish. She

could never live with herself if she had to watch his smile dim and the light in his eyes fade as he toiled away the rest of his life for something that could never be completed. And heaven forbid if Nicholas insisted that any children she and Wes might have would owe the money to him if they were unable to work off the debt in their lifetime.

Wes stepped back and crossed his arms, a hardness in his eyes that she'd never seen before. "I'll only sign those damn annulment papers if you tell me but one thing: what is it about him that makes you more loyal to him than a hunting hound?"

Stung, she mirrored his defensive stance. "My loyalties are none of your concern."

"When they concern me, they are."

"Well, Captain Tucker, you are a very fortunate man, because soon, nothing regarding me will be of your concern."

"Not for my lack of interest," he said. "It seems to be you who cannot make up her mind, and I think I'm entitled to know why the woman I love is leaving me for a man who will never love her the way I will."

A new round of tears filled her eyes. "I know he'll never love me the way you will, but it's because I love you more than him that I must marry him."

"That makes no sense," he countered.

No, to him it wouldn't. "Wes, please stop."

"No. You're not being honest with me. Just tell me why you want to marry him."

"His money," she said bitterly. Wasn't that what he'd accused her of earlier? Only marrying Nicholas for his money. It was true—in a way. If she didn't marry him, she'd owe him money. Not that it mattered. It was far easier to allow Wes to think his initial opinion was true and that she was marrying Nicholas for his wealth.

A shadow crossed Wes' face. "I might not earn ridiculous amounts, but I do earn enough to take care of you and keep you comfortable, Allison." His quiet voice crumbled her resolve.

"I know you do," she whispered before she could think better of it. "You've taken wonderful care of me and I know you'd continue to if I were your wife." She sniffled and took a deep breath. "But that's the problem. I cannot condemn you to a miserable life because of your love for me. And that's what would happen if we stayed married." Then, before he could ask

her anything and destroy her resolve, she grabbed her skirt and retreated to the Lewis' house.

OceanofPDF.com

~Chapter Twenty-Three~

Wes speared his fingers through his hair. The past day had been nothing less than torture as he'd done everything he could to chance another encounter with Allison. When that hadn't happened, he'd set aside all pride last night and had gone to the Lewis' where he was informed calling hours were over.

Wes had never been tempted to do anyone bodily harm before the moment Colonel Lewis had closed his door in Wes' face, but there was always a first.

Now, dinner was almost ready to be served and by his calculations he only had a few hours to get this straightened out before General Bridges would be here to grant the annulment. Wes scoffed. Colonel Lewis or General Ridgely could have done that. Out here, they had absolute jurisdiction. He suspected Colonel Lewis had only sent riders on to Fort Smith to allow Wes more time. While he appreciated his efforts, it didn't make sense as to why Colonel Lewis had refused him entry into his home last night.

Wes strode to the door of his office. There was one last thing to do; and with no other options available to him, he had to try.

"Mr. Parker," Wes said as evenly as he could as he approached the other man.

"Yes?"

Wes ignored his arrogant tone and forged ahead. He wanted Allison. Why she hadn't had the nerve to confront this man and tell him to go to hell, he'd address later; for now, he just needed to find a way to free her from the imaginary shackles she'd set for herself before it was truly too late.

"I want to talk to you about Allison."

"Miss Pierson, you mean," the man said in icy tones.

"No, Mrs. Tucker," Wes corrected with a forced smile. "As much as you might not like it, she is no longer Miss Pierson but has taken my last name, which I gladly gave her and will allow her to use forever if it's what she desires."

The other man snorted. "We both know you only gave her your last name so you could make her your whore. You took advantage of her, is what you did."

"No, I gave her my last name and my protection because I was trying to keep her safe until you got here. Now that you're here, I see that the person I really should have been guarding her from is you."

"Me? Her own betrothed? I don't think so." He snarled and shook his head. "No, you saw your chance for a quick affair without consequences and took advantage. She has nothing to fear from me, and we both know it. I courted her for two years with nothing more than a handful of chaste kisses. You were around her for mere days and got her to fall in love with you."

Wes stared at him. He was jealous. A wave of understanding, and even sympathy for the man, came over him. "A person can't help who they do and don't love," he said softly.

"I couldn't care less if she loves you instead of me. It will be harder to convince my clients with families that I have a doting and devoted wife when clearly I do not, but my only irritation as far as you're concerned is that you stole her innocence from me."

"From you?"

"Yes. It was mine to claim, not yours"

"You act as if she's nothing but an object to possess," Wes said with a sneer.

"No. She's just a woman. One with very weak morals, it would seem." He pursed his lips as if he were in deep thought. "I suppose I'll have to forgive her, though. It's not her fault you attacked her."

Blood roared in Wes' ears and it took every ounce of strength he possessed not to grab the man about the neck and throttle him. He truly didn't know what Allison saw in him or why she'd choose a man like him when she loved Wes. She'd said some cryptic statement yesterday suggesting it was because of her love for Wes that she couldn't marry him and had to marry Mr. Parker instead. That could only mean that Mr. Parker was using some underhanded tactic to get her to leave and marry him. Whatever it was, Wes wouldn't have it, nor would he allow Allison to be manipulated that way.

"Since you seem to hold her in such low regard, then you won't mind if the two of us don't sign the annulment papers tomorrow."

The man's mouth formed a tight line and something flashed in his eyes. "I might find it hard to look at her knowing she was so careless with whom she allowed to sample her wares—" he let his eyes slowly travel Wes' form, his lips curling in disgust— "but I still require a wife, and she's the one I've been promised to have."

"You and I both know that contract you had with her became void the moment she pledged herself to be my wife, so drop the nonsense."

"Ah, but do you think you can convince her to stay with the likes of you when she has so much more than you can offer her in Austin?"

"Like yourself?" Wes asked bitterly. "She might have thought you were charming in Boston, but I have the strangest feeling that you won't be nearly as charming once the two of you are married."

A smile spread across the man's face. "I'm glad to hear she thinks so highly of me. As for the rest of your *assertion*, what does or doesn't happen after we marry is none of your concern."

A knot fisted in Wes' gut as his worst fears were confirmed: this man had no real desire to marry her. Well, perhaps he did, but not because he loved her or planned to treat her right. She was an amusement, a plaything, something to have to make himself look better. That knot turned to fire. Allison was none of those things, and he wouldn't stand for her to be treated that way. "Why is it that both of you speak as if she has to marry you? She doesn't. That blasted contract isn't worth the paper it's written on, so why do you both insist she must marry you?"

The man twisted his lips and nodded casually, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Perhaps she feels a deep sense of loyalty to me. She has known me far longer than she's known you."

"Or perhaps you've provoked her into thinking she must marry you," Wes countered. There was no other logical reason for Allison saying it was because she loved him that she couldn't marry him. Mr. Parker had to have bullied her into it. "What will it take to make you disappear?"

"Allison's vow to take me as her lawful, wedded husband," he said, flashing Wes a quick grin.

Wes was not amused by the man's insolence but refused to let him know that. "Other than that, sir."

"What I want, you couldn't get for me," he said with a shrug.

You just might be surprised. "You'll never know if you don't ask," Wes said, matching the man's tone and adding in the same careless shrug.

A sharp bark of laughter rent the air. "I already know. I don't need to ask."

"How much?" Wes bit off. He'd already assumed the man wanted money, and the startled look on his face only confirmed it.

"More than you have," Mr. Parker snapped.

Wes crossed his arms. "Name your price."

"Forty thousand dollars."

"Is that all?"

The man blinked, then laughed. "Is that all?" he mocked. "Sir, I do believe that's more than you might ever see in your lifetime."

Were Wes just an army officer with a family of adequate means like the other officers, the man would be correct. But Wes still had that trust at the bank in Charleston. His mother had refused to allow him to relinquish it, claiming he might need it someday. He'd denied her nonsense and left. All he wanted was to be free of money; that's the only thing money *couldn't* buy. Except perhaps Allison's hand in marriage, he thought with a twist of his lips. "If I secure that money for you, will you inform Allison the choice is hers to make and that you make no further demands?"

Mr. Parker narrowed his beady eyes on him. "No. Not until that money is in my hands. I don't trust that I'll get it otherwise."

"Don't worry, you'll get it." His tone was harsher than he'd intended it to be, but not because he was annoyed or felt any great loss at having to give nearly all of his trust to this man so he'd leave Allison alone. He'd do anything to secure that, but he hated that she'd allowed this man to manipulate her like this. Did she not know her own worth? That was another thing he'd address with her later.

"How exactly do you plan to get such a hefty sum?" Mr. Parker wondered aloud. "I understand your family had to have some money in order for you to go to West Point to be an officer; otherwise, you'd have had to enter the army like the majority of the others: as a private."

"Don't worry about where I get the money," Wes snapped. "You'll get it and that's all you need to know."

"You won't ask your family to sell their plantation for you, will you?" He picked an imaginary piece of lint off his coat. "I'd hate to know I was responsible for sending a family into the street."

"I'm sure you would," Wes muttered. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have arrangements to make."

“You’re not thinking about speaking to Allison and telling her the joyous news yet, are you?”

Wes stared at him.

“I will not give her my permission to break our contract until I get my money, Mr. Tucker.”

“Captain Tucker,” Wes corrected sharply. He folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t know what kind of lies you’ve poured into her head that have made her believe she must honor that damn contract. But sir, if you want any money from me, you’d better understand that I’ll do as I please and so will Allison. She has no obligation to marry you as far as I’m concerned, and as her rightful husband, the law is on my side. It is only to ensure you never bother her again that I’m even willing to entertain this ridiculous formality of giving you money in exchange for releasing her of whatever fear you’ve put into her head; and you should consider yourself fortunate that I’m willing to give you money to leave her alone and not bash your skull in. Is my meaning clear, sir?”

“Quite,” he said quickly, then *tsk, tsked*. “But you are a bad businessman, *Captain* Tucker. Any man with any sense of business at all wouldn’t take my word or handshake for this but would insist we write it all down.”

Wes pierced the man with his stare. He was right, dash it all. “All right, since you lack the honor of the men I generally do business with and feel you’ll have a problem keeping your word, let’s go write down our terms, then we’ll go see Allison.”

~Chapter Twenty-Four~

Allison tried to pay attention to what Sarah was telling her to do. With all of the things she'd learned about cooking the past two days, she could have all of the men here fighting for her hand.

Not that it mattered. She had to marry Nicholas come tomorrow and there wasn't anything else she could do about it. She tossed the wooden spoon on the table and rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. It would only be a matter of hours now before General Bridges arrived. Then she'd have to sign the papers.

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis would probably be glad to see her leave, she thought with a self-deprecating smile. They'd been kind enough to allow her to stay in their home overnight, but she imagined they'd like their privacy again.

Not to mention some quiet. Wes had knocked incessantly at the door last night, demanding to speak to her. She'd been unable to force herself to go. She knew what he wanted; though why he wanted it, she didn't know. When they'd been out riding Midnight yesterday morning, he seemed impatient to get her out of his company. Then only hours later, he was being sweet and trying to convince her to stay. She didn't understand it.

That wasn't true. She did. He wanted the same thing she did. Only, she knew how impossible it was.

"Allison, why don't you uncover the meat? It's time to cook it."

Allison did as Sarah asked, then put it onto the skillet when Sarah held it out to her. Last night she'd barely been able to be of help as she tried to lock in the tears. She vowed that tonight she'd do her best to be helpful and earn her stay.

"Thank you. I can do this if you'd like to go put on your other dress for dinner," Sarah said.

Allison swallowed. Nicholas was supposed to join them for dinner. Apparently, he found the food being served in the dining room wasn't up to his standards of fine fare. She bit her lip. How did she word this without hurting the other woman's feelings? "Actually, Sarah, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to wear what I have on."

Sarah gave her a sideways look.

"It's not that I don't like the dress you made for me," she blurted. "I do. It's just that...um..." Her face flushed.

"It's just that that dress is from Wes and I made you the other one."

"Well, it's not *from* Wes," she said. "He didn't buy everything and give it to me, he just—"

"Bought the materials and helped you come up with the idea," Sarah supplied.

"Yes." She bent to help Sarah place the large skillet squarely on the fire. "Please, don't take it to heart. I love the dress you made and I promise to wear it tomorrow on my journey to Santa Fe. I just want one more night in this."

Sarah didn't say anything about the way her voice wavered, and for that, Allison would be forever grateful. The older woman opened her mouth as if she were going to say something, then closed her mouth and nodded once. "Very well."

The door of the Lewis' cabin swung open, followed by heavy boot falls.

Allison's stomach knotted to the point of pain. She forced down her nerves and turned to face the men. "Where's Nicholas?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Colonel Lewis said, removing his hat. He hung it up on a peg by the door, then shrugged out of his coat.

"The last time I saw him, he was talking with your husband," General Ridgely said. He flashed a tender smile at his wife, which would have surprised Allison to see if she wasn't nearly shocked to the toes already when she heard that Wes and Nicholas were seen speaking to each other.

"Do you know what they were speaking about?" she hedged.

A wide grin split Colonel Lewis' face. "I do believe General Bridges' presence won't be needed after all."

Understanding hit Allison like a carriage being pulled by a team of four and dread washed over her from the roots of her hair to her toes. "No!"

"No?" everyone in the room echoed.

"No! No!" she shrieked as her heart pounded out of control. Tears blinded her eyes and she lurched forward to leave the dining room. She had to stop this madness before Wes did something stupid. He didn't deserve the life he was about to be forced to enter. "Where are they?" she demanded as

best she could over the tears clogging her throat. “Where did they go? I must find them!”

A pair of strong hands came down on her shoulders. “Do you not want to marry Wes?”

“Let go of me,” she cried, pushing at the large body of Mr. Lewis that held her hostage. She gasped for air. “I need to find them!”

“Allison, what’s wrong?”

“I—I—I c-c-can’t s-s-stay w-with Wes. I-if I d-don’t marry N-nicholas then Wes will be tr—trapped,” she sobbed, her body shaking uncontrollably.

“Allison, calm down,” came Colonel Lewis’ soft voice. “All men say they’re trapped when they get married. They don’t mean it.”

“Colonel Lewis, please,” she begged. “Let go of me. I have to find him before he does something stupid.”

“You think Wes staying married to you is stupid?”

“Yes! Now let go, so I can stop him.”

“Allison, I cannot let you leave this house while you’re shrieking like a madwoman. Now, explain to me what’s going on and I’ll help you find Wes and sort this out.”

“There’s no time,” she said, swiping at the tears falling from her eyes.

“Yes, there is, now sit down and tell us what’s going on.”

“I can’t!” She wiggled in his grasp but couldn’t get loose.

“I’m not letting you go until you talk to me and tell me what’s wrong.”

“I owe Nicholas money,” she said breathlessly, then hiccuped.

“What do you mean?” someone in the room asked, and at the same time, someone else asked, “How much?”

Allison gasped for breath to calm her nerves but couldn’t manage. “My father—” *hiccup*— “and Nicholas—” *hiccup*— “had a business arrangement.”

“What kind of business?” General Ridgely asked.

“I don’t know.” *Hiccup*. “Money was exchanged and—” *hiccup*— “it was agreed that I’d marry Nicholas—” *hiccup*— “in exchange for my father’s loan.” *Hiccup*. “If I don’t marry him—” *hiccup*— “I have to pay Nicholas back.”

“Let me make sure I have this right,” Colonel Lewis said, his thin graying eyebrows furrowing. “Your father and Mr. Parker signed an

agreement saying if you marry him, your father's loan will be forgiven, and if you do not, that you'll be responsible for the debt?"

"My family," she clarified on a hiccup. "But I don't—" *hiccup*— "have any left."

"So it would be your husband who'd owe the debt," General Ridgely said.

Allison nodded.

"How much is the debt?" Colonel Lewis asked, as if they were talking about something as casual as the weather.

"Twenty thous—" *hiccup*— "and dollars."

Two low whistles sliced the air. "I see why you were in a hurry," Colonel Lewis said dryly.

"Do you have a copy of this agreement that I might see?" General Ridgely asked.

"No. It was—" *hiccup*— "on the—" Her words died on her tongue as another hiccup erupted. It *had* been on the stage—in that little brown bag she'd kept all of Nicholas' letters and other documents she'd deemed important. "I think I might," she amended, praying it was still in there. She still didn't know exactly how Wes had ended up with the thing. She didn't remember it being in her purse for it to have fallen out when she'd run off to find peppermint, so the only thing she could think of was that Mary had found where she'd stuffed it in her travel bag, removed the letters of recommendation that Allison had traveled with that were to be given to Mary upon safe arrival in Santa Fe, then tossed the rest out of the stage as they drove away.

Not that it mattered. The only thing that mattered now was if Mary had been self-centered enough only to have taken only the letters of recommendation.

Allison held her breath to stop the hiccups and walked over to where she'd hidden the blasted thing in her purse and breathed one sigh of relief that she hadn't followed her first instinct—which was to burn the whole thing when she'd first seen it.

Holding another breath, she dug through all of the papers until she found the little folded stack of papers she was looking for and wordlessly handed them to the general while simultaneously breathing another sigh of relief that they were still there.

“They’re still sealed,” he observed as he broke the red wax seal that held the bundle together.

She shrugged. “I already know what it says. I wasn’t *that* consumed with tedium on the way here to have to resort to reading it for entertainment,” she said, trying in vain to cover the hysteria she knew to be in her voice. Truly, she knew what the document said already, this was only taking up time. Unfortunately, it seemed that if she didn’t show them the documents, she’d lose even more time arguing with him about their contents and that was time she didn’t have. She needed to find Wes before he ruined his entire life.

Though his lips were moving, General Ridgely didn’t say anything as he read through the pages. “Did your father explain the conditions of this contract to you?”

Allison knit her brow. “No, Nicholas did. Why?”

The man frowned. “That’s what I thought. Come with me.”

~Chapter Twenty-Five~

“Captain Wesley Tucker, I order you to drop that pen at once.”

The hair on the back of Wes’ neck stood on end. General Rigid. Rarely did the man speak to him, and today was one of those days Wes wished he wouldn’t. “I’ll be at my post in the tower in a few minutes, sir,” Wes mumbled. He knew it was disrespectful to speak to the man that way, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. He had to finish writing out this blasted contract, so they could sign it and he could go speak to Allison.

General Ridgely yanked the pen from Wes’ grasp and tossed down a stack of papers in front of him.

Wes scowled at the man, who had stepped so close to where Wes was sitting that he was now all Wes could see. “What’s this?”

“Read it.”

Wes’ eyes scanned the lines.

On this eighteenth day of May in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty-three..

“Out loud,” General Ridgely barked.

Wes turned his eyes to Mr. Parker and froze. The man’s face looked harder than stone. Suddenly, he leaned over in his chair as if to reach for the papers in Wes’ hand.

Wes jerked the papers back out of his reach and the man fell forward against the desk. It would seem that he didn’t want Wes to read whatever was in the lines of these papers.

““On this eighteenth day of May in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty-three, I Franklin Robert Pierson bequeath my daughter Allison Jane Pierson’s hand in marriage to thee Mr. Nicholas William Parker.

““Those signed below have entered into this agreement with the expectation that Franklin Pierson shall bestow upon Nicholas Parker a sum of a collective thirty thousand dollars as a dowry.

““This contract shall be a supplemental addendum to the original loan agreement between Franklin Pierson and Nicholas Parker.

““Herein, twenty thousand dollars of the dowry will be in the form of a forgiven debt in which Franklin Pierson funded the undersigned’s business. The other ten thousand shall be set into a trust and signed over to Nicholas Parker at which time the marriage takes place.

““If the marriage fails to commence, at the discretion of either party, the terms of this contract shall become void and the original terms of our business agreement shall be reinstated.’”

Wes flipped the page and scanned the lines of the original agreement.

...non-repayment within thirty-six months from the date of the loan shall result in default and the business and all assets shall revert to Franklin Pierson, or upon the event of his untimely demise, his heir, Allison Pierson, to be put into a trust until her twenty-first...

Wes dropped his eyes to the date the agreement had been signed: 1841.

“You owe Allison your entire business,” Wes breathed in disbelief, looking up at the pale, stone-faced man across the desk from him.

Just as he said it, a gasp rent the air and Wes craned his neck to confirm what his mind already knew: Allison was in the room.

“You owe *me* money if I break this contract? But you always said I owed twenty thousand dollars because my father would then default on a loan if I didn’t marry you,” she said, her voice wavering with every word.

Everything made sense to him now: she wasn’t holding true to her original promise to Mr. Parker because she wanted his money, but as he’d expected, because Mr. Parker had bullied her. He’d just never imagined it had been with money, though why he hadn’t thought so, he’d never know. It had been *he* who’d kept insisting she was only keeping her promise because of the man’s wealth. Not Allison.

How could he have been so blind as to actually believe that Allison was only interested in money? She’d dined on jerky—and enjoyed it, for goodness’ sake—and had worn the same dress for nearly a week before she wore another far less flattering costume. How many times had she told him that his assessment of her was wrong, only to have him discount her words

and let his own fear of a money-hungry young lady attaching herself to him take their place?

Even her cryptic words yesterday, about her loving him too much to marry him, now made sense. She was refusing him because she believed herself responsible for an amount of money that was far more than some men would ever make in their lifetime. She was just trying to protect him. His heart constricted and his throat went dry at the realization.

He needed to make this right. This new technicality with Mr. Parker could be handled later. Right now he needed to make things right with Allison. He got from his seat and, in a voice full of raw emotion, called for her.

Allison couldn't move. In the past two minutes, roots must have grown out of the soles of her feet, keeping her numb body planted firmly in place. Nicholas owed *her* money? No wonder he wanted to marry her so badly. He'd pressed her almost to the point of forcing himself on her in Boston, then had written letters nearly every day after she left. First polite, then more demanding, informing her it was time. And now, to hire someone to escort him here and refuse to allow her to marry Wes, it all made sense: he needed her. He needed her to marry him to clear his debt and secure him more money.

"Go on," General Ridgely encouraged, a sparkle in his brown eyes.

Before she could move, Wes was off his feet and at her side. "Allison —"

"Allison!" Nicholas barked. "Don't you be entertaining any foolish ideas in that head of yours, now. You've given me your word—"

"And you deceived me!" That was her voice, though she had no idea she'd said the words. They just slipped right off her tongue. "You—you lied to me. You t-told me my father owed you m-money, and if I didn't m-marry you, his debt w-would fall to me," she said through sobs.

"You were the one foolish enough to believe me," he said arrogantly.

"Only because you—"

"Shhh," Wes crooned in her ear, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close. "He's not worth it. There's nothing he can say now to talk his way out of this. You do not have to keep your word to him—only me."

"Does that mean she has no intention of collecting?"

"Of course she does," Wes snapped.

Allison jerked at his tone, and the meaning of his words. He still thought she was obsessed with money. She pulled back to get out of his hold and blinked back the new round of tears she felt pricking her eyes. Even now after everything that had been exposed, he still saw her as greedy. “Wes, I—I don’t want his money.”

“Good,” Nicholas said, his voice flooding with relief.

“I don’t know why you’re acting so relieved,” Wes said. “Doesn’t every good businessman need to have his interests in writing?”

“Yes, well, um...”

Wes grinned at Nicholas and his mouth that worked but couldn’t produce sound. “You owe it to her and you’ll pay every cent. Had you been a smarter man, you’d have quietly gone back to Austin when her letter arrived, and you’d at least be able to keep the money you already had. But your greed for more forced you to come here and now you’ll pay everything back.”

“Wes, I don’t want it,” she said, taking a small measure of satisfaction in the way Nicholas’ throat worked convulsively at Wes’ words.

Wes reached for her hand, but she pulled away. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I have a post to report to before General Ridgely here sends me to the stockade. Not to worry though, Mr. Parker, General Ridgely is a good and fair sort. He’ll be sure to keep you company until General Bridges arrives to help sort out the legalities.” He turned to face Allison. “Tonight is my night in the watchtower, will you join me?”

“No,” Colonel Lewis said, coming up behind her. “A married officer doesn’t have watchtower duties. Gray has taken the shift tonight.” He handed something to Wes, then walked across the room to where Nicholas and General Ridgely were standing. “Now, what are we going to do about you?”

“Send him home tomorrow without protection and see how he fares against the Indians?”

The sound of Nicholas’ gulp was louder than any gun she’d ever heard.

“Allison,” Wes started, his tone very quiet and low. “Will you come upstairs with me?”

She bit her lip and caught the stares of the three other men in the room.

As if sensing her hesitation and perhaps even her apprehension due to his earlier insinuation about her being greedy, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear, “I’m only asking you to talk with me, Allison. I think

there's something you might want to tell me and I know there's something I need to tell you."

Mutely, she nodded, then allowed him to take her hand and lead her up the stairs and to the room they'd shared.

Nothing was out of place or had been changed since they'd left yesterday morning to go riding. Even the bedsheets were still in disarray from them sleeping on them. She looked to Wes, who shrugged in response, then turned to lock the door and light a few candles as the sun was quickly fading.

"Allison," he started when he was finished. "I need to tell you something."

"I don't want his money, Wes," she blurted before he could say anything. "I never did. I—I." She clenched her hands into fists, then released them, unable to form the words.

Wes reached for her hands. "Allison, there's something I need to tell you about me."

"Yes?"

"Have you ever examined the handle of your parasol?"

"I'm sorry, what did you just ask?"

"Your parasol. When you were in Boston, did you ever happen to see the T & E Co. etched into the bottom of the handle?"

She frowned. "Actually, now that you mention it, I think I've seen that."

"Do you know what it stands for?"

She shrugged. "The initials of the company who makes them, I expect."

"It does. The E stands for Ellis, my mother's maiden name, and the T stands for Tucker—my surname."

All sense of reasoning left her brain. "Wh-what does that mean?"

"It means my family makes parasols," he teased.

Since all sense of reasoning had already fled, now every drop of blood still in her body fled to her toes. "P-parasols," she said dumbly.

"And fans, walking sticks and other frippery," he said with a grimace, "but mainly parasols."

She couldn't think of a single parasol she'd ever picked up that *didn't* have the T & E Co. engraved into the bottom of the handle, now that she thought about that. "What does this mean, Wes?"

“It means that when Mr. Parker asked for forty thousand dollars in exchange for him leaving you alone, I was able—and willing—to give it to him. That’s what I was writing down when you and General Ridgely came in—the terms of the agreement we’d reached.”

“Forty thousand dollars,” she breathed. “That’s outrageous.”

“Actually, I thought it was rather low,” he said with a shrug. “I’d have agreed to pay ten times that, had he asked.” He squeezed her hands briefly. “The trust my mother had my father set up for me would have covered what Mr. Parker asked for today. But had he asked for more, I would have found a way to secure the rest.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she whispered.

“Afraid of?”

She nodded. “When I went to see him yesterday, he told me that if I didn’t keep my word and marry him, I’d be in his debt for twenty thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money, Wes. I couldn’t ask you to take on a debt that large. We could never be happy and—” she swallowed hard past the emotion lodged in her throat— “I couldn’t bear it if you grew to resent me.”

Wes placed a kiss on the top of her knuckles. “Never.”

She tried to pull her hand from his and he wouldn’t let her. “But you think I have an obsession with money and am wasteful. How could you not grow to resent me when our entire future would have been to work hard every day only to repay a debt? A debt that is nothing but a waste.”

“*You are not a waste*,” he all but growled. “I happen to love you more than I could possibly explain, and if that’s what it took to have you, I’d have done it.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know you would have, but I couldn’t stand to let that happen to you. You don’t deserve it. That’s why I didn’t tell you the truth. I didn’t want you to do something foolish such as agree to take on that debt.”

He brought both of her hands up to his lips and sank to his knees in front of her. “I know and I’m very sorry,” he said in a tone that might suggest he had a pound of gravel in his throat. He held her hands against his lips and looked up at her with those pale blue eyes of his. “I didn’t fully understand how much you loved me and how wrong I was about you until I read those documents tonight. I’ve spent my entire life being fawned over and flattered because of my family’s fortune. In Charleston, I was similar to how you described Mr. Parker: considered the best catch in Charleston. But

I didn't want that, Allison. I had to start attending dinners and 'forming connections' when I was barely sixteen. I hated it.

"I hated that no young lady would talk to me without blinking her lashes at me and agreeing I was right about everything I said, even when I was wrong. I hated attending dinners and being given what was considered the best spot: right next to the hostess' oldest daughter, even if she was only fourteen or all the way into her thirties. I did what my family required of me and danced and smiled, but I hated it." He swallowed in a way that made his Adam's apple bob considerably. "When I was eighteen, I informed my parents that I was going to West Point to join the Army. I couldn't do the Social life anymore. That was their life. They loved it and they thrived on it. I don't despise them for it, nor do I hold their love for being right in the center of everything that happens in Charleston against them. But it wasn't for me. I wanted to be just me. Just Wes Tucker, an average man. Not Wesley Ellis Tucker, heir to the T & E Co. fortune," he finished in an arch tone.

"Wes, I don't care about your money," she said a touch defensively.

"I know." His voice was thick and raw. "I didn't always see it, but that's only because I wasn't ready to believe it. I saw you just the same as I saw the ladies in Charleston and that wasn't fair of me."

"No, it wasn't very fair of you," she agreed. Not that she could blame him entirely. If he had enough money that he didn't seem bothered one bit about paying Nicholas forty thousand dollars, then she could only imagine how much money his family had and why it had made him so skeptical.

"Will you forgive me?"

His broken voice and clouded eyes stopped her heart. She sank to her knees, too, bringing them face to face. "Wes, there's nothing to forgive. I might have been slightly less than complimented when you accused me of being obsessed with money; but now that I know your past, I understand your reason and I don't hold it against you. I'd be the same way if I were you."

"That doesn't make it right," he said raggedly.

"Wes, stop. There is no need for you to be so hard on yourself."

"Yes, there is. It was because of my nasty accusations about you being frivolous and wasteful that you kept from telling me what you thought was the truth regarding Mr. Parker and his demands."

“No,” she corrected. “It was because I knew that you loved me and you’d work yourself to death to come up with that money. I couldn’t allow you to do that. I wanted you to be happy, and I didn’t think that would make either of us happy.”

“But it was because of me being an ass in the first place and saying those things to you that you felt you couldn’t come to me with your problem,” he pointed out.

“I see,” she said slowly. “Do you not think that even if you hadn’t mentioned that I was wasteful or thought I was overly concerned with money that I would have come to you with his demands?” She shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t have.”

“Well, you should have,” he retorted.

She pressed her forehead to his. “Don’t you know that I’m just as protective of and in love with you, as you are with me?”

“Are you?” he murmured against her lips before kissing her.

“Mmmhmm.” She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and held him closer to her, thankful he’d fought so hard for what he wanted to bring them the happiness they could embrace together now and forever. “As stubborn as you are, I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“Allison,” he breathed, pressing a trail of kisses from the corner of her mouth across her cheek then to behind her earlobe. “I want you in many ways.” He licked the skin just behind her earlobe as if to further emphasize his meaning and she shivered.

“Wes, you can have me any way you’d like.”

“Any way I’d like, you say?” he murmured as his lips further explored her neck and his fingers worked the buttons on the front of her shirt. He undid the top half of her shirt, then slipped his large hands inside to cover her breasts. “I think I’d like you on the bed just now.”

Allison sighed his name as her breasts swelled under his touch. “As you command, Captain.”

~Chapter Twenty-Six~

Only the knowledge that they'd soon resume their spot—and on her bare skin, no less—allowed him to relinquish his hold long enough to help her crawl onto their bed.

He sat down next to her and removed his boots, then stood to shed his coatee, shirt, and gunbelt before climbing onto the bed with her. “I love you,” he said with a kiss on her lips, while the fingers of his left hand continued where they'd left off, caressing her breasts.

“I love you, too,” she said against his lips.

He took her parted lips as an invitation and pushed his tongue into her mouth, using his hand to pull the bottom of her shirt free from her skirt. He loved the way she tasted and how soft the inside of her mouth was.

She brought her hands up to the back of his head and sank her fingers into his hair, holding him to her. He spread her shirt wide and reached for the thin fabric of her chemise, pulling it from where it was tucked into her skirt, then began to kiss down her cheek and to her jaw. He reminded himself to slow down or everything would be over too quickly and began a slow line of kisses along the edge of her jaw.

Wes slid his hand under the hem of her chemise and skimmed his palm over the soft, smooth skin of her stomach and her sides. Her muscles jerked at his touch. He reached the edge of her jaw with his lips, then parted them slightly to taste her behind her ear. He swallowed hard to tamp down his excitement at her gasp.

Then he did it again.

“Wes,” she said on a sigh.

He moved his lips to the crook of her neck and his hand to her breast in response.

Beneath his palm, her breast swelled and the tip hardened. He loved that her body reacted this way to him. He continued to caress and shape her right breast and moved his lips to the plane of her chest, just above the edge of her chemise.

“Wes, what can I do for you?” she asked in a voice he'd have never believed was hers.

“Just enjoy it,” he murmured before lowering the top edge of her chemise and dropping kisses along the top of her breasts as he made his way lower.

“But I want to—” She sucked in a sharp breath, ending her words, as soon as his lips brushed her nipple.

He pulled a little more on her chemise to allow him better access to what he craved so dearly. Allison’s fingers tightened their grip on his hair, her body arching up to him, offering him more. He wanted so badly to take more; but her confounded chemise was in the way, and he knew she didn’t have another so he couldn’t tear it.

He moved both of his hands under her, then urged her to sit up, refusing to relinquish her breast from his mouth until he absolutely had to. “Take this off.” He might have grimaced at the way his words sounded as if he were panting if he didn’t desire her so much.

She reached for the cuff of her shirt and began to pull at the sleeve.

He ground his teeth and moved to help her. She was taking way too long for his liking. He slipped his fingers in the shoulders of her shirt and slid it down. Once it was off, he locked eyes with her, then took hold of the bottom of her chemise, which was pooled around her waist, and slowly lifted it to reveal her beautiful body, complete with flawlessly creamy skin and a pair of pert, pink-tipped breasts.

It had only been two days since he’d seen her naked, but it felt like an eternity.

He swept her with his gaze, then felt his face heat at the curious look on her face.

“I take it that you like what you see,” she mused.

“You know that I do,” he said raggedly, then leaned forward, intent to show her just how much he enjoyed what he saw.

She fell back against the pillows and embraced him as he positioned himself over her and lowered his head toward her breasts.

Under him, she arched and gasped and jerked and sighed in response to his mouth on her. He closed his lips around the crest of her breast, leading her to arch and jerk and gasp and sigh almost all at the same time.

Just for good measure, he did the same on the other side.

He released her nipple and a noise of frustration came from her throat, which only excited him more. He ran his parted lips along the curve of the underside of her breast until she sighed his name.

Repositioning himself, he moved lower, dragging his lips down the soft plane of her abdomen and to his target: her navel, where he dipped his tongue inside and was rewarded when her entire body jerked in response. Lavishing attention on her lower abdomen and the soft dips above her hips, he worked the buckle on her belt to loosen her skirt.

When it had been loosened enough, he moved his weight off to the side a little and tugged her skirt down just enough to expose the points of her hips, an area he had yet to explore.

He'd have to remedy that immediately. And what a pleasure it would be.

Allison must have thought so, too, for she twisted and sighed under him as he used his tongue to explore every dip and point of her hips. "Wes," she said on a ragged breath.

He murmured her name against her skin in response and lifted her thick skirt just high enough to slip his hands underneath, then skated them up her calves and to her thighs. Ever-so-gently, he eased her thighs apart and brought his right hand to the apex of her legs.

"No," she said, her legs tensing.

He jerked his head up so he could see her. Had he heard her right over the roaring of blood in his ears? "No?"

"No," she repeated breathlessly. She leaned up and wiped away the hair that was plastered against her damp face. "You did that last time."

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "I thought you enjoyed it."

"I did. But you—" She bit her lip and her already pink cheeks flushed crimson. "Last time you didn't..." She cleared her throat and shot him a pointed look.

"Climax," he supplied for her.

Her crimson face flushed even darker. "Yes. That. I want to make you —" she swallowed audibly— "do that."

Any other time, he might have grinned at her innocence. "Don't worry about that just now. I have no plans for either of us to leave this room until that happens at least twice. Now, lie back and let me touch you."

She didn't look convinced.

What better way to convince her than with action, since his words weren't changing her mind. He brushed his fingertip over her silky folds and watched with interest as, at first, a look of surprise, then pleasure, came over her face when he did it again with a touch more pressure.

“Lie back.”

She bit her lip and looked at him as if she were undecided.

He touched her again, this time sliding his finger inside her. “You’ll get your chance to drive me mad with desire soon enough; right now it’s my turn, now lie back.” He reached his free hand up to help ease her back against the pillows.

“Wes,” she said in a tone that sounded as if she were trying to protest.

He would have none of that and brought another finger to join the first. “Do you not know that this gives me just as much pleasure as it does you?” He sped his pace and covered her breast with his hand. “It does.” He kissed the dip of her hip. “I like the way it makes your skin heat.” He gave her breast a firm squeeze. “And the way it makes your breasts swell and your nipples harden—” as if she might need any clarification on that point, he closed his fingers around her erect nipple and applied a hint of pressure, eliciting the most rewarding gasp he’d ever heard— “and that, too.” He opened his hand to palm more of her breast while he increased the pace of his thrusts again. “Then, of course, I like it when you respond like this—” he moved higher and drew her nipple into his mouth, laving it with his tongue until she was writhing underneath him and her hands were back in his hair, holding him there.

Sensing how close she was, he pushed just a little harder and gently added more pressure with his lips.

Then suddenly, she tensed and her inner muscles were contracting around him. He pulled his head back to watch her flushed face as she reveled in the splendor of her completion.

“That’s my absolute favorite part,” Wes commented a few moments later, just as she was coming back to reality.

Her face flushed slightly. “Watching me?”

“That’s part of it.” He removed his hand from between her legs and moved up the bed until he was even with her. “I like the way your breathing grows rapid and shallow and your face goes rigid right before it transforms; and I certainly like the way it feels when your body tightens around mine. But most of all, I love that it’s me who creates this reaction in you.”

“I am, too, Wes.” She rolled on her side and trailed her fingertips up and down his abdomen with a feather-light touch. “And I’m sure I’ll enjoy getting the same reaction from you.”

He groaned and his muscles leapt under her touch. “You don’t plan to torture me, do you?”

She tipped one shoulder up in a careless shrug. “Is that what you think making love is: torture?” She pushed him onto his back, then moved her fingers to the top of his trousers where she traced the top edge of the fabric along his warm skin, then undid the top button, but not the rest. She lowered her hand to boldly cup his erection. She stroked it with her thumb, then released her hold on him and walked her fingers back up to his chest.

“When you’re being deliberately slow or teasing, it qualifies as torture,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Is that what I’m being, Wes? A tease?”

Wes reached between them and cupped her bare breast. “You know it is.”

“Does it qualify as teasing when you’re not aware that you’re doing it?”

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded once as if he’d understood her question perfectly. “I have no doubt you know you’re doing it, because you’re doing it to perfection.”

She blushed at his compliment and relaxed at his assurance that she was exciting him as much as he’d excited her. Peeking up at him from under her eyelashes, she slipped her hand beneath his waistband and closed her fingers around his thick erection.

His body jerked slightly and his hand’s hold on her breast tightened a fraction. He brushed his thumb over her nipple and she mirrored the action, by moving her thumb over the velvety tip of his erection and then sliding her hand down to the base, with deliberate slowness, then back up to the top again.

His eyes locked with hers and she repeated the action, noting how he grew more rigid as she did, if such a thing were possible.

“Allison,” he rasped, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

The intent look in her eyes must have rivaled his, because before she knew what was happening, Wes had her flipped over onto her back and had himself positioned on top of her. Her hand was still wrapped around his erection and she gave him another squeeze. His grunt made her feminine pride soar and she did it again, tighter this time.

His hand flew to hers and he encircled her wrist. “That’s enough.” The look in his eyes said more than his words and she pulled her hand away.

He'd had several opportunities to embarrass her and hadn't; for as curious and slightly proud of herself as she was for bringing him so close, she couldn't do that to him.

She brought her hands up to his shoulders and traced his muscles, and he slid her skirt down, then peeled off her stockings and slowly kissed and rubbed his way back up her body to rest his hair-roughed thighs between hers. She didn't know just when he'd removed his trousers, nor did she care at that moment. She loved the way his warm lips felt against her skin. So soft and gentle, yet they had the power to send sparks of lightning jolting through her with each one.

He pressed openmouthed kisses along her ribs and under her breasts, as he'd done earlier; and just as before, tension and fire pooled in her abdomen. She'd never expected him to do such a thing, nor that she'd enjoy it so.

"Wes," she sighed.

He nuzzled the crook of her neck and said her name against her skin. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said as evenly as she could, considering how heavy her breathing had become in the last moment or two.

He murmured something else before gently nipping her neck and soothing it. Then suddenly, something thick was *there*. That must have been what he'd said. She tried to concentrate on the way he was kissing her, not on the discomfort down below, but instinctively gripped his shoulders tighter as he pressed forward.

She closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek, saying a silent prayer that he didn't have much farther to go.

"Let me know when you're ready," he whispered a moment later.

She blinked at him and the strained expression on his face. She could never tire of seeing the intense look in his eyes when he looked at her thus. The discomfort and stinging she'd felt a moment ago began to fade. She relaxed her grip on his shoulders and pushed a hank of his thick, brown hair from his forehead. "I'm ready to be yours."

A wolfish grin spread his lips, then he half-groaned, half-grunted and began moving on top of her.

At first, his strokes were uneven and varied in depth and intensity, but then he found a rhythm, one that sent a new set of sparks spraying through her body and settling in her abdomen.

His face grew rigid and his eyes darker and more vibrant, keeping her held captive as the pressure in her core mounted with each thrust until she couldn't get enough and bucked her hips to meet his.

Then with a gasp, the last thread of her sanity snapped, and a flood of fire and tension overcame her, prolonged by Wes' continued thrusts deep within her. She fought to keep her eyes locked with his as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her, until finally, Wes' face grew rigid and a savage growl filled the air around them.

Gasping for breath, as she was, he separated their bodies, then rested his head on her chest.

She idly ran her fingers through his thick hair while she tried to catch her breath.

Wes moved and she shamelessly let her eyes wander over the entire length of his naked body as he repositioned himself next to her.

"I take it you like what you see," he teased, as he propped his head up on his fisted hand next to her head.

"Indeed, I do." She turned on her side to face him. "I do believe I just claimed your virtue."

He laughed. "Yes, you did."

"Both of them," she amended.

Wes knit his brows. "Both?"

She reached her hand down to encircle his shaft and gave it a squeeze, then released it, after which, she brought her foot to his calf, then extended her leg and pointed her toes until she touched the top of his foot. "I do believe, Captain Tucker, you have exposed your handsomely scarred bare feet to my gaze, thus giving away their virtue, too."

He grinned at her logic and ran his arch up her calf. "You are correct, my lady," he said with a wide smile. "I do believe I have finally surrendered the virtue of my feet, but I trust that their future is safe in your care."

"You have nothing to fear, sir. I will be here every day for the rest of your life to go to the store and be taken advantage of by Charles, in order to buy you another pair of socks if yours get misplaced in the night."

"With a promise like that, I'd say I made the right decision by giving you my virtue, then," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

She kissed him back. "And I made the right choice, too. There's no other man who could love me as you do."

"No, there's not," he agreed.

Then, as the final rays of the sun faded from the sky, he proceeded to show her again just how much he loved her.

OceanofPDF.com

~Epilogue~

Later that week

Wes sat in General Ridgely's home staring straight out the front window and vaguely listening to him and Colonel Lewis talk about attack procedures.

How long did it take to get ready for a ball? Like most men, it took him ten minutes to shave and get ready, but Allison had been in there with Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Ridgely for nearly an hour.

It'll be well worth it to see her in the ball gown Mrs. Lewis made for her, Wes repeated to himself over and over again.

"Say, Wes, I wondered if you'd given anymore thought to Fayetteville, North Carolina," Colonel Lewis asked.

Wes shrugged. "I'll have to ask Allison what she thinks."

Colonel Lewis nodded his head. "That's understandable. I just thought, in case she conceived, it might be a more appropriate environment."

Wes nodded. Colonel Lewis was right. Fayetteville was an actual city, where Allison could make friends and have a little of her old life back. Out here, that was not the case; and if Wes didn't accept the assignment, he'd better start taking measures to ensure Allison didn't conceive, or she wouldn't be able to stay.

Tension knotted in his shoulders. He certainly didn't want her to leave. He'd have to ask her what she wanted and be content with it until the situation changed. Most women did want families and to be mothers. But if she could wait two more years, his commitment to the Army would be up and they could go wherever she wanted—even to Boston or Charleston, if she so desired.

"I'll have to let you know later this week," he said.

"Very well," Colonel Lewis said and then turned back to General Ridgely.

The room was overly warm and he was tired of sitting. He thought to tell them he'd be waiting outside, then dismissed it. They were smart fellows. They'd know where he was going.

He strolled over to the door, opened it, and froze. Right there at the door just across the narrow hall that separated the two cabins was Allison.

Her long auburn hair was down and in long, thick curls. The dress she wore was pale pink with a modestly-cut bodice and beads and other fripperies sewn into the fabric. She walked toward him and the fabric swished with a whisper around her ankles.

“You’re beautiful.”

She grinned at the roughness in his voice, then came up on her toes and brushed a kiss on his lips. “You’re looking rather handsome yourself, Captain.”

Not nearly handsome enough to be her escort, but he’d rather cut his own arm off than see her with another. He offered her his arm. “I thank you and I must ask if a highfalutin Bostoner such as yourself would mind having to claim me as her dance partner for the night?”

“Hmm.” She twisted her lips as if she had to give that a lot of thought. “Are you saying you’re to be my only dance partner and I’m not allowed to dance with your friends?”

He scowled. “Absolutely not. I’ve seen the way Jack looks at you and I wouldn’t trust Gray not to try to steal you from me,” he teased. They both might adore Allison and be insanely jealous of him for having married her, but they could both be trusted.

“Well, I’d hate to be stolen, so I’d better accept your generous offer.” She took his arm and looked up at him from beneath her lashes. When she spoke again, her voice held little of the humor it just had. “Thank you for the gown, Wes.”

“The gown?”

She gestured to the silk and satin gown she wore. “When I went to thank Mrs. Lewis, she told me that it had been your idea. And that—” her voice broke and she cleared her throat— “you’d asked her to make it for me last week. I didn’t realize...” She tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Thank you, Wes. It is a very beautiful dress and an even more beautiful gesture. I expected to wear the dress Sarah made me, which is beautiful in its own way, just not as elegant as what the others are wearing.”

“I know. The dress I asked Mrs. Ridgely to make for you is for you to wear during the day, so you don’t always have to wear the shirt and skirt.”

“You asked Sarah to make that, too? She never said anything.”

“Yes, I asked her,” he said slowly. “But to be fair, she’d already seen that you had a need and had started making it on her own.”

Her face pinkened and she groaned.

He chuckled at her reaction. “It’s all right, Allison. We can’t all be good at everything. You’ll get better at sewing. The same way you got better at cooking and making coffee.” He didn’t know if it was his imagination, pure love altering his thoughts, or what, but her coffee had been far better tasting the past few days than it had been the first few times she’d tried it.

“That’s because Sarah taught me how to cure the meat.”

“And the coffee?” he prompted.

Color rose in her cheeks, confirming his suspicion that Mrs. Ridgely had helped her on that score, too. “Apparently you’re supposed to roast the bean.”

A sharp bark of laughter rent the air. “I could have told you that.”

“No, you *should* have told me that,” she corrected with a grin.

Yes, he probably should have if only to have spared himself from any further tongue-torture, but by the time she’d made coffee for him again, he’d seen her roast the bean and had assumed Mrs. Ridgely had informed her of the step. “Well, then I suppose I got my rightful punishment for not,” he said simply. A group of Indians carrying crates toward the barracks caught his eye and reminded him what he needed to say to her. “Can we sit a moment?”

Allison shot him a curious glance, then allowed him to help her sit on the bench Colonel Lewis had built for Mrs. Lewis so that she could sit outside on clear days. “Allison, the reason I asked Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Ridgely to help you with your wardrobe wasn’t just because I thought you’d need something decent to wear besides the dress you wore when you arrived and the skirt and shirt you seem so fond of.” He flashed her a smile and squeezed her hand, because he loved seeing her wear that.

“Yes?” she prompted

His grin faded and he swallowed past the lump in his throat at the memories that were stirring in his head. “Do you remember the day that I told you I’d join you for lunch, and then I wasn’t able to?” At her nod, he continued. “Colonel Lewis had received information that there had been an attack that day.” Her gasp allowed him the perfect opportunity to clear his

throat and better compose himself. “The stage you came in on—” He shook his head, hoping she’d understand his meaning.

She did and her hand flew to her mouth. “Did they... *All* of them?”

Wes nodded. “I’m very sorry, Allison. I hope you weren’t overly close to your chaperone.”

“No,” she murmured. “I wasn’t close to any of them. But, are you sure *all* of them. Even the—”

“Yes, even him.”

“But he was a child,” she argued in an uneven voice.

Wes reached his hand up and wrapped a tendril of her fallen hair around his index finger. “It’s better that way. His life would have been miserable if he’d been captured.”

She nodded solemnly, then something lit her eye. “That’s how you ended up with my letters, isn’t it? You found them there...on the ground.”

He grinned at the way she’d used his exact words, then nodded. “I did.” His face turned a pale pink. “Then like a besotted fool, I hung onto them for a while, hoping to change your mind before giving them back.”

Allison reached up and ran the knuckle of her slender finger along his jaw. “Did you think to write me a love letter, too?”

“No,” he said on a chuckle. “I’m not skilled in that department, I’m afraid.” He grimaced remembering the opening line to the one he’d read and wondered what she’d done with those...

As if she could read his mind, she said, “Good. Like you, I often had a stomachache after reading his notes.”

“Ah so you found them just as useless as they did?” He flickered a glance to the Indian men and women carrying goods toward the barracks.

“Pardon?”

Wes squeezed her hand again and took a deep breath to steady his nerves. “They normally sell the goods they claim during those attacks. They clearly knew those silly things wouldn’t have sold or they would have taken them, too.”

She laughed, and he did, too.

“Actually, I doubt they’d found them,” he said. “If they had, they’d at least taken the leather to sell or use. And who knows, they might have tried to sell the soldiers the prose for whatever reason.” Then he sighed and became serious. “Allison, I have little doubt that you’ll find your clothes over there in their heaps. I could have tried to go to their camp to buy them

back when I knew they had them, but—” he shrugged— “it’s generally not a good idea. It’s not that they hate us, and us them, but it’s better for keeping the peace if we stay in our own camps unless invited into the other.” Not that he minded buying them back for her; he would if she asked him to. She needed the items and deserved to have them back; he just hoped he wouldn’t see the images of that day every time he glimpsed her in one of her dresses or using her hairbrush.

She reached across and laid her hand on his arm, the gesture more reassuring than any words she could have spoken. “Wes, I don’t need you to buy back my clothing.”

He studied her face. “Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t mind. But I don’t need all of those fancy clothes—and I don’t want them, either.” She took a deep breath, a smile on her face. “I’m perfectly content with the wardrobe I have now. It suits me far better than the one I wore before.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

“Are you saying you like living here?”

“Yes, I do.”

“So you wouldn’t mind staying a few more years?”

She shook her head in a way that made her curls sway. “Wes, as long as I’m with you, I don’t care where we go.”

And now for a short excerpt of
The Officer and the Southerner

OceanofPDF.com

~Prologue~

Fort Gibson, Indian Territory
Late May 1845

Second Lieutenant Jack Walker scanned the endless brown grass that stretched out for miles ahead of him from where he stood in the top of the northwest lookout tower. *Lush, open prairie*, he scribbled on his paper. He mindlessly drummed his fingers on the wooden ledge of the lookout, thinking of what else to write for the ad he was placing for a mail order bride.

He swiped the back of his hand across his forehead. *Warm weather*. He jotted that down and looked up in time to see a man on his horse. Jack tipped his hat to the man and the rider returned the gesture. *Friendly neighbors*.

There, that should do it. He rescanned the lines of his ad, a slow smile spreading over his lips. Perfect. He folded up the paper and stuffed it in his pocket, lest anyone see him carrying it.

Whistling, he went downstairs and across the large courtyard to his office where he dripped hot wax on the top edge of the folded paper and sealed it.

“Jack? Are you in here?”

Jack snapped his head up to see the curious blue eyes of his friend and the reason he’d had the nerve and motivation to write the ad in the first place: Captain Wes Tucker. Wes had married a mail order bride not even a week ago and everything seemed to be working out perfectly for the two of them, giving Jack hope the same would be possible for him.

“Do you need something, Wes?” he asked as he shuffled around the papers on his desk to hide the address of the Savannah newspaper he was writing to.

“Yes, it’s time for you to hie yourself up into the watchtower.”

“Oh. Right,” he said trying not to scowl. Now that Wes was married, he was exempt from having to spend a night in the watchtower. Just another

point in the favor of marriage. “I just need to finish getting the mail addressed and in the basket, then I’ll be right out.”

Wes nodded his head slowly and gave him a quizzical look. “Don’t be long.”

As soon as Wes was out of the room, Jack finished addressing his letter, then slipped it into the middle of stack of letters that were waiting to go out with this week’s mail.

The rest coming late summer/early fall 2013!

OceanofPDF.com

If you enjoyed *The Officer and the Bostoner* I would appreciate it if you would help others enjoy this book, too.

Lend it. This e-book is lending-enabled, so please, share it with a friend.

Recommend it. Please help other readers find this book by recommending it to friends, readers' groups and discussion boards.

Review it. Please tell other readers why you liked this book by reviewing it at one of the following websites: Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Goodreads.

OceanofPDF.com

Other Books by Rose Gordon

Fort Gibson Officers Series

American-set historical romance series that takes place in Indian Territory in the mid-1840s.

[The Officer and the Bostoner](#)—While on her way to meet her intended, Allison Pearson was abandoned by her traveling party at a desolate Army fort in the middle of Indian Territory. It's a good thing there is a handsome, smooth talking officer named Captain Wes Tucker will to temporarily marry her until her intended can reclaim her.

[The Officer and the Southerner](#)—Lieutenant Jack Walker sent off for a mail-order bride. Ella Davis answered the ad. Jack forgot to mention a few living details, and Ella's about to let him know it!

[The Officer and the Traveler](#)—Captain Grayson Montgomery's mouth has landed him in trouble again! And this time it's not something a cleverly worded sentence and a handsome smile can fix. Having been informed he'll either have to marry or be demoted and sentenced to hard labor for the remainder of his tour, he proposes, only to discover those years of hard labor may have been the easier choice for his heart.

Coming Soon!

Gentlemen of Honor Series

Regency set series that is coming in 2014!

[Secrets of a Viscount](#)—One summer night, Sebastian Gentry, Lord Belgrave hauled the wrong young lady to Gretna Green. When her identity is exposed, the only obvious solution is to get an annulment. Only, just like his elopement plans, things didn't go as planned and while she has reason to believe they are no longer married, he knows better. Wanting to make things right for her, he offers to help her find a husband—what neither counts on is it just might be the one she's still secretly married to.

[*Desires of a Baron*](#)—Giles Goddard, Lord Norcourt is odd. Odder still, he has suddenly taken a fancy to his brother's love interest, the fallen Lucy Whitaker. Lucy was once thrown over by a lord and she has little desire to let it happen again, but she's about to learn that his desires just might be enough for the both of them.

[*Passions of a Gentleman*](#)—Having been thrown over twice already, Simon Appleton has given up his pursuit for a wife—especially if his only choice is the elusive Miss Henrietta Hughes. But when he discovers a secret about her, he's not above helping to protect her...

If you'd like to stay current on Rose's releases, then [sign up for her new release newsletter!](#)

Scandalous Sisters Series

Three American sisters have arrived in England for a brief visit, but they're about to all find something they never bargained for: love.

[*Intentions of the Earl*](#)—Faced with never-ending poverty, a gentleman is offered a handsome sum if he'll ruin a certain young lady's future—only she has other plans, and it might entail her ruining *his*.

[*Liberty for Paul*](#)—There's only one thing Liberty Banks hates worse than impropriety: one Mr. Paul Grimes, and unfortunately for her, it's her own impropriety that just got her married to him!

[*To Win His Wayward Wife*](#)—Not to be outdone by her sisters' scandalous marriages, Madison Banks is about to have her own marriage-producing scandal to a man who, unbeknownst to her has loved her all along.

Groom Series

Four decided bachelors are about to have their freedom ripped right from their clutches with nothing to show for it but love.

[Her Sudden Groom](#)—When informed he must marry within the month or be forced to marry the worst harpy ever to set foot on English shores, the overly scientific, always logical Alex Banks decides to conduct his courtship like a science experiment!

[Her Reluctant Groom](#)—Emma Green has loved Marcus, Lord Sinclair for as long as she can remember, so when he slips up and says he loves her, too, it should all be so simple. But it's never that simple when the man in question was once been engaged to and jilted by Emma's older sister.<http://www.suziegrantauthor.com/>

[Her Secondhand Groom](#)—What Patrick Ramsey, Lord Drakely AKA Lord Presumptuous wanted was an ordinary village girl to be a “motherness” to his daughters and stay out of his bedroom; what he’s about to get is something so much more.

[Her Imperfect Groom](#)— Sir Wallace Benedict is a thrice-jilted baronet who is about to finally have his happily-ever-after, if only the family of his one-true-love, would stop being so darn meddlesome!

Banks Brothers’ Brides

The first two are prequels to the previous series and the second two are follow ups.

[His Contract Bride](#)—Since just a lad, Edward Banks, Lord Watson knew Regina Harris would one day be his bride, he'd seen the paper to prove it many times; only someone forgot to inform Regina...

[His Yankee Bride](#)—John Banks wants *nothing* to do with the scandalous, sweet talking, ever-present, American beauty named Carolina, or so that’s what he keeps saying...

[His Jilted Bride](#)—Amelia Brice has a secret...and so does Elijah Banks. Hers is big...but his is bigger!

His Brother's Bride—Presented with a marriage contract his twin brother has signed but cannot fulfill, Henry Banks has to form a plan to save the Banks name, even if it means pretending he's his brother, or worse yet, marrying a lady who holds a grudge against his family.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling and Award Winning Author Rose Gordon writes unusually unusual historical romances that have been known to include scarred heroes, feisty heroines, marriage-producing scandals, far too much scheming, naughty literature and always a sweet happily-ever-after. When not escaping to another world via reading or writing a book, she spends her time chasing two young boys around the house, being hunted by wild animals, or sitting on the swing in the backyard where she has to use her arms as shields to deflect projectiles AKA: balls, water balloons, sticks, pinecones, and anything else one of her boys picks up to hurl at his brother who just happens to be hiding behind her.

She can be found somewhere in cyberspace at:

<http://www.rosegordon.net>

or blogging about *something* inappropriate at:

<http://rosesromanceramblings.wordpress.com>

Rose would love to hear from her readers and you can e-mail her at rose.gordon@hotmail.com

You can also find her on [Facebook](#), [Goodreads](#), and [Twitter](#).

If you never want to miss a new release, click [here to subscribe to her New Release list](#) or visit her website to subscribe and you'll be notified each time a new book becomes available.

OceanofPDF.com