



**INCOGNITO
IN COLORADO**

**A ROMANCE NOVELLA
BY CASEY CLINE**

AUGUST 1886

ONE

Violet St. James knew no one in the small town of Dearborn, Colorado, and that's just the way she wanted it. Hefting her travel-wearied leather valise into the crook of her left arm and lifting her navy-blue skirts with her right, she descended the train's three steps onto the depot's packed, dry dirt.

Newly minted as it was, Dearborn lacked the luster of the larger towns she'd passed on her way from Kansas City. But she didn't need elegance in her new residence, she needed anonymity.

Hunkered within her straw sunbonnet for protection from both the late afternoon sun and onlookers' curious stares, she paused within the small spot of shade cast by the depot's brick form and fingered the tattered slip of paper nestled in the folds of her bustle. Though she had its contents memorized by now, she withdrew the fragile missive and worked it open with one hand, rereading the words she knew so well:

WANTED: Teacher for the growing town of Dearborn, Colorado. Room and board provided. Must be unmarried and remain so. Interested parties to inquire in person of Mr. William Montgomery.

She stowed the paper away and set off down Dearborn's main street, the heels of her laced half boots echoing off the wooden planks below her feet as she passed the town's main establishments—a dry goods store and mercantile, a hotel, a doctor's office, and a saloon—in pursuit of the one she'd traveled more than six hundred miles for—the schoolhouse. She'd come so far already, now all she had to do was find Mr. Montgomery. And avoid the town marshal at any cost.

Will Montgomery drove the last nail home on the schoolhouse step railing, giving the wooden structure a good shake to test its soundness. Nice and sturdy. Good.

Removing his weathered hat, he mopped his soaking brow with the handkerchief from his trouser pocket. Mercy, today was a scorcher. With the children in school during the day, the only time he could work on the final few construction items was after the children returned home, when the relentless sun was at its hottest.

It'd be several years before the spindly tree he'd planted last week made any scrap of shade on the parched, cracked ground, so in the meantime, he made do with what little shade was cast by the brim of his hat.

As he replaced his handkerchief and hat to their rightful locations, his eye snagged on a figure making its way up the curved path that climbed the hill to the schoolhouse.

As the apparition approached, Will made out the features of a rather becoming young woman. Clad in a blue dress with a mass of mahogany curls cascading down her back, she appeared to be on a very determined mission. Toward him. But who was she? He'd certainly recognize her if she were from Dearborn or a neighboring town.

Perhaps it was all a mirage—an unfair trick the heatwaves were playing on him in his fatigue. Will crossed his arms and leaned against the frame of the schoolhouse door, daring Mother Nature to take away the sight.

It wasn't until she stood before him, breathless from the climb, a wary glint in her eye, that he decided luck was on his side for once. She was downright stunning up close.

"How may I help you, Miss?"

She clutched a leather valise in gloved hands, looking quite piqued from her ascent in the afternoon heat.

"Are you William Montgomery?"

"Ah, that's a bit too formal. Most folks around here just call me Will."

She went on as if she hadn't heard him. "Mr. Montgomery," she said, withdrawing a piece of paper from somewhere in the folds of her

dress and holding it up with a gloved hand. Mercy, she must be burning alive in all that, Will thought, almost missing her next words. "I'm here about the teaching position. In this advertisement. Is the position still available? I wrote ahead but received no response."

Ah, one question answered, but so many more raised. He pushed away from the doorframe and leaned his elbows on the schoolhouse railing, looking down at her. She fidgeted at his attention, a common response from the usual objects of his scrutiny. But it wasn't fair of him to use these sorts of tactics on her.

"Yes, Miss—"

"St. James. Violet St. James."

Violet. At the word, his mind conjured up rich, colorful flowers with heart-shaped leaves, and he shook his head to clear the errant thoughts.

"Well, Miss St. James, why don't you come settle on down up here in the shade of the porch while I fetch you a drink of water. Then you can tell me about your teaching experience."

She hesitated for a long moment, and he caught a flicker of fright in her eyes before it was lost again behind a mask of cordiality. She gave a single, firm nod, then ascended the stairs.

TWO

This was all a big mistake, Violet thought, as she settled down on the top step of the schoolhouse porch. The shade was a welcome relief, though sweat still trickled down her back. She hadn't anticipated Colorado would be as stiflingly hot as Kansas City, otherwise she would have foregone her extra petticoat and gloves.

While she couldn't remove the former, she dispensed with the latter, wiping her sweat-slicked hands on her dress and casting a glance over her shoulder, on the lookout for Mr. Montgomery's return.

She heard the languid clack of his boot heels on the porch boards before his towering frame sauntered into view. She couldn't quite make out his expression within the shadow of his cowboy hat, but the confidence and self-assurance he exuded was apparent in the way he carried himself. And no wonder, too. He was handsome—devilishly so. And far too perceptive, if the looks he'd given her since she'd arrived were any indication.

She didn't want anyone's notice, though, least of all someone like Mr. Montgomery. He caught her watching him and a slow grin spread across his face. She cast her eyes down to where her hands were wringing her gloves.

"Here you are, Miss St. James."

She looked up enough to see a canteen dangling from his outstretched arm. She considered the unorthodox drinking vessel a moment before her parched throat won out over propriety. Pressing the rim to her lips, she tipped the canteen back. She tried for dainty sips at first, but her insatiable thirst had her gulping down the cool liquid moments later.

After one final swallow, she withdrew the canteen from her lips and wiped at the dribble of water coursing down her chin. A quick glance to her side confirmed Mr. Montgomery had seen her unladylike behavior. She handed the canteen back to him with a "thank you," her cheeks flushing at her *faux pas*.

Mr. Montgomery angled the canteen to his own lips, and her face flamed hotter at the intimacy of his lips now touching the very thing her lips had last touched. She needed to take control of herself and of the situation, turn it back to the reason she was here in the first place, not what Mr. Montgomery's lips were doing.

"So, have you been the one teaching in the absence of a formal schoolteacher?"

He finished drinking and recapped the canteen. "No, that would be Mrs. Pritchard. Her husband passed a few years ago, but she's getting on in years herself and wants to be back at the milliner's shop. Says she misses the feathers and the fellow women."

He sat down next to her, his large presence consuming all the available space. And air. Did he really need to sit so close? Surely there was plenty of room on the other side of the step. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, revealing brawny forearms bronzed by the sun, the hair on his arms bleached nearly white.

"So, you help out—building and repairing—that sort of thing?"

"You could say that."

A rather evasive answer, and wasn't *she* the one who was supposed to be answering *his* questions?

"Shall I tell you about my teaching experience then?"

He leaned back on his elbows and crossed his feet at the ankles, settling in. "Yes, by all means."

She kept her eyes resolutely forward, facing the town's small grouping of buildings and not the gentleman by her side. What he found so relaxing about this situation was beyond her.

Her confidence grew, however, as she delved into a topic she knew well—teaching. She explained her background, careful to avoid mentioning exactly where she had taught, and what curriculum she used then and would anticipate using here in Dearborn.

Mr. Montgomery uttered not a word while she spoke, nor did he ask any questions.

When she had finished, he sat up again, held out his hand and said, "The job is yours, Miss St. James. How soon can you start?"

That was almost too easy. Hoping her face didn't reflect her surprise, she took his hand, belatedly realizing her gloves were still in her lap. His hand was warm, and the ridged callouses of his fingers enveloped her hand for far longer than was proper.

She met his eyes, startling at their chestnut depths. Her stomach did a strange flip flop, and she was certain her mouth was gaping open. The left side of his mouth quirked into that same grin, the one that told her he knew what effect he was having on her.

She yanked her hand away and stood. "Thank you, Mr. Montgomery. Now, the ad mentioned lodgings were provided. Where can I find those?"

"Ah, that'd be the extra room in Mrs. Pritchard's living quarters above the milliners. Come, I'll show you." He also stood, but had nearly half a foot of height on her. He was so large. So looming.

He held out his right hand to her. It'd be rude to reject his gesture, so once again she found her ungloved hand in his as she descended the steps. When they reached level ground, he lifted her hand and settled it into the crook of his arm, giving her hand a reassuring pat while he lifted her valise with his left. "Dearborn isn't much, but it's a right fine place to live. It'll grow on you, trust me."

But she didn't trust this man more than she could throw him, which wasn't very far at all.

THREE

"Well, aren't you just the prettiest little thing. Come in, come in," a portly woman who must be Mrs. Pritchard said, ushering Violet inside. The space was small but tidy, complete with a small kitchen, table and chairs, and two closed doors on the far end that presumably led to the bedrooms.

Will crossed the threshold, and the dwelling shrank four-fold. He set down Violet's valise, then exchanged a few hushed words with Mrs. Pritchard.

"Go on, now, Will. Leave her to me. She's likely plum wore out. I'll get her fed supper and settled."

As if in response to Mrs. Pritchard's words, Violet gaped a huge yawn, the fatigue of the day having finally caught up to her.

Will nodded, tipped his hat to the women, and clicked the door shut behind him.

"Have a seat, dear," Mrs. Pritchard said, bustling into motion. She set a plate before Violet, full of piping hot fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans, with a glass of sweet tea to wash it down. Violet dug in with gusto, murmuring her thanks and appreciation for Mrs. Pritchard's hospitality.

Mrs. Pritchard prattled on while Violet ate, covering everything from the latest gossip in the milliners to the children's personalities and eccentricities.

"Now don't let Joshua Barnes bring any more frogs inside the schoolhouse. My pulse jumps just thinking about that time when the children and I spent a whole day chasing around a bullfrog instead of working in their primers." The woman bellowed a laugh at the memory, which sent Violet's lips into a grin of their own.

"I'm excited to start—," Violet began, before she cut herself off with a yawn.

"Goodness me, I'm so sorry. Here I am going on and on and you're all tuckered out. Leave the clean-up to me and go on and get

settled. The room on the right is yours. You should find everything to your liking, but holler if you need anything."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pritchard."

"Tsk. You must call me Polly, dear. Everyone does."

Violet nodded. "I will, Polly. And you must please call me Violet."

The older woman cracked a grin and moisture misted in her eyes. "Violet. Such a lovely name. I'm so glad to have you here. It's been awfully lonely these last few years with Harold gone."

Violet swallowed around the lump forming in her throat. "I'm glad to be here too."

She bade Polly one final good night before taking her leave. The days of rail travel and worry had caught up with her, and she could barely keep her eyes open as she hastily readied for bed. Tucked underneath a pale pink quilt, she relished in the cool, freeing fabric of her nightdress and in the foreign feeling coursing through her—safety—before sleep overcame her.

It'd been almost a week since Violet had appeared in Will's life, and just about as long since he'd last seen her. Work had taken him to the neighboring town of Elmwood for the last five days.

Elmwood wasn't as large as Dearborn yet, so Will found himself traveling between the two towns more often than he'd like. Especially after Violet's arrival.

He urged Remington on. Ever reliable, his mount picked up a ground-churning lope in the last few miles before home. Once Remington was cooled down, unsaddled, and settled in his stall with a fresh bucket of hot mash, Will could ignore his own growling stomach no longer.

He unlatched his door and groped around in the dark before lighting the oil lamp by touch alone. The flickering light illuminated a plate of food and a folded piece of paper on the rough sawn kitchen table. Polly Pritchard. Bless that woman. He had yet to regret giving her an extra key to his living quarters. She more than looked out for him, and

his occasional lending of a listening ear to the lonely woman's ramblings would never be repayment enough for her kindness to him.

Will emptied the plate of its contents, then turned his attention to the letter. True to form, her letter was far from brief. He skimmed over her gushing about Mrs. Hampton's new hat and the latest arrivals in the dry goods store. He was about to set the letter aside and save its remaining contents for tomorrow, when his eyes snagged on Violet's name. Here, he read every detail:

Violet is settling in nicely. She is such a joy to have. A bit skittish at times, but Dearborn is new to her, so that is to be expected.

Will had noticed the same behavior in his brief interactions with Violet. His impulse to know about her past warred with his instinct to wait for her to be the one to reveal more. Such patience had always proved fruitful for him in the past. But his fortitude was slipping where Violet was concerned. He needed to see her again, yet he couldn't very well hunt her down. And if he did, what would he say to her? He had no further business with her.

Once again, Mrs. Pritchard proved his saving grace, this time by way of her letter:

Violet has mentioned that the schoolhouse door keeps coming unhinged and that the blackboard frame is separating from the wall. These weren't complaints, merely items mentioned offhandedly during our meals together. However, I'm wondering if you might be obliged to take a look and see if you can fix things when you're back?

Will put down the letter and smiled to himself. He'd be more than happy to help out the schoolteacher. In fact, he'd do so the very next day.

FOUR

Violet scratched out an equation on the blackboard, addressing the students to her back. "Now, try to solve this one. It might be a bit trickier than the last, but just do your best."

She dusted the chalk off her hands and turned to face the room, startling at a silhouette in the doorway. Though it'd been a few days since she'd last seen that figure, she immediately recognized its owner—Will Montgomery.

After he'd dropped her off at Polly's her first night in town, he'd all but disappeared. And though she'd kept telling herself it was for the best that he'd made himself scarce, her traitorous heart stuttered at seeing him again.

The children caught the direction of her gaze, and she lost all control of the class as they exclaimed Will's name. It seemed his renown and favor in the town was widespread.

A glance at her watch fob told her it was close enough to dismissal that she could let the students go early. At her announcement, the volume in the room increased as the children streamed from their chairs, clamoring around Mr. Montgomery. He called out each child's name as they passed him, ruffling the boys' hair and smiling in his roguish way at the girls. The latter appeared absolutely smitten with him, and when he turned that same smile on her, she was suddenly a small schoolgirl herself under his attentions.

She turned to the blackboard and began erasing its contents, hoping if her hands kept busy then maybe her mind would stop thinking about the man in the doorway.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Montgomery?" She kept her tone clipped, formal, and her focus on the blackboard.

His boots thumped across the room, her heart hammering in time with his footsteps as she sensed him near.

"I'm here about this," he said, his breath nearly on her neck.

Despite the heat in the room, gooseflesh pricked along her collar. Willing her pulse to remain normal, she turned and found herself almost

in his embrace. His arm was outstretched to the top corner of the blackboard, where the frame was separating from the wall. Thankfully, his attention was directed there too and not at her.

Up close, he was even more rugged. The stubble on his jaw from a few days ago was now a full beard, and he smelled of an intoxicating mix of leather and the outdoors. Mercy.

Regaining her composure, she stepped back, taking her first full breath since he'd entered.

"Th-thank you, Mr. Montgomery."

"Will. Please." His eyes connected with hers, all molten chocolate in the late afternoon light.

She suppressed her instinct to object. What harm could there be in using his given name? "Alright, Will."

"And might I call you Violet?"

Never had her name sounded as sensual as it did on his lips.

"A—Alright." It seemed she could only utter that single word. In her brain's lack, her body sprang into action, moving about the room to gather the slates and primers from the students' desks.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Will withdraw a hammer from a loop on his belt and nails from his trouser pocket. The tap of the hammer echoed through the schoolhouse for a few moments.

"There, all set here," Will said, returning the hammer to his waist. "Now, for that hinge."

"Thank you," Violet murmured, returning to her desk where she set the supplies as Will made his way to the door.

"Are you settling in?"

"Yes, Polly has been a Godsend."

"A heart of gold, that one."

Violet smiled at his praise of the woman who had grown to mean so much to her in just a few days.

"Mouth of a raging river, too."

Violet laughed at his sage observation of Polly.

"You should do that more."

"Pardon?"

"Laugh. You light up when you do it."

His offhandedly delivered compliment stunned her into silence. His attention was back on the door, his fingers fiddling here and there as if such compliments were commonplace for him to give. They weren't commonplace for her to receive.

"Th—thank you," she finally managed. "I find that I've been able laugh a lot more here in Dearborn," she added.

He halted his motions and rose to look at her. Concern creased his brow. "Is your past so bad, Violet?"

His comment hit too close to the truth. The levity from moments before vanished, and her mask of detachment fell back in place.

"I prefer to focus on the future." She straightened the items on her desk that were already organized, willing him to be finished soon.

"Any room in that future for a sweetheart?" His teasing tone and lopsided grin were back.

She couldn't help but quirk a small smile at the hopefulness in his voice. "If I married, I'd lose my position."

"So, you're thinking of marrying me already? What if I'm already spoken for?"

Her cheeks heated as she belatedly registered the implication of her words. "I didn't mean—."

"I'm teasing you, Violet," he said, returning to his task with the door hinge. Silence stretched between them, which only added to Violet's discomfort. She had nothing left to do to occupy herself—the schoolroom was tidied and ready for tomorrow. Should she leave? But then she'd have to squeeze past Will.

"I'm not, by the way."

"Not what?" she asked, not following his train of thought.

"Spoken for."

She shook her head at the absurdity of this conversation. How had it turned down such a preposterous path so quickly? Will was all too good at distracting her. She was here to teach, that's all. "Noted," she said, hoping he'd catch the finality in her response.

He just grinned. "Are you ready?"

He must have caught the confusion in her expression because he went on. "For me to walk you home. I'm finished with my tasks, and it looks like you are too."

Given that she hadn't done anything productive in the last few minutes, she couldn't argue otherwise. She nodded and gathered her things, determined to take control of the conversation during their walk as she relinquished control of her arm to Will's.

FIVE

Back in Violet's presence, with her arm in his, Will struggled to harness his unwieldy thoughts. Earlier, in the schoolhouse, it was the pained look on her face when he'd asked about her past that had likely caused him to joke about marriage. And though he'd said he'd only been jesting about matrimony, he was starting to disbelieve his assertions, though, thankfully, she seemed to believe them. Regardless, she hadn't elaborated about her past, and he didn't want to push her. He could try and find out by other channels, but that felt too deceptive.

"I'm glad you stopped by."

His ears perked at her welcome interruption to his thoughts. "You are?"

"Yes, I've been meaning to ask you. How do I collect my pay?"

Will tried to hide the disappointment in his response, assuming a nonchalance he didn't feel that she'd only wanted to see him for reasons related to her employment. "Ah, yes, you'll want to find the assistant town clerk, Mr. Wood."

"Not the head clerk?"

She was inquisitive, he'd give her that. But he didn't need her meeting the head clerk anytime soon. "Naw, the head clerk will be busy with other responsibilities."

"Very well." His relief that she hadn't inquired further was short lived, for her next question was another one he was reluctant to answer. "Polly said you were in another town for the last few days. Were you repairing things there too?"

"In a way." He was being deliberately obtuse, but he wanted her to know him for who he was as a person, not his job responsibilities. He changed the subject. "You got a new hat."

He caught her small smile in his periphery. "Polly insisted. I fear it's too much, but she wouldn't let me leave with something more understated."

The contraption was decorated with all manner of frilled and feathered things, but what might be gaudy on most women was downright becoming on her.

"You look very pretty."

"I—I wasn't fishing for—"

"Just accept the compliment, Violet," he said, stopping to face her.

She stopped too, looking all the more beautiful with her flushed cheeks peeking out from under the bedecked hat's brim.

"Th—thank you," she whispered.

A stray tendril of hair had escaped her coiffure, and before he could stop himself, he lifted his hand to brush it back. Knowing he was pushing propriety, yet past the point of stopping, he smoothed his thumb over her glowing cheek, marveling at the softness of her skin.

Surprise lit her eyes, but it didn't entirely erase the fear there too. It was too much for her. Finding his last scrap of resolve, he removed his hand and took her arm in his once more, determined to act beyond reproach for the rest of their walk to her lodgings.

Violet hoped Will didn't feel the trembling in the arm she had hooked through his as they continued toward town. A myriad of emotions still coursed through her even after he'd withdrawn his hand from her cheek. He'd been so close, so consuming, yet his touch had been tender and featherlight, pledging safety and protection. She'd seen the desire lurking there too, and her body had responded in kind, and still was given how close they were.

But how could she trust her heart to this man who seemed determined to conceal his true self? Not that she was any better, however, she had every reason to want to forget her past. What could Will possibly be hiding from her?

As her questions increasingly outpaced any answers, her urge to escape heightened. The town hall approached on their right, and she took advantage of its proximity.

"I'll go see Mr. Wood now," she said, withdrawing her arm from Will's. She kept her eyes diverted from his. "Thank you again for fixing things at the schoolhouse. And for escorting me."

"It was my pleasure." Even without looking at him, she heard the smile in his voice—especially as he emphasized *pleasure*—before she ducked into the safety of the town hall.

The clerk's office was easy enough to find, and within it sat an older gentleman behind a large wooden slab, intent on the papers before him. She rapped lightly on the doorframe so as to not startle him. "Mr. Wood?"

The man looked up and cracked a smile upon seeing her. "I'm sorry but Mr. Wood is not in presently. His horse threw a shoe so he's down at the farrier's."

"Oh, my mistake. I can return when he's available." She turned to leave, but the man stood.

"I'm certain I can help, Miss—"

"St. James."

"Ah, yes, the new schoolteacher. I'm sorry it has taken us so long to meet. I've heard much about you already."

"Th—thank you, sir."

"I'm William Montgomery, the head clerk."

She froze. How could that be? She'd just left William Montgomery in the street.

"Pardon?"

"I see the confusion in your eyes. I'm William Montgomery, Sr. I believe you've already met my son? He's William Montgomery, Jr. but has probably told you to call him Will as everyone else does."

"Y—yes," she stammered, her mind replaying every interaction she'd had with Will since they'd met. No wonder he hadn't asked her any questions in her interview—he wasn't the one she was supposed to see about the job in the first place. Anger replaced her bewilderment. Will had lied to her since the minute they'd met. Odious man.

But with the man's father before her, she needed to keep her calm. "He's been quite helpful with repairs at the schoolhouse," she finally

managed, finding the one positive thing she could say about Will at present.

The father beamed at the praise of his son. "Yes, he's so good to volunteer his help on his days off."

Good? Will? She almost emitted a disbelieving snort before focusing on the latter part of Mr. Montgomery's statement. "Days off? You mean that's not his job?"

"Goodness no, Miss St. James. He's a town marshal. Splits his time between here and Elmwood, in fact."

Her pulse pounded in her ears, and she lost her equilibrium for a moment. No, it couldn't be. Will was the town marshal. The very worst possible scenario was before her—she'd been cavorting with the enemy all along.

SIX

Will kneaded the knot of tension gathering between his brows, and though his mind and body were both weary, sleep evaded him.

As had the Harris brothers. For six long months, he'd been on their trail. They were wanted for a string of robberies but were proving just as competent in avoiding capture as they were in divesting others of their valuables. He thought he'd nearly had them in Elmwood last week, but the campfire smoke the town residents had seen off in the distance had only belonged to a team of trappers bound for Idaho.

He glanced at his watch fob under the flickering light of the oil lamp. Nearly midnight. He'd been finished with his post for three hours now—the mantle having been passed to Mr. Campbell, the other town marshal—but he couldn't bring himself to leave the office and enter his empty living quarters above.

Instead, he stood and crossed to the window, stretching his legs and peering out at Dearborn's darkened main thoroughfare. A few lamps glistened in the upper windows, but on the whole, the town had settled into slumber.

As should he, he reminded himself. He made to turn around and do just that, when a shadowed figure darting between the milliner shop and the mercantile snagged his attention. Instinctively, he reached to his right hip, where his revolver was usually holstered, but he'd removed it when his post had ended.

After a quick dart to the desk's top drawer, and a second or two more to pop open the cylinder and confirm the rounds were in place, he had the revolver holstered once more. Another glance out the window revealed the interloper had almost made its way to the train depot. It was certainly too much to hope that it was one of the Harris brothers. They likely wouldn't be so bold as to gallivant around his town, even after dark.

Will snagged his hat from the hook by the door before slipping out of the marshal's office in pursuit of the perpetrator.

Violet paused behind the train depot, released her valise to the ground, and leaned against the building's brick facade, trying to catch her breath. Even so long after sunset, the sun's warmth stored in the bricks seeped into the muslin of her gown and her body's temperature—already elevated from her midnight dash through Dearborn—inched even higher.

When would this part of Colorado experience the welcome cool of autumn? Well, she wouldn't be around long enough to find out anyways. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the brick, the chirp of crickets the only noise she heard over that of her slowing inhales and exhales. Noticeably absent was the sound of an approaching train. The midnight train must be running behind tonight, which was just her luck.

"Mighty fine night for a stroll, huh?"

Violet's eyes flashed open, her stomach lurching to her throat and her pulse hiking to her ears.

A cowboy hat clad silhouette stood a few yards off, and even if she hadn't recognized his voice, she would have recognized that virile figure anywhere. Will Montgomery. The very last person she wanted to see.

She crossed her arms. She didn't need to engage with him, she owed him no response. After all, he'd lied to her. Whether it was for his own entertainment or for some other nefarious reason, she knew not. But it didn't really matter at this point. She would be westbound on a locomotive any minute now.

Will took three steps toward her, out of the mercantile building's shadow and into the waning moonlight. Something silver glinted on his hip. A revolver. And a glaring, physical reminder that he'd concealed his true self from her.

She tracked his gaze as it flicked to her valise on the ground then back to her face. This man missed no detail. She should have realized he was the town marshal sooner, and she was embarrassed that she hadn't. The way he was always studying her, asking questions in such a way that she actually felt inclined to answer. He'd been using his lawman tactics on her all along.

He nodded toward her valise. "Lifting weights for a new exercise regimen?"

"A trained marshal like you should recognize the signs of someone leaving, don't you think?"

"I saw 'em, I'd just hoped it wasn't the case."

Did that mean he wanted her to remain? Or was this another of his interrogation strategies? Though the questions swirled in her head, she mercifully kept herself from voicing them. Instead, she narrowed her eyes at him.

"My absence can be easily filled with another teacher."

He shook his head side-to-side and took another step closer. "No, it cannot. The children will miss you."

At his comment, a lump rose in her throat. Even in such a short time, the children had become so dear to her. She would miss them all very much too. Guilt stabbed her stomach at the thought that she hadn't even said goodbye, and she swallowed around the thickness in her throat, blinking back tears.

Will advanced another step and shoved his hands in his pockets. He was within arm's reach now. "And quite frankly, Violet, I'll miss you too."

His eyes bore into hers, nearly black in the dark of night, and she prayed the honesty she saw within their depths wasn't just a trick of the moonlight.

But she'd misjudged his intentions before and wouldn't—couldn't—risk her heart more than she already had.

"Y—you lied to me, Will." Her accusation was just above a whisper.

"More like, omitted a few key details." He shrugged his shoulders to his ears as though this was all a small misunderstanding to him. To her, however, it was a grave infraction.

"I cannot abide dishonesty. From anyone. It's wounded me too much in my past for me to overlook any degree of it now."

A pained look crossed his face. "I'm truly sorry, Violet, I—"

But a rumbling beneath their feet cut him off. The train. She glimpsed the depot over her shoulder. The locomotive was hissing to a stop on the tracks.

"Please, Violet. No more secrets. I promise."

She turned back to Will. The expression on his face mirrored the sincerity she detected in his voice. Could she trust him to keep his promise? And did she really have any other option?

Sure, she could head farther west, gain even more distance from the life she left behind in Kansas City and her attempt to start anew. But there was no guarantee that any work would be awaiting her, much less a desirable teaching position like she had now.

With one more glance over her shoulder, she took a steeling breath, picked up her valise, and stepped toward her decision.

SEVEN

Will held back his relieved sigh when Violet pushed away from the train depot and stepped toward him. He hadn't scared her off completely, but she'd come too close to leaving for his liking.

He should have told her his true identity sooner—especially now that she'd revealed someone had broken her trust in the past—but he wanted her to know him for who he was, not what his job responsibilities were. People tended to act differently around him once they found out he was the town marshal.

Wordlessly, he relieved her of her valise, and she took his left arm and fell in step beside him. He slowed his pace to allow her to keep up. And to draw out his time with her. He caught her eyeing his revolver, a somewhat wary looking expression on her face.

"I thought you were a robber," he said in answer to her unspoken question. "There's a band of them running loose right now and I thought luck might be on my side in finally snagging one."

At his comment, she imperceptibly stepped closer to him, as if she drew a measure of safety from his presence. Well, at least she found him less frightening than a criminal.

"And instead of good fortune tonight, you found me."

"On the contrary. I consider it the greatest of windfalls to have found you instead of a dirty, grizzled bandit."

She let out a small laugh at his reply, and he grinned.

"Only because I smell better."

His heart took flight at their lighthearted banter, so different from the weighty words exchanged between them moments ago. "You're also far prettier than them too."

"You're quite the charmer, Mr. Montgomery," she said, shouldering him playfully.

His smile widened. "Will. Remember?"

"Very well...Will." His name passed her lips slowly, hesitantly, as if she were asking him to confirm again that she could place her trust in

him. And he was going to do everything within his power to make sure she knew that she could.

He guided her around the corner of the marshal's office when a familiar nicker sounded from the stable in back and Remington peeked his head over the half door in greeting.

"Oh! What handsome gentleman do we have here?" Violet asked, her whole face brightening.

Though Will wished her remark had been about him, such a compliment to his horse was nearly as pleasing.

"This here is Remington," Will answered, crossing to the gelding and rubbing a hand along the horse's sleek, copper neck.

"Is it alright if I come closer?"

Remington was already arching his neck toward her, his dark brown eyes wide with curiosity, his nostrils puffing in and out, likely taking in Violet's scent.

"Yes. I promise he'll behave the perfect gentleman." Will stepped back slightly and motioned for her to take his place at Remington's neck. She advanced slowly, her hand outstretched, until her fingers finally made contact. She scratched down to the horse's withers and back up, Remington bobbing his head along with her movements.

"I think he likes it," she said on a laugh.

"I think so too. He wasn't always this trusting of humans." Will advanced a step and placed his own hand on Remington's neck, above Violet's. "Unfortunately, his previous owner wasn't kind, and it took a lot of time and patience for him to stop thinking that every human posed a danger."

"I can empathize with that," she whispered, more to the animal than to him. Oh, how he wanted to know more, but he didn't press.

Remington's lips toyed with the sleeve of her dress, and she laughed again.

"I do love horses. It's been forever since I've ridden, though."

"You've come to the right place to rectify that. You're welcome to ride Remington anytime."

As if communicating his assent to Will's statement, the gelding nudged Violet's torso, sending her back a step. Will's arm looped around her waist before she could fall any further.

"Well, an almost perfect gentleman," Will amended under his breath, all too aware of how close he was to her.

She peered up at him over her shoulder, her eyes—almost the same color as her name in the dark of night—wide and her mouth slightly parted in surprise. Yet she didn't look away or step away. All he'd have to do was lean down a few inches, and her lips would be his.

Will shook the thought from his head. It'd be too fast, too forward. He, too, needed to act the perfect gentleman. And so, with his final fragment of resolve, he released her and stepped back.

"I should be getting you back home."

When what appeared to be disappointment flashed across her face, he nearly took her in his arms again. But as when Remington had been learning to trust him, he knew patience would be the key with earning Violet's trust too. The hardest part would be heeding his own advice.

EIGHT

"Miss St. James!" Joshua Barnes said, jumping up from his seat.

"Now, Joshua, remember, you must raise your hand and not interrupt." Her rebuke was kind. As with all her other students, the young lad had found a special place in her heart, and his antics were usually more out of overexuberance than actual ill will.

"But Will's out there! With horses!"

Her own curiosity won out. It was nearly dismissal time anyways, and the students had worked hard all day. "Very well, we will stop here, but please practice your math facts at home." Her last words were lost in the cacophony of students clambering to be the first one out the door, and she, too, had to contain her own excitement as she followed them outside.

She stopped on the covered porch at the sight before her eyes. Will sat atop Remington, the reins of a second saddled horse looped around his saddle's horn. In his cowboy hat, plaid button-up shirt, jeans, and boots, he was the quintessential rugged frontiersman, and her stomach did a strange flip-flop as she took him in.

In the weeks since he'd found her outside the train depot trying to escape town, they'd fallen into a familiar routine. On the days he wasn't working, he'd meet her outside the schoolhouse and walk her home. He had also joined her and Polly for dinner on occasion, and Violet wasn't sure if she or Polly were more enamored with the man at this point.

Yet in those weeks, he hadn't tried to kiss her again. Assuming she'd read his thoughts correctly that night at the stable, that is. She'd admittedly thought about the non-kiss far too much, especially when she was in his presence, which seemed to happen more and more lately.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Montgomery?" She couldn't keep the playful smile from her voice.

"I've come to rescue you, fair maiden. I've even brought you a noble steed," he said, gesturing to the black horse beside him, his tone lighthearted and toying.

The children giggled at his hilariousness, and a full smile curved her lips as she descended the school steps and approached him and the horses.

The second horse was a gorgeous animal, all sleek and toned, with perceptive eyes and an obsidian coat that glinted small rainbows when the sunlight caught it just right. "And tell me, fair sir, what is the name of this so-called noble steed?"

"Ah, that is for her new owner to decide." He looked down at her and grinned, the familiar scent of him—leather and all things masculine—working its usual effect on her insides.

"So, what will it be?" he asked.

He must have caught the confused expression on her face, because he continued, "What will you name your new horse?"

Her breath hitched in her throat. He'd remembered her comment from that night about loving to ride and had gone and found a horse for her.

Sense quickly caught up to her surprise—she couldn't accept such a gift from him, could she?

"But, Will—," she began in all seriousness.

"Before you object, Violet, consider it a favor to the animal. Mr. Davis in Elmwood has more horses than time, and this mare is too lively to be standing in a paddock all day."

As if in confirmation, the horse tossed her head and pawed the ground with one hoof. Violet raised her hand to the animal's head and stroked the small kiss of white hair on the forehead—a star it was called—then straightened the raven-colored forelock before meeting the animal's intelligent, brown eyes.

With now two sets of pleading brown eyes on her, neither of which she could deny, she nodded her assent. "Very well, then. For the animal's sake."

The horse nudged her head into Violet's shoulder, and Violet appeased the animal with more head strokes.

"And a name?" Will asked, dismounting from Remington.

After some deliberation, she said, "I think Cachet would do nicely."

"An admirable name for an admirable animal," Will called, louder, with his hands outstretched in show for the children, who clapped and cheered.

"Now, for that first ride?" But his was more comment than question, for he was already beside her, his hands about her waist, ready to hoist her into the saddle.

Despite the cooler, late-September air, her whole body flushed warm. Considering his contact and the children's attention, she found that she could only nod her agreement.

A second later, he had her safely astride Cachet and her skirts arranged to preserve modesty before propelling himself aboard Remington in one, full swoop. He clucked his gelding into a walk, and at a small squeeze of Violet's calves, Cachet willingly followed.

The children smiled and waved, and she and Will did the same before the children finally dispersed and the schoolhouse became a mere speck on the horizon.

Soon, Violet's body had synchronized its movements to the rhythmic sway of Cachet's eager gait. The mare flicked her ears back to Violet periodically, an implication that she was listening and awaiting Violet's commands.

Violet glanced over at Will and found him watching her, satisfaction lining his features.

"Thank you," she said, leaning down to run a hand along Cachet's mane. "She's glorious."

"I had a feeling you two would suit."

"It's the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"You deserve the indulgence, Violet," he said, as solemn as she'd ever seen him.

Her throat clogged with sudden emotion. She wasn't used to such treatment from men, and she was again grateful for the circumstances that led her to Dearborn in the first place. And for those that had caused her to remain.

Though her heart was still fragile, she finally felt ready to entrust it to Will. And maybe even trust her lips to his, too. If he was so inclined.

NINE

Violet was a vision, and one Will couldn't stop watching. She sat confident and competent astride the flashy, black mare—the two of them bound to turn heads anywhere they went. Will was grateful his was the only head around at the moment. He wanted her all to himself.

He nudged Remington into a lope and was pleased to see over his shoulder that Violet and Cachet were picking up the faster gait right behind him.

A moment later, however, Violet and Cachet overtook him and Remington, Violet flashing him a competitive grin as they passed. She stood in her stirrups with the reins outstretched and her body weight poised over Cachet's neck, riding the mare's strong gallop with what looked like pure joy.

Remington needed little urging from Will to transition into a four-beat gallop of his own in pursuit of the women. As Remington's hooves churned up the grassy plains below, the wind whipped across Will's ears and the saddle leather creaked underneath his seat.

But his older horse was no match for the vivacity of Violet and her younger mount. The latter raced ahead, Violet's hair and Cachet's tail streaming out behind them until they finally slowed to a stop at the spot where the grasslands met the rocky hillocks of the lower foothills.

Knowing his defeat was secured, Will drew Remington down to a walk and allowed the gelding to catch his breath as they ambled up to the victors. Violet's mare, however, was hardly winded.

A triumphant smile split Violet's face and mirth danced in her eyes. "Pray tell, what reward does the fair maiden receive for vanquishing the valiant knight?"

"Whatever the fair maiden wishes," he said, his eyes connecting with hers.

Her cheeks flushed a becoming pink. "And at whatever time she wishes?"

"Yes." Did his voice sound as breathless to her as it did to him?

"Very well," she said, ducking her head for a moment before raising it again with a more composed look on her face. "Consider the reward deferred at present."

He hoped he schooled his features of the disappointment he felt before she'd had a chance to see it. He'd given her—and would still give her—all the time she needed, but a small part of him had hoped to have gained her favor by now. He needed a change of subject—and scenery.

"Come," he said, signaling Remington to begin climbing up the rocky foothills. "I have something to show you."

The horses picked their way, single file, up the craggy slope, instinctively twisting and turning to gain the best footholds. The grasses transitioned into scrub brush and spindly trees whose roots clung precariously to the stony ground.

Violet remained quiet behind him, but it was a companionable silence, one borne of recognizing that not all connection required talking. After about thirty minutes of scaling, Will signaled for Remington to halt before he dismounted.

Violet and Cachet stopped beside him. Though Violet came into his outstretched arms without hesitation, he stepped away as soon as she'd gained her footing. It wouldn't do to torment himself with more nearness to her if she wasn't amenable to it.

Instead, after assuring the horses were settled and wouldn't wander away, he took her hand and led her along a footpath that wound up and around to the hill's summit.

When he heard Violet's sharp intake of breath, he knew she'd finally seen the panorama spread out before them—the sunlit valley, the winding creek, the tanned vegetation, and the endless sky with stray billows of clouds. All untamed and unbelievably beautiful. He had the same reaction every time he saw it too.

"This is my favorite place," he said, reverence in his tone. This visit, however, he found himself watching the woman before him instead of the scenery. In the late afternoon light, she too was untamed and unbelievably beautiful. Even more so than Mother Nature's display beyond.

The wind toyed with her unbound hair, which was unruly after her sprint on Cachet, and he released her hand and placed his hands in his pockets to resist the urge to reach for her.

"It's utterly enchanting," she breathed out on a sigh. She turned toward him and smiled that heart-rending smile of hers. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

He gave a small nod and, as if suddenly shy, looked down and toed a stray pebble with his boot. "My pleasure." Then, after a beat, he added, "Hopefully a sufficient enough reward for the victorious fair maiden?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her gaze flick to the landscape, then back to him. "It *is* quite beautiful, but..." Her voice trailed off.

She was silent for so long that he hazarded a glance her way. She was watching him, color high in her cheeks, her teeth toying with a corner of her lower lip.

His body instinctively turned toward her, a magnet unable to withstand the pull of its counterpart. Mercy, what she was doing to him.

"But...", he prompted.

She stepped closer. "But I had another reward in mind."

"Oh?" The question came out barely a whisper, one he wondered if she could even hear over the erratic thrum of his pulse. And one he hoped he knew the answer to, though he wasn't taking any chances without knowing her meaning was clear.

Another step closer and she raised her right hand to his shirt lapel, just over his thudding heart. Of their own accord, his hands freed themselves and snagged her waist, drawing her flush against him. Her warmth, her smell, her energy seeped into him.

A tendril of hair escaped from behind her ear, coursing across her face before he caught it with his right hand and tucked it back in place. His hand wouldn't leave, however. It trailed down her impossibly soft cheek, then under her chin, where it rested while his thumb coursed over her lips.

She raised her head toward his, and when her eyes blinked shut, he knew only heaven could help him were she to change her mind now.