



**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-wear 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. 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 he’d brought in his pocket 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 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 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?" he asked.

"Yes, Polly has been a Godsend."

"A heart of gold, that one," he said.

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," he added.

Violet laughed at his sage observation of Polly.

His mouth quirked into a full smile. "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 give 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.

He spoke again first, startling her from her thoughts. "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," she said.

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,” he said.

“I—I wasn’t fishing for—,” she started

“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 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 lurched to her throat and her pulse hiked 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 a 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 eying 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," she said.

"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," she said.

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?" she asked.

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," she said.

"You've come to the right place. 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 looped his arm 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 she was to him.

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 Violet 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.

“But, Will—,” she began in all seriousness.

“Before you object, Violet, consider it a favor to the animal. Mr. Davis 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 he propelled 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,” she said.

“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 didn’t want 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 grazed 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.

Will dipped his head down and closed the final few inches, pressing his lips against hers. His left hand settled into the curve of her hip and drew her into him, molding her body to his. Mercy, it was as if she were made just for him.

He'd expected timidity from her and had prepared his mind for restraint. But she was boldly declaring what she wanted, and he responded in turn. His right hand snaked through her hair, angling her chin so he could trail his kisses from her lips, down her jaw, and to the soft hollow behind her ear.

He took his name on her breath as an invitation to continue, so he sought her lips again. But she'd begun her own exploration of his jawline, first with a featherlight sweep of her fingertips, followed by her lips, each kiss searing his skin. Her lips were making their way back toward his, but where she seemed possessed of the utmost patience, he was not, and he claimed her lips first. She wound her fingers in his hair, his hat having long been discarded, though he knew not where, nor did he care.

All that mattered right now was her. Which is why, with a final shard of self-control, he broke the kiss a moment later. With his forehead leaned against hers, he struggled to control his ragged breathing. Her chest was also rapidly rising and falling, and at the satisfied smile curving her lips, he nearly went back for more.

But he needed to stop while he still could, plus with the sun setting, the terrain would prove almost as precarious a situation as their kiss would have been had he not stopped.

He took her hand and brushed a quick kiss over her knuckles.

"I trust your reward was satisfactory m'lady?" he asked, hoping the humor would douse his lingering desire.

Her cheeks bloomed a becoming pink at his direct address of what had just transpired. "Quite," she said, before adding. "Though I believe Cachet and I would be up for another race with a similar reward in the future."

He grinned. "Though Remington and I would likely lose again, I find that bestowing your reward is no sacrifice for me."

She laughed at his quip, and he took her hand and began to guide her down the mountain, his thoughts on future races and rewards.

TEN

Will glanced at his watch fob and drummed his fingertips on the wooden desk in the marshal's office. Only twelve minutes had passed since he'd last checked, and he still had another twelve to go before John Campbell would take over the post.

He was eager to see Violet again, to hold her, to kiss her. They'd spent nearly every possible moment together since their first kiss on the plateau two weeks ago. Two weeks of strolling down Dearborn's Mainstreet on lazy afternoons. Two weeks of talking and laughing over meals in Mrs. Pritchard's kitchen or picnics in the field when the weather allowed. Two weeks of countless horse races and stolen kisses when no one was watching.

He'd been in Elmwood the last two days, and not seeing her had been pure torture. As would the next—he checked his watch fob again—ten minutes. He sighed and raked his hand through his hair, wondering at how quickly he'd become a smitten fool.

Boot heels thudded up the steps to the marshal's office and Will snapped back to attention. At John's familiar stout silhouette in the door's frame, Will sprung to his feet and began donning his wool coat. This October had started out unseasonably colder, and Mother Nature didn't appear to be changing her mind on that score any time soon.

"Thank you, John," Will said, buttoning the coat and reaching for his hat hanging on the wall. "I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

"Will."

Will paused at the alarm in John's voice and truly looked at the other man for the first time since he'd entered the office. Concern laced the older marshal's brow. Concern mixed with something else. Sorrow?

Will's heart began to race. "What is it, John?"

"You'll want to see this." John held up a manila envelope he'd apparently been holding—another detail Will had missed in his distraction.

John withdrew a single sheet of paper from the tattered envelope and as he placed the missive on the desk, Will caught the word “Wanted” in all capital letters across its top.

Will blew out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Such “Wanted” posters were commonplace in a marshal’s office. He’d take a quick peek at the new criminal, commit the man’s features to memory, and then be on the lookout for the fellow while he hunted down the Harris brothers.

Except it wasn’t a man’s face sketched on the poster, but a woman’s. A face Will knew too well. All the wind left his lungs. The artist had done a remarkable job capturing Violet’s likeness, from her high cheekbones to her astute gaze to her full lips. Lips that he had kissed just a few days ago.

Betrayal stabbed through him as he read each remaining word on the paper:

WANTED

Dead or Alive

V. St. James

For the murder of her husband, Arthur

Last seen in Kansas City, August the 12th.

Will collapsed into the chair behind the desk, his legs unable to hold him upright a moment longer. The past few months swirled through his mind. The wary glint in Violet’s eyes when she had first approached him at the schoolhouse. Her reluctance to open up about her past. *Her* rebuke of *him* for not telling the truth, when all along, *she’d* lied to *him*.

Bile rose in his throat. She’d been married. And was now accused of murder. Will pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes to calm his roiling stomach.

“I’m sorry, Will,” John whispered from where he stood across the desk. “No one wanted it to end this way.”

Anger flared deep in Will’s belly. It wouldn’t take long for the entire town to know of Violet’s betrayal and what a fool he’d been to trust her. Once everyone knew a criminal had concealed herself right

under his nose, his job—his entire livelihood—would be in jeopardy. And he was certain that once the news made it to Violet, she'd try to sneak out of town again.

Will shot to his feet and snagged the “Wanted” poster from the desk, now confident in his next actions. After all, this is what he was trained to do: hunt down criminals.

ELEVEN

Will's fist reverberated against Mrs. Pritchard's door, but in his irate state, he couldn't feel the pain his knuckles were surely experiencing from his pounding.

The door opened a crack, and Violet's face appeared in the void. When recognition lit her eyes, she smiled and stepped back, pulling the door open wide. "I thought we were meeting at the stables. I was just about to head down there—" she started, but he pushed past her and into the room.

Will turned and took her in, his traitorous heart skipping at the sight of her. She was altogether too beautiful.

He set his jaw and held up the poster. Her eyes rounded and her mouth opened into an unspeaking "o" before she schooled her expression again.

"Will, please, I can explain—," she began.

"You lied to me," he said, bitterness lacing his voice. He tried to ignore the pleading expression on her face—it was likely another of her devious tactics. "Apparently you can abide some degree of dishonesty if it suits your purposes."

Her chin raised a fraction and moisture gathered in the corners of her eyes. Boy, she was good. If he didn't already know her true character, he'd have almost believed she was actually remorseful.

"Yes, I had my reasons for not telling you about my past," she said. "But it was safer for me, for you, for everyone in Dearborn, if no one knew."

She took a step toward him, but he held his hand up to stop her. He wouldn't be able to think straight if she drew closer. Not that he was thinking straight right now as it was. He didn't know what to believe. She was likely lying to him even now.

He took a ragged breath. "What's safest for everyone in Dearborn, especially me, is for you to disappear without a trace. I'll give you a twelve-hour head start before I alert the authorities that you were sighted here in Dearborn."

“But I—,” she started.

“I won’t hear any more of your excuses, Violet.” He cut her off, his voice raised. “I should turn you in right now. I’m a marshal, for heaven’s sake.” He let out a sardonic laugh. “I should be bringing the criminal in, not letting her go.”

“But—.”

“Leave, Violet. And don’t show your face around Dearborn ever again.” He crumpled the “Wanted” poster and pocketed it, then stalked past her, out the room and to the stables, certain that a good gallop on Remington would set his mind straight.

Will stood at the window of the marshal’s office and stared, unseeing, at the falling snow. Such weather the first week of November wasn’t unusual for Colorado, but it was unwelcome. It further soured the foul mood he had been in since Violet left town a few weeks ago.

At least word of Violet’s deceit hadn’t spread through the entire town. Mrs. Pritchard knew, of course, and she’d been adamantly trying to convince him of the other woman’s innocence since. But he wouldn’t be swayed—Violet had outright admitted she’d lied to him.

He shook his head to clear it of the thoughts that haunted him all too often. He needed to focus on his duties. The Harris brothers were still at large. They’d robbed a stagecoach west of Elmwood last week, so they were close, but dancing just outside his reach.

With the sun having set long ago, the flurries outside the window swirled in the black void of night, and Will was glad the town had been calm that evening. He didn’t want to leave the relative warmth of the marshal’s office if he didn’t have to.

A pinprick of light winked at the far edge of main street. Given his exhaustion and the weather, at first Will thought he’d imagined it. But when the light blinked a second time and then a third, each time successively closer, he knew it couldn’t be only an illusion.

He donned his hat and coat, checked that his revolver was secure at his hip, then slipped out the door, turning his coat collar up against the frigid blast of air that greeted him.

He slunk around behind the marshal's office, down the back alley, then took two left turns so that the person was now about ten yards ahead of him. Though the snow crunching under his boots made it impossible to remain completely silent, the person he was chasing didn't appear to know he was there.

Will gained on his quarry until he was just a few feet away. Even though the person's form was bundled up against the weather, in the light cast by the saloon's lonely oil lamp, Will caught the telltale cinch of the coat at the waist to accommodate a woman's curves. At least he could rule out the Harris brothers.

Reassured that she wasn't a hardened criminal, he stopped and cleared his throat, eliciting from the woman the reaction he'd hoped to achieve—she turned and faced him. The blood in his veins iced cold. Right before him, illuminated by the dancing glow of the oil lamp, was the face of Violet St. James.

TWELVE

“I thought I told you never to come back,” Will growled. The woman had the sense to look afraid, but strangely enough, no recognition lit her eyes.

“W—who are you?” she breathed, a tremor in her voice.

Had Violet sustained an injury to the head? Is that why she was here, having forgotten who he was entirely and the last words he spoke to her? Or was she playing with him again?

“So, you don’t remember kissing me?” he asked.

The woman had the audacity to look affronted, which only ignited his anger. Were his tokens of devotion that unmemorable? He crossed his arms over his chest.

“What are you doing here, Miss St. James?” he asked, hoping she took his use of her last name as an indication that their intimacy had ended.

Surprise, then fright, flickered across her face. “How do you know who I am?”

“For heaven’s sake, Violet,” he said, throwing up his hands. “Quit toying with me. You came here a few months ago, we fell in l—.” He stopped and adjusted the brim of his cowboy hat then stuffed his hands into his coat pockets before hurrying on. “We liked each other. Even ended up kissing. A lot. Before I knew you were a wanted criminal, that is. How is it that you don’t remember any of it?” He knew his voice sounded desperate, but a small part of him he needed her to confirm that it hadn’t all been a game for her. That she’d felt for him what he’d felt for her.

“I don’t remember any of that,” she said.

Will clenched his jaw and took a steeling breath. A ready rebuke was on his tongue when she spoke first.

“But that’s because all that was with Violet. My twin sister.”

Realization, then horror, coursed through him. No, it couldn’t be. He scrutinized the face of the woman before him. What had appeared identical before now had minute differences. Her eyes were rounder and

spaced slightly wider than Violet's, and her chin angled into a sharper point. Even in the light of day, anyone could have confused the two, both in person and in a "Wanted" poster sketch.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She wrung her gloved hands together. "Vera."

Still, one unanswered question loomed. A question he was afraid to ask but more afraid to not know the answer to. "And which of you was married to Edward?"

Vera wiped at a tear trailing down her cheek. "I was," she said.

Violet ran her hand along Cachet's smooth neck and whispered her nightly "good-bye" to her only source of solace in the past few weeks of misery. Mercifully, she'd been able to keep the horse in her new situation, though Mrs. Hyde regularly grumbled that Violet "brought the smell of horse into the house with her."

Violet couldn't complain, though. When she'd arrived in Fairmont that first night all those weeks ago, she hadn't intended to stay long. But when the respectable position as domestic servant to the wealthiest family in town arose, she decided she'd take it until she could figure out something longer term. Fairmont was still altogether too close to Dearborn, with Elmwood the only large town separating her from Will.

Her heart lurched as it did every time she thought about him and their final interaction. The look of betrayal that'd been on his face. The biting accusations he'd hurled at her. His unwillingness to even give her the opportunity to explain. As soon as he'd slammed the door, she'd packed her meager belongings and tore out of town atop Cachet, sobbing the entire way to Fairmont.

Her throat thickened with unshed tears at the memory, but she'd made a vow that night to never cry over Will again, and she'd held fast to the promise ever since. If he wasn't going to allow her an explanation, then she wasn't going to allow him any more room in her heart.

Resolute once more, Violet gave Cachet a final parting kiss on the muzzle, then crossed the barn floor, its hay-strewn surface muffling the click of her boot heels across the wooden planks. She set her oil lamp on

the ground, freeing both hands to ease the heavy door shut. It tended to stick if it wasn't coaxed along its track just right. Snow had started to fall while she'd been inside the barn, and her cold fingers fumbled with the slick lock for a few moments before it clicked into place.

With the barn's occupants safely abed, she bent down, retrieved her lamp, then turned around to make her way up the path to the Hyde's stately two-story home.

Violet startled and nearly dropped her lamp at a gaunt male form blocking her path.

"I've been waitin' fer you," the man said, finishing his statement with a wicked grin full of gold teeth that glinted in the lamplight.

"I ask you to step aside, sir, so that I might return home." Though her pulse hammered somewhere near her ears, Violet somehow kept her voice steady.

The man flicked open the side of his jacket, and this time, the light winked off a silver revolver holstered at his hip. "The only place yer going, darlin', is with me."

She swallowed around the panic rising in her throat. "I—I have no money."

The man tsked. "Well, darlin', yer currency is for luring that Dearborn marshal right where we want 'im."

Her breath caught in her throat, and her face must have betrayed her surprise, because the man's grin widened. She tried to school her expression. "Mr. Montgomery and I have no further association." She tamped down the traitorous tears clogging her throat, trying to remain detached even as her next words ripped her heart. "He—he cares nothing for me." She gripped the lamp's handle tighter and raised her chin a fraction. "So you see, Mr. Harris, I'm useless to you."

She'd been guessing at the man's identity, but at the appreciative gleam that lit his eyes, she must have correctly identified him as one of the two Harris brothers that Will had been chasing.

The man sauntered a step closer, the rowels of his spurs jangling in the otherwise quiet night air. His gaze raked over her. "We'll see about that."

Distress skittered up her spine and she instinctively stepped back. But instead of meeting the coarse wood of the barn door, she met the corpulent stomach of a second man. He snagged her around the neck and pulled her against him. She lost her grip on the lamp, and it fell to the ground, its light extinguishing in a resounding crash of breaking glass.

She opened her mouth to scream for help, but the man silenced her by clapping a clammy hand over her lips. He reeked of liquor and cigarettes, and Violet's stomach lurched in disgust as she wriggled to free herself from his grasp.

"Ooo, Luther," the man holding her crooned, his lips all too close to her ear. "This one's got a bit of spark in 'er."

"We like a bit of spark, don't we, Floyd?" The lanky man bellowed a laugh before retrieving a small vial and a grubby handkerchief from his coat pocket. He wet the handkerchief with the vial's contents, then advanced toward her. "Don't ye worry, darlin'. You'll see reason after a bit of a nap."

Frenzied now, she thrashed against the other man's clutches, but to no avail. He overpowered her. The last thing she remembered before her world went dark was the skinny man replacing the other man's hand with the wet handkerchief and a sour smell that bit her nostrils and throat.

THIRTEEN

Will paced the length of the marshal's office for what had to be the hundredth time, trying for a patience he knew he'd never be able to feel. Not in the middle of the night. And especially not when he'd just found out he'd made a grave error.

He paused and glanced Vera's way. She was seated in a chair that he'd pulled up before the metal stove, sipping a cup of coffee he'd brewed after bringing her inside from the snowy street.

Other than a brief "thank you" when he'd handed her the steaming mug, she hadn't spoken. And he'd been doing everything within his power to wait until she was ready to talk. But his fortitude was fading and the questions he needed to ask her were growing more and more pressing.

"Vera," he said, unable to stand the silence no longer. "We will move you to more comfortable accommodations shortly, but first I must ask if you are open to answering a few questions?"

Still facing the fire, she responded, her tone flat and dispassionate. "I didn't do it, if that's what you're wanting to know." She paused, then delivered her next words with more conviction. "I didn't kill my husband."

Well, that certainly cleared up one question. He opened his mouth, ready to ask "Did Violet?," but stopped himself and took a steeling breath. He had to remain objective. "Why don't you tell me what happened?" he asked instead.

She drew in a shaky breath. "I met Arthur three years ago. He was new in town—a lawyer. All the women had fawned over him, yet somehow, I'd caught his eye." She paused and swiped at her eyes. "He was quite dotting while we courted. Always the gentleman, chivalrous. He proposed six weeks later, and we were married four weeks after that."

She stopped, and Will held his breath. The firelight danced across her face, so similar to Violet's yet now that he'd studied it in more detail,

so different, too. A single tear trailed down Vera's cheek, and Will dug his handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her.

She took it with a nod, then dabbed her cheeks before giving him a wobbly, half-smile. "Arthur met a client at the saloon one evening, which derailed into a night of drinking and cards. That night turned into one, then two, until he stopped in every evening after work, sometimes not returning home until after midnight. He'd rant and rave through the house, throwing and kicking at things. He—he never laid a hand on me, thankfully, but I still locked myself in a bedroom and pretended to be asleep when he came home like that. The town all knew of his conduct." She let out a sardonic laugh. "It wasn't like he tried to be quiet when he staggered home, drunk, every night. But they were all on his side. They thought I'd seduced him, for why else would he settle for the likes of me?"

"That night, in August, was the same story. From the other side of the door, I could hear his usual bout of enraged destruction when he came home, then he slammed his bedroom door and everything was finally, mercifully quiet."

Will watched as she wrung the handkerchief in her hands and stared into the fire, as if it held all the answers. He waited, his knee dancing up and down with the energy he fought to contain. She finally continued. "The next morning, I cleaned up the mess and made breakfast, yet all was still quiet on the other side of Arthur's door. That wasn't unusual, though. He usually roused late after one of his spells. But when it was nearly noon and he hadn't awoken, I peeked into his room. He was abed, clothed in his business attire. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw him. He—he was unnaturally still. I called his name, shook his shoulders, but no response. I found no pulse, no breath, and I—I panicked. I ran to Violet—she lived next door, you see—and told her everything."

"Violet said I should go to the sheriff," Vera went on. "Explain everything. That they'd understand it was an accident of Arthur's own making. But I knew the sheriff wouldn't listen. He was one that frequently imbibed with Arthur and had turned a blind eye to Arthur's unwelcome advances on Violet. Given how close we lived and how alike

we looked, I'd told myself Arthur was simply mistaking her for me, but now I know that wasn't the case."

Bile rose in Will's throat at the implication of Vera's words. Arthur had been a vile man, one who'd broken the trust of not only his wife, but of her sister—the woman Will loved.

Violet interrupted Will's painful line of internal thought. "I saw an opportunity to escape a terrible situation and I took it. I—I ran."

Silence pervaded the office. Will's stomach twisted into knots. Though his actions toward Violet weren't nearly as despicable as Arthur's had been, he'd acted a cad nonetheless. In his own hurt, he hadn't given Violet a chance to explain.

Will swallowed, unable to resist speaking any longer. "And Violet?" he whispered.

"I—I thought she'd be safe there. In Kansas City. But they turned on her. Said she helped me escape. I wrote to her the next week. Thankfully the letter was intercepted by the post master's wife. She was the only one who'd believed me and Violet, but she wasn't about to openly disagree with her husband and the rest of the town. She wrote back, saying Violet left shortly after I did, but she didn't know where. That Violet had simply vanished one night."

Just as she had vanished a few weeks ago, Will thought. And at his own directive. Will stood. He had to find her. To explain how he'd blundered, beg her forgiveness, do anything, everything, just to have her back here in Dearborn, safe and sound.

Though he didn't know where to begin looking yet, he had to trust the answer would come to him soon. In the meantime, he had a very tired woman to take to safe shelter.

"Come, Vera. I'll take you to Mrs. Pritchard's." He gave a wry smile at the explaining he'd have to do to Polly when she awoke and found a Violet look-alike in her living quarters. But that was a problem he'd deal with tomorrow.

Vera obliging followed him to Polly's, and once she was settled, he made the return trek to the marshal's office, all the while mulling over what to do next.

When he opened the door to the marshal's office, a sheet of paper swirled up from the ground. A sheet of paper that hadn't been there when he'd left fifteen minutes ago. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, and he slammed the office door and locked it behind him, then bent down and retrieved the paper. His blood ran cold at the message scrawled on the tattered missive:

*"We have her. Will trade her life for yours. Meet us at the water tower in thirty minutes. Come alone and unarmed.
-F. & L.H."*

Will's breath caught. It was the worst possible scenario imaginable—the Harris brothers had found Violet before he had.

FOURTEEN

“He ain’t comin’, Floyd.” A man’s voice reached Violet’s ears, but in her brain’s current foggy state, she couldn’t make sense of who it was. With tremendous effort, she blinked open her weighty eyelids and her surroundings came into focus. She was sitting with her back leaned against something solid. A wall, perhaps? But one made of wood, not stone or brick. And her hands were bound behind her, with a rope she guessed, if the biting chafe at her wrists when she tried to move them was any indication.

A wooden railing ran before her and beyond that was the black of night. The wind whipped at her hair and the falling snow, sending both into a spiraling frenzy. She shivered. She couldn’t remember the last time she was so cold.

“Just be patient, Luther,” another male voice said. Violet pivoted her head toward the sound, then immediately regretted it when her stomach lurched to her throat. She closed her eyes against the wave of dizziness and gulped in deep lungfuls of the crisp night air.

“It’s been nearly an hour, and he hasn’t shown up to claim ‘er,” the first man whined.

“He’ll come,” the second man said.

Recognition sparked in Violet’s mind and a chill chased down her spine. That voice belonged to the man who’d held her captive—the second Harris brother, Floyd, if she’d followed their conversations correctly. The rest of the memories before she lost consciousness clicked into place—the outlaws were using her to lure Will to his death.

Her eyes shot open, and she struggled to her knees. She had to run, to find Will and warn him. Her stomach pitched at the sudden movement, and she doubled over. A hand clamped under her arm and hauled her to her feet, and she found herself once again pressed against Floyd’s corpulent frame.

“Don’t go sneakin’ off,” he hissed in her ear. “We ain’t done with you yet.”

She tried to pull away, but his vice-like grip on her arm prevented any forward movement.

“Plus, where are ya gonna go?” he cackled, the movement rippling through his body. “We’re thirty feet up.”

Dread pooled in her stomach. Now that she was on her feet, she could see over the wooden railing. The black void beyond the handrail was just that—open air stretching from the water tower’s balcony to the snow-covered ground below. She had nowhere to go.

From a nearby copse of trees, Will had been watching the action at the water tower unfold for the past fifteen minutes. Despite the chill of the snowy night, his blood boiled at the Harris brothers’ ruthless treatment of Violet.

He’d nearly charged from his hiding place several times, especially when the paunchier brother, Floyd, had grabbed Violet. But he needed to be strategic, wait for the right opportunity to make his move. He couldn’t let his emotions cause him to lose the element of surprise, or worse, lose Violet’s life.

The brothers were circling the water tower now, with Floyd dragging an unwilling Violet beside him. If Will trailed wide and stayed hidden in the line of trees, he could sneak up the water tower ladder when the brothers were on the opposite side.

He hadn’t quite listened to the brothers’ demands. He wasn’t entirely alone—Remington stood a few yards away—and though he’d left his revolver at the marshal’s office since he didn’t want to give the brothers any more reason to turn from robbers to murderers, the weight of a small, ivory-handled pocketknife in his right boot gave him some measure of comfort.

Will counted under his breath until he reached ten, then slunk from his hiding spot to the tree line to his right. He crouched low and advanced in the relative protection of the trees, glancing at the water tower every few steps to ensure the Harris brothers hadn’t heard his footfalls or his pounding heart.

When he reached the trees nearest the water tower's ladder, he paused to catch his breath and pinpoint the brothers' current location. They were nearly to the opposite side. Good.

With a steeling breath, Will began to leave the trees' safety when one of the brothers called out, "Looks like you decided to finally show up, Will Montgomery."

He froze. How had they seen him? The water tower should be blocking their view of him. That's when he saw what they'd also apparently seen—a figure had materialized on the ground on the far side of the tower, nearest to town and the Harris brothers, a shotgun propped under its arm. *Who in the blazes?*

"Now you listen here, Luther and Floyd Harris," the figure said, its voice tremulous, but instantly recognizable. Polly Pritchard. Blast it all. What in heaven's name was she doing out here? Now he had two women to try and save from harm's way.

Polly went on, keeping the shotgun trained on the ground at present. "Will's not coming because you've got the wrong woman."

Luther leaned over the railing. "We ain't listenin' to ya. This here is the woman he's been with the last few months."

Will's blood reached a new boiling point. They'd been watching him and Violet all along, and he'd been none the wiser.

A second figure stepped beside Polly—Vera—and Will's dread tripled. "Actually," Polly said, motioning to Vera. "This is."

Will wished he could see the looks on Luther's and Floyd's faces. They were surely just as astonished as he had been to see a duplicate of Violet.

"The woman Will loves, Violet, is a twin, you see," Polly continued. "And Violet's right here next to me, which means you have Vera."

Will heard one of the brothers mutter a curse. He was nearly cursing himself. Somehow Polly must have awoken shortly after he'd left Vera at her place, had found the note from the Harris brothers in the marshal's office, and had apparently concocted some scheme with Vera to save Violet. Without him. But their plan was risking all their lives, and he couldn't let harm befall any of them.

His mind began to rework his own strategy. How could he cut in without causing chaos? And without knowing all the details of Polly's plan?

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Polly said, "So why don't you send Vera on down the water tower and the three of us will head back to town and pretend none of this ever happened. I'll convince Will to agree that he won't come after you ever again so long as you leave Dearborn and its occupants alone for good."

"And why should we trust you?" Suspicion laced Floyd's tone, and he must have tightened his grip on Violet for Will heard her emit a strained gasp. "We'd rather shoot him dead so we'd know for certain we'd be safe."

Polly tsked. "Now why would you two gentlemen want to add murder to your record? Seems an awful messy business too. A body to dispose of and all, not to mention the blood." Will couldn't help a wry grin—Polly was a godsend. What other woman would be casually convincing a band of thieves against murdering someone, all while nonchalantly toting a shotgun?

And based on the frenzied whispering between the brothers, it seemed as though Luther and Floyd were considering Polly's proposition. Meanwhile, Will had developed his own idea. It would require skill—and a bit of luck—but he couldn't stand by any longer.

He crept across the open expanse of snow between the trees and the water tower and waited at the bottom of the ladder, catching his breath.

He peeked his head around the water tower's base and caught sight of Polly and Vera. Polly's gaze flicked to his briefly, and he let out a relieved breath when she gave him a miniscule nod. Good. She'd recognized him and knew he was there to help.

Now, he needed the Harris brothers to cooperate. Their whispering stopped a moment later, then Floyd spoke. "We'll do what you said, but first ya gotta unload yer shotgun and throw the cartridges in the trees."

"Sure, sure," Polly acquiesced, briefly glancing at Will out of the corner of her eye. "That's a mighty fair proposition, gentleman."

Especially since you've been so accommodating." She did as they asked, unloading the shotgun and chucking the cartridges as far as she could. If she was afraid of being unarmed now, she didn't show it.

Once the shotgun cartridges had crashed into the underbrush, Floyd said, "We'll send the woman down, but no funny business."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Polly said. "What sort of mischief could a little old lady like me cause anyway?"

She sounded innocent, and while Will knew better, he was banking on the fact that the Harris brothers didn't.

Footsteps coming down the ladder interrupted his thoughts, and he heaved a relieved sigh at the sight of Violet's boots and skirts descending.

Despite every fiber of his being begging to draw her in and never let go, he had to remain out of sight. It wouldn't do to startle her further by showing himself and further risk the Harris brothers catching wind that he was right below them.

Once her feet hit the ground, Violet ran, slipping and sliding on the snowy terrain, and fell into Polly's and Vera's open arms.

Polly gave Will a knowing look over Violet's shoulder, and though the older woman had already done so much to help, he had one final request of her.

He brought his thumb and forefinger to the corners of his lips but kept from breathing out. He then motioned to Polly to complete the action, all the while praying she fully understood. The right side of her mouth hitched into a knowing smile, and a moment later, she did the same action, only she breathed out, emitting a trilling whistle.

"Hey, I thought I said no funny business," Floyd growled from above.

"Just calling my horses," Polly explained.

Will had only a moment to reflect on the fact that Polly had implied multiple horses—she must have brought another with her—before he took advantage of the distraction to ascend the ladder as quickly and as quietly as possible.

He pressed his back against the water tower's side, his breathing slightly labored after the climb but still hopefully inaudible to the Harris brothers.

"They're on their horses now, Floyd. C—can we go?" Luther said, his teeth chattering. "I'm pretty sure my fingers have f—frozen."

"Quit yer whining, Luther," Floyd said. "I want to keep my eye on 'em till they're out of sight. I ain't fully trusting of that older woman."

"She seemed harmless enough," Luther countered. "Plus, shouldn't we be runnin' away or sumthin'. Just in case that marshal shows up?"

"I suppose you're right, Luther," Floyd said, his footsteps heading Will's direction. "Though part of me still wishes the coward had shown up."

"Well, gentlemen," Will said, stepping from the shadows and into the brothers' path. "Looks like your wish has been granted."

The brothers halted with looks of surprise on their faces. Luther raised his bony arms above his head in surrender while Floyd reached for the revolver holstered at his hip and leveled the gun at Will's forehead.

"I knew that old crone was a liar," Floyd said, his face darkening in anger. "Well, if she ain't keeping up her end of the bargain, then we ain't gonna either." He laughed a sardonic laugh, his fleshy abdomen convulsing at the movement, then cocked the hammer of his revolver back with a callused thumb.

"B—but, Floyd," Luther whispered under his breath, his face ghastly white. "What about the b—blood and th—the body?"

"Luther's got a fair point," Will said, hoping he kept his voice steady. Even as the town marshal, he never imagined he'd be thirty feet up a water tower trying to discourage criminals from shooting him. "Disposing of bodies is quite the unseemly business. I should know."

Floyd paused as if in thought for a moment, then shook his head and pushed the gun closer to Will's forehead. "You ain't gonna distract me from this. I've been waitin' months for this."

"F—Floyd," Luther said, tapping his brother's shoulder, his eyes trained over the water tower's side. "You'll want to see this."

“What now?” Floyd demanded, his gun and his gaze never leaving Will.

“Let him go!”

The cry from below was fierce and feminine and unquestionably Violet’s.

Will’s heart leapt into his throat and he muttered a curse under his breath. *Why hadn’t she escaped when she’d had the chance?*

Floyd’s mouth curved into a satisfied smirk. “Go fetch her, Luther, and we’ll see that the lovers meet their demise together.”

“B—but Floyd,” Luther said, “she’s on a horse.” A shot rang out, splintering a section of wood on the water tower just over Luther’s shoulder, sending him ducking to his knees. “And she’s got the shotgun now.”

This time, Floyd cursed under his breath. He snagged Will’s arm and brought the two of them to a crouch, pressing the revolver into Will’s abdomen while he hollered down to Violet. “I wouldn’t do that, darlin’. Yer bound to make me mad. And when I’m mad, I shoot.”

Another bang echoed from below, the resulting crack of wood closer than the last.

Floyd pressed the revolver’s muzzle further into Will’s already depleted lungs, and Will barely contained a flinch at the metal connecting with his ribs. Floyd reached his other hand behind his back, lifting his coat flap to retrieve something he then held out to Luther with a nod of his head in Violet’s direction.

Any remaining breath fled Will’s lungs as Luther nodded in return before retrieving the matching revolver from Floyd’s outstretched arms, cocking the hammer back with trembling fingers and aiming the gun in Violet’s direction.

Pure rage flashed red in Will’s eyes. In one swift thwack of Floyd’s arm, Will dislodged the revolver from the man’s grasp and sent the gun sailing over the water tower railing. But Will knew he had to maintain the upper hand.

He dug his right hand into his boot, his fingers finding purchase on the knife’s ivory handle, before he snagged a surprised-looking Floyd, turned the man around to face his brother, and pressed the knife’s blade

against Floyd's neck. It took every ounce of restraint Will still possessed to not dig the blade in deep enough to draw blood.

Luther had turned to face Will and Floyd with the revolver still in hand, its muzzle shakily sighted on them.

"Luther," Will cautioned. "Put the gun down and I'll release Floyd."

"N—no," Luther stammered. "I don't believe you. Yer a liar."

"If you shoot me," Will said, "you'll shoot Floyd too."

"Luther," Floyd joined in, and Will could feel the man shaking underneath his hold, but whether it was from fear or rage, Will didn't know. "Drop the gun, you imbecile."

Defiance flashed in Luther's eyes and he advanced a step, the gun steadier in his hands. "Yer always tellin' me what to do, Floyd, and I'm fed up with it!" Luther's pointer finger edged toward the trigger. "Just 'cause yer older doesn't mean I have to listin' to ya."

Instinct kicked in and Will released the knife from Floyd's throat, swinging it out and around as he came down on one knee—still gripping Floyd's arm—and sliced the man's heel.

Floyd cried out and crumpled to the ground, and for good reason. Though it likely hurt like the dickens and had the intended effect of rendering the man immobile, it wasn't a death blow. As mad as Will was at the brothers, he would let the judge decide whether they'd pay for their crimes with their lives.

With Floyd disarmed, Will turned to Luther, who still had the revolver sighted on him. Luther's expression had grown more crazed, likely at witnessing his brother's fate and perhaps the blood, too. It dripped from the knife's blade in great crimson drops and its metallic odor hung heavy in the air.

"Come now, Luther," Will soothed. "I'll give you one final chance to surrender peacefully."

"N—no." Luther shook his head and squeezed his forefinger on the trigger. The time for bargaining was over. As Will lunged toward Luther, the revolver fired, its report echoing in the night air. From somewhere below, Violet's scream answered.

Pain seared the left side of Will's abdomen and he doubled over, pressing a hand to his side, his fingers slickening with blood in an instant. At the sound of the revolver's hammer cocking back, he lifted his gaze to Luther's, then righted himself fully, steadfastly ignoring the fresh ripple of agony in his gut and the swirling in his head the action caused.

He charged Luther a second time, slicing the knife across the man's skinny forearm. Luther howled and lost his grip on the revolver. It clattered to the wooden floor, and Will kicked it over the water tower's side.

Through the blackness spotting his vision, Will seized Luther's left wrist. Surprisingly, the man didn't fight back, likely in too much shock from the gaping gash on his other arm. With one final surge of strength, Will maneuvered the metal cuffs from his back waistband and encircled Luther's left arm in one and the water tower's railing in the other before the all-consuming wave of inky oblivion overtook him.

FIFTEEN

“Oh praise the stars above, he’s coming to,” Polly said, pausing her pacing of the small room where she and Violet had been keeping vigil at Will’s side for the past two days. “I’ll go alert Dr. Davis that he’s finally awake,” she continued before trotting out the door.

From her spot in the chair near Will’s head, Violet allowed a tentative smile, but tempered her eagerness at his waking. She wasn’t quite sure what to expect from him since only a few weeks ago he’d told her in no uncertain terms that he never wanted to see her again.

Will blinked his eyes open and slowly scanned the room, as if searching for something. Or someone. When his eyes settled on her, he cracked a wide, though pained grin, and Violet’s traitorous heart swelled. Even a bit scuffed up—or maybe it was because of his current disheveled state—he was far too handsome.

“You’re here,” he croaked.

“As are you,” she said, unable to hold back the tears welling up. It’d been an emotional few days—no, weeks—and the strong facade she’d built during that time was now crumbling.

Will lifted his right hand and gently swiped the moisture from her cheek, which only caused the tears to course faster.

He moved his hand down to her arm, then her wrist, and pulled her toward him. She didn’t resist and went into his arms, mindful of his bandaged left side, though she didn’t need to be reminded of the injury. The events from that night had been haunting her ever since.

She’d been astride Cachet, Polly’s shotgun in hand, trying to take down at least one of the Harris brothers to help Will. She still wasn’t sure how he’d gotten there in the first place, but she’d somehow known that he’d come to save her, and she had likewise planned, albeit impulsively, to do the same.

When she’d heard the shot from the revolver in Luther’s hand and saw Will buckle from the impact, she’d cried out as though she’d been the one shot. The wracking sobs had come next.

She'd helplessly watched through tear-blurred eyes as Mr. Campbell and Dr. Davis had arrived, apparently summoned by Polly. After fashioning a sling from a blanket and lariat rope tied to Mr. Campbell's saddle horn, the men had lowered down the bloodied and bewildered Harris brothers—Floyd having first been handcuffed by Mr. Campbell—followed by an unconscious and equally bloody Will.

The sobs had tempered only slightly while Dr. Davis had operated on Will in the medical office into the wee hours of the morning. Vera and Polly had been a great comfort to Violet, but she hadn't felt complete reassurance until Will had opened his eyes a few moments ago.

Now, in his arms, with him rubbing his hand up and down her back, murmuring words of comfort, she could finally take a full breath of relief.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispered into his chest, his shirt nearly soaked from her blubbering.

She expected him to laugh it off, make a joke of things as he usually did, but he responded seriously. "And I thought I'd lost you, Violet." With great tenderness, he pushed her at arm's length and looked at her, his forehead pinched with emotion.

"I'm so sorry," he said, and Violet's throat lumped anew at the moisture gathering in the corners of his eyes. "I'm sorry that I didn't listen to you, that I pushed you away, that I thought those terrible things about you and, even worse, spoke them aloud. Though I'm afraid this apology is too late, I needed to say it."

She grazed his cheek with her hand, the coarse hairs of his few days' beard tickling her palm. "I'm sorry, too, Will. I should have trusted you with the truth sooner."

He smiled, then brought his hand up to cup hers, turning his lips and pressing a kiss to her palm.

"And it's not too late," she said. "That is, if you don't think it is."

Hope lit his brown eyes. "Does that mean we can start over?"

She bent in close, hovering just above his face. "Could we start somewhere a bit after the beginning?"

He grinned, an impish glint in his eyes. "I've seen you with a shotgun, so I'm not about to disagree with you, Miss St. James."

A laugh of pure joy bubbled up inside her and escaped her lips. “Polly’s been teaching me.”

“You are an excellent pupil,” he said, finally drawing her into him and claiming her lips with his.

Careful not to risk further injury to his wounded abdomen, she unburdened every other worry to his willing arms and lips. He angled his head to deepen the kiss, yet it was still somehow not enough for her. Or for him, it seemed. His hands were at her back, then her neck, then tangled in her hair, and she did the same, marveling at the way the silken strands of his hair slipped through her fingers.

He angled her chin up, leaving it open for his lips to pave a trail across her jaw to her ear. “I love you, Violet,” he whispered, sending a shiver of delight through her.

“I love you too, Will,” she said around a smile before searching out his lips once more. She knew Polly and Dr. Davis would return any minute, and she intended to make every second count.

EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS LATER

“Steady, girl,” Violet whispered to Cachet, resting a comforting hand on the mare’s neck as the animal pranced and pawed beneath her. Cachet could likely sense Violet’s own excitement. The birds that had been flapping around inside her stomach all morning intensified now that the moment for her and Cachet’s jaunt was almost upon them.

They weren’t going far, just down the field a little ways, but it was what awaited them at the end of the trek that Violet was most eager for. Or, more like, *who* awaited them.

After double checking that the strings of her white fur cloak were securely in place and her white gloves and white dress were still spotless, Violet gave Cachet a small squeeze with her calves and angled the mare out of the lean-to shelter and into the falling snow.

The frozen flakes clung to Violet’s eyelashes and Cachet’s obsidian coat and mane as the pair paraded ahead. Blinking the snowflakes away, Violet caught her first sight of the onlookers. To her left, Joshua Barnes and the other school children grinned and waved. A bit further on, Dr. Davis and Mr. Campbell and other townfolk from Dearborn watched with equally expectant expressions and cold-nipped noses.

Near the front, on Violet’s right, a teary Polly clung to an equally teary Vera, while a smiling Mr. William Montgomery Sr. gave her a knowing nod.

Her eyes couldn’t avoid *him* any longer, though. She’d felt the pull of his gaze on her ever since she’d stepped out of the lean-to, but she’d wanted to save the sight of him for last because she knew she wouldn’t be able to look away once she did.

The flapping in her stomach reached an all-out crescendo when she finally took Will in. He sat atop Remington, who stood at ease with his left hind foot tipped up. Violet would have thought Will was just as relaxed as his horse if it weren’t for the intense emotion swirling in his brown eyes.

The left side of his lips hitched into a smile that gave her all the confidence she needed to lead Cachet the final few steps to where the preacher stood.

They kept the ceremony short—it wouldn't do to have the entire town of Dearborn out in the cold of a Colorado December for too long—and after the vows were said, Violet leaned in to kiss her now husband. The man who had worked tirelessly the last few weeks to exonerate her sister despite recovering from his own injuries. The man who had wholly captured her heart and saved her life in the process. Her forever love, her future, her everything.

To whoops and cheers from their audience, Violet pulled away from a kiss that pledged all they would share as husband and wife and beamed up into Will's face.

“Race you to the spot?” she asked. “Winner gets to claim a reward?”

“You have a deal, Mrs. Montgomery,” Will replied, a roguish grin on his face.

Violet squeezed Cachet's sides and gave the mare free rein, her mind already on the reward she'd claim when she won.

THE END.