

CHAPTER ONE

Lee held tightly onto the reins of her wagon and cursed the blinding blizzard she was driving through. Her hat pulled low, muffler wound up to her eyes, and wearing the thick oversized buffalo coat given to her by her cantankerous grandfather Ben, she was dressed for the brutal weather. Having spent the past fifteen hours helping a friend with a difficult foaling, she was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to get home, take a hot bath and sleep. Instead, she and her mare, Lady were as snow covered as the surroundings and could barely see the road. It was mid-April. By all rights winter should be on the wane, but the seasons in Wyoming Territory moved by a calendar all their own. Buffeted by the howling wind, she chanted inwardly: *Another half mile. Another half mile.* and she and Lady would be home.

Up ahead on the deserted road, a horse appeared out of the storm. She thought she'd imagined it, but a break in the gusts showed the animal walking slowly, head lowered, its mane and body crusted with the elements. As she came abreast of it and stopped, she took in the bags attached to the saddle and the thick bedroll riding the rump.. *Where's the rider?* She scanned the area. Not seeing anyone, she got down and waded through the calf high drifts. Urging the animal forward, she trailed its reins to the wagon's bed, climbed back up to the seat and resumed the drive.

She was familiar with the mounts of her neighbors, but she'd never seen this horse before. Had the rider been thrown and was hurt somewhere up ahead? Weariness and the freezing cold might have made another person leave the mystery for someone else to worry about, but she'd been raised better, so she kept an eye out for the rider as best she could.

It didn't take long.

She rounded a bend and saw a hatless, snow covered man slowly limping his way up the road. He turned to look back, revealing a brown skinned, ice crusted face. Upon spotting her, he waved frantically.

When she reached him, she pulled her muffler down and yelled over the wind, "Climb on!"

He didn't hesitate, but his injury made the ascent slow. "Thank you!" he said, once settled.

"There's a couple of blankets under the tarp behind you! Wrap up!"

While he complied, she got them underway. A glance his way, showed he'd placed one blanket over his head and wrapped the other around his brown wool coat. She had no idea who he was, but his story would have to wait. Getting them home came first.

A short while later, the sight of her cabin filled her with a weary joy. She alerted her passenger, "We're here! Go on inside and start a fire. I'll take care of the horses."

Draped under the blankets, he climbed down and haltingly made his way to her door while she drove to the barn.

By the time she got Lady and the man's gelding bedded down and a big fire built in the grate to keep her other three horses warm, she was weary enough to lie down where she stood. Hating having to face the weather again, she rewound her muffler, pulled on her gloves and stepped out into the frigid

wind.

Inside, there was no fire. The stranger, still wrapped in the blankets was stretched out on her fancy new sofa, head back, snoring loudly. She set his bedroll and bags on the floor. The younger, wilder Spring Lee would've given his foot a swift kick to wake him up, but the more mature version of herself settled for grumbling while tossing logs into fireplace. As the flames rose, she viewed him. He was handsome she supposed, but a pretty face often masked an ugliness inside, so she wasn't impressed by the strong jaw or the pleasant features it anchored. "Hey! Wake up!" she called crossly. The wet blankets would ruin the sofa her sister in law Regan recently convinced her to buy, and Spring was the only person allowed to damage it.

As he snored on, she shook his shoulder. "Mister. Wake up."

His eyes opened.

"I have a spare room. You can sleep there."

He looked confused.

"Ruin my couch and I'll feed you to a bear."

He startled.

"Can you stand?"

His eyes swept her face. The confusion gave way to wariness. Finally, he whispered, "Yes. Sorry for falling asleep."

She noted his shivering, but she was too bone tired to fire up the boiler to heat water for the hot baths they both needed. "This way."

He rose took a step and cringed.

"Is it your leg?" she asked.

"My knee. Hurt it when the horse threw me."

She raised an eyebrow, and he responded with, "The horse reared when a big cat ran into the road chasing a deer."

"They tend to do that. Lean on me," she offered.

"I'm too heavy for you, ma'am."

"I'm stronger than I look, so let's try. Otherwise you'll have to sleep here on the floor."

"I'd do fine in front of the fire. I have a bedroll."

She gritted out, "Just come on, please. You can be a gentleman after I've had some sleep."

He seemed amused by that. "Yes, ma'am."

With her supporting him, they slowly made their way to her spare room. Inside, he dropped onto the bed and offered his thanks.

"You're welcome." She opened a nearby trunk and withdrew blankets and quilts. Still wearing her buffalo coat, she made a fire in the grate. "Should warm up eventually. There's a washroom through that door. Tub too, but I've been gone a couple of days, so there's no hot water for now. What's your name?"

"Garrett McCray."

"I'm Spring Lee."

"Related to Dr. Colton Lee?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I'm a reporter. Here to do an article about him for my father's newspaper."

He brother had mentioned a reporter was on the way. "Colt's married to my sister in law."

As if confused by her response, he studied her for a moment, before asking, "Dr Lee is your brother?"

"A smart, gentleman. Rare as the white buffalo. I'll bring your bags and bedroll. You should get out of those wet clothes."

She exited.

Garrett stared at the empty space she left behind. Did the doctor and his wife reside nearby? Had her confusing responses been deliberate? His numerous questions about her would have to wait. Her advice about his wet clothes was sound. The last thing he needed was to be laid low by illness, so doing his best to keep his weight off his injured knee, he shed the blankets and his coat. Seeing no place to hang them, he laid them in front of the fire, then hobbled to the room's lone chair to remove his boots. Raising his leg hurt. It only took a few more attempts to realize that between the pain and the boots' tight fit removal was impossible. The boots were new and so tight and uncomfortable that during the ride to Paradise he'd wanted to snatch them off and toss them into the nearest stream. Now, his feet were probably so blistered and swollen, he'd need a surgeon to cut them free.

She returned. After placing his belongings beside the chair, she asked, "How's the knee?"

"It's been better. Can't seem to remove my boots." He hated admitting that.

"Can you raise your leg?"

He nodded.

She took off her big coat and let it drop to the floor. Back home women didn't wear men's shirts, denims or gun belts, so he forced himself not to stare.

"Show me."

He hadn't any idea why she'd asked, but she didn't appear to be in the mood for a discussion, so he raised his leg as requested.

"Hold onto the chair."

He grasped the arms, she turned her back to him and took his booted foot in hand. He forced himself not to stare again. This time at her behind.

"Yell, if you have to."

And before he could ask what that meant, she pulled with a strength that was surprising, and the boot came free. The pain put a catch in his breath, but he didn't yell. Not in front of her.

"Now, the other one."

She repeated the process with the same expertise and once it was done, he melted with relief.

"Thank you."

"Boots new?" she asked.

"Yes. Bought them a few days ago. Storekeeper said they'd be tight."

"Where are you from?"

"Washington."

"Territory?"

"No. District of Columbia."

Her thoughts on that information were kept unspoken. "I've water boiling on the stove for bark tea. It should help with the pain. Once it stops snowing and Odell clears the road, we'll ride over to my brother's place and see if he's back."

"He's not here?"

"I'm not sure. He left a few days ago to help with a measles outbreak over in Rock Springs."

"When will the road be cleared? He wondered who Odell might be and hoped the doctor had returned.

She shrugged. "Depends on how long it takes the storm to blow through. I'll be back with the tea."

She picked up his wet coat and hers. His eyes followed her strong stride until she closed the door

and disappeared.

She was gone long enough for him to change into a dry union suit. He longed for a hot bath to take the chill off his bones, but he'd have to wait. With the door closed, heat was finally warming the space, but it was still cold enough to bring on shivers. Outside the wind continued to wail. Knowing gentlemen didn't allow themselves to be seen in their underclothing by a lady, he climbed into the bed. He'd just settled under the quilts and blankets when a knock sounded on the closed door. "Come in."

She entered carrying a large drinking cup. "It's hot," she cautioned, handing it to him.

It was and tasted awful. "What's in this?"

"Bark."

"From a tree?"

"No, a dog. Yes, it's from a tree – a willow. It's a Native remedy. Tried and true."

He kept his skepticism hidden but wasn't sure he wanted more.

"Drink it or not," she stated, as if having read his mind. "Your pain. Your knee."

Was she always so direct? Another question to add to his list. Still skeptical, he drank the rest and handed the cup back.

"It'll help you sleep, too." She crossed to the fireplace and put in more wood. "Do you need anything else?"

"No. Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome."

She departed. He cocooned himself beneath the small mountain of blankets and quilts. Thoughts of his enigmatic hostess and the sounds of the roaring storm faded away as he sank into sleep.