**Ellie’s Wolf**

# Dedication

I dedicate this book to two of the classiest and bravest ladies I know: Nanci LeClair Nedweski and Caren Pelkey. Neither has met the other, but they are people I admire greatly. Each was diagnosed with cancer the same week, began chemo the same week, shaved their heads the same week. This book isn’t about cancer. It’s about love and the determination to hold onto hope and joy even when life throws crap at you. Ladies, as I’ve watched your journeys through cancer via Facebook, I’ve seen each of you show that determination every step of the way. Thank you for inspiring me.

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# Chapter 1

“You have no right to sell us!”

Ellie flinched at her fellow captive’s screech. Sara was absolutely right, but yelling at these men probably wouldn’t help. They had all heard it a dozen times during the ten hours they’d traveled under the scorching prairie sun. The only one who hadn’t heard it was Bruce, the leader of this crew of prairie traders, who had spent most of the day riding ahead of the small caravan. He hadn’t returned until after camp was set up and supper was ready. Ellie glanced at him, hoping he wouldn’t slap Sara for her tirade. But he laughed so hard his beer belly shook over his leather belt.

“Your uncle sold you to me, little lady, and I’m gonna make a sweet profit selling you to the fine, wife-hunting men of Ellsworth.”

“Well, who gave him the right to do that, huh?” Sara demanded, her clenched fists on her hips, her brown eyes narrowed. “That worthless excuse for a human being isn’t even really my uncle! My dad was the sheriff of Ford County. He was important. I can’t be sold like a horse! I want to go to Omaha, to my real uncle.”

The humor drained away from Bruce’s whiskered face, leaving it cold. The uneven light of the campfire flickered across it, creating a mask that reminded Ellie of her father’s stories of demons dancing in hellfire. Bruce hooked one thumb in the belt loop closest to his large silver belt buckle and leaned down until his face was only inches from Sara’s.

“Personally, I don’t give a rat’s ass who you are, who your parents were, or what the fuck you want.” Bruce turned his head slightly to spit. The gob landed disgustingly close to the blanket whose frayed edge Ellie had been mending before the sun set. She jerked the wool closer to her. “All I want from you is a nice profit. You’re pretty and”—his eyes ran down her soft figure—“you got enough flesh on you to make plenty of men hot for you. If you’d keep your big mouth shut, you’d be damn near perfect.” He snagged the front of her shirt and twisted it in his fist to jerk her to her tiptoes. “You gonna shut up?”

“No!”

Bruce dropped her to unbuckle his belt. “You know what your problem is, little lady? You never got your ass whooped regular.”

Ellie clenched the blanket in her lap. Sara was only sixteen, but didn’t she have any common sense? Antagonizing the men who controlled them wouldn’t make anything better. Now Bruce would beat her with his belt, and then how could she sit in the wagon tomorrow? Ellie cast a cringing glance back at Bruce and Sara and jerked in a sharp breath. Bruce hadn’t removed his belt from his jeans, which had dropped to his ankles, but he’d lifted his shirt to reveal himself semi-erect.

Ellie clapped her hands to her mouth, eyes searching the other men around the fire for help. There was Jeff, thin and balding and serenely snoring in his bedroll. Tim was on guard duty about a hundred yards away. It was too dark for Ellie to see him. Paul and Dexter were out of sight with the horses. Rye was across the fire from her, yawning while watching Bruce with only mild interest. Quiet, stocky Jeremy was a yard to her left, his thick, stiff brown hair and goatee looking almost black at the edge of the campfire light. She caught his eye.

“Please,” she begged in a hoarse whisper. “Stop him.”

Jeremy pulled his hat down lower, not quite hiding the unhappy curve of his mouth. He didn’t seem to like this either. “No, ma’am,” he muttered. “He’s the boss.”

No matter how hard she stared at Rye, who reclined only a foot from Bruce, he didn‘t turn his head to look. A cauldron of horror, embarrassment, and rage bubbled inside Ellie. She pulled the blanket up higher, wondering if it would do any good for her to try to intervene. Somebody had to do something.

Bruce clutched his groin, arching his back to flaunt his manhood. “What do you think of this, little lady?” he sneered at Sara.

Sara sniffed and looked away. “I’ve seen better.”

A short, low chuckle came from Rye. Bruce swung a fist at Sara’s face. She gasped and ducked, but she didn’t need to. Bruce’s fist was halted by a hard hand gripping his wrist. Rye stood straight, easily holding Bruce back. The light amusement that habitually tilted Rye’s lips was gone. He shook his head.

“No reason to damage the merchandise,” he said calmly.

Bruce tore his wrist free of Rye’s grip. “What the fuck?”

Rye stood a few inches taller than Bruce, even though he wore flat-soled workman’s boots and Bruce was in heeled cowboy boots. “I could say the same thing to you.” There was an edge in Rye’s voice. “If we want top dollar for our goods, we better keep ’em in top condition.”

“We’ll get paid the same either way.” Bruce glared at Rye. His expression made Ellie shudder. “All I want is for that little bitch to shut up.”

Rye slouched and shrugged, preparing to sink back to the ground. “So gag her.”

“I’ll gag her,” Bruce promised with an ugly laugh. He grabbed himself. “I’ve got just the thing.”

Rye turned back to Bruce with a weary sigh. “Oh, for God’s sake, put your pants back on and think with the head on top of your shoulders instead of the one hanging between your legs. In another four days, she’s off our hands. Just cool it until then, okay?”

“Are you trying to tell me what to do?” Challenge chilled Bruce’s voice. “Who’s in charge of this outfit? You?”

“Put your goddamned pants on, Bruce. It’s late, and I’m tired. Let’s all get some sleep.”

“Fine.”

Bruce bent over, hands reaching for his ankles. Ellie modestly looked away, so she didn’t see where the knife came from. All she saw was Bruce straightening with a snap, and the gleam of a blade cutting through the dark, headed for Rye. Ellie’s scream was lost in the thud of Rye’s boot kicking the knife out of the air, sending it spinning into the fire with a shower of sparks.

Sara shouted, “Sweet move!”

And then there was a bang, a stab of flame from the barrel of the pistol in Rye’s hand, and a choked bellow from Bruce. Ellie clutched her collar as Bruce staggered back and hit the ground with a groan that changed to a breathy sigh. In the sudden silence, the snap of the fire made Ellie jump.

After a minute of watching Rye bending over Bruce, Sara asked, “Is he dead?”

Rye straightened up and took a cartridge from his belt to reload his pistol with a little chuckle. Ellie had heard that little chuckle a dozen times today, and she’d never thought it sounded evil until now. “Yep.”

“Cool! Will you take me to Omaha?”

“Nope. You have a Bride Fight waiting for you in Ellsworth. We contracted with them to supply brides for the fights and we’ll deliver.”

“But—”

“Could you shut up for ten minutes?” Sara puckered her mouth in displeasure.

“Thank you,” he muttered then raised his voice. “Everybody get over here for a second.”

Tim, Paul, and Dexter left their posts and came to stand close to the fire, shifting their weight from foot to foot and looking between Rye and Bruce’s body. Rye indicated Bruce with a flip of his pistol.

“Bruce is dead. I’m in charge from now on. Anyone got a problem with that?”

Paul craned his head to get a better look at Bruce, stroking the long brown ponytail that lay over his shoulder. He shook his head.

“Anyone?” said Rye. Silence. “Good. Then I got a few new rules for us. Rye Thomas’ crew ain’t thieves. We ain’t welshers. When we take a contract, we deliver, and we deliver the goods in prime condition. That includes women, if we ever trade any more of ’em.” His sour, sidelong glance at Sara suggested they wouldn’t be. “So the women are off limits. If you need to talk to ’em for some reason, this,”—he pointed a booted toe toward Sara, kneeling by the fire—“is Miss Nelson, and that lady leaning on the tree is Mrs. Overdahl. Treat them like they’re your own sisters. The women will sleep in the wagon, so be sure you have all your gear out of it. Any questions?”

None of the men said anything.

“All right, then. Jer, Jeff, go dig a grave.”

Jeff rolled out of his blankets. “Where?”

“Wherever the hell you want, just out of camp. And for god sakes, pull Bruce’s pants up before you plant him.” “Okay, boss,” Jeremy said.

Ellie remained sitting against the tree, cold to the marrow of her bones in spite of the fire a few yards away. Surprisingly, Sara was actually being quiet. The teenager stayed sunk on her knees at the fire. The flames painted gold highlights in her wavy brown hair when she turned her head to watch Jeff and Jeremy pull Bruce’s body out of camp.

Rye bent to the fire to fill his coffee cup. He paused to shake his head and use his boot to nudge something at the edge of the fire. “Waste of a good knife.”

“That was so cool, the way you kicked it!” said Sara enthusiastically.

Rye took a sip of coffee. “It’s late, Miss Nelson. You should go to bed. Another ten hours in the wagon tomorrow.”

“I want to ride a horse.”

“You’ll ride in the wagon with the rest of the merchandise.” Rye gave another of his little chuckles before looking at Ellie. “Go to bed, Mrs. Overdahl, and take the chatterbox with you.

Please.”

Ellie gathered her blanket and stood up. “Good night, Mr. Thomas. Come on, Sara.”

Sara balked. “If I’m merchandise, then I’m not helping with breakfast. Or lunch or dinner.

And I’m not washing dishes either!”

Rye nodded. “Fair enough.” He opened his mouth in a jaw-cracking yawn and turned away from them to slouch back to the ground by the fire, apparently not interested in them any longer.

Sara opened her mouth to persist, but Ellie put an arm around her. “Come on,” she whispered. “Let’s go to the wagon.”

Sara allowed herself to be towed along. “This isn’t fair.”

The teenager snatched the lamp hanging at the side of the canvas-topped wagon and lit it before clambering inside. The weak glow of the lamp showed two bedrolls laid out side by side in the center, with the boxes and bundles of other merchandise stacked around them. She plopped herself down on one set of blankets and yanked her worn cowboy boots off. Ellie followed her in and sat on the other blankets.

“You know it’s not fair!” Sara persisted. “We’re not merchandise!”

Yes, Ellie knew it wasn’t fair. “Shhh. Keep your voice down. They can hear us at the fire.

No, we’re not merchandise. But what can we do?”

“Run away!”

Torn between longing and common sense, Ellie shook her head. “And go where? What if we’re found by worse men? Women stealers? Rye seems to want us treated well, at least. I thought Bruce was going to rape you.” The thought shook her with a shudder. Then she shuddered again when she remembered him falling. He was dead. Rye killed him right in front of her.

“Nothing bad. He wants his merchandise in top condition, remember?” Sarcasm dripped from Sara’s voice. “Let’s do it.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

Sara snorted. “You act like an old granny. You’re not that old.”

“I’m twenty-four,” Ellie murmured. At this time, one short year ago, she had been a happy twenty-three-year-old wife and mother. Now, she was a widow who felt twice that, at least. Maybe three times that, with her little boy kept behind in the house of the man who had sold her like a cow. “I’m old enough to know what could happen to two women alone.”

Sara’s scowl was ferocious. “If this were the Times Before, no one would treat us like this. We could go anywhere we wanted to, and we wouldn’t have to worry about woman-stealers catching us. Back in the twenty-first century, there were as many women as men, and some of them never got married. I wish we lived back then.”

Ellie didn’t. She had heard all about the Times Before from her mother’s father, who had actually lived through the Terrible Times when evil men bombed cities and released epidemic diseases. Grandpa Gray gave her carefully preserved newspapers to read, and those news articles written in the last months of 2014 horrified her. People did cruel things to each other just to be able to survive.

“If we’d lived back, then we probably wouldn’t have survived the Woman-Killer Plague,” she told Sara. “Not very many women did, you know.”

A cold shiver slid down her arms when she remembered the recurrence of the plague that broke out the winter before her marriage to Neal. Only a few women died of it, thanks to the quick response by the mayor. She and her aunts and cousins had been quarantined in their home until it passed, and each day they watched each other for fever and any hint of the excruciating headache that signaled the onset of the plague. Thank God they had been spared.

Sara waved an impatient hand. “Yeah, I know. Forget that for a minute, okay? Think! We could have used a phone to talk to my uncle, and he could have ridden his car to come and get us.” The teenager heaved a sigh. “Wouldn’t that be nice? My dad told me that cars could go anywhere just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

Ellie had to admit some things from the Times Before would be nice to have, like running water and refrigerators. All day the wagon had rolled along the prairie not far from the broken remains of a road from the Times Before. The paving was overgrown by grass, but Ellie could imagine that a long time ago, when it had been smooth and flat, a wagon could travel quicker and easier. That would be nice. The magazines from the first decade of the twenty-first century fascinated her with their glossy pictures of women working in offices and walking along crowded sidewalks without a male escort, but Ellie wondered if they’d ever had time to relax with their families.

“But we’re not in the Times Before,” she reminded Sara.

“We have to do something! I don’t want to be married to some guy I don’t even know.” Neither did Ellie. “But even if we did manage to get away, how would we feed ourselves? Where could we go?”

“I know how to ride and hunt. My mom died when I was little, and my dad taught me everything he would have taught a boy. We can do it. We’ll go to my uncle and my cousins in

Omaha. They’ll take care of us.”

Ellie wanted to throw up her hands. Sara made it sound as if two women strolling four hundred miles alone would have no problems, as if any men who found them wouldn’t keep them or sell them for profit, like Sara’s uncle and Mr. Moore had. She wondered if Sara had ever been disciplined in her life. If she, Ellie, had ever acted the way Sara had today, she wouldn’t have been able to sit for week. Had she ever been so young and bratty? Probably. She remembered the bemusement she’d seen on her cousin Taye’s face from time to time in the days before her marriage. “I have a cousin too.”

A wave of longing for Taye, her big, strong and over-protective older cousin, swept over her. Taye had tried to talk her husband out of taking her so far away to live. When Neal died five months ago, she had written to Taye, asking him to come and collect her and little Connor. Letters had gone also to her Gray cousins and even her estranged brother-in-law, Dane Overdahl. She had considered writing to the elders at Odessa, where she had grown up, but with her father and all his relations dead, she had decided against it. Her only living relatives were her mother’s kin, in Kearney, Nebraska, and she wrote to all of them. She had written several times since

Neal’s death, but no answer ever came. She hadn’t understood why until this morning when Mr. Moore traded her for gold. All the letters she had given him to post had gone into the fire instead of the mail pouch. Taye probably didn’t even know Neal was dead. If he did, he would have come for her right away. An idea struck her.

“Sara, wait here. I’m going to talk to Mr. Thomas.”

Sara perked up. “What about?”

“I think I have a way for us for us to not become prizes in a Bride Fight.” Ellie climbed over the back of the wagon. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck. But if it doesn’t work, we’re running away.”

“Hmm,” said Ellie, noncommittal.

Rye was still reclining by the coals of the fire, and Tim, Jeremy, and Paul were there, too, drinking coffee and talking in quiet voices. They broke off when she came to Rye.

He looked up at her, his face mildly surprised. “It’ll be a long drive tomorrow. You might want to get some sleep.”

“I’d like to talk to you for a few minutes, if you don’t mind.” She wiped her wet palms on her pants. “It’s business related.”

“Always glad to talk business.” Rye waved his hand at Tim, and the blond man moved a couple feet down the log so she could sit close to Rye. Rye waited in silence for her to speak. It took her a second to find the right words.

“I have a cousin who loves me. He’s pretty well off. He would pay you twice what the men of Ellsworth would if you brought me to him.”

Rye’s brows rose until they almost disappeared under his limp curls. “Twice? That would be two hundred gold.”

Ellie’s heart stuttered at the sheer amount of money. Taye couldn’t have that much. “I don’t think that will be a problem for Taye” she lied. “He dotes on me.”

“And what about Miss Nelson?”

“He will pay for her, too.”

“Four hundred gold?” Rye whistled. “Your cousin must be loaded.”

Loaded with gold, no. Loaded with sharp teeth and a wolf’s aggression, yes. Not to mention he was the head of an entire pack of men who all felt like he did. Ellie forced her hands to relax in her lap.

“Taye feels strongly about the safety of the women in his family. Actually, all women. He’ll be grateful to you if you bring me to him.”

Her knuckles ached from clenching her fists. Should she mention Taye would want her son Connor brought to him too? No, better not. Once she was safe with Taye, they would retrieve Connor from Moore’s Mill. With a stab of vindictiveness, Ellie yearned to be there to see the look on Mr. Moore’s face when Taye showed up at his place to collect Connor. She doubted Mr. Moore would live through the retrieval process. That thought relaxed her fists. Justice would be served. That hope was all she had to cling to. It would have to be enough to keep her sanity intact until she once again held her son in her arms.

“That’s a lot of money,” Rye said thoughtfully. “But we have a contract with the men of Ellsworth. If we start breaking contracts, who will trust us to deliver our goods? Besides, we got one more girl to pick up tomorrow. Sorry, Mrs. Overdahl. When you get settled in Ellsworth, you can write your cousin a letter.”

She steeled herself to deliver a gentle threat. “Taye Wolfe is not a man you want to make an enemy of, Mr. Thomas.”

Next to her, Tim jerked in an audible breath. “Taye Wolfe? Where’s he from?”

“My cousin lives near Kearney, Nebraska.”

“Shee-it,” muttered Tim. “We’re in trouble, boss.”

Rye grunted inquiringly. “You know him?”

Tim rubbed his hand over the bristles on his chin. “I know *of* him. Had a couple dealings with some of his kin.” He swallowed loud enough for Ellie to hear it. It was hard to tell in the dark, but she thought he looked pale. “She’s right, Rye. Nobody wants to mess with those wolves. Last time someone fooled with one of their women, there was hell to pay. Twenty-five men went against Taye Wolfe and his kin, and twenty-five men died.”

Rye ran a hand over his wavy hair. The waves ended in neat half curls. Ellie remembered one of Taye’s men had wavy hair like that. She’d give anything to see him or any of Taye’s men walk into the firelight this minute. “This Taye Wolfe cares about you?”

“He loves me. I am his only blood-related female cousin. His entire Clan will come for me, dozens of men.”

“Hmm. The Wolfes must be a big family. That doesn’t sound good for us.” He tugged one of his curls straight and let it spring back. “But, like I said, we have a contract with Ellsworth.” He slapped his hand on his knee. “Tell you what. I’ll send one of the boys up to Kearney to let your cousin know where you are. He can meet you in Ellsworth and speak to the men there himself. Tim, you know the guy. In the morning, ride north to Kearney as fast as you can. We’ll take our time travelling to give Wolfe a chance to get to Ellsworth before the Bride Fight.” “Better send someone else, Rye,” Tim said. “I don’t think any of the wolves like me.”

Rye’s brow arched again. “Fine. Jer? Want to take a ride to Kearney?”

“Sure, boss. Any message for your cousin, Mrs. Overdahl?”

Her fingers were trembling. She balled her hands into fists to control it. “Tell him my husband is dead and his employer sold me and kept my son. Tell him I want to come home, and I want to bring Sara too. Tell him…” When her voice broke, she paused to force herself back under control. “Tell him to hurry.”

Jeremy had a shy smile. “Okay. I’ll tell him.”

# Chapter 2

The next morning, Sara and Ellie were told to stay in the wagon while they traveled. It was hot, but Ellie didn’t mind. The canvas top kept some of the dust out. When Sara demanded to be allowed to ride a horse, Rye told her coolly, “You’ll ride in the wagon with the rest of the merchandise, Miss Nelson. No need to flaunt the fact that we have a couple of pretty women with us if we run into any other travelers.”

“It’s hot in the wagon,” Sara said with a pout. “And the smell of the coffee makes me sick.”

Ellie enjoyed the scent of coffee more than the flavor of it. The burlap sacks of coffee beans exuded a gentle scent that reminded Ellie of Sunday mornings when she was a child. It was the only morning coffee was served in Odessa’s big communal dining room.

“You and Mrs. Overdahl will ride in the wagon,” Rye repeated. “It’ll cut down any attempts to steal our most valuable merchandise.”

“God forbid,” Sara snapped. “Thieves can have the coffee and the sugar, but not us, right?”

Rye chuckled as he swung up into the saddle. “Oh, we’d fight to keep the coffee and sugar too. They’re quiet at least.”

Ellie didn’t pay much attention to this exchange. She was watching Jeremy ride north at a quick pace. He had formally shaken her hand before he mounted, promising her he would travel as quickly as he could to get her message to Taye. Ellie said a quick, heartfelt silent prayer for his safety and speed. When she lifted her head and opened her eyes, she saw Sara staring at her with a cynical twist to her lips.

“Praying?”

Ellie looked at her until the teenager glanced away, muttering, “I guess it can’t hurt.”

“I think we can use all the help we can get. I wonder how far it is to pick up the new girl.”

Sara straightened on the wagon seat, glowing with high spirits. “I hope it’s a long way. The longer it takes, the more time your cousin has to come get us, right?”

Six hours of bouncing in a badly sprung wagon later, even Sara’s spirits were flagging. The scent of the coffee beans, which had seemed so light this morning, had strengthened in the heat of the day until Ellie hoped she never had to smell it again.

Sara patted her hand. “Are you feeling a little sick too?” “A little.”

“I hate feeling like I’m going to throw up. I don’t remember my mom very well, but I remember her singing to me when I was sick.” A melancholy note tinged Sara’s voice. “She was a really great mom. She said I was hell on wheels, and I got plenty of spankings from her, but she loved me. She sang to me all the time.”

They had that in common. “My mom died when I was four. When did your mom die?”

“I was six. My dad was really broken up over it. He loved her so much. He loved me, too, but he didn’t sing to me. But he didn’t spank me either. Ever. He let me do whatever I wanted. When he was dying, after being shot, he told me he was sorry about that because I was in for a rude awakening.” Her voice went from pensive to defensive. “What do you think he meant by that?”

Ah. That explained Sara’s brattiness. Ellie lifted the canvas wall to get a little fresh air and to hide her face. “Well, uh … I don’t know.” She grasped for a change of topic. “Oh, look, there’s part of an old road from the Times Before.”

Sara glanced out the opening at the broken asphalt almost completely overgrown by prairie grass, but without interest. “I want a husband who will love me the way my dad loved my mom.

I want to choose my own husband.”

Ellie heaved a sigh and let the canvas drop. “Hopefully we’ll be able to do that.”

“You look kind of green.” Sara offered the canteen. “Have some water. Do you want to sit on this side? I think it’s a little smoother here.”

Ellie smiled at the teenager. Sara was certainly bratty, but she was also compassionate.

“Thank you. Maybe that will help.”

An hour later the wagon’s jolting smoothed out, and Ellie knew they must be on a welltended road. She lifted the bottom of the canvas again and peeked out. They were coming to a fence whose once-white paint was chipped and faded to show the wood beneath. Sara leaned over Ellie’s lap to look out too. A sign, so weather beaten as to be almost illegible, welcomed them to the Flying D Ranch and Resort.

“The Flying D?” Sara said. “I’ve heard of this ranch. In the Times Before, it was a place where people came to get married and have parties. City dudes came to learn how to ride and rope.” Her snort was eloquent with scorn for city people who played at being cowboys. “The ranch made a lot of money that way.”

Ellie looked down the dirt drive and saw a sprawling ranch house, a long, low bunkhouse, and collection of other buildings half a mile away. As they came closer, Ellie could see that any wealth the ranch might have had in the first decade of the twenty-first century was long gone. What would it have looked like before the terrorists destroyed the world? She thought the solid buildings would have been blindingly white against the golden rolling hills and the cloudless blue of the sky.

Today, the house might still be stately and elegant, but it was two hundred years old and in poor repair. Like the fence, the once white paint was mostly worn to weathered gray. The fancy gingerbread cutouts edging the roof were broken, the roof shingled in an uneven patchwork of contrasting colors. About a hundred yards to the south was the long, low bunkhouse and beyond that was a fenced corral. The only sign of people was the black line of a rifle poking out the highest window of the house and two more from the bunkhouse.

The wagon pulled to a stop in front of the steps of a wraparound porch and was welcomed by a half a dozen dogs running into the yard, barking and growling. A sharp word from the house quieted them. Rye signaled the other men to keep still and dismounted, keeping his hands clearly away from the pistol in his belt. “Good afternoon,” he called. “I’m Rye Thomas, here to pick up Mrs. Fosse.”

A man’s voice called from the house. “I made a deal for my sister with Bruce Gephart.”

“That’s right. Bruce is dead. I’m in charge now.”

Ellie couldn’t see who was speaking from the house, but the voice was clear enough that he must be close to an open window.

“We were expecting you earlier.”

“One of the other ladies isn’t feeling well,” Rye returned. “The smell of some of the goods in the wagon makes her sick, so we’ve been taking our time for her sake.” “You got the money?” “Yep,” said Rye.

Inside the wagon, Sara snorted. “Money is all Rye cares about,” she said to Ellie.

The voice from the house didn’t lose its suspicious tone. “What’ve you got in that covered wagon?”

Rye half turned. “Mrs. Overdahl? Why don’t you and Miss Nelson step down?”

“About time!” huffed Sara, nimbly climbing over the back of the wagon.

Ellie followed her more slowly. It was normal for people to be wary of strangers. In Odessa, the religious community she had grown up in, the walls had been guarded twenty-four hours a day. At the Overdahls’ mill north of Kearney, where she and her husband spent the first two years of their marriage, the fence was made of stone and the gate was solid. There were stories of outlaws posing as travelers being welcomed and then attacking and killing their hosts and stealing anything of value, including women. Ellie wasn’t surprised by the caution the ranchers showed, but she felt terribly exposed under the guns pointed at her.

There was a pause, and then a shrill whistle from the house signaled the gunmen to lower their weapons. In a moment the front door of the house opened, and a tall slender man stepped onto the veranda, his rifle over his shoulder. Two more men came out of the bunkhouse, carrying their rifles in the crooks of their arms. They were young and rawboned, with wild shoulderlength brown hair and cold, hard faces that looked alike. *Brothers*? Ellie wondered. The man on the veranda was a few years older than they were but had the same brown hair and cold face. Rye went to shake hands.

Sara muttered, “He looks exactly like a man who would sell his daughter to the devil.”

“He doesn’t look old enough to have a marriageable daughter. I doubt he’s older than twenty-five,” Ellie returned, straight-faced. “I think he’s rather handsome.” Sara shuddered theatrically. “Sure, if you think demons are handsome.”

Ellie closed her mouth on her next comment. The man’s face was hard and sun-browned in spite of the shade cast by his wide-brimmed felt hat, but his features were regular. Now that he was a little closer she could see lines of weariness and worry on his face. It made him look considerably less cold.

At a wave from Rye, Paul and the other men dismounted. Only Jeff, in the wagon’s driver’s seat, stayed put.

The stranger said, “I’m Marcus Dirk.” He nodded to the two younger men standing their ground fifty yards away. “My brothers, Michael and Mordecai. Water trough is behind the bunkhouse. Boys, give them a hand watering their stock.” He turned back to Rye, and Ellie thought his next words were cool, but reluctant. “I suppose, having lost several hours, you want to push on right away. I’ll call my sister out for you. She’s been packed and ready to go for two days.”

Rye held up a hand. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather stay here the rest of today and get a start later in the morning tomorrow.” An ironic note entered his voice. “Miss Nelson isn’t a good traveler. A little extra rest would do her good. Don’t wanna show up at Ellsworth with a greenfaced prize for the Bride Fights.”

Sara produced a faint moan. Mr. Dirk’s gaze shot to her. “The ladies can come inside. You and your men will have to stay out here. No offense intended.”

Rye said, “No offense taken. We would appreciate water, but we have our own food and gear. Where would you like us to park the wagon?”

Mr. Dirk waved to one of his brothers. “Mord can show you. I’ll take the ladies inside, and then we can talk business.”

Rye inclined his head and walked toward the bunkhouse. Mr. Dirk nodded at Ellie and Sara without looking directly at them. Sara did a good imitation of a woman on the verge of fainting. Ellie suppressed the urge to laugh and held her arm solicitously. Rye was keeping his promise to go slowly to give Taye enough time to get to Ellsworth before the bride fights began. Thank God.

Mr. Dirk scattered the dogs with a word. Ellie followed him up the steps and into the house, still holding a supportive hand under Sara’s elbow.

“Mel!” he called when they had cleared a wide entryway made bright by many windows and passed into a dim hall.

A figure in a cowboy hat and a gun belt moved in the near darkness at the end of the hall.

“I’m here.”

“You hear all that? The traders won’t be leaving until tomorrow.”

The indistinct figure seemed to sag a bit. “Sounds good, Marc.”

Mr. Dirk waved at Sara and Ellie standing behind him. “You look after these ladies while I go have a talk with the traders.”

Mel shifted into the light, revealing a face that, like Marc’s, was cold. Silhouetted in the light and dark of the hallway, the figure had soft feminine curves. Ellie stared. From a distance, dressed in a bulky shirt, worn jeans, a beat-up hat and work boots, this woman could be taken for a man, but up close, the bust and hips were unmistakably female.

“You’re a girl!” Sara accused.

“Since the day I was born,” Mel agreed drily. “Follow me, gals.”

Ellie and Sara followed her to a kitchen whose windows let in the midday sun. Mel took off her hat, hung it on a peg, and turned to them. In the clear light of the kitchen, Ellie could see that Mel didn’t look nearly as cold or dangerous as she had appeared in the shadows of the hall. Her hair hung to her shoulders in a mix of dark blond and light brown streaks, her eyes mossy brown in a face tanned dark by hours in the sun. Her slanted smile showed off even white teeth.

“So…” Mel said, drawling out the word. “It’s us three for the Bride Fights, huh?”

Ellie nodded. “I’m Ellie Overdahl, and this is Sara Nelson.”

“Melissa Fosse.” Mel shoved a hank of sun-streaked hair behind her ear as she looked Sara up and down. “You’re kinda young to get married, aren’t you?”

“I’m sixteen. How old are you?”

“Twenty-three. You gals hungry? You want some bread and beef?” “You bet. Rye never stopped for lunch.” Sara pulled out a chair at the table.

Ellie moved to the center of the kitchen. “Thank you. What can we do to help?”

Mel nodded at a pump fastened to the counter next to the sink. “There’s a pitcher in the cabinet above the sink. Pump up some water while I slice the bread and meat.”

“I can cut the bread,” Sara offered.

Ellie marveled at the convenience of having a pump right there in the kitchen. The water was good, too, clear and cold. The three women sat at the table, Sara and Ellie eating and Mel sipping a glass of water.

“This Rye,” Mel said. “What kind of man is he? I thought another man was the leader of the traders.”

“Bruce,” Sara said with relish around a mouthful of beef. “Rye killed him last night.”

Mel’s eyebrows climbed. “Murdered him?”

“It was self-defense,” Ellie said with a glance at Sara. “Bruce was going to… Well, he…” “He was an ass,” the teenager said.

Ellie cleared her throat. “He threw a knife at Mr. Thomas, and Mr. Thomas shot him.”

Sara waved her sandwich at Ellie. “Quit being so la-di-da. Call him Rye.” She turned to Mel. “Why is your brother selling you?”

Ellie drew a pained breath at Sara’s bold manners, but Mel answered calmly. “It was my idea.”

Sara dropped her sandwich. “Your idea?”

Mel nodded and took a sip of her water. “We need the money. My mom…” She looked away for a moment and cleared her throat. “When I was a kid, the ranch did well. The grass was good, and the cows dropped lots of calves. But in the last ten years, it’s been dry, and we’ve lost a lot of stock to rustlers.”

Ellie hesitated to ask personal questions, but Mel seemed open. “Isn’t there a neighbor who could help out? Maybe someone you could marry who would be able to contribute to his in-laws’ ranch?”

Mel set her glass down on the table very carefully. “Already tried that. Married Rob Fosse from the Leaning F south of here.”

“Then how could you be a prize for a Bride Fight?” Sara burst out. “What about your husband?”

“He’s dead.” Mel laid a hand on the butt of the pistol strapped to her thigh. “Shot him myself.”

A gasp escaped Ellie before she could catch it. Sara stared at Mel with popping eyes. “You shot your husband?” the teenager squeaked.

“He deserved it.” Mel sounded bored. “The rustlers that are stealing our stock? He and his brothers were the kingpins of that gang.”

Ellie tried to find the right words to say and failed. “Oh,” she said lamely.

“It’s a shame.” Mel traced a finger through the condensation on the side of her glass. “Rob was a fine looking man.” Her laugh was mirthless. “I’d stay here and marry someone else if the spineless fools weren’t afraid of me.”

Sara made a face of exaggerated surprise. “They’re afraid of you? Why in the world would they be afraid of you?”

Mel snapped a finger against the tip of Sara’s nose. “Don‘t be sassy, miss. Why are you going to be a prize?”

Sara fired up. “Because my dad died, and my mother’s stepbrother sold me.” Mel nodded and cut Sara off by turning to Ellie with a raised brow.

“My husband died in an accident at the mill he managed,” Ellie said quietly. “His employer asked me repeatedly to marry him, but I refused. Yesterday morning the traders showed up and… He sold me.”

The memory of it rose up and slapped Ellie in the face, and for a moment, she forgot to breathe. She could still feel the sting of dish soap in the dry places on her hands. She’d been washing the breakfast dishes when Mr. Moore came into the kitchen. Connor still sat in his high chair at the table, with the younger Moore boy, Tommy, entertaining him with a few painted wooden blocks.

“Well, Mrs. Ellie,” Moore said. The coaxing note she had grown to dread wasn’t in his voice. “It’s time for us to say good-bye. Matthew has packed a few of your clothes, and Bruce Gephart has loaded them into his wagon.”

Ellie’s first thought was that Taye had come for her at last. The unfamiliar name of Bruce

Gephart killed her burst of wild excitement. “What?” she said in confusion. “Who?”

Mr. Moore laid his hand on her arm, pulling her away from the sink full of dishes. “Come along, the women traders are in a hurry.”

Women traders? Ellie could not get enough air. Her lungs tried to turn themselves inside out

as she gasped. No matter how she twisted in Mr. Moore’s grip she couldn’t get free. He ignored her feeble attempts at escape and towed her outside where two wagons and half a dozen men waited. The leader of these men, an unshaven brute whose big belly strained his shirt buttons, laughed. “She’s a feisty one, Moore. The men in Ellsworth oughta like her.”

Ellie’s heart stopped when she heard Connor screaming for her from the kitchen and started up again with a jolt. “Connor!” she shrieked.

“I’ll take care of him,” Moore promised. “Here, take her.”

“Connor!” she screamed again, managing to twist free at last and lunge up the steps that led to the house.

Mr. Moore caught her again, hands bruising her arms, and gave her a rough shake. “You had your chance to stay here. Maybe whoever wins you will be willing to raise another man’s brat. If so, you can send word when you’re settled. If I don’t hear in three months, I’ll sell the little monster if I can find anyone willing to take him.”

Connor was still shrieking. He was not a little monster! He was her son, hers and Neal’s. Hatred-fueled rage welled up in her, a visceral maternal reaction to her son’s cries. She’d never felt such fury. It hooked her fingers into claws she raked down Mr. Moore’s face. “Don’t you dare touch Connor,” she snarled through her clenched teeth.

“Bitch!” he howled at her, all vestiges of the kindly employer and would-be lover gone. She’d been raised to respect her elders and love her enemies, but she hated Moore with a passion so alien to her she felt drunk with it. She shook the memory off and saw Mel staring at her.

“She gets like that sometimes,” Sara was saying to Mel. “When she thinks about her little boy, she kind of goes away.”

A blush rolled up Ellie’s neck. “Sorry.”

Mel waved a hand. “No problem. You have a little boy?”

“Connor.” Ellie had to swallow hard. “He’s almost three.”

When she fell silent, Sara put in, “That bastard who sold her kept her son.”

“Well, day-yum,” said Mel slowly. “A man like that don’t deserve to breathe.”

Ellie took a deep steadying breath. “I’ve sent a message to my cousin up north. He’ll get everything sorted out.”

\* \* \* \*

Jeremy Stokes had covered over one hundred miles in two days. He’d stopped whenever he could to trade for a fresh horse and check his directions. It had been ten years since he’d made such a ride, and he was feeling it in every muscle in his body. It was worth it though. He hated the idea of Mrs. Overdahl forced into a marriage she didn’t want. He had a little daughter of his own, and the thought of someone forcing her into marriage rubbed him raw, so he didn’t grudge the sore muscles and aching bones. He stopped in Kearney to get directions to Taye Wolfe’s place and made it up there before supper.

The Wolfe compound was large and well-guarded by a solid stone wall eight feet high. It looked to Jeremy like Mrs. Overdahl hadn’t exaggerated her cousin’s wealth. Only a man of means could hold a place like this. Jeremy presented himself at the gate and waited for the small, reinforced window in the gate to open to ask his business.

The face in the small window was cold with suspicion. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“I’m Jeremy Stokes, here on business from Mrs. Overdahl. Mr. Wolfe’s cousin, I mean. I have an urgent message from her.”

The gate was instantly opened, and two large dogs pressed against him, herding him into the compound. His horse came with him, snorting uneasily. A cluster of half-naked Native American men stood watching him. One of them looked him over.

“Give me all your weapons.”

Jeremy silently handed over his pistol and his knife and waved a hand at the rifle in the saddle scabbard. “That’s all.”

The guy nodded. “Snake, Blaze, take him in to see the chief. Paint, look after his horse.”

Two men flanked Jeremy like guards. When he was led into a large room with a big fireplace, he understood why he was being treated like a possible threat. Beside the fireplace sat a hugely pregnant woman with long brown hair. Standing protectively beside her on one side was a fiercely scowling man, and on the other side, a three-year-old boy scowled just as fiercely. From the looks of their faces, they were obviously father and son. A dozen men lounged around the room, bodies appearing relaxed but eyes keenly watchful. Their stares made Jeremy want to squirm. He turned to look at the man beside the woman.

“Mr. Wolfe?” Jeremy asked.

The man gave one sharp jerk of his head.

“I’m Jeremy Stokes. I work for the Ryan Thomas Trading Company.” There Jeremy stalled briefly. “Your cousin, Mrs. Overdahl, sent me with a message for you.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” said the woman. “We haven’t heard from Ellie in ages. How is she?”

When Jeremy hesitated, the weight of the eyes on him grew heavier. “She’s well,” he said carefully. “But she needs your help.”

Taye Wolfe leaned forward, dark eyes hard under lowered brows. “What do you mean?”

Jeremy swallowed. “Her husband has died, and she’s been sold to the Trading Company to be taken to Ellsworth. The men there are having a Bride Fight in a week or so…”

A snarl jerked Jeremy’s head around. He saw nothing but men with angry faces. No longer lounging in relaxed sprawls, they looked ready to spring. Most of the men were clearly Native American, with black hair hanging in braids or loose down their backs, but one of them had curly brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was on his feet, practically shaking. With rage? Yes, Jeremy was certain it was rage that clenched the man’s fists and jaw. He hesitated before turning his back on the man, shoulder blades twitching.

Taye Wolfe’s set, angry face wasn’t any less scary. A bead of sweat rolled down the back of Jeremy’s neck.

“Where is my cousin?” Wolfe rasped.

“She’s travelling to Ellsworth for the Bride Fights.” Jeremy blotted his upper lip with his wrist. “Rye is making sure the women are treated with respect. He has to fulfill the contract to deliver brides, but he sent me to let you know what’s happened to your cousin so you could help her.”

That same snarling noise jerked Jeremy’s head around again. The curly-haired man was closer, eyes glowing eerie green under clenched brows. “Who dared to sell her?” he demanded.

Standing between Taye Wolfe’s cold fury and this man’s volcanic rage was ulcer inducing. Jeremy felt the prickle of more sweat forming on his back. “I don’t know all the details. A man named Moore sold her to the last owner of the trading company.”

The woman gasped. “That’s the man Neal worked for. What about her son?” she asked Jeremy.

Inwardly, Jeremy flinched at the memory of Mrs. Overdahl’s heart-broken shrieks as the wagon drove her away from her crying son. “He’s still with Moore as far as I know. Look, you have to hurry. Rye said he would travel as slowly as possible to give you time to get to Ellsworth and stop the fights. But, even if we left right now, we might not get there in time.”

“Taye, you have to go at once.” The woman struggled to heave her bulk out of the chair. Wolfe pressed her gently back down. “Taye!”

“I can’t leave you, not with the baby due any day.” Wolfe looked at the men in the room, and Jeremy noticed that their number had more than doubled in the last few minutes. “Quill,” he said to the curly-haired man. “Pick a dozen wolves and get to Ellsworth as fast as you can. Once you have Ellie secure, go to Moore’s Mill and get the boy. Bring them home.”

The face under the curly hair was equal parts grim and strangely elated. “I’ll bring them home, Chief.”

Jeremy cleared his throat. “Mrs. Overdahl said you would take care of Miss Nelson too.”

Taye Wolfe’s eyebrow arched. “Was she sold too?”

Jeremy nodded. “And she’s not happy about it. She’s not even seventeen yet.” Disgust overlaid the cold fury on Wolfe’s face. “Quill, bring the other girl too.” Quill nodded. “You’ll need gold to buy them,” Jeremy advised.

“Gold.” Quill curled a lip. “I’ll buy my mate with the blood of any man who stands in my way.”