

LARAMIE LASS

By Katrina Susan Henderson



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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LARAMIE LASS

By Susan Henderson

1. Gunplay in Omaha

The dance hall was filled with music and the dancing of the chorus girls as I sat there in that saloon in Omaha on that fine October evening of 1880. I was in a good mood having just completed a job for the richest man in the city, J. E. Roberts, the rancher. I knew the money I had made that month was going to be spent here for the most part. The reason for this was named Trixie.

Well, Trixie wasn't her real name, of course. No legitimate dance hall girl ever used her real name. Her real name was Elizabeth Anne Carter and she was a right pretty sight to a loner like me. Trixie was one of those girls who just couldn't seem to keep two things in mind at once, but I had fallen in love with her during the course of my long stay since the beginning of the summer.

I am, by choice, a mostly solitary man. I hadn't had much time for anyone else since I left my mother and older sister in Boston when I was sixteen. Pausing over my beer, I thought about my life up till now.

My father had never been home much, from what my mother told me, with him being a private in the Union Army. He died during the civil war fighting for the Union Army in the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 on July 2 when I was only five. I, therefore, grew up without a male role model to help shape by early development. My older sister, by eight years, and my mother raised me the rest of the way. I had gone to school in a small Boston school for boys and had learned to shoot a gun from one of the teachers who had taken a fancy to my interest. When my sixteenth birthday had come, I left home, and headed steadily westward to seek my fortune on the other side of the Mississippi.

Sitting here, in this saloon, nursing a warm beer was proof of my failure. I had started out with the thought that golden opportunities had existed for a man of my learning and background. Little was I to know that the west gave nothing to no one. If you wanted something, you either killed for it, took it away from someone else or worked your fingers to the bone to scratch out an existence. I had been reduced from a bright eyed boy to a dull and bitter man who hired himself out as a bodyguard to the ranchers when they were away from their spreads.

As I sat there, sipping my warm beer, the voice of a drunken Jake Callan boomed out, "Well, if it isn't, young Daran McLaughlin. Mind if me and the boys join you?"

I looked up at the shaggy hard face of Jack Callan and his two partners, Bob Gulch and Tom Pickney. I really didn't want these men to set with me but, ignoring my silence, they sat down at the table. I never have liked Jack and the feeling was mutual. I had met Jack a couple of months ago when I had a small job helping out the local

Wells Fargo man. We had stared over the barrels of our pistols until Jack had decided that the presence of a Marshal would deter from the enjoyment of shooting me and stealing the money of the small Eastern. Since then, we had enjoyed an uneasy truce.

“Heard you just got paid, Daran. How about buying me and the boys a round, just for friendships sake?” hinted Jack with a broad grin on his scarred face.

I looked up from my beer and replied, “What gives, Jack? I thought we had agreed to leave each other alone.”

He leaned toward me, his fetid breath in my face and answered, “That was then. Now, you don't have no Marshal to back you up. You did hear the news, didn't you, pansy?”

“Listen, Jack. I don't care if you gunned down the Marshal. Heck, me and him weren't exactly pals. I don't want any trouble with you and your two, uh, associates,” I replied keeping my hands on the table in plain sight.

“I gunned down the Marshal in self defense, the Sheriff even agreed with me,” said Jack tensely.

“I doesn't matter to me if you had shot him in the back. All I want is to be left alone to enjoy myself,” I replied setting the glass down.

“Listen here, Momma's boy. I don't give a cow's fart what you want or don't want. I want a beer and we're going to have one!” shouted Jack.

“Is that your final word?” I asked.

“Yes it is, pansy. Now fork it over,” said Jack reaching for his gun.

I saw Jack's partners reaching down under the table and at that moment the Sheriff put his gun to Jack's head and pulling back the hammer. Jack's eyes went wide and moved away from his guns.

“Put'em away, boys, or I'll blow his head all over the ceiling,” ordered the Sheriff.

Jack nodded his head and his partners brought their hands up into plain sight.

“Well that's better. I think you and your boys have had enough excitement for one evening. Why don't you boys take some air and a brisk ride back to your camp,” suggested the Sheriff in crisp tones.

Jack got up from the chair and said, “As you wish, Sheriff. We don't want any problem with the law. This isn't finished, McLaughlin. One day, the law won't come between us and I'll kill you.”

I picked up my beer, took a swallow and replied, “If I don't get you and your boys first. Now, I'd get moving if I were you. It looks like, to me, that the Sheriff's just itching to pull the trigger.”

“Right you are, McLaughlin. Move out, boys,” ordered the Sheriff, punctuating his remark by shoving the gun into Jack's neck.

“Let's get out of here, boys,” commanded Jack heading for the exit with Gulch and Pickney.

After they had left the saloon, the music started up and the Sheriff turned to me and said, "I'd watch my step if I were you, McLaughlin. Callan and his boys are up to no good. Now, I wouldn't care if you and them killed each other right here. You're not exactly my idea of a peaceful citizen, but at least you haven't killed anyone yet. Just take this as a friendly warning, McLaughlin. Don't let me catch you shooting anyone."

"I hope I don't have to, Sheriff. I don't want to be a murderer, but if I have to, I have to. You heard Jack. He just declared that our vendetta is on again," I replied.

"I know that, Daran, but I've got women and children to protect. Just keep that gun in your holster," stated the Sheriff.

"I can't make any promises, Sheriff," I answered.

He just gave out a growl and walked away. The music changed and hit into a nice burlesque number. As the music picked up, out on stage came Trixie in her dance hall outfit. As the music played, she slowly stripped in tune with the music. She was something else and the hoots and howls of the men in the saloon were testimony to the artistry with which she performed. As the music died, she came out among the patrons of the saloon and began to serve drinks and entice money out of the men. She winked at me as she came by and then continued with her work.

Now, I don't fault anyone who is working to get ahead. Heck, I've done some jobs that I haven't been too proud of myself. But, I really detested what Trixie had to do for a living. I'd always thought that she was much more suited to being the wife of a rich rancher than a dance hall girl, but I was just a down on my luck gunman and not the rich rancher I had hoped to become upon coming out west.

After the dance hall had closed for the evening, I still sat there waiting for Trixie. Soon she came down the stairs from the upstairs rooms, her outfit askew and with her quick date on her arm. The slobbering cowhand kissed her and left the saloon. Trixie came over and took a seat across from me.

"How's it going, Daran?" asked Trixie kicking off her shoes.

"Fine, Trixie. I was just waiting for you," I replied with all thoughts, but of her, wiped from my mind.

"That's sweet of you, Daran, but you didn't have to wait up for me. I can take care of myself," she answered tartly.

"I know that, Trixie. I just wanted to see you," I said leaning across the table.

She reached out, patted my cheek and answered, "That's nice. I'll just go and get changed and then you can walk me home."

"All right, Trixie," I replied as she left me and went into the curtained area in back of the stage.

After about an hour, she came out in a plain blue dress and cloak. She could even make normal clothes look exotic. I got up on my feet and offered her my arm. She accepted and we left the dance hall and headed down main street toward her place at Mrs. McNarry's Boarding House.

As we came up to the front entrance, I asked nervously, "Could we sit on the bench here in front. I need to talk to you."

"Very well, Daran. What's up?" replied Trixie seating herself.

I took a seat next to her on the bench and began, "We've know each other for quite a spell, Trixie. I've got to tell you. I love you, will you consent to be my wife?"

The silence was deafening for a long moment. It seemed to me that the night had just came to a stop and that the world was listening for her reply. She looked quite struck to me. Surely she must know how I felt. Wasn't my concern for her safety and my frequent visits proof enough of the regard I held her in?

Slowly, she licked her lips and answered, "Don't take this wrong, Daran, but I can't."

"Why not? Is it because I'm not rich?" I asked in pain.

"No that's not it, Daran. I don't care if you don't have a dime to your name." she replied.

"Then why?" I questioned in confusion.

"I'm in love with someone and it isn't you, Daran," she said with a sigh.

I sat there thunderstruck. I couldn't believe what I had just heard. Deep inside of me I felt my heart break and the black pit of depression opened its maw to engulf me. Trixie got up, smoothed down her dress and came over to stand in front of me.

"You're a fine person, Daran, and you've been a good friend to me, but that is all. I've never even thought of you in those terms and if I had, I wouldn't have let it go on so long. I have to go. Good-by," she said with compassion as she left me.

I sat there long after she had entered the boarding house. I was filled with a deep sadness and an incredible agony deep in my soul. I sat there for a few minutes in dire agony, then stood up and started toward my room at the hotel. As I walked, I was filled with misery and had to stop in an alley to gather my fractured self back together.

I heaved a sob in the alley and sat down in misery in it's embracing darkness. As I sat there, I heard the sounds of someone approaching. I sat back in the shadows as three men on horseback came down the street. They were dressed in black and had black bandannas covering their faces.

"Right, boys. Let's raid the boarding house. That pansy has gone and it's time for us to collect a little honey before getting out of town," said the voice of the leader that I immediately identified as Jack Callan.

"Sure, boss. Will we have any time for raping?" asked the blurry voice of Bob Gulch.

"Nah. If you want a filly, grab one, but remember, that Trixie is mine as will be the pansy when he calls me out," replied Jack gruffly.

"Sure, boss," answered the voice of Tom Pickney from the last rider.

As they rode past the alley, I got up and moved to a position behind a barrel sitting there in front of O'Mallery's General Store. I drew my Colt pistol and took aim at Jack. Just as I was pulling the trigger, Tom Pickney dropped back and took my shot in the

back of his head. Suddenly, Jack and Bob dropped from horseback and, using the horses for cover, took position behind a water trough.

“Whoever you are, we've got no beef with you. Why don't we talk about this?” shouted the voice of Jack from behind the trough.

I didn't reply and when Bob stuck his head out from behind the water trough, I took a shot at it. He ducked back and soon two pistols were blazing at me from the water trough. Every once in a while, I poked up and squeezed off a shot or two at the water trough. I was pretty sure that I had winged one of them, but I wasn't sure which one. When I was down to my last shot, Bob got careless and took it in his chest. I ducked back around and started to reload my revolver. Suddenly, I heard the crunch of a boot on some gravel and spun around. Standing there was Jack Callan with a shotgun in his hand. The varmint must have snuck up on me while Bob had kept me occupied. He grinned and pointed the shotgun at me.

“Well, if it isn't the pansy. Time to die!” he snarled bringing up the shotgun.

A shot rang out from down the street and caused Jack to duck back into the alley. Seeing my break, I tried to dive out of the way when the shotgun went off catching me below my waist. I fell heavily in the mud in front of the general store. I could hear the sounds of people screaming and the sound of a quick getaway on horseback. That was the last thing I heard as I lay there in the mud.

2. The Perfect Disguise

I awoke to find myself lying in a bed in a small smoke filled room. I instantly recognized the familiar smell as that of opium. Peering through the curtains of the bed, I managed to make out the shape of an old Oriental man sitting on the floor smoking opium from his water pipe. At my stirring he looked up and took the pipe stem from his mouth.

“Ah, I see the injured one awakens,” he said in highly accented English.

“Where am I?” I asked trying to move.

“No, do not move. You will injure yourself. I am most honored to be Chin Xian, a knower of medicines and herbs. You are an honored guest at my humble home on the river front,” he replied rising to his feet and approaching me.

“What is going on here?” I questioned starting to rise.

He reached out a hand and easily stopped me in my weakened state. Just then, I started to notice the stirrings of pain. He heard my grunt of pain and quickly poured me a cup of some herbal tea.

“Here. You are in much pain. This will help. I will get the ones who must explain. You must rest now,” he said handing me the cup.

The pain, which had been in abeyance hit me a little hard right then so I drank the tea. It wasn't bad at all. It had a peculiar earthy taste but was moderated by the addition of honey and an orange peel. I soon had drained the cup and after the warm liquid hit my stomach, the pain began to subside.

“Is that better, honored guest?” he asked taking back the fragile china cup.

“Yes, thank you Mister Xian,” I replied.

“So, sorry. It should be Mister Chin. I forget that you Americans put your surname last. That is all right, though. Lie back and I will inform the two who will explain that you are awake,” he said backing away.

“Thank you, Xian,” I answered leaning back in the soft bed.

He left the room and after a moment, the Sheriff and Trixie walked in. The Sheriff was obviously suffering from a lack of sleep and Trixie was dressed in an evening frock with an overcoat over the top.

“Well, it looks like you're going to make it, McLaughlin.” said the Sheriff.

“I reckon so. I don't remember much of what happened after Jack got the drop on me.” I replied.

“I don't know what I should tell you, McLaughlin. I warned you about Callan. The sound of gunshots woke me from my snooze in the jail and I ran out to see what it was about. When I came out, I saw that Pickney was lying on the ground with his head blown off and you and Gulch were blazing away at each other. I moved down the street along the storefronts and arrived in front of Franklin Jewelers when I saw Jack Callan step out of the alley. I saw you shoot Gulch dead and then attempt to reload. Jack then stepped on some gravel to alert you and cause you to turn. I drew my gun and

shot the varmint in the arm. He ducked back out of sight but managed to get a shot off at you as he took off. I followed the varmint but he got away on his horse,” answered the Sheriff.

“I see, Sheriff. How did I wind up here?” I asked looking at him.

“Well, you have Elizabeth to thank for that.” he replied.

“Trixie?!” I exclaimed in amazement.

She just laughed and said, “Yes, me. I felt bad about what happened between us tonight. I realized that I had just, most likely, lost a true friend. I watched you as you walked like a shot dog down the street and was just beginning to close the shade, when I heard horses approaching. Now, I had no lights on in the room and could see the three horsemen in the street. I saw no sign of you, but saw them stop and gesture toward the boarding house and I heard them talking about raiding us and taking some of us girls away to rape us. I was quite frightened and I crouched down below the window sill. I then heard the shots ring out and I saw Pickney fall dead. The other two dived behind a water trough and soon guns were blazing. After a bit, I heard the sound of a double barreled shotgun go off and I saw you lying in the mud next to the barrel in front of the general store. I ran out to help you. I managed to get the bleeding stopped, but you were banged up real bad. I knew you didn't have long to live without any medical care, so I took you to someone us girls at the saloon knew about when we needed medical help and Doc Jorgens was out.”

“I see, Trixie. So you brought me to Chin's,” I replied starting to feel a little woozy.

“That's right, Daran. Then I went and brought David here,” she replied leaning against the Sheriff.

Suddenly, it was clear to me whom she loved. She was in love with the Sheriff and he was obviously quite smitten by her. Well, it was obvious that I would never have her and at the moment, I didn't care.

“So what happens now, Sheriff?” I asked.

“Well, McLaughlin, it's like this. You've murdered two men tonight, one of them in cold blood. You should hang for it,” replied the Sheriff rubbing his whiskered chin.

“I am sorry about Pickney and Gulch. The only one I really wanted to kill was Jack Callan. It was just a lousy stroke of luck that Pickney chose that moment to want to converse with Gulch,” I answered as calmly as I could.

I knew that the Sheriff was right. According to the laws of the state of Nebraska, I was a dead man. Even if I fully recovered from my encounter with Jack's shotgun, I would soon be hanging from the tree out in the center of the town courtyard.

“However, Elizabeth begged for your life. She felt that you had done it to protect her and the other girls, even if it was an afterthought. Well, she talked me into letting you live. Now don't thank me yet, McLaughlin,” he said seeing me start to open my mouth.

I promptly closed it and he continued, “Now, I don't want you anywhere in this town or in this state for that matter. You are already well know here and if you stick around, Callan is liable to come gunning for you again. Now the only way to make old

Jack give up on his vengeance is to get you out of the state and into the Wyoming Territory. There, you can live out your life, if you can keep from killing anyone else.”

“How could I get there without being discovered?” I asked.

“Please, David. Let me explain it to Daran, in private,” said Trixie.

“Certainly, my dear. Good luck, McLaughlin. With any luck, I will never see you again,” pronounced the Sheriff as he left the room.

Trixie pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down. She had a very serious look on her face and sat down near the head of the bed. She laid her coat on the back of the chair and crossed her legs elegantly.

“Okay, Trixie. How are you going to smuggle me out of Nebraska?” I asked.

“We'll get to that. Now, has Xian told you how injured you are?” she questioned pointedly.

“No he hasn't. He seems to be a nice man, but a little mysterious and inscrutable,” I replied with a smile.

The smile didn't phase her serious mood and she continued, “All Orientals are. Anyway, you almost died there in the street. If it wasn't for Xian's extraordinary skill, you would have died on his table downstairs.”

“It was that bad?” I asked feeling a bit uncomfortable.

“Yes, it was that bad. Xian managed to patch most of you back together, but. . .” she answered.

“But what, Trixie? Tell me. I need to find out and we're still friends, aren't we?” I asked.

She smiled, patted my hand, and replied, “Of course, we're friends. Okay, here it goes. Xian managed to get your guts back inside you body and sew that part up. But, the area between your legs had taken the blunt of the damage.”

“You mean, I'm paralyzed?!” I exclaimed in horror.

“No. Xian is a genius. He managed to save your legs, but something had to be sacrificed in order to do it,” she answered taking my hand.

“Okay. Give it to me. What had to be sacrificed?” I asked steeling myself.

“In order to save your legs, he had to remove your mangled manhood,” she replied matter of factly.

I was stunned. My manhood. Gone! I reached down for the covers but she gently pushed my hands back down.

“No. It won't do for you to see it yet. You must get better first,” she said.

“Now, don't take this wrong, Trixie. I'm glad to be alive, but not as a gelding!” I exclaimed.

She jumped up, put her hands on her waist and asked sternly, “Is it a prick that makes a person?”

“Well. . .” I began.

"It's not," she cut me off and added. "It is much more. Look, now I don't have a prick but am I not a person?"

"Of course you are, Trixie," I replied quickly trying to calm her down.

"And don't I have a life? Don't I have love? Don't I have plans for the future?" she rattled off in quick succession.

"Of course you do, Trixie," I answered truthfully.

"Well then," she replied taking her seat again. "So should you. David has spared your life on the condition that you get out of the state. Now going out as Daran McLaughlin would only get you shot or even hung. I'm sure the wanted posters have gone up on you even now. So what are we to do?"

"I don't know, Trixie. It's going to take me weeks to recover. Is this place safe?" I asked with concern.

"It's safe. Mr. Chin doesn't cotton to reporting fugitives having been one himself in China. Now, I have an idea that will save you, keep David happy and simplify matters for me, after all, I can't have a gelding mooning after me on my wedding day. Now, Mr. Chin is an expert in medicines and herbs and has studied for many years in the forbidden lands of the Orient. Have you noticed how us dance hall girls don't have any hair we need to shave on our legs and how we all seem well developed?" she replied.

"Yes. You all seem to be silky smooth and your, uh, feminine attributes seem to be very well developed, especially yours," I answered.

"Thank you, hon. Well, Mr. Chin is an expert in the treatment of female patients and for the next month you are going to be in his personal care. He will help you get well and prepare you for your new life," she said in her matter of fact voice.

"My new life as what?" I asked.

"As a woman. In fact, as my best friend Ellen Holland from St. Louis," she replied.

"But as a woman? Trixie, I can't become a woman. I'm every bit of a man," I answered.

She just laughed a cruel little laugh and replied, "Not anymore, gelding. Mr. Chin has many methods at his disposal. I can assure you, you will become a woman. It shouldn't be too hard for you. You often told me how you were raised by your mother and sister and how half the time you fell into a feminine pattern of mannerisms. If you can remember those lessons that your mother taught you and your sister, you should do just fine. Now since no one saw us bring you here, our story will be that you rode out of town into Iowa and got away from the posse that has been sent out to find you. You will be my best friend, who just arrived yesterday and fell ill. You are being cared for by my private physician, Mr. Chin. From time to time, I will stop by to help you. After a few weeks, the physical changes will become apparent and irreversible. At that time, I will take you to the rail station and put you on a train to Wyoming."

I sat there for a moment then asked, "Why, Trixie?"

She looked thoughtful for a minute, then answered, "You've been the best friend I've had, bar none, and you never asked to go to bed with me. You were always my

confidant and always supported me. Soon, David and I are going to be married, and frankly, your friendship as a male would have complicated matters. Now, with you becoming a woman, that problem is solved. I know you are highly educated and they're always looking for teachers on the frontier. As a woman, it will be easy for you to find a job and a new life free from the dangers of getting shot. That's something, I frankly couldn't take. So, you'll be a fine girlfriend and we can still write as friends do. Well, I had best go and attend to David. You know how men are, Ellen, all they want is sex and attention. Don't worry, Xian is a genius and you'll make a perfectly lovely lady. Ta, ta!"

With that last remark, Trixie got up, put on her overcoat and left the room. I sat there in stunned shock. Trixie wanted me to become a woman and the Sheriff had agreed to let me live if I did it. As I sat there in the bed, I realized that I had no choice at all. I was going to become a woman. Well, at least it might beat being a eunuch. As sleep began to hit me, I thought that maybe becoming a woman wasn't such a bad idea after all.

The next day, Xian woke me up with the chime of a small gong he had mounted on a trolley. As I opened my eyes, I caught the scent of his herbal teas and the fresh smell of freshly baked bread and recently washed fruit.

"Ah, I see honorable guest awakens." he said giving me a little bow.

"Good morning, noble physician. I'm sorry I can't return the compliment," I replied smiling slightly.

"It is good that you display courtesy. It will make preparing you much easier. Now I, Xian Chin, will perform the complicated physical part of your rehabilitation. Most beautiful, Miss Carter, will prepare you mentally and emotionally for your ordeal. First is breakfast and a mild herbal tea to soothe your remaining pains," Xian replied with a ghostly smile on his oriental lips.

"Thank you, Mr. Chin," I answered as he poured me a cup of tea.

As I ate, he said, "Now, I know honorable guest will wish to know how I will proceed, yes?"

I nodded as I began munching a pear.

"I will take your nod as yes. First, I have already begun your transformation. When I removed your manhood, I managed to save enough to create a convincing womanhood where it had been. I have outdone myself this time and thank Buddha for the chance to stretch my skills. It came out a perfect replica of a woman's private place and will even provide you with pleasure. Secondly, I have begun a regiment of homeopathic drugs that will create a woman's attributes upon you. You need not worry, these have been used for centuries in my country for geishas. Today, I will begin treatments on you to remove hair from your body and face. We will start slowly. In a couple of weeks, your wounds will heal enough for you to get up from the bed and then Miss Carter will train you in the art of womanhood. At the end of the next six weeks, I should have you fit for your new life. Great Buddha has spared you by the friendship

of a woman who had no friends and has chosen this way to make you pay for his saving you. Wise is the way of Buddha and you must accept.”

I looked up at Mr. Chin and replied, “I have no choice but to accept.”

“It is good that you understand this. What name does Miss Carter wish you to answer to?” he asked.

I thought about telling him my name, but realized that that name was dead to me, so I answered, “Ellen.”

“Very good, Ellen. You and I have much work to do. Finish your breakfast and then we'll begin,” he replied setting down cross-legged on the floor.

“Yes, Xian,” I replied as I finished the pear.

The next two weeks passed in a painful haze, I lost track of all the things, Xian did to me. He doused me with potions, he covered my skin with pastes and lotions. He even used large amounts of fine wires hooked to a hand cranked electric generator and applied something he called, acupuncture.

After the two weeks had passed, I was at last allowed up. Whatever Xian Chin had done, was entirely effective. I was totally devoid of body and facial hair and had begun to develop flared hips and breasts. As I was up examining myself in the mirror, Xian Chin entered the room.

“Good morning, honorable Miss Ellen. I see you admire my handiwork in the mirror,” he said in his differential way.

“Yes and thank you, Mr. Chin,” I replied dropping into a curtsy like my mother had taught me.

“Very good. We will have breakfast, but I think it is time for me to remove the bandage from your womanhood,” he decided.

“Oh,” I gulped in nervousness.

“Stand still. I will not gawk for was it not I who made it? Stand still, girl.” he ordered kneeling before me.

I stood rigidly still as he began to unwind the bandages. All during my convalescence he had used a tube and a bedpan to cleanse me of my wastes. I had not once seen what had been done to my nether regions. I was going to see, at last, what had been done to me. I can tell you that I was more than a little nervous. He came to the point where only a few bandages remained. He then carefully removed the tube. It felt odd when he removed it, not really painful, but as if something was now missing. He smiled up at me and undid the last few bandages. As the last bandage came off, he looked at my nether region studiously and then looked up at me.

“Well, Xian, what is it?” I asked in a feminine concerned voice. “Is there something wrong?”

He gave me a ghost of a smile and moved out of the way of the mirror. What I saw in the mirror stunned me, even though I had been looking at the rest of the package, nothing prepared me for what I saw. It was a perfectly formed womanhood, virginal, to be exact. Xian had been a genius! I had seen my sister's womanhood before and mine

looked just as perfect as hers' had. I felt weak on my feet and knelt there on the rug. Suddenly, Xian was there and he put a ladies night coat around me. I looked up at him in gratitude and allowed him to help me rise.

After breakfast, he left me with instructions to dress and that Trixie would be stopping by soon to begin my orientation into my new life. I went to the chest and found it filled with feminine underthings. They were all satin, silk and lace. I was embarrassed for a minute. Normal respectable women only wore cotton underthings. Apparently, these were like those that Trixie wore and she must have thought them to be natural for me to wear. I gave out a surprisingly feminine giggle and then proceeded to put them on. The panties were smooth and luxurious as I slid them on. I then stuffed my, amply developing breasts into a corset and was just beginning to tie it on when Trixie walked in.

“Good morning, Ellen. Here, let me help you with that,” she said setting down her parasol and handbag.

“Thanks, eh, Elizabeth,” I replied as she put a knee in my back and began to tie me in tightly.

“That's all right, hon. Why don't you call me Beth like we used to back home,” she said.

“Sure, Beth,” I grunted out as she tied the thing at last.

“You'll learn how to tie it yourself, given time. Of course, it will be difficult for you to reach it at first, but you will develop the needed flexibility. Let's get your make-up on and get you ready,” she ordered.

Soon she had me in make-up and dressed in a plain blue dress with a pair of hose, some fluffy white petticoats and some ladies lace up heeled boots.

“There we go. Much better, Ellen. Now listen to me and do what I say,” she said.

For the next few days, she drilled me on how to walk, how to sit, how to hold myself and how to speak like a lady. I was the victim of her riding crop infrequently, due to me remembering the lessons my mother had drilled my sister in while I had watched from the doorstep. After that, Trixie acquainted me with the feminine arts of cleaning, sewing, cooking and gave me some pointers on how to please a man. I must admit, I was blushing most of the time during the latter lessons, but I found myself wondering what it would be like to be on the other side of the sexual exchange. I remembered the lessons on how to be a respectable lady, that my mother had given my sister and integrated it with what Trixie was teaching me. It seemed like no time had passed until I was ready to leave Chin's.

On my last night in Omaha, we had a party at Chin's, just me, the Sheriff, Trixie and Xian. At the party, they all gave me gifts to get me started in my new life. The Sheriff gave me a ladies' derringer with a small box of shells explaining that a woman needed to defend herself sometimes. I thanked him and told him I hoped I'd never have to use it. He smiled and sat back down. Next, Trixie presented me with a huge carpet bag full of clothes to go with the others she had given me. It turned out, that a collection had been taken up for me when the girls at the saloon had heard that I had my luggage stolen from me. I thanked Trixie and next came Xian. The Chinese man simply

presented me with a bag full of his special herbal tea, instructing me to have a cup of it every day and to write him when I ran out so that he could send me more. I thanked him for his kindness and hugged each of them. It was going to be hard to leave such dear friends, but in order to save my life for good, it was best I leave.

After everyone had left, I lay there in bed in my best nightgown and began to think about all that had transpired over the past few weeks. I discovered that it had been an education and that I was beginning to adjust to my new role. What I found to be even more amazing was the fact that I was beginning to enjoy it. With those happy thoughts filling my head, I drifted off to sleep.

3. Westward Ho!

The next day found me delivered to the train station by the Sheriff and Trixie in his wagon. It wasn't a very elegant trip to the station, but it sure beat trying to walk there. You never know how hard it is for the womenfolk to negotiate those muddy streets in heels until you have to give it a go yourself. The first time I tried, I nearly fell in a steaming pile of horse manure. Thankfully, Trixie managed to grab me and steady me. While, the Sheriff loaded my bags on the train, Trixie got my tickets.

"Here you go, Ellen." she said handing me the tickets. "Now, I hope you let me know how things go out in Wyoming. Be sure and write me. Oh, here's the address."

I looked down at the address, noticed that it was the house of the Sheriff and replied, "When is the big day, Hon?"

"Tomorrow. We're going to be married in the church off Main Street," she replied in a gush.

"I'm so happy for you, dear. I wish I could have attended," I answered, mindful of the people around me.

"I know you do, Ellen. I'm sorry too. Can't you postpone your trip?" she asked playfully.

I noticed the Sheriff's expression and replied, "I'm sorry, but I can't. They've been without a teacher for months now and I'm overdue because of my illness. I'll write you though."

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor.

"Well, I've got to go." "Take care, Ellen." Trixie giving me a sisterly hug.

"You too, Beth. I wish you and David only the best together," I replied returning her hug.

The Sheriff helped me onto the train with a smile and the tip of his hat. As I was seated by the conductor, who also took my ticket, I gazed out the window. There on the platform, I saw the Sheriff put his left arm around Trixie and I saw her weeping as the train began to pull away. As the Omaha station faded away, it hit me that I was on my way to my new life, come what may.

As the train moved away from the Omaha station, I had a chance to relax. No one paid me any attention, so I reached into the seat pocket in front of me for something to read. The only two items in it were an old copy of the New York Times and last month's copy of Godey's Ladies Book. As not to arouse suspicion, the first one I took out was the Godey's. After cautiously opening it, I discovered that it was actually pretty good and soon found myself absorbed in the pages.

I finished Godey's by the time the conductor announced lunch in the rear dining car. I put away the Godey's and began to rise from my seat. Unfortunately, my left leg seemed to have fallen asleep and when I tried to stand up, I found myself teetering on my right boot heel. As I began to fall, I felt a hand stop me and help me right myself. I turned to face a whiskered well dressed man of forty and his lovely wife, several years

his junior, dressed in a maternity dress and just starting to show that she was with child..

“Are you all right, Miss?” he asked with concern.

“Yes. Thank you, sir. It seems that I'm just not used to the train yet.” I replied with a small laugh and a whisp of a smile.

“You're welcome, Miss,” he answered giving me a short bow.

“Are you on your way to the dining car, Hon?” asked the woman.

“Yes, ma'am,” I replied meekly.

“Oh, Alfred,” said the woman to her husband. “Let's invite her to join us for lunch.”

“A capital idea, Susan. Would you be amenable to joining us and our family for a noon repast?” he asked me formally.

“I would be delighted. I don't believe we have been introduced?” I replied.

“Excuse me. It was really quite thoughtless of me. I am Alfred Coulson and this is my wife, Susan,” he answered with a stiff formal bow.

I gave a brief curtsy and answered, “I am Ellen Holland and I'm pleased to meet you both.”

“Excellent. Shall we adjourn to the dining car?” he questioned pleasantly.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Ladies' first,” he said allowing his wife and I to precede him to the dining car.

The dining room of the Transcontinental was everything that it was reported to be. The seats were covered with the finest leather, the tables with the finest white linen, the wood work of pure mahogany and fixtures in metallic silver. It took my breath away when I first saw it and even more so when I beheld the exquisite art work between the windows. Susan led me over to a table set with six chairs. All ready setting there was a matronly lady in her mid fifties and two small children, a girl who looked about six years old and a little boy who was just at the toddler stage.

Alfred seated his wife on his left side along with his children, the matronly lady on his right with me sitting on the right side across from the two children. After seating us all, Alfred took the seat at the head of the table and called for a waiter. The waiter smiled at us pleasantly and gave us a copy of the menu.

“May I get sir and the ladies some drinks while you decide on your order?” he asked.

Alfred ordered himself a beer, Susan a small glass of wine, the matron a glass of sherry, and the children a cup of apple juice each. When it came to my turn, I followed Susan's lead although a shot of whiskey wouldn't have been amiss right then. It only took a moment for the waiter to return with our glasses.

Alfred rapped on his glass and said, “Miss Holland. Please allow me to present my children, Linda age six and Samuel age two. Also with us is Mrs. Michelle Dittman, our Nanny. Children, Mrs. Dittman, allow me to present to you Miss Ellen Holland.”

“Hi,” said Linda shyly pushing back her golden blonde hair.

“Hi, Linda. I'm pleased to meet you.” I replied smiling at the little girl.

She smiled at me shyly while the boy, promptly ignoring me, sipped from his cup. The waiter came back and took our orders. I settled for a small green salad, a small portion of chicken, a modest slice of bread with butter and a small slice of cherry pie for dessert.

“Where are you from, Miss Holland?” asked Mrs. Dittman.

“From St. Louis, originally, ma'am, but I've been away to Boston for my education for the past seven years at a finishing school,” I replied as I and Trixie had worked out in our talks before.

“What brings you back West?” asked Mr. Coulson between bites of his Kansas City steak.

“I've been trained as a teacher, Mr. Coulson. I know how difficult it is for a young person to get an education out here in the frontier and I thought I would go to Wyoming and try to find work there,” I replied spearing a piece of tomato with my salad fork.

“Well, I do declare! You're in luck then, Ellen. We've recently lost our teacher, Mrs. Tanner, last December and haven't found a good replacement yet. I think a young lady, such as yourself, could do a lot worse than Laramie!” said Susan with a gush of excitement.

“That's a wonderful idea, Susan!” exclaimed Alfred setting his mug down loudly.

“Do you think it would be possible?” I asked in a quiet voice setting my fork down on the napkin.

“Certainly it is possible, young lady. I'm not Alfred Coulson for nothing. Wyoming isn't much good for farming, but it is great cattle country. Now, I own 10,000 acres of the best grazing land on the northwest side of Laramie which makes me a rather influential man in the town. I'm sure that the mayor and the city council won't look a gift horse in the mouth. You're a trained instructress and I'm sure you could get the position with no problem!” he replied with pride.



“That would be very nice, Mr. Coulson. It would sure help to find a job quickly, I find that my meager funds haven't lasted me all that long and it would sure go a long way toward finding a place to stay,” I answered with a thoughtful smile.

“If that's got you worried, girl, think no more about it.” said Susan with a smile. “You can stay with us at the ranch. We've got plenty of room and it would be nice for the children to have an instructress living in the house.”

“Oh, I wouldn't want to impose. . .” I began quickly.

“Nonsense!” boomed Alfred. “You're coming to stay with us and that is final.”

I felt a brief surge of anger at his words. How dare he decide it for me. Wasn't it my decision to make about what to do with my new life? After a moment had passed, I felt all their eyes upon me. Their faces were filled with kindness and anticipation. I suddenly discovered that I couldn't turn down those faces, especially those of the little boy and girl across from me.

I looked up from the table and replied, “I don't know what to say, but thank you all. Thank you all very much.”

“Here's to our new teacher and our new house guest.” said Alfred raising his glass in a toast to which we all joined him.

After lunch, we went back to the coach car and sat all together. I soon discovered a kindred spirit in Susan who was so much like my sister that I became her instant friend and confidant. We spent many hours that afternoon playing with the children while she and Mrs. Dittman taught me the finer points of knitting and cross stitching. I discovered, much to my surprise, that I was rather good at it. The train made frequent stops for passengers, fuel, food and the mail all the afternoon, and as evening settled on the train, we pulled into the town of North Platte.

In North Platte, we got off the train and booked reservations at the hotel. I had my own room which was just a few doors down from the Coulson's. We had dinner together in the restaurant on the ground floor of the hotel, by the time all was said and done. It was quite dark outside and all of us were ready for bed. I had just finished washing up and putting on some face cream when I heard a knock at my door. I put on my bedroom slippers and my fur trimmed bath robe over my evening gown and went over to the door. When I opened it, I was greeted by the sight of Linda, clad only in an evening gown and holding a book in one hand and her dolly in the other.

“Hi, can I come in?” asked Linda.

I stooped down to her level and asked, “Why aren't you in bed, young lady?”

“I couldn't sleep. My brother fell asleep with Mrs. Dittman in a chair and Mom and Dad are sending a message to the stork to bring us another baby. I've been told not to disturb them. I thought you could read a story to me,” she replied handing me the book.

“Well, come in then dear and I'll read to you,” I replied rising to my feet and taking her small hand in mine while closing the door.

I took her over to the bed, threw back the covers and placed her under them. I then took off my bedroom coat, draping it over a convenient chair, and stepped out of my

bedroom slippers. The floor was damned cold and I was more than happy to hop under the covers with Linda.

She snuggled up next to me with her dolly by her side and I said, "All comfy now?"

"Yes, me and Annabell are quite comfy, ma'am," she replied setting against me.

"That should be, Annabell and I are quite comfortable, Linda," I corrected gently.

"Right. Annabell and I are quite comfortable, ma'am," she answered with a slight giggle.

"You're a silly girl, Linda. Why don't you call me Ellen, except when I'm teaching when you should call me teacher." I said giving her a hug.

"Yes, Ellen. Now, please read to me. I want to learn to read myself and Mrs. Dittman said that this was good for me," she replied with a smile on her pretty little face.

"All right, let me just undo my hair," I answered undoing the bow that held up my own red locks.

"Will you let me brush your hair, Ellen. I'll be careful," she said with a bright smile.

I sighed, handed her the hairbrush and answered, "All right. But only if I can do yours."

"It's a deal, Ellen," she replied as she ran my hairbrush through my shoulder length red hair.

"You have pretty hair, Ellen. You should let it grow long like Mommy's. It would make you even prettier," she said as she methodically brushed my hair.

I giggled a little at the thought. To think that I was getting beauty advice from a six year old! I found it quite enjoyable and relished in my turn at brushing her hair. Her hair was incredibly soft and she smelt of rose petals. In that instant, I wished more than anything that I had a daughter just like her. After a bit, we put away the hair brush and plumped up our pillows to brace us against the headboard and got comfortable.

"Now that we both look pretty, we can read your book," I replied picking the book up.

I looked down at the book and broke out in a smile. Of all the things she had chosen to bring me to read to her, she had brought Little Women! I smiled and started the book. Before we had gotten through the second chapter, Linda had fallen asleep and had snuggled down in the covers next to me with her dolly gripped securely in her right hand. I gently placed the book down on the table next to me and gazed down at the child. She was absolutely perfect and I found myself wanting to keep her exactly as she was. I then heard a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," I whispered.

"It's me, Mrs. Dittman. Have you seen Linda?" she asked as she opened the door.

I put my right index finger to my lips and shushed her. She came in quietly to where I was and looked down at the sleeping Linda with a smile.

"I see she found someone to read to her. Shall I take her back to her room now?" she asked with a smile.

"No. It's okay if she stays with me tonight. I've never had a child become this attached to me and I like it," replied smiling at her.

"I suppose it's all right. I see that you'll do just fine with the children and it seems that you've been adopted into the family. Well, I'll leave you two to sleep. Good night, Ellen," she answered turning out the gas lamp.

"Good night, Mrs. Dittman, and thank you," I replied.

"Good night, Hon," she said closing the door behind her.

As I heard her walk away, I gently scooted down under the covers with Linda and composed myself to sleep. I felt wonderful. I had a future shaping up and I had been accepted as a woman. More over, I discovered that I had a love of children and always wanted them near me. Soon, I fell asleep to the rhythm of Linda's breathing as she turned and nestled herself against my left side.

The morning came early and I felt a slight yawn and a stretch beside me. I turned to look and found Linda and her dolly looking at me.

"Good morning, Linda," I said looking at her.

"Good morning, Ellen. Thank you for reading to me," she replied.

"You're welcome, honey. Come, I must take you back to your room so that you can get dressed," I answered getting out of bed.

"Yes, ma'am," she replied as I put on my bedroom coat and bedroom slippers.

I took her over to Mrs. Dittman's room and knocked on the door. It took a few moments, but she appeared at the door.

"Good morning, Ellen," she greeted me sleepily.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dittman. I brought Linda over so that she can get ready," I said with a smile.

"Good. Come on in, Linda and I'll help you get ready," replied Mrs. Dittman.

"Can't Ellen help me get ready?" she asked quizzically.

"She has to get ready herself, child. Now run along inside," ordered Mrs. Dittman.

"Yes, Nanny," replied Linda unhappily.

"Thank you for letting me keep her for the night." I said in a gush of gratitude.

She just smiled and replied, "Think nothing of it, hon. Now you run along and get yourself presentable. It wouldn't do for one of the men folk to see you like this in the hall."

I let out a short feminine laugh and answered, "You're absolutely right, Mrs. Dittman. It would definitely not do."

With that, she closed the door and I hurried back to my room. After a quick washing up, a new application of make-up and a change of clothes, I was starting to feel awake. I carefully made my way downstairs, about an hour later, and joined the Coulson family and Mrs. Dittman for breakfast. After breakfast, we reboarded the train.

The following day and night were practically a repeat of the previous one. The next day found us pulling into Laramie about noon. Now it was time for me to face the future and the new life I had been given.

4. Laramie

Laramie immediately struck me as being a typical railroad and cattle town the moment I stepped off the train in the company of the Coulsons. It had grown large enough to have more streets rather than just a main one and even had a reasonable assortment of shops and services. I had never been through Laramie, but it was much like other of the towns I had been in, but slightly larger than most between California and the Mississippi River. It was obvious that Laramie received a large amount of its prosperity due to the railroad which transported the products of the ranches to the urban hordes in the East.

As soon as we had stepped off the train, Mr. Coulson was immediately mobbed by what appeared to be newsmen. The prevailing question seemed to be about the current state of the ranch economies in regard to an agreement that he had reached with the buyers in Chicago. While he was handling the reporters, I helped Susan and Mrs. Dittman get the children off the train as well as our luggage.

“How are we going to get out to the ranch?” I asked Susan as I grabbed Samuel who had just begun to crawl back toward the train.

“Oh, not to worry, Ellen. Alfred will just hire a rider to go out to the ranch and Jerry, our foreman, will bring a carriage to pick us up,” she replied taking Samuel from me and holding him to her chest.

“It's good to be home, isn't it. Linda?” asked Mrs. Dittman fondly.

“Yes, ma'am. It doesn't look as different as I thought it would,” she replied with a puzzled frown.

“Well, how long were you gone?” I asked her with a smile on my face.

“A whole month,” she answered proudly.

“Well, they don't often change that soon,” I said after a brief feminine laugh.

“How are you feeling, Susan?” questioned Mrs. Dittman for at least the third time that day.

“I'm fine, Mrs. Dittman. I'm only four months along and the morning sickness only lasts a little while. There's no need to fuss over me. It's not like this is new to me.” she replied a little tartly.

“Keep your skirt on, girl. I was just asking,” mumbled Mrs. Dittman turning back to gaze over the busy streets of Laramie.

After a moment, I heard Linda ask, “Who's that man with the star coming this way?”

“Why that must be the new Sheriff and I do declare, he seems to be coming over this way?” she replied to the little girl's question.

The Sheriff? For a moment there I felt an irrational surge of panic. A lawman was coming this way and it normally spelled trouble for Daran McLaughlin. I was on the verge of thinking about jumping back on the train when I suddenly realized that I had nothing to fear. As far as everyone was concerned, I was Ellen Holland, a lady of education and breeding, not Daran McLaughlin, Eastern tenderfoot turned gun for hire. I

was looking down at my feet with a grin plastered on my face, when I heard the sound of spurred boots hitting the planking approaching us.

“Good morning, Sheriff,” greeted Susan as he came to a stop in front of us.

“Mrs. Coulson, I believe. Good morning. I don't know if you remember me,” he began.

“Why of course I do, Jackson Durning. How could I forget the boy who used to torment me in school,” she replied smartly.

I heard him give a slight cough and answered, “You're looking well.”

“Why thank you, Sheriff. Oh, I'm being thoughtless. This is Mrs. Dittman, our nanny, these are my two children, Linda and Samuel, and this is my friend and school teacher, Miss Ellen Holland from St. Louis via Boston, and this is Mister Jackson Durning, the new Sheriff,” she replied introducing us.

I heard the rest of Susan's family greet him and I looked up at him with that grin still plastered on my face. By all that's holy! Jackson Durning was a devilishly handsome man. His face was finely chiseled, his eyes of blue molten metal, his hair as dark as the moistened earth and his body muscular and well formed. I was struck speechless, not so much by his appearance, but by the fact that I had noticed how truly handsome he was as a woman might notice him. It seemed that the cat had gotten my tongue, so I settled for giving him a slight curtsy and extending my hand. He quickly took my hand in his and gave it a delicate kiss. It was like someone had poured whiskey in my veins. His kiss sent a wave of heat right down my spine and right down to where I live.

“I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Holland. Welcome to Laramie. It is true that we are in need of a teacher for the younguns' but I never thought to meet a school marm as pretty as you.” he replied gallantly.

“You're too kind, Sheriff,” I managed to stammer out blushing a little.

“Well, if I can be any help to you ladies, just let me know. I hope to make amends for some of the trouble I caused when I was younger. Well, good day, ladies,” he answered as he straightened the stetson on his head and walked away from us heading for where Alfred was being mobbed by the newsmen.

“Wow! He has sure changed!” exclaimed Susan once he was out of sight.

“How?” I asked more than a little intrigued.

“Why do you ask, Hon?” asked Susan impishly.

“I'm curious, that's all,” I replied knowing that I must be turning an amusing tone of red.

“Well, honey, it's like this. About nine years ago, Jackson had a run in with the law over a gambling debt and some sexual allegations. It seems that he had been losing in a game at the saloon in town and had gotten angry when someone had accused him of being a sissy boy. Well, a gunfight ensued and Jackson was forced to kill the man in self defense. Unfortunately, the man had friends in this town, so Jackson disappeared.

We knew that a new Sheriff was coming before we left, but who would have thought it would be Jackson Durning!" she answered.

"What was the name of the man who was shot?" I asked quizzically.

"His name was Avery Callan," she replied with a puzzled expression on her face.

I felt the blood rush from my face and I began to feel a little faint. I sat down heavily on one of the trunks. I couldn't believe it. Here I was, in Laramie and here too was the man who had killed Jack's brother. I felt a keen surge of fear.

"Whatever is the matter, dear?" asked Mrs. Dittman coming over to me quickly.

I got up from the trunk and said, "I've got to go. I must see the Sheriff about something I saw in Omaha. Which way did he go?"

"He's gone back to his office, Ellen," replied Susan.

"Thanks, Susan. Can you and Mrs. Dittman deal with the children and the luggage?" I asked.

"Of course we can, dear. Now run along and tell that handsome Sheriff what you need to. We'll meet you at the Laramie Arms Hotel across the street from the Sheriff's office after Alfred tears himself away from the newsmen," she answered with a smile.

"Thank you, Susan. I'll see you later, children, you too, Mrs. Dittman," I said remembering my manners before hurrying off.

I carefully plotted my destination to the Sheriff's office, taking special care to keep my skirts out of the mud and frequent mud puddles. It didn't take long for me to get used to the men tipping their hats and calling me ma'am. The ladies just smiled as I went past and wished me a good day. I replied back in the same vein and crossed on the opposite side of the street from the saloon. I tried to ignore the cat calls and wolf whistles as I made my way gingerly down two more blocks. I was just glad that none of the men felt like accosting me yet. For the first time, I was realizing exactly how much shit a woman had to put up with. It was lucky they were so forbearing else there wouldn't be a man alive today.

At last, I arrived in front of the Sheriff's office that doubled as the town jail. It was an impressively heavy building. It sat there like a little fort surrounded by the rest of the town. It was clean though and had the look of being newly painted, which it probably was. After all, it was a town getting a new Sheriff, even if everyone knew him from his younger wild days.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" came a young voice from behind me.

I turned to look and saw a young black haired and mustached man with the star of a deputy on his vest.

"Yes, I need to see the Sheriff," I replied as steadily as I could.

"No problem, ma'am. Allow me," he said reaching past me and opening the door.

Inside myself, I let out a little moan. Now that it came down to it, I was afraid to enter the jail and see a Sheriff. But with the door opened, I had no choice but to continue with my original reason for coming. I straightened my hat, adjusted my hand bag and closed my parasol, and then I entered the jail.

Inside the jail, the floors were of rough wood as were the walls with only the thinnest coat of wax on the floor and whitewash on the walls. In the room were three desks, two of them for the deputies, a coat rack, and an iron bound door leading to the cells in the back. Sitting in the third desk, in front of a wall of wanted posters, sat Jackson Durning.

“What's up, Pete?” asked Jackson not having looked up yet from the papers on his table.

“Lady to see you, Sheriff,” answered the deputy crisply.

Jackson looked up wearily, but his face brightened as his gaze came to rest on me. Suddenly, all the fear and anxiety I had built up in me had vanished like snow in the springtime. I carefully approached him and he pulled out a chair for me. I sat down, crossing my legs daintily and waited for him to resume his seat.

“That will be all, Pete,” he said shortly after resuming his seat.

“Yes, sir. Sheriff. I'll just go make my rounds,” Pete replied with a broad grin as he left.

After his footsteps had faded, he asked, “What brings you here, Miss Holland?”

I carefully removed my hat, placed it in my lap and replied, “I don't know where to begin, Sheriff.”

“Just take it easy, Miss. Why don't you call me Jackson. It may put you more at ease,” he replied giving me a glass of water from a pitcher on his desk.

“Thank you, Jackson,” I replied sipping the water daintily.

He was patient as I finished, then I began, “On my way through Omaha, I got ill while spending some time with my best friend, Beth. While I was there, there was a shooting involving Jack Callan, Avery's brother, and a local hired gun.”

“I see. So Jack Callan's back in the area and gunning for revenge, no doubt. Who was the fellow who took a shot at him?” he replied looking at me calmly.

I gulped a bit then answered, “I believe his name was David or Daran McLaughlin. Beth only mentioned his name once.”

He didn't seem to notice anything amiss and turned to look at his board of wanted posters. There, in startling clarity, was a wanted poster of me, or rather Daran McLaughlin! The artist who had done it had done a very good job of it and it was the spitting image of me before Trixie and Xian had transformed me into a woman. I only hoped that the handsome Sheriff was too smitten with me to start making parallels between the resemblance on the poster and me. He looked over the poster most carefully and studied it for about five minutes. I let out a sigh of relief when he turned back to face me.

He stroked his clean shaven chin thoughtfully, then said, “Well, thank you, miss. I'll have to check this out. Something you may not know, the Callan brothers used to be employed by Mr. Coulson out at the ranch. When they left, they promised revenge against him. Let me know immediately if something is goin on, all right?”

“Yes, Jackson. I'll let you know the minute anything goes on. I'd better be getting back to Susan and the children,” I replied starting to get up.

“Hold on a minute, woman. Let me get that for you,” he said holding the chair for me.

I grinned at him impishly as he escorted me to the door and opened it for me.

“Thank you again, Sheriff,” I said as I stepped out.

“No, it is I who thank you. Take care and stop by and see me again,” he grinned in answer.

I only managed a foolish grin and then began to make my way across the muddy street. It was hard going, but I finally managed to arrive on the hotel side of the street. I glanced back at the Sheriff's office and noticed that Jackson was still standing by the open door looking at me. He must have watched me come the whole way like a hawk looking out for its' fledgling. I gave him a brief wave in answer and ducked into the hotel, my face aflame.

Inside the hotel, I saw the Coulson family and a couple of very distinguished looking older men. Behind the counter, the manager was filling out a receipt which he gave to Mr. Coulson and instructed some boys to take the luggage upstairs. Mr. Coulson waved for me to come over. Floating at a pleasingly feminine stride, I walked up to them.

“Ah, Miss Holland. Come let me introduce you, Mr. Mayor, this is Miss Ellen Holland from St. Louis,” Alfred said with a flourish.

“Ah, a pleasure to meet you, miss,” said the older of the two men.

“My pleasure, your honor,” I replied giving him a low curtsy.

“And this is Mr. Thompson the banker,” added Mr. Coulson.

“A pleasure, miss,” he said giving me a slight bow.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Thompson,” I answered formally.

“Alfred here tells me you're looking for a job, Miss,” said the Mayor.

“Yes, your honor. I've been trained as a teacher back in Boston and hope to take a position here in Wyoming. The Coulson's were kind enough to let me travel with them, and I learned that your fine town has need of a teacher,” I replied laying it on as thick as I could.

The Mayor was wearing a large grin and answered, “In fact we do. To help matters, it seems that Alfred here has adopted you and will provide all the room and board for you at that monstrosity he calls a ranch house. I think that in addition to that, that we can offer you the sum of \$100 a month for yourself. I know that may not be much back east, but here you'll find it more than enough.”

I thought it over for only a moment. \$100 dollars a month wasn't very much money, but I didn't anticipate spending money gambling, drinking or whoring anymore. For a school marm on the frontier, the offer was more than reasonable. All three men held their breath as they awaited my answer. There was no other choice open to me, what else was I supposed to do?

“That sounds agreeable, your honor,” I replied with a smile on my face.

“Ah, you make an old man's heart beat a little lighter with your smile. We anticipated your agreement and Thompson here will finish the details on the contract. After we handle this legal mumbo jumbo, we'll nip over to the school and show you around. We'll give you the weekend to get things ready, and then, maybe, things will get back to normal with the kids in school and not running around all over the place and getting underfoot,” answered the Mayor.

“Now, your honor, that is no way to speak about the children,” I said in a shocked voice.

“Sorry, Miss. You haven't changed you mind, have you?” he asked with concern.

I gave a little feminine laugh and answered, “Not at all, your honor. I've seen harried parents before.”

“If you'll just sign here, Miss Holland,” said the banker pointing to a space on the contract.

I quickly gave the contract the once over and signed it when it appeared to say the same thing as the agreement we had just reached. After I signed it, the Mayor and the banker signed it and so did Mr. and Mrs. Coulson as witnesses. After the ink had dried, Thompson took the contract and tucked it into his waistcoat and bided us a good day as he left for the bank.

“I'm afraid that I'm going to have to bow out of the school house inspection I'm feeling a bit tired,” said Susan who did indeed look rather tired.

“Of course, my love. Mrs. Dittman, stay here with my wife and Samuel, if you don't mind,” suggested Alfred in his calm unassuming voice.

“Yes, sir. Now come along, ma'am. Lets get you undressed and tucked into a bed,” ordered Mrs. Dittman taking Samuel from Susan's arms.

Susan mounted the stairs wearily with Mrs. Dittman bringing up the rear. Soon they had made the top of the stairs and disappeared from view.

“Daddy, I want to go too,” said Linda stubbornly.

“Of course, my angel. Come on, you can ride in the back with me,” said Alfred scooping Linda up in his arms and spinning her around shrieking with joy.

“Come along then, Miss Holland. I guess you'll have to ride up front with me,” said the Mayor ruefully.

I smiled, took his arm and replied, “I'd be honored, sir.”

He just chuckled and showed me out to the buggy he had parked out front. The mayor helped me into the front seat while Alfred and Linda piled in the back. The Mayor then climbed into his seat and encouraged the horses into action. We rode out of the west side of town just past the big white church on main street. Once past the church, we turned up a side street and up to a large red schoolhouse. It was an older structure, no doubt used for a barn until the need for a school arose. It seemed to be in good condition and I was anxious to look inside.

“Here we are, Miss Holland. Here allow me to help you down,” said the Mayor graciously.

“Thank you, your honor,” I replied as he lifted me down from the buggy.

He took a key out of his pocket and handed it to me. Meanwhile, Alfred and Linda were testing out the playground equipment, a seesaw, a set of swings and a slide made of wood with a metal lining. All the equipment was obviously homemade, but seemed to serve well enough. I took the key and inserted it into the lock. The lock opened noisily and the door creaked when I opened it. The inside of the school house was a mess. Desks were overturned, cobwebs hung from the ceiling and the floor had a thick coating of dust. The windows looked intact, but the curtains needed a good washing. The chalkboard looked okay and the cabinet full of readers looked okay, given the neglect.

“How long have you been without a teacher, your honor?” I asked.

“It's been almost a year or so, miss. I know it's a bit dirty, but we have everything here you need. If there is something else you need, let me know,” he said obviously trying to put the best face on it he could.

I shook my head at the sight. I was sure it was going to take me all weekend to get the school house ready and I didn't know where to begin. As I looked more, I recognized a place where the roof had leaked and weakened the floor.

“Mister Mayor,” I said carefully. “This roof is leaking and this floor is weak. If we don't want the children wet or broken, this needs to be fixed. We can mark off this area for now, and the weather seems to be holding so we may have a bit of time before it has to be done.”

“Yes, Miss Holland. I'll look into it tomorrow,” he promised as he walked out with me.

Out in the waning sunshine, the school had a golden glow which belied the amount of work it was going to take me to make it presentable. I gave out a sigh. At least I wasn't going to be bored this weekend. As I looked around the grounds. I saw a lone shape setting on a rail near the tree at the end of the school grounds. I saw the glit of the setting sun against the shiny metal on his chest and my heart skipped a beat. I couldn't keep my eyes off of him for I knew it could only be Jackson.

“Shall we be getting back?” asked the Mayor.

“What?” I asked him, barely hearing his question.

“Back to town?” he tried again.

I broke out of my gaze and replied, “Certainly, your honor.”

He helped me into the buggy as Linda and Alfred got in back again. Once in, with a snap of the reins, the buggy headed back into town. As I rode, I glanced at the street parallel to us. Occasionally, I caught the sight of a rider on a white horse. How fitting it all seemed. It seemed the Sheriff rode a white horse and he was watching me. I smiled at the thought and let out a contented sigh. I heard some whispering behind me, but when I turned to look, Alfred and Linda just gave me meaningful smiles. All I knew, is that tomorrow would be a working day for me.

5. Acquaintances

The next day, Saturday, bloomed fresh and sunny and I went out to the Coulson ranch with the family. The house was an hour out of town and overlooked a scenic valley full of grazing land. The sight of it enabled me to understand the significance that it took in the minds of these hearty frontier folk. It was amazing to me how after all this time, I still had a problem seeing myself as anything but an Easterner.

The ranch house, itself was a full three stories tall and had ten bedrooms. It was built in a purely Western style, but had a nice rose garden on the south side. The home looked distinguished and obviously the home of a well to do rancher.

Jerry, the ranch foreman, began to unload the buggy as the Coulson's escorted me into their home. The inside was just as impressive as the hallway had been. The interior furnishings of the house were immaculate and quite expensive. Alfred bade us to get settled in while he went out to inspect the ranch. Susan spent most of the morning showing me around including the room I would be using for as long as I was staying with them. It was a very femininely decorated room with delicate flowered fabrics and completely furnished with expensive Eastern style furniture. I spent most of that morning getting my stuff unpacked and settled then turned ruefully to the work at hand.

Mrs. Dittman offered to help me, since Susan wanted to stay at home, and so did Linda. We loaded up a lot of cleaning equipment into the carriage and Jerry offered to drive us into town. Soon we were on our way with Mrs. Dittman sitting up front with Jerry and Linda, Samuel and me in the back. After about half an hour, we pulled up in front of the school. I opened the door, and Jerry unloaded our cleaning equipment inside the front door.

"If it's okay with you, Miss, I'll take master Samuel with me and pick up some things to prop up the floor over there and get you girls some more cleaning stuff. It looks like you're just about out of it," he said with a grin on his weathered old face.

"Thank you, Jerry. That would be nice. While you're gone, we'll get started," I replied.

"Sure enough, Miss," he answered taking Samuel off the floor and heading out to the carriage.

Mrs. Dittman said in a huff, "Just like a man. The moment there's cleaning to be done, off he goes leaving it to us women!"

I just smiled and replied, "Well, I guess cleaning is too hard for the poor dears. I guess that leaves it up to us girls to keep things tidy. Right, Linda?"

"Yes, Ellen. What can I do to help?" Linda asked excitedly.

"Well, how about you and Mrs. Dittman start cleaning the furniture while I start to get this floor cleaned up," I suggested.

"Sounds good to me, Ellen. By the way, you can call me Michelle. That Mrs. Dittman stuff is only for my employers and the young'uns. Come along, Linda, and you and I will get started over here on the teacher's desk," answered Mrs. Dittman.

I picked up the bucket we had brought with us and took it out to the pump outside. I put the pump under the spout and reached for the handle. I tugged and tugged on that handle, but nothing I did seemed to make it budge. Apparently, the darned thing had rusted into position. As I was trying the handle, for the fifth time, I heard footsteps behind me and someone clearing their throat. I turned around quickly because this quite startled me. Standing there, with a stupid grin on his handsome face, was Jackson Durning. In the sunlight, his blue eyes seemed to twinkle with hidden mirth and meaning.

“Good day, Miss Ellen. Sorry if I startled you. I just happened to be passing by when I met Jerry Mason and young master Samuel heading into town. He told me you were out here with the Nanny and Linda, so I decided to mosey out and check on you. Can I help you with this pump?” he said in a friendly voice.

I dusted my hands on my apron and replied, “Why, thank you, Jackson. It seems to be stuck and I can't budge it.”

“That's okay. Let a man do that. You're too pretty to be messing with a dirty thing like that,” he answered gripping the pump handle.

He leaned his full weight against the handle and slowly, it began to budge. Sweat beaded on his face and his muscles tensed under his clothes. I couldn't believe that I was actually interested in watching him, but I was staring at him like a thirsty man at his last shot of whiskey. Soon, he had the handle open and water issued from the spout filling my bucket. About that time, Jerry arrived back with the carriage and Mr. Hanson, the owner of the general store, followed him with a wagon load of lumber and tools with his two young teenage boys.

“Hello again, Sheriff, Miss Ellen. It seems that I picked up some help as well as some tools,” said Jerry climbing down from the carriage with Samuel.

“So it seems. Good day, Mr. Hanson,” I replied as Mr. Hanson climbed down from his wagon.

“Good day, Miss Ellen, Sheriff. I brought all the stuff we need to fix



that roof and floor for ya as well as my two boys to help,” answered Mr. Hanson with a grin.

“I’ll help too,” said Jackson taking off his vest.

“Are you sure you can spare the time, Jackson?” I asked in concern.

He gave me a cheshire grin and replied, “No problem, Miss Ellen. Pete and Bert can handle things for today. I told them I’d be busy today with other things and with the cattle drives about over, there’s not too much to be concerned about. Besides, it’s not every day I get to help out a pretty thing like you.”

I was quite over come with embarrassment so I merely curtsied and went inside. Outside, I heard the gruff good natured laugh of the men as they began to unload the wagon and get started. I was greeted by a secretive little smile from Michelle and Linda who hadn’t seemed to have gotten as much done as I thought they would. From where they were, I noticed that they must have seen everything that had gone on outside. I blushed again and quickly grabbed the mop and started in on the floor.

The floor of the school was atrociously dirty and I had to make several trips out to the pump to get fresh water. Every time I so much as stepped out of the building, it seemed my eyes always sought out Jackson and he, mine. I couldn’t believe what was happening. I seemed to get a thrill every time I saw his handsome face and also seemed to enjoy being seen by him. However strange it seemed, I felt happy and it added a bit of bounce to my step and a little pep to my cleaning. After it was well past noon, I heard a commotion outside and looked out the window to see Mrs. Hanson and her daughter, Rosa, driving up in a carriage. I exited the school and went out to greet her with Michelle, who picked up Samuel, and Linda.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Hanson,” I said as she came to a stop.

“Good afternoon, you must be the new school teacher, Miss Holland,” she said with a smile.

“It’s just Ellen when I’m not teaching. What can I do for you today, Mrs. Hanson?” I asked.

“Nothing, hon. I just came out to bring you all some lunch. I figured the men might be getting a little hungry, so I packed up enough for all,” she replied.

“Oh goodness me!” I exclaimed. “I was so busy that I forgot all about lunch!”

She just laughed and said, “It may be all right for us womenfolk to miss a meal or so, but men folk want their food when they want it on a regular time table.”

From the roof, I heard, “About time you got here, Edna. We’re about starved.”

“Come on down, Frank, and bring everyone else. I brought us a picnic lunch.” she called up to him.

“Yes, dear,” he replied turning to the other men folk on the roof.

Linda and I helped Rosa and Edna set up the blankets and lay out the food. We girls all helped in serving the men folk. Michelle took care of the drinks, Rosa the utensils and plates, Linda took care of handing out the cheese and bread, I handled the roast beef and Edna served up the peach cobbler. The serving went without a

hitch, though I know I must have prolonged serving Jackson just a wee bit longer. After the men folk were settled, then we girls got our food. Me and Michelle got the children settled first and then fixed ourselves a plate. I noticed something was fishy when the only place left to set on the blanket was under the tree next to Jackson. I put a sheepish grin on my face and walked over to where he was.

“Mind if I sit down here, Jackson?” I asked sweetly.

“Not at all, Miss Ellen. As a matter of fact, I insist,” he replied flashing me a wide grin.

I couldn't help but give out a feminine giggle and settled down next to him. That lunch will be one that I will always remember. Everyone accepted me and thought of me as a member of their town and of their family. In many ways, being a woman in this town wasn't going to be bad. All during lunch, Jackson turned out to be a good speaker and a good listener. I was especially flattered that he went out of his way to make sure that I was included in most of his conversations. After lunch, we got back to work and had the school looking good enough to open on the following Monday. I thanked everyone for helping, gathered our stuff and headed out of town back to the ranch. Jackson insisted on escorting us as far as the crossroads and then waved goodbye to us as he returned to town. I waved back and watched him until he was out of sight, then I gave out a big sigh and turned back to face the way back to the ranch.

“Such a nice man,” said Michelle brightly.

“Yes, that he is,” was all I could say.

The next few months seemed to fly by. I attended church every Sunday, often finding myself in the presence of Jackson Durning, and taught school during the week. That only left me my Saturdays open and I spent a lot of time at the school preparing more lessons to keep the kids occupied. Some of those kids were really bright and I hoped that I was making a difference to them. Often, during those Saturdays and during lunch time during the week, Jackson would ride out and stay with me for that time. We seemed to get closer everyday.

Jackson frequently spent the holidays with me and the Coulson's, at their invitation. When we were together, it seemed like we had always been together. Susan, my best friend and confidant, often joked that Jackson and I looked perfect together. I often got irritated with her, but made up afterwards. In a way, it bothered me that everyone thought we were perfectly matched. If they had only known the truth, they would have run me out of town and Jackson would hate me for the rest of his life. As it was, I was satisfied to have Jackson as a friend, but allowed it to go no further. For his part, Jackson seemed to be riding with loose reins and was in no rush to press me on the matter. He had brought it up once, but I had rebuked him as gently as I could.

It was later on, in early March, when things changed for the worse. Susan was now into her ninth month of her pregnancy and could barely move. When I wasn't at the school, I aided Michelle in caring for her. Susan was really no trouble and often joked about how someday soon, it would be my turn to see what being a mother was all

about. I often just laughed with her, though deep inside, part of me yearned to be able to say yes to her insinuations. On that fine March day, I was staying home with her when I heard a knock at the door. I went to open it, and found myself face to face with a rough looking cowboy. I was just glad that he was being escorted by Jerry and a couple of the burly ranch hands.

"I'm here to see Coulson," he spat out from between rotting teeth.

I just gave a brief nod and said, "Please wait here."

I shut the door and went next door to the study. I knocked at the door and waited for it to open. The door opened and out walked Mr. Coulson with a ledger in his hands.

"What is it, Ellen?" he asked calmly.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. There is a rough looking man outside demanding to speak to you," I replied.

"Thanks, Ellen. I'll see to it," he replied handing me the ledger.

He walked to the door, opened it and said, "What do you want with me, stranger?"

The man with the rotting teeth replied, "I deliver a message from one who knows you."

"What is the message?" asked Mr. Coulson.

"If you pay the sum of one million American dollars, he will forego killing you and your children. If you do not pay, he will extract his revenge," he answered.

"You can tell him that he can go to the devil. Besides, if it's money he wants, my investors have it all in escrow and will not release it to anyone if I'm dead. Now, good day. Jerry escort him off my property and if he tries anything, kill him," ordered Mr. Coulson calmly as ordering a beer at the bar.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Coulson. Come with us and don't try anything," commanded Jerry.

The man with the rotting teeth followed without protest and was soon riding away from the ranch to the west. Mr. Coulson closed the door and turned back to face me.

"Well, it has begun," he stated flatly.

"What has?" I asked.

"Jack Callan is back with his boys and is looking for revenge," he replied.

"What's up with the money demand?" I questioned.

"Why not make some money at it.?" he answered with a shrug. "I guess I'll have to see the Sheriff tomorrow and let him know about this. Don't say anything about this to Susan and the kids. It wouldn't do to alarm them."

"I understand, Mr. Coulson," I replied.

"Good girl, Ellen. I'll be in my study if you need me," he said taking back the ledger.

"Yes, sir," I answered meekly as he returned to the study.

I don't know how he could take it all so calmly. I was nearly screaming at the thought of Jack Callan being in the same neighborhood as I was, especially since I was

now a girl, at least to external appearances, and I knew what Jack Callan did to girls he took a fancy to.

Later, that evening, we settled down for lunch and were just beginning to get started when we heard a commotion outside. Mr. Coulson calmly got up from the table, picked up his shotgun and left the house.

“What do you suppose is going on?” asked Susan in confusion.

“I don't know, Susan. I suggest we take the children and retire to the inner parlor until this is resolved,” I suggested.

“Sound move, honey.” said Michelle. “Let's wait in there until the men folk have things under control.”

With that, we retired to the parlor and sat down. Susan sat there, wringing her hands in fear and anxiety. I must confess, I felt it too. Michelle, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber and soon had the children sitting on her lap while she read them a story. After what seemed like hours, Mr. Coulson came back into the house.

“What happened, dear?” asked Susan anxiously.

“Easy there, honey. The carriage house caught fire and burned to the ground before we could stop it,” he replied putting his arms around her.

“But there were shots, Alfred! Who was doing the shooting?” she exclaimed.

“Calm down a minute, sweetheart, and I'll tell you,” he replied lowering her gently to the couch.

After a moment, she said, “I'm calm now, Alfred. Now tell me.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and replied, “Well, I got a message this afternoon with a warning. Remember that man we had trouble with last year?”

“I remember. That bastard that made a pass at me and attempted to steal us blind. Is it him?” she replied bitterly.

“I'm afraid so dear. This time, he has threatened to harm you and the children,” he answered.

“That, that, man! Alfred, you have to do something,” she said angrily.

“I'll ride in and see the Sheriff tomorrow,” he promised.

“I'll go too, if you don't mind, Mr. Coulson,” I interjected.

He just nodded his head and said, “Come on, dear, let me take you to bed.”

Susan murmured her agreement and the two walked arm in arm up to their bedroom.

“This isn't good at all,” said Michelle after they had left the room. “With her in her condition, this could complicate matters when the baby comes.”

“Will she be all right?” I asked in concern.

“She will if I have anything to say about it. I've seen women give birth prematurely when they're under a lot of stress and it sure looks like this may happen here. The best I can do is have my midwifery gear ready,” she replied solemnly.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“That's good of you, Ellen. Of course you can. I'll need all the help I can get when the baby comes,” she answered.

“Fine, explain to me the basics,” I said sitting down next to her.

6. Revelations

The next day arrived with only a trace of frost in the air. Fred, one of the ranch hands, volunteered to drive me and Mr. Coulson into town. We sat out early after a brief breakfast and arrived in town just as most of the stores were opening. Fred took us right up to the front of the Sheriff's office where we found Pete setting out in front.

"Good morning, Mr. Coulson, Miss Ellen. What can I do for you?" he asked politely.

"Morning, Pete. Is the Sheriff in," asked Mr. Coulson climbing down from the seat besides Fred.

"Certainly, sir. Here, allow me, Miss.," said Pete helping me down from the carriage.

"Thank you, Deputy," I replied.

"My pleasure, miss. If you'll both just follow me," he answered opening the door for us.

Mr. Coulson motioned me in first and then followed me in with Pete. The inside of the jail had brightened up a bit, especially with the curtains I had made for the windows, with Susan's help. Sitting there was Jackson Durning polishing his gun.

"Good morning, Mr. Coulson, Miss Ellen. Here have a seat. Allow me, Miss Ellen," said Jackson getting us seated before resuming his seat.

"What can I help you with?" asked Jackson after he had resumed his seat.

"We were threatened yesterday afternoon by a stranger. He had a message from Jack Callan that he was to deliver." stated Mr. Coulson calmly.

"What was the message?" asked Jackson intently.

"That I pay the sum of one million dollars or else they would kill my wife and children," answered Mr. Coulson levelly.

"Why the cold blooded son of a . . ." swore Jackson.

"Yes. Anyway, he couldn't get the money unless I sign for it and I have no intention of making that man rich. What are you going to do about it, Sheriff?" replied Mr. Coulson.

"I'll organize a posse at once and we'll start looking for him and his gang," answered Jackson angrily.

While this conversation was going on, I examined the posters on the wall. Something about one of them was bothering me. Suddenly, I saw it. Down near the bottom of the wanted board was a drawing of the man who had delivered Jack Callan's message. I let out a gasp as I recognized him.

"What is it, Ellen?" asked Jackson in concern.

"That's him! He's the one that delivered Callan's threat!" I exclaimed pointing at the wanted poster.

Jackson looked at where I was pointing, took off the poster and asked, "Are you sure, Miss Ellen?"

I took the poster from him, looked at it and replied, "That's him, Jackson. I'm sure."

Mr. Coulson looked at it and said, "She is quite correct. That is the man, Sheriff."

"Well so Cougar Stevens has teamed up with Jack Callan. Well, well, well. If Jack's put together a new gang with that lot, he could be a lot of trouble," replied Jack thoughtfully.

"Does this change things, Sheriff?" asked Mr. Coulson.

"Not really, Mr. Coulson. However, I think it might be a good idea if I have one of my Deputies watch your house," said Jackson.

"Thank you, Sheriff. I'll have my own boys help with the search except what I need to defend the ranch," said Mr. Coulson getting up.

"Thank you, Mr. Coulson. I'll get started right away. Could you stay a moment, Miss Ellen?" he replied.

"Certainly, Jackson," I answered meekly.

"Very good. I have some things to do at the bank. I'll see you out front in about an hour or two, Ellen. Good day, Sheriff," said Mr. Coulson leaving the office with Pete.

After the door had shut, Jackson resumed his seat and said, "Well, it looks like I won't be able to see you for a while, with Jack Callan and all."

"That's all right, Jackson, You have a job to do and I'm very proud of you," I replied fluttering my eyelashes.

"Why thank you, Ellen. That means a lot to me. Permit me to escort you around, at least for a little while," he answered with a pleading look in his eyes.

Who was I to deny him?

"Certainly, Jackson. I would be honored to have you escort me," I said with an easy grin.

He got up, helped me out of the chair and escorted me out of the jail. At least for today, the streets of Laramie had dried out so that I didn't have to fight the mud and mud puddles today. Jackson offered me his arm and soon we were strolling arm and arm down the street. The children were running about on that fine Saturday and several of them greeted me and the Sheriff. I imagined that we must have raised a few eyebrows as we strolled down the street. At last, we came to Hanson's General Store.

"Let's go in for a minute, Jackson," I suggested.

"Certainly, Miss Ellen," he replied with a smile.

We walked in the door to the jingle of the bell and found Mrs. Hanson behind the counter.

"Good morning, Edna," I said as she turned to greet us.

"Well I do declare, if it isn't our school teacher being escorted about the town by the Sheriff. What can I do for you today, Hon?" asked Mrs. Hanson.

"Just need to buy a few things," I replied digging for the list I had put in my purse.

Mr. Hanson came out of the back room and engaged Jackson in conversation. They were talking low, so that I didn't hear what they said and they went into the back room

together. While Mrs. Hanson was helping me fill out my order, I noticed, setting on a sewing dummy, the most marvelous dress I had ever seen. It was white and lacy and made of fine white satin. The lace work was made into delicate roses that circled the neckline, hem line and cuffs of the arms of the garment. All in all, it was the prettiest thing I had ever seen in Hanson's store.

"Wow! That sure is some dress, Edna!" I exclaimed as I came across it.

"That it is, Ellen. It came here all the way from France. It's what the high class ladies in Paris are wearing this year. It's a might too fancy for wearing around here most of the time. You interested?" asked Mrs. Hanson with a grin.

"It's probably too rich for me, Edna. Besides, where on Earth would I wear such a pretty gown?" I asked.

"Well, it is a might expensive, but I'm sure a pretty girl like you could find something to wear it too," she replied with a big open smile.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Edna. Let's just finish this up. I wonder what Jackson is up to?" I asked of no one in particular.

"Keep your skirt on girl. He'll be along when he's ready. Can't hurry the men folk up too quickly. Here, we'll finish up your list," she said pleasantly.

After about another twenty minutes, I had my items purchased and taken out to Mr. Coulson's carriage. About that time, Jackson and Mr. Hanson came from out of the back room smiling and wishing each other a good day.

"Have I been keeping you long?" asked Jackson when he saw me.

"Not at all. Edna and I were just finished," I replied.

"Shall I escort you to your carriage, Miss Ellen?" he asked formally.

"Why certainly, Jackson. Good day to you, Edna," I answered merrily.

"Good bye, dear. And a good day to you, Sheriff," she said.

Jackson tipped his hat to her and opened the door for me. He offered me his arm again and we started off down the street to the bank. As we arrived at the front of the bank, Mr. Coulson was exiting, apparently done with his business.

As we came up to the carriage, Jackson said, "Well. Until I see you again, Miss Ellen."

He helped me up into the carriage and as I was seated, I impulsively suggested, "When you get back let's get together for a picnic."

Jackson took off his hat, flashed me a smile and replied, "I can't think of anything that would be more pleasant. I look forward to it, although it may take me a few weeks to wrap this up to everyone's satisfaction."

"Good bye, Jackson. Take care and return to us safe and sound," I said as Fred started the carriage in motion.

"I will. I have something to come back for," he answered as we pulled out of hearing.

He waved to me as he reentered the jail and soon Laramie was behind us. I turned back around in my seat and gave out a sigh. It was going to seem like a long time without seeing him. I looked up to see Mr. Coulson looking down at me with a fatherly grin. I just gave him a brief smile and looked down to see myself wringing my hands.

I was miserable for the next three weeks and I must have let on about it. Everyone avoided me most of time because I seemed to always be in a foul mood. I tried not to let it interfere with my work, but every now and then, Jackson's face came unbidden to my mind. I buried myself in my work but it never seemed to help much. I checked in with Pete and Bert everyday to see if there was any news from Jackson, but so far nothing much was going on.

It was the last day of May and I went to the jail to make my normal inquiry when I had finished class. I walked up the walk to the jail with my parasol held up to keep off the sun. It had turned unusually warm for late March and I hoped that Jackson would make it back before the weather turned foul again. As I walked up to the door of the Sheriff's office, Pete opened the door and stepped out.

"Miss Ellen. Good news. The Sheriff is on his way back with the posse. They ambushed those desperadoes and killed most of 'em, but he says that Callan and a couple of his boys got away. They tried to track them down, but they managed to loose the Sheriff and the boys. The Sheriff is high tailing it back here in case he tries to sneak into town," said Pete hurriedly.

"Is that all he says?" I asked pointedly.

"Not quite, Miss. He also sent this for you," he replied handing me an envelope.

"Thank you, Pete, for everything. When is Jackson due back in?" I questioned putting the envelope in my purse.

"Day after tomorrow, if the weather holds. He should be out near Ox Bow by now. Well, that's all the news for now, miss. I've already seen Mr. Coulson and told him about it. If I can't help you with anything else, a good day to you, miss." answered Pete tipping his hat.

"Good day to you, deputy," I replied giving him a little dip of a curtsy.

He just grinned and walked off down the street toward the saloon. I, on the other hand, walked back the way I had come from the school. No doubt, Jerry was waiting there with the carriage cursing me for taking so long to check up on Jackson. Jerry is a grumpy old coot but was a loyal as a bloodhound for which I was extremely grateful.

The closer I got to the school, the more curious I got as to what Jackson had written to me. I firmly resolved to wait until I was back in my room at the ranch before I read it. At last I arrived at the school and sure enough, Jerry was waiting at the gate with the carriage.

"Good day, Jerry. I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," I said as I came up to him.

"Yeah. Come along, Miss. I'd best get you home before it gets dark or Michelle will have my ears cut off and fed to the dogs," he replied grumpily.

“She wouldn't do that, Jerry. She's getting much too fond of you,” I answered as he helped me into the carriage.

“If you say so, Miss,” he said starting the horses on their way.

On the way, it seemed like my purse had a flaming spot in it as that letter threatened to burn if I didn't read it. A part of me was afraid to read what it said, another part rejoiced that he had written me in the first place. I was grateful when the ranch came into view.

Jerry helped me out of the carriage and I went inside. I greeted everyone, had a late dinner and retired to my room. Once there, I could contain myself no longer. I reached into my purse and pulled out the fateful letter. With a letter opener, from the vanity, I opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was written in an incredibly bad hand, but was unmistakably Jackson's. It said:

Dearest Ellen,

I write to you in the hope that you are well and no threats have come against you and the Coulson's while I have been away. Pete has undoubtedly told you of our work so far, so I won't dwell on it. There is still some danger, so I'm on the way back as soon as I can.

I've missed you these past few weeks and half the boys think I'm obsessed with finding Jack Callan. They may be right at that. While he may not have directly threatened you, he came too damn close.

I think of you constantly and hope to see you soon.

Well, that's all for now. I'm sorry I can't think of sweeter words for your pretty ears but I'm just an old cowpoke turned lawman and I can only say I want to see you again.

With thoughts of you,

Jackson

As I finished reading the letter, I started to cry. That dear man was thinking of me and missing me. I couldn't believe that there was someone in the world like that. But, I can't let this romance go on. It isn't fair to him. I could never be the kind of wife he would want, heck, I couldn't even be the woman that he'd want and it would break his heart if he ever found out the truth about me. With those thoughts, I really began to cry with earnest. As I wept, I heard the door open and soon found myself crying on Michelle's shoulder.

“What ever is wrong, dear?” she asked me in concern.

I just handed her the letter and kept on weeping. She read the letter and then cradled me in her arms.

“He'll hate me when he finds out and I don't want to hurt him,” I sobbed.

“What will he hate about you, honey?” she questioned soothingly.

“The truth about my past,” I wept bitterly.

“It will all work out for the best, dear. Tell him the truth and if he really loves you, it won't matter. All that matters is that you love him and he loves you,” she replied.

“Are you sure, Michelle?” I asked now only sniffing.

“I am, dear. Now go wash your face and to bed with you. Can't have you looking worn out now can we?” she said friendly.

“Thank you, Michelle,” I answered not feeling as bad as I had.

The next day was a bewildering array of wonder as I held school and planned for the picnic. The classes went smoothly that day, unlike the previous few weeks, and the students noticed I was in a much better mood. All of them, seemed to know that the Sheriff was coming back and that their teacher was happy because of it. The little darlings knew me better than I knew myself.

That evening, I was so worked up that I had problems getting to sleep. I'm afraid that I must have tired out Susan and Michelle with my insistent checking if everything was ready for tomorrow. It was well past midnight before I managed to get to sleep.

The next day dawned warm and clear. It was going to be a great day for a picnic with a mild spring day. The morning sun seemed brighter to me today, the air cleaner and the world smelled of wild flowers. Susan, Linda and Michelle had helped me prepare all morning and I felt like one of those stage stars. At last, all was ready and I was sitting in my best yellow sunders on the porch waiting for him.

Just before noon, I saw him coming up the road astride his white horse. He was wearing his best suit and vest. His black stetson sported a shiny silver buckle as did his black belt. His black shoestring tie accented his white shirt. His boots were shined to perfection and he had a bundle of posies in his left hand. I got up to my feet as he approached and Michelle and Linda came out to stand with me.

“Good day, Miss Ellen, Miss Coulson and Mrs. Dittman,” he said casually.

“Good day, Sheriff,” answered Linda and Michelle.

“It's good to see you again, Jackson,” I replied with a smile from under my flowered bonnet.

“Here's some pretty flowers for a pretty girl but they are not as pretty as you,” he said gallantry handing me his bundle of posies.

“Thank you, Jackson. They're lovely,” I answered brightly.

Just then, Jerry walked around the edge of the house leading a saddled and packed mare.

“Here's your horse, Miss Ellen. She's all packed and ready to go,” he said with a smile.

Jackson got down off his horse and came over to me. He practically picked me up and sat me on onto the side saddle on the horse. I wasn't the greatest at riding side saddle yet, but I could manage well enough. Jackson got back astride his white horse. We bade everyone farewell and we rode away from the ranch. We rode for a half hour until we came to a little meadow next to a lake under the shade of a willow tree.

“Let's have our picnic here,” said Jackson.

“Looks positively enchanting,” I replied.

Jackson got off his horse and helped me down. We then unloaded the bags and spread the picnic out on the shore. It was a delightful picnic. While the food was ordinary, the conversation was not. It was so good to have him back. We talked and talked and talked. After a while, the silences became longer and I found myself setting very close to him. He seemed a bit nervous and then turned to face me.

“Ellen,” he said. “I’ve got to tell you something,” I sighed heavily, “And so do I.”

“Please let me go first before I lose my nerve?” he pleaded.

I nodded yes and then he continued, “We’ve been seeing each other for over five months now and I’ve grown more than just a little fond of you. You’re such a wonderful lady that I can only hope that you will consent to become my wife.”

I was stupefied. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Jackson Durning, a man, was proposing to me, a eunuch, a less than man or woman. It tore me up inside, but I knew what I had to do.

“I can’t, Jackson. I can’t tell you how much I wish I could say yes. But there are things you won’t be able to accept about me,” I said beginning to sob.

“What things, my love. There is nothing I can’t accept,” he replied with love in his voice.

I got up angrily and spat out, “You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re going to hate me for it but here’s the truth. I’m not Ellen Holland. I never have been. I’m not even a girl. I’m a eunuch who used to be a man called Daran McLaughlin. I didn’t mean to deceive you or hurt you. I love you, even though I know that you will probably hate me and even kill me!”

With that last outburst, I raced for the mare, vaulted into the saddle and took off. Behind me, I heard Jackson yelling for me to stop and come back. I was too upset to hear or listen to anything. I was lost in my sorrow and headed for the ranch sobbing all the way.

7. Held Hostage

I rode hard all the way back to the Coulson ranch. I was so lost in my sorrow, that I didn’t even notice that the sentries that Jackson had posted were missing. I rode practically up to the house when a man stepped out armed with a pistol. I was shocked to see that it was a rather beaten up Jack Callan.

“Hold it, Miss. Off that horse,” he said pointing the gun at me.

I reigned the horse in and slid off the saddle. I stood there as he approached me at gun point. I wasn’t going to move looking down the business end of a 45 caliber pistol. He approached me and with the sun to my back, apparently didn’t recognize me.

“Okay, this way woman,” he said motioning me inside with the gun.

Suddenly, one of the dogs came racing around the house growling and barking. The barking set the mare to running as the dog arrowed in on Jack. Jack calmly lowered his revolver and shot the dog dead.

“Inside, girl, or you’re next,” he growled.

I quickly entered the house and found three of Callan's thugs guarding Mr. Coulson and little Samuel.

"I'm sorry to see you here, Ellen," said Mr. Coulson miserably.

"Don't be, Alfred. You have all your women with you here now. Now, I'm a patient man, but I want that money or else I will kill you all as my consolation prize. I'll start with you're Nanny first and then this young woman. Next it will be your boy, then your daughter and your wife," spoke Callan menacingly.

"I keep telling you, Jack, that I don't have the money here," replied Mr. Coulson.

"Then get it, Coulson, or start looking for a new family," answered Jack coldly. "Reb, take this girl and put her with the others, don't want some damn petticoats interfering with a man's work."

A rough looking outlaw motioned me with his gun toward the stairs. He followed me up the stairs, pointing the gun at my back and up to Susan's room. He relieved a man there and motioned me to go inside. I opened up the door and went in. There were Michelle and Linda sitting next to Susan, she was pale and not moving. I went down and sat next to them. They were both weeping. It was obvious, Susan was dead. I too cried. She had been the best friend I had and now she was gone. Linda put her arms around my neck and sat in my lap and cried.

"She died having the baby but it was stillborn. Ah, if only I had more time, I could have saved her, but those damn scoundrels ruined it all. They killed her," she sobbed.

I sat there for a time, with a child crying in my arms. I held her close and cradled her. Poor little Linda and poor little Samuel. Now they had no Mommy because of Jack Callan and his ruffians. After awhile, one of Jack's hooligans threw Samuel in with us and then we heard horses as one of Jack's men rode out with Mr. Coulson toward town.

After a time, the sound of rough footsteps approached. After a brief greeting of the guard at the door, the door opened and Jack Callan looked in. He looked at us all, tear streaked and miserable.

He turned to the guard and said, "I'm getting a might hungry for some female cooking, Reb. No sense that the old petticoat there can't fix us some supper while we wait until Alfred and Brezlin get back. Take the younger petticoat and the young'uns over to that other bedroom there. Lock them in and stand guard."

"What about my grub, boss?" asked the man.

"I'll have her bring it to you, Reb. Now keep them safe, for now. They're our insurance policy on Coulson. Keep you're head and we'll be rich," replied Callan gruffly.

"Sure, boss," answered the man.

"Come on out, you all," ordered Jack waving us out with his gun.

I kept my head low and partially hidden by my sunbonnet. Fortunately for me, Jack seemed to have other things on his mind than some women and the children. He motioned Michelle to proceed him while Reb, moved the children and I to a bedroom,

the very same one I had been using. He locked us in and leaned against the wall. The children and I went over and sat down on my bed.

“Who are these bad men, Ellen?” asked Linda between sobs.

“Just that, Linda. Very bad men,” I answered trying to comfort her.

“My Mommy's gone?” she asked in disbelief.

“Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. She's gone to heaven and will meet you there when your time comes. Now, hush. Do you think you're Mommy would like you to cry all night long? I know you're hurt and so am I. Look at Samuel, he's taking it as well as he can and he's younger than you,” I said gently.

“But he's a boy. He's supposed to be tough, that's what Poppa says,” she replied stifling a sob.

“True, but us girls can be tough too. Now finish up with you're crying. We've got work to do,” I answered trying to lighten the mood.

“What work, Ellen?” questioned Linda.

“We've got to plan our escape. I doubt if your Father has any intention of paying these goons after what happened to your Mother. Whatever he has planned, we must be ready to act to get away. The Sheriff and his men are not far away,” I replied.

“You like the Sheriff, don't you?” asked Linda innocently.

That kind of took the breath out of me. She had asked it so innocently. How was she supposed to know the inner turmoil she had let loose within me. Did I like him? I suddenly realized that I really did and found within me that it was much more than that. How could I have done this? How could I be in love with Jackson Durning? Linda had watched me for a long moment with those innocent brown eyes of hers. They were so pure and so sweet that they pierced my very soul. I felt compelled to answer her.

“Yes, honey. I like him a whole lot,” I said simply.

“Like Mommy liked Poppa?” she questioned with a pointed look.

I sighed out loud and answered, “Yes, Linda. Just like your Mommy loved your Poppa.”

“Good. Now tell me what to do. I want to make those bad men sorry for what they did,” she said angrily.

“We've got to get away first,” I reminded her.

“Right, teacher,” replied Linda with fire in her little voice.

Linda and I took inventory of our situation. Now, my room was situated on the end of the house next to the porch facing the remains of the carriage house and the stables. The porch was only about eight feet under the window and had a tree close to my end of it. If I could figure out a way to get the children down to the top of the porch, Linda could climb down with Samuel and run to the stable and hide. It would take a diversion, and I knew what the diversion would have to be. It would have to be something that would catch Callan completely off guard and had to happen as soon as Mr. Coulson returned from town.

It was starting to get late and soon they would be back. Acting swiftly, Linda and I began to pull the covers off my bed. After we had stripped the bed, we put the pillows and comforter back on the bed and knotted the sheets together into a rope. I tied one of the ends of our makeshift rope to the bottom leg of the bed and curled the rest under it. I cautioned the children to be quiet and pretend it wasn't there. After about an hour and a half, Michelle came up with some food for us. The guard let her in and shut the door behind her.

"Here's some food children, Ellen." she said handing us each a plate of food.

I replied gaily, "That's great, Michelle. The children are starved."

We ate in silence and soon heard the muffled breathing of a man at rest.

I moved over next to Michelle and whispered, "I have a plan to get the children and you out of here."

"Whatever have you got planned, girl?" she replied in a low voice.

"Linda and I have made a makeshift rope out of the sheets on my bed. I'm going to have to keep the guard and Callan busy while you three hightail it over to the stable. Hide there. Jackson and his men can't be too far away," I said softly.

"It's too dangerous, girl. You could get killed," she answered sharply.

"Hush. I know that, but we have the children to think about. I'm nobody important, they are and you are the best one to care for them. I know that their Poppa might not make it out of this alive. Callan hates him too much to let him live. Now, you take care of those little ones and let me do what I have to do," I replied with deep resignation in my voice.

Michelle went quiet for a moment and turned away from me. I looked out the window at the dying sun. In the distance, I could hear the approach of two horses. It was no doubt, Callan's goon and Mr. Coulson coming back from town loaded with Mr. Coulson's money. It was almost show time.

Michelle turned back to me and whispered, "Are you sure about this, honey?"

"Yes, Michelle. Quite sure. If there is a chance for these children to escape alive, I owe them that much. Wish me luck, Michelle. I'm going to need it once I face Callan," I replied.

"How are you going to distract him long enough for me and the children to get away?" she asked in puzzlement.

I breathed heavily and replied, "Callan and I back a long way."

"Is that what you were referring to about telling the Sheriff about your past?" she questioned pointedly.

"Yes," I replied uncomfortable with telling her a half truth.

"All right, honey. Do what you have to, but don't take too many chances you don't have to. I think we'd like to have you around a bit longer in these parts. You got enough spunk though, that's for sure. That's what it takes out here on the frontier to be a Laramie Lass," she said with a grin.

Laramie Lass! Well I guess that was what I was now and I'd be the best one I could be. I returned Michelle's grin, got up, prettied myself up at the vanity, smoothed my dress and walked to the door. I knocked on it, and Reb, the guard opened it.

"What is it, girl?" he growled out roughly, obviously upset at having fallen asleep.

"Take me to Callan. I think I've got something he might want," I replied fluttering my eyelashes.

Reb gave me a big grin and replied, "That you might, girl. Normally, Jack's all business, but I think he might be in the mood for a bit of pussy after he's gotten old Coulson to sign over his wealth. Come along then and I'll lock in these others and take you to the boss."

He motioned me out with his pistol. I saw Michelle nod her head as he shut the door and locked it. He then motioned me toward the stairs ahead of him. I was nervous as hell as I walked down the stairs with my petticoats swirling around my legs. I knew that I was going to die. There was no doubt about it, but probably not until Jack and his boys had a little sport with me first. Reb motioned me ahead and into the main setting room. In the room, I saw Callan with his other two goons and a rather disheveled and beaten up Mr. Coulson.

"What is this, Reb?" growled out Callan who had been pressuring Coulson to begin signing the papers over to himself.

"This here petticoat has something you might want, boss," Reb replied with a nasty leer.

"Ha! Ha! I might just at that. Set that pretty piece of fluff over there in the chair. Vain, you watch her. Now, Brezlin, relieve Reb for a spell so he can help me convince Coulson to start writing," answered Jack turning back towards Coulson.

Brezlin left and left me with Reb. Now Reb was a dumb man and could only do what he was told to do by Callan. He didn't watch me too closely so I managed to take a peek out the window. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Michelle and the children running for the stable and to safety. I let out a little sigh of relief and turned back to the matter at hand. Namely, staying alive for the next few minutes. They beat on Coulson for a time and soon he fell unconscious.

"Well, give him a break, Reb. Maybe, he'll come to and be more cooperative. Now, though, let's have a look at this girlie," said Callan with a sinister leer.

As they approached me, I felt the cold hand of fear grip me. Reb reached over and dragged me to my feet and moved behind me.

"Now don't fight, girlie. You were the one who wanted it. Now let Jack make you feel good," said Callan as he began to undo his trousers.

Jack slowly undid his belt and pants. As he let the front of his red union suit open, his huge cock came out stiffly at attention. He looked down at me with a nasty smile and motioned to Reb. Reb grabbed me by the shoulders and forced me onto my knees.

"Now, girlie. Take Daddy's candy into your mouth and make him feel good. If you please him, maybe he won't kill you," spoke Callan with an evil grin.

What choice did I have? If Callan guessed who I was right away, the children and Michelle might not make a clean get away. I had to save those precious children so I opened my mouth and slid his manhood into it. He began to move it in and out of my mouth. The taste of it was awful. He hadn't washed in weeks and he smelled badly. He just grunted and grabbed me by my bonneted head.

“That's the way, girl. Lick my manmeat. Make me feel good. That's it bitch! Suck that cock!” he exclaimed lost in the feeling.

With him holding my head, I had little choice. Soon, he was spurting his hot manseed into my mouth. I nearly gagged as Reb held my nose to make me swallow it. Jack then made me lick him clean.

“Well, that was pretty good, girlie. Now, I think I'll rape the shit out of that pretty pussy of yours, then the boys can have a go at you.” he said looking down at me admits my petticoats.

I knelt there in total abject terror when Brezlin came running down the stairs.

“We're in trouble, boss! The old petticoat and the children are gone and I just saw some men moving in the woods yonder!” exclaimed Jenkins excitedly.

“Damn. You did this, bitch!” yelled Callan viciously back handing me.

I gave out a cry of pain and dropped to the floor. Fortunately, I managed to do so away from Callan. It hurt and I started to cry softly. All except Reb turned from me and took positions near the windows and the front door.

Outside, I could hear Jackson yelling out, “Come out with your hands up, Callan. We have you completely surrounded. If you harm anyone, it will go bad for you. If you surrender, you will be given a fair trial.”

“Bring me that petticoat,” ordered Callan pointing at me.

Reb came over, grabbed me roughly and took me to Callan. Callan got my left arm in a painful lock and pointed his gun at my head.

“Open the door, Reb,” commanded Callan.

Reb opened the door and Callan marched me out on the front porch.

“No deal, Sheriff. I've got Coulson and this petticoat here. If you try to rush the place, I'll kill'em both. Now move back away or she gets it now!” threatened Callan.

“Hold your fire men. Move back,” ordered Jackson.

At that moment, Jack lurched as something hit him from behind grabbing his gun arm. While Jack was distracted, I got loose from his arm, kned him in the groin and pulled up my skirts and started running for the stables. Behind me, shots erupted but I kept my hairless stocking clad legs pumping at full speed. Some shots, obviously fired by the outlaws, came pretty close to me and as I came abreast of a huge water trough, I stumbled. I wheeled around and fell backwards into the water trough. With the shots ringing around me, I did my best to find the bottom of that water trough and stick to it. It seemed like hours, but I was forced to surface as I ran out of air. Standing there with a couple of bullets in him was Callan. As he looked at my sopping wet

and bonnetless head, he suddenly smiled in recognition and pointed his gun at my face.

“Time to die, pansy,” he sneered with his finger whitening on his trigger.

“No way, Callan!” I heard from beside him.

As Callan turned to shoot the person next to him, he suddenly jerked backwards as a shotgun blast took off the top of his head. Callan fell heavily and moved no more. I was splattered with blood and prayed to God that it was over. As Jack lay still, a shadow fell across me. There, in the light of the setting sun with a shotgun in his hand was the most handsome man alive, Jackson Durning.

“So, it seems I've arrived just in the nick of time,” he said with a grin.

“Get me out of here, Jackson,” I said filled with embarrassment.

“Not until you promise me,” he replied sternly.

“Promise you what?” I asked in complete surprise.

“You know what, woman. Don't give me that,” he answered angrily grabbing me by my head and dunking me.

I sputtered out water and saw Michelle and the children approaching me with the rest of the Sheriff's men. They gathered up semicircle around us and settled down to watch.

“Jackson, please. Just let me out. You don't really want me to say it, do you?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, girl. I want you to say it or you'll be sitting in there a very long time until you do,” he replied.

“Michelle?” I pleaded.

“He's the Sheriff, honey. Better do what he says,” she laughingly replied.

I looked down shyly and said, “All right, Sheriff. I will.”

“You will what? Say the whole thing!” he ordered.

I looked him straight in the eyes and replied, “Yes. I'll marry you if that's what you really want.”

He nodded his head, flashed me a prize winning grin and answered, “That's exactly what I want. Now, upsy daisy.”

He plucked me out of the water and with the others looking on, kissed me deeply. I barely notice the cheering from the rest of the people as his sweet tongue entered me and sent me to paradise.

8. Man, Wife and Family

The next day was very difficult for me, Michelle and the Coulson children. Funerals for Mr. and Mrs. Coulson and their stillborn child were held that following day in the church at town. I wore black and stood near the children, with Michelle, to provide them with as much comfort as I could. The children managed the ceremony well enough, but broke into tears when we went to the cemetery.

Mr. Coulson had purchased a couple of plots in the cemetery and there they were laid to rest. We buried the unnamed stillborn child with Susan. Everyone in town filed past us that day as we laid them to rest. The children buried themselves in my skirts and cried the whole time. All I could do was hold them and let them let their sorrows out.

After the funeral had broken up, Thompson, the lawyer, approached me and said, "My condolences to yourself and the children."

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," I replied simply.

"I know this is an inconvenient time, but Mr. Coulson's will and business affairs will have to be put in order. He made some changes to his will and left them at the bank. Please stop by with the children tomorrow so we can get this behind us," he stated with professional but tender concern.

"We'll have to see about that, Mr. Thompson. This has been very rough on the children," I answered.

"That is all I can hope for at this time, Miss Holland. Until we meet again later," he replied tipping his hat.

"Until later, Mr. Thompson," I replied with a dip of my head.

Mr. Thompson patted the children on the head and moved off. He walked the walk of a man who had just had to do something very distasteful and was now glad it was over. No doubt a man in his profession had to do things like this at awkward times. But that was of no importance.

I stood there with the children until they finished covering the graves and then we placed flowers on the graves. We then knelt in prayer with Linda bawling out her love for her parents while Samuel looked around with loss in his eyes. He ran over to me and buried himself on my chest. After a bit, Linda rose up and came over to where I was kneeling.

"Let's go now, teacher. I don't want to stay any longer. Take us home," she said wiping the tears from her soft brown eyes.

"All right, honey," I replied picking up Samuel and taking her hand in my right.

We walked out of the graveyard and climbed into the carriage that Jerry had waiting for us. Jackson, who had stood near us during the ceremony approached us from where he had been standing next to a tree.

"Is it all right if I stop by later?" he asked softly.

"Yes, but make it later on tonight. The children are going to be difficult to put to bed," I replied.

"I can see that," he replied. "Children. I know this is hard for you. I lost my Mom and Dad when I was little."

"You did, Sheriff!" exclaimed Linda.

"Yes, I did. So if I can do anything to help, just let me or Ellen know," he offered simply.

Linda nodded and replied, "Thank you, Sheriff. Let's go, Uncle Jerry."

"Certainly, Miss Linda," answered Jerry starting the carriage in motion.

Jackson held up his hand and I waved good-bye to him as we rode out of the cemetery. Soon we were out on the road to the Coulson ranch. As we rode in silence, I couldn't help but think what was going to happen to the poor little waifs. They were alone in the world and looked completely lost. I couldn't help but wish that there was something I could do for them.

An hour later, we arrived at the ranch. Some of the townsfolk and Jerry had cleaned up the place and set it to rights. The wreckage of the carriage house had been hauled away and the bullet holes in the house had been patched. It still needed a fresh coat of paint to make it look right and some new wallpaper to cover the white plaster spotted walls.

We had a cold supper and none of us ate very much. After dinner, Michelle and I put the children to bed. They had problems getting to sleep and it took us several hours of consoling to get them to sleep. After we had finally gotten them to sleep, Michelle and I retired to the setting room. We had ourselves a glass of brandy and sat down in the chairs.

"Well, at last they're asleep, the poor dears," said Michelle wearily.

"Yes. Whatever is going to happen to the poor things?" I asked with concern.

"Well, they'll probably be either sent to the orphanage or offered to adoption to the highest bidder." she replied sipping her brandy.

"What?!" I exclaimed, slamming my glass down on the end table.

"That's the law in the territory. I don't think they'll go to the orphanage though. I'm sure that someone will adopt them in order to get their hands on Coulson's money," she answered calmly.

"They can't do that! Don't the children have a say in this? Don't they have the right to choose what will happen to them?" I replied angrily.

Michelle looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Unfortunately, no. Unless Coulson had something in mind in the event of his demise."

"Do you think he did?" I asked.

"Well, Mr. Coulson was a crafty old fox and it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't start making arrangements the moment Callan's threat arrived," she replied drinking the last of her brandy.

"I hope so," I said leaning back in the chair.

"Are you going to wait up for Jackson?" asked Michelle.

“Yes. I'm just going to stay here and read the new Godey's Ladies Book,” I answered.

“Very good then, hon. I'll just nip off to bed now. See you in the morning,” she replied getting up and leaving the room.

It was nearly midnight when I awoke to the gentle tapping on the door. I placed the magazine I had been reading on the end table and went to answer the door. I opened it and there was Jackson looking tired and beat.

“Sorry I'm so late, darling,” he said with a boyish grin on his face.

He was all wet as it had begun to rain during the early evening.

“Come inside before you catch your death of cold.” I ordered him sternly.

“Yes, ma'am,” he replied coming into the house.

I took his dripping wet hat and coat and hung them in the hall. He looked so miserable that my heart went out to him. I made him set on a stool and I took off his boots which were full of water.

The rest of him was wet, so I said, “You're soaked to the skin, Jackson. Come into the kitchen. We've got to get you out of these wet things before you catch a chill.”

“Anything you say, honey,” he replied.

I felt a bit puzzled by the way he was addressing me, but I lead him into the kitchen. I stoked up the stove and hung up the emergency clothesline. I then turned to face him. He just stood there with a big grin.

“Now let's get you out of these,” I said reaching for him.

“Go ahead, honey. I'm not stopping you,” he replied.

I couldn't believe it. First he wanted me to marry him, which I agreed to under protest, and now he wanted me to undress him. Oh well. I was the one who had suggested it after all so I began to undo his shirt. As I unbuttoned his shirt, I revealed his hairy manly chest. It was large and muscular and sent a wave of heat coursing through my body. Next, I took off his socks and then I loosened his belt while I was on my knees. I undid his pants and pulled them down. Under them, he wore only a pair



of shorts which soon went the way of the pants. As the shorts came off, his manhood sprung erect in all its glory. It looked a lot better than Callan's had and it was clean and smelled of the freshly fallen rain.

“Want to suck it baby?” asked Jackson in a calm even tone.

I was overcome with the desire to do it so I replied, “If you want me to.”

He looked down at me with a wide grin and answered, “It's all yours, baby, from now on.”

I moved close to him and took his erection into my mouth. It was wonderful. It tasted so good unlike Callan's had. Also, it was by my choice this time and that made a world of difference. He coaxed me to lick his balls, which I did enthusiastically. As he climaxed, I willingly swallowed every bit of his delicious seed and then licked him clean.

“That was good, baby. You're very good to your man. Now stand up,” he said.

I stood up and then he scooped me up into his arms. He lifted me like I was something fragile but heavy and carried me out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Kissing me all the way up.

“Which way, darling?” he asked between kisses.

“To your left is my bedroom,” I replied in a hushed whisper.

He just grunted and took me to my door. When we came to the door, I reached out and turned the knob. He then carried me into my bedroom closing the door behind him with his foot. He carried me over to the bed and sat me down gently on it while giving me a long kiss.

“Now, it's my turn,” he said with a sly grin.

I just smiled at him as he slowly undid the back of my dress. I shrugged out of it and soon it and my petticoat were lying on the floor. My stockings and shift soon followed. I had to roll over so that he could undo my corset. He took it off with an economy of motion, only taking time to kiss me as he had all during his undressing of me. As I rolled back onto my back, clad only in a white lace chemise and satin panties, I felt an intense pleasurable feeling for being so feminine and being noticed by that nude man undressing me. He slowly reached out and slowly pulled the chemise over my head revealing my large dangling breasts. He reached out and took them in his hands and began to knead them. God! The feeling was magnificent.

“You've got a fantastic pair of breasts. Is it all right if I play with them awhile?” he asked.

“Yes, Jackson. Oh, yes,” I gasped out lost in the intense feelings of pleasure shooting through my breasts.

He lowered himself onto me and took my left breast in his mouth. The feeling of pleasure was so intense as he sucked and licked my breasts that I nearly died on the spot. Was this what women felt when a man touched their breasts? No wonder why women put up with the inconvenience of them. If they felt that wonderful, I wouldn't trade them for the world.

At last he stopped and said, "I want you, Ellen. I want all of you."

"Are you sure?" I gasped out. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"Don't worry about that, darling. When your horse came back riderless, I nearly went out of my mind. I love you, Ellen. Even if you used to be a man, you're a woman now and I need you," he replied in loving tones.

"But, I'm not a real woman," I sobbed.

"I don't want a real woman. I want you," he answered simply.

"I want you to want me." I replied with a smile on my face.

"Good. Now, let me get those panties off you and make you feel like the woman you are to me," he said with a smile.

I just smiled back as he got off me and pulled my panties down over my legs. He took them off me and allowed them to join the rest of my clothes on the floor. He then knelt down between my legs. My fake pussy was in front of his face and he began to gently lick me. God! The feeling was more intense than my breasts were. So he had me breathing heavily and feeling the first stirrings of an orgasm.

After a long while, he stopped and said, "We'll save the rest of that until our wedding night. I don't want to ruin my virgin bride. Instead, I'll have you up the back door. It might hurt a little, but soon it'll make you feel good."

"Yes, dear. Have your woman," I moaned.

He grinned and placed one of the pillows under my rear. He then took some of my night cream, smeared it on his manhood and approached me. He leaned me back and with his manhood in his right hand, entered me. The night cream was cold but it helped me not to be in too much pain. It hurt a little when he first started, but soon he was pumping away with my enthusiastic support. After a bit, he climaxed inside my bowels and as his hot spray hit me, I orgasmed as a woman might. It was like the best whiskey I had ever tasted and was more succulent than a freshly baked apple pie. After he had spent himself in me, he lay down next to me. I pulled the covers over us and nestled down next to him. I was in ecstasy and nestled down next to him and fell asleep.

When we woke the next day, I found his clothes cleaned and pressed outside my door. I helped him get dressed, then got myself dressed and we went down the stairs to the kitchen. I must have turned an amazing shade of red as we walked into the kitchen to find Michelle and the children having breakfast.

"So you two are awake at last. The children couldn't wait so why don't you both set there and have some of these pancakes I've made," said Michelle with a cheery grin.

"Well, I got work to do. . ." began Jackson.

"Nonsense, Sheriff. You'll need some food and coffee before you get started. Then you'll be set for a hard day's work," she said simply.

"Don't fight me too," I said sharply as he looked at me.

"Maybe I made a mistake asking you to marry me," replied Jackson thoughtfully.

“Yelp. I reckon you did, Sheriff. Have any left for me?” asked Jerry as he came in the back door.

“Yes. You old devil you. Have a set next to Samuel there.” ordered Michelle.

“What you got planned for today, Miss Ellen?” asked Jerry setting down.

“Well, if it's okay with Linda and Samuel, I think we need to see Mr. Thompson and get all this business settled,” I said carefully.

“What is it, ma'am?” asked Linda curiously.

“Well, honey. When people die, they leave behind what is known as a will. It tells the lawyers how they want their property and children handled when they go to heaven,” I replied.

“I see. All right, let's get it over with,” replied Linda with resignation.

We ate our breakfast and carried on some lighter conversation. All during the mean, I noticed that the children seemed to be observing me and Jackson constantly and almost evaluatingly. I blushed several time during the discourse. It seemed, unbeknownst to me, that a romance had blossomed between Michelle and Jerry. I was happy for them and when Jackson looked into my eyes, I was happy for me as well. We finished breakfast and Jerry took us to town in the carriage. Jackson rode in with us and soon we arrived at the bank. A teller informed me that Mr. Thompson would see us at the courthouse at one so while Jackson went to check on the jail, the rest of us went to the general store.

“Good morning, Edna,” I said as I entered the store.

Mrs. Hanson turned to me and replied, “Good morning, Ellen. Children. Michelle. Jerry. Come over here children.”

Samuel and Linda walked over and soon Mrs. Hanson had them with a toy and piece of candy each. Then she had Rosa take them into the back room to play. The children went off and soon the sound of children at play came from the back room.

I sighed and said, “That's good to hear. If they can play now, the worst is over for the poor dears.”

“I'm afraid not, Ellen. With no parents and only greedy folk out there, their outlook is none too bright. I'd take them in myself, but I've got mine almost grown and most of the other ladies that would be good to them are in the same boat,” she replied.

“I wish there was something I could do,” I answered in exasperation.

“Do you really mean that, honey?” she asked seriously.

“Yes, I love them, Edna. I only wish that they were mine,” I said sadly.

“Well, who knows how things will work out. Now tell me about that handsome Sheriff of yours,” she said conspiringly.

I know I must have blushed a bright scarlet because Michelle and Edna both let out a good natured laugh. I couldn't lie about me and Jackson even if I wanted to. I decided that coming clean was the best thing for me at the moment.

“Well, he asked me to marry him,” I replied with a smile.

“And what did you tell him, Hon?” asked Edna.

“I told him yes,” I answered.

“Good. I knew it was going to happen,” said Edna confidently.

“How?” I asked in amazement.

“The way you and him looked at each other it reminded me of a stallion and his mare. You are just begging to be rode, girl and he's beggin to ride you.” she said with a chuckle.

“Oh,” was all I could say.

“I know what you need, girl. Come over here,” ordered Edna leading me to the side of the store.

There in the corner was the sewing dummy wearing that wonderful dress from Paris. Edna deftly took it off the dummy and grabbed a lace veil from one of the shelves.

“Here you go, dear,” she said handing me the dress and veil.

“Edna. I can't afford this! I'll just have to get married in one of my own dresses. This is much to fine for me,” I gasped aloud.

“Nonsense, girl. Nobody in this town can afford it, besides, it's yours. I want to see that dress worn, not rotting in my store. Consider it my wedding gift to you,” she replied with a large smile.

I was speechless as she carefully folded it and the veil into a box. Soon it was about time to meet Mr. Thompson, so we went over to the courthouse. Jackson was waiting there for us and went in with me arm in arm. Inside the courtroom was Territorial Judge Lawson, Mr. Thompson and a U.S. Marshall.

The Marshal came up to us and said, “Good day. If Linda and Samuel will come with me we'll get started.”

The children were a little reluctant to go with him, but Michelle and I convinced them. Soon they were seated at one of the tables with the rest of us setting in the audience.

“Here ye! Here ye! The Territorial Court of the Territory of Wyoming is now in session. The honorable Thorton P. Lawson presiding,” announced the Marshal formally.

“What is the case before me?” asked the judge as dictated by form.

“Your honor. I have here the last will and testament of one, Alfred Thomas Coulson,” said Mr. Thompson.

“Let me see the document,” said the judge.

Thompson handed him the document who looked it over and handed back to Thompson saying, “Do you swear that this was sworn before you on the date in question?”

“I do, your honor,” answered Thompson with a slight bow.

“Good. It is legal. You may now read it,” replied the judge.

Mr. Thompson cleared his throat and began, "Let it be known that I, Alfred Thomas Coulson, being of sound mind and body to hereby decree that all my lands and wealth shall go to my wife, Susan Elspeth Coulson, upon my death. If she does not survive me, then the wealth shall be distributed among my children. In the event that both of us meet our deaths, the children shall be allowed to choose what will become of them. If adopted, both must be or both must stay together in the same orphanage. Sworn this day, the 13th of March in the year of our lord 1881."

"Well, while it is most irregular, it is binding. Children, you have a decision to make. Regardless of it, you will be together. Do you want to go to the orphanage?" asked the judge.

Linda and Samuel whispered together then Linda said, "No, sir."

"Then who will take care of you two?" asked the judge in puzzlement.

Linda and Samuel whispered together and then Linda said, "We want to stay with Ellen."

With that, they both turned and pointed to me. I felt as though a thousand volts of electricity flowed from those two little fingers and right into me.

"They can't your honor. She's an unmarried woman," stated Mr. Thompson blandly.

"Well. . ." started the judge.

I looked frantically at Jackson who merely nodded and stood up.

"Your honor. I have a solution to that," said Jackson loudly.

"Yes, Sheriff. What is your solution?" asked the judge solemnly.

"I have the pleasure of informing you that Miss Holland has agreed to become my wife and is ready to marry me here and now," aid Jackson.

"Is that true, Miss Holland? You're under oath," asked the judge.

I stood up and said, "Yes, your honor. I even took the liberty of bringing my wedding dress with me."

The judge grinned and turned to Thompson and asked, "Any other problems with this, Mr. Thompson."

"None at all, your honor. May I suggest a short recess so these two can get prepared," suggest Mr. Thompson with a grin.

"Certainly. After the wedding, we'll have the formal adoption. Court adjourned for an hour," said the judge bringing down his gavel.

It was a close thing to get everything done in an hour, but we managed somehow and soon I was in a wedding gown and veil. Jerry gave me away and soon I found myself saying my wedding vows, the woman's part. Linda was a beautiful flower girl and Samuel had carried the ring that Jackson had bought from Mr. Hanson in the back room those many weeks ago. Pete acted as the best man and Bert took care of seating everyone. Practically the whole town had turned out. Soon Jackson said his part of the

vows and put the ring on my finger, I'll remember the kiss that followed until by dying day.

After the wedding, we formally adopted the Coulson children making me a bride, wife and mother all in the same day. We left the church, being pelted by rice and climbed into the wedding carriage. Jackson and I climbed into the front seat. I threw my bouquet and Michelle came up with it with a laugh. I grinned as Michelle, Jerry and the children climbed into another carriage. We then all set out for the ranch and were soon there.

Inside, we had a celebration that went long into the night. At last, the children were in bed. Michelle and Jerry had left the ranch for a hotel room in town leaving me and Jackson alone. Soon we were in my bedroom and made the most beautiful love ever.

After we had exerted ourselves to the maximum, Jackson asked, "Are you happy, my beloved."

I laid my head on his chest and replied, "I'm the happiest woman in the world."

With that he sighed and put his arms around me. That was when I knew that this Laramie lass had truly found love, a family and a home, at last!

THE END