

# Protecting Annie

Jodie Wolfe

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**Protecting Annie**  
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## *Dedication*

For my grandson, Elliot Jacob Wolfe. Apparently, you were a glimmer in Grammie's eyes well before you were born. Grammie loves you,  
Elliot.

Special thanks to Nicola and Jamie for loving my stories enough to make me be a part of the Pelican family (again). I so appreciate your servant hearts and attitude.

Thank you, David for all you do to love and support your writer wife.  
You are my hero!

To my Lord and Savior who called me as a little girl to step out in faith on this writing journey. I look forward to where You will continue to direct me.

Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. ~

Isaiah 55:6-9 (KJV)

# 1

*Burrton Springs, Kansas*  
*August 1, 1876*

Death paced close enough for Annie McPherson to smell its rotted breath. A menacing growl rumbled in the beast's throat. The animal bared his teeth when she attempted a tiny step. Perspiration trickled between her shoulder blades. She cocked her head a fraction of an inch, hoping to spot a bystander, but only a small glimpse of a barren street stretched between the tight alleyway. Her heart hammered beneath her polonaise.

Not a single soul in sight. "Where's help when you need it?"

Her movement and words caused the monstrosity to circle closer. If Annie'd been on speaking terms with God, it would've been a good time to send a plea for someone to come to her rescue. But she'd fallen out of practice of praying over the past years, ever since—

She released a silent breath, shifting her foot in the dirt. The deranged creature snarled and snapped, just short of capturing her wrist in his jaws. Annie tried to swallow, but her throat muscles refused to contract.

The wolf settled on his haunches, two feet in front of her. A glistening tongue protruded from his face. His beady eyes stared at her, unmoving. Was the beast contemplating how she would taste, like the one in the tale of Little Red Cap she'd read as a child? A shiver ran down Annie's spine. She had no desire to be wolf chow.

"Easy, fellow. Don't eat me. I'm sure I'm not very appetizing."

It was time to take charge of her fate since no assistance was coming. Annie took a step sideways. Her back scraped against the rough boards of the building.

Why had she chosen to saunter through the narrow passageway and follow the jumbled directions the blacksmith had given her after she'd exited the conveyance? The other townspeople she'd asked had stared at her as if she'd spoken a different language, as if the man didn't understand English when he heard it. Annie hoped he wasn't an indication of what type of people lived in town. She'd have to make the best of it since returning to New York wasn't feasible, not after that louse—

An ominous snarl snapped her back to her current situation. How many times had Mama warned her about focusing on the situation at hand? While she'd been woolgathering, the wild animal inched his way closer. He leapt.

Annie screamed and slammed the parasol onto the beast's head with a satisfying whack. The wooden frame splintered, splaying like twigs littering the ground after a windstorm.

It dazed the wolf for a brief instant, long enough for her to edge away from the building. She pivoted and tried to make a run for it, but her heel caught in the flounce of her dress. Her body slammed to the ground. Thick, dirty paws shoved the air from her lungs as the beast stood on her stomach. The furry head loomed in front of her face. A deep-throated growl pierced the air, and an odiferous stench hung like a cloud. Darkness threatened at the corners of Annie's eyes. She gritted her teeth. There was no way she'd allow him to be the victor.

Her fingers stretched toward what was left of her parasol. If she could just reach it. One inch closer and she'd have it.

The wolf bared his teeth and a guttural growl rumbled.

She tried to suck in a breath. Her fingers finally slipped around the wooden handle and remaining rod, but the heavy animal made it impossible to get oxygen. Gathering every ounce of strength left in her body, she smashed the side of the brute's head. The remains of her parasol broke into several pieces. The creature yelped, falling partially to his side. She rolled from under him. Air rushed into her lungs, making the world spin as she sucked in deep breaths.

"Don't come any closer, ye demented beast." She scooped up the nearest shaft of wood, brandishing it like a sword. A shriek escaped

her lips when he rose to his feet again.

~\*~

Joshua Walker grumbled as he strode the streets of Burrton Springs, not loud enough for anyone to hear him, but he was unable to stop the sound from gurgling from his mouth. He'd given up his job as a deputy U.S. Marshal for this—searching for a stray dog wandering the streets of his new hometown. So much for settling here so he could protect his sister, Jules. With her being married and expecting a child of her own, she didn't need him anymore. Apparently, the only thing needing protecting was the dog the townspeople were concerned about.

He puffed a breath and readjusted his Stetson, swiping at the sweat creeping down his hairline and onto his neck. Maybe he'd have time for a trip to the barber shop after he checked into the dog issue. When had he last sheared his head? He couldn't recall. If anything, it might help to cool him at least a bit from the blistering sun.

Josh licked his lips. What he wouldn't do for a cool drink about now. Perhaps he'd swing by his sister's place on his way to get his hair trimmed and see if she'd offer him something to quench his thirst. After he took care of the dog issue.

A low growl and scream sounded from up ahead. He cocked his head, trying to distinguish from where the noise came. A yelp reverberated, and Josh took off at a run. There was nothing he hated more than an animal being mistreated. When he learned who was responsible, they wouldn't make the same mistake twice, at least not while he was the lawman in town. He rounded the corner of the alleyway.

"Stop!"

He screeched to a halt. The woman lying on the ground shuddered. Some sort of stick that she'd been holding clattered to the dirt. Had she beaten the dog with it?

The mongrel yipped a happy bark before vaulting over the woman. The mutt jumped up against Josh's chest, his whole body wriggling for attention, thrusting his head against Josh's hand.

He scratched behind the dog's ears. "What's the matter, fella? Did the mean, old lady hurt you?"

Josh wished he could yank back his phrase when he saw the woman's pair of beautiful, big blue eyes shining through wire-rimmed spectacles. They blinked as if to hold back tears. He hadn't intended to hurt her. Closer examination of the dirt-smudged woman revealed a youthful face. His neck blazed as hot as a roaring fire on a cold winter night. Just then the mutt started licking him. Josh welcomed the coolness of the large tongue, but not the odor exuding from it. What had the dog eaten to make his mouth smell so bad?

He likely didn't smell much better either. Tempted to take a whiff of his armpits to check for sure, it took concentrated willpower to refrain.

Josh patted the dog's head, eased the big paws from his chest, and stretched a hand toward the woman. "Let me help you, ma'am."

For a second, he thought she'd refuse him. Was she that upset about the age comment? In fact, a full minute ticked by before her slender, gloved fingers were placed in the palm of his hand. He lifted her to an upright position and sucked in his breath when he caught a waft of flowers and sunshine...with a hint of dirt. A chuckle gurgled from his lips before he could stop it.

"I don't see anything funny about a wolf attacking a woman in the street." Her blue-eyed gaze darted toward the animal, and her hand trembled in his.

He couldn't keep a smile from spreading across his face. "That's no wolf, ma'am. I don't know where you come from, but around here, that's a dog."

The large mutt lay with his head on his paws, tail wagging back and forth. He whined and crept forward.

The woman kept an iron grip on Josh's hand and vaulted behind him. "Keep that beast away from me, ye hear?"

He liked the lilt in her voice. She had an accent he'd never heard. The pressure of her hand in his seared into his mind, taking him back to the last time he'd held a young lady's hand. Many years ago. Josh shook his head to clear away the unwanted memory and dropped his contact with the woman cowering behind him.



~\*~

Good heavens. What had come over Annie to be standing in the middle of an alley with a strange man and holding his hand, no less? Warmth sprang to her cheeks. Thank the Lord her parents weren't alive to witness her social faux pas. Mama would've said a thing or two about her lapse in judgment. It wouldn't matter that a wolf had attacked her.

The man surely was deranged, thinking the creature was a dog. Annie's copy of *The Everett Brothers' Overland Tourist Guide* in her valise clearly depicted a wolf, just like the one that had assaulted her. The one spread out in the middle of the walkway. A dog, indeed. The stranger couldn't fool her. She hadn't just gotten off the boat from her overseas crossing. Annie knew a wolf when she saw one. The man was delusional.

Her heart thudded beneath the emerald bodice of her dress. She peered around a set of broad shoulders. The wolf still lay at the man's feet. What caused the sudden docility in the beast? Would the animal attack if she moved from behind her protector?

A pent-up breath escaped her lips. She inhaled and a mixture of shaving soap and perspiration tickled her senses. "W-why is he just lying there when he wanted to eat me?" Annie struggled to keep her voice from warbling.

"Maybe he's scared of that deformity on the top of your head."

Of all the insufferable men she'd met in her past, none compared to the poor excuse of a man standing before her. She ground her teeth together, not caring if she chipped one. Good manners demanded she keep her retort unspoken, but her mind was screaming at him.

The tall fellow's shoulders quaked. *Is he laughing at me?* Hadn't he insulted her enough when he'd called her a mean, old lady?

He tipped his big hat, almost bumping the top of her head. Muscles corded under the fabric of his shirt. He wouldn't hurt her, would he? Annie's gaze traveled the length of his back searching for some indication of his intentions. She gulped when she noticed his slim hips—hips encased in some type of belt with two items bulging from either side. Closer examination revealed two weapons. Her

mouth went dry.

Annie's heart pulsed in her throat. She'd read in Papa's newspaper how the west was filled with Indians and lawless men. Would she live to see another sunset, or would she die her first day in a town where nobody knew who she was or why she'd come? She licked her lips. Which was worse, being cornered by a wolf or an outlaw? Why, oh why, had she chosen this particular route? Why hadn't she stayed on the main street?

She couldn't prevent it now. *A plan. Yes.* That she could come up with, if she just had a moment to think before either predator made any advances.

The sound of a throat clearing jarred her back to the situation before her.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" The man shifted and turned.

The wolf sat on his haunches. Mouth wide open, ready to eat her.

"I'm fine." Annie adjusted her spectacles and took a step backward. The building grazed against her shoulders. She ran her fingers along the wood, not caring when a splinter pierced through her gloves and bit into her palm. She slid her foot to the left, distancing herself from the pair.

The man's eyebrows quirked as he studied her.

Had he seen her move? She'd have to be more careful with the next step. He glanced at the beast, and she moved another foot away from them. Twelve more feet and she'd reach the edge of the building. If she could just make it to the main street, perhaps assistance would be in sight. She doubted she could outrun the man and his companion unless she made some more headway first.

The outlaw patted the wild animal as if it was his best friend. She never heard of such a thing. Could someone tame a wolf? Maybe it was all an elaborate ruse, and he planned to rob her. First, he sent in his crazed animal to corner her in the alley, and then he'd swoop in to 'save' her, but instead intended to steal her funds or worse. Her mouth was still dry. She had to get away from them.

The criminal took a step toward her.

Annie glanced at the rod of her parasol, several yards away. Why hadn't she maintained a hold on it? She needed a weapon.

The beast growled, his fur stood on end, and he pressed against the man's trouser leg.

Her fingers gripped the handle of her reticule. Its hard bottom bumped against her leg. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of it sooner? "Don't come any closer, ye hear?" Annie edged toward the street. With every step she advanced, the man and his beast closed the distance between them. She took a huge breath. Time to strike or be subject to whatever harm the pair intended.

Annie swung her arm and used every ounce of her strength and energy as the hard-cased reticule swung and connected to the side of the man's head with a resounding crack. As her arm started its downward path, a thud, followed by a whimper sounded as her purse connected with the wolf's side. She didn't stop to assess what damage she'd caused but took off at a run.

## 2

Annie's legs couldn't pump hard enough to suit her. She lifted her dress, searching for somewhere safe to flee from the gunslinger and his four-legged companion. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed no one in pursuit. She wasn't taking any chances though. In the distance she saw a bell tower. A church. She'd be free from harm there. No criminal would think to search for her in the house of God. Her toes pinched in her new kid boots as she ran the wide expanse. The heel of her shoe caught on the top step, and her hip slammed into the door.

Her fingers fumbled with the latch. The portal flew open, throwing Annie off balance, and she stumbled head-long onto the floor. A whoosh of breath escaped her lungs. Her spectacles flew from her face, and her carefully pinned curls cascaded down her shoulders.

"What do we have here?"

A rustle of skirts drew Annie's attention. She shifted to her side and squinted, trying to bring into focus the hazy figure in front of her.

"Please, help me find my spectacles." Annie rolled to a sitting position, careful not to squash the eyewear if it happened to be in proximity to her.

"Spectawhat?"

She frowned. What was wrong with the inhabitants of her new town? Did they not understand English when they heard it spoken? She repeated the word again, slowly, pointing to her face, hoping it would help to clarify the matter.

"I reckon you meant these?"

A set of metal frames were shoved into Annie's hand. She grasped ahold of them and brought it within inches of her eyes, making sure they were unharmed before securing them on her ears.

A woman heavy with child stood before her. "Here. Let me help you." She stooped over and thrust her hand forward.

"That's quite all right. I can get myself up." Annie shifted her skirt and drew to her feet. She didn't want to take the chance of harming the woman in any way or cause her child to make an appearance ahead of time. "Perhaps *you* need a seat." She glanced around the room, surprised to see rows of desks. Her mouth dropped open. So much for the idea of finding sanctuary in the church. If she was right, Annie had found her place of employment.

"Yer mouth is gappin' like a fish. Are you sure you didn't hit yer head or somethin' when you fell?" The brown-haired woman stepped closer.

Annie snapped her mouth shut. "Forgive me. I'm afraid you haven't caught me at my best. I'm Miss McPherson." She extended her hand.

The woman's hearty hand shaking rattled Annie's thoughts. "Name's Jules Montgomery. I don't reckon I've ever seen you afore. Are you new?"

"Yes." Annie sniffed and glanced around the room. "I had thought this was a church, but I see now, it's a schoolroom." She ran her glove along the back of a chair. Dirt smudged the fingertip. She'd have to see to putting things to rights as soon as she was settled.

"Well, actually it's both. During the weekdays it's a classroom, but on Sunday, it's where my husband preaches." She grasped the desktop and pulled.

Annie was concerned the woman would hurt herself but stared when the smooth surface of the desk pivoted on a hinge and was stored behind the seat. What a clever invention. She'd never seen anything like it.

"My brother figured how to make it so we wouldn't have to keep shiftin' furniture around each week." Her hands rested on her swelled stomach. "Did I hear you runnin' afore you fell on the floor?"

Annie's hand fluttered to her chest. How could she have forgotten? She licked her lips and nodded. Ringlets bounced at the side of her face. Fiddlesticks. She must be a sight. She grasped a drooping hairpin before it fell out, twisting the loose strands of hair

and re-pinning the mass beneath her hat. No doubt her coiffure tilted at an awkward angle and not the careful precision she'd achieved earlier that morning. Her mother would've been proud of her accomplishment.

"Miss, are you sure you didn't bump yer head or somethin'?"

"What? No, I'm just fine, really, now that I've gotten away from the wolf and bandit."

The woman bent down, hitched her skirt up to her knee, and extracted a small pistol from a boot.

The room started to sway. Had the whole world gone mad? Annie shook her head. Perhaps life in the city wasn't so bad after all.

Mrs. Montgomery waved the gun under Annie's nose. Her legs started to buckle. Her fingers stretched toward the back of a desk chair before darkness claimed her.

~\*~

Josh woke to a tongue licking the side of his face. The dog's breath brought him fully awake. His head throbbed with each beat of his heart as his fingers traced along the goose egg growing on the side of his temple. He winced and grimaced at the blood staining his hand.

His own blood.

That crazy woman. What was wrong with her? Why had she broadsided him with her bag? For a little thing, she sure packed a wallop. He groaned. Jules would never let him live this down if she heard about it.

A hairy head shoved into Josh's face. The dog whined.

"I'm all right, boy. Don't you worry."

The hound wiggled as Josh rubbed the scraggly fur.

"You could use a good washing." He gritted his teeth and gained a seated position, willing himself not to pass out. Bile rose to his throat. He would not get sick.

A lad poked his head around the corner of the building. "Hey, Sheriff, are you hurt?" He trotted toward Josh and stooped down, peering at his head. "Do you need me to fetch some help? You're bleeding."

“No, just help me to my feet.”

The young boy grunted and groaned as he tugged on Josh’s arm. Josh bit back a grin. The lad struggled to help him get his bearings. Hit with a wave of nausea, he bent over and lost his lunch, narrowly missing his boots.

The child hovered. “You sure I shouldn’t get the doc?” The boy’s brow wrinkled.

“No, just help me to my sister’s place, and I’ll be fine.” He might as well admit defeat. She’d learn about the situation soon enough anyway.

“Sure thing, Sheriff.” The lad wrapped his small arm around Josh’s waist. “Lean on me. I’ll help you get there.”

He stifled a laugh. The fella’s shoulders didn’t even come up to his chest. He draped a hand across the boy’s back and was rewarded with a broad smile. “What’s your name, son?”

“Billy Miller.”

“You aren’t related to Edward Miller, are you?” Josh grimaced with each step.

“He’s my uncle. I’m visiting for a couple weeks.” The boy peered up and adjusted Josh’s grip. “You don’t look so good. You aren’t going to spew again, are you?”

The words themselves caused his stomach to pitch like a boat caught up in a storm at sea. He had his share of head wounds through the years, but he’d never experienced this. It had to come from living in town. It made a man weak. He should’ve known better.

“Sheriff?” The boy’s face grew white.

He wanted to answer the lad, but he was too busy concentrating on walking the infernal distance to his sister’s place without losing his dignity again in the middle of town. His head beat a steady cadence, competing with his churning gut. They were almost to the parsonage when the door of the school flew open and his sister appeared.

Her hair had slipped from its braid and was hanging in disarray.

He smiled as she waddled down the steps.

“Joshua Walker, what happened to you? I was just going for help.” She pointed back to the building she exited. “There’s a woman inside, and she’s out cold.”

He clamped his teeth as they clomped up the steps. Sweat poured between his shoulder blades. The room swayed and refused to right itself. He tried to brace his fall with his hands but didn't succeed.

~\*~

Annie stared at the ceiling. *Where am I?* In an instant it all came to her. The wolf, the outlaw, and the woman increasing with child, wielding a gun in her face. None of her carefully laid plans accounted for that type of situation. Not even the detailed guidebook had addressed such a scenario. How could she have prepared for such an occurrence? Goodness knew, it wasn't one she'd ever considered.

"Good, yer awake."

The uncultured voice sounded familiar. She glanced to her left as the woman placed her hand on Annie's forehead.

"You don't feel feverish or nothin'. What were you saying about a wolf and an outlaw? My brother will want to hear all about it once he comes to. We used to track criminals together, so we can handle most anythin'."

Annie shook her head and struggled to a seated position. What on earth was the woman talking about? Since when did women pursue lawbreakers? She'd take her leave as soon as the room stopped swimming. Then she'd excuse herself to find her new residence.

"Yes, well, I'd best be going. Thank you for your assistance." Annie stood and caught a glimpse of the man lying on the floor. Her lips trembled. Could she exit before he awakened? She held her breath and made a sprint for the door.

Once outside, she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. At the base of the stairs stood a small boy and the confounded wolf again. "Young man, step away from that creature."

"Ma'am?" A blank look crossed the child's face.

"I said to distance yourself from the wolf. Come to me, and I'll protect you until we can obtain a law enforcer." Annie placed herself between the lad and the wild animal. "Where are your parents, sir?"

The boy quirked an eyebrow and glanced around. "I'm not sure



what all them big words are, and I don't see no sir here, but my folks live in Dekater. I'm just visiting."

He patted the brute's head. Annie waited for the varmint's teeth to snap the lad's hand, but the only movement was from the wolf's tail, wagging back and forth. Perhaps he wasn't so dangerous after all. She took a step closer.

A growl rumbled in the throat of the beast.

Annie grabbed the hand of the child tugging him with her as she ran as fast as her legs would carry her. She peered over her shoulder and slowed her pace when the animal remained seated in front of the school. "I think we'll be safe now. Shall I see you to your home?" Annie's breaths came in short bursts.

The lad shook his head and took off, back to the school before she had the opportunity to question him further.

~\*~

Josh let out a groan and held his pounding head. Could the day get any worse? Living in town sure was complicated. He'd never had such problems when he and Jules lived along the trail. If only it was possible to return to those days.

"What 'xactly is goin' on, Joshua Walker?"

His sister's pale face loomed over his prone frame. He bit back another moan and struggled to sit. His brother-in-law wouldn't be pleased if Josh was the cause of bringing about an early labor for their baby. Surely, Jules had miscalculated the date. She appeared about ready to pop at any moment.

"Josh?"

He gained his footing. "Don't get your skirts in a knot. One bump on the head isn't going to put me down for long. I'm fine."

She didn't look convinced. Likely, it had something to do with the stickiness on the side of his cheek. He swiped at the substance. Sure enough, still bleeding.

"I reckon you'd better come to the house so I can take a gander at that for you unless you'd rather I send for Doc Adams." She swung his arm around her shoulders.

He hated to rely on her strength, but if he didn't, he'd wind up on the floor again. There was no way around it. Town living was making him too soft. He was a shame to his profession. Next thing he'd be drinking tea and be hornswaggled into marriage. Josh shook his head and regretted the action instantaneously. No. No pretty head would ever sway him. Marriage was for other numbskulls. Not that his brother-in-law was one. He just personally wouldn't ever be tempted to join their standing.

"Josh? You have me worried."

Jules crouched in front of him. When had they entered her kitchen? He didn't recall the short trip from the church to the parsonage. Perhaps he'd been hit harder than he'd thought.

Her fingers probed his lump. "That's quite a blow to yer noggin. What 'xactly did you say happened?"

Josh's thoughts blurred. Had he told her anything about it yet? He couldn't remember. "Some crazy woman hit me with her bag. She must have had a rock in it or something."

"Why would she wallop you?" Jules soaked a cloth in a bucket of water before swiping at the blood trailing down his face.

Josh shrugged. Why weren't women more like his sister? It was easy to figure what she was thinking. She always said things plainly and wasn't prone to female emotions like most. Not that he'd encountered too many women in the past twenty years.

"I came across her when she was mistreating a mutt—one of the biggest I've ever seen. She was convinced it was a wolf."

"That must've been the same one who was rantin' in the schoolhouse about a wolf and an outlaw. Miss McPherson, I think she called herself." Jules chuckled. "I reckon she's not from Kansas. Seemed as high strung as a stallion that hasn't been broke." She dabbed at his face again. "What made her think she saw a wolf? You're talkin' about the dog sittin' under the tree with Billy Miller, right?"

"Yes, that's the one. I have no idea how she could make such a mistake. I'm guessing she doesn't get out much or something. Clearly, it's a dog."

"The fella looks in need of a good scrubbin'."

"Who? Billy or the dog?"

"I reckon both." Jules smiled. "But I was talkin' about the mutt. Wonder where he came from? I've never seen him around town afore."

Josh winced when his sister continued to probe the lump on his head. "It's the mongrel I was searching for when I came across the stranger. Several folks came in to complain earlier today about a stray stealing baked goods set outside to cool. If you ask me, putting food in the open is just an invitation for critters to come and take it."

"I reckon you'll live. You don't need no stitches. I got the bleedin' to stop, but you'll have a pheasant egg for a few days. If the swelling don't go down by then, you best see the doc though." Jules wiped her hands on a towel.

"Thanks." Josh rolled up his sleeves.

"Here." She set a glass of water in front of him. "You still look a might puny. So how did Miss McPherson come up with the idea you're an outlaw?"

"I don't know, unless she happened to see my gun belt and just made an assumption. Of course, she seemed mighty prone to those, so that's probably where she came up with all the nonsense." Josh drank the water in two gulps. "I guess I'd better go check on the dog and make sure he's all right. I'm not sure if she injured him. She was convinced he was some sort of wild beast, although he seemed mighty pleasant when I came across him."

"I think you should rest a few more minutes." Jules smoothed her skirt with a faltering hand.

His mouth went dry as a desert. "I-It isn't time, is it? I knew I should've moved here sooner so I could watch out for you on the days Drew can't be with you."

"What are you sayin'? No, it's nothing like that. You seem to be forgettin', it's God who does the protectin', not you. You needn't worry about me. Although, if anyone could use some takin' care of, it's that new woman. She sure don't seem to know too much about livin' around here." She glanced away. "No, I wanted you to stay 'cause I figured you better set a spell. After all, you've been nearly knocked senseless."

She wouldn't meet his eyes. Something was definitely bothering her. She wasn't one to hold back. She only did so when she had a piece to say that he wouldn't like. "Spit it out, Jules. What did you do?"

"You'd say I have a good marriage to Drew, wouldn't you?" She clasped her fingers tight in her lap.

A rock settled in the pit of his gut, its jagged edges twisting back and forth. "Yes. What are you not telling me?"

"Even though I didn't know Drew when I arrived over a year ago, bein' a mail-order bride worked well for me, don't you agree?" She fiddled with the gold band on her left hand.

"I already told you that when you exchanged vows again this past January. Are you suddenly regretting your decision? It's a little late with a little one on the way." Josh refrained from moving to the edge of his seat.

"No, nothin' like that. I love Drew and am eager for the little one's arrival." She stroked her bulging stomach. "You made the right decision in sendin' me here to marry."

He wanted to grind his teeth. Why couldn't she just say whatever needed said? It must be something dreadful.

She darted a glance at him.

Josh had a sneaking suspicion he wouldn't like the next words to come out of his sister's mouth.

Jules chewed on her lower lip before blurting, "I-I've ordered you a bride. Well, actually, two of them, but only one was willin' to make the trip. She arrives in two weeks."

*Sure enough.* He gritted his jaw so hard his teeth complained.

### 3

"You did what?" Josh shoved back his chair. He faltered for a second when darkness cut loose before his eyes. "Why would you do such a fool thing?"

"Now, don't get yer guns a blazin' afore you give it a chance. You aren't gettin' any younger, you know." Jules rested her hand on his shoulder.

He shook it off. "And what's that supposed to mean? I've done just fine without a wife. Why would I need one all of a sudden?"

"Because you need somebody to love and to take care of. At least think about it." She pressed some papers into his hands. "Read them and be willin' to take a risk. It's no different than you asked me to do."

Josh shoved his Stetson onto his head, refusing to wince when it grazed his lump. He jammed the papers into his vest pocket and ripped open the kitchen door.

Billy jumped up from his spot under the big elm tree. "Are you feeling better, Sheriff?"

The mutt raced to Josh. He bent to scratch behind the dog's ears hoping the action would help to diffuse his anger. There was no use taking it out on the boy or the stray. "Reckon I'll live." He stood and clapped a hand on the lad's shoulder. "Thanks for your help. I'm indebted to you."

"Don't think nothing of it." The boy beamed and stretched a good inch taller than a second ago. "What will you do with the dog? I sure wish I could have him, but I know my ma wouldn't let me. Neither would Aunt Erma."

"I suppose I'll keep him unless someone comes forward to claim him." Josh smiled. "Don't suppose you'd be interested in helping me