

Wooded Acres Ranch, CO

Christmas Eve Morning 1876

The wind howled down from the north, nearly robbing Leon Weston of breath as he trudged through the heavy snow, his old bones groaning in protest. In his younger days, he'd made the short trek from the house to the family cemetery without complaint. This morning the walk felt akin to ten miles. Even the hinges on the gate squeaked in complaint as he pushed open the wrought iron and stepped toward the lone headstone.

Removing his Stetson and bowing his head, Leon inwardly recited the Lord's Prayer then returned his hat to his head and tied his scarf tighter around his neck. Lifting his gaze, he noted the several inches of snow lining the top of the marble and the frost covering the inscription.

"Good morning, Emily," he said to the stone representing his wife who'd passed twenty-three years ago. "Merry Christmas Eve to you."

He shoved his gloved hands deep into his coat pockets and looked around for a place to sit. What he'd come to say to Emily would take a while, but the bench he'd positioned beneath the towering pine was swathed in snow, and hunkering down in the white powder caused his bones to groan even more. So he stood, his fingers gripping the lining of his pockets.

"Cade brought home a bride last Christmas. The Christmas before Tess married James." He spoke of his grandchildren. "I like James. He's a hard worker and takes good care of Tess. Lucas wouldn't have allowed our granddaughter to marry a scoundrel." Leon smiled fondly in remembrance of the ill expression on his eldest son's face when Lucas had given Tess away in marriage. "It ain't easy for a man to watch his daughter leave home. Good thing Tess lives on Wooded Acres. Lucas visits with her and James almost every day. James has become another son to him."

A gust of wind pelted Leon's back and he sobered as the face of his second son flashed across his mind. "Don't think Royce will walk alongside Tabitha and hand her over to the man she wants to marry as quietly as Lucas did with Tess." Leon cleared his throat with a cough. "Then again, Royce has a few years before his daughter sets her sights on someone. Now, Creel," he paused and shifted his gaze toward the ominous snow clouds shrouding the mountains.

"Creel's our youngest, Emily." He returned his attention to the gravestone. "His wife is young, too. Racy told me she wants a passel of children. Her first one's due to come into this world next month. Creel doesn't care if it's a boy or a girl so

long as Racy and the babe are healthy. And Rachael's little girl will be two tonight."

A shiver moved through Leon's weathered body, not so much from the cold as from his prattling. He was stalling, revealing tidbits he'd already told Emily while trying to form the words he'd come to say, the approval he sought.

Emily had died in a riding accident. She'd been galloping across the meadow when her mare had spooked and thrown her across a log. A sharp branch jutting out from the wood had pierced her chest.

"Why?" he croaked painfully. "Why did you leave home that day? Why didn't you stay at the house? I told you nothing good would come if you found your way back to Boston, no matter how much you willed it. Why didn't you believe me?"

Unbidden, heated arguments between him and Emily filled his ears. Spats behind the barn, squabbles behind closed doors... their children had overheard and had suffered greatly. Rachael had run away, and had stayed away for two decades. Royce had distrusted women for seven long, miserable years before Paige conquered his temper and tamed him. Missy had done the same with Lucas. Creel had been young when Emily had passed. He hadn't cottoned to his brothers' and sister's beliefs Emily favored the comforts of Boston over them until he was older. Truth be told his children were wrong. And not once during the few occasions he'd happened upon them harping on their suspicions had he spilled the truth.

Emily wasn't spoiled. While it was true she came from a wealthy family and wore vibrant gowns sewn from the best cloth, behind the closed doors of her grand home she felt her pa's heavy hand nightly. The same was true for her ma. Emily's fancy-pants attorney pa enjoyed terrorizing his family. She'd often said a crazed glow shone in his eyes each time his fingers curled around the strap.

Eventually, the time had come for Emily to marry. Her pa choose a man for her, someone older and of the same nature as himself. Unwilling to spend the rest of her life in torture, or allow the same to happen to any children she might have, she fled under the cover of darkness, pained at leaving her mother behind to suffer even more because of Emily's defiance. On the outskirts of the city, she happened upon Leon and Earl Jansen, the man who had once been Leon's friend.

"I couldn't take you back to Boston. The detective I hired said your pa was more crazed than you remembered, and would've killed you soon as he saw you. Me, too, for helping you escape that night." He swallowed hard. "You shoulda let me tell our children the truth. I know," he held up a hand to silence her outburst echoing between his ears, "you'd rather they hate you

than perish alongside you. That's why you put up a brave pretense of disowning them for their mistakes, so none of them would follow you to Boston."

Helplessly, he kicked at the snow before lowering his hand and shoving it back into his pocket. "You were a good woman, Emily. I couldn't have asked for a better wife, even when you browbeat me to take you back to Boston to find your ma. The detective said she'd passed, but you didn't believe that, either."

A tear laden with regrets slid from the corner of his eye to freeze on his cheek. "I've come to ask a favor. I've kept your secrets, including how you fancied Earl Jansen until you and I were forced to spend the night together to keep warm and Lucas was born nine months later..." He sighed heavily at the memory of what had started a forty-year feud between him and his best friend. "I told you about Emma. She's done right by me all these years. It's time I do right by her." His shoulders sagged. "But I can't without your blessing."

Another gust of wind pelted his back, knocking his Stetson forward. He caught it and fixed it firmly back in place. "Please, Emily, allow me this and I'll continue to keep your secrets." He pressed his lips together, thought a moment. "Our secrets."

Squaring his shoulders, he turned and retraced his steps. Listened to the gate squeak again as he swung the wrought iron shut, his gaze falling on the headstone. "Merry Christmas, my sweet, sweet Emily. You'll always be my first love, but Emma..." a lump of emotion lodged in his throat. "I love her, too."

Trudging through the snow, his bones again protesting the cold and his innards shivering, he ducked inside the barn and instructed the foreman to saddle his horse.

Jack eyed him uneasily. "Royce ain't gonna like this, you going off alone. More snow coming. I feel it clear down to my toes."

"Something I gotta do, Jack." Leon narrowed his eyes. "No tattling to Royce. Or Lucas. Or Creel. Understood?"

Against his will, and better judgment, Jack agreed and saddled the mare.

Leon made it to town without incident. His first stop was Jasmine's eatery where he drank down two cups of steaming coffee to thaw his insides. Next he paid a visit to the preacher, then to the seamstress to collect a Christmas gift. One last cup of coffee at Jasmine's and Leon made the long trek home, where he encountered Royce's temper and Paige ushering him inside to sit before the fire. She tucked a blanket around him and served him a cup of hot tea, and as the afternoon gave way to evening, sounds of laughter and merriment filled the house as, one by

one, his children and grandchildren arrived. Leon rose to greet Emma and tugged her aside.

"You old coot." She swatted his arm. "I heard you went to town." She fisted her hands on her hips. "Were you *hoping* to catch your death in the cold?"

Admiring her gray hair pulled into a loose bun, the fine lines rimming her eyes and mouth, her concern for him touched his heart. "Had something important to take care of." He winked at her before looking over his shoulder to ensure they were alone, then reached into his pocket and withdrew a ring. "Marry me, Emma. Tonight. The preacher's on his way."

"My stars!" She gaped at the diamond, the worry in her eyes giving way to longing. "Put that away," she snapped. "We're too old for such nonsense."

"Bah! We're never too old," he smiled warmly, and slid the band onto her finger. "I love you, Emma. I have for a long time." He glanced at the festive pine in the far corner. "Cade and Tess each married on Christmas Eve. Why not us?" He inched closer to her. "Say yes."

Tears welled in her eyes, which was most uncharacteristic of her. She bowed her head and touched her forehead to his chest. "Yes," she whispered.

And just like his grandchildren, Leon stood before the preacher on Christmas Eve, with the woman he loved beside him, and recited his vows. When he finished, a familiar voice echoed between his ears.

"Merry Christmas, Leon," Emily whispered. "You have my blessing."

