

Chapter One

Megan James shivered with cold as she sat alone on the sidewalk, her hair and clothing damp from the cool, steady rain that had been falling for the past hour. Crossing her arms across her chest, she began to tap her foot impatiently as her temper heated. She had arrived in the small town of Wallace, Idaho, two hours ago, having survived a long, uncomfortable journey by train from Denver, Colorado. She had certainly been expecting her fiancé to meet her upon her arrival in town, as they had agreed. So far, there had been no sign of Mr. Caleb Williams. The lack of consideration from her future husband was certainly not a good first impression, especially since the past hour of her two-hour wait had been spent in the rain.

Up until six months ago, Megan had been living a fairly happy and peaceful life. Although she had lost her father when she was twelve, Megan and her mother had been able to live comfortably for the past eight years in their home on the outskirts of Omaha. They weren't wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but they had enough to get by. Thankfully, their home was paid for, and Megan's mother had been able to keep them clothed and fed by taking in a small number of boarders. Megan had learned to cook, clean and provide for others from a relatively young age, and she enjoyed meeting the different people who stayed with them. Once Megan had turned nineteen, her mother, Irene, had seemed to be pushing her daughter to find a husband. When Megan had asked why, her mother admitted to feeling guilty about keeping her daughter from having a home of her own. It had seemed to be fate that brought the new, handsome minister to their small church, and in just a few short months, Megan had found herself engaged. Six months ago, just one month before the wedding was to take place, Megan's world had fallen apart.

"Miss, you've been out here for long enough. Isn't there something I can do for you?"

Megan's attention was pulled from away from her memories as she looked up at the elderly gentleman standing in the doorway of the general store. The two other times he had checked on her, she had politely declined his assistance, assuring him her ride would be along

anytime. This time she was cold enough and angry enough to accept whatever assistance he may be able to provide.

"Evidently, my fiancé has gotten tied up with other responsibilities. Is there someone I could hire to drive me to his ranch?"

Herman Larsen scowled. "Your fiancé was supposed to meet you? Can't see what should be more important to a gentleman than that. Who exactly is your man?"

"Caleb Williams. Do you know him?"

Herman's scowl turned to concern. "Sure do, and I can't imagine him standing you up like this. I'll have my grandson, Randall, give you a ride. He's out on an errand right now but will be coming back shortly. Come in and have a cup of tea while you wait. You have to be cold."

Uncomfortable enough and now thoroughly chilled, Megan readily agreed to Herman's offer and followed him into the small store. In no time at all, introductions had been made and she was settled in a chair by the wood stove with a warm cup of tea from Mr. Larsen's wife in hand. Once again left alone to her thoughts, Megan continued her journey down memory lane.

Megan had fled her hometown, leaving behind her mother and her fiancé. She had a good amount of money to start out with, and she made her way by train to Colorado. She found a nice boarding house to stay in, and began looking for work. It hadn't been long, however, before she realized there were few jobs available for single, respectable young women in the somewhat rowdy town. As her cash supply began to dwindle, Megan began to grow more concerned with how she would be able to support herself long term. When the owner of the house had suggested looking at ads for mail order brides, at first Megan had been appalled. As she thought about it more, however, she decided it might not be such a bad idea. It was a common enough practice for the more unsettled areas of the west, where men wanted the companionship of a wife but where women were still scarce. She had been ready to be a wife and a mother, and perhaps going into a marriage without the romantic expectations of love would be more practical. She could concentrate on being a good wife and taking care of her home, without worrying about having her heart broken again. Once her decision had been made, she had begun searching the newspapers for suitable ads. The posting from Caleb Williams had gotten her attention immediately for it seemed more personal and well written than the others, and the inclusion of a three year old daughter had only made him that much more appealing. She had replied immediately and then began the arduous process of waiting for a return response.

"Are you feeling better, dear?" Margaret Larsen asked.

Megan looked up to find the woman studying her with frank concern. Since Megan was much more comfortable than she had been seated on the damp bench outside, she offered a smile in response. She may still be angry with Caleb Williams, and his lack of attendance was causing her to harbor some serious doubts about the situation, but the Larsens were warm and friendly.

"Yes, thank you. I appreciate your kindness."

"I think you will find us a fairly friendly town overall," Margaret told her. She hesitated briefly before speaking again. "May I ask how—"

"Margaret Jane!"

At her husband's stern call, Mrs. Larsen gave an impatient sigh, and then offered Megan a brief smile. "Excuse me."

Margaret made her way back to her husband's side, where the couple talked quietly. Megan could see that Margaret had some concerns from the way she kept frowning at Megan and then talking quietly to her husband. Megan wondered if her worries were for Caleb's sake or Megan's. While she had been more than a little apprehensive about marrying a complete stranger, it had seemed like the only way to escape her situation. His letters had been very warm and she couldn't wait to meet her future daughter.

"You don't need to be meddling, Margaret," Herman's stern admonishment interrupted Megan's own worries. "I'm sure Caleb has everything planned out."

"He can't just have her at his ranch before—"

"Margaret Jane," he said again, a warning clearly sounding in his tone. "I'm sure he's made proper arrangements until after the wedding."

Seeing that Megan was clearly listening to their conversation, Margaret offered a comforting smile. "Caleb's a good man, honey. I'm just being motherly, and I don't want folks to talk about you or him. But Herman's right. I'm sure Caleb has a place for you to stay before the wedding that will keep everything respectable. His brother and sister-in-law live close by as well."

It wasn't long before the Larsens' eighteen-year-old grandson was ready to escort Megan to her new home, driving a buckboard wagon that, unfortunately, still didn't have a cover. After another thirty minutes in the cool rain and bouncing around on the hard buckboard seat, Megan's temporary comfort and warmth from the general store was quickly forgotten. As Randall Larsen

stopped in front of a large log home with a wide, wrap around porch, Megan felt some relief. Despite the fact her fiancé hadn't been there to greet her, at least his home looked to be as welcoming and comfortable as he had described it.

"Are you sure you'll be all right here?" Randall asked with a frown.

"There just must have been a mix up with the date or time of my arrival. I'll be fine on the porch while I wait for Mr. Williams. Thank you for bringing me," Megan said as she smiled politely.

Although he obviously still had some concerns, Randall Larsen helped Megan down from the wagon and then quickly unloaded her things. He climbed back onto the wagon seat and tipped his hat politely. "Best of luck to you, Miss."

Megan stood on the porch steps for a few minutes as Randall drove away, and then with a sigh, she turned back to the porch. Looking longingly at the front door for a moment, she squared her shoulders and marched forward. She knocked first, just to make sure the house really was as empty as it looked before bravely trying the doorknob. To her disappointment, it was actually locked, which she found somewhat surprising. The area looked quite serene and peaceful, so she wondered if there were hidden dangers or if Caleb Williams was an overly cautious man. Feeling a mixture of fatigue, dejection, and anger, Megan made her way to the porch swing and prepared to wait some more.

It was after 2:00 in the afternoon when Caleb and his younger brother, Thomas, entered the Larsens' general store. They had both been out of town for two days, taking care of business at their logging camp up in the hills around Lake C'ouer D'alene. Both men were tired and looking forward to returning home. Thomas didn't like to be away from his young wife for too long and Caleb always felt guilty when he had to leave his daughter, Rachel, with his widowed neighbor. Perhaps it seemed strange to some people that he didn't leave his daughter with his sister-in-law, but Whitney wasn't used to children and wasn't quite ready to handle a busy toddler on her own for an extended period of time. She occasionally watched Rachel for short durations, but Whitney was one of the first to declare that more than a few hours with Rachel was too much for her. His neighbor, Abby, however, had been part of Rachel's life since she had been born, and had been a godsend when Caleb's wife passed away six months later, stepping in to help him with both his housekeeping and his infant daughter.

"Caleb Williams, what are you doing here?" Margaret exclaimed when he walked into the store.

As her question was accompanied by a stern frown and her hands planted firmly on her hips, Caleb looked around in confusion, wondering what he had done wrong. He didn't have any manure on his boots that he could see, and his clothing was relatively clean and respectable. As far as he knew, Margaret liked him. He wasn't sure why she seemed angry.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Margaret declared. "Why aren't you at home?"

"Margaret Jane!" Herman exclaimed in exasperation, coming from the back room in time to hear his wife scolding Caleb. "You go on to the back room for a spell and sort through your dry goods order. I'll help Caleb and Thomas."

Margaret glanced at her husband, prepared to do battle on behalf of that sweet young woman, but at his nod, she calmed down. Herman was just as upset as she was about Caleb's failure to meet his intended, so she could trust him to talk to the younger man. With a nod at her husband, Margaret walked briskly to the backroom of their store.

"What was that about?" Thomas asked, looking curiously at both his brother and Mr. Larsen.

"Margaret's just a little upset about the way Caleb failed to meet his pretty little fiancée when she arrived on the train this morning. Poor thing sat out in the rain for a good two hours before I could convince her to come inside."

"My what?" Caleb demanded. "I don't have a fiancée, Herman."

"Are you sure, Caleb? A very nice young woman seems to believe differently."

"I'm sure I would know something that important, Herman," Caleb responded.

Herman frowned, scratching his beard thoughtfully. "She seemed quite positive you would be waiting for her, and I could tell she was getting angry the longer she waited, but she was still real polite to us. She really was a sweet thing."

"Where is she?" he demanded. "We will clear things up right now."

Herman looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, seeing as how you weren't here to pick her up, my grandson took her on out to the ranch."

Caleb's expression darkened. "Let's go, Thomas. I don't know what this woman is planning, but I'll soon find out."

Thomas smiled politely at Herman as his brother stormed out of the store. "We'll be back for supplies in a day or two, so we'll let you know what the story is."

"I'm sure it's some sort of misunderstanding, Thomas. She seemed like a very nice, respectable young lady."

"We'll figure it out, Herman," Thomas assured him quietly, before following Caleb in a much easier fashion.

The two men rode fast, making it back out to the ranch in twenty minutes. Caleb wasted no time, immediately jumping off his mount and throwing the reins to Thomas before walking up the front porch towards the small body curled up on his porch swing.

For a moment, his anger cooled as he looked at the sleeping woman. Damp, blonde curls framed a sweetly angelic face. She appeared very young and small all curled up on the swing. Certainly she didn't look like any type of a con artist. An unexpected surge of protectiveness rose within him as he studied her sleeping form, for she looked so delicate and innocent. He frowned, wondering exactly what was going on, since he knew for a fact he didn't have a fiancée.

Megan woke suddenly, sensing she was no longer alone. Her eyes slowly opened, and at the sight of the tall, gorgeous man staring down at her, she quickly jumped to her feet. Caleb forced his momentary lapse of weakness aside, irritated with himself for feeling a stirring of longing at the sight of a soft, pretty woman. Just because she was beautiful and looked sweet and innocent, certainly didn't mean that she was.

"What are you doing here?" he asked firmly.

"Caleb Williams, I presume?" she asked, not waiting for his reply before she continued. "After making me wait in the rain half the day, that's the first thing you have to say to me?" she demanded, all of her earlier anger rising rapidly to the surface and her voice taking a slightly shrill tone. "You failed to pick me up when I arrived, left me to find my way here alone, and now you ask what I'm doing here?" She settled her hands on her slim hips. "Since this is my future home, I assumed this is where you would want me to be."

Caleb's own temper wasn't eased by either her words or her attitude. He took a step towards her. "Listen, young lady, I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play here, but I don't appreciate lies, and I certainly don't appreciate you telling the entire town that I'm your fiancé!"

"You're the one playing games!" she shot back. "You sent me a letter agreeing to marry me, along with travel instructions and when I should arrive. I had to spend the last of my funds getting here."

"I assure you, I did no such thing, and I'm certainly not going to be coerced into marriage, or into giving you money. You can just take your little fanny back to Finch or whoever put you up to this elaborate charade and let them know their crazy scheme isn't going to work."

"Would you happen to have this letter with you?" Thomas broke in, his quiet, easy tone calming Megan and preventing her from offering another angry retort.

"Of course, I do," she replied, quickly reaching into her satchel. Her expression was both challenging and triumphant as she pulled the letter out of the bag and handed it to Thomas.

"Just because you have a letter doesn't prove anything," Caleb told her. "I still didn't write it."

"No, you didn't," Thomas sighed, running a hand through his thick hair in a gesture of frustration. "But I'm afraid I know who did."

Caleb glanced at Thomas and recognizing the resigned look on his brother's features, he groaned. Immediately he felt his anger towards the pretty little blonde evaporating. "She didn't!" he exclaimed, reaching for the letter himself.

Thomas offered his brother a tight smile before turning to look down at Megan. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding, Miss James," he began, using the name from her letter. "I'm Caleb's brother, Thomas Williams, and this letter was written by my wife, Whitney."

Megan's face turned white and she looked up at Caleb, her pretty blue eyes filling with tears. "So you really didn't send for me? Why would she do this to me?"

Unable to help himself, Caleb reached out to pull the petite woman into his arms. Now that he knew for a fact she was probably every bit as innocent as she looked, and hadn't been sent by Edward Finch to cause him trouble, he allowed his protective instincts to take over. "I'm sorry, and I'm sure Whitney wasn't planning to hurt you. She's impulsive, and she's been wanting me to find a wife for the past year. It looks like she decided to take matters into her own hands."

Thomas sighed. "Impulsive is one word for it. That woman is going to send me to an early grave."

Although Megan found the circle of Caleb's arms to be very comforting, she didn't want to enjoy it too much. Stiffening her back, she stepped away, offering a tight smile.

"Forgive me for barging into your home and making accusations," she apologized with quiet dignity. "Would it be possible for me to get a ride back into town?"

"And where would you go once you were in town?" Caleb asked firmly. "You said you didn't have money."

"That's not your problem, Mr. Williams."

Caleb flashed a look at his brother and then smiled down at Megan. "Well, actually, it is. I may have not personally written the letter, but you were given a promise by someone in my family. We all have a responsibility to you."

"Caleb is right, honey," Thomas offered. "I'm sure Whitney will have an explanation to share with all of us, and now isn't really the time to go traipsing back into town. I think you should stay here and get a good night's rest and we can all talk tomorrow. I'll have Whitney over after breakfast to give you her apology." Thomas nodded politely at Megan and glanced at Caleb. "I'll settle the horses and then head home to deal with my wife."

Caleb smiled ruefully. "Not exactly the evening you were planning," he remarked, knowing Thomas had been looking forward to getting home earlier than planned and spending some extra time with his wife. Instead of romance, he would be spending the evening taking care of disciplinary issues instead.

It was certainly no secret that Thomas spanked his wife. Whitney was a handful. She'd been a willful, troubled young woman when she had first met Thomas, but over the past two years, under his guidance and loving discipline, she had made vast improvements. The spankings were far less frequent, for Whitney had finally come to realize her husband would continue to love her no matter what she did, and she had stopped pushing boundaries. Over the last year, most of her punishments had been the result of her failure to consider the consequences of her behavior before acting rather than her purposefully acting out for attention.

Caleb sighed, and offered her a comforting smile. "Although I've determined your name from Whitney's letter, and you obviously know mine, before we continue how about a more formal introduction? We may not have made the best first impressions on one another."

Megan nodded, giving him a slight smile in return, even though she was still upset by the entire turn of events.

"I'm Mr. Caleb Williams, a rancher, miner, and logger from Wallace, Idaho."

"Megan James, most recently from Colorado."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss James. I promise we will get this figured out. In the meantime, you will stay here."

"I can't stay here alone with you!" Megan exclaimed aghast. "It would hardly be proper."

"I was going to be heading down to pick up my daughter, Rachel, from my neighbor's house. I'll just ask Abby if she can stay with us for a bit."

"Please, I don't want to put everyone to so much trouble," Megan protested. "You look like you've been working and town wasn't really that far. I can walk—"

Caleb frowned sternly. "You most certainly cannot," he interrupted. "And it won't be any trouble. Abby has stayed with us before when I've been out of town or working late. Until we figure something out, you are my responsibility."

"You didn't ask for the responsibility," Megan argued, getting worked up once again. "Just because your sister-in-law is a manipulative bi—"

"Enough!" Caleb interrupted sternly. His voice softened before he continued, "I understand you're upset, Megan, and you have a right to be. However, that doesn't give you the right to behave like a shrew or to call Whitney names. And I most certainly do not allow that kind of language in my house."

Megan gave him a silent glare and a subtle pout. While Caleb silently found the look adorable, he didn't want her to think he approved of the attitude. When he thought she was just a stranger trying to trick him into marriage or that she had been sent by the owner of a competing mine, Edward Finch, the idea of having her as a wife never crossed his mind. After learning that she was innocent of any deceit, he was able to more fully appreciate her beauty and spirit, and he found himself strangely unopposed to the idea of fulfilling the bargain Whitney had made for him. In the event they did make the marriage a reality, Megan would need to know that he believed in discipline as much as his brother did. His first wife, Emmaline, had been a naturally sweet woman, and had only been spanked once during their too short marriage. He hadn't known her long, but he had the feeling Megan would be somewhere between his sweet Emmaline and Thomas's wild Whitney.

"Go on into the house so you can get changed before you catch a chill."

She continued to look at him in silent mutiny. Megan didn't consider herself a difficult person, but she also wasn't used to a man telling her what to do. Since being on her own the past several months, Megan had also gotten quite used to answering to no one but herself.

With a sigh, Caleb gently took her arm and turned her toward the front door. As he opened it, he slid his hand down to the small of her back to guide her inside. Megan flashed him a glare over her shoulder. With a slight smile, Caleb swatted her rump, which caused her to jump and her eyes to widen in shock.

"That means stop arguing and get your fanny in the house," Caleb told her. "I'm offering help, and your continued refusal to accept it is going to upset me."

Megan warily entered the house, sidestepping away from Caleb as he moved around her.

"And I don't want to upset you?"

Caleb flashed her a quick grin, but didn't comment, taking her by the hand and leading her toward the stairs.

"Let me show you to your room. I'll bring your things up so you can change while I'm gone. I'll also start a fire in the front room so you can warm up. Your hands are freezing."

"Yes, well, your sister-in-law's little game did result in me spending the majority of the day waiting outside in the rain. Hardly a shock that I would be cold," she retorted waspishly.

"Watch the attitude, young lady," Caleb told her firmly. "You have had a difficult day, and I am sincerely sorry for that. But we are not going to keep talking about Whitney when she isn't here to offer her side of the story."

"But—"

"Megan," Caleb interrupted softly. "Trust me when I say Whitney will be taken to task for her behavior. If you persist in pushing the issue tonight, I will put you over my knee."

Megan turned her head to gape at him in disbelief. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sure you understood me perfectly," he replied calmly.

"You bullying bastard!" Megan exclaimed.

"I won't give any more warnings about the language," he warned, "I'm a firm believer in discipline and consequences, but I'm certainly not a bully."

She looked at him in astonishment. "Are you serious?"

He sighed. "Actually, yes. Call me old fashioned—"

"I'll call you something," she muttered under her breath.

Flashing her a look that actually made her squirm like an errant child, Caleb continued. "I may be coming across a little strong, Megan, but this is who I am. I don't run around looking for excuses—I only had to spank my late wife once—but I do insist on obedience."

For a moment she said nothing, just studied his handsome features. For some reason, she wasn't as appalled by his threat as she should be. She had also had a picture flash in her head at the spanking threat and she found it oddly intriguing. The idea of being over his lap with her skirts flipped up and her bloomers down around her thighs while he swatted her bare backside made her squirm with something that was far from fear. Actually, the idea of him touching her in any way, was enough to make her stomach quiver with an odd feeling she had never experienced before. She swallowed, wishing she had something to soothe her suddenly dry throat.

"I'm not your wife, so I haven't made any vows of obedience," she managed quietly. She flashed him a challenging look. "That doesn't mean I would allow you to carry through with your silly threat even if we were married."

Caleb flashed her a careless grin, transforming those stern features. The man had dimples in his cheeks and dark brown eyes that seemed to dance with mischief. Something about that reckless grin caused a throb in the lower half of her body that gave her the urge to press her legs together. "Be careful, honey. I can't really resist a challenge," he warned in a husky drawl.

When she opened her mouth to speak, Caleb placed a gentle finger over her lips to silence her. "Don't say anything more. We've started off in difficult circumstances. Let's get you warm, dry, and fed, and then we will talk about everything in a new light. I don't want us to start out being angry with each other."

Megan swallowed and nodded silently, and Caleb took his hand away from her mouth, dropping it to catch her by the hand.

"Thank you," he smiled. "Let me show you to your room. You can dry off and get changed while I run down and get Abby and Rachel. Then we will make sure we get something for you to eat. If you're not too worn out, we can talk a little more after Rachel is in bed."

Without waiting for a response, Caleb led Megan up the stairway to the second floor. For the first time, Megan really opened her eyes to her surroundings rather than just focusing on her discomfort and anger. The house was large, but not overwhelmingly so, and it was very welcoming. She listened while Caleb provided her with the basics for the house, including the fact that there were four bedrooms upstairs and one downstairs, and that the house actually had indoor plumbing. Considering what she had believed about Wallace, Idaho, Megan was pleasantly surprised at how modern Caleb's home was, and she certainly wouldn't have any

complaints about living there. Of course, considering the fact that he wasn't the one who had actually sent for her, the likelihood of her making his home hers was pretty slim.

Before she had time to start fretting about her situation once again, Caleb opened one of the bedroom doors and ushered Megan inside. Her eyes widened as she looked around, and her mood brightened considerably. It was simply hard to be irritated in the feminine bedroom with the frilly canopy bed, and delicate furniture.

"It's so pretty!" she exclaimed in delight.

"Make yourself comfortable," Caleb smiled, pleased to see that her earlier mood had vanished. "This is where our mother stays when she comes to visit. She's the one who decorated it. I'll go down and get your trunk and then I'll leave you in peace so you can change. It will take me about fifteen or twenty minutes to get Abby and Rachel."

She bit her lower lip. "I'm sorry again for the trouble. Are you sure Abby won't mind?"

"She won't mind, and the trouble isn't your fault so you have nothing to be sorry for."

"But—"

He gave her a stern frown to silence her. "No more talking right now. I'm going to go get your things before you get ill."

Megan nodded in agreement, since she was getting tired of wearing damp clothes. She was relieved that Caleb was no longer angry with her, as he had been when first discovering her on his front porch, but he still couldn't be happy about her presence. He hadn't been the one to send for a wife, so marriage probably wasn't in her near future. While she had been nervous about meeting and marrying a complete stranger, she had also been happy at the idea of belonging somewhere, and having a ready-made three year old daughter. Despite his comments about believing in spanking, Megan knew she would still jump at the chance to be his wife. He was handsome, obviously successful, and she secretly found his take-charge demeanor comforting.