

CHAPTER 1



C. 1920

Just as she was hefting a large box of books into what she intended to use as her study, there was a loud, booming knock, causing Audra to wonder whimsically if there was a giant at the door.

"Billie, would you get that, please? I've got my hands full here."

"Yes, Miss Audra."

She heard the painfully slim, austere older woman open the door but couldn't hear any of the conversation that took place. She was caught. She knew she never should have opened a box—concentrating instead on wrestling the plethora into the correct rooms after the movers had kind of just left things wherever they landed and skedaddled—but she never had much strength of will when it came to books, so she found herself almost lovingly fondling the spines of a lot of her most favorite friends.

So far gone was she into her own wonderland of pleasant memories spent reading and re-re-re-reading all of those many

volumes, Billie's voice startled her when she appeared in the doorway.

"There's a man here, Miss Audra. He says he's your neighbor?"

"Well, isn't that nice—he must be the welcome wagon!" Completely oblivious to Billie's both verbal and gesticular attempts to suggest she might want to tidy up a bit before she met him, she forged her way through the maze of boxes and out into the hallway that led to the front door, although she didn't get very far. She halted immediately at the scene that met her eyes, and the absolute confirmation that her subconscious had been right—there *was* a giant at the door.

Only now, he was actually in the foyer of her new home. She watched—unnoticed, she thought—as he sank down from what had to have been well more than six-feet to make himself almost the size of the fey little girl who was standing in front of him, sleepily clutching both her blanket and her favorite bedraggled stuffed rabbit.

"And who might you be?" she heard him ask in an all too pleasantly deep and rumbling bass that—along with what seemed to be a genuine smile of delight at the sight of her—played unexpected hell with her nerves.

Dislodging the two upside-down fingers from her mouth that she had preferred from infancy to either thumb, the tiny toddler answered softly, "Beffie."

"Well, hello, Miss Beffie," he greeted quite seriously, reaching out to take the little girl's hand and kiss the back of it, not turning so much as the slightest hair at the fact that it had to still be damp from just having been in her mouth as he bowed a bit over it. She gave him credit for not wiping his hand on anything, either, once he'd relinquished his hold of it. "My name is Rye Aldrich, and I am *very* pleased to meet you." Maintaining the polite demeanor he had affected, he tilted his head a bit and asked, pointing to the bunny, "Would you be so kind as to introduce me to your rabbit?"

Even though she was facing away from her, Audra knew that

the little imp's eyes would have lit up at his interest, however feigned.

"This is Minneola, but I call her Minnie."

The disturbingly charming man repeated his gallant gesture on what passed for the rabbit's worn right paw, his tone not changing in the least as he greeted her quite formally, too.

She was so entranced by his easy manner with Elizabeth that she might have lingered longer in the shadow of the hallway, but when the little girl—who had as keen an eye for men as her mother'd had—giggled and practically threw herself into the stranger's arms, she knew she had to step in.

"Elizabeth!" she chided but not too severely as she moved towards the door. The child was precocious and a bit mischievous, at times, but never nastily so, and indeed leaned towards being a bit emotionally delicate, so—if she had to be disapproving or discipline her—Audra tried to be mindful of that and not go overboard. "What have I said about throwing yourself at men you don't know, you little minx?"

Almost as if he enjoyed thwarting her, the big man met her eyes and grinned broadly while clutching the tiny bundle to him, rising—and rising—and rising even more until he was at his full height and literally towering over her. "In this case, she's fine where she is, if you don't mind."

That was a loaded question, and he had to have known it—Elizabeth had settled in immediately, of course, her bum supported by his big arm, one small arm around his neck—although unable to make it all the way around—and the fingers of the other popped right back in her mouth as she surveyed her territory from what she considered to be the safety a new great height, and if she insisted that he put her down, a scene might—or might not—ensue, depending on how well the child had slept during the nap from which she'd just awakened.

Audra didn't shrink from being firm with Bethie when she

needed to be, but she was exhausted from moving and frankly was just as happy to let the man hold her if he really wanted to.

Sensing he'd won a small but important victory, he forged ahead. "Please forgive the intrusion," he said, offering his hand. "I'm Rye Aldrich. I own the next ranch over. I know you're in the middle of moving in, but I wanted to come over and offer any assistance that I can."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Aldrich. I'm Audra Merrill." She forced herself to put her hand in his, feeling it being gently engulfed, shaken twice very carefully, then released as she did her best to avoid his gaze, which only helped a little. She could feel his eyes on her like a knowing touch in what were highly inappropriate places.

He surprised her then by swinging Elizabeth down onto her own feet—ignoring how the child simply clung to his leg instead, his hand gently mussing her hair as he stood there and took stock of the situation. "And I can see that I came just in the nick of time. Whoever you got to move you in did a pretty shabby job of it. Do you mind if I'm forward enough to ask who that was?"

Audra declined to answer, saying instead, "Thank you, Mr. Aldrich, but—"

She snuck a look up at him and he was still wearing a broad smile as he stepped towards the nearest stack of boxes, lifting the top two as if they were empty when she knew they were packed to the gills with heavy tomes. "Please, call me Rye. Where can I put this for you?"

"Really, Mr.—"

He stilled in a manner that let her know wordlessly that she had misbehaved, somehow, and she quickly corrected while severely chiding herself for doing so, "Rye—my housekeeper and I are fully capable of—"

"Oh, I'm sure you are, Miss Merrill," he replied smoothly, subtly calling attention to the fact that she had not given him permission to use her first name. "But my Momma would come down from

Heaven and whup my behind if I left two..." he paused to gaze down at Elizabeth, who had glommed determinedly onto him and corrected with a grin "...three beautiful ladies to do all of this toting and lifting. It looks to me like they did the cowardly thing and dropped your stuff and left. Won't you let me do what I was built for and be donkey labor for you—get things where you want them to be, at least—and then I'll leave you to the unboxing? It won't take me very long, I promise, and then I'll be out of your hair."

When he put it like that, as she suspected he knew, it was darned hard to turn him down.

Still, she hesitated. "But I hate to impose on someone I barely know," she murmured aloud.

Suddenly, he was much too close to her, although he'd only taken one step towards her, his voice even lower. "But it's not an imposition. It's the neighborly thing to do. Now, where would you like these?"

Giving in in a most ungracious manner, she said, "Oh, all right—those down the hall, first door on the right, please."

Not about to let him do all the work, as he did that, she grabbed one of the other boxes and headed for the stairs, only to hear just as she was planting her foot onto the bottom stair, "Excuse me, missy, but that's what *I'm* supposed to be doing."

Elizabeth giggled, probably because that was what she called the little girl sometimes when she was chiding her.

When she turned to confront him, she found herself relieved of the box and on the receiving end of a very stern look.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear enough about how I intend to help. I don't want you—any of you ladies—to lift so much as a finger while I'm here to move anything. Is that understood?" He glanced at Billie to make sure she understood that this pertained to her, too.

What it was, was autocratic in the extreme, and she wanted to take him to task for it, but, although her spirit was certainly willing to confront him about his high handedness, she was just too

damned tired to do so, and—truth be told—she had not been looking forward to hauling all of those boxes herself.

So, if he wanted to be chivalrous, who was she to tell him no?

Still, his firm demeanor—which also bordered on the intimate—had her blushing brightly and somewhat tongue tied, which made him smile in an altogether too self-satisfied manner.

"Say 'Yes, sir!'"

The stain on her cheeks only worsened, but she managed to parrot back, "Yes, sir."

"I take it this goes upstairs?"

"Yes, si—please," she corrected quickly. "Second door on the left. Just leave it against an open wall."

He was back before she knew he was gone, not in the least winded.

"If you don't mind, Miss Merrill."

Finally, she remembered to say it, stammering, "P-please—call me Audra."

"Audra," he repeated, inclining his head to her. "Would it be too boorish of me to ask if you'd mind if I removed my suit coat to tackle this job more easily?"

"Oh, of course not! Make yourself comfortable, please, and thank you so much for your help."

"You're very welcome."

Having said that so blithely, she almost came to regret it when she pretended to be taking things from the nearest box, but instead found herself wholly mesmerized by the sight of muscles playing under his shirt as he shrugged out of his coat to hang it on the hall tree. That was one of the few things that was actually in its rightful spot, and he was left in his waistcoat with her to admire the way what looked like very expensive material strained at the breadth of his shoulders and the muscular girth of his arms.

Then he began to roll up his sleeves, revealing strong, lightly veined and hairy forearms, and causing her to—finally—force

herself to avert her eyes, startled to find herself having to stifle the impulse to fan herself with her hand.

He lifted and toted, and she directed and supervised. In a very short time, the rooms were cleared, any boxes were lined neatly up against the walls, everything that needed to be upstairs—or down in the basement—was there, and she could actually move through the house without figuring that she should expect a piece of cheese once she reached her destination.

"Thank you so much for the help. We would have still been doing that into next month, I'd wager."

He gave her another one of those highly impertinent, dominant looks. "You shouldn't be doing anything of the sort at all, Audra. In fact, it might be a bit forward of me to say so on such short acquaintance, but I will expect you to call on me whenever you need to do anything that requires a strength that's beyond your capacity. If I'm not available to help, I'd be more than happy to send someone else from the ranch. I'd never forgive myself if any of you got hurt trying to do something that I could so easily accomplish for you."



RYE THOUGHT he might well have overstepped his bounds, judging by her fierce frown, but he didn't regret anything he'd said in the least, although he did recognize the need to reign in what seemed to be overactive protective tendencies towards her.

So, he smiled and said, "And you're very welcome. I'm always glad to help." He looked about as if he'd lost something. "Where'd my limpet go?"

It was such an apt description of how Elizabeth tended to attach herself to a man that Audra had to chuckle. "I think she heard Billie in the kitchen and went to cadge a snack." As much as she didn't want to be around this very disturbing man any more than was absolutely necessary, she knew she had to do the neighborly thing

in return for his own generous gesture, considering it was just about dinner time. "Won't you please join us for supper? It's probably not going to be what you're used to—I'm afraid it's catch as catch can because the kitchen's not set up yet. But we have cold ham and roast beef we bought in town, along with homemade bread, butter, jam, piccalilli, fruit and an apple pie we got from the bakery for dessert."

She was again treated to the sight of him dressing, which smacked of an intimacy that was far beyond their relationship, and made her wonder what it must be like for his wife to watch him getting dressed—or undressed—in front of her in their bedroom.

Shocked at where her own thoughts were leading, she waited for his answer, unable to keep her eyes from darting to the third finger of his left hand, which was bare. Although that didn't really mean anything. If he worked on a ranch, he might well prefer not to wear a ring.

And besides, she brought herself up short mentally, she wasn't in the market for a husband, in any way shape or form.

"Well, if you don't mind that I'm going to be a bit sweaty after that, I would love to have dinner with you."

Rye let her lead him down the hall to the back of the house, where the big, homey kitchen spanned the length of it—not that he noticed much beyond the gentle sway of her hips in front of him, which were almost obscenely outlined in the fashionable—if worn—pants she was wearing.

He wasn't at all sure what he had pictured of the woman who apparently now owned this place, but she was definitely not it. This might be easier than he thought—and, he mused, perhaps, if he played his cards right—he might be able to take care of the two most problematic situations he was currently facing with one pretty little stone.

Rye did note that there was even a small table—with just enough chairs to go around—that was positively heaped with all of the delicious looking food she had described and more.

When she saw him, Elizabeth made as if to run to him from her place at the table, but Audra caught her just in time. "Stay right where you are, pumpkin. Mr. Aldrich is going to join us for dinner, so there's no need for you to move."

Beffie frowned darkly at that pronouncement—looking strikingly like Audra as she did so, Rye thought—but remained where she was.

When she reached to pull out her own chair, he was there, doing it for her with a gallant wave of his arm that had Elizabeth giggling again. He did the same thing for Billie, who colored in much the same way Audra was sure she was. She, for one, was glad that he didn't seem to balk in the least at the idea of someone who was—technically—a servant eating with the family, but then Billie was much more than a servant to her, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

The man was certainly charming; she had to give him that. It was almost enough to make her want to excuse what seemed to be a bit of a domineering tendency.

Almost.

When all the food and drinks were on the table and everyone was settled, Rye, who had taken the seat—quite naturally, it seemed—at the head of the table—didn't just dig in. Instead, he offered a hand to Billie on one side and Audra on the other.

Billie caught on more quickly than she did—giving her the eye and tipping her head to encourage her to take his hand.

"Oh, sorry. I'm a heathen," she explained nervously, taking Elizabeth's hand and hoping he wasn't going to wax eloquent in a sermon, because she was famished.

He bowed his head, and the females surrounding him dutifully followed suit. "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly grateful. Amen."

"Amen," Billie and Audra said in unison.

Rye had to admit, it was a very nice spread. She hadn't been exactly right about it not being how he usually ate. He was a simple

man, with simple tastes, and—despite the fact that he now owned one of the largest spreads in the state—he didn't have a chef. Just Cooky, his father's grizzled former hand turned grudging cook for the two of them.

In fact, this was actually a nicer meal than he was used to, because, at least, it was edible. Years of what could be generously called "practice" hadn't increased Cooky's proficiency at his profession in the least.

As they ate, he watched her as covertly as he could. She was a delicate little thing—very much like the little girl—looking like one good, stiff wind would knock her head over tea kettle, while at the same time appearing wonderfully, roundly feminine—despite the pants, which he didn't object to in theory, but, in action, he was glad there were no other men around to appreciate her finer points.

If she was his, he might have to put his foot down about them. And, come to think of it, she wasn't and yet he was itching to tell her not to wear them around anyone but him.

And then only in the privacy of their bedroom.

Where she wouldn't be wearing them for long.

The distinctly carnal trail of his thoughts had him readjusting in his seat.

"Everything all right, Mr.—Rye?" she asked, handing him a pretty, patterned platter full of slices of cheese, bread and meats.

"Yes, thank you. This is indeed a feast—thank you for inviting me."

"You're welcome. You deserve it."

He watched as she added small amounts of almost everything to the little one's plate. They were both tiny things, but they ate with relish, which he enjoyed seeing. There was nothing worse, as far as he was concerned, than someone who picked at their food rather than eating it. He'd starved enough as a youngster that he ate whatever the hell was put in front of him and was damned grateful for it—which was one of the reasons he was still alive, despite Cooky's

numerous attempts to kill him with various inedible—and unidentifiable concoctions.

She wasn't beautiful—not truly—but she was certainly pleasant to look at. Beyond that, there was an air about her, a slight, hesitant reserve that made him want to knock it down more so than he should have, considering the fact that they'd just met.

Yes, she would fit the bill nicely, on several counts, he was sure. And he'd already set his mind that he was going to have her.

The two women kept plying him with food until he practically groaned with it. "I'm sure I should apologize for eating you out of house and home, and it might have been brought in, but that was one of the most wonderful meals I've ever had, with the most pleasant of company, too."

"Pshaw! You saved us literally weeks of work," Audra exclaimed, rising to gather plates at the same time Billie did.

That was another thing he'd liked about her immediately—she didn't just loll around while her housekeeper worked. She pitched in and did her share of things.

"Coffee, Mr.—Rye?" Audra didn't know what it was about him—he just seemed to command respect, and her mind wanted her to afford him that every time.

The man in question had to smile at how she was stumbling so sweetly over his name each time, and he thought it was a good sign. "Yes, please, Audra."

It wasn't the first time he'd said her name—but it was the first time he'd said it in a tone that clearly didn't belong outside a bedroom, and she tried—unsuccessfully—not to let it get to her, but it did. She had to hold the saucer with both hands so that its clinking wouldn't betray the way her hand was shaking.

"I hope you saved room for dessert—it looks scrumptious."

Billie put a huge slice of pie in front of him that must've been stuffed at least three inches tall with apples, along with a generous slice of cheddar cheese.

He groaned again, rubbing his flat belly and making Elizabeth giggle. "Well, I can't bear the idea of it going to waste, of course."

"Of course," Audra agreed, smiling over her cup at him.

It was a simple, unconsciously intimate gesture on her part, he knew. Just like he knew that he had lost the battle right then and there. Come Hell or high water, one way or another, she was going to be his.



LATER, he had amazed her by not only offering to watch Elizabeth but ending up chasing her around the house until they were done doing the dishes. When Audra had finally caught up with them, she was up on his shoulders, and, if she stretched her arm up, she could touch the ceiling.

"Thank you for riding herd on her. She can be a handful."

Audra stretched her own arms up in offer to Elizabeth, saying, "I think it's someone's bedtime." Of course, the little girl refused, shaking her head solemnly and holding onto Rye more tightly.

Her, "No," was quiet but defiant. It wasn't a tantrum, just an emphatic statement of her opinion on the matter.

Still, Rye wasn't going to have it. He lifted her up off his shoulders to deposit her into Audra's arms, and when she tried to scramble out of them and back to him, he simply said in a very soft, firm tone, "Elizabeth."

She frowned but slumped obediently back against Audra.

"Good girl. When your mother says—"

"Auntie," Audra corrected, noting how startled he looked at that bit of information.

"Auntie..." he corrected himself "...says it's bedtime, it's bedtime, little one." Then he bent down to give her a loud smooch on the cheek, his big fingers ruffling her curls as he said, "I'm going to be leaving now, anyway. You sleep well, and obey your aunt."

Elizabeth huffed loudly at that commandment, making the adults laugh.

"Thank you again for your help, Rye."

"You're very welcome, Audra. Might I call again sometime? I would love to see this place once you've put it all together."

"Of course! We'll have you over for a real meal, sometime soon."

Then he set her heart—which had almost calmed down to a normal pace—to fluttering again when his eyes caught hers and he asked, "Would you like to accompany me to dinner in town sometime? Mrs. Bush—of Bush's Bakery, where you probably got the pie—cooks for the restaurant in the hotel, and I'd love to accompany you there, whenever it might be convenient."

She was certain he could see just how nervous he was making her with that unsettlingly intent stare of his.

"Well, why don't we start with having you over for dinner, first?"

He squashed his beautiful gray cowboy hat down onto his head. "Afterwards, then," he said, reaching out to cup her flushed cheek for a second before stepping out the door.

"Close and lock this behind me, Audra," he commanded from the other side. "This isn't small town New Hampshire."

"Yes, Rye." She didn't hear his booted feet crossing the verandah until after he could hear that she had complied.

When she finally made it to her own room that evening, she leaned back against the door, yawning and stretching and mulling over the unexpected events of the evening, her hand landing on top of her head.

Which was when she realized that she had met that gorgeous man and even had dinner with him while wearing not only a pair of pants—which was disreputable enough, but even the condition of the pants themselves was disreputable—but with what was undoubtedly by then a dusty, dirty kerchief holding her hair back that she'd forgotten entirely about, thanks to him and his all too masculine presence and tendencies.

Intense mortification flooded through her. He was, indeed, a

fine specimen of a man—not quite handsome but close enough, especially considering his exquisite manners. And she met him while looking like a drudge. She was surprised he didn't think that she was the housekeeper and Billie the owner!

Tugging it off her head, she threw it in a wash pile by the door that she would take down tomorrow morning and collapsed, boneless, onto the bed.