

## CHAPTER 1



PRESSURED...

Caleb Matthews scowled as he slammed the cell door shut on his prisoner. "I figure I'm a reasonable man. Wouldn't you agree?" He pulled off his Stetson and brushed his sandy hair out of his eyes. Exhaling with frustration, he looked lost in thought.

The bearded man behind bars regarded him soberly. "Can't say for sure, since we only just met and all. If I was to make a guess, I'd say you were fairly reasonable, seeing as you didn't rough me up any once you figured me for a wanted man. But I have to tell you, the way you bowed up at my question about you getting hitched did scare me a might, at first."

Caleb's face reddened as he glared at the prisoner he'd just locked up. "All I asked for was a yes or no. So, you can keep your opinions to yourself." He walked back to the front of the office.

"Is that the man who is wanted for robbing the bank in Sacramento?" Sheriff Tobias Madison began flipping through the wanted posters. He whistled when he located one with the description of the man his deputy and good friend had just brought in. "Where did you find him?"

"He was hiding out behind the new hotel, watching the gaggle of geese—excuse me—brides, nesting there." Caleb grabbed a chair from behind the desk and turned it so he was straddling it, his elbows crossed over the back. "Well, Sheriff, I'm waiting for an answer."

Tobias glanced up from the poster detailing the robbery. "Remind me what the question was again. My mind is mush these days, my friend. Obedience is sick as a dog, and it has me befuddled."

"Is she still retching all the time?" With all the hoopla going on in his own life, Caleb had forgotten the sheriff's new bride was expecting. He felt guilty for not being more supportive of his friend's plight.

Tobias nodded. "Noah stopped by to check on her this morning. Obie was so thrilled by the gesture, she rushed to fix him a cup of coffee. I have warned her to avoid the kitchen because the slightest odor upsets her stomach. The smell of black coffee did her in. The preacher left wearing both the coffee and a good deal of the milk and biscuits my wife had for breakfast. The woman is so dang tiny. Where does she store all this stuff that comes back up?"

Caleb tried not to laugh, but it was satisfying to know other men were suffering the effects of dealing with the original Golden River brides. About six months before, the mayor had come up with a doltish scheme to ensure the town grew and prospered, even though the gold mines which brought most of the settlers here had dried up. The politician collected a tidy sum from suckers like himself, Caleb remembered. But he wasn't the only one to support it. The money was supposed to be used to send off for brides to come here—and likely, some of it was, but not all. Putting that thought aside, however, Caleb returned to thinking about the arrival of the first brides. Nothing had been the same since.

Daniella Abcott had arrived, soon afterward, and had promptly stolen his clothes and his sanity. Jeddah Cromwell and Danny, as most people called her, had answered the mayor's advertisement. They'd ended up staying with Obedience Bartlett, who had come

west to help her aunt run one of two ranches outside town. The three women had no sooner settled in at the ranch of Faith Bartlett than mischief ensued.

Obie had managed to bury a perfectly good wedge deep into a stump while trying to chop wood. There wasn't a man in all of Golden River who could get it free, and nearly all had tried at one time or another. Then Daniella had decided to mend fences with barbed wire, resulting in Obie getting her arm sliced open. Next, Daniella had pulled Jeddah into another scheme and stolen the clothes of both himself and Noah, while they were swimming in the river—all within the first forty-eight hours of the ladies' arrival. Caleb sighed.

It was only the beginning.

"Poor Noah." Caleb chuckled, finding his first genuine smile in weeks. "He still only has one shirt and one set of trousers to his name. But if Daniella and Jeddah hadn't stolen our clothes and destroyed them so they could make themselves breeches, Noah could look better when he preaches on Sunday morning. It would serve those young ladies right if we tanned their hides all over again. When I recall catching them strutting around in those obscene clothes, showing off their feminine curves on the very night they were kidnapped by rustlers—"

"Take a deep breath, Caleb. You are much too tense these days. You used to be so reasonable, but lately, you seem to explode like dynamite where the brides are concerned." The sheriff opened his top desk drawer and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. Pouring them each a shot, he nudged one glass toward the deputy.

"Any man in my position *would* lose all reason. Do you know what kind of week I've had? My life has been in shambles ever since you up and got married." Caleb downed his measure of liquor in one gulp before helping himself to more.

Tobias cocked his head to one side and cleared his throat. "Pardon, but how is my marrying Obedience ruining *your* life?" He swirled the liquid in his glass and smiled. "Made *my* life much

nicer," he added, drinking down the contents of his own glass. "Please tell me Obie hasn't thrown up all over you again."

"No, she hasn't. Not lately. It's you and Sterling who mucked things up. When the mayor sent off for the brides, you fought the notion every step of the way. You swore you'd send them back home. But you took one look at Obedience Bartlett and fell in line like a whipped mule. You up and married her before either of the official brides had a chance to settle in. Then Sterling married Faith. How does it feel to have a wife who tells you what to do?"

Tobias stared. "Does she? I wasn't aware of that."

Caleb rolled his eyes. "And now everyone in town expects me to rush down the altar, myself, to marry Daniella."

"You were one of the men who put in money to send for the brides," Tobias said fiercely. "I take offence at you comparing me to a whipped mule. Danny picked you as her future husband, another part of the stupid scheme you and the rest of the men let the mayor stipulate."

Caleb studied his glass and turned to glare at Tobias. "I'm not a stallion or bull to be paraded about so some slip of a girl can pick me out as her prize. When and if I marry, it will be on my terms. I am sick of repeating that fact time and again."

"You love Danny," the sheriff pointed out. "She loves you. Some would say you decided the 'when and the if' when you put money in the pot to send for the brides."

Caleb slammed the glass down on the wooden desk, causing the wanted posters to flutter off the edge. "Some would say? How about *all* would say?"

He tried to grab the bottle of whiskey to refill his glass, but the sheriff insisted on pouring it, giving him only a small portion. A few choice words escaped before beginning to list the times he had been cornered with questions about his impending marriage. "Old Howard got into a fight with Grayson, yesterday. It took me a good ten minutes to separate the two of them. Howard might be close to fifty, but he is as strong as a bull. I gave them both my standard lecture about public fighting. If they wanted to beat each other to

death, they needed to leave the town's limits to do it. Finally, I asked if either of them had anything to say about their actions. Care to hear what each said?"

The sheriff had a keen mind. He gave his friend more whiskey. "Go ahead and let it out, buddy."

"When are you getting hitched? Maybe that'll keep you off our backs," Caleb scowled, mimicking old Howard's scruffy voice.

But his tale had just started. Soon, more details emerged, his frustration growing. "Last week, Fred, the skinny hermit who lives near the river, lost control of his wagon. It rolled over in a ditch, and he couldn't get it out. I stopped to give him a hand. The man has not spoken a word to me in the five years I have lived in this town, but he was full of questions that day. 'When you marryin' that girl, deputy?' Now, Caleb's voice sounded deep and cocky.

The sheriff covered his mouth with his hand and turned away, but Caleb had already seen his grin. "It's not funny, Tobias. The brides weren't here more than a few hours before they caught wind of the plot afoot to snare me."

"Plot? You sound like you think the entire town is out to trap you, Deputy. I think you've had enough to drink today." The sheriff returned the bottle to the drawer and locked it shut, depositing the key into his pocket.

"Not the entire town." Caleb stood up and started pacing. "Just one brown-eyed, dark haired brat. She's plotting my demise, Tobias. I'm surprised she doesn't have my scalp hanging from her bedpost, already." He stopped for a moment, staring before remembering another confrontation.

"And listen to this! The pretty little chaperone watching over the brides pulled me aside the day of their arrival. She demanded I stop tempting her girls. It was hard, but I asked her nicely, *politely* even, to explain what the hell she meant. She didn't hold back." Now the deputy's voice grew shrill and high pitched. "The brides get to pick their husbands, and it's best for them to focus on available men. Since you are taken, you are only confusing them. And by the by, when are you getting married?"

Different encounters poured from him like a river reaching flood levels. The deputy continued. "I go to check on Faith. 'Married life is blissful, deputy. When are you going to stop stalling and marry Daniella?'" He glared toward the back room where the prisoner stood, eyeing him warily, and continued.

"Then the mayor sees me crossing the road. 'Hurry up, Matthews. When are you planning to tie the knot?' And even my buddy Noah. He sees me after Sunday service. Does he say, 'Good to see you here, buddy? Nice day today, buddy?' No. He says, 'Let me know when you and Daniella are ready to get married.'"

"This morning, on the way into town, I passed the telegraph office. He stopped me and handed me this." Caleb reached into his pocket and pulled out the paper. "Believe it or not, I got a telegram from my mother. She hates spending money, Tobias, since we were destitute for so many years. Yet she paid dearly to send me a personal inquiry. 'Hello, son. *Stop*. Been thinking of you. *Stop*. When are you going to give up and finally get married? *Stop*.' I want *grandchildren*.'" He slammed the paper down on the desk in front of the sheriff, shouting, "*Stop!*"

Tobias was leaning back in his seat, shaking his head. "You've got it bad, Caleb. Relax."

"I'm trying. But you asked about the man I just shoved into the jail cell. Today, I was forced to realize just how out of control this entire situation has become. I was walking around town, minding my own business and not daring to get too close to the brides or their mother hen, when I saw a strange man lurking around the back of the hotel."

"Him?" Tobias jerked a thumb in the prisoner's direction.

"*Him*. Then I remembered the wanted posters which came in day before last. I recalled one of them was for a man who robbed a bank over in Sacramento. Hard to comprehend why anyone would choose to hide out here, in a town with no money in it, but he fit the description. So, I sneaked up on him and took him into custody."

Tobias glanced toward the jail cell and then back at Caleb. "And?"

"He confessed to everything, robbing the bank, hiding the money just outside of town, and trying to bide his time here until things blew over in Sacramento. He figured he could stay in Golden River without a lick of trouble because everyone knew the sheriff just got married and wasn't around and about as much. Then he looked me right in the eye and asked, 'Aren't you the deputy? I heard you were getting married next, so I figured it would be safe to hide out here.'"

A wide grin spread across Tobias' mouth. "Not easy being thought of as a whipped mule, eh?"

Caleb stopped pacing. "I'm not whipped yet." He shoved his hat back on his head and decided to put an end to the whole mess. "It's about time I pay little Miss Daniella a visit and lay down the law. I won't be rushed. If she loves me, waiting until the time is right should not be a problem."

Caleb turned toward the door to go outside, stopping at the sheriff's voice.

"And if it *is* a problem? Suppose she's tired of waiting and another man wants to snap her up?"

Caleb's mouth was a flat line. "She won't do that."

"You willing to take that chance?" Tobias' brow rose.

"She'll have to learn to deal with it," Caleb said, feeling a bit like a cad at his cold statement. He hated feeling caged in. Always had, probably always would.

Caleb stood, leaning against the doorway. The whiskey was taking its effect on his nerves, finally, and a mellow feeling replaced the anger he'd felt a few moments before. He barely noticed Tobias staring at him, his head cocked to one side.

He remembered the day the mayor had called a town hall meeting and talked about Golden River dying out. Miners were pulling out, and something had to be done soon, or the town would cease to be.

This town, poor but proud, had been the first place where Caleb

had ever felt in control of his own destiny. The thought of it disappearing off the map had startled him. He got caught up in dreams of having a warm woman next to him on cold nights. He hadn't been with a woman in over a year. Before that, if he wanted to bed down with one, he had to make the long journey to Sacramento. It would be a damn sight more convenient to have someone closer to home. Not just a woman. A wife...

So, he'd added his funds to the pot to send off for brides, right before the sheriff showed up. Tobias hadn't hesitated to remind him about all the trouble associated with women. Golden River was still wild in so many ways. "Women from the east would likely die, like my first wife, Jenny," Tobias had said, "or flee after a few months of the harsh reality of living here."

Caleb was frowning as he thought of how it had crossed his mind; some of the other men *could* step up and marry the brides who came here. Then the town would have a better chance of surviving and he wouldn't have to deal with any of the troublesome issues a wife would bring. But did he really want that?

*It was a solid, logical plan.* And it would have worked, if he hadn't looked backward over his shoulder one day while bathing in the river and spotted an impish, dark-haired little brat gawking at him. Her beautiful brown eyes had locked on his backside, and damn, if she didn't seem to enjoy what she saw.

It was a good thing he was in the cold water at the time. His body had reacted immediately to Daniella's arrival. He'd had to stay in the water a bit longer than he wanted just to make sure he didn't embarrass himself when he exited. He'd intended to dress quickly and track her down. He wasn't sure if he wanted to give her a long, deep kiss or a sound spanking, but he was determined to find her.

Doing so was hampered. She had stolen the clothes hanging from the tree not far from the water's edge—clothes belonging to both himself and Noah—outsmarting them and allowing herself precious time to escape his wrath. When he'd finally tracked her down at Faith's ranch, one look told him he was in deep trouble. She'd looked him right in the eyes and lied, claiming she didn't have

his things. Yet his heart still skipped a beat as he remembered the gentle sway of her full hips as she'd walked away.

Danny was just about perfect. She had a sharp wit, a zest for life, and no idea just how beautiful she truly was. He'd almost lost her when she was kidnapped by outlaws, but she didn't sit around waiting for him or the sheriff to come rescue her. Her bravery and intelligence helped save her life and the lives of Jeddah and Obedience, too.

Oh, hell," he cursed silently. He loved her. He adored her. "Now, what?"

"Now, you marry her." The sheriff's voice was full of mirth. "Of course, that's not *my* advice. *I'd* never say that. Not me." When Caleb turned to him with a withering glance, he chuckled. "My wife *told* me to."

Caleb rolled his eyes once more. "That's exactly what I mean."

"Ah," Tobias commented, staring out the window just as he had a moment earlier. "And take a look. The object of your affection isn't far away." A sly grin made its way across his face.

Caleb followed Tobias' gaze, seeing his beloved moving toward the mercantile across the street. Her beautiful chestnut hair peeked out from under a fancy bonnet. Even with her back to him, he could still picture the adorable dimple which appeared when she smiled. As she moved inside, a small gloved hand rose to wave at the shopkeeper. She began to move about the store, touching things just out of sight. Caleb's heart began beating faster.

What he did *not* see, because his gaze was so focused on Daniella, was the group of young ladies heading in his direction until one of them almost knocked him over. The group started giggling as he offered his apologies. They disappeared into the store, and he wondered if he should wait outside for Daniella. He didn't wish to tangle with the brides' chaperone again.

Several of them found their way toward his beautiful brat, and they admired something in her hands. Not that he cared all that much, he told himself, but Caleb tried to get a glimpse of what she held. Maybe he could come back later and purchase whatever she

was admiring. His mother was always thrilled when his dad brought her little gifts.

Then, however, Daniella lifted it in the air to hold it up against the light of the window, and clear as day, he saw it. It was material, white cloth to be exact, the kind a woman might choose if she was making a special outfit like a wedding dress. He could almost hear her sweet, little voice asking, "When are you going to marry me?"

Any chance of being reasonable disappeared immediately. The deputy stormed into the building, grabbed the bolt of cloth out of her hand and slammed it back on the table she had pulled it from. "Now, listen here, you little brat." His hands were planted on his hips. The other women started gathering around to watch the excitement.

"Caleb! What's gotten into you? I was planning on purchasing that fabric to make—" Danny's cheeks tinged with scarlet as she spoke, seeing an audience gathering. Perhaps she didn't want any of the brides hearing them having a spat.

"You can forget it. Your little sewing project will wait until I am good and ready to ask." He yanked off his hat when he noticed the young ladies watching him. His voice lowered, but the brides compensated by taking a collective step forward. "Miss Daniella, I think it would be best for you to head back to the ranch this minute. I will come calling soon. You and I need to have a very important discussion."

One the brides sighed loudly. "How romantic, Deputy! You're about to propose. Though I think it quite rude of you to settle on whom you want to marry before you get to know the rest of us. You are in most of our top ten lists, you know. Of potential mates, that is."

Danny took a threatening step toward the girl who had just spoken. "Well, you can all just scratch him off, because he's already taken."

Caleb picked his little brat up in his arms and moved to the door, setting her down a few feet away from the group of brides. He scowled at her. "I never thought I would have to give this

warning to women, but public brawling is not acceptable in Golden River."

But none of the girls seemed to be listening. "Is it true?" one demanded. "Are you taken?"

"Taken but not branded yet," he announced firmly. "Let's step outside, ladies. I think everyone in this town should hear what I'm about to say."

Another bride whispered, "Maybe he will announce when they're going to get married."

Caleb's back stiffened, and Daniella began stroking his arm in an effort to soothe him. She smiled up at him, and he was sure she was trying to sway him with her charms.

*It won't work*, he promised himself. *Not this time*. Caleb pulled her outside and called out to those citizens standing nearby, "I have an announcement to make. You can all stop asking when Miss Abcott and I are going to marry. It's our decision. When we are prepared to make a commitment, we'll let you know. Until then, the rest of you can kindly mind your own business."

He braced himself before looking down, fearing the hurt he would find on Daniella's face, but swore to himself he would not back down. The brides already looked mutinous. If they were pirates, he would be fed to the sharks before sundown.

His eyes fell to Daniella's face. What the others thought didn't matter to him. Only Danny did. He met her brown eyes and was speechless for a moment. She was nodding her agreement about his statement. Was she calling his bluff? Testing his resolve? Not understanding his determination? He leaned his forehead down to touch hers and spoke in a low voice so no one else could hear. "Daniella? Do you understand my meaning?"

She nodded, and he put an arm around her shoulders but didn't let her go. His voice in her ear was meant only for her. "Our marriage plans will be only between us and no one else. Hear me?" When she nodded eagerly, he gave her a quick kiss on the mouth. His voice rose again. "You, young lady, can put off your sewing plans until I give you my permission. I won't be manipulated. If you

truly want to have me for a husband, you will wait until I ask you properly."

With that, he put his hat back on, gave her a quick kiss on the forehead this time, and jumped on Socks, his horse. The entire town was frowning at him as if he had kicked beautiful Danny in the gut. He already felt like a louse; he didn't need them judging him. Maybe he needed to put some distance between himself and the situation. "I'm taking a trip to Sacramento, tomorrow. I need to transport a prisoner wanted for robbing a bank to the jail there. Then I might have to spend some time trailing after a few wanted men." His gaze fell on Danny. "Miss Daniella, don't get concerned if you don't see me for a week or so. The sheriff will have everything under control." With one last glance and a wink at Danny, he maneuvered his horse around and galloped away.

"The bastard." The dark mutter came from the back of the watching group.

Danny shook her head at the crowd. "Stop frowning. Everything is perfectly fine. My Caleb is an honorable, decent man. He likes to make his own decisions, and I respect him for it."

The owner of the mercantile patted Danny's shoulder. "So he's not running off to avoid marrying you?"

Danny laughed again and shook her head. "No."

The owner glanced over the other girls surrounding her. "Well, if you aren't upset by what just happened, I guess none of us ought to be, either. I guess you won't be making curtains for Mrs. Faith's bedrooms, after all." He wandered again behind the counter and picked up the bolt of material to return it to its rightful place, still muttering. "Although I must say, most men wait until after they are married to put their foot down on a woman's purchases."

Danny had a twinkle in her eye. "I won't be making any curtains until the deputy agrees, but I think I have another project in mind."