

PROLOGUE



LARAMIE, WYOMING TERRITORY, MID 1880'S

"*Y*ou look beautiful, Lacy. I daresay no bride ever looked more so," Amelia Hardy said to her daughter as she adjusted her veil. She kissed Lacy's forehead just before she lowered the sheer fabric.

"Thank you, Mother." There was no joy in her voice, only resignation.

"Oh, Lacy, you might as well accept it. We're just lucky Carl stepped up and agreed to marry you. You would have been ruined."

"But I wasn't ruined, Mother. Carl didn't compromise me at all. It isn't fair and you know it."

Amelia sat down and sighed. "Fair has nothing to do with it and *you* know it. You two were out all night and he didn't bring you home until morning. Perhaps it might have been different if we hadn't had guests, but you know how people are. We didn't have any choice but to insist that he protect your reputation."

"My reputation was spotless. So is Carl's. He's a good man, an honorable one, or I wouldn't have been with him in the first place. We shouldn't be held responsible for a violent thunderstorm. You and Father ought to be grateful that Carl got me safely to a shelter."

"Or should we be irate that he took advantage of an opportunity to be improperly intimate with you?"

"Mother!"

"The fact is that we can't know for sure, and neither can anyone else."

"Carl and I know, and our word should be good enough."

Amelia stood and put her arms on Lacy's shoulders in a sympathetic gesture. "Lacy, honey, you said yourself, Carl's a good man. He's certainly an attractive one. He is quite a catch, my dear. Several disappointed mothers of single daughters are lamenting right now that he's off the market. Try to be happy. You like each other, and that's more than some married couples can say. Love will grow between you, and I'm sure it'll happen soon." She hugged her. "And we know Carl is interested in you, or he wouldn't have invited you on a picnic in the first place. You're a smart, sweet, funny, clever girl. Just give him even half a chance to fall in love with you, and he'll be head over heels before the honeymoon's over."

Lacy took a deep breath. "I suppose so. I do enjoy his company. I just wish all these small-minded people wouldn't jump to the worst conclusion. He was a gentleman!"

"That's just how it is, dear. It isn't your fault. It isn't his, either. If anyone's at fault, the blame is mine. I shouldn't have begun allowing you to go out unescorted. But we can't undo that now. As your father would say, we have to play the hand we're dealt. You can turn it into a winning hand with your attitude. Now, put a smile on that pretty face. It's almost time for your father to walk you down the aisle."

"Unescorted, my hind foot. I would have gone with him

anyway. I'm an adult now, Mother. I'm nineteen, in case you've forgotten. I'm old enough to make my own decisions."

"Oh, Lacy. That independent streak will cost you one day. I wish you would work on being more, well, obedient. More yielding."

"Apparently, I already am, or I wouldn't let myself be forced into this marriage." She gave Amelia a look that bordered on a defiant dare to be argued with. "Will Father come up to get me when they're ready?"

"Yes. I believe we're just waiting for the groom and best man. It's such a pity their parents couldn't attend. I hate that they're sick."

Lacy let out a mirthless chuckle. "Do you think it's a bad omen that the groom is late?"

"He'll kick himself when he sees how beautiful you are."

"Thank you, Mother." Lacy managed a smile.

"Are your bags all completely packed for your honeymoon in Cheyenne?"

"Yes. I have one bag packed for tonight at the hotel, then we catch the train east tomorrow. I'm glad it's a short trip from here to Cheyenne. You know how I don't like being cooped up for a long time on a moving train."

"Yes." Amelia laughed. "I'll never forget that regrettable train ride when we went to Chicago."

Lacy laughed at the memory. "Neither will the other passengers."

"I wonder what could be keeping your father. I'll go check." Amelia closed the door behind her as she left to go downstairs.

Their parlor had been transformed into a floral wonderland. The pianist, a family friend, kept the attendees entertained with a wide assortment of songs. Even though it was a few minutes past time for the ceremony to start, people still had smiles on their faces and some even sang along to the music.

Amelia found her husband, George, waiting at the door. "What's the holdup?"

"Carl's nowhere to be found. I'll kill that scoundrel if he backs out now."

"That's not like him, I don't think. Surely, there's a good reason. I'll go back up to wait with Lacy. He'll be along soon; you'll see."

Upstairs, Lacy paced. "What could be keeping him? They don't live that far away."

"I'm sure it's nothing, Lacy," Amelia said, worry creeping into her voice.

"It's not like him, Mother."

"All we can do is wait, dear. I'm sure he'll be here soon, and I'll bet he'll have a good reason. Years from now when you tell your children about your wedding day, you'll both laugh about it."

Lacy thought about having children with Carl. Would she love him by then?

"Did you and Carl talk about whether or not you'd continue to work at the store with us after you're married?"

"We did. He decided to let me choose for myself. He said that should I become with child he'd prefer that I stay home. I agreed to that. Until then, I'm not sure yet. I'll probably work short days with you so I can take care of him and the house."

"That sounds like the perfect solution. We'll have time to find someone to work with us, and you can help us interview people. You see? He's a good man, to let you decide."

Lacy smiled ruefully. "We knew that already."

They heard sounds at the front door. Getting excited again, Amelia pinched Lacy's cheeks for color and told her to purse her lips a few times. Lacy stood in front of the full-length mirror, making sure everything was fine with the dress and veil.

The door opened and George appeared in the doorway along

with a deputy sheriff. Gerald, Carl's brother, stood behind him in the hall.

"Carl's been found. Dead. Shot in the back."