

BIG ROCK RESCUE

BIG ROCK ROMANCE, BOOK FOUR



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



1882, BIG ROCK, WYOMING TERRITORY

Sadie Shepard put two loaves of bread and a big block of cheese in her tow sack and looked around for more food that would be easy to carry. She opened a cabinet door and found four cans of peach preserves. They probably wouldn't notice if one of them was missing, she reasoned. There was a good bit of jerky in the cabinet, too, and she dropped six or seven strips in the bag before putting one in her mouth.

"Mmm, venison. Tasty," she said out loud to herself.

One thing she'd discovered when she had run away from that awful Gentle Hearts Children's Home, five weeks ago, was that Sunday morning was the perfect time to visit the homes of worshippers and borrow their food. They usually had plenty on hand to serve for Sunday dinner. She never took everything; she made sure to only take a small portion of what she found. She wasn't greedy by nature, but she did get hungry out on her own in the wild.

Stepping outside, she admired the shirts, dresses and lacy

underthings that hung on the clothesline. As much as she would have liked to have such fineries, she could live without them. No, she'd only take what she needed to survive.

It was the third house she'd visited, and she had enough food to last a week, maybe longer if she ate sparingly. She disappeared into the woods and made her way about half a mile out of town where her horse awaited, hidden in a thicket not too far from the road. She knew it would be harder to visit houses unseen if she rode in on a horse. Another thing she'd learned in the last five weeks was how to blend in and hide when she needed to. She couldn't let herself be found, at least not yet.

Her horse nickered as she neared, and she nuzzled him as she reached into her bag and pulled out an apple, holding it up to his mouth. She called him Hero, but since she'd borrowed him, too, she didn't know his real name. He seemed to be getting used to the name Hero.

Sadie mounted her horse and followed the tree line that was roughly parallel to the rutted road. It would be easier, that way, to head into the woods to hide if another rider were to come along. At one point, she veered off onto an overgrown trail and road leisurely for another half-hour or so. Before long, a swiftly running creek came into view, and she hopped off of Hero so they both could rest a bit and she could refill her canteen.

The water looked so cool and refreshing that Sadie decided to shuck most of her clothes and wade in. It was unlike her to do that; she was normally more reserved. But the creek did look inviting, and she knew she smelled ripe. The water wasn't terribly deep, so she sat down on the rocky bottom and scrubbed herself the best she could without soap. She made a mental note to borrow some soap next Sunday when she went into town. She'd done fairly well just washing herself and her clothes with water, but she was a girl, after all. It would be nice to be truly clean.

When she got out of the water, she walked over to Hero and began talking to him and running her hand along his muscles. She

thought he was beautiful—a gray so dark, it was almost black, except for a white spot that looked like jagged lightning above his eyes. He also had a big spot of white on his left flank. He responded to her with an affectionate whinny and a turn of his head into her neck and shoulder. Sadie chuckled at him, gave him another kiss, then strode over to a grassy spot in the sun. She looked around again, to make sure no one was there, and stretched out to air dry.

Sadie dozed off and on for about an hour then decided it was time to head back to her temporary home. She redressed, mounted Hero and took off for the short ride to the old mine.

The mine had long been abandoned, the silver lode having dried up many years ago. There were old and rickety "Keep Out" and "Danger" signs posted all around. The doorway had once been reinforced in its heyday, but now, even the entryway supports drooped. There was a large grassy yard in front of it, and there were still posts connected by rails here and there where the original miners must have tethered their horses. There was even a rickety three-sided lean-to on the far side of the yard where Hero could be somewhat protected from the elements.

Sadie unsaddled Hero and wiped him down before turning him loose to graze in the high grass. She'd grown to love that horse in the few weeks she'd had him. Picking up her sack of food, she turned around and headed for the door of the mine. If she turned just right, she could squeeze inside without disturbing the wooden boards that crossed each other, and on which had been written, "Danger: Keep Out."

Due to the hill the entry was carved from, as soon as she was inside, she was underground. She felt a slight but noticeable drop in temperature just a few feet inside. There wasn't much light coming through the entry between the rickety boards, so Sadie picked a few twigs and sticks from the pile she'd amassed and laid them out near the entry so smoke could escape when she finally decided it was time to build a fire.

She unloaded the jars and tins from her bag and laid them out

on the floor along the wall; the rest, she left in the bag to protect from bugs and insects. She unrolled her blanket to prepare her bed. There was still quite a bit of late afternoon daylight left, but she found herself yawning. It had been a busy day of borrowing. She didn't like to have to do it, and it tired her out.

Outside, she gave Hero some water in an old bucket then walked him over to the lean-to, where she tied him to an end post with enough of a lead to give him room to move about just a bit. After giving him one last hug, she squeezed back into the dilapidated mine entrance. She took her late father's pocketknife—the only thing she had of his—and sliced a bit of cheese. The bread was too wide for the blade, so she cut through the crust all around and pulled the remaining middle apart with her fingers. She had a hunk rather than a real slice. Sadie gave a mental thanks to the people she borrowed the food from and ate slowly, savoring every morsel.

With her hunger pangs sated, she downed a bit of water. Looking about, she straightened her meager belongings then decided she'd lie down. She might nap for a while, or she might sleep until morning; she was quite tired. She put her matches in a place where she could easily find them if she awoke in the dark. Before she lay down, she went back to the entrance and looked out at Hero. It weighed heavy on her heart that, technically, she hadn't borrowed him. She'd stolen him. Men hanged for that.



DR. ELLIOTT LARKIN let his horse pick its own pace as he headed back to the town where he had spent his childhood. According to his brother Jim, the sheriff, the town of Big Rock had grown considerably since he last saw it. With plenty of time to make it to his brother's house before dark, Elliott decided to veer off the main road and take a back way. It was where he and his brother had played as children, even though their parents forbade it. That old mine was dangerous, and old-timers told youngsters it was

haunted. As they grew older, they realized the adults just told them that in an effort to keep them away from it. It almost never worked.

He thought back to his childhood. It had been a happy one, and he and Jim had been close. They were a little over a year apart and only rarely fought, as brothers often do. Instead, they played together, worked together and got into an inordinate amount of trouble together. Their mother always said they had way too much courage when they were together and got into much more mischief, far more than they would have individually. Some days, she just threw up her hands in frustration.

A loud sound brought Elliott out of his reverie. It was a rumbling boom coming from the direction of the mine. Seeing a dust cloud rise above the trees, he clicked his horse into a run. Within just a few minutes, he came up on the back and to the side of the mine hill. He was immediately worried when he rounded it and saw a horse tied up to the old lean-to, and the horse appeared to be agitated. *Damn. Somebody's in that mine.* He jumped down from his own mount and loosely threw the reins over a low tree branch.

He made his way to the entrance and saw that dust still hung in the air. When he stepped through fallen debris to get to the door opening, he found it blocked by wood, rock and a whole lot of dirt. He started pulling the wood planks out and shoveling the dirt with his hands.

"Who's in there? I'm trying to get you out!" he called, hoping for an answer.

"Hello," he cried out again, fearing the worst. By this time, he was coughing from the dust, but he couldn't stop. He was the only one who could help.

"Are you hurt in there? Yell out to me!"

He stilled and listened for a moment. No response. He resumed his frantic rescue attempt, pulling more loose wood out. He was stopped by one of the huge railroad ties, brought there from back east, which had been used to bolster the sides and top of the entry. He wasn't strong enough to move it out from under the heavy load.

"I'll be right back—I need to get some rope and my horse!"

Elliott ran to the side of the hill and pulled the rope off the horse where it been coiled. He brought his horse around and tied one end of the rope to the saddle horn. Then he tied the other end of the rope to the only loose end of the huge piece of lumber he could get to. It was covered in dirt and debris.

He coaxed Atlas into pulling the timber, trying to go slowly enough not to incur greater damage. When the tie was pulled out and free from the entry, Elliott went back to work on clearing it more.

"Hello! Are you hurt?" he yelled as loudly as he could.

He almost swore he heard a cough coming from inside. If that's what it was, the man sounded weak. He tore at the debris with a renewed vigor.

Another ominous sound came from inside the mine, and Elliott knew more of it had fallen in. The small hole he had cleared emitted a breath of dust in his face. He coughed again and tore at the loose wood and dirt that piled up. Elliott heard the horse tied up at the lean-to make a fuss and turned in time to see him rear up, but he didn't escape his rope.

He came across another railroad cross tie and again had to enlist the help of Atlas. This time, the horse sensed what he was supposed to do and pulled, even as Elliott ran to him after tying the rope to the big beam. He pulled the tie far out of the way, and that shifted the heap on top of it, making a larger opening at the top.

Elliott climbed up on the lower debris and frantically pulled everything toward him to make the hole larger. He was rewarded when he again heard something, and this time, he was sure it was a cough.

"Make a sound, so I know where you are!"

Sadie moaned but was able to call out, "Please help me!"

Elliott was taken aback that it was a woman's voice, but he didn't have time to think much about it now. He needed to get her

out alive. He was able to tell about where she was, but the dust hadn't settled enough inside for him to see her clearly.

"Are you hurt?"

"A little. I don't think anything's broken, though. There's a big piece of wood on my leg, and I can't get up."

"All right. You just rest easy there. I'm getting you out. Is there anyone else in here?"

"No, just me."

Elliott cleared an opening big enough for him to climb in. Once inside, his footing was unsure due to the fallen timbers and dirt, but he made his way to Sadie.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

"Sadie."

"Well, Sadie, I can't see very well, so I'm going to have to feel for the wood on your leg."

Elliott squatted and held out his hand in the semi-darkness to feel for it. It was what he'd been afraid of—he felt one of the railroad ties. As he used both hands to feel along the length of it, he discovered that instead of the tie being across Sadie's leg, it was on another board that had fallen on her leg. If he could get behind it or get to it somehow from the other direction, he could use the two-by-four on her leg as a lever to move the heavy cross tie and the debris on top of it. That would free her.

"Sadie, I'm going to have to get on the other side of you so I can maneuver this thing off your leg. I know it's tight in here. Forgive me if I hurt you."

"All right. Do what you have to do. I sure am glad you came along. What's your name?"

"Elliott." He stepped to the other side of the smaller piece of lumber then felt where her legs were. He was able to put one foot behind her and the other one in front of her legs. That gave him a good, solid stance, enabling him to put all his strength and weight into lifting the lever. With a mighty heave and a loud groan, he had Sadie free.

"Oh, Elliott, thank... ow!" Sadie tried to pull herself up but couldn't.

"Sadie?"

"It's my wrist. Maybe I did break something."

"Well, this may be your lucky day after all. I'm a doctor. Once I get you outside where I can see better, we'll get that arm taken care of. Give me a minute, though; let me see if I can clear some of this doorway from this side. Meanwhile, try moving your toes and all your leg muscles. Let's see if that wood did any damage."

Elliott cleared the entry a bit more, enough so that if her legs were unbroken, she should be able to climb out with his assistance.

"I can move my legs and toes. I'm bleeding something awful, though, where that board was."

"That's good news, darlin'. We can take care of that in no time. There. Let me help you up. There's more daylight shining in now, so you can see where to step to get out."

He helped her stand and held her until she was sure she was steady on her feet. He pointed out where to put her feet, then her knees, so she could crawl out, and he told her, once she was out, she could see where to step to get down on solid ground.

"Turn your head," she ordered.

"What?"

"My skirt's in the way. I'm going to have to pull it up. Don't look."

"Really? I just saved your life. And I am a doctor, you know."

"Not mine, you're not. Now turn around or close your eyes."

He closed his eyes. "They're closed." As soon as she began to climb, he opened them. He needed to make sure she took the right steps and didn't make her situation worse.

He watched her inch her way over the massive heap, but when she was about to place her weight on a loose and unsteady board, he had to say something. "Don't put your knee on that board—it won't hold."

"You! You're not supposed to look! I'm not covered!"

"Don't be silly. I've seen legs before. I'm more concerned with getting you out safely than I am about your modesty. If you'd taken that step, you might have fallen and been hurt even worse."

"I'm not being silly, and I won't get hurt more. Now don't look."

"I have to look because I'm coming out right behind you. You may have trouble getting down the other side."

"I'll be fine," she huffed. "I only have to go slow because my wrist hurts. Stop looking."

"You better watch out, little lady. I've got more important things on my mind than seeing your bare legs. Now get on out. This mine's still dangerous, and we both need to get out. Besides, I need to tend to your injuries."

Sadie got most of her body through the opening but had difficulty finding a way to negotiate her way down the pile of debris on the other side, since she was positioned headfirst.

"Scoot your legs to the side a little bit to give me room. I think I can climb out and help you down from the other side."

"All right," she sighed, trying to cover her legs. Elliott shook his head.

He decided to climb up the heap then put his legs through the opening first. He turned then so he would be backing down the outside. Once he had a firm footing on the other side, he looked around and determined the best way to proceed.

"Sadie, I believe I can lift you down now. Hold out your arms to me. I know your left one hurts, so I'll be careful."

"All right."

Elliott carefully grasped her under her arms and pulled. She moaned in some pain but let him pull her out. Since she was at about the right level, he found the best way to hold her was to put her over his shoulder. He was able to step his way over the debris pile, and he laid her down in the grassy area, over toward the lean-to.

At that moment, another rumbling sound came from the mine, and this time, a big part of the hill collapsed into it. The realization

hit Sadie that if Elliott hadn't come along, she'd be dead. She burst into tears and reached up with her good hand, grabbing his shirt with all her strength.

Elliott scooted close to her and pulled her into his arms. "It's all right now, darlin', we got out in time. The danger's over. Just think, now you'll have good story to tell your grandchildren."

She managed a rueful laugh even as she cried. "I don't know how to thank you. I would for sure be a goner."

"You can thank me by letting me check you over for injuries. I'm going to go get some things off my horse and I'll be right back. I need to do this while we've still got daylight. Not sure what I'll find."

He came back and spread out his bedroll on the grass then picked her up and gently placed her on it. "There. Now the tall grass won't get in my way. Here, use this as a little pillow to help you get more comfortable." He put a rolled-up blanket under her head.

"Thank you."

"I want to look at that leg wound first, since it's bleeding a bit." He started to lift up her skirt to see it, and she rose up quickly to pull it back down.

"Sadie. You're trying my patience. How do you expect me to tend your wounds if I can't see them?"

She sighed. "All right. But don't raise my skirt any more than you have to."

"All right, deal. I see your skirt's torn above the knee, so I'm going to have to raise it at least that far." He raised her skirt, noting several minor scrapes and the beginning of a few bruises, but the big wound was low on her right thigh. "That's a pretty nasty abrasion. It's going to be uncomfortable while I wash it, but I have to, darlin'."

She nodded, closed her eyes and prepared to grit her teeth. Elliott got some clean cloths from his doctor's bag and a clean shirt from his saddlebag. He first poured water over the wound and

surrounding skin, and she hissed, then he followed with an antiseptic, and she yelled out.

"I know it hurts, darlin', but I have to do this to prevent infection. You're also going to have some mean bruises on this same leg below the knee. You're lucky that board didn't hit your knee straight on, or you might have ended up with a permanent limp, or even worse."

"I am hurting more than I was."

"That happens all the time. When the initial excitement dies down after an accident, people often realize they're hurt worse than they thought. I've heard of soldiers in battle being shot and not even realizing it until much later."

As he spoke, Sadie transferred her attention from her own injuries to Elliott. He looked nice, handsome, even. At the moment, he looked a mess, though, all covered in dirt. She realized she must look the same and was momentarily horrified. She brought her good hand, the right one, up to feel her hair. Sure enough, she felt dirt in it. Her face felt gritty, too.

Elliott applied a red salve then put bandages on to cover the wound. He picked up his spare shirt and ripped off a sleeve. "I'm going to wrap this around your leg to hold the bandages in place." The width of the sleeve spanned the wound and bandages, and he tied the ends of it together at her outer thigh.

"I need to check these cuts and bumps and see what's going on there, all right?"

She nodded.

He ran his hands along the red discolorations but didn't feel any troublesome areas that alarmed him. "I think they're just run of the mill bumps. You'll have lots of bruises, but they should heal on their own in time. You're lucky. Now let me check this wrist." He could see swelling and a little of the bruising that had already become colorful. She hollered when he bent it and felt along the raised redness.

"Sadie, I can't be sure, but I think you may have a small fracture

here. It's nothing that won't heal, but you have to keep it straight, and you can't do anything with it for a few weeks. I'm going to splint it."

He got up and looked around for some short, straight sticks and found some in the rubble. They were pieces of wood that had splintered off larger timbers during the mine collapse. He didn't have anything to grind down the rough edges, so he grabbed the small scissors from his medical bag and cut enough of the shirt to wrap around the pieces and protect Sadie's skin from splinters and sharp edges. He placed one so it ended inside her palm and the other so it was a little longer on the top of her hand, then he used a few more strips cut from his shirt to bind them in place and immobilize her hand.

Elliott placed her hand down gently and began to pull her shirt from the waistband of her skirt.

"Whoa! What are you doing?" Sadie grabbed her shirt and pulled it back down, away from his hand.

"I need to check your belly to see if I can spot any signs of internal bleeding."

"No, you can just forget that, mister. You're not looking under my clothes anymore!"

"Sadie. We don't have time for this. Internal injuries can kill you pretty damn quickly. If I have to hog tie you, I'm going to check."

"Oh, no, you aren't!" Sadie put her weight on her good hand and struggled enough to turn herself halfway over in an attempt to stand and run. Suddenly, she felt a strong hand deliver a solid lick to her bottom.

"Lie back down and do what I say, or you'll find yourself on the receiving end of a whole lot more of those."

Sadie whimpered, but she did as he said. It had taken a major and painful effort on her part just to move that much, and she felt sure she couldn't have gotten away from him.

"Tell you what. I'll start out by just touching over your clothes. Tell me if any of this hurts."

He palpated around her organs and satisfied himself that she probably didn't have any internal injuries. She would have cried out.

"All right. We need to get to my brother's house. I need you to sit up so I can fashion a sling for your arm." He took her right hand and reached under her shoulder to help her up. He took the remainder of his shirt and ripped it so that he could tie lengths together to hold up her arm. When he was satisfied, he tied a knot behind her neck. "Does that feel all right?"

"I guess so. I'm not sure how it's supposed to feel."

"It needs to keep your wrist and hand about level with your elbow. Not too high or too low." He looked up at the sun, which was getting lower in the western sky. "I think we can just about get there before it's too dark. My horse is packed, but I'll saddle yours, and we can ride it and pull mine behind."

"Oh, no, I can't go with you! I don't even know you."

"Well, you can't stay out here. Besides, I need to keep an eye on your injuries. You'll need more medical care."

Sadie panicked. She'd run away from the Gentle Hearts Children's Home for a good reason, and she didn't want to be found.

"I, uh, I can't go with you. I'm running away."

He took a long look at her and sighed. "Darlin', you have no choice. You have to go with me. I promise, between my brother and me, we can protect you from whatever it is you're running from. How long have you been on the run?"

"About five weeks."

"You've been living out here in that mine for five weeks?"

"No, I've been here for about three."

"How old are you?"

"I turned eighteen two weeks ago."

"How are you getting food?"

She hesitated and looked at the ground. "I'd rather not say."

He nodded his head. "All right. Let me get your horse saddled, then we need to get a move on."

Elliott saddled her horse and refastened his supplies on Atlas. He had a small lantern in his pack, and he placed it at the top so it would be easy to find if it got too dark and they needed it to light their way. He lifted Sadie carefully up on the horse, then he moved her skirt out of his way so he wouldn't sit on it, and climbed up behind her. He clicked the horses to start walking.

"If your arm or leg starts throbbing with pain and it's too much for you to handle, I have some Laudanum I can give you. But I'd rather not give it to you until we get to my brother's house and get you cleaned up and ready for bed."

"I can't pay you or your brother for your help. I don't have any money."

"Is that what's bothering you? You don't have to pay me anything, and Jim wouldn't let you pay him, either. Don't give it a second thought."

"No, I can't be beholden to anybody. I wasn't raised like that."

"Well, that's admirable, but all the same, we're still going to help you. You're just a kid, and you're injured. There's no way I could leave you out here. Tell me why you ran away."

Sadie remained silent.

"All right, then. Where are you headed?"

"I don't know."

"Then how will you know when to stop?"

"You're making fun of me."

"Darlin', I'm just trying to make conversation. It's going to be a long ride."

"Why are you going to your brother's?" Sadie tried to change the subject.

"I guess I'm running, too, come to think of it."

"What could you be running from? You're a doctor. You probably have all the money you need."

"Money's not everything in this life." He paused, debating whether he wanted to talk about it or not. Maybe if he told his story, she would tell hers. "I was married to a wonderful woman,

and after four years of trying to build a family, we finally had a baby girl. That cute little thing was practically my whole world. Ruth and I thought our lives were perfect; we were all set to grow old together. One afternoon, I was called out to deliver a baby several miles out of town. The mother had had a hard pregnancy. When the babies arrived, she had twins. It was well into the night, and they asked me to stay until daylight and eat breakfast with them. I did, because they weren't on the main road, and I wasn't sure I could find my way in the dark. By the time I got home the next day, our house was burnt to the ground, and Ruth and Willa were dead."

"Oh, Elliott, I'm sorry. That must have been awful. When was that?"

"About seven months ago."

"What caused the fire?"

"Never got that question answered. It was a new house; I'd built it myself, on the outskirts of town. I put my office and an examination room at the front of the house. It was perfect for us. We suspected arson, but we don't know for sure. I didn't have any enemies, at least none that I knew of. I was all she had. No family. And I wasn't able to protect her."

"Oh." Sadie didn't know how to respond to his pain.

"Since then, I've been living in a hotel and seeing patients there. I just couldn't stay any longer. And that, darlin', is why I say money's not everything. When it's all you have, you might as well have nothing. It's a very cold comfort."

"That's not all you have. You still have your brother."

"I do, and I'm grateful for that. We were always close. He talked me into coming back to Big Rock."

"I guess I'm lucky he did, or you wouldn't have been there to save me. And the other thing you have is that you're a doctor. You can do that anywhere you go."

"I suppose you're right. Now you know my story. What's yours?" Sadie didn't want to tell him. She kept quiet.

He decided to prompt her. "Where are you from?"

Silence.

"Where are your parents?"

"Dead. Years ago. The only thing I have from them is Daddy's pocketknife," she said, pulling it out of her pocket to show him.

"It's a nice one."

"It is. He was never without it."

"So, if they died years ago, where have you been living?"

"At an orphanage."

"Why did you run from there?"

She paused. "They turn boys out when they turn eighteen. Sometimes, they arrange marriages for the girls."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"It is when you have to marry someone you can't stand, simply because they gave money to the orphanage."

"Oh, so is that what happened? They wanted you to marry someone you didn't like? You know, lots of people marry for reasons other than love, and love grows between them later. Some of the best marriages are arranged ones. Maybe you should reconsider."

"No, not this time. It would never happen. It was a man named Oliver Hensworth. He's a lawyer. He's fifty-six years old and scrawny and mean. Mrs. Goforth, the matron, said I have to marry him because he's been giving money to the orphanage. Well, let me tell you, I never saw any of that money. None of us ever did. Mrs. Goforth must have kept all the donations from men who want to marry the girls. A few weeks before my birthday, he started to come over to see me, and Mrs. Goforth would leave us alone. Normally, she wouldn't leave us alone with a man. Mr. Hensworth kept trying to kiss me and pawed me all over, pulling up my skirts and trying to put his hands inside my blouse. When I told the matron, she grabbed and shook me and told me to stop telling lies. So, he kept coming. The last time he was there, I tried my best to defend myself and keep him from kissing

and touching me. He managed to get his hand under my dress and inside my drawers. I was screaming for him to stop and for Mrs. Goforth to come in, but he just laughed at me and said I belonged to him and he could do whatever he wanted. When I felt his fingers touch me down there, I fought so hard, I ripped his shirt. He called me names and called for Mrs. Goforth. When she came in, she held me down so he could beat me. I snuck out that night. I had a busted lip and two black eyes and bruises all over me."

Elliott was silent for a while, but he began to understand why she didn't want to move her clothes around to reveal her body, even for a doctor's examination.

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Sadie. You're right. That's nothing like love."

They rode on in silence.

Daylight was dying when they rode up to the house Sheriff Jim Larkin shared with his wife, Amy. It was the same house the boys had grown up in.

"Jimbo," Elliott called out. "I picked up a stray!"

Elliott hopped off the horse and reached up, taking Sadie in his arms to carry her in. She was tired, and he knew she was in pain.

Jim came out and saw the situation. "I'll unpack your horses and take them out to the barn. Amy will be glad to help you inside," he said as he nodded toward the house.

Once inside the house, Amy ushered him in and told him to set the young woman down on a kitchen chair.

"Oh, Elliott, I'll give you a big hug hello later, but now, take one of those pots of water boiling on the stove into the bathroom and put it in the tub."

"Okay, but you'll have to be careful. She has a big bandage on her thigh that should be kept out of the water if possible. I can replace the hand splint if it gets wet, so that's not as crucial, but I'd like to leave that leg wound undisturbed until tomorrow. She doesn't have any clothes, either. Can she borrow a nightgown?"

"Of course! I'll go grab a gown and robe. I'll take good care of her."

Elliott took one large pot of the hot water and poured it into the tub, then he added enough cool water to be comfortable, keeping it shallow.

When he came back into the kitchen, Amy continued with orders. "All right, now, grab that empty pitcher and mix some hot water in with the cold. I'm going to wash her hair here in the sink. I think it'll be easier that way. Now, then, sweetie," she said to Sadie, "tell me your name."

Sadie was tired and her wrist was throbbing in pain, but she managed to answer.

"All right, Sadie, I want to get you cleaned up. I believe the best way to do it is from the top down. Considering your injuries, it'll be easier to wash your hair here in the sink. Can you get up?"

"I think so." She struggled, so Amy helped her.

"Good. Now lean over the sink and hold this towel to your eyes with your good hand. Try to rest your hurt arm up on the counter out of the way. I'll try to be quick and gentle so I don't bother it."

"All right, thank you."

"I'd comb this out first, but I believe it's too tangled. Let's just wash it." She got Sadie's hair wet and worked some shampoo through it. They both knew it would take at least two washes. Amy called Elliott over to pour some water slowly over Sadie's hair while she ran her hands through it to help remove the dirt and suds. Another wash followed that one, and Amy pronounced it clean. She wrung out Sadie's hair and wrapped it in a towel.

In the bathroom, she had a problem convincing Sadie to take off her clothes and step in the tub. Sadie didn't want to remove her clothes, and she wouldn't say why. Finally, Amy was able to reason with her that she needed to get clean, and they needed to wash the clothes she was wearing.

Amy had never seen a dirtier person, not even cowboys who had been on the range for months at a time. She couldn't imagine

what had happened, but she didn't want to upset Sadie further, so she didn't ask.

She finally got Sadie washed and into a nightgown and robe, and it was clear she was in pain with her arm. Together, they got the sling back on her, and that helped somewhat. She towel-dried and combed out Sadie's hair, then stood back to take a look at her. "Oh, my, Sadie, you are a lovely young lady. I would never have guessed you had this hidden under all those layers of dirt!"

Despite the pain in her wrist and leg, Sadie brightened a little and uttered, "Thank you."

"Now let's go back into the kitchen, and I'll fix you a cup of tea and get you something light to eat. Ell's going to want to look at your injuries, now that he can see them better."

She limped but made it into the kitchen to sit down. The hot bath had helped, but she would have loved having a tubful of hot water she could soak in. Luxuries like that weren't allowed at the Children's Home. Now that some hours had passed since she'd been on the floor of a collapsed mine, she realized exactly how sore she was. Her wrist was definitely causing a great deal of pain.

"Here's a cup of tea, Sadie. Do you like sugar or cream in it?"

"Yes, please!" Tea with sugar and cream was a treat. They only had water at the Home.

"Here you go, there's more if you'd like it. I put the roast back on to heat up again, and I believe it's just about right. There's lots of gravy, too. My Jim loves his bread and gravy. I wish there were some potatoes left, but we ate all that I cooked. If you'd like and are willing to wait, I can cook some more."

"Oh, no! Roast and bread and gravy will be a feast for me! I can't remember when I've eaten this well."

"Eat up, darlin'," Elliott said. "I'm going to dish me up some of that, too. Let's see if Amy's as good a cook as Jim says she is," he said, winking at Amy.

"She is," Jim said as he walked in. "Sadie can have my old room. I'll put your things in yours."

"Thanks, bud. Sadie, tell me how sore your arm and leg are."

"The leg only hurts when I bump it or move it. When I'm still, I can take it. Arm hurts up a storm, though. It's giving me fits."

"I figured it would. I'll give you Laudanum to help you sleep through the pain. You need plenty of rest."

"Can you give it to me now?"

"In a few minutes. You need time to eat before it makes you too sleepy."

Sadie felt herself grow more tired and even achier. When she'd eaten some more, she pushed her plate a few inches away from her. "I think I'm ready to go to sleep now. Where do you want me to put my dishes?"

"Leave them there, sweetie," Amy said, eyeing at her with a questioning look. "We'll take care of that. You don't need to do anything except get well."

"Oh, I need to earn my keep."

Elliott spoke up. "No, ma'am. Not yet, you don't. It'll be weeks before I let you do anything strenuous with that arm. Let us take care of you."

She knew she wouldn't let them do that for very long, but she didn't have the energy to argue.

Elliott came around to sit next to her. "Let me take a peek at your wrist." He had her lay her arm down on the table, then he carefully unwound the wrapping that held the splints in place. He was satisfied with how it looked, so he carefully rewrapped it. "Let Amy take you one last time to the bathroom, then we'll get you in bed. I'll get the Laudanum for you and bring it to you in there."

She didn't think she needed help in the bathroom, but she was too tired to argue. On the way in there, she admitted to herself that with a bum leg and only one good arm, she might well need help with the chamber pot.

Amy helped her to her bed and brought a glass of water to sit on her nightstand. She patted Sadie's good hand and said, "Good night

and sleep well. I'm glad Elliott brought you here. Now rest easy; we'll take good care of you."

Elliott sat down on the bed and looked at her. "I've got lots of questions for you, Sadie, but they can wait until you're feeling better." He spooned out the Laudanum. Sadie swallowed it and made a face at the foul taste, so he took pity and let her wash it down with some water.

"I'm just in the next room, so call out if you need me in the night. I'll check on you first thing in the morning."

"All right."



SHE WAS ALREADY DROWSY, and Elliott knew it was too soon for the opiate to take effect. She was worn out.

Jim and Amy were waiting for Elliott when he walked back in the kitchen. "Well," Jim began, "are you going to tell us how you came by this woman and how you got so dirty? You still are, by the way. I put on more water to heat for your bath."

Elliott let Jim pour him a whiskey, and he downed it before answering. "She's lucky I had a nostalgic bent on the way here and decided to take the old mine cut-through. Damn mine caved in. I heard it and got there about four or five minutes later. Saw that there was a horse tied up. I barely heard her, but I was able to dig a hole and crawl in. Got her out just in time before the rest of it caved in. Would have killed her."

"Whew! Are you sure she was the only one there?"

"Yes."

"Well, what was she doing there in the first place?" Amy wanted to know.

"Running away. She was raised for the last few years in an orphanage, and they arranged an engagement to an old codger. They were supposed to be married on her eighteenth birthday. Before that, though, he apparently tried to rape her then beat her

up. So, she ran. She's been staying in that mine for two or three weeks, she said."

"Oh, that poor little thing!" Amy was horrified.

"What's she been doing for food?" It was Jim who asked. He had an inkling he already knew.

"She refused to tell me, so I suspect she's been stealing it."

Amy looked at Jim and smiled. "Well, I bet we just found that Sunday morning food thief."

Jim chuckled. "I thought the same thing. So, Ell, do you think we need to check up on her story?"

"I do. I suspect the horse is stolen. I don't even know what town she's from. She said the man who beat her was a lawyer named Oliver Hensworth. The matron at the orphanage—her name is Goforth. Do those names sound familiar?"

"Not right off, they don't. I can send a few wires and find out, though. There aren't that many orphanages around. That'll help narrow it down," Jim said.

"Are there any reports of stolen horses? I want to pay for it and the tack. Maybe we can avoid her facing charges for stealing it."

"Most likely you can, but you might have to pay a premium price for the owner to be satisfied."

"I'll do whatever it takes," Elliott said. "I'll reimburse your townspeople for the missing food, too."

"All right. Although, when they find out Sadie's story, I doubt if they'll accept any payment. No one suffered great losses. I imagine they would have given it if asked."

"But they weren't asked," Elliott reminded him.

Amy joined in again. "What do you think she'll do? It sounds like she doesn't have any place to go. How sad for her. No family. She can stay with us as long as she needs to, but that's not a permanent solution. What'll she do?"

Elliott smiled. "Well, I've been thinking about that. She'll marry me. She just doesn't know it yet."