

CHAPTER ONE



Wyoming Territory ~ December 1884

He didn't expect a hero's welcome home, but neither had he anticipated a deserted street.

Bryant Whitsett dropped the oilskin back over the stagecoach's window. He couldn't tell whether his body was shaking more because of the cold, the stagecoach's awful springs, or the anticipation of seeing his wife, his eldest daughter, and the grandchild he'd yet to meet. He tugged his coat lapels higher and puffed warm air into his hands. Though he'd called himself a fool several times on the trip home for not buying a better coat, he'd wanted to keep every dollar he could to hand over to his wife.

Not that money would make up for anything he'd done to Leah—but surely it'd help some, considering how he'd left her to fend for herself for seven long months.

Four weeks ago, he'd been released from the Wyoming Territorial Prison with little more than the clothes he'd arrived in, which were wholly unsuited for winter weather. Since writing home for money to travel was out of the question, he'd walked to the nearest town in search of work.

Not many of the townsfolk had been keen on hiring a

stranger—not surprising with the prison close by. It'd taken nearly a month to work enough odd jobs to pay his way home. His lack of employability had only confirmed what he had to tell his wife. Since everyone in Armelle knew of his crimes, they'd have to leave if he had any hope of supporting them.

The day he'd been brought to trial, he'd figured staying would be impossible. Folks from all over the county had come to watch the mayor and his cohorts get sentenced for defrauding land owners, cattle rustling—and murder. Though Bryant had only abetted the others by fixing the county's ledgers in an attempt to keep his boss from revealing his gambling debts, the glares the townsfolk had given him made it clear he'd not be welcomed back.

The driver called his team to a stop, and Bryant braced himself for his return.

As soon as the stage quit moving, the vehicle rocked as the driver, Charles Volkmann, climbed down from his high perch.

Forging out into the bitter cold, Bryant groaned. His joints already ached from the long ride. "I hope you're heading home for the night."

Though the winter sun hung far above the horizon, it would sink quickly, dragging snow with it, if his nose was correct. Hopefully Charles wouldn't notice no one awaited his return. Had Leah not gotten the letter detailing his arrival?

"*Ja*, I am happy to get home." The big man rubbed his hands together, speaking softly as was his wont. His German accent seemed to be fading some. "You, as well, I am certain."

The greeting that awaited Charles would surely be warmer than his own. "Has your mother-in-law settled in yet? She's from Georgia, right? How's she doing with the cold?"

Charles shrugged as he continued to chafe his hands together. "She has not been able to come. We needed her room for anozer baby."

How enthusiastically should he congratulate the man? His

wife had been so excited about having her mother come live with them. “Another babe is wonderful. Boy or girl?”

The man shook his head. “Two months yet more to wait. Zis weather makes it hard to add on another room, not zat I have zee money to do so.” He sighed, though it turned into a chuckle. “With how many children we’ve got, I may end up on zee roof so Mutter can get here.”

Bryant frowned up at the hulk of a man, one of the hardest-working, mild-tempered men he knew. If this man couldn’t have the life he wanted, perhaps Bryant had been a fool to expect his wife awaiting him upon his return.

After only a moment’s hesitation, he pulled his money clip from his pocket and gave Charles his every last dollar. He’d make up for the loss later. Fighting tooth and nail to hold onto his money was how he’d gotten into trouble to begin with.

Charles’s brow crinkled as he glanced at the money and then to Bryant. “But you already paid.”

Bryant held up his hands. “Keep it.”

The man’s eyes widened as he counted the money. “Zis is more than twice zee price.”

“A tip for getting me safely to prison and back.”

The man’s chuckle puffed white air between them. “I never thought someone would give me a tip for taking them to prison.”

“Enjoy it. For you’ll never get another tip from me for the same thing.”

“I hope so, Mr. Whitsett.”

Though the man had treated him cordially since he’d picked him up at the last stage stop, the fact that he only hoped Bryant wouldn’t return to prison didn’t bode well for him. No doubt the other townsfolk wouldn’t be far behind in their suspicions. But could he blame them? “You wouldn’t happen to need another driver to help you with the stage?”

“Driving a stagecoach is different from a vagon. But I am sorry. I have no hours to spare.”

He should be happy Charles hadn't laughed in his face for asking, like countless others surely would. "If you hear of any work I can do, will you let me know?"

"Of course." Charles's voice held a smidgen of pity.

Picking up his satchel, Bryant gave the man a nod. "I won't keep you any longer."

Charles pulled his hat down farther, his frosty breath swept away by the wind. "Merry Christmas."

Bryant returned the greeting as cheerfully as he could, but he wasn't at all certain he could do enough in the next few weeks to deserve a happy Christmas. Though seeing his family would be enough.

Turning toward home, he forced his frozen feet forward. He ought to walk quickly, to get the blood flowing, but every step caused his lungs to tighten. The last time he'd seen his wife, she'd been unconscious, her face battered and bruised because of an accident he was ultimately responsible for. He'd had no idea his boss's hoodlums would kidnap her in an effort to force him into continuing to aid them, but if he'd not gotten involved in the first place, she'd never have been hurt. Though she'd not awoken until after he'd been locked behind prison bars, he'd been informed she'd survived—but with a limp and damaged vocal chords.

His daughter's letters hadn't told him much beyond that, though he'd been immensely grateful she still found him worthy enough to write. Whenever loneliness had punched him in the gut, he'd held on to the hope of seeing his first grandchild. Lenora was evidently a sweet, yet fussy baby, with a mop of brown curls and sparkling green eyes.

His wife hadn't written him but two lonely letters. The first informed him she was recovering, and the other only answered his question about how Ava was handling motherhood. Was Leah worse off than Ava had described?

Spotting one of the older women in town passing the mercantile, Bryant pulled his hat down low. It wasn't Mrs. Tate,

thank goodness, but he didn't want to risk his arrival being broadcast across town faster than a coyote could streak across the ridge.

Minutes later, he stepped upon the dirt of his own street. The windows in his cozy, green house were dark, and no smoke rose from the chimney. Had Leah moved in with Ava and her husband? If his wife's recovery had been long, that would make sense. But why wouldn't his daughter have mentioned that in her letters?

He headed back. Hopefully the streets would be as empty on his way to Ava's as they'd been on his way here. But before he turned off Main, a dark-haired, petite form wearing a green dress he recognized crossed the street toward the laundry. Heart hammering, he watched his wife stop in front of the town's laundry, who was wearing a green dress of her own. He'd never seen Corinne in anything but a white shirtwaist and dark skirt. When the tall blonde took leave of his wife and climbed into an awaiting wagon, his gaze stayed riveted on Leah who'd turned to wave farewell.

How had he forgotten how lovely she was?

Barely breathing, he took one step, then another as he strode down the boardwalk on the opposite side of the street to close the distance between them.

What if she turned her back on him?

In prison, he'd longed for the day he could return home and hold her for days on end—though he didn't deserve such comfort.

Leah opened the laundry's door and limped through. Was she working for Corinne now?

Across the way, Leah flipped over the closed sign. Strange. Why was she closing the laundry and not Corinne?

The sign rocked to a halt only to swing again as Leah pushed backwards out the door, a wrapper tucked tightly around her. Without looking his way, she marched in the opposite direction, a limp slowing her progress. Wasn't she going home?

He clamped his lips to keep from calling after her. Best they have their first encounter away from the public eye.

Her irregular movements matched the haphazard beat of his heart. He was going to have to have a talk with the doctor about the obvious pain she was in.

After crossing the street, he followed her, taking surreptitious glances, hoping no one called to him while he was basically stalking his wife.

At the bank, she reached for the door just as the bank president backed out, keys in hand.

“Mr. Rice.” Leah stumbled backward.

“Oh!” The balding man startled and twisted to look behind him. “Mrs. Whitsett, I completely forgot.”

“If now’s not a good time...” Her voice no longer held the clear timber he remembered, but rather sounded more like harsh grit.

The bank owner opened the door wider and swung an arm to usher her in. “The time is yours. We can still sign the papers.”

Papers?

And then they both disappeared into the bank.

Had she lost the house? With renewed energy, he bounded up the bank stairs. He had paid off the house. They couldn’t lose it now that he was back! Or at least not until they had a chance to sell it.

He pulled hard on the door, breathing easier when he found it unlocked. “Mr. Rice,” he called. “Please, wait!”

Bryant stopped midstride at the wide-eyed, almost fearful expression on Leah’s face. He’d hoped to have her crash into his arms the moment he returned, but the look she gave him was *not* longing.

“Um, I’m sorry to barge in.” He nodded at her before addressing Mr. Rice. “But please, give us an extension so I can pay whatever we owe before you take the house.”

Mr. Rice glanced between them. “I’m sorry, I don’t under—”

“I’m not selling the house, Bryant.” His wife’s gravelly tone was less from cord damage and more from a hostility he’d never heard her direct at anyone. “It’s not in danger. I’m buying the laundry.”

“The laundry?” He turned toward Mr. Rice. “She can’t buy that.”

Leah straightened all five foot two of her. “Don’t you dare, Bryant. You don’t know—”

“But that will only complicate things since...well. We need to talk about this outside of Mr. Rice’s presence.” He knew he hadn’t flat out told her in his letters they couldn’t stay in Armelle, hoping to let her adjust to the idea, but she couldn’t have missed his intentions. Unless of course, she’d thrown his letters straight into the fire—if that was the case, employment was the least of his worries.

Mr. Rice cleared his throat. “Uh, well, perhaps today is not the day to put this in writing.”

She whipped back toward him. “It is. It’s the day we arranged to do it.”

“But you don’t have your husband’s permission.”

Leaning across the counter, she tapped on the papers. “I didn’t need his permission while he was gone, and I’ve done everything you’ve asked.”

Tugging on his tie, Mr. Rice pulled the paper gently out from beneath Leah’s fingers. “I don’t know if...well, I’m going to need some time to be sure the bank can—”

She huffed. “Fine, I can keep renting.”

“I’m afraid your lease is up at the end of the year.”

“What?” Her shoulders drooped. “You mean you won’t renew the lease?”

Mr. Rice glanced toward him, and Bryant shook his head slightly.

Leah turned fast enough to see him do so. She glared at him then stomped past, leaving him in a wake of the scent of her favorite floral shampoo. His heart clenched, but he clamped his

fist around the chair in front of him to keep from chasing after her.

Her expression had been hard. Real hard.

He was thankful she wasn't blanketing him with the kisses and praises he'd never deserved, but for her to have uttered such harshness in public? It wasn't like the Leah he remembered—not at all.

The bank door slammed behind her, and the windows rattled, reverberating through the empty hollows within him.

Those first few days, when her life had teetered on the brink of death, he'd told God he'd accept living separated from her if he must—if only God would save her life. He'd done plenty to deserve such punishment.

But after spending only a few seconds in her presence...

Lord, I lied to you. She might be better off without me, but there's no way I can live without her.

Leah marched back to the laundry. How dare Bryant show up at the bank and ruin another part of her life.

Her hip ached, especially with the cold, but she kept her boots thumping against the boardwalk. She needed to put more distance between herself and Mr. Rice, who'd so easily rescinded his offer just because her husband had shaken his head no. Her husband, who'd helped the mayor defraud half the county last year! His say-so shouldn't have undone anything.

"Leah!"

Her heart clenched at Bryant's broken voice.

She swallowed hard but kept moving forward. He wasn't the only one who'd been broken.

"Wait!" He jogged up and stopped in front of her.

Seemed he'd stayed active in prison, his chest and arms were broader and more muscled than she remembered. Averting her gaze, she passed by him. "I can't believe you."

“About what?”

As if he didn’t know. When he showed up, what did he do? Apologize? Grovel? No. He’d made a life-altering decision without consulting her—which was exactly the reason they were in this mess to begin with. “You don’t get to make financial decisions without my input ever again.”

He stopped, but after a moment, his footsteps continued behind her. “But isn’t that what you were doing? You didn’t tell me anything about buying a laundry in the two letters you sent me.”

She hugged herself as she recalled the scads of paper she’d written on only to crumple and toss them into the trash. Though writing the words that had festered inside of her had felt good, they’d been too harsh to send. “I think I’ve earned the ability to make decisions on my own now, considering we would’ve lost the house if I’d not taken over the laundry.”

“How’s that? It’s paid off.”

She whirled on him. “How was I supposed to maintain it or keep it warm without a cent in the bank? How was I supposed to feed myself? I can’t eat furniture.”

He pulled on his neckcloth. “I figured Oliver would help.”

“He didn’t deserve such a burden. Besides, he and Ava have enough to worry about without me piling my problems onto theirs.”

“I understand I put you in an awful spot—”

She scoffed. “An awful spot wasn’t the half of it.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But you can’t buy the laundry. Not when we have to leave town.”

She shook her head. When he’d hinted to that in his letters, she’d stopped writing him. “Our first and only grandchild is here.”

“I don’t want to leave either, but haven’t you read any of my letters? I don’t think we have much choice. Who’s going to hire me here after what I’ve done?”

“You should’ve thought about that before you swindled

people.” She stomped around him and pulled out her keys to the laundry.

“What if we moved closer to Jennie?”

She paused, swallowing hard. Finding him a job in Chicago would certainly be easier, but Jennie was content at the blind school. “She doesn’t need us like Ava does. You’ll just have to find something here, because I’m not leaving.”

Bryant’s brow was deeply furled.

She let out a long, frosty breath. She’d never before talked to him so sharply or told him no so adamantly. But whereas she used to think he hung the moon and the stars, every time she looked in the mirror now, she was reminded of how naive she’d been.

She stopped herself from reaching up to touch the scar that ran through her eyebrow and jammed her keys into the lock. Bussing herself with the door might just keep the warmth in the back of her eyes from becoming tears. Though he deserved the townsfolk’s distrust, he wasn’t the only one who’d messed up. Why had she not questioned him last year when she’d known something was wrong?

“I’m staying in the laundry’s upstairs apartment,” she said with a slight tremble in her voice. “You can have the house.”

“I—”

When he didn’t finish his sentence, she couldn’t help but turn.

His face was paler than the winter sky. He looked down the road as if to be sure no one would overhear. “I figured I’d be sleeping in the guest room, but for us not to be together at all?”

Why she remained standing in the cold staring at him, she didn’t know, but she couldn’t just turn her back on him when he looked like a puppy that’d been tossed off a stage.

Then he stepped closer, and the invisible thread that had stitched two hearts together pulled tight, nearly making her stagger with the desire to collapse into his arms and pretend last

year had never happened. She looked away, her chest tightening with the effort to resist.

“What happens if I can’t find a job here?” His voice was barely audible.

She crossed her arms, clamping against the ache. “Then you’ll have to look harder—or somewhere else.”

He pulled off his hat, his ears red with cold. “But how can I make things up to you if we’re not together?”

Her throat constricted at his first hint of an apology. “You likely can’t.”

“I know I don’t deserve a second chance, but is there any love left in your heart that could convince you to extend me one? I’ll work hard to make up for everything wrong I’ve ever done to you.”

Tears welled hot against her frozen face.

He took another tentative step forward, holding out a gloved hand. “I can’t do that if we’re apart.”

She took a step back and pushed against the door. “I’m not ready for that.”

Once inside, she closed the door before he could say anything else. Over the last few months, she’d imagined the moment she’d show him exactly how little control he had over her now.

But no cathartic rush swept over her by shutting the door in his face.

She only felt more alone.

