
Chapter 1

LARKSPUR VALLEY, *Wyoming, January 1873*

"Please don't go."

Twenty-eight-year-old Dr. Hugh Bennington sighed, running his palm down his face in frustration as he looked at his fraternal twin sister Poppy Bennington. She had become Mrs. Weston last year, after being a spinster for longer than she should have been.

She was looking at him as if he had just announced he was going to war, which was an exaggeration on her part. He was just going to Laramie, the nearest city, which was less than a day's journey by train. It was also the same city where Hugh and his younger brother Anthony had attended school.

Unfortunately, all of the trains were currently out of commission because of all the snow Larkspur Valley had received. As a result, Hugh was forced to make the journey by horse, which took considerably longer. Fortunately, he was a fast rider.

While he and Poppy shared the same blue eyes all of the Bennington siblings had, their hair color was different. Hugh

had the same inky black hair as his brothers while Poppy's own hair was a buttery yellow.

Her husband, Finn Weston, wrapped an arm protectively around his wife while giving Hugh a reproachful look. Poppy was four months pregnant, the little belly ballooning underneath her thick wool dress. Since the announcement of her pregnancy, her husband had waited on her hand and foot, as if Finn couldn't be more pathetic.

Finn and Hugh had never really seen eye to eye. as he was more the older brothers Christopher and Steve's friend rather than Hugh's. Hugh thought Finn was a lovesick fool who lacked a spine because he'd been pining after Poppy for years. Finn, on the other hand, considered Hugh rude and selfish, which Hugh had to admit wasn't exactly a lie.

"I'll be back before you know it, Pop." Hugh patted her head affectionately. His sisters, especially his twin, were the only ones who managed to bring out his softer side. "I'll only be gone for a few days."

Hugh's favorite cigars had been unavailable for months. Mr. Simon, the owner of the mercantile, had assured him he simply hadn't received his packages, but Hugh had a feeling it was because the Benningtons had been less than kind to his beast of a daughter, Chrissy.

As a result, he had to make the journey into the city, which was the reason for his sister's fussy nature. Hugh had to go now, as it was the first time in months he hadn't had to deliver a baby, no one was sick and no one was dying. If he didn't go now, he wouldn't have a decent break until the summer, after he delivered Poppy's baby.

She wrinkled her nose. "I still don't understand why you are going all the way over there for cigars. It's such a nasty habit, Hugh. Mr. Howard from church is convinced cigars will end up killing men someday."

"Mr. Howard also believes that one day, we will be able

to roam the skies like birds. I wouldn't take his words to heart, sis."

Poppy looked like she was going to argue, but Finn interrupted, "Let him go, sweetheart, he's a grown man. He knows what he's doing. Don't guilt yourself. Whatever foolish decision he makes is his alone."

Hugh scowled at him.

Poppy bit her lower lip worriedly. "Just hurry home, Hugh. The weather is so terrible, I worry about you. The last thing I need is for you to be lost in a snowstorm."

His sister thought that just because he didn't have a wife fussing over him, Hugh must surely be incompetent. Being blissfully in love and being their wives' lapdogs might suit Christopher and Steve fine, but Hugh enjoyed having the company of a different woman every night.

He had never been one to form strong, loving relationships outside his family, never properly courted a woman. Hugh thought most women were boring and had the attention span of a bird. Hugh would probably remain a bachelor forever, which suited him just fine. His work as a doctor kept him perfectly busy.

"I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail, Pop." Hugh kissed her forehead. "Just focus on keeping my little niece or nephew safe in your belly."

Hugh didn't bother saying goodbye to Finn. The air was bitterly cold as he got on top of his horse and headed towards Laramie. Hugh hadn't bothered telling the rest of his siblings about his little trip; he would let Poppy squeal like she always did.

Besides, Hugh doubted any of his siblings besides Poppy would notice he was gone. Christopher and Steve were busy with their families, Anthony was busy as the church pastor, Iris spent every minute of the day studying so she could pass her teaching exam, and Lily was no doubt busy scrap-

booking or doing whatever young girls currently obsessed over.

Not to mention, Hugh was in no mood to hear a scolding delivered by his older brothers. He loved them, but Chris and Steve still treated him like a troubled fourteen-year-old at times. No, it was better this way. The less they knew, the better. Hugh would just pick up six months' worth of cigars and return back to Larkspur Valley.

Once or twice, he thought about hiring another doctor to help him at his practice, but then he was quickly reminded that he was annoyed by most people, leading him to dismiss the idea. It was better this way. Hugh was, and would always be, a loner.

The trip to Laramie turned out to be more of a hassle than he had anticipated. For starters, the trip by horse went mind-numbingly slow compared to traveling by train. Even though Hugh was an expert rider growing up on a successful cattle ranch, he didn't particularly enjoy riding in the blistering cold.

Hugh longed for a Wyoming summer. At least then, he didn't have to deal with the sudden occurrence of snowstorms or an endless amount of patients who only came in for a sniffle.

When he finally made it to the city and secured his packages, Hugh briefly wondered how his life would have been different if he had moved to the city to open his practice instead of returning to his childhood home of Larkspur Valley.

He would probably be earning more money, there would be more entertaining things for him to do, and he would no doubt be surrounded by lovelier women than he had in his dull little town.

Anthony, his pestering little brother, had asked him once why he didn't just stay in the city, but Hugh had ignored him.

The reality was he would have missed his family too much. Even though Laramie wasn't far from Larkspur Valley, Hugh would have still felt the emptiness. The years he had spent away attending medical school had been hard enough. Besides, his family might be a pain at times, but they stuck up for each other, and his parents' graves were in Larkspur Valley. He couldn't leave.

Hugh stayed the night at an inn in the city and even kept his promise to his twin and was good, by not hiring a prostitute. The next morning, he ventured back to Larkspur Valley, silently cursing himself for being so stupid and coming into the city in the midst of this unpredictable weather.

Hugh wasn't much of a worrier, but even he was concerned as snow started coming down. His horse started whining in protest. He had lived through enough Wyoming winters to know this was a snowstorm that was preparing to descend on him.

The middle Bennington brother continued on his path even though he wasn't quite sure where he was going. There wasn't anything out here for miles. Continuing was better than staying where he was and freezing to death. The last thing he needed was for his siblings to find his corpse.

He breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the God he wasn't even sure existed when he found a small cabin. It was shabby and not well made, but it was better than nothing. Best of all, it looked abandoned, so he didn't have to beg for shelter or make small talk.

Hugh opened the door and frowned. He had been expecting it to be empty, but it actually looked cozy.

Someone did live here if the shabby couches, cracked plates and cups, and clean laundry all over the place were any indication.

He cleared his throat, touching his pistol inside his coat pocket. His brother Steve, the sheriff of Larkspur Valley,

always told him to carry a weapon in case of emergencies. Chris and he followed the rule dutifully, while Anthony thought they were silly. But then again, he was a pastor.

Hugh wasn't a fan of shooting anyone, mainly because it was a pain to pull the bullet out of someone. Still, he wasn't opposed to defending himself. To be honest, he liked a little violence, which was why he had almost been kicked out of medical school for all of the fights he had gotten himself in.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" He cleared his throat as he put on a cheerful, fake voice. "I am not here to hurt anyone. I would just like a place to stay for the night. My name is Dr. Hugh Bennington."

Silence.

Hugh smiled. Maybe the place was abandoned after all. Lucky him.

He started looking around the small kitchen, desperate for food, but he found only tea bags and a small loaf of stale bread. Hugh scoffed as he closed the cabinet. Thankfully, he had brought a bit of food with him; he was hopeful it would last him until the storm died off.

A pair of lacy drawers caught his attention as he picked them up. They were small and delicate looking, which made him wonder why women liked lacy, unpractical underthings if they were just going to be ripped by their husbands.

The door flew open as Hugh turned around, still holding on to the lacy underthings. He was ready to pull out his gun if necessary.

A woman stood before him, dressed messily in men's winter clothes which were too big on her small frame. She was carrying a pathetic amount of wood and her bright red curls were stuck to her forehead.

The woman's eyes widened when she saw him holding on to her lacy drawers. "Don't touch that!"

Her face flushed adorably, obviously not expecting him

inside her property. Hugh was glad she didn't have a husband; otherwise, he would have probably beaten Hugh to a bloody pulp.

She took a step forward, no doubt ready to smack him. Her eyes widened when she felt her foot slip as she tumbled backwards, feet up in the air.

Hugh heard her head hit the wet floor before she became still. He groaned. He really did have the worst luck in the world. Now, he had to play savior.