

CLAIMING CAROLINE

GROVER TOWN DISCIPLINE - BOOK SIX



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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



"*O*ff!" The bundle of new reins fell from one hand as the hard thump of his new saddle dropped from his other. He wasn't bothered by the falling items as long as the slight form against his chest was all right.

"Oh, gracious me. I'm sorry..." Her words ceased, as her dark brown eyes—as rich as brewed coffee, that issued a punch to his gut the same way as the roasted beans did—rose and met his.

He gripped her shoulders, feeling the thin but strong muscles hidden beneath her worn green dress, which did not a thing to enhance the beauty of the woman wearing it, but neither did it dim it for him. The unexpected contact set her body against his and he didn't regret having her in his arms. His farm and the people employed by him consumed all his effort and time. It was the responsibility for those who depended on him weighing on his shoulders that kept him from thinking of himself and the things he wanted. That want included the woman now standing in his arms at a bird-chirping early hour of the morning. Only a few businesses were even open at such a time and a handful of people were moving through the area. He didn't doubt it was strategic that Caroline Douglas was in Grover Town now.

"Cuse me, ma'am." He couldn't help his natural male reflex to inhale and take in the soft flower scent of the soap he could smell coming from her body or hair. He gritted his teeth not to lean down and drag his nose along the side of her slender neck and take in more of her. This wasn't the time nor place. Hell, it wasn't the woman either.

His gaze must have revealed his urges toward her because she stumbled back and away from him. There was a crunching sound then a gasp.

"Oh, no!" She dropped to her knees, basket dangling from her arm, but there were three eggs, rather broken yokes and shells, staining the boardwalk between them.

Lowering to his haunches, he stared down at the mess. It was only a few eggs, but her strained expression as she wore her teeth into her bottom lip made it clear they may have been all or most of them from her basket. "Miss Caroline, it was my fault. I'll replace them."

Her head popped up and she stared at him, trying to force a smile. She widened her eyes to appear as if the destruction didn't bother her; he wasn't fooled.

She rose, readjusting the linen in the basket as if there was something else in the basket she was protecting, but the cloth lay too flat for there to be anything else within. "It's fine. I was just dropping some items off to the Russells and happened to pick up a few eggs, maybe for a cake. Don't worry yourself, Mr. Rand."

Even as he enjoyed hearing his surname from her lovely, odd lips, the top slightly fuller than the lower, he wasn't convinced. The more she talked and didn't meet his gaze, it solidified his decision to replace them. "Miss Caroline, I won't feel good about myself if I didn't make amends for my mistake."

She brushed a hand over her skirts, sweeping away mysterious dirt. Her dress was old, and more than a few of the buttons down the front of it were different colors. There was a long, jagged dark green stitch down the side, all proof she'd had to mend the dress

more than once, but it was clean. "Truly, it isn't that serious of a matter." She offered him a small smile and short nod, as she made to pass him.

He placed a hand lightly on her elbow to halt her as she started to turn to walk away and felt the electric spark from the place he touched her through his fingertips and straight to his core. He didn't remove his hand as he enjoyed the soft fabric of her dress warmed by her skin. Waiting until she glanced over her shoulder at him, he kept his voice low. "Please allow me to do this."

She took in a shuddered breath as her gaze held his.

Her eyes seemed to consume him, drown him in their soulful loveliness. Garrett gave himself strict instructions not to lower his gaze to her lips, but his eager ass eyes didn't listen as they practically moved of their own accord and took in their fullness and the off-kilter size, the top one that was just a bit fuller and wider than the bottom, a captivating pair. He was standing close to her. There was a respectable gap between them but not big enough that his mind hadn't calculated the one step it would take to set his lips on hers.

Dammit. He wasn't a fool. In Grover Town, if he kissed sweet, innocent Caroline Douglas, there'd be church bells ringin' before noon. Right now, his life was headed in the right direction where his farm was concerned but too much for him to handle to even consider taking a wife. It took most of his might, but he tore his gaze away from her tempting mouth and back on her eyes.

His little nervous bunny. He saw the worry and relief that combined in her gaze when finally, she acquiesced, "If it's that important to you, I'll wait while you replace it."

His heart did a strange drop, then it soared as if he were on a horse headed face down a deep gully then coming up over the other side. There was a tug at one side of his mouth as he smiled. "May I?"

She frowned, confused at what he was asking for. When he tapped the handle of the basket over her arm, she stammered, "Oh, yes."

When she slipped off the basket and handed it to him, he saw the flood of color in her cheeks and wondered what had been going through her mind.

Was it like mine? He shoved that thought away. Caroline worked too hard alongside her pa to tend their dying farm and keep a bit of food in their mouths to be considerin' kisses at daybreak.

"Be but a minute." He tipped his hat and hustled inside of Russell's Mercantile.

"Mornin', Rand."

"Henry." He strolled up the center aisle between the rows of provisions and goods stacked and shelved on tables, crates, and barrels, and even more items displayed on shelving along the side walls. At the counter, he set the basket down.

Henry, with two thumbs' worth of salt at his temples marring the darkness of his hair, the only show of his age, looked down at it. Not something Garrett had ever carried into the store, and he was sure the older man knew it belonged to Caroline, who was standing right outside one of two large windows.

"What can I do you for this day?" the man asked, not even mentioning the woman outside.

Garrett was grateful Henry was here instead of his wife. She was a little more than a busybody, not malicious about it, just nosey. He took a second and flipped back the top linen of the light-weight basket just to verify he was right. The basket was empty; only those three cracked eggs had been inside. "I need half dozen eggs, if you got them, and a half pound of flour and meal."

"The eggs are yesterday's. I should have fresh within the hour." He stepped over to the big sacks cinched tight with twine behind the counter.

"What you have'll be fine."

"I can get that right up for you." Henry started scooping and weighing the items.

As he waited, Garrett noticed the various jars of sourballs, gum drops, peppermint sticks, colorful gumballs, and candy sticks.

Usually, they weren't something he'd paid much attention to since he was a youngster, but he thought about the woman outside, embarrassed by the meagerness of her morning shopping. He decided he wanted to give her a treat personally, hopin' she'd like it when she discovered it and even the meal and flour. He wasn't trying to shame her, or her prideful father, just help a little where he could.

"All right. All set." Henry's voice snagged his attention.

Moving back to the basket, he handed Henry the peppermint stick to place in a small wax bag. "Place it on my farm's tab. When Mrs. Copernic comes in shortly for things she needs at the house, she'll pay it with the other stuff."

"Sure thing."

Garrett covered all the small items up in the basket, then he left after a two finger tap to the brim of his hat, biddin' the other man good day.

"Here you go, Miss. Caroline."

"Oh, thank you." She held out his reins. "Here. Figured you didn't purchase them because the boardwalk was in need of leads for a horse."

He grinned at her humor. "No, ma'am. Sorry if I delayed you today. Thanks." Garrett took the reins that he'd plum forgotten from her hand and exchanged it for the basket.

When her gaze rounded at the heft, she started shaking her head, denying herself the unseen items in it. He covered her hand, lightly gripping the handle. "Just my apologizes. Please take it with the kindness it was given."

She hesitated. "Okay. Thank you, Mr. Rand." She stepped away, breaking their contact. "I must get going. Papa will come in from the field soon, needin' his breakfast."

"I'm sure. Good day, Miss Caroline." *Lovely bunny.* He stood next to his new saddle still on the planks of wood below his feet as he watched her hasty steps take her down from the boardwalk to the nag-pulled wagon out front of the store.

Once there and in her seat, she offered him a wave and a small smile before she was tottering off on the rickety ride, the basket stationed on the seat beside her. He hoped that with such an unsteady ride before her, this batch of eggs would make it to the tiny farm. If not, at least she could make something to fill their bellies with the meal and flour. He would have liked to bring her a bucket or two of fresh milk and a pound of butter from his dairy and farm, but he knew Mr. Douglas wouldn't allow such kindness, or charity, as the protective father and farmer saw it.

Caroline Douglas was a beauty and sweet young lady. Longer in the tooth than most gals who were married by ten and six, she would make a man a fine wife if her pa ever gave anyone the opportunity.

Garrett hefted the saddle from the walkway before he slung it onto his shoulder and made his way to his horse. There was too much in his way to even consider makin' an offer. So he did what he always did, put Caroline Douglas out of his mind.



"WHAT BRINGS YOU 'ROUND, GARRETT?" Sam Douglas barely gave him a slight glance as he continued breaking up the hard ground with his hoe.

Fingering the brim of the hat in his hand, Garrett looked around the yard. The farm was small and the house just as little. It appeared sturdy but run down. Sam had lived out here on the outskirts of town with his daughter, Caroline for years. Everyone in town knew that Samuel and his daughter were two pennies away from the poorhouse in Topeka. Crops hadn't been good in more than a handful of years and without money to buy cattle or proper irrigation to the fields, a person could bury themselves deep in debt. However, Douglas' crops weren't the reason Garrett came around. Caroline was the reason he was here. An hour ago, he'd

seen her ride into town on their weathered wagon, pulled by the old nag Douglas liked to call a horse.

Needing to speak to Douglas alone, Garrett had come rushing over. It had been two years since he'd literally run into Caroline, and since then, most things he'd done since then had set him on this course.

"If you've just come to stand around, then you'll have to do it someplace else. I'm gonna need that piece of earth your boots is takin' up roots in." Douglas continued moving backwards as he dug the hoe deeper in the ground, his Scottish brogue intricately peppering the Midwest dialect, both thick even though it was common knowledge that the older man had been in America since age eleven.

Not put off by the older man's gruff tone, Garrett took a deep breath. "Mr. Douglas, I'm here on a personal matter."

A slight pause in motion was the only indication that Douglas was truly processing the conversation. "We ain't got no personal matters between us."

Pulling a handkerchief from his back pocket, Garrett swiped the sweat from his forehead. It was late winter, but just southeast of the Great Plains of the Kansas Territory this year, things began to heat up early. "Not yet. But, I was hopin'—"

"What is it that you was wonderin'?" Stopping and leaning against the long stick of his tool, Douglas eyed him.

Garrett stood tall as he was assessed by the brown, weary eyes of the older man. Douglas' features had been carved by years of a hard life. His determined struggles had won Garrett's respect. After losing his house, wife and infant son in a twister, Douglas had never missed a beat. He cared for his six-year-old daughter alone and worked the land. Everyone in Grover knew their story, their struggle.

"I'm not gettin' any younger." Smiling, Garrett made a small attempt to lighten the mood.

Douglas didn't bite just continued to stare.

"I've been thinkin' a lot lately about settlin' down."

"Mm-hmm."

The bleating goat secured in the small pen at the side of the house communicated more than Douglas. Garrett ventured, "Look, I'm here to ask you for Caroline's hand."

"Keep away' fae mah daughter. Dinnae even think about it. It ain't goin' happen." Douglas' response was gruff as he gave Garrett a sharp-eyed look on the last statement as if he ensured they were communicating the same language before he began hoeing again, slammin' the tool into the dry earth with all his might, as if that ended the conversation.

Unable to let it go, Garrett questioned, "Why, Douglas? I make more than a decent living out at my farm. I can take care of her. Caroline is at least one and twenty. She's been old enough for years. Besides that, I have a feel—"

"You ain't gotta tell me about my daughter. A crofter kens his lassie better than a'body. Her place is here and that ain't goin' change." With his two dialects mangled into one, Sam Douglas raised his hoe and began his work again with more gusto as heavy rivers of sweat rolled down his tan skin. The man's face was blotchy, with red patches here and there, and the rivulets streamed from his face to his chin and dripped on his arm.

Garrett sighed heavily. He didn't know if he wanted to growl or rage. This conversation was not going as he'd hoped. "Mr. Douglas! I promise to do good by Caroline and not treat her wrong."

"I know you won't treat her wrong, cuz you ain't gettin' my lassie, so stop askin'," Caroline's father said without looking up. "I don't care how many of you *randy* bucks and Bellmores come round here, the answers still goin' be *na*. *Ye ken?*"

Garrett didn't know if Mr. Douglas was making a play on his name or if it was true that other men in town had asked for Caroline's hand. It wasn't hard to believe others wanted her; she was a beauty. Even underneath all the old clothes and the layers of dirt

from working in the field with her father, Caroline was something special.

What did Bellmore have to do with any of this?

"Ah ken." Realizing that this conversation had come to a close, Garrett allowed the meeting to end. He placed his hat back on his head. "Preciate your time, Douglas."

Grunting under his voice, Douglas continued his field work.

Shaking his head in disappointment at the old man's stubbornness, Garrett crossed the uneven, hard, dry and rocky soil and mounted his chestnut horse, King. Tugging on his reins, he steered the big horse back toward town.

It was time for him to re-evaluate his plans. Evidently, his thoughts of getting Caroline to the altar was a dream that was fading with dawn's light.

Good thing he wasn't a man who gave up easily.