

IN SEARCH OF A NOBLE MAN



MARIELLA STARR



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-000-3

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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.

PROLOGUE



1898, CODY, WYOMING

Noble Lawson reined in his horse at the top of a hill to look down upon his final destination of Cody, Wyoming. It gave the appearance of a new town with a lot of new construction taking place, although Noble did not see much he considered useful. He had heard the stories, as had his brother Brigham, about Buffalo Bill Cody starting a town not far from Yellowstone Valley. Cody looked exactly like what it was – a rough western settlement built with false fronts to make it look impressive and settled. It wasn't. His proof was that his brother was dead. Noble was here to make sure Brigham had a decent burial place and to pick up a breeding bull.

Noble had not agreed that his brother should come to Cody to purchase the Brahma bull he had seen written up in a cattleman's magazine. He thought Cody too far to travel without the convenience of a railroad, but now he was stuck doing it anyway. He had received several telegrams from a man named Jude Miller who said

he was holding onto the purebred Brahma bull, along with his brother's personal property.

Noble would not have made the trip at all if his Aunt Effie Cox had not jumped all over him about family duty. His brother had never been concerned with family duty. Brigham had spent more time away from his ranch than on it over the last ten years, leaving his younger brother the responsibility of caring for the property. Brigham had suffered from itchy feet and a predisposition for gambling, except when he was broke. When he was broke, he had managed to find his way home just fine.

This last time, the brothers had argued long and hard about adding a breeding bull to Noble's cattle stock. Since it was Noble's ranch, he thought he had made himself clear on the subject. Apparently, he had not. One morning shortly after the argument, he awakened to find his stash of greenbacks considerably lightened. Brigham had left a letter for Noble saying he had gone to buy the bull. It was not the first time his brother had helped himself to cash not belonging to him. It would be his last, since someone had killed him in Cody. What surprised Noble was that his brother had actually bought the bull.

Aunt Effie had twisted his ear for voicing his doubt. His six-year-old daughter, Betsy, thought that was hilarious and had giggled until he had given her a one-eyed squint – his signal for her to straighten up. He loved his little girl to pieces, but she was a handful of rowdy little tomboy.

Ultimately, Noble traveled to Cody instead of staying on his ranch in Green Valley, as he would have preferred. He had reluctantly turned the reins of the ranch over to his foreman to make the trip. He knew Tom Ford would do a good job. Noble's reluctance came from the fact that he was not a man to delegate. He was a hands-on man. When there was a job to do, he considered it his ranch and thus his responsibility.

As he steered his horse into town, Noble took his time looking around. Cody seemed to have more saloons, dancehalls and

theaters than any practical businesses geared for people such as ranchers and farmers. There was not a church or a schoolhouse anywhere. That meant the population was mostly men. He gave a sigh, but he would still ask in town if there were a newspaper.

He had promised Aunt Effie he would consider marriage again. She had been after him for a while about getting Betsy, a momma, and himself a wife. The life of a rancher was hard in Montana, tougher still without the comfort and companionship of a woman. He was long past mourning his Ruth Ann, who had died leaving him a three-month-old baby to care for, which was when Aunt Effie had moved to the ranch. Aunt Effie had saved his baby's life. He was sure of that because he had certainly not been up to the task of being a substitute momma. She had probably saved his life too during those hard grieving times because he truly had loved Ruth Ann.

That had been six years ago, and he had not found another woman yet. There were not that many single women in Virginia City and they married as fast as they arrived. The town council got so danged tired of hiring schoolmarms, simply to have them run off and get married, they finally hired a male schoolteacher. He took off with sixteen-year-old Emelia Haskings, her Daddy hot on his heels with a shotgun. He had married her.

Some men wrote off for mail-order brides. That was a dicey proposition as far as Noble could discern. Earl Brice wrote for a wife through a church group. The picture she sent Earl might have been how she looked at some point in her life. Nevertheless, when Estelle Fulbright finally arrived, she looked nothing like that picture. She also did not live up to her promises, as she was a nagging and complaining, woman. Noble did not think Earl Brice had been honest in his letter writing either since he had described himself as handsome. Earl was a good man, but he was so homely only a mother could love that face and only a desperate woman would have stuck around to marry him. Lies or mistruths aside, apparently Estelle and Earl suited each other. They had been

married for five years and had three children. They were doing something right.

Towns such as Cody did not typically have marrying kind of women. They had saloon whores and dancehall girls. Most of those were willing do what a good woman was not supposed to do to get a husband. Noble could not have that kind of woman around his Betsy. Still, if the town had a newspaper, it might have a section on women advertising for husbands.

Noble went to The Mercantile since the store was the cornerstone of all settlements and he could get any information he needed there. First, he needed to find a man named Jude Miller. He had business to attend to before his personal life.

CHAPTER 1



Belle Bijoux rode through Cody looking straight ahead, not letting her gaze stray to meet anyone's eyes. She hated coming into town. Nevertheless, she was in desperate need of supplies. The last hired man had left, so she had to make the trip herself. She dismounted from her horse and, although two different men offered to help, she shook her head and refused their assistance. She had learned that to allow a man even an innocent advance of kindness was asking for trouble.

She went straight inside The Mercantile speaking only to Mrs. Landry to obtain what few staples she could afford. She also needed to stop at the post office and the bank, before she could return to the safety of her cabin.



NOBLE WAS WALKING toward The Mercantile when he saw a woman hurrying out the door. A man followed her, trying to talk to her, but she was shaking her head and moving quickly to get away from him. When she turned in Noble's direction, he about stopped in his tracks. She was near the prettiest woman he had ever laid eyes on.

Wisps of black hair escaped from a tight bun at the back of her neck, they curled and bounced as she walked past. She was small-boned and almost too thin, with delicate features and porcelain smooth skin. She kept her head down ignoring everyone around her. As she turned a corner, he saw something fall from her clothing that she did not notice. He reached the item and picked it up. By that time, she was no longer in his line of sight.

Jude Miller stopped and waited for Noble Lawson to return. He had no idea why the man had suddenly turned and walked down a couple of store lengths before walking back, but that did not concern him. He was glad the man had finally shown up. He would have never recognized Noble Lawson as Brigham Lawson's younger brother. Brigham had been a short man with a potbelly and thinning hair. He wore the more dandified suits associated with professional gamblers, along with a sidepiece revolver. Noble Lawson was the opposite. He was so tall he had to duck through doorways, and there was not an ounce of fat on him – only lean, hard muscle. He was dressed as a cowman wearing durable clothes, a good Stetson and sturdy working boots – the hallmarks of a rancher. Jude had almost given up hope of Mr. Lawson showing up. Finally, he would be relieved of his duty as the last friend of Brigham Lawson. His employment opportunities were also looking up since he thought the brother might offer him a job.

When Noble Lawson walked back to Jude Miller, he was slapping an envelope against his palm.

“Do you know that woman who walked by us?”

The young man grinned. “Everyone knows Belle Bijoux, but she won't turn a head to any man. She is a widow and hands down the prettiest woman anywhere around. She has herself a little spread about fifteen miles outside town. I haven't talked to her myself, but I hear she is from South Carolina. She married a Louisiana man, Emile Bijoux, who was a gambler. He won the title to their little spread in a poker game. He was no rancher, that's for sure. It seems someone kicked him in the head or took the butt end of a rifle to

him. Either way, it made him a drooling idiot. He was laid up six months or more before he died. I think every man within a hundred miles has offered for her since then, but she won't take up with anyone. It doesn't keep them from trying, though."

Noble listened as the young man rambled on amiably. He needed to return the letter she had dropped.



BELLE COMPLETED her business at The Mercantile and walked on to the post office. However, when she arrived there, she could not find the letter she had wanted to post. It had taken her weeks to gather the courage to put pen to paper, and even more time to decide she would post it. She had been so careful this morning and so determined when she put it into her pocket. She had placed what little faith she had left into God's hands, deciding she would post the letter and hope for the best. Now, the letter was missing. If she were to believe that God was trying to tell her something... it was probably that she was not supposed to mail the letter.

Belle stood in the shadows of the alley behind a stack of barrels and waited until she saw Arnold Crosby, the bank manager, leave the Yellowstone Bank and walk down the street toward one of the saloons. She did not want to deal with him again. As soon as he was out of sight, she slipped into the bank and asked to close out her bank account. The pitiful amount of money the clerk handed her caused her hand to tremble, but she steadied herself. She put the money in her reticule, signed the release and left the bank.

She had barely stepped outside when someone gripped her arm painfully. Her eyes flew up to the face of Arnold Crosby. He dragged her around the corner of the bank. "I was out to your place last week. I told you I would be there and I waited for you. You can't hide from me, woman. The Sheriff will be out Friday and the loan will default."

"You will get the ranch as you want," Belle exclaimed.

"I don't want that worthless piece of property," Arnold snarled as he gripped her arms tighter and gave her a rough shake. "I want you, and I will have you."

"I have told you over and over again, no! Leave me alone and go home to your wife!" Belle exclaimed struggling to pull away from him.

His fingers tightened painfully. "I offered to take you as my mistress, yet that wasn't good enough for you. Now, before I'm through with you, I will have you as my whore."

"I will starve first, Mr. Crosby!"

"Oh, you will starve," said Arnold nastily. "I will make sure no one hires you in this town. I will ruin your reputation so badly that no decent person will speak to you. When you get hungry enough, you will come to me, and I will see you beg!"

"Let me go!" Belle cried fighting to break free from his grasp.

"Let the woman go!"

Both Belle and Arnold Crosby looked up – way up – to a tall man with a broad chest and a square jaw. The banker released her arm.

"This is a private conversation, mister," Arnold Crosby said.

"It is not private when you are insulting and threatening a lady on the street," Noble growled. The menace in his voice was enough to make Belle shake.

"Excuse me," Belle dodged past both men and ran down the sidewalk.

The suited man adjusted his cuffs. "We don't take kindly around here to strangers sticking their nose in our business. You should watch your back, mister," Arnold Crosby said, walking away and entering the bank as if nothing had occurred.

Noble looked down the street after the woman. He still had not returned her letter. He glanced at the door of the bank and narrowed his eyes. Back home, he would have taught that bastard a lesson in manners. On the other hand, back home no man would have treated a woman as that banker had treated Mrs. Bijoux.

He returned to the livery where he spent some time talking to Jude Miller, who worked there and bunked in a small tack room. Jude was a young man of only twenty-one, yet honest and loyal. He handed Brigham's money belt to Noble. It was intact except for the cost of his brother's burial. Brigham had been on a winning streak since arriving in town. William Cody had organized a high-stakes poker tournament at one of the saloons, which had attracted wealthy gambling men to the tables. Men, he had hoped, who would also be investors in his town.

Apparently, Brigham had been one of the winners. There was more than enough in the money belt to repay what Brigham had taken from Noble. However, the winnings did not come close to replacing the entire fortune his brother had wasted in gambling over the last ten years of his life.

The man who had killed Brigham had no time to steal the winnings. Jude Miller had heard the shot, grabbed his rifle, and run into the alley behind the livery where he found the murderer standing over Brigham's body. Jude had shot the assailant in the leg, disarming and apprehending him. Then the honest young man reported the crime and turned the killer over to the Sheriff. Initially jailed for assault, the charges were amended to murder when Brigham died. Three days later, they hanged the killer.

Jude had been the last person to talk to Brigham while he was alive. He had taken Brigham's dying words to heart, confiscating Brigham's personal belongings until he could turn them over to the man's brother. Everybody in town knew the sheriff was not a man of integrity or honesty, so Jude had not mentioned the money belt to him. The sheriff sent a wire to Green Valley about the killing. Jude telegraphed Noble Lawson directly saying he needed to come to Cody to pick up his brother's property.

Noble decided to send Jude back to Green Valley Ranch with the Brahma bull, which the young man called Brimstone. Jude would first have to get the animal to the nearest railroad station seventy miles away. There, he was to place Brimstone and himself

in a cattle car heading towards Helena, Montana. After reaching that destination, Jude still would have to wrangle the bull another hundred miles to Noble's ranch outside Virginia City, Montana. If he made it all the way, Jude would have a full-time job waiting for him.

Next, Noble went to his brother's gravesite. Then he paid a visit to the undertaker's office where he ordered a stone marker for the grave since he was leaving his brother's remains were they lay. Exhuming a body to move for reburial was a nasty business. He might have considered it except that having Brigham's final resting place in another state was typical of his family. His father's final resting place was in Texas, his mother in Illinois. His grandparents and most of the previous Lawson's were scattered all over the mid-west. His family had been on the move for decades as each generation traveled to new places to better their lives. Noble's own last stop had been Virginia City, Montana, ten years ago. He and his wife, Ruth Ann, had arrived there twenty years after the gold rush was over after the town had become a decent place to raise a family. Raising a family had been their dream. Only Noble had been able to fulfill his part of their plan.

With his family duty completed, Noble checked into a hotel. Around four in the morning, he reckoned his sleep was over as a beautiful face marred by distress and fear kept slipping into his thoughts. As the light of dawn filtered through the hotel window, the letter came back to mind. He had not returned it yet. He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and bounced it a few times in his palm. He knew he did not have the right to open a sealed letter. Yet, for some reason, he felt he needed to open it. Noble got *feelings* sometimes. His mother had called it Divine Intervention. He had never given much credence to the idea of God trying to contact him. Nevertheless, he had learned to pay heed to his intuition. He gave the matter a fair piece of thinking until he finally opened the flap and pulled out the single piece of paper. Addressed to a church in Carson City, Nevada, the letter asked the

minister if anyone in his congregation was interested in finding a wife.

She listed her attributes modestly and apologized for not being able to send a photo. She assured the minister she was a presentable woman, honest and truthful. She described herself as a Christian woman, widowed with no children. She would come with no dowry as the bank was foreclosing on her husband's property. She was hardworking, a good cook, and was teaching herself how to sew. She did not know how to work the land, but she was willing to learn. The prospective husband would have to swear he was not prone to drinking or gambling. She wanted a noble man of high moral principles and good character – a man who would treat her with respect and who wanted to forge a life together.



NOBLE REREAD the letter several times, as he considered the written words. He remembered the beauty of her face. He especially remembered her eyes, because they reminded him of his daughter's eyes. People called that particular mix of green and brown hazel. However, where his daughter's eyes were always full of laughter and mischief, Belle Bijoux's eyes were haunted with embarrassment and anguish.

For some reason, he wanted to remove her sad look and replace it with joy. She deserved so much more than what she requested. Even so, it was likely more than she would get from a match in Carson City. He had been there and it was a rough mining town, full of rough men. With his decision made, he folded the letter, returned it to the envelope and placed it in his pocket. He packed his belongings and walked over to the livery where he woke Jude Miller. He asked for directions to the Bijoux property and said he would meet up with Jude when he returned home.

"Jude, you have a big job and a lot of distance between here and Virginia City. In these parts, there are men who will kill for that

bull, or your horse, or what is in your pockets. Take care, and with or without the Brahma, try to reach Green Valley Ranch. There will be a place for you there," Noble promised.

"I'll make it sir," Jude said with a grave nod of his head followed by an easy grin. "Me and old Brimstone, we have us an understanding. If he doesn't try to kill me, I won't serve him up as spit-beef. We will make it there, or there will be a darn good reason why not."



BELLE WAS CARRYING a bucket of water from the well when she saw a rider in the distance coming in her direction. She took the water inside, picked up her husband's shotgun and waited.

She had lived almost two years outside Cody. From what she had been told, the little settlement had been a peaceful community until right before she and her husband had arrived. William Cody, more prominently known as Buffalo Bill, had shown up with a crazy scheme of building hotels and saloons for travelers coming to see the first designated National Park – Yellowstone National Park. He had convinced many wealthy investors that people would come to visit the park.

Gamblers came. Mountain men and cattlemen came, but so far the families of sightseers had not arrived. The men who came were crude and uncultured. They spent all their time in the saloons – drinking, smoking, gambling and occupying themselves with the indecent women. Some of those men came out to Belle's place where she had to prove she could protect herself. Since Emile had died, numerous men had come calling. Many of the offers were crude and unwelcome. A few offered marriage. She had to make all the men understand that even though she was a widow, she was not necessarily in need of a man. At least not for what they offered or wanted.



NOBLE RODE UP to the porch of the small log cabin where he sat his horse and waited. He saw the barrel of the shotgun peeking out from the window, and he was not fool enough to ignore it.

"Hail, the house!"

"What do you want?" demanded a female voice.

"Only to talk, ma'am," Noble said, raising both of his hands. "I have no weapons drawn, and I mean you no harm."

The barrel of the shotgun withdrew, the door opened, she still held the gun on him. "You are the man who helped me yesterday," Belle said, the Southern lilt to her voice sounding surprised.

"Yes ma'am," Noble answered. "Where I live, a man who spoke to a woman in that manner would get a midnight visit and be taught how to treat a lady."

Belle swallowed. "I thank you for your honorable intentions. Have you had coffee this morning, sir?"

He nodded. "Yes ma'am, I have, but coffee is always welcome. I would also like to have some words with you."

"Stay there," ordered Belle as she backed into the cabin and returned a few moments later with a pewter cup. "You may dismount, come as far as the top step, and sit down. Please understand I will not hesitate to shoot if I feel threatened."

Noble followed her instructions as she put the cup down where he could reach it and backed off. He sat down as she settled into a porch swing still holding the shotgun on him.

"What did you wish to discuss with me?" Belle asked.

Noble took a long drink of coffee and considered his words carefully. "I'm concerned about your situation, ma'am. I asked around a bit, only to someone who would not carry tales or gossip. You are about to lose this place to that banker Crosby. He is a nasty piece of work, the worst kind of man. He uses his money and power against other people. Men like him tend to get what they want in this world, and they could care less who gets hurt along the way. If he has his way now, he will hurt you. I would like to stop that from happening."

“Why?” Belle asked.

“You don’t deserve to be treated that way, ma’am. No woman deserves the disrespect he showed in his manner of speech towards you yesterday. I found your letter, ma’am. You dropped it. I looked for you in town to return it, but one thing or another happened and I never did get it back to you.” Noble said, handing her the letter.

“The seal is broken. Did you read my personal correspondence?”

“Yes ma’am, I did. I realize that may anger you and you would have every right. Still, I would like you to hear me out.”

Belle considered his request for a full minute before she nodded yes. “Go on. You could have opened it, and either discarded it or used it to ridicule me all over town. You did not. Why did you read it?”

“I don’t rightly know. I woke up this morning fully intending to deliver it to you unopened and be on my way. Yet, I felt compelled to open it. I get these feelings sometimes when my head tells me to do something when there really isn’t a good reason to do it.”

“Is it some kind of precognition or a divine calling?” Belle asked.

Noble chuckled. “I would not go that far, ma’am. I just call it a feeling. My brother was killed in Cody a couple of months back. I came here to make sure he was buried properly and to pick up a breeding bull he bought for my ranch. I apologize, ma’am, I have not even introduced myself. My name is Noble Lawson. I am from Virginia City where I have a spread about forty miles from town. We call it Green Valley Ranch. I am a widower with a sweet little six-year-old girl, named Margaret after my mother. We call her Betsy. She is about the prettiest little thing you have ever seen, although she tends to be sassy and is a tomboy.”

Belle Bijoux eyes softened and she lowered the shotgun a bit. “Go on.”

Noble took a deep breath. “Well, ma’am, I read your letter and I think I would be a good match for you. I don’t swear except when I’m angry. I don’t take but the occasional drink with friends, and I

don't keep liquor in my house except for medicinal purposes. My wife's Aunt Effie Cox lives with us, taking care of my little girl and running my household. She is a good, strong, Christian woman who would have my hide if I took up drinking for any reason other than medicinal. I don't gamble – ever. My father and my brother were both drinking and gambling men, but I never took to that kind of life. I guess I am what you would call a stable man. I work hard, I look out for my own and I respect my womenfolk."

"Those all seem to be noble traits, Mr. Lawson," Belle said softly, her lips curving up ever so slightly.

"Yes ma'am," Noble said with a self-conscious grin. "I have heard jokes based on my name my entire life, but what could I do about it? My middle name is Erastus, which I think is a whole lot worse than Noble."

"I see," Belle said. This time she did almost smile.

"Well," Noble said, wanting to get back on track. "I read your letter, and I think you are selling yourself short, ma'am. These mail-order bride advertisements and matches are like getting a pig-in-a-poke. I know that the men writing in and answering letters are not always truthful. In some cases, the women wanting husbands aren't telling the truth either.

"From what I heard, you've had a hard time for the last couple of years. You need a husband, ma'am. You need someone to protect you from men such as that banker, Crosby. I am in need of a good woman, as a wife for me and a mother for my Betsy.

"I am not a pig-in-a-poke. I am here ma'am, right in front of you. I am what I claim to be as I am not a liar. I take care of my family, and I take care of what belongs to me. I was a good husband to my wife. The only complaints my Ruth Ann had with me was she said I was stubborn, and sometimes I have a quick temper. I admit I am a bit on the strict side, and I do not take well to back talk or sass, yet I consider myself a fair man. I believe in the Ten Commandments and the vows of marriage. I am not a stingy man, but I am not a wasteful one either. I would provide for you prop-

erly with a home and everything you need to make your life comfortable. I will never raise a fist to you. However, I will fire up your fanny with the flat of my hand if you disobey me or need setting straight.”

“Is that last item supposed to be a selling feature for your good traits, Mr. Lawson?” Belle asked softly. She had put the shotgun aside realizing she had nothing to fear from this man.

“No ma’am,” Noble said, ducking his head as his neck turned red from embarrassment. “I probably should not have taken honesty that far.”

“I have been forewarned,” Belle said with a genuine smile that lit up her face. “Mr. Lawson, may I ask some questions of you?”

“It is simply Noble, ma’am. You can ask me near anything.”

“How long have you been a widower, Noble?”

“Six years. Betsy was only three months old when my wife died of pneumonia. We were married three years before Betsy came along.”

“That is a long time to be a widower. Why haven’t you remarried?”

“Virginia City is a settled town, Mrs. Bijoux, but it is still a man’s town. Men outnumber the women considerably. When a single woman comes into town, she is usually spoken for and married before I even know she is there,” Noble said honestly.

“Would you expect this marriage to be normal,” she faltered in her words.

“Yes ma’am,” Noble said. “You are a beautiful woman, Mrs. Bijoux, and I was attracted to you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. I would expect you to share my life in all ways. That includes sharing my bed and having my babies if we are so blessed. This marriage would not be a sham, one of those ‘in name’ only marriages where a man simply gets a housekeeper or a cook. If I wanted that, I’d hire someone. My Aunt Effie takes care of those things, anyway.

“I am a man with the needs of a man. I want a woman to be my

partner and companion. Our winters are hard and long, and they can be on the lonely side. Sometimes ma'am, two people simply have to take a chance. We can't predict the future. We can only work with what is given to us and move forward."

"It is a frightening prospect to marry without any time to judge a person in advance," Belle said softly.

"Yes ma'am, it is. However, if you answered a mail-order wife letter, you would meet and marry on the same day, and assume your wifely duties to a total stranger that same night. If you want to get to know me a bit better before making your decision, I will understand."

Belle nodded nervously and blushed. "I hadn't gotten that far in thinking ahead. I will admit I feel a bit desperate to get away from Mr. Crosby."

"I can understand that, ma'am. We could take the stagecoach to Virginia City or we could travel back the way I came, which was camping out. There is a little settlement about a two-and-a-half-day ride from here called Jenks. It's a played out little gold town, but there is a church there with a preacher. I know most women don't care much for living outdoors, but if we went back that way, we would have a little time to get to know each other. You have my word you would be safe. If you decided I didn't suit you, we could part company in Jenks. I remember seeing a sign for stagecoach service there, but I don't have any idea of when or how often it runs through. If nothing else, it would get you out of the reach of that banker."

"That is more than a fair offer," Belle said. "It does not escape my notice that I asked for a 'noble' man in my letter, and a man named Noble stands before me."

"That is strictly a coincidence, ma'am."

"Maybe so, maybe not," Bell said, giving him a long, steady look. "Would you allow me to take any of my things along?"

"We could freight ship whatever you wanted to take with you or, if it isn't too much, we could take a couple of pack horses or

mules with us. If we needed to take a wagon, that would double our traveling time. You wouldn't need much, Belle. I've lived at Green Valley Ranch for ten years. I have a house full of furniture."

"Would you come inside the cabin, please," Belle asked as she turned and went inside.

Noble followed her to find a stack of things on the kitchen table. There was a music box, a wooden chest opened to display a set of silverware, and a pile of crocheted items. Alongside them were a fancy brass clock, and polished silver frames filled with tintypes of people, probably relatives. These were the kinds of things that meant something to women.

"These were my mother's things," Belle said, her soft southern accent making her words sound almost reverent. "I took them from my home in Charleston when I married and moved to Louisiana. We brought them from Louisiana to Cody. I would hate to leave them behind because of the memories they hold for me, but I will if I must." She looked up at him waiting for an answer.

"Are you saying that you will marry me, Mrs. Bijoux?" Noble asked.

She nodded her head. "I will consider your offer, Noble Lawson. You are not a pig-in-a-poke as you call it. You have looked me in the eye, and I believe you have told me the truth – the good and the bad. I can do no less. Everything I wrote in the letter was true except my saying that I am a good cook. My results in cooking are sometimes a failure, so in all honesty I have to judge myself as only a fair cook. I am, however, an excellent baker. My pies will make your mouth water just smelling them. I also did not include any of my faults in the letter. I can be opinionated and have a tendency to speak my mind. I too can be stubborn. Nevertheless, I am a good worker and I love children. I come with no dowry other than twenty-eight dollars and these keepsakes. However, I do come with a good heart, and a willingness to be a good wife and mother. I give you my word that should I decide to marry you, I will do my best to make the marriage work."

"That is better than a fair offer, ma'am," Noble said. "Would we get married here in Cody or in that little town I told you about?"

"I do not want to be married in Cody, nor do I wish to leave by stagecoach from there. It would be best if Mr. Crosby has no idea I am leaving. He is a foul man whom I would prefer never to see again. I will travel with you and accept your offer of getting to know you better beforehand. We can marry in that town you spoke of, the one with the minister, or we can wait until we get to Virginia City.

"The sheriff will be here the day after tomorrow. I suspect Mr. Crosby will come with him. Both of these men have made indecent proposals, and I do not trust either one. I must be gone before they get here. I already planned to pack up my things the best I could, take my horse, and leave. I was going to hide out at the homestead of a friend for a while. Mr. Lawson, Arnold Crosby terrifies me. I do not want to end up at the mercy of a man such as him."

"That will not happen, ma'am," Noble promised. "As of this moment, you are under my protection."