

C H A P T E R 41

Her second winter in Griffin Gulch was relatively mild, with much less snow than the first. Spring burst forth after an early thaw, and Emily itched to get her hands into the soil. She strode to her garden enclosure, her pulse quickening. She felt as vital as a tree with sap rising in its trunk, or a bear emerging from its den after a long hibernation. Life buzzed about her. The earth seemed to hum with sunlight and warmth.

Andrew was coming later to discuss the wheat planting, and she wanted to get as much done as possible before he arrived. The wire fence had fallen victim to the winter winds – but she knew he’d fix it before he left. She’d miss Andrew’s reliability. Whoever took his place wouldn’t be half as conscientious, but she was resigned to make the best of it. Any help would be welcome.

As she bent to the earth, pulling weeds and plotting new beds in her mind, she heard the sound of horses and their tack: two horses, to be exact. She lifted her head and recognized Andrew’s mount, but the other was new to her. Astride the second horse was either a boy or a small man, she couldn’t tell which. She stood and wiped her

muddy hands on her apron. As they neared, she could see that the second rider was definitely a man, though he was a full head shorter than Andrew in the saddle. She left the enclosure and went to meet them.

“Morning, Mrs. Todd,” Andrew said.

“Morning, Andrew. I see you brought company.”

“Yes, ma’am. This here’s Mr. Coleridge Walker. He’s going to help out while I’m gone.”

“Ma’am,” Cole greeted her, touching the brim of his dusty hat and nodding. She calculated him to be about her height. Was he big enough for farm work? With the war on, she supposed she couldn’t be choosy. He might be stronger than he looked.

“Mr. Walker,” she said.

“Most folks call me Cole, ma’am. I’d be pleased if you’d do the same.” His voice was reedy but warm, and reminded her of the rich aroma of her father’s finest tobacco.

“I prefer Mr. Walker, for the time being,” she said.

“Then I’ll be pleased to have you call me Mr. Walker,” he said. She looked at him closely – she had developed a keen eye for insolence in a man’s face – but saw that he was waiting courteously for her to speak. She met his eyes. They were a deep azure, set in a bronzed and lined face fringed with sun-bleached, sandy hair. She sensed

kindness behind those eyes. An unbidden sensation stirred in her, and she pulled her gaze away.

Andrew dismounted. "Cole's done a lot of things, ma'am - farming, prospecting, trapping. He knows a little bit about almost everything. He'll be a great help to you."

"Is that so, Mr. Walker? Then why not work your own farm?"

Cole dismounted and scratched his head. He wished Andrew weren't so enthusiastic about his past. His wandering habits didn't tend to go over well with prospective employers.

"Truth is, ma'am," Cole said, "I'd like to settle down on my own place, but I haven't the means. I thought mining would provide that, which is why I came here after years of trapping in the Northwest Territory. But the work is too hard for so little return. I decided to take my chances with the land and the weather."

"You'll certainly have the opportunity to do that here," she said, deciding not to hold Cole's mining history against him, since he appeared to have the good sense to be finished with it.

"Cole's been living in the mountains, at a mining camp," Andrew said. "He came to our place a few days ago, looking for work, which is how I met him. I was hoping you'd let him camp out in your barn, so he won't

have to travel back and forth to the mountains every day. The barn's plenty warm and dry enough."

Emily pursed her lips: she hadn't bargained on providing lodgings to a strange man. From experience she knew that accommodations in the barn were hardly the comforts of home, but a man who'd been living at a mining camp probably wouldn't know the difference. "I have no money with which to pay you, Mr. Walker. Anything you earn will be in the form of meals and" – she cast a chastising glance at Andrew – "a place to stay. You'll sleep in the barn and take your meals on the porch."

"That's fine, ma'am. I don't need more than a roof over my head and two meals a day. When Andrew comes back, I'll stake my own claim. Until then, I'm pleased to help out here and get my farming muscles working again."

"Cole can start today, ma'am. I'll show him around, tell him how we do things. He can work with me until I leave."

Emily took a long look at Cole. If she stood on tiptoe she'd be taller than him. But he looked strong, seasoned by weather and hard work. She nodded to Andrew. "You'd best get started. The morning's half gone. Andrew will show you all you need to know, Mr. Walker."

"Thank you, ma'am," Cole said, and followed Andrew to the barn, leading his horse by the reins.

Emily's good spirits drained away as she bent to her garden. Another drifter, another man with wanderlust, another man who'd had gold fever. Still, she needed help, and Cole could provide it. But could she trust him? Andrew had rushed to find someone, and he didn't realize the precarious position he'd placed her in. Now there would be a man in her barn, as well as in her fields. Where else might he wish to be?

An unwelcome sensation returned, the stirring she'd felt as she looked into Cole's eyes. She'd thought those passions were long dead, but they'd merely been smoldering, waiting to burst into flame. She would pray hard to resist. There could be no more men in her life. Samuel - and the doctor with his news - had seen to that.