



LOVE
— *at Any* —
COST

A NOVEL

Julie Lessman


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To the Lover of my soul,
Who taught me about “love at any cost”
two thousand years ago on a hill outside of Jerusalem.
I will love You and worship You
all the days of my life.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and
where thieves do not break through nor steal:
For where your treasure is, there will your heart
be also.

—Matthew 6:20–21

1

SAN FRANCISCO, MAY 1902

Sweet thunderation—deliver me from pretty men! Twenty-two-year-old Cassidy McClare peered up beneath the wide feathered brim of her black velveta hat—legs, luggage, and magazine scattered on the dirty platform of Oakland Pier train station.

“Miss, I’m so sorry—”

You certainly are. Hair askew, she blew a curl from her eyes along with a broken feather dangling over the rim of the “fashionable” hat Mama begged her to wear. Reining in her temper, she forced a smile at a man in a stylish straw boater who’d just swept her off her feet—*literally*.

A whistle shrieked and the Overland Limited belched a cloud of steam into the air, the smell of smoke and coal wrinkling her nose. Apparently the “gentleman”—and she used the term loosely—hadn’t seen her, too busy rushing to wave goodbye to the girl he’d just put on the train. With a deafening screech, the train groaned on its rails, chugging away while people moseyed and milled on the platform, gaping at a girl sprawled on her backside in a House of Worth tailor-made suit. A curious sight,

indeed . . . not to mention embarrassing. Even for a non-prissy ranch girl from Humble, Texas.

The heat of summer asphalt warmed her bottom while the man's gaze warmed her face, his frank perusal sending off warning bells she'd heard before. And, unfortunately, ignored. She issued a silent grunt. *But never again.* Struggling to rise, her lips went flat, not unlike the hatbox her mother had foisted on her, which she'd just crushed on her fall from grace. *Foiled by a pretty boy once, shame on him. Foiled by a pretty boy twice, shame on me.*

"Are you okay?" Nudging the boater up, he held out a blunt hand attached to a muscled arm that strained beneath a crisp, white pinstripe shirt, its casually rolled sleeves in stark contrast to a meticulous four-in-hand tie and a high starched collar. He could have walked off the pages of *Men's Wear Magazine*, easily six foot one with a boyish smile that lent a roguish air Cassie recognized all too well. A thick curl of dark brown hair that was almost black toppled over his forehead, obviously a stray from the slicked-back style of the day. Hazel eyes the color of coffee with cream assessed her with a crimp of concern wedged between thick, dark brows, reminding her so much of Mark, she cringed.

Make that cold, bitter coffee.

Hand still extended, he eased into a smile that at one time would have generated as much heat as the platform beneath her body, a gleam of white in a chiseled face that sported a California tan. "I beg your pardon, miss, but I never even saw you." A sparkle warmed his gaze as it slowly trailed down the upturned brim of her hat, past renegade curls from her upswept hair to her white silk shirtwaist, hesitating long enough to prompt a blush in her cheeks. "Which is pretty hard to believe," he mumbled, almost to himself. His bold look continued to roam her gored navy skirt only to halt with several blinks at the peek of her for-

bidden cowboy boots—the ones she'd put on *after* Mama and Daddy left the station. A grin inched across his face and his eyes slowly trailed back up as naturally as his dimples deepened with the lift of his smile. Heat suffused her cheeks, as much from the obscene number of petticoats Mother had insisted she wear as the Romeo's frank perusal. *Flattery will get you nowhere, mister.* Her lips took a slant. Though it'd certainly gotten Mark's ring on her finger. She issued a silent grunt. *A history lesson unto itself,* she thought, the smell of horse manure from buggies lining the terminal oddly comforting.

And appropriate.

Lips clamped, she ignored both the Romeo and the disparaging glance of a passerby and tugged on her trumpet-shaped skirt to hide her socially unacceptable footwear. Oh, how she wished she could have worn her “shocking” jeans from the ranch instead of the fashionable suit Mama requested. Huffing out an unladylike sigh, she accepted the Romeo's proffered hand, feeling like she'd been hit by a train, and not the one on the tracks. His massive palm dominated hers, and she popped up with all the grace with which she'd toppled over her luggage in the first place: *none.*

He stooped to retrieve her magazine, using it to slap the dirt from her skirt as if shooing flies from the rump of a horse, and she waved him away, mortified that a stranger was swatting at her backside. “Please, I'm fine, truly. No harm done, I assure you.”

“No, I insist . . .” Paying her no mind, he collected her blue handbag and dented hatbox after righting her Oshkosh suitcases, cherished gifts from her father when she'd gone to Europe with her cousins three summers past. *Before* the oil wells ran dry, ending life as she'd known it.

Shaking his head, he handed her the purse and magazine, then dangled the sorry hatbox in the air, sucking air through clenched

teeth. “Gee, I’m sorry,” he said, giving her an endearing little-boy grin she’d lay odds had gotten him off the hook more times than not. “But I think this box may have seen better days.”

As have I. Cassie winced at this brazen man whose casual air, rugged good looks, and wind-tousled hair reminded her way too much of the man who’d broken her heart. But . . . better days were ahead . . . she hoped. She and her cousin, Alli, just graduated with teaching degrees, and Aunt Cait didn’t know it yet, but Mark’s rejection had sent Cassie northwest for that very reason. Not just for the summer this time, but to join forces with Aunt Cait and Alli in their dreams of a school for poor and disadvantaged girls on the Barbary Coast. For Cassie, San Francisco was not only her chance to put the pain and humiliation of Humble behind, but it ensured she could focus on a teaching career instead of a man. Her lips kinked. Doting on lots of children instead of just one. And girls to boot, because if there was one thing she’d learned in Humble, Texas, it was that boys—little or big—were nothing but trouble.

Squaring her shoulders, she took the box from his hand with as much dignity as possible after picking herself up off the ground. “Thank you, it’s no problem, really.” She offered a polite smile, then turned to go, tripping over her luggage till he steadied her with a clasp of her arm.

“Wait!” At her startled look, he slipped both hands in his pockets with a sheepish grin, glancing up beneath the longest lashes she’d ever seen on a man. “I’d like to make it up to you, see you home, buy you lunch, whatever.” His eyes sparkled with humor. “After all,” he said, tone husky, “girls have fallen for me before, but never quite this hard.”

“I b-beg your p-pardon . . .,” she sputtered, heat scorching her face. She leaned in, her Texas Irish going head-to-head with

his California dimples. Her pride bucked as much as that prize filly Daddy had to auction off with most of his herd. “*Stampeded* is more like it,” she said, painfully aware this was *just* the type of man for whom she tended to “fall.” A fact that only steamed her temper more, giving the high-pressure steam locomotive nothing on her. She gesticulated with a shaky hand, making her fluster all the more obvious, but she flat-out didn’t care. Anger hog-tied all Christian kindness, vibrating her words with more fury than warranted. “M-manhandled by some . . . some . . . Casanova chasing a train to say goodbye to a woman.” She reloaded with a deep breath, then gave it to him with both barrels, unleashing her fury at Mark and every man just like him. “And then, great day in the morning, you have the nerve to . . . to . . . ogle *me* while the tracks are still warm?” Boots wobbling, she nodded at the train with a fold of her arms. “I suspect your *sweetheart* would have a few choice words to say about that!”

The dimples took on a life of their own. “First of all, miss,” he said with a half-lidded smile, obviously enjoying the scold, “if you’d been manhandled by me, trust me—you’d know it. Secondly, my ‘sweetheart’ would say nothing because I don’t have one, which,” he said with a mock grimace, “suddenly doesn’t seem like such a bad thing. And thirdly . . .,” he hiked a thumb toward the departing train, heating her cheeks with a wink, “that was my cousin.”

“Horse apples!” The whites of her eyes expanded while her cheeks flamed red hot, which, given the flush of heat beneath her blue suit, might be considered warmly patriotic. Sweet chorus of angels, did he think she just fell off the turnip truck? She’d *seen* him—watched him swallow the girl up in those ridiculously muscular arms, heft her up like a sack of grain while he twirled her high in the air. Cassie fumed, feeling her blood pressure

rise. *Talk about manhandling!* And now he wanted to take *her* to lunch? Her chin snapped up. “And I’m the Queen of England,” she hissed, suddenly wondering why she was berating some poor dope whose only sin had been to accidentally mow her down and look good doing it.

Giving a slow whistle, he stepped back with two hands in the air. “Look, miss . . . uh, I mean, *your majesty* . . . I didn’t mean any harm—either by knocking you down or my offer to make it up to you.” He gave her a quick salute. “I think it’s best if I just take my leave, but before I do . . .” The dimples returned in force as he nodded his head behind her. “You might want to brush off your posterior really well, because I think you may have a burr in your saddle.” Giving her a wink, he strode away, hands in his pockets and a whistle on his lips.

Cassie stared while what was left of her anger seeped out of her gaping mouth. Sweet soul-saving mercy—Mama would tan her hide but good had she seen how Cassie just acted. Never had she been so rude in her entire life. She slumped and put a hand to her eyes. “God forgive me,” she whispered. “What in the world is wrong with me?”

But she knew the answer before the words even left her tongue. The pretty boy was right. She had a burr in her saddle, a pebble in her boot, an ache in her heart. Heaving a weary sigh, she brushed the back of her suit, wishing more than anything she could tell Pretty Boy she was sorry for lashing out. That it wasn’t him personally, just men like him.

Men like Mark.

Inhaling deeply, Cassie blasted out her frustration along with the acrid fumes of oil and grease. Retrieving her pocket watch, she checked the time, fingers grazing the smooth, cool casing of the men’s gold timepiece Nana had given her, a cherished keep-

sake of a great-grandmother Daddy said she reminded him of. Nana McClare had been as unconventional as a woman could be in an era that focused on a pretty face instead of a keen mind. And like Cassie, Daddy reminded, a woman as solid, dependable, and unfrilly as the watch in Cassie's hand. "Always remember," Nana would say, "life is an adventure and every day a fresh start . . . especially with God by your side."

"Oh, Nana, I hope so," she whispered, praying for a summer to help her forget. Forget the ridicule of young boys because she was different. Forget the high-society matrons who'd thumbed their noses at her from little on. Forget the whispers of their daughters when the new bachelor in town courted Cassie instead of them. Her chest squeezed, having little to do with the corset as tears stung her eyes. Then forget when that same bachelor cast her aside like everyone else had.

Shaking off the hurt, she put a hand to her forehead, shielding her face from the glare as she scanned for a sign of her cousins or their driver. Her lips quirked as she arched a brow at the sky. "I prayed *I* would forget, Lord, not them." She shook her head and smiled, and in the shrill wail of a faraway train, faith suddenly whooshed through her like a prairie breeze, so strong and powerful she felt it clear down to the tips of her pointed boots. She breathed in deeply, noticing the scent of San Francisco for the first time since she debarked, its crisp bay air, salty sea spray, and faint smell of fish. It smelled like change and she closed her eyes, thrilling at the tangy breeze that feathered her face. "Oh, Lord, let it be so," she whispered, a smile curving her lips. "Let me forget the past and start anew." A gentle wind tickled her hair, and her smile bloomed into a grin because somehow she knew, as sure as the dimples on Pretty Boy's face.

She would.



Jamie MacKenna dialed the Blue Moon Bar & Grill and leaned against the glass wall of the mahogany phone booth inside Oakland Pier station, feeling as stripped of his pride as the booth was stripped of its polish—weathered, splintered, and as tired as he. Eyes closed, he waited for his boss to answer the phone, wondering what in blazes he'd done to earn the royal shellacking from the Queen Mother. A corner of his mouth hooked at the memory of the pretty little rich girl who'd fallen hard, but not over him, apparently—a situation he seldom encountered, if at all.

He pinched the bridge of his nose as the phone continued to ring, properly humbled by the woman's distaste for him. At twenty-five and newly graduated from Stanford Law, he was used to a warmer reception from women—a lot warmer, as a matter of fact—and although the petite blond was pretty in a cute and clumsy kind of way, she certainly didn't compare to some of the women who vied for his attention. A slow exhale breezed over his lips. Although never had he seen more unusual eyes—the color of his favorite green agate marble as a boy—like pale green jade, hypnotic, mesmerizing, fringed with honeyed lashes as thick as her Texas drawl. He frowned, aware he was still thinking of her, which meant the little spitfire had wreaked havoc on his emotions, a reaction that both annoyed and appealed. He flapped the front of his Oxford shirt in an attempt to cool off, giving the testy little princess credit for one thing: she sure knew how to spike a man's pulse.

She was obviously one of those nose-in-the-air rich girls with a vendetta against men, smacking of wealth and privilege in her expensive suit and top-of-the-line luggage. He shook his head. Although a socialite in cowboy boots was a first. He exhaled loudly, grateful he'd never have to see her again. Rejection had a

way of piquing his interest, enticing him to do what his friends Blake and Bram claimed he did all too well—charm a jury, win a lost cause, lift an underdog so high, he'd think he could fly. "I swear, Mac, you could coax a jury into acquitting Jack the Ripper," his best friend Bram Hughes always said, and Jamie had to admit it seemed to be true. Whether it was his innate desire to please, the warm smile he'd inherited from his mother, or the strong angular jaw from an alcoholic father now dead and gone, he wasn't sure, but people—especially women and juries—seemed to like him.

"Blue Moon."

His boss's voice jolted him back. "Hey, Duff—is my mother still there?"

"Sure, Mac, hold on."

Jamie loosened his tie, throat so parched, he wished he had one of Duffy's fountain Dr Peppers, the only drink he ever touched whenever he was in a bar. He waited while the sound of ragtime filtered through the phone with a familiarity that felt far more like home than the ramshackle flat he'd once shared with his family in the same neighborhood. Back then, they'd lived in a sleazy cow-yard of the Barbary Coast—a brothel with an apartment building above—until Jamie went to work on the docks at the age of twelve after his father drank himself to death. Desperate to get his mother and sister out of the slums, he worked additional jobs, supplementing his mother's meager seamstress income and a stipend from his aunt. Pride swelled when they finally moved out of the red-light district and into a boardinghouse in a respectable neighborhood several blocks away.

It'd been a struggle excelling at his studies—first in college and then in law school—while tending bar two nights a week, weekends at the Oly Club and Saturday mornings keeping books at the Blue Moon. Yet somehow he'd managed to win more mock

cases than anyone in his class, a fact that made his mother proud. A pride hard-earned by the sweat of his brow and that of his mother, who now also worked as a cook at the Blue Moon.

He heard the crackle of the receiver as somebody picked up. “Jamie?”

“Hi, Mom—I just put Sara on the train to Tulsa.” He glanced at his watch. “The schedule says she’ll arrive by Monday at two, so can you let Aunt Sophie know when you call?”

He heard his mother’s sigh of relief. “Yes, of course.” She hesitated. “It’s been a long time since your sister enjoyed herself like she did with your cousin here.” Her voice wavered enough for Jamie to notice. “Thank you for switching your shift at the Oly to take Sara to the station. You’re a good brother, Jamie, and I hope your boss will understand.”

A good brother? Jamie’s gut clenched. *Hardly. Then Jess wouldn’t be crippled.* He forced a casual tone. “Mr. Burke gives me free rein, remember?” He paused, head bowed and eyes focused on a cigarette butt on the floor. “How’s she feeling today?” he asked, hoping against hope she would say what he wanted to hear.

She took too long to answer, and he winced at the cheerful voice she always resorted to when she didn’t want him to worry. “Tired, but that’s to be expected with Sara’s visit.”

“And the pain?” He closed his eyes, dreading his mother’s answer.

Longer pause. “We had to use the last of the laudanum,” she whispered.

He put a hand to his eyes. “I’ll stop by Doc Morrissey’s on my way home.” Sucking in a deep breath, he shifted his focus. “Did you bother to eat today?”

“Yes, son, before I came in to work. Toast and tea, then Duffy’s dumplings later,” she said quickly, as if desperate to put his mind

at ease. A hint of a tease seeped in as she switched roles to become the mother. “And you?”

He managed a smile. “Like a horse—leftover meat loaf from yesterday’s blue plate special, which, by the way, was some of your best. Duffy says if I keep it up, he’ll dock my pay.”

The lilt of her laughter thickened his throat. “Well, you better get back for your shift or he’s liable to follow through.” She hesitated. “I love you, Jamie,” she whispered, and the rasp of those gentle words nearly sparked forbidden moisture in his eyes. “No mother could have a better son, nor Jess a better brother.”

“Love you too, Mom.” He gouged at a pain in his temple, wishing more than anything Jess were well and he could put them both in a house on Nob Hill. His eyes flickered closed. *Where they belong.* “I’ll bring you and Jess dinner when I get off.”

She laughed. “No, don’t spend the mon—”

“It’s Thursday, fried chicken special at the Corner Bar, Jess’s favorite, so don’t argue.”

“You’ve gotten very pushy now that you’re a lawyer.” Her voice shimmered with pride.

“Let’s hope,” he said, teeth gleaming in the glass of the windowed booth. “We both know I won’t get that house on Nob Hill with my looks.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she teased, and it felt good to laugh with his mother.

“Love ya, Mom. See you at seven.” He hung up the receiver and smiled, almost oblivious to the hum and buzz of the station as his words circled in his brain. “*Won’t get that house on Nob Hill with my looks.*” He peered into the glass, noting the flicker of a muscle in the hollow of his cheek. His lips clamped into a hard line that carried the faint bent of a smile.

Wanna bet?

2

Sorry we were late, Cass, but Market Street was a zoo.” Alison McClare plopped on the lavender canopied bed in the spacious guestroom where Cassie would stay for the summer, obviously unconcerned about wrinkling her full-length chiffon dress. She lay on her side, elbow cocked and head in her hands. “It was awful—a horse and buggy reared when a Benz truck tried to outrun a cable car. Hadley braked so hard, I almost ended up in his lap in the front seat of the Packard.” Her lips took a twist. “Which wouldn’t have been the first time since the poor dear is near deaf and can barely hear shouts or horns, not to mention he forgot his glasses—*again*.”

Cassie grinned. “How is sweet Hadley? Rosie still picking on him?”

Her cousin chuckled. “Of course, although not as much as she picks on Uncle Logan, for pity’s sake.” She shook her head. “Goodness, maybe it’s just men Rosie can’t abide because she sure rides Uncle Logan without mercy. But dear Hadley?” There was a smile in her tone, laced with affection. “The sweet man’s only sin, apparently, was being Uncle Logan’s butler growing up, yet he takes Rosie in stride, as usual. I feel so sorry for him because Mother had to rig this thunderous gong in the kitchen when

the doorbell rings, which annoys Rosie to no end.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, Hadley’s vision isn’t much better, so Mother sent him to the optician to get glasses as thick as soda pop bottles.” She giggled. “Makes his eyes look three times their size and rather like the sweetest owl. Of course, he misplaces them a lot, which drives Rosie absolutely crazy when they work in the kitchen. But he’s such a dear, nobody minds if he can’t see or hear or runs late.” She paused, grating her lip with an impish smile. “But then . . . it rather sounds like this is one time ‘late’ may have been a good thing . . .”

An armful of dresses in hand, Cassie slid her cousin a wry look on her way to the wardrobe, lips swerving off-center. “Absolutely. A potent reminder of just *why* I left Texas.”

“Mmm . . . just how potent are we talking?” Mischief tipped the edges of Alli’s rose-colored lips while green eyes twinkled, the exact color of her delicate jade earrings, another gift from Nana. Soft strays of ebony curls from her upswept Gibson Girl hairstyle framed her face, a perfect complement to cream-colored skin. A summer breeze fluttered both her curls and her sheer, ruffled sleeves while sunlight blazed through French doors overlooking a garden where pink rosebushes wreathed an Aphrodite fountain.

Hefting the clothes with a grunt, Cassie hung them in the wardrobe with a roll of her eyes, determined that Alli understood loud and clear men were *not* on her list of sights to see. *Especially pretty men.* “Too potent for his own good, and ours, I can tell you that. A pretty-boy yahoo with dark, curly hair, chiseled jaw, hypnotic eyes, and more ‘mussels’ than San Francisco Bay.” Cassie shivered. “Sweet Texas tea, it’s enough to drive me into a convent.”

Alli chuckled and rolled over, head on a plush eyelet pillow. “Probably not—I’m pretty sure they don’t allow boots, lassos, or spurs.”

“Or blue jeans and a Stetson,” Cassie said with a scowl. She fingered a coiled rope in the bottom of her suitcase, rubbing the smooth hemp between forefinger and thumb. A smile tugged at the sudden thought of “Pretty Boy” all trussed up like a steer. Closing her eyes, she imagined breathing in the sweet smell of hemp and home, and instantly tranquility flooded. Quirky certainly, and maybe even a little bit odd, but nothing calmed Cassie like the feel of a lasso in her hand. Since her father had taught her to rope a fencepost at the age of four, she’d been a little girl who snuggled with a lariat at night rather than a blanket or bear, preferring tying knots and rope tricks to baby dolls and tea parties. The edge of her mouth crooked. And it had certainly come in handy once or twice with boys who had taunted her as well. Her smile went flat. Too bad Mark had gotten under her skin before she could hog-tie him and send him packing.

Alli jolted up, nose in a scrunch. “Wait—*please* tell me you did not bring that nasty old rope with you all the way from Texas. For mercy’s sake, Cass, heaven knows where it’s been!”

Cassie’s eyes narrowed as she hugged the lariat to her chest, chin high. “You’re lucky I didn’t bring my Winchester, Allison ‘Priss’ McClare, and this top-grade piece of hemp has been with me since I was a tot, I’ll have you know—in my bed at night and on my hip at the ranch.”

Allison’s smile tipped. “Yes, I know, Annie Oakley—you slept in my bed many a summer, remember? But good gracious, Cass, I’d rather my cousin not smell like a horse.”

Grazing the rope to her cheek, Cassie drew in a deep breath filled with the smell of horse and hay and *home*. She blinked, desperate to dispel the moisture beneath her lids, but it was no use. The fight leaked from her voice as a tear leaked from her eye,

stealing her trademark spunk. “It calms me, Al,” she said quietly, fingering the twine. “Makes me feel safe and in control.”

Sympathy radiated from Alli’s eyes. “Something you didn’t feel with Mark, I guess?”

“No,” she whispered, chest constricting at the memory of Mark asking for his ring back, robbing her of her future as well as her heart.

“Well, you can’t convert,” Alli teased, obviously trying to lighten Cassie’s mood. “No convent would take a nun who smells like a horse and has a lariat on her hip instead of a rosary.”

Cassie’s smile rebounded, as dry as her tone. “Wish I’d had the rope on my hip at the train station, I can tell you that,” she muttered. “Would’ve lassoed Pretty Boy and tied him up nice and neat with a pretty, little bow.” She fumbled with the buttons of her infernal high-necked shirtwaist. “And at least hiding away in a convent is better than being a sitting duck for some fortune-hunting man.” She heaved a weighty sigh before slipping the blouse off and sailing it toward a purple velvet settee. “Or maybe I should say ‘sitting pigeon’ given these ridiculous pigeon blouses we’re forced to wear. I’d like to wring Charles Gibson’s neck for turning us all into air-deprived Gibson Girls.” She huffed. “*Along* with that pretty-boy polecat at the station. No doubt he’s another louse like Mark Chancellor, and obviously not very bright.”

“You don’t know that,” Alli said with a grin.

“Oh, yes I do.” Cassie issued a grunt. “Expecting me to swoon over a two-timer like him? Humph! Face it, Al—I’ve always been good with numbers, and trust me—I had his the minute he asked me to lunch. Like Daddy says, the boy’s plumb weak north of the ears.” She flopped down on the bed, and before she could rein them in, more tears glossed in her eyes. “Botheration, Al, why do men have to be such rats?”

Alli shifted to face her. “They’re not all rats,” she said softly, giving Cassie’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Blake’s not too bad for a brother, you know, and he’s got a couple of dreamy friends that are really nice. And then there’s Uncle Logan . . .” She paused, a wrinkle wedging her nose. “Although I suppose he’s not the best example since he is still single and a bit of a rogue.” She puffed out a sigh. “But even so, he is pretty wonderful, so not all men are rats like Mark.”

Cassie loosened the buttons of her voile skirt, a wry tilt to her lips. “Maybe not, but a Texas-size rat like Mark has a way of curbing a girl’s interest in any man.”

“Mercy’s sake, I hope not.” Alli sat straight up. “I’ve got an itch for adventure this summer, Cass, and I need you to be focused and engaged.”

Cassie arched a brow.

“Whoops. Sorry,” Alli said, offering a feeble grin. “Poor choice of words.”

A wispy sigh drifted from Cassie’s lips. “Well, I’ll go where you want me to go, Al, but don’t expect me to turn on the Texas charm for any of the Romeos you have in mind.” She shimmied off both her skirt and several layers of petticoats, pitching them on top of the blouse. “The idea of flirting with a man right now is as blasted uncomfortable as these ridiculous female trappings.” She scooted around, her back to Alli. “Here—untie this silly S-curve corset Mother made me wear, will you? Sweet suffering saints, why do women put up with these things?”

Alli’s low chuckle blew warm against Cassie’s neck. “To turn heads, Cass,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper, “and trust me, with this gorgeous flaxen hair of yours, your dainty figure, and those mesmerizing green eyes, you are going to turn aplenty.” She wrinkled her nose. “That is, if I can manage to hide the boots.”

“Don’t you dare touch my boots!” Stays loosened, Cassie immediately gulped in a deep draw of air before pumping it out again. “Besides, the only male head I want to turn right now is Mark Chancellor’s.” Her smile was devious. “Preferably with a slap of my dainty hand.”

Alli’s laughter filled the spacious bedroom with a musical sound, warming Cassie inside as much as the hazy shafts of sunlight that streamed through the French doors. Her cousin gave her a playful squeeze of her neck. “Well, trust me—we are going to do everything in our power to see you have a wonderful summer and forget all about Mark Chancellor.”

“Who?” Cassie said with a tight hug. “I barely remember the sorry excuse for a man.”

“Good!” Alli bounced up. “Because your total lapse of memory begins at dinner tonight.”

“What?” Cassie jolted up. “Wait—it’s just family tonight, right?”

Alli spun around without answering, hurrying to rifle through her cousin’s dresses until she found one of the fussy evening gowns Cassie’s mama had forced her to pack. “Here we go,” she said with a bright smile, holding up a sea-foam green taffeta Mama swore matched the pale green of her eyes. “Mother thought it might be fun to dress up for your first night, so this is perfect.” She gnawed on her lip. “Of course you’ll have to wear the swan-bill corset . . .”

“Perfect-for-what?” Cassie enunciated carefully, quite certain she didn’t really want to know. “Or maybe I should say for ‘whom,’ because I refuse to truss up like a show horse.”

“Come on, Cass,” Alli said with a pout. “You’re my best friend and I’ve missed you. It’s your first night in San Francisco in forever, and we just want it to be special. Is that a crime?”

Cassie drew in a calming breath and released it in a show of

humility. “Okay, okay . . . I’ll wear the stupid dress and straitjacket corset, only *please*—tell me it’s only family tonight.”

“Absolutely,” Alli said with a flourish, laying the whispery pale-green dress on the bed. She stood up straight with a gleam in her eye, hands clasped behind her back. “After all, Bram is a fourth cousin, and Jamie spends so much time here, he’s practically family anyway.”

The blood leeching from Cassie’s face, no doubt tingeing her skin the same seasick green as the dress. *Oh, good—a perfect match.* She opened her mouth to speak, but her words were a rusty rasp like Daddy’s cowhands the morning after a night in town. “J-Jamie? Bram?”

Alli all but preened, the same mischief in her face as when she used to dare Cassie to join her on forbidden adventures. “Oh, you remember Bram—you met him briefly the summer we went to Europe. He and Jamie are Blake’s best friends. Trust me, you’re going to love them.”

“Trust you?” Cassie croaked, eyes narrowing considerably. “You were the one who saddled me with Theodore Swaller at your eighteenth birthday party, if you recall.”

“Oh, boo, that’s right.” Alli scrunched her nose, then quickly dismissed the incident with a wave of her hand. “Well, don’t worry, Jamie and Bram are both taller than you, neither has lazy eye, and you know,” she said with a finger to her chin, “I don’t think there’s a single pimple between the two.” She squinted in thought. “At least I don’t think so . . .”

Cassie hurled an eyelet pillow at her cousin. “So help me, Allison Erin McClare, if either of these two clowns have any notion of sparking me, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” Alli snatched the pillow

midair. “Bram’s a sweetheart and a perfect gentleman.” Her smile turned wayward. “And Jamie’s just plain perfect.”

A hoarse groan dragged from Cassie’s lips. “Please tell me he’s not one of those womanizing scoundrels I just escaped in Texas.”

Alli tilted her head. “Well, there is a bit of the rogue in the boy, no question about that, but you have nothing to worry about, I assure you. He and Patricia Hamilton have been very cozy lately, and she’ll be here tonight. I hope you don’t mind, but my best friend Lydia Hamilton is sweet on Blake, so I invited her as well as her sister Patricia.” Her nose bunched. “Not all that crazy about Trish as she tends to monopolize Jamie, but Senator Hamilton has this crazy rule—you invite Liddy, you invite her sister. So you see—you should be able to relax and make new friends without fear of anyone ‘sparking’ you.” Alli bobbed the pillow with a smirk before aiming it back. “That is . . . if you still know how after keeping company with horses and pigs.”

“Leave Mark out of this,” Cassie said with an evil grin. Alli’s pillow pelted the side of her head and she giggled, memories of pillow fights and slumber parties thickening the walls of her throat. Her cousins McClare were the only family she’d ever really known except for Mama and Daddy, and goodness, Alli, Meg, and Maddie were far more like sisters. Ostracized by the snooty Humble elite for her eccentric ways, Cassie had lived for summers in San Francisco or trips to Europe, precious moments with family that always made her feel like she’d come home.

Home. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away. *The perfect place to heal.*

“Wait—are you crying?” All jest faded from Alli’s face as she hurried to where Cassie sat on the bed. Sidling in, she tucked her head to Cassie’s, an arm cradling her back. “Gosh, I’m sorry

about Theodore, but I was just jealous 'cause Peter Rutherford liked you better than me.”

Cassie’s smile swerved. “I had sore feet and a sick stomach for days, not to mention a head cold after Norman Godfrey cornered me in the billiard room.”

“Oops. But I apologized, remember?” Alli said with a sincere dip of brows.

“Only after Peter Rutherford invited you to visit his parents’ Napa vineyard.”

“Oh, double boo, that’s right.” She grated her lip, then glanced up with a conciliatory smile. “But actually, Cass, I did you a favor. Peter gave me a personal tour of the wine cellar, and trust me, it left a sour taste in my mouth that had nothing to do with the grapes.”

Cassie’s jaw dropped. “You never told me that!”

Alli bumped her shoulder with a sheepish smile. “Couldn’t—I was too embarrassed.”

“Well, serves you right, you little brat.” Cassie pinched her waist. “But so help me, Al, if either of these two clowns corner me in the billiard room tonight, I’ll be showing you ‘sour.’”

Allison lunged away, giggles bouncing off the walls as she sashayed to the door. She turned in a dramatic pose, hand on the knob. “Or thank me,” she said with a dance of her brows. “Because trust me—these two make Mark Chancellor look like the rump of your prize filly.”

A deep-down chuckle rolled from Cassie’s lips, the first real laugh she’d had in way too long. Alli winked and closed the door, leaving Cassie with an image of Mark she could live with.

That of a horse’s behind.