

Chapter 40

Jackson rode the mounts hard for the next two days, spending a quarter of that time checking their back trail. He found no signs of pursuit, so on the third day he detoured off the main trail and headed for one of his favorite spots in Colorado Territory. “We’re going to ride up to a meadow I know, where we can rest for a day in relative safety.”

Ruth’s heart leapt with joy at the thought of being on solid ground for a change. She patted Caboose’s loyal head in apology. “Nothing against you, my brave friend, but a few hours of teaching a mount the joys of side saddle is scant preparation for days of endless riding on a half-baked trail. I’m sure we’re both ready for a rest.”

Caboose shook his tattered mane in apparent agreement as they began a hard climb up the side of the mountain, quickly gaining altitude. After nearly an hour of scrambling up and over rocks, Jackson signaled Ruth to stop.

As she came up alongside Jackson, he turned to her in apology for the hard ride. “I hope I’m not tiring you too much, but if you can stomach another bit of a climb - on foot this time - I’ll share with you the purest, wildest bit of earth you’re likely to see in this lifetime.”

Ruth couldn’t resist the longing on Jackson’s face. His look was contagious, and suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to share a moment of peace and joy with this brave man. She knew life offered no promises and she might never get another chance. “I’m ready. Lead the way.”

A look of joy and triumph broke across his weathered face as he offered Ruth his hand to dismount. “It’s not far on foot, just too much gravel to ride safely. We can’t risk a bruised hoof - or worse - on the horses.”

He kept hold of Ruth’s hand as he led her up and over several large boulders. Climbing in a skirt - even a split one - was a tricky proposal, and she was grateful for his steadying arm. He turned to Ruth as they approached the last boulder blocking the entrance to the meadow, then handed her his hat. “Hold on tight.”

With that little warning, Jackson leapt up the boulder in two quick strides. He turned to pull her up behind him, knowing the horses would find their own way up, since Jackson had all the grain in the saddlebag over his shoulder.

“Here it is, Ruth. What do you think?” Jackson asked, still slightly in awe himself at the sight before him.

She caught her breath at the beauty before her. There was nothing burning. Nothing charred or trampled from the careless boots of an invading army. Just acre upon acre of rich, clean earth spread out before her, covered by swaying grass and late season blooms. The only sound to be heard above their mingled breaths was the wind rustling the autumn leaves still stubbornly clinging to their mother trees, one final burst of color before the long sleep of winter.

“Who lives here?” Ruth whispered, thinking someone must have beaten them to this gorgeous piece of earth.

“No one does,” Jackson replied, smiling as he said it. “There are no people for miles. It’s clean - just the meadow creatures and the odd wild horse passing through in summer to feed on the rich grass.”

“I feel like a child again, searching for faeries in the woods behind our house.” She turned to Jackson and tentatively laid her hand on his forearm. “Thank you for this. I had almost forgotten that good memory of home.”

He turned his quiet gaze to Ruth’s round eyes. “It’s healing, this unspoiled land. It’s empty of the ugliness of the War, and bad memories just wash away in the streams.” He pulled Ruth’s

pliant body close to him, knowing she was part of him now, even if just for this small shared moment in his meadow.

She didn't think to resist Jackson's touch. Not here, not now. Here was another world, far away from her troubles and the strict rules of a war-torn society that no longer seemed to apply. She turned fully into his embrace, loving the warmth and strength he offered.

He stroked his gloved hands down the sides of her chilled face, passing the worn brown leather across her parted lips. He watched for the response he wanted in her dilating eyes as he continued to stroke his thumb, ever so slowly, across her slightly swollen lips. His lips followed the same path as his hand, barely touching Ruth each time he passed back and forth across her parted mouth.

He pulled back just enough for her eyes to open and catch his rapidly darkening gaze. He stroked his thumb once again across her heated lips, knowing the chill of the leather would awaken her senses to the warmth of his parted mouth.

Ruth's eyes closed of their own volition as Jackson parted her lips to accept his thrusting tongue. She didn't resist as he pulled her more fully against his heated body, until she was flush against him. She reached her arms around his neck, wanting only to get closer to him. Closer to his heat as his slick tongue thrust rhythmically into her. She ran her restless hands up into Jackson's thick, smooth hair, entranced by the feel of it curling around her sensitive fingertips.

Jackson stroked his still-gloved hands down the soft sides of Ruth's body, barely touching the swelling curves of her breasts. Wanting nothing more than to encase her fully in his aching hands, he forced himself to patience and began the lengthy journey back down to her waist and over the heated flesh of her hips.

Ruth's insides burned as she felt his left hand slowly curve underneath the swell of her backside, until he was lifting her up into him, allowing only her toes to graze the solid earth. She inhaled sharply as Jackson splayed his thick fingers fully open and closed again, lightly stroking the undersides of her buttocks with his fingertips as he cupped her more fully with his gloved palm. Ruth felt the heat in her own body concentrate in her core, feeling every soft stroke of his wandering fingers as he splayed them open and closed, open and closed endlessly as he continued to stroke her swollen ruby lips with his tongue.

Jackson felt himself harden as Ruth responded to his touch with cries of pleasure. He forced himself to pull back slightly from their kiss, to pass just the tip of his tongue across her lower lip until it glistened for him. He slowed his strokes, of both hand and tongue, knowing he wanted Ruth to come to him for more.

She felt Jackson's heat pull away ever so slightly from her, and she ached at the loss of his mouth on hers. She reached for him but he evaded her kiss repeatedly, not giving her the full contact she needed until she let out a cry of protest and opened her eyes to demand his return.

Ruth met Jackson's burning gaze – his black eyes fully dilated as he took in her flushed body, his gaze landing everywhere with no apology.

With one of Jackson's hands firmly around her waist, and the other still cupping her backside, Ruth felt fully naked and exposed to his gaze, even though he hadn't removed one article of her clothing. She wanted his mouth on hers again, keeping all thoughts away that didn't bring her demanding body more pleasure. She tentatively stroked one finger across his lips, mimicking what he had done before, silently wondering if he felt the same pleasure she did. When Jackson sucked in his breath at her delicate touch, she had her answer and smiled in pleasure at her triumph.

He needed no other encouragement, and closed his lips around her teasing finger, sucking on the tip until she was the one crying out. He took her lips with his and thrust deeply, after her heat.

When Ruth felt Jackson's hand stroke upward from her waist to cup her swelling breast, she nearly cried out in pleasure. The heat in her body focused instantly on her tightening nipple, which he obligingly rubbed between his thumb and forefinger. She barely noticed the cloth separating her from his touch, but Jackson wanted it gone.

He ached to feel her bare skin against his, but swore silently to himself that he would wait. His seduction had to be slow enough, and pleasurable enough, to break off all thought of Ruth's far-away sailor. Jackson forced himself to think straight and limit his touch to what he had now. Tomorrow he would take more.

Ruth held on with all her strength to Jackson's muscled arms, not sure if her shaking legs could support her as he methodically stroked the curve of her breast, then held the tip firmly but perfectly still between his thumb and forefinger. Her body's rhythm was now tuned to Jackson's movements, as he stroked her backside with one hand, stilled, and then stroked her breast. She ached where his hand had stopped, until her body squirmed of its own volition, demanding the return of his touch.

Jackson took a steadying breath before allowing himself one last, long stroke down her body. He pulled them apart, and placed several gentling kisses on Ruth's dazed face, before stepping away entirely. "It's time to set up camp, Ruth. It'll be dark soon."

With no further explanation, he turned away to round up the horses.

As Ruth watched the sun begin to set, she barely felt the chill of the quickly cooling air against her still-blazing body.