

CHAPTER 1



Marshal Seth Walker rode into the yard of Journey's End and pulled his horse to a halt. Of all the ranches under his supervision, this was his favorite.

Five well-built houses formed a semi-circle. Each had a generous porch scattered with chairs, pillows, tables and toys. Kitchen gardens bloomed in a riot of carefully tended vegetables and herbs beside the cabins. The horse corrals were generous and secure. One large barn was connected to the corrals and a second one stood silhouetted in the distance.

The well-ordered ranch called to him like a siren's song. He was a lover of the neat and tidy. His black hair was trimmed. His polished boots reflected the sun. His horse was brushed to a burnished glow. His gun was clean and snug in his holster. His money was tucked away in the bank.

Life was perfect. Well, almost perfect. He'd turned twenty-eight a few weeks back, and his thoughts had turned to marriage. Yes, sir, he was hankering for a bride. Not just any bride, of course. His wife would keep his house ordered and uncluttered. Meals would be on the table in a timely fashion. Their children would be well-behaved. Children and wife both would be obedient and respectful.

“Howdy, Marshal,” a man said as he emerged from the shadow of the barn. “What can we do for you?”

Thoughts of his perfect family fled like morning mist.

Seth tipped his hat. “Afternoon, Rowdy. I wanted to introduce myself to your visitors. It’s always a good idea to know everyone in my vicinity.” He stopped and snorted. “Well, that’s part of the truth. The other part is I heard one of your guests is John Wayne. I grew up on stories of John Wayne and the Texas Rangers. He’s something of a legend. I’d like to shake the man’s hand.”

“You’re in luck. John, Marcie, and their daughter took every child over four berry picking, but it sounds like they’re almost back,” Rowdy said.

In a single, fluid motion, Seth swung down from his horse. Both men stood still and listened as laughter grew louder and a group of bare-foot children burst into view.

“Uncle Rowdy, Uncle Rowdy,” they called in unison. “We’ve got blueberries and raspberries and a few blackberries, too. Ava says we’re in for some first-rate pie.” They surrounded their uncle holding buckets filled with fruit in their stained hands.

“That’s mighty fine,” Rowdy replied, laughing. “From the look of your faces, I thought maybe you’d eaten all the berries.”

The oldest boy ran the back of his sleeve across his mouth. “No, Aunt Marcie wouldn’t let us eat them all. She said we’d get stomach aches.”

“Aunt Marcie knows what’s best,” Rowdy affirmed.

When the three chaperones caught up with the giggling group, Rowdy launched into introductions. “Marshal Walker, this is John, Marcie, and Ava Wayne.”

Seth offered his hand. “Mr. Wayne, I’ve hoped to meet you. You were the stuff of legends in my childhood.”

“Well, that makes me feel the years,” he replied, smiling. “Call me John.” He placed an arm around the shoulders of a small woman. A riot of chestnut curls exploded in a halo around a freckled face. “This is my wife, Marcie.”

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Seth touched the brim of his hat and dipped his head.

"And this is our daughter, Ava." John motioned toward the young woman standing on his other side.

"Miss Wayne, it's a pleasure..." Seth stuttered to a stop. Before him stood a breathtaking beauty. She had her mother's curls, only looser and lighter in color. A blue ribbon had once captured the mass of her hair, but it now slid down her back and dangled uselessly. His hands longed to reach out and retie that bow, but he held them stiff at his sides.

"How do you do, Marshal?" Ava asked and extended a hand.

He paused. Women didn't shake hands with men as a general rule. He'd been all set to tip his hat a second time.

Seth glanced from father to daughter. They both watched him through eyes the most startling shade of turquoise. He gulped and took her smaller hand in his. He'd expected soft, but Ava's hand was rough, calloused. She'd been working. Working hard and for quite some time. A girl didn't get hands like this from sweeping or cooking or washing a dish or two. He knew that for a certain fact.

"I'm doing well, thank you. And you?" he managed to reply.

"I'm fine." She pierced him with her gaze. "I better go help clean those children up since I let them get so dirty."

"Why don't you stay for supper, Marshal?" Rowdy asked.

"I wouldn't want to put anyone out," Seth stated.

"One more plate won't make a dime's worth of difference. You'll see." Rowdy turned to Ava. "Would you ask Ellie to set an extra plate?"

"I'll see you at supper, Marshal." She scanned the horizon with those mesmerizing eyes before placing two fingers in her mouth. A whistle loud, high, and sharp split the air. He'd not be surprised if they heard it in town. He winced.

"Here, Azul," Ava patted the side of her leg. A large dog withdrew his nose from the hole he'd been investigating, ran to her side, and dropped to his bottom. "Good boy," she praised. "Let's go."

The dog took his place next to her thigh. She dropped her hand to his back ruffling her fingers in his fur as they departed for the house.

That dog looked to be smarter than most men. His thick fur was a mix of russet, black and brown, but, like his mistress, it was the eyes that captured and held you. His were the transparent blue of deep ice or a river rippling over colored rocks or the sky on a clear summer day. Before he'd turned to accompany Ava, the dog had bestowed a look of suspicion laced with a dash of contempt upon him. That glance and those eyes had delivered a message. *She belongs to me.*

His eyes trailed after her. Her hair was a messy mass of unconfined curls. Her blouse was untucked and hung loose around swaying hips. Her skirt was tucked up to reveal brown ankles and bare feet. The wet hem of her skirt confirmed she'd been wading, and a pair of shoes dangled from her hand.

She was the picture of disorder. The antithesis of his imaginary bride, but he had to remove his hat and hold it in front of his crotch lest her parents see the evidence of his swollen manhood.

John and Marcie regarded him with knowing eyes.

"Your daughter is very beautiful," Seth stammered.

"That she is," John replied. "I've been scaring boys and men off for a good five years. She's eighteen now, and knows her own mind, but I'm still her father."

"Yes, sir," Seth stuttered. He guessed the hat hadn't fooled them any.

John steered his wife toward the house. His arm still draped over her small shoulders.

"You can settle your horse over there." Rowdy pointed at the barn behind the houses. "This barn is only used for the horses I'm training or breeding."

Rules and order. That Seth understood.

"Thank you. See you at supper." By then he hoped to have regained control of his body. He gave a rueful shake of his head. He

was a twenty-eight-year-old man and not some randy, untried boy. He needed to act like it.

Seth settled his horse and joined the men washing up at the pump. He cupped his hands beneath the cold water, splashed his face, and ran a wet hand around the back of his neck. A dive in an icy river was needed to fix what really ailed him.

Rowdy planted a friendly slap on his back. "Guests usually sit next to Sven at the head of the table. We eat together there every night. Used to move from house to house, but there's so many of us now that Sven built a long table for his house. We didn't want to give up the habit of breaking bread together."

Seth stepped into a house alive with motion and sound. A parade of women, three of whom were quite pregnant, ferried dishes to the table. The men gathered up children and deposited them on chairs, holding the smallest ones on their laps. When the last woman sank into her chair, Sven stood and voices faded.

"We have a guest tonight." He motioned toward Seth sitting on his right. "The men know him, but I suspect he's not met all the wives and children. This is Marshal Seth Walker. He's the lawman in Ford and keeps peace in the surrounding area."

"Hello, Marshal Walker," a cacophony of voices offered greetings.

"We sit as families, so mamas and pas can help their young 'uns. So, to your left is my wife, Maeve. Next to her is our youngest, Marcie."

"Me Marcie." The little girl pointed at herself before turning the pudgy finger toward Ava's mother. "Her Marcie." Gentle laughter swept the room.

Maeve covered her hand with her own. "Don't point, sweetheart. But you are right. You were named for Marcie Wayne. She's an old friend, and you share the name."

"Next to Marcie is Karl, Elin, Mary and Micah. Those five are Maeve's and mine. We are expecting a baby in a few weeks," Sven said.

“Baby,” little Marcie squealed.

“Hush, Marcie. Let Pa finish,” Maeve reprimanded the child, but pulled the tiny girl onto her lap when her eyes filled with tears.

“You know my brother, Lars,” Sven continued. “His wife, Ellie, is beside him. Their children are Annika, Jakob, Martin and Freya. I see the little natives are growing restless. I’ll hurry. On the other side of the table Mitch, Ellie’s brother, and his wife Melody. Their girls are identical twins, Rose and Lily. Next comes Matthew and his wife, Harmony. As you can see, Melody and Harmony are also identical. It’s double trouble, I can tell you that. Matt and Harmony have twin boys, Matthew and Mark. They are not, praise be, identical. Both Harmony and Melody are pregnant. They do everything together.”

“Not everything,” Matt protested. More laughter floated like a friendly breeze around the table.

“Last but not least, this is Rowdy and Susanna. They have one son, Daniel.” At the mention of his name, baby Daniel struck the table with his spoon until Rowdy took it away. Next to Susanna are John, Marcie and Ava Wayne. You met them this afternoon.”

“Thank you for the introductions and for inviting me to share your supper,” Seth said. Ava sat directly across from him. Their eyes met and sparks raced up and down his spine. Lord have mercy, he draped his napkin across his lap. No woman had ever affected him like this. He might not be able to leave the table without disgracing himself.

“You’re welcome. Now, join hands.” Sven waited while parents helped younger children with this task and the table grew quiet.

“Heavenly father,” he began, “Thank you for the bounty of this table and the health of those gathered around it. Thank you for bringing guests to our home. We are truly thankful to Seth for keeping the peace. Lord, we pray for the safe delivery of Maeve, Harmony, and Melody. If you could keep an eye on them, we would surely appreciate it.”

The room fell into deep silence as Sven struggled for compo-

sure. Sven's first wife, Caroline, had died in childbirth two years prior leaving Sven in a gray fog of grief. Maeve had come into his life like a blessing from beyond, but Caroline's grave cast a long, sad shadow. Sven struggled with fear for his second wife as her time drew near.

Sven cleared his throat. "Thank you for bringing the Wayne family to Journey's End. It relieves my mind that Marcie Wayne will be here for the birth. I better finish up before the children eat the tablecloth. We place our troubles and our joys in your hands, Amen."

A chorus of Amen filled the room before plates were filled with chicken and dumplings, carrots, green beans, mashed potatoes, biscuits and pickles. Four mixed berry pies cooled in the kitchen. The reward of the afternoon adventure.

"Sven said you'd traveled here. Where do you make your home?" Seth regarded the Wayne family with curiosity.

"San Miguel, Texas," John replied. "It's about a two-day ride west of Abilene."

"I know where it is. I grew up on a ranch not far from Austin. My family's been there for a little better than one-hundred years. I heard stories about the Comanche, drought, and range wars my whole life. Some of those stories were about you, Mr. Wayne. You're a mighty big hero in Texas."

"Those were rough days. Now I buy, sell, and train horses. Ava's twin, Adam, is taking care of the stables while I'm gone. Maeve came to help with the birth. She's a midwife, well, a doctor really. Many a woman was sorry to see her leave." John planted a little kiss on his wife's head.

"Now, they'll be just fine. Old Doc Wilson can care for them until I get back," Marcie Wayne explained. "I wouldn't leave the town without medical care."

"Mind if I ask how you know Sven?" Seth inquired.

"Not at all. Sven and Caroline and Lars used to live in San Miguel. They only had Micah then. Caroline was the schoolteacher,

and Sven was the preacher. We were sorry to see them go, but they've done right well here in Oregon."

"Sven was the preacher?" Seth's voice rose in surprise.

"I was, but I make a better rancher, and I have a workshop around back where I make furniture. I'm still ordained, so I reckon I could marry you if you get the notion." Sven laughed and winked at the younger man.

John continued, "Like I was saying, Maeve came for Marcie. I wanted to see old friends, too, but I also came to meet Rowdy. His horses are the talk of the west. I brought two mares and a stallion with me. Rowdy and I have plans to breed them."

"You brought three horses on the train?" Seth asked.

"No, I wouldn't do that to my horses. We traveled rough. It brought back memories of my years as a Ranger, but I'm getting old to sleep on the ground." He chuckled.

"You women camped all the way from Texas?" Surprise laced his words like butter dropped into hot rum.

Ava laughed. "It was fun, an adventure. I helped Pa with the horses, and Mama did most of the cooking."

Well, that explained the state of the girl's hands.

Seth's mother was quiet, genteel, soft. Her back so straight you could lay a ruler against it. Her black hair was always coiled into an elegant bun at the back of her head. He didn't remember ever seeing it set free. It was understood that was a privilege reserved for his father. The hardest task he'd seen her do was carry a bucket of water from the well, and he'd been firmly chastised by his father for letting her do it.

From stories passed around after dinner when he was a boy, Seth knew the women who arrived earlier had worked hard and fought even harder beside their men. Their lives had been filled with danger and death, but there was joy to the tales. The struggle and the success woven deep into family lore.

Now that the ranch was prosperous, his father pampered his wife. Besides, it was what she was used to. She was the daughter of

Jose Moreno, the patron of a large ranch west of Mexico City, an important, impressive man. The Moreno family had arrived with the conquistadors.

His father had gone to Mexico hoping to buy horses from Señor Moreno. He fell in love with his beautiful daughter and managed to convince the man he would keep her safe and treasure her always. He returned to Texas with a string of horses behind him and a Spanish bride perched in front of him.

The Wayne women were a different sort altogether. His stomach tightened into a small knot. They didn't fit into his idea of womanhood. They were as different from the mother he idolized as a kitten is to a lion, and yet he liked them. More than liked Ava if the condition of his body was any indication.

Seth realized with a start that folks were staring his way, and John and Ava both had those turquoise eyes fastened on him. Eyebrows raised high.

"Sorry. I was gathering wool. Did you ask me a question?" Heat rose up his face and disappeared into his hair.

"We wondered how a fella from Texas came to be a lawman in Oregon?" John repeated his query.

Seth pondered before he replied. "Well, my two older brothers are married and work the ranch with my pa. My sister married our neighbor, but I wanted to see more before I settled down. The law suits me, too. There's an order to it. A balancing of the scales. I put on a badge for the first time in San Francisco, and I've been making my way north ever since. I like Ford. It's a good town filled with good people, but I plan to return to Texas sometime. I still call it home." He shrugged.

At an invisible signal, the families began to rise from the table. Men carried small children to the porch and sat them on their laps. Plates were whisked to the kitchen. The older children dragged Ava toward the door.

"No, I need to help clean up," she cried out, laughing.

“Go keep those rascals busy,” Maeve said. “We can handle this mess easy enough. We’d thank you for it.”

Seth joined the men on the porch and was handed a small glass of whiskey. The men rolled cigarettes and watched as Ava organized a game of baseball. She was still barefoot. Her blouse still hung loose, and that disreputable ribbon still clung to the ends of her hair. She was all wrong, so why did she feel right?

Ava pitched to both teams. She helped a confused runner intent on returning to first base from second. She laughed as balls rolled through legs and sailed overhead. She squealed with delight when Azul caught the ball mid-flight and presented it to her like a precious gem.

She was a whirlwind, a tornado, a Texas twister of energy and emotion. He couldn’t help but laugh along with the other men at the good-natured fun and hilarious spectacle of the game. When the women declared it was time to wash up for bed, Seth rose to his feet.

“Thank you for supper. It was a pleasure to meet all of you.” He tipped his head before settling his hat on his head and pulling it low. Smiling, he swept the gathering with his gaze and let it linger on Ava.

He would let his horse walk to town. There was no rush returning to the small house provided to the marshal. No one waited for him. No warm body would share his bed.

The women in his life: his mother, his aunts, his Spanish grandmother, his sister, were all quiet and demure. He’d never wondered if they might want to go barefoot or play baseball. A woman didn’t. That was all. But now he wondered if they wanted more freedom to whoop and run and let their hair fly free.

He remembered a night long ago. Dinner at the Hacienda Moreno. All the men wore black fitted jackets and pants, white shirts with string ties. The women’s dresses were the shades of flowers—rose, yellow, lavender, blue. Shoulders were bare and a necklace adorned each elegant stalk of neck.

His uncle had made a comment, most likely one not well thought out. He had the habit of speaking before thinking. When his wife corrected him, the table fell silent. His aunt's face had first flushed scarlet, and then drained to pasty white. She held her hands clasped in front of her trembling bosom, almost as if in prayer, and begged his pardon.

Later that night he'd heard the sound of a hand meeting flesh, over and over, accompanied by a low, chastising voice. His aunt's cries floated over the banister where he stood listening.

His father had laid a hand on his shoulder. "Your aunt is learning respect over her husband's knee." Then he'd shrugged and walked away.

How many spankings would it take for Ava to learn obedience?

He must put the thought of Ava aside.

He wanted a woman like his mother, docile and calm.

Or did he?