

CHAPTER 1

Wakefield Farm
Lexington, Kentucky
1894

The day of reckoning was at hand for Byron Wakefield. A wife for a wife was the fitting retribution. It wouldn't bring Victoria back, but Jared would have satisfaction in seducing the beautiful Angelia Wakefield away from his treacherous stepbrother. After witnessing her covert actions, Jared was convinced that Angelia intended to run from her husband. Revenge would be sweeter and easier than Jared had imagined.

"Going somewhere, Mrs. Wakefield?"

Jolted by the deep voice behind her, Angelia knew she had just been caught hiding the valise. Would she now be on trial for wanting her freedom? Her heart raced as she slowly turned to face the meddlesome Mr. Jared Breckenridge. He held a lantern up to illuminate the dark barn. The low, flickering flame revealed a triumphant smirk which spread across his face—the same smirk he displayed when he first arrived on her doorstep claiming to be Byron's stepbrother. His appearance couldn't have been more ill-timed. She hadn't stepped foot off of the farm to escape her despicable husband and already her plan was unraveling. Her life was now in the hands of this handsome, hazel-eyed stranger.

Jared Breckenridge had arrived from Denver the week before. He stated that he had unfinished business with Byron and would be staying in Lexington until it was resolved. Since the man had come such a long way and was anxious to see her husband, Angelia felt compelled to offer him a room in the manor until Byron returned from purchasing a new thoroughbred stallion for the farm. As the days passed by, Angelia wished she had recommended that Mr. Breckenridge stay at a Lexington inn instead because he seemed more interested in her than in resolving business with Byron. She managed to escape his company during the time she cared for her ailing father, but felt as if her focus was on hiding from the nosy man rather than spending quality time with her father. She was relieved when Mr. Breckenridge left the farm temporarily to conduct business in Louisville; it gave her time to plan her escape from Byron, unobserved by the stranger's prying eyes...or so she thought.

"Mr. Breckenridge, I thought you would be returning tomorrow...you're early."

"On the contrary, it looks as though I'm right on time," Jared commented as he turned the flame up on the lantern, hung it on a nearby post and slowly stepped toward her.

Jared arrived from Louisville long after the farm had settled in for the evening. Just as he stepped out of the stable, after securing the horse in its stall, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. She was stealthy and swift as she ran toward the barn and Jared quickly followed, obscuring himself until Mrs. Wakefield had hidden her secret behind the bales of hay. She practically jumped out of her skin when he revealed himself to her.

Angelia's heart continued to race as Mr. Breckenridge closed the space between them with his tall, powerfully-built body. Panic over being caught and the attraction she felt for this striking man were both tumbling in her belly. His warm breath brushed her

forehead as he halted his advance only inches away from her. Angelia's eyes followed the path from his hard, bronzed chest, under his open shirt, to his whisker-shadowed face. One corner of his mouth turned up slightly and crinkles of amusement appeared around his eyes. Angelia protectively crossed her arms over her chest and ignored the impulse to run as she stood firm to confront her overly confident opponent.

Jared's nearness to Mrs. Wakefield revealed contradicting body language. The blush in her cheeks, the quickening of her breaths and the way she nervously twisted her hair around her finger suggested she was attracted to him, yet she exhibited wariness when she shyly covered her breasts as if she were standing bare before him. He would like nothing better now than to take her gently in his arms, taste those luscious pink lips and prove to her that she had nothing to fear from him except igniting her passion, but the need to pull her secret out into the open took precedence. He would force Mrs. Wakefield to reveal the cause for her intention to run and then gain her trust before he offered her refuge.

Jared noted the look of defiance on Mrs. Wakefield's lovely face as he reached behind her for the valise. He boldly stood before her with the bag in his hand, waiting for a response from her. He didn't wait long. The emerald hue of her dazzling eyes instantly deepened with her rage. Her rising body heat made her scent of jasmine more pronounced and intoxicating to his senses. Jared wanted more than ever to touch her—to be touched by her. She certainly looked angry enough to hit him. He almost wished that she would; any physical contact with her would be welcomed. Alas, even her acute anger didn't spur her into touching him.

"You should consider choosing a better hiding place for your valise; it could easily be found here," Jared warned. He didn't know if Mrs. Wakefield was aware of it, but she was being watched—and not just by him. Jared had noticed the farrier on staff keeping an eye on her as well. Byron must be worried about losing his pretty little wife while he's away...and so he should be.

Jared opened the valise and reached for *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which was nestled atop her clothing. "A bit of reading for your short trip; you obviously don't plan to wander far from home with so little."

Angelia could feel her face growing hot with provocation. The audacity of this man was unbelievable! What made him think he had the right to pry into her life?

"It's none of your concern!" Angelia grabbed the book and jerked the valise out of Jared's grip. She detested his laughing eyes. Angelia frowned as she shoved the book into her bag. Jared backed away and leaned against the nearby post with his arms folded. He smiled and watched as the beautiful red-head squirmed under his scrutiny.

That little curl of sable hair defiantly resting in the middle of his forehead dared Angelia to keep her eyes fixed on his handsome face. Of course, his teasing, sensual eyes and lips didn't discourage her perusal either. In fact, she felt utterly flustered at being this close to the man.

The stubborn woman refused to heed Jared's advice about her hiding place because she turned to put the valise back in its original position. He opened his mouth to warn her about the water pail she obviously didn't see, but it was too late. Angelia tripped over the pail and plunged face-first into the soft cushion of loose hay on the barn floor. Jared was quite amused by her clumsiness; he hadn't laughed this much in years. Just as he made a move to help her up, Angelia rolled over. She refused the hyena's helping hand and

began dislodging pieces of hay from her tousled mane.

“Since I’ve been an absent host for most of your stay, I thought I would make up for it with a bit of entertainment. I see that my embarrassment is exceeded only by the level of your amusement.” Angelia’s eloquent statement regarding her present predicament only served to make Jared’s laughter more robust. Angelia fought to keep her frown from turning into a smile, but she couldn’t help herself; his hilarity was contagious. She forgot her annoyance with him and laughed as well. It felt good to be able to laugh again, even if it was at herself.

Jared placed the valise behind the bales of hay and again offered Angelia a hand up. She hesitantly accepted his assistance. The warmth and tenderness of his touch captivated her. The effect he had on her was frightening. She quickly pulled her hand out of his gentle grip.

“Are you afraid of me?” Jared asked.

“No, it’s just…” Yes, she was afraid.

Fear had been Angelia’s constant companion since she married Byron, and she was sure she smelled of it. She had lost her happiness and her identity and now this stranger was jeopardizing her attempt to get them back. Yes, she was most definitely afraid, but she wasn’t going to let Mr. Breckenridge know it.

“It’s just what, Mrs. Wakefield?” Jared recognized Byron’s handiwork. There were no outward signs of physical abuse, but her spirit had been trampled. The sadness in her eyes made Jared lose sight of the revenge he craved for the moment. Jared gave in to the compassion he felt for her and reached out to cup her cheek in his hand.

“Don’t.” Angelia pushed his hand away and lowered her eyes from his probing stare.

“What has Byron done to make you want to sneak away?” *As if he had to ask.*

Angelia shook her head in denial. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Jared pulled her chin up with his index finger and held it there until she looked him in the eye. “I know my brother; he’s a man with no conscience. He has a specific destination planned and doesn’t care who he hurts or what he has to do to get there, Mrs. Wakefield.”

“Please don’t address me in that manner; I hate that name.” Angelia chewed on her lower lip. Did she really want to be on a first-name basis with this man? Well, it was certainly better than hearing Wakefield every time he addressed her. This was the first step in regaining her identity. “My name is Angelia.”

Jared smiled. He noted the fact that she sidestepped his question, but since her tension seemed to have subsided a bit, he would drop his inquiry for now. Compassion was what she needed and a little had just gone a long way in gaining her trust...or so he hoped. Time would tell if she trusted him enough to follow him back to Denver. Unfortunately, time was a luxury he didn’t have; Byron would arrive home in two days. By then, Jared had to convince Angelia that running to him was her only choice. It would be a pleasurable challenge.

“Very well, Angelia. Please call me Jared—not because I hate the name Breckenridge, but because it makes me feel old when a pretty, young lady addresses me as Mr. Breckenridge.” Jared managed to get a slight smile and a concurring nod from Angelia. “Regardless of what you may think, Angelia, I didn’t follow you out here to indulge in espionage. I just arrived back from Louisville and saw you as I came out of the stable. I wondered why you would be out this late in the evening. My curiosity prompted

me to investigate.

“Curiosity killed the cat, or so my father always says.”

“Perhaps, if taken to the extreme,” Jared stated, “but in moderation, curiosity can be very revealing.” Jared smiled. Angelia blushed and lowered her eyes. “Speaking of your father, I took the liberty of checking in on him before I left for Louisville.”

Angelia’s eyes widened and focused back on Jared’s handsome face. She was touched by his gesture for only a second and then her suspicion overshadowed his benevolence. The distrust was a learned response from being married to Byron. She could no longer be easily awed by a man’s kindness. What was Jared’s motive—surely he had one. She studied Jared’s face. There were no obvious facial tics that would indicate he was being deceitful in any way, and she saw nothing but kindness in his amiable eyes. How could she be sure that he was genuine in his thoughtful gestures? He seemed concerned about her, and his compliments were plentiful, but caution was in order. Freedom was within her grasp, and she wouldn’t ruin the one chance she had to start a new life for herself by falling for another chivalrous man who showed her a little kindness. The last one was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and she wouldn’t fall for that again.

“Thank you for taking the time to visit with my father, Jared, but why would you do that? You don’t even know him.”

“I’m a physician; it was my duty and my pleasure to do so.” Jared saw the surprise in Angelia’s eyes. In the time that he had been at Wakefield Farm, Angelia never asked about his occupation. She probably assumed that, like Byron, his trade involved horses, which was partially true.

“How was my father when you looked in on him?” Angelia inquired, feeling jealous and guilty. That precious time with her father could have been hers if she had not been spending it in preparation of the escape from Byron.

“In spite of your father’s illness, he has maintained his apparent sense of humor. He told me I could poke and inspect anything he had except his toes. He said they were the only things that were still in perfect working order.”

Angelia snickered and nodded. “That sounds like Papa.”

For just a moment, Angelia’s hopes were lifted. Maybe there was something else that could be done for her father. Perhaps Jared was the person to give her the miracle she sought. Byron had already brought a physician from Lexington to look at her father, but she wasn’t satisfied that he did everything possible. For all she knew, that man wasn’t a physician at all, but a paid charlatan hired to silence her concerns over her father’s failing health. Byron would like nothing better than to see her father die. Angelia looked at Jared with hopeful eyes, but then she saw the unspoken apprehension on his face.

“Jared?”

As if Jared could read her mind, he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Angelia, there is nothing I can do except give him something to ease his suffering. He is in God’s hands now.”

With tears threatening to issue forth, she lowered her eyes. “I guess miracles are in short supply these days...at least for me.” Angelia brushed at her clothes. “I don’t mean to be rude, Jared, but I must get back to Papa.” She turned to walk out of the barn, but hesitated in her departure and looked back to the area where her valise was hidden. “Can I trust you not to reveal my secret, Jared?”

“For certain, Angelia; you and your secret are safe with me.” Experience had taught her not to trust, but what choice did she have now? Angelia nodded and stepped toward the barn door. Jared cleared his throat. “Angelia?”

“Yes, Jared?” Angelia halted without turning to face him. “Was there something else?”

“I intend to ask the cook to prepare a picnic for us tomorrow. We could ride out to the meadow near the pond. It’s very beautiful there, and I thought you could use some time away from your worries.” Jared sensed her hesitation. “Your father seems like a very kind, loving man. I’m sure he would want you to take time for yourself. I promise I won’t keep you long.”

If nothing else, Jared was persistent. Should she let her guard down just a little? He was such a gentleman and trying so hard to gain her trust—which is what made her suspicious of him. She should decline his invitation, but she couldn’t resist the opportunity to expose the real Mr. Breckenridge. She would ask a member of the house staff to sit with her father until she returned from the picnic.

“That sounds nice, Jared. It’s been a while since I’ve been on a picnic. I’ll look forward to it. Please don’t forget to extinguish the light on your way out.” Angelia walked out of the barn, knowing that Jared’s eyes were on her. She felt quite anxious about his attention and quickened her steps to escape his view.

Jared followed Angelia as far as the barn door. He stood there watching her swift retreat through the lush, dewy grass between the barn and the two-story, Greek revival manor. The moonlight danced off of the long curls that hung loosely down her back and bounced with her every step. Jared smiled and noted her interesting combination of fashion. Her hair obstructed most of his view of her fashionable lady’s blouse except for the enormous leg-of-mutton sleeves, but the form-fitting men’s trousers showed off her soft curves very nicely. He remembered Angelia begging his pardon for her unconventional way of dressing. She explained that she preferred to work and ride unencumbered by the yards of material in a skirt. Jared could imagine how Byron, who liked his women feminine and subservient, reacted to her style of dress. Despite the trousers, Angelia was the picture of femininity, but she was no docile mouse—something which she had most certainly suffered for under Byron’s rule. Unlike her husband, Jared had an appreciation for what he saw in Angelia. She deserved so much more than she would ever get from Byron.

Jared pondered why God would honor Byron or men like him with the gift of a companion if he knew that inevitably she would have to endure such deplorable treatment. Did the dishonor of God’s gift of woman go back as far as Adam? If so, Adam didn’t deserve Eve and neither was Byron worthy of Angelia. Jared justified his retaliatory intention of taking Angelia away from Byron with this rationalization as he began to strategize her relocation into his paradise.

