

# *Time of the Rose (Excerpt)*

©*Bonita Clifton*

## *Prologue*

*Wyoming Territory, 1878*

Lightning snapped, serrating a sterling lance through blackened storm clouds with unimaginable force. The ground under his boots jolted in a peal of tooth-rattling thunder. His thick brows furrowed in puzzlement as a mysterious vapor gyrated from the rocky soil, dancing up to meet angry gray skies as if tempting the heavens to collide with earth. Shoulders squared, he tilted his head back and squinted, the first raindrops splattering his face, cascading across his jaw in jagged rivulets.

Damn! Where in God's name did this storm come from? Only moments before, clear blue in every direction. Colton Remington Chase stalked through a snarl of new spring grass toward a copse of quaking aspen, thumbs looped into his pockets. Lodgepole pines backed him in dense stands, their feathery tops spreading in verdant waves over the rugged Wyoming wilderness. The storm's cool air descended, hanging heavy with the musk of conifer, rain, and wildflowers.

Colt remounted the dapple-gray stallion in one powerful movement. Lifting the doeskin felt Stetson from his head, he let out a confused sigh, raking fingers through the thick, dark hair grazing his shoulders. He pulled on leather gloves, smooth and oiled with the work it took to manage a cattle ranch.

Confident astride the great horse, he wore a pale blue double-breasted cotton shirt with fine German silver buttons, one side unbuttoned and draping over his chest, a worn red bandanna knotted loosely at his neck. Dust from the range coated tan Levi trousers, buckskin sewn over the seat and inner legs to keep them from wearing thin. Cuban-heeled boots rested easy in the wooden stirrups and leather straps secured roweled spurs. His vest, the color of fresh sawdust, concealed a hideaway rig supplied with a bounty of ammunition and twin silver-plated Colt Peacemakers, a rose carved into each ivory grip. At his side, a cowhide saddle boot held a Henry .44 rifle, accessible to his right hand.

It wouldn't do to start down the pass now, he rationalized, for a downpour may well trigger a flash flood and he'd be a sitting duck. He preferred options.

Colt focused on the peculiar rose, twirling the blossom by its thorny stem between gloved fingers. Moments before, he'd pinched the blossom from a single vine clinging to the bark of a spruce tree, its buds tucked beneath sheltering boughs. He'd long fancied the rose flower. This one may have bloomed a vivid crimson, time fading the pigments into shades of violet. He pressed it to his nose, inhaling a tangle of heady scents: raw honey, rich earth, forest moss, gray smoke, evergreen, moisture. And spice. A reminder of clove spikes decorating a ham on Christmas day. The silken petals rivaled the skin of a beautiful woman, he mused, lips curving into a smile. He slipped the rose into the suede pouch at his waist just as another blue arc snapped its warning, thunder rolling on its heels. The earth shook.

Suddenly, the air around the rider and his horse took on a ghostly shimmer. The mist twisted, weaving about the legs of his horse like a serpent, melting into an eddying whirlpool. Colt faced the wind then, the stallion tossing its head, snorting, prancing with uncharacteristic nervousness.

"Whoa there, boy. It's only a little storm brewing," he murmured, stroking the muscled horseflesh and delivering a reassuring pat. The gray didn't spook easily. A hint of worry crossed Colt's face.

Gales whipped larkspur into a dancing frenzy around enormous black hooves as he reached behind the cantle, loosening rawhide strings and shaking free a rain slicker, thrusting his arms into the canvas sleeves. He pressed his hat firmly onto his head.

Despite the angry outburst above, a strange peace settled over him, something he hadn't experienced in a long time. Tempting him to forget his mission. To clear his head. He also sensed excitement, an urge to give in to some unknown force beckoning him down into that meadow.

Into the fog.

"What the hell, Cinder. Let's go for a little ride," he challenged under his breath.

A thunderclap shook the heavens at the instant he spurred his horse. Springing forth and down, horse and rider vanished into the murky haze with the flowing rhythm of a man and beast who knew one another so well. They moved as one. Colt lay low, giving full rein, Cinder stretching into a sleek, fluid gallop. He needed the speed, the exhilaration. Free for the first time in ten long years of wandering, chasing after anything that might bring him closer to his goal. Right now he believed he could ride the massive steed forever, lose himself in the muscular power, drive the animal into eternity.

It became impossible to see. Only the liquid motion, the rippling sea of grass, clumps of soil flung high by the gray's shod hooves. Rain pelted his cheeks in a stinging deluge and he squeezed his eyes shut, no longer pressing the stallion on, and yet, he moved faster, breathing in harsh, lusty snorts.

Blasts of wind sang a deafening chorus, beating against his ears as overwhelming dizziness enveloped him, spinning into nausea. His senses reeled as he envisioned the clouds forming an arcane tunnel, hurling him headlong into corridors of murk. Into the unknown.

*Stop.*

Colt hefted back on the reins. Cinder didn't respond.

A shrill ringing within his head mutated into what sounded like human voices, thousands upon thousands of them, drawn from eons of triumph and tragedy. Indecipherable. A calliope of sound—yet, softly, came the fleeting cadence of a drum, an Indian war chant, the resonance of an operatic baritone, melting into tinkling laughter floating on the wind at his side. Intermixing, louder the discord grew, until he thought he would surely be driven mad.

A final, blood-curdling scream was his own.

With all the power he could muster, Colt muscled the steed to the right and into a wide circle.

“Whoa, boy!” he said, voice a raspy growl.

The gray veered, skidding to a stop, hooves digging into spongy soil. Leaping from the saddle, Colt sucked in a deep breath to quell rising nausea, tossing off his hat, stumbling a few feet where he promptly lost his morning meal. The sickness passed quickly enough. Slowly, he straightened, hands planted to his thighs, panting. He mopped rainwater from his brow with a sleeve, a brisk shake of his head sending a shower of water droplets sailing.

A haunting stillness closed in as the mist curled, dissipating to reveal the arch of a rainbow above an emerald, rain-soaked valley. The summer sun had already begun to pull the chill from the air as he strode to where Cinder happily nibbled at a patch of clover, scooping his hat from the ground and knocking it against his thigh. A mockingbird’s repetitive cry echoed from the crest of a pine.

Before him, the craggy, snow-capped Tetons reigned over Jackson Hole. This view had long been one of his favorites. Glittering streams meandered along a lush valley floor as far as the eye could see, connecting with swifter rivers, then lakes, forming a complex maze. Early June wildflowers bloomed, interspersing tall spires of wheatgrass with dramatic spangles of vibrant color. An eagle cut the air above with powerful wings, soaring, vanishing into now crystal azure skies.

Colt inhaled in satisfaction, but the sensation was short-lived. Squinting to validate his vision, he stared in utter disbelief as the last of the fog lifted. Nestled at the base of the far range seemed to be some sort of settlement—quite a large one by his standards. Hadn’t been a trace of it before the storm, although the angle may have obscured it from view, he reasoned. True, been almost a year since he’d last ridden this area, but how could a metropolis of this size have sprung up so rapidly? And why hadn’t he at least heard of it?

Always curious and never one to recoil from a challenge, a spirit of adventure fired into his veins. He rubbed his eyes as if that would help him to see better. What in tarnation were those carriages—wagons moving up and down black streets without the assistance of horses? Everything looked shiny. And colorful. Why the entire town glistened like hard candies and polished silver under a glaring sun. Then, an unfamiliar droning hum reverberated through and beyond far treetops, disappearing.

“Son of a—” Shielding his eyes and craning his neck to see, he looked up in wonderment, unable to spot the source. Nothing but blue sky and a few puffy clouds.

Lines of concern crossed his brow as he positioned the water-stained Stetson back onto his head, giving a downward tug on the brim. With unthinking ease, he swung back into the saddle, clicking his horse forward, down into the valley.

# Part One

## *Chapter One*

### *Jackson, Wyoming - Old Town - 2014*

A fiery spring sun toasted the thin mountain air, and yet harbored a distinct chill in the aftermath of the thunderstorm. Madison Calloway noted how Main Street once again crawled with sightseers engaged in shopping, their shorts, sneakers, cell phones, cameras, and cars disrupting the otherwise authentic 19th-century atmosphere of a turbulent Old West. Lining the skinny street stood a couple of gaudy false-front saloons, cozy hotels, and a medley of shops, which Madison had ducked in and out of, obsessively filling her slouchy shoulder bag with a variety of odd-sized purchases. An avowed lover of all things antique, she beamed with elation at a successful barter for a perfectly preserved flow blue gravy boat, the name derived from a particular glaze that blurred during the firing process. A perfect addition to her collection back home.

Windchimes fluttered in the rain-scented breeze, the sound drifting behind her in a delicate and haunting melody. Searching for her companions, Madison glanced at her phone for the time, and increased her pace along the wood-planked boardwalk, stopping abruptly before her reflection in a large wavy glass storefront window.

“Rats ... I knew I should have worn it up,” she mumbled under her breath, fiddling with a cluster of blonde spiral curls that had a mind of their own, wrinkling her nose at the mess the damp winds had made of her hair. Despite soon turning 31, she still sometimes felt like a little girl, and looked it, too, when her hair hung long over her shoulders as it did today. This morning she’d woken with a heart lighter than usual, no sign of the all-too-familiar lead weight in the pit of her stomach—yet. After what she’d been through these past few years, this short trip to Jackson Hole was precisely what she needed.

It was a weekend excursion provided to Calloway World Travel in Colorado Springs by a Wyoming tour operator. As the owner of the agency, she typically took advantage of the familiarization tours, but lately hadn’t felt much like traveling. Instead, she’d delegate to either her younger brother or one of the other agents while she stayed behind and buried herself in work at the office. But not this time. Today she eagerly anticipated the hotel inspections and tours, the meals, and educational talks. The return flight to Colorado Springs wasn’t until Sunday, and since today was only Friday, there’d be ample free time to explore. Damn, but she needed this.

After eight years as a travel agent, three of them starting up and operating her agency, she was a successful entrepreneur and proud of it. Personal life had been happy as well, but all that changed when a marriage of eleven years turned sour, threatening to shatter all she'd worked for.

Thinking back still made her cringe, which is why she avoided it. She'd come so close to giving the agency up, tempted to let it all go right along with him. After all, if it hadn't been for Jon's investment in her dream, it might never have materialized, and she wanted nothing to remind her of him. But when it came down to it, she'd created this little empire herself, with the help of Mark and a troupe of talented agents. Jon might have provided some of the bankrolling, but her sweat made it successful. Eventually, she'd refused to let it fall by the wayside. Last year the agency thrived with triple the annual income and substantial growth in clientele.

*Jon Klein.* Out of habit, Madison's thumb moved across her the palm of her left hand to toy with the gold band, finding only the soft skin of her finger instead. The dreaded lead weight returned, falling right into place at the base of her stomach. She still loved him, no use denying it. And it irked her. Thing was, lately she'd become too tired to deny it. Did she have no pride at all? How could anyone continue to love a man like that? Despite the contentions battling inside her head, the end result invariably rose to the surface and she'd come to accept it. She'd just have to find a way to live with it.

Even though she strived not to dwell on it, questions and doubts about her failed marriage snuck up on her at the worst times, bringing the familiar salty burn to her eyes. *Why had Jon done it?* Hadn't she been a good wife? Could be she wasn't pretty enough. Maybe it was simply his personality, always taking the elusive chance, living on the edge, attaining one lofty goal only to feel cheated, and demanding a higher one. Never satisfied. His choice of careers certainly reflected that side of him. A fast-paced stockbroker, extremely intelligent. Too intelligent—his wheeling and dealing often leading ethics astray. Madison suspected his means of obtaining investment money for the agency hadn't been totally on the level. But when she questioned it, he'd denied any wrongdoing, insisting he'd been playing options and got lucky.

Always in pursuit of the almighty dollar, Jon made it quite evident that nothing else mattered as much—except for, Madison discovered, women. *Lots* of different women.

"Earth to Maddie..."

Mark's low timbre voice sifted through the cobwebs of her thoughts, and she tossed a welcoming smile over her shoulder. His gentle hand rested on her arm.

"Hey. What's up, bro?" She once again focused on a display of ghastly instruments exhibited behind the window of the 1880s replica of a Barber/Dentist.

"We need to get a move on, Maddie," Mark encouraged. "There's a hotel inspection at the Blue Lady in fifteen minutes. After that, a bus tour of the ski resort and countryside. Then back here for lunch. Shit, I'm already hungry. Oh, and I managed to grab tickets for the Wild West Show this afternoon." He cocked a triumphant eyebrow.

Mark recognized her every mood, and likely knew exactly what she'd been daydreaming about ... or rather, *nightmaring*, if there was such a word. Reminders of the day's agenda were his way of getting her mind off problems and on to other things. Thank goodness her brother had been there to scrape her remains from the bottom of the pit of despair when her marriage ended.

Madison's eyes lifted to his, certain he detected the moisture about to spill down her cheeks. To lighten the mood he grinned like a goof, then stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes—eyes the mirror image of her own, dark-fringed teal that flashed bright green when excited or angry. She giggled.

“Better get yourself a snack now, or forever hold your peace,” she advised. “Where’s Lanie and Gertie?”

Mark glanced at his watch. “Was hoping they were with you.”

“I haven’t seen them since breakfast. You go on ahead. I’ll round them up and be right behind you.”

“Yep. Don’t be too long.” With an affectionate squeeze to her shoulder, her brother continued toward The Blue Lady Hotel, his long strides and sturdy Merrell’s eating up the boardwalk.

Madison loved Mark for all his support during the emotional roller coaster of her divorce. Though they’d had some hair-raising disagreements over the years, she knew she couldn’t have a better brother. They’d always been close. At four years her junior, he was her most cherished friend. When she wasn’t contemplating how to murder him, she was loving him to death. It had been only natural to hire him as the agency manager once he’d graduated from the University of Colorado. He’d always been the analytical brains in the family, something one wouldn’t guess simply by looking at him—tall, built, athletic, swoon-worthy, with a thick mop of dark blonde wavy hair and eyes to die for. Of course, whenever Madison looked into those bright green orbs, all she saw was a reflection of the ornery boy who used to annoy her, crash her slumber parties, eat all the birthday cake and sneak peeks into her diary.

Madison lingered for a couple more minutes, reading descriptions of the crude dental instruments, then, spotting her travel companions in the distance, traversed the crowd to where Gertie and Lanie had paused.

“There you two are. Find something interesting?”

“Would you look at that, Maddie?” Gertie whispered in awe, pointing at a display behind another wavy pane of glass. She grimaced, pursing her lips until they were as round as her plump face. “Isn’t that the most beautiful dress? So eloquent.”

“Whoever wore it must’ve had one skinny waist,” Lanie added, her sunny nature as bright as the buttery yellow of her hair.

A weathered mannequin stiffly displayed a withered burgundy velvet gown, the snug bodice held together with dozens of little pearl seed buttons extending down to a wasp waist. Starched frills, yellowed by age and probably years behind that glass, adorned the neck and wrists. Pointy ankle boots peeked out from a gathered skirt, a bustle accenting the back. A crooked and dusty wig supported a hat fashioned from the same burgundy velvet. Black lace veiled the chipped face of the mannequin.

“Imagine how miserable that lady was to have that small a waist,” Madison replied thoughtfully. “I remember reading about malformed ribs because of tight-laced corsets, sometimes causing punctured lungs.”

“Yikes. Sounds horrid,” Lanie said with a shiver. “I’ll stick with my leggings and Converse.”

“Makes a gal feel lucky to have been born in the twentieth century, that’s for darn sure.” Gertie wrinkled her tiny nose in distaste, patting her short graying hair. “I can’t tell you my relief at not having to wear a bustle with a butt the size of mine.”

An infectious giggle rolled from Gertie’s throat and trailed behind as she and Lanie continued onward toward the hotel. Maddie laughed along, admiring Gertie, the eldest agent in the office, always up for any adventure. The woman possessed a zest for life those half her age didn’t understand.

Madison glanced back to the mannequin, a wistful expression playing over her features. Despite the many hardships, life in the 1800s surely had its own kind of romance. The layers of feminine clothing removed slowly, piece by frilly piece, during an impassioned moment between two lovers. Must have been very erotic.

Startled back to reality, Madison jumped at the intrusion of a shrill catcall from behind. Catching her breath, she spun around without thinking, her gaze met with a seedy, unshaven drugstore-cowboy type. A nasty straw hat lay low, obscuring his eyes in a cryptic shadow as he strolled past on the boardwalk.

“Nice ass,” he said with a smirk, revealing brown-stained teeth, a wad of tobacco stuffed into his cheek. He continued to appraise her as if expecting a favorable reply.

Annoyed, Madison bit her tongue and backed away, the flesh creeping along her spine.

“Jerk. Get a life,” she muttered caustically.

A blind turn to her left landed her directly in the path of another passerby, a woman with two small children in tow. Dodging them, she excused herself and leaped off the edge of the boardwalk, spinning around and barely stopping before a collision with the shoulder of the most enormous horse she’d ever seen. Certainly the largest she’d been this close to.

A gasp tore from her throat as she reversed step again, catching her balance before embarrassing herself further by falling flat on her ass. She steadied herself, then looked up.

Charcoal-tipped ears twitched. Round, liquid-black eyes studied her. That earthy, pleasant horse scent tickled her nose and woke up a few childhood memories. Mottled gray was the animal’s color, like a stormy sky, its mane and forelock draping a muscled neck in a semblance of long, pale icicles. For a sliver of a moment Madison realized that, with concentration, she could count each delicate lash fringing that soft eye...

“Pardon me, ma’am. My fault.”

She jumped. The voice surprised her, tumbling over her like a gentle breeze. A man stepped out from the opposite side of the gray horse, his eyes sharp beneath hooded lids, locking with hers as though he may know her. Apparently deciding he didn’t, he lowered his gaze and touched the brim of his hat, and with a solemn nod, moved on.

Madison found no words. With the seedy urban cowboy a distant memory, she stepped back onto the boardwalk and continued distractedly down the street. But curiosity gnawed at her. She spun around again to watch the old cowboy’s progress, the sight striking her as authentic, typical, and unusual. Certainly no tourist, she reasoned. Maybe a performer in the Wild West Show? He looked ancient, but walked—no, ambled was the word, with the spirit of a much younger man. A full-length tarpaulin rain slicker, slit up the back, drifted behind the old cowboy as he led the

huge gray horse up the street. He paused along a queue of parallel-parked cars, studying them unashamedly, oblivious to the countless stares he attracted himself. Ever so cautiously, he leaned to peer inside one of the vehicles as if searching for something in particular.

Those eyes. She couldn't put those eyes out of her mind. Like a golden-brown caress, so clear and alert. And that hair. Shimmering silver; almost white and flowing past his shoulders from beneath a tan hat adorned with a snakeskin band. Tourists parted for him to pass. His quiet demeanor lent a sort of menace, an air of unapproachability, suggesting wariness to the casual stranger.

A yellow Jeep sped recklessly along Main Street, far too fast considering the number of gadding pedestrians and Madison held her breath.

"No—no, slow down!" she muttered, gritting her teeth.

The old silver-haired cowboy bounded in exaggerated haste toward the safety of the boardwalk, his horse shimmying nervously behind. People turned to watch. Then, an attractive woman in shorts sprinted across the street to join her friends on the other side. Dismissing the speeding Jeep entirely, the man turned, adjusting his hat and scrutinizing her with open interest.

At last, Madison caught up to Mark and Lanie outside the Blue Lady Saloon and Hotel.

"Did you *see* that old guy?"

Out of breath, she motioned toward the direction in which she had come. The old man vanished around the corner, nothing but a sea of tourists in his wake.

"The one with that big horse? They probably pay him to walk up and down the street for effect. Looked older than dirt." Mark shoved a bag of popcorn in front of her, obviously not sharing her enthusiasm.

"And did you notice the arsenal he packed under his coat?" Lanie reported excitedly. "He had enough ammunition to wage war on a small country—and win. I hope he's a legitimate performer in the Wild West Show and not some looney with a vendetta for tourists." She blew out a breath, shrugged, and disappeared inside the doorway.

"A few years ago I'd say you watch too much TV. Nowadays, who knows." Mark caught the door after her and, turning back to Madison, "You coming?"

"The way he jumped away from every car that passed," she said, absently chewing a fingernail, "it was like he was scared to death. Could be he doesn't get into town much. He gawked at those cars as though he'd never seen one before." Then, remembering Mark waited, "Be there in just a sec."

At that moment Gertie rolled out of a gap in the steady stream of people, latched onto the door, and followed Mark inside. Madison remained out on the boardwalk for a moment longer to scan the swarms of happy, vacationing faces with hopes of catching one more glimpse of the old man and the horse.

