



Mountain Magic
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Hard Shell Word Factory

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Chapter 1

Arkansas, January 1868

"Whoa!" Jasper Longtree leaned back on the reins and pulled the stout team of horses to a stop in the middle of the muddy crossroads. "We're here." The lanky farmer raised a gnarled hand and pointed to a weathered sign nailed to the trunk of a white oak tree. "The holler's down the hill. I can't take you any closer because of the mud," he shouted, making himself heard over the rumble of thunder.

Elizabeth Eastgate stared past the sign to another rutted track that left the intersection and plunged down a steep hillside. Her spirits plummeted right along with it as she traced the road to its end. A bleak cluster of weather-beaten houses clung to the sides of a broad bowllike depression. Devil's Hollow. Well, the name certainly fits.

Taking in the stark, winter-naked landscape, she tightened her grip on the battered satchel and allowed Jasper to help her down. It was worse than she had imagined, but at least her journey was over. Now it was up to her to make the best of it.

She pasted a smile on her face and turned to the stick-thin, gray haired man who stood beside her.

"Thank you, Jasper. I don't know how I would have gotten here without you."

The farmer shook his head. "I'm not sure you ought to thank me for bringing you to this godforsaken place." Muttering to himself, he removed her black horsehide trunk from the wagon bed and placed it on a patch of dried grass at the edge of the muddy road. "Miz Elizabeth, I don't feel right about goin' off and leavin' you here all by yourself. Are you sure somebody is comin' to meet you?"

Beth rummaged in her reticule for the tattered letter. She held it up, as much to reassure herself as the man standing beside her. "Logan Winfield wrote that he would provide my transportation from here." She tucked the envelope away.

"Logan Winfield?" The man frowned. "Well, if you're sure?"

"I'll be fine," Beth said with a lot more confidence than she felt. "Goodbye, Jasper." She held out her hand.

The farmer grasped it in a hearty handshake. He hesitated before releasing her. "Ma'am, if you ever need anything..." When she smiled, he shrugged, then climbed aboard his wagon. "Anyhow, good luck to you." He shook his head. "You'll need it," he added softly.

Beth locked her jaws to keep her lips from quivering as the kindly man drove out of sight. A brisk gust of January wind moaned down the mountainside and cut through her threadbare coat, making her shiver. She clutched the front of the garment closer and gave thanks that the Arkansas weather wasn't as

cold as Chicago at this time of year.

As she tightened the strings of her worn, brown velvet bonnet, her fingers automatically went to the brooch she wore at the neck of her dress. Touching the ivory cameo, her only link to a mother she'd never known, somehow gave her comfort. She stared around her. *Well, I'm here. Now what?*

A short distance away in a copse of trees on the knob of a small hill, she spied a dwelling she hadn't noticed before. The sight encouraged her until she realized no smoke rose from the chimney and the dark windows showed no sign of life. To make matters worse, the rumble of thunder in the dark clouds overhead told her the rain would not hold off for long.

She tugged the coat front tighter. Where was he? Since Mr. Winfield had answered her letter, in which she'd stated the date of her arrival, she'd expected someone to be waiting for her. She certainly hadn't counted on being left all alone in the middle of nowhere. Thunder boomed again. "Well, do something, Elizabeth. You can't stand in the road all night."

She pulled her feet free of the oozing muck and glanced down the slick hill at the hollow. Mr. Winfield, or whoever was supposed to meet her, was probably waiting at the settlement. She squared her shoulders then eyed her book-laden trunk with dismay. She'd have to leave it. It was all she could do to carry the cumbersome satchel.

Discovering she could avoid most of the mire by stepping from one patch of dead weeds to another,

she clasped the handle of the bulging bag and headed for the community at the base of the hill.

"Ma'am! Wait up, ma'am."

She turned and peered over the top of her gold-rimmed spectacles.

A young man in faded denim overalls emerged from the cover of the trees and hurried his mouse-colored mule toward her.

"Are you Miz Eastgate?" he drawled.

Smiling her relief, Beth nodded. "Are you Logan Winfield?"

"Me?" The grinning youth shoved back a battered felt hat and dismounted. "Shucks no. I'm Nate Winfield. Logan's my brother. He sent me to fetch you."

Fetch her? Puzzled, she scanned the area behind him. "I don't see your wagon."

"That's 'cause I don't have one, ma'am. It's winter. A wagon'd need wings to get through these hills."

"Then how--?"

"Molly here will carry us." He slapped the mule's rump.

"You expect me to ride that animal?" Catching a baleful gleam in the mule's eye, Beth took a step backward. She shook her head. "I can't. I don't know how." Grasping at any excuse that might suffice, she pointed down the road. "Besides, I can't leave my baggage. It's going to rain."

"I'll tote your trunk to the Lathams' rooming house. Logan can fetch it later." Ignoring her protests, he shoved the reins into her hands, then strode to her trunk and hoisted it on his shoulder. He carried it to the unoccupied house she'd seen earlier, opened the front door, and deposited the chest inside.

Dusting his hands together, he ambled toward her. He pointed at the sky. "I guess we'd better be goin'. With a storm comin' it'll be dark soon. Are you ready?"

"There's no other way?" When he shook his head, her heart thudded uneasily. The mule looked tall as a mountain and mean as Satan. Furthermore she couldn't imagine any way, short of sprouting wings, to get aboard the animal.

"How do I...?"

"I'll help you."

Before she had a chance to change her mind, the boy's hands closed around her waist and she found herself lifted high in the air and plopped astride the mule. She bent to tug at her skirts, which had risen to her knees, and glimpsed the ground far below her. "My stars!" She quickly righted herself and clutched the saddle horn, trying not to think of her perilous perch, or the immodest length of stockinged leg she'd been unable to cover. After tying her satchel to the saddle pommel, Nate mounted behind her. "All set?" he asked. When she nodded, he reached around her and picked up the reins. "Giddap, Molly."

The mule took off at a stiff-legged-gait that threatened to loosen Beth's teeth. Praying she didn't fall

off, she held on for dear life.

Instead of going toward the settlement as she'd expected, Nate guided the mule through a thick stand of trees, following a narrow path that wound steadily upward, reaching the crest of one hill only to dip into the valley of another.

The icy mist that had begun to fall soon seeped through Beth's thin coat to saturate the scratchy, woolen dress underneath. She wiped the raindrops from the lenses of her glasses and stared bleakly at the black skeletons of trees surrounding them. *Devil's Hollow*. Overwhelmed by this place of brooding, mist-covered mountains and dark valleys, she shuddered.

Footing became treacherous and Nate slowed the mule as they eased down the rain-slick trail into the depths of a canyon.

The valley narrowed into a steep-sided gorge, a dark cavity cut into the ground with its trees forced to stretch to great heights in order to reach the sun. The odor of rotting vegetation, pungent mule hide, and wet wool filled the damp air.

The only daylight Beth saw edged the top of a rim, but when they reached it, it wasn't the crest at all but a bench of rock with others leading steplike up to a higher, flat plateau.

Now out of the sheltering recesses of the canyon, cold drops of rain pelted them anew. Water trickled in a steady stream down the rims of Beth's bonnet, joining to make an icy trail down her spine.

She drooped wearily and would have toppled from the saddle if not for Nate's arms supporting her.

After jolting over rough, rutted roads in the wagon for the better part of a week, every bone in her body ached. Now, forced to ride the mule, she felt the skin on her inner thighs throbbing, rubbed raw by the friction of the wet leather. She gritted her teeth to stifle a pain-filled moan. *How much farther?* She prayed she could hold out.

"We're almost there," Nate said sympathetically. He pointed to a ridge that loomed in front of them.

Through the gloom, Beth saw the faint glow of a lantern-lit window. They left the woods and zigzagged around a series of stacked log fences that edged the only flat spot on the mountain.

Nate halted the mule in front of a tall, angular house perched on stiltlike piers of stacked rocks. "We're here," he shouted toward the house. Hearing his voice, a half-dozen long-eared dogs raced from beneath the dwelling. Snarling and barking they surrounded the mule.

The door of the house crashed backward against the wall and four shrieking children of various ages exploded from the light-filled opening. "Teacher! Teacher!" Pushing and shoving, each fought to be the first to reach them.

To her horror, Nate lifted Beth from the mule and set her in the middle of the din. Then, apparently oblivious to her plight, he led the mule away and vanished into the darkness.

"I'll take you," cried a small boy, tugging at Beth's arm.

"No, let me," another child screamed. She jerked Beth backward, ripping the sleeve of her coat. The excited dogs lunged, snapping at Beth's legs and skirts. "Get away," she cried.

"Let go, Rowdy! Stop it, Belle!" an older girl shouted.

"Please, stop," Beth pleaded. Exhausted and half-frozen, pushed and pulled by the youngsters, her heels nipped by the baying hounds, Beth could feel her fortitude dissolve. Unable to help herself, she covered her face and burst into tears.

"Now look what you did," the little boy said, fighting to retain his hold on Beth's bag.

"You did it, not me." The smaller girl gave him a shove.

"That's enough!" a man bellowed.

Instantly the gathering grew quiet. Grateful to be rescued, Beth glanced toward the rickety porch.

A bearded man, so tall and broad that his silhouette blocked most of the flaring light, stood beside a woman so tiny she looked like an elderly elf. Observing Beth, the man snorted his disgust. "Hell, I should have known it," he muttered. Shaking his head, he stomped down the steps and vanished into the gloom.

Beth stared after him, resentfully wondering who he was.

The old woman wiped her hands on her apron and hurried forward. "Get along with ye." She waved her hand, shoos the children and dogs away like they were a flock of stray chickens.

Even though Beth herself was small, the old woman barely topped her shoulder. Wild, white hair stood in an undisciplined halo around a face wrinkled as a sun-dried apple, but the woman's blue eyes were bright as a child's. Like a diminutive general, the elderly voice barked orders at the unruly brood before her. Then she wrapped clawlike fingers around Beth's arm, and her tone softened. "Pur little thing needs some tending to. Come along, dear. Granny Jo will see to ye."

Feeling as though she'd been dropped onto a strange planet, Beth allowed herself to be led through the rain to the tall house. The children followed quietly behind them.

Beth found the dwelling was as peculiar as the people. Only one story, but tall and peaked, the house was divided by a dogtrot, a wide, open hall that ran through the middle. With no doors to keep them out, that same area was occupied by various cats, chickens, and a variety of sleeping long-eared dogs.

Once inside, Beth had her coat and hat removed and was seated in a cane rocking chair in front of a huge, rock-fronted fireplace. All accomplished before she could blink.

She held her hands toward the pine-scented blaze, savoring the crackling heat that sent steam from the wet wool of her dress. Regaining her composure, she surveyed the room, curious about the place that would be her home for the next month or so. Although the house wasn't overly large, massive beams supporting the walls and roof showed it to be more solidly constructed than it first appeared.

Serving as the parlor, the area where she now sat held two rocking chairs and a smaller table and bench. Pegs and shelves on the honey-colored pine walls displayed a variety of clothing, wood carvings, and assorted knickknacks. Multicolored braided rugs made bright splashes against the dark floorboards.

At the far end, where the old lady scurried about, a huge, nickel-plated cook stove dominated a space containing various cupboards and a long, planked dining table with matching benches.

Even though the room appeared cluttered, it had a homey quality that Beth found comforting.

"Now, dear, while you're gettin' thawed, have a bite of this." The elderly woman placed a dish with a large slab of fragrant gingerbread in Beth's hands. "It'll warm your innards." She then set a steaming mug on the table by her side. "Sassafras tea. Guaranteed to cure whatever ails ye."

"Thank you." Beth smiled, hoping to ease the old woman's anxious expression. "I'm feeling better now." Embarrassed by her loss of control, Beth tried to explain. "I'm so ashamed. I guess I'm just tired from the trip. I'm sorry."

The woman patted her hand. "Nothin' to be sorry about. The first time I saw this place, when I came as a bride sixty-five years ago, I cried like a baby. It ain't changed much since."

Beth held out her hand. "I'm Elizabeth Eastgate."

The old woman extended her own withered, blue-veined hand. "Josephine Winfield. But everybody hereabouts calls me Granny Jo." She tilted her head. "Lizabet. That's a purty name."

Granny Jo turned and motioned to the solemn-faced children who had lined up along the wall. "This here's Sally Mae. She's fourteen."

A tall stringy-haired blond girl stepped forward and gave Beth a shy smile.

"This one is Ruth. She's nine."

Thin as a stick, with pale lemon-colored hair, Ruth wiped a hand across her rain-streaked face and smiled broadly.

Granny ruffled the dark hair of a grinning, snaggle-toothed boy. "Joseph, here, is six."

Beth smiled and greeted each of them in turn.

"You talk funny," Joseph said.

"That's because I came from Chicago," Beth answered. "People from different places talk differently," she explained, feeling herself drawn to the child. Although they didn't look anything alike, he reminded her of Teddy. Thinking of her home, and the small boy she'd left behind, she sadly wondered how Teddy was faring without her.

"The one with no manners is Seth. He's ten. Get yourself over here and say hello to your teacher," Granny Jo instructed.

A skinny boy with dark eyes gave her a reluctant greeting then immediately returned his attention to the piece of wood he was whittling.

"You've met Nate. He's sixteen, but thinks he's growned."

"Since you're doing the honors, Granny Jo, you can introduce me," said a voice entering with a blast of cold air.

Behind her spectacles, Beth warily recognized the man she'd seen earlier on the porch.

"Was ye borned in a barn?" Granny Jo complained.

The man kicked the door closed, then removed his hat and coat and hung them on a peg. Brass-colored hair hung long and shaggy to his collar. He smoothed a lock away from intense blue eyes then ran a tanned hand down his face to wipe the rain from his cheeks and beard. He stepped forward. Dwarfing both the room and its furnishings, he loomed over her, the contempt he felt plainly etched in the rugged lines of his face.

"This is Logan, my oldest grandson," Granny Jo said proudly.

Logan? Logan Winfield! The man who had hired her! Determined not to be put off by his appearance, or his manner, Beth tried to control her trembling as she placed her plate on the table beside her cup. She stood and held out her hand. "I'm Miss Elizabeth Eastgate," she said primly.

Through the rust-colored beard, his lip curled in a cynical smile. His wet hand engulfed hers. "So I gathered." Then, releasing her as if he found her touch distasteful, he crossed his arms. His slate-blue eyes started at the top of her head and roamed to her toes and back again, making her flush with

indignation. "Well, Miss Elizabeth," he drawled in a deep voice. "It appears like you bit off more than you can chew." He raised his callused hand and stroked his whiskered chin. "We'll give you a day or two to rest up, then you can go back to Chicago."

Shocked, Beth stared at him. *Back to Chicago? Just like that? Leave?* After all the hellish torture she'd gone through to get here? *Not likely!*

Her backbone stiffening with outrage, Beth pulled herself rigidly to her full five-foot, one-inch height. "Mr. Winfield, I thought we had an agreement. Six months. A trial period, you called it in your letter. Now, after barely making my acquaintance, you plan to send me packing?" She shook her head, loosening curly, wet tendrils that escaped from the tightly pinned knot and sprouted like corkscrews around her face. "I think not."

The thinning of his lips only made her more determined. "You see, Mr. Winfield, I won't go." Her hands on her hips, she took a step toward him. "I signed your contract. Now I intend to hold you to your word." Ignoring the way his smoke-blue eyes darkened, she took another step.

Glaring up at him, she raised her index finger and jabbed his rock-hard chest. "Six months from now--if I have not performed in a satisfactory manner--you may dismiss me. But not one day before!"

Hearing a gasp, Beth whirled to see the others staring open-mouthed, first at her, then at Logan.

Shocked to her senses, she turned to see his brow wrinkle into a thunderous scowl. Terrified by his

reaction to her outlandish behavior, Beth took a step backward, bumping into Granny Jo in her haste to retreat.

As she watched the tall backwoodsman clench and unclench his fists, Beth's breath caught in her throat. She raised a trembling hand to cover her mouth.

His gleaming eyes probed hers for a long moment, then, without a word, he spun on his heel and slammed out the door.

When the big mountain man left the room, Beth's shaking legs dissolved beneath her. She crumpled into the rocking chair.

"Well, well." Granny Jo stared thoughtfully at the door. Then, she eyed Beth, her wrinkled face splitting in a delighted grin. "Lizabet, I think you'll do just fine."

Chapter 2

The soft beat of rain on the roof woke Beth to a cold gray dawn. She opened her eyes and peered about the sparsely furnished room, confused for a minute, until she remembered where she was. The Winfields'. *Logan Winfield's*. She groaned as the confrontation of the night before came back with shocking clarity. *Fine way to start your new job, Elizabeth.*

She peeped over the edge of the quilts and saw that the bed next to hers was empty. The girls had already risen and were nowhere in sight. The room had no heat and was so cold that just exhaling made a trail of vapor in the air. Reluctant to leave the warmth, Beth snuggled deeper into the feather mattress and gazed toward the window. "Mercy sakes. It's barely daylight. These people must get up before the chickens."

She stretched her legs under the covers, seeking the hot stones that someone had wrapped and placed in the bed the night before. "Brrr!" She jerked her toes away. She'd get more warmth from a chunk of ice.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hall outside. Beth shot a worried look toward the door. Afraid the whole clan would be in before she dressed, she bolted from the bed. Stepping from one colorful rag rug

to another to avoid the icy floorboards, she went to the oak bureau and poured water into the speckled blue enamel basin. Noting the rising steam, she said a silent thanks to whoever had placed warm water in the matching pitcher. After donning her underwear and using her buttonhook to fasten her ankle-high shoes, she scrambled into one of the high-necked, long-sleeved dresses that composed her wardrobe.

Beth eyed the ugly gray garment, secretly wishing she had dared to bring something colorful and pretty to help brighten the dreary day. She immediately dismissed the idea. Remembering Logan Winfield's disapproving scowl, she decided that on this job, the plainer she could make herself, the better.

She freed her braids, then drew a brush through the dark mass of curls, skinning them back from her face in a knot so tight it drew her mouth into a thin line.

Keeping a watchful eye on the door, she unwrapped a piece of charcoal and smudged a bit under each eye, then she opened her jar of rice powder and liberally dusted her naturally rosy cheeks to hide their color. She peered into a mirror fogged with age and nodded. "There. Now for the last." She picked up her gold-rimmed spectacles from the dresser top and perched them on her nose. "Miss Elizabeth Eastgate, I presume," she said to her image in the mirror.

She lifted her nose as if she smelled something distasteful and recalled the words of Logan Winfield's letter. *A schoolteacher of impeccable morals, preferable a man or a sturdy old maid.* "Well, Mr. Winfield," she said, raising a brow at the pale, hollow-eyed vision in the mirror. "I'm neither male

nor old, but because I need this job so badly, I'll be so darned stiff and proper, you'll have to climb a ladder to get my attention."

Muffled giggles sent Beth spinning toward the door. "Uh, good morning, girls," she said, uneasily wondering how long her two roommates had been standing there.

"Mornin', Miss Eastgate," they chimed in unison.

She smiled. "Please, when we are out of the schoolroom, I'd like it better if you would call me Elizabeth, or Beth."

The girls looked at each other. "Elizabeth," they both agreed. "It's such a pretty name, not plain like Ruth," the younger one added.

"I think you have a very pretty name. Did you know Ruth is in the Bible?"

"I know." The little girl sighed. "But it still sounds plain, not like Sally Mae, and that's in the Bible, too."

"Sally Mae?" Beth asked, puzzled.

"It's Salome, but everyone hereabouts calls me Sally Mae," the older girl explained. "Now we'd better go eat before Granny Jo comes to get us."

Beth followed the two girls across the hall and entered the larger room she'd seen the night before. Pulling the door shut, she noted with embarrassment that everyone, including Logan Winfield, was

seated at the table, apparently waiting for her.

The girls slid into their places on the long bench, leaving a spot on the very end for Elizabeth.

She hesitated. Then, determined to hide her discomposure, she took the vacant seat, wishing it had been anywhere but where it was. She adjusted her skirts and banged her left knee into the leg of the tall, bearded man seated at the head of the table. "I'm sorry," she whispered, lifting her gaze to meet his slate-blue eyes. "I'm sure you are," Logan said. Giving her a mocking look, he held out his hand.

When Ruth took her other hand, Beth glanced around the table and realized he was waiting for her to complete the circle for the table blessing.

His callused palm, warm and strong, closed over her icy fingers. He bowed his head, his voice deep and respectful as he asked the Lord's blessing on the bounty before them. Just before he released her, he gave her hand an added squeeze.

Shocked, she raised her lashes and saw him lift his lips in an arrogant smile.

"Now pass the vittles. Miss Eastgate 'pears near starved."

Beth felt her face flame an even brighter red. So much for the rice powder, she thought grimly. At his urging, she was presented with steaming platters of so much food it made her tired just to pass them. All the same, her mouth watered at the sight of thick slices of smoked ham, golden-yoked eggs, saucer-sized biscuits, something he'd called red-eye gravy, and a pitcher filled with thick sorghum molasses.

She approached the feast with the reverence of one who had never had enough to eat, not even on holidays. She blinked back moisture, wishing Teddy could be here to share it with her.

"Something wrong with the food, teacher?"

Startled by Logan's voice, she quickly shook her head. "Oh, no. It's delicious. But you shouldn't have done all of this just for me."

He looked puzzled.

Sally Mae laughed. "We always eat like this. It's a miracle we aren't all as fat as hogs."

Beth's eyes grew wide with wonder as she took in the almost cleaned platters. They always ate like this? The food at this meal alone would be more than they had in a month at the orphanage. Dismayed, she stared at her own plate. Even though she felt stuffed, she'd barely made a dent in her food. She tried to swallow a few more bites, but after a moment, afraid she might get sick if she continued, she reluctantly pushed the plate aside. She raised her head to see Granny Jo watching her. "I'm sorry to waste it. It was truly wonderful."

The old woman gave her a gentle smile. "Child, you are so little the food you did eat will probably keep you for a week. But I'm giving you fair warning," she said, wagging her finger. "I intend to fatten you up. Right now a good puff of wind would blow you clean away."

As if in answer, the wind moaned around the eaves. Across from her Nate chuckled and said the

teacher would be blown back to Chicago if she went outside today.

"I should be so lucky," Logan muttered, just loud enough for her to hear. He rose from the table. Nate joined him and they left to tend the stock.

When Sally and Ruth declined Beth's offer to help with the dishes, she joined Granny Jo, who sat in front of the fire with a huge stack of mending before her. She watched the elderly lady make several unsuccessful attempts to thread her needle. "Please, allow me," Beth said, bending to take the needle into her own hands. She deftly threaded it, then handed it back. "If you have another, maybe I could help."

"Thank you, child. These old eyes ain't what they used to be," the older woman said, glancing up. "Think I need a pair of your spectacles."

Beth prayed she didn't ask to borrow hers. She would have a hard time explaining why they were clear glass.

Accepting another needle and a spool of thread, Beth picked up a shirt that was missing most of its buttons. A few minutes later, buttons attached, she folded the garment and set it aside. Before long, she'd added several more pieces of clothing to her stack.

"Looks like you're an old hand at this," Granny Jo noted as Beth's finished pile began to grow.

"I must have mended a mountain of clothes in my time," Beth said with a laugh. "Some so holey I was hard put to find anything to sew."

"You come from a big family, did you?"

Beth froze at the question. Not knowing what to say, she bent her head to bite off the thread. She was almost grateful when loud footsteps sounded in the hall and Logan and Nate stomped into the room.

Dear Lord, the way her mouth had been running, it's a wonder she hadn't spouted off her whole life history. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being an orphan. Everybody had their burden to bear, but the cruel taunts and jeers still rang in her ears. "Bastard, bastard, all fall down." She added the garment to the pile and reached for another. *A large family? If only you knew, Granny Jo.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Logan go to the stove and pour himself a cup of coffee. Instead of joining Nate at the table, much to her dismay, he strode toward the fireplace.

Beth tucked her head and concentrated on her sewing, but she couldn't help being aware of his presence when he propped one elbow on the mantel, then sipped his steaming brew and stared at her.

Unnerved by his brooding gaze, she jammed the needle into her finger. She started to pop the tip into her mouth, then she saw his mouth twist in a knowing grin. She jerked her hand down and clenched her teeth.

Bravely meeting the challenge she saw in his eyes, she vowed that until she'd achieved her purpose in coming, neither Logan Winfield, nor the devil himself, would make her leave the hollow.

Chapter 3

It was almost a week before the storm blew itself out and a watery sun returned to shine on the knee-deep mud of the barnyard. Gale-force winds the night before had ripped shingles off the barn, leaving the roof full of holes. Logan had moved his bedding from one spot to another, only to find it had leaked there, too. In the wee hours of the morning, he'd given up and gone below to share a stall with one of the mules.

Knowing the respite would not last for long, Logan rose at daybreak so he could get a head start on the work that needed to be done. Since he'd given Nate the job of splitting cedar shingles for the roof, Logan had not only his own chores but Nate's to do as well.

He'd hurriedly replenished the firewood supply, fed and partially milked the two cows before turning them out with their calves. Then he'd fed the horses and the chickens, gathered eggs, and mended harness. Now at midmorning, he tramped to the pigpens and dumped a bucket of spoiled apples into the hog trough.

He chuckled when a dozen squealing piglets scrambled forward to search for the choicest pieces. Disdainfully ignoring her noisy offspring, a mud-speckled white sow waddled to the fence and waited for

her own handout.

"Hello, Rosie." Logan scratched her behind her ear, then deciding it was time to wean the pigs, he lured the sow to another pen and fed her, too.

Finished at last, Logan rolled his shoulders to loosen the kinks and heard his stomach growl. Patting his empty middle, he thought of his missed breakfast. He'd been so busy feeding everything else, he hadn't had time to notice his own hunger. He gazed up the hill and scowled. Even though he hated to admit it, he'd been trying to avoid the teacher.

Since she'd arrived, the place had suddenly grown way too small. He'd never realized that fact until, to make room for the woman, Granny Jo had given up her bed in the girls' room and moved into the room that Joseph and Logan had shared. Because there wasn't anywhere else to sleep, Logan had moved into the barn--with the rest of the jackasses.

He hadn't minded moving to the barn. Quite the opposite. It was the only place he could get any peace. It wasn't bad enough that she'd shown up early, but from the day she'd arrived, she'd them hauling water for something or another. She'd scrubbed and scoured everything in sight till the house was almost as wet inside as the outside had been in the rain. The thing that really irritated him was that the house hadn't been dirty to start with.

"Cleanliness is next to godliness," she'd quoted. If that was the case, the woman should be a saint.

She'd taken so many baths it was no wonder she was little, she'd probably shrunk.

Another thing that made him run for cover was her rules. The woman had rules for everything. And Granny Jo was getting just as bad. "Don't run to the outhouse in your long johns, Logan. You might shock Miss Eastgate," he mimicked. No doubt about it, that four-eyed runt of a schoolmarm was ruining his life.

He cast a disparaging glance toward the sky where a fresh mass of clouds already crowded the fog-shrouded mountain, then he eyed the clothesline where his blankets flapped in the breeze.

___*Wonder if they'll have time to dry before the rain sets in again?* Quickening his step, Logan trudged up the hill, grimacing as the cold, muddy water penetrated his sodden footwear and squished between his half-frozen toes.

He'd stopped to wipe his boots on a clump of weeds before entering the house when a faint scratching sound drew his attention. He looked up to see Nate on all fours at the far end of the dogtrot. Dumbfounded, Logan strode forward. "What are you doin'?"

Nate, in the midst of a pile of soapsuds, gave him a sheepish grin. "Scrubbin'."

Logan's mouth thinned. "Did you get the shakes split?"

"Nope. Granny Jo grabbed me first thing after breakfast and I've been scrubbin' ever since."

As he reflected on the state of the barn and his wet bedding, Logan's temper ignited. "To hell with

the dogtrot!" he roared. "Get those shingles done."

Nate flashed Logan a startled look, then dropped the brush and bolted toward the barn.

Realizing there was no way he could get the roof done before it rained again, Logan was in a mood as black as the clouds overhead when he stepped inside the kitchen. He'd made it halfway to the stove when an outraged screech froze him in his tracks.

Behind a quilt strung across the tops of two ladder-backed chairs to shield her from the rest of the room, Sally Mae sat up to her chin in a washtub full of soap bubbles. "Mercy sakes, Logan," she cried. "Can't you see I'm taking a bath?"

On Thursday? His face flaming, Logan quickly turned away. "Well, I ain't gonna peek. I wanted to get something to eat, but since you and your bathtub are taking up the whole kitchen, I guess I can forget about that."

Thinking he could make do with a chunk of bread and a cup of coffee, he scanned the top of the cabinet for his battered enameled cup. It wasn't there. In fact, nothing was there. The surface gleamed bright--and bare--as a new dollar. "Where in the devil did everything go?" He twisted toward the cupboard only to hear his sister shriek before she dived beneath the water.

"Logan, git out of here!" Granny Jo charged, brandishing her broom like an avenging angel. She halted in midstride and sucked in a deep breath. She pointed a rigid finger at his feet. "Logan Winfield,

look what you've done to my clean floor!"

Peering down at his muddy footprints, Logan heard a swish of air then the broom slammed across his shoulders. "Ow!" Astonished, he gaped at his grandmother. She hadn't swatted him like that since he was ten years old.

"You smell like a hog pen." Her blue eyes snapping, she drew back for another swing.

"All right, dammit. I'm going," Logan shouted, raising his hand to shield his head as he dodged the stiff broom.

"And watch your language. We have a *lady* present," the old termagant scolded.

"Lady, hell!" Striding toward the door, Logan shot a murderous glare toward the parlor.

Spotless and prim, Miss Eastgate sat in her rocking chair before the fire. Opposite her, equally scrubbed and groomed, Joseph, Ruth, and Seth were studying their lessons. Seth, his face mirroring his misery, gave Logan a pitiful look before returning to his book.

Her face wreathed in disgust, Miss Eastgate peered over her glasses. After giving him a sour look, she addressed her charges. "You may continue, children."

"Rule number two," they chimed in unison. "Carefully avoid everything that is repulsive, even to the most sensitive, either in manner or conduct. Be neat in your person."

"Very good. Remember children, a slovenly appearance degrades a man in the sight of the world. A

man is fearfully mistaken if he imagines that any strength of mind, or variety of attainments, will excuse vulgarity, rudeness, or dirt." As if to emphasize her point, she looked at Logan.

Feeling like a tail-kicked mongrel pup, Logan slammed out the door and stomped down the steps. His empty stomach growled resentfully. "Damn that woman! Can't eat in my own house. Can't sleep in my own house." He cursed again. "Blasted female!" She looked at him like he was some kind of varmint that had crawled out from under a rock.

For Granny Jo and the children's sake, he'd tried to be polite and make the best of things, but everything about the woman riled him. She reminded him of a fledgling crow, all dressed in black, so stiff and proper, with those glasses and her hair all skinned back. She wore the necks of her dresses so high you could hardly see her chin, let alone anything else. "Not that anybody would want to look," he yelled back at the house.

"Be neat in your person," he mocked. Recalling the misery on Seth's face, Logan shook his head. It was a battle to get that child into the tub anytime. So far the boy had two baths this week. "Wonder the younguns got any hide left."

Thinking of baths, Logan looked down at his own grimy state. What he wouldn't give for a hot soak. But with everybody else hogging the tub, he'd be lucky if he got a chance once a month. "Danged highfalutin, citified female," he muttered. "Lord, preserve us from a little honest dirt." He bristled as he

remembered how Granny Jo had taken the broom to him. His own granny said he smelled.

What did she expect? He'd just slopped the hogs. Nobody ever complained before. Scowling, he brushed a splotch of dried apple swill off his sleeve and headed for the barn.

After retrieving his draw blade and ax, Logan paused to glower at the house before viciously attacking the cedar rounds he'd cut for the roof. Picturing Miss Eastgate sitting in front of the fire all clean and fed and warm, he did a slow simmer. "You might think you've won this round," he muttered. "But, missy, the battle isn't over yet. Not by a long shot!"

After Logan left the house, Elizabeth dismissed the children and retired to her room to mend a small rip in the hem of her dress. When she'd finished, she eyed the drab garment with disgust. If she ever had a choice again, she'd never wear gray, or brown or black. But then, knowing the animosity Logan Winfield had for her, even if she had anything different, she wouldn't dare wear it.

She'd had such high hopes last year when Hannah Parker, her longtime friend and teacher, found Beth a position as governess. But Beth had been fired only two days later after she'd stopped the master of the house from taking liberties by hitting him with a vase. Another position as a housemaid ended much the same way. Even if she hadn't suffered bad experiences on her own, she had learned enough

about the perfidy of men from Tess to know she wanted no part of them.

Dear Tess. Two years older but just as naive when it came to the opposite sex. Tess, too, had taken a job as housemaid, but she had fallen in love with a male friend of the family she'd worked for. She'd been so positive he loved her, so certain he wanted to marry her, that she yielded to his demands. When she found out otherwise, it had been too late.

Beth wiped at a stray tear, remembering that fateful night when they had slipped out of the orphanage and gone to meet with Tess's young man. Beth had hidden in the shadows and waited.

Instead of the joy Tess had expected upon telling him that they were going to have a child, the man had screamed at her and called her vile names.

"But what of your child?" Tess pleaded.

"Another man's bastard, not mine."

"No. The babe is yours," Tess protested. She clutched his sleeve. "You were the only one..."

He shoved her away. "You orphan girls are all alike, spread your legs for any bloke that walks by and then expect me to pay the price? You must think me a fool."

Tess, her blond hair tangled about her face, lay crumpled on the ground. The man removed his handkerchief and leaned toward her. For a moment Beth thought he might be suffering remorse, then she saw him wipe his jacket sleeve where Tess had touched it. He grimaced, then tossed the kerchief away.

She heard him say, "As for the child--when it's born, drown it--like any other mongrel." He'd turned on his heel and disappeared into the darkness.

Appalled by the man's behavior, Beth had helped Tess back to the orphanage. Barely six months later the child had been born, but the ordeal had been too much for Tess's frail body. After making Beth promise to look after the baby, Tess had died.

From the moment Beth had held the tiny fair-haired boy, he'd become her own. She'd fed Teddy when he was hungry, changed and washed him when he was wet or dirty, and nursed him through childhood illnesses. He called her Mama.

But his real mother would have never let Teddy get hurt, she thought bitterly. He had been struck by a carriage when a toddler, and his leg hadn't healed properly. Now, at five, he needed an operation. She had to raise the money. That's why this job was so important. Why she'd left the only home she'd ever known and traveled to, what seemed to her, the far ends of the earth, even though it had killed her to leave the little boy behind.

Devil's Hollow wasn't the sort of place she would have preferred, but with her lack of experience the job had been the answer to a prayer. Beth had always strived to maintain the highest moral character, but being branded an orphan ranked her with the lowest dregs of society. She couldn't afford the slightest hint of scandal. If the Winfields or anyone found out about her background...She sucked in a breath.

She tucked a strand of curly black hair into the knot, then put on her haughtiest face and observed herself in the mirror. There. *Sour as a green persimmon*. At least here she wouldn't have to worry about being seduced, she thought wryly. The only males she'd met so far that were big enough to give her any trouble were Nate, who was so shy he fell over his own feet every time he happened to catch her eye, and Logan, who had detested her on first sight.

Thinking of Logan, she glanced through the window and caught sight of the tall, bearded man who chopped wood by the barn. Well, she thought smugly, he'd done his worst and she wasn't gone yet, nor did she intend to go.

As if sensing her eyes on him, Logan straightened and turned toward the house. Realizing he could see her, she quickly stepped away from the window.

Even though she was certain she could handle anything Mr. Winfield could dish out, she uneasily remembered the dark look in his blue eyes when he'd left the room. The look that promised he wasn't finished with her yet.

The next storm passed with barely more than a shower. With the barn roof fixed and his other work caught up, Logan had tramped into the hills to the valley where he'd set his traps.

He'd found most of the snares empty. After he'd skinned the last of three otters and added the pelts to those of two, dark-furred beavers, he paused a moment to gaze down the hill.

Only a slender edge of ice remained along the bank of the stream. Sign of an early spring. Soon the animals would start shedding their winter coats. That would end his trapping.

He scowled. If that blasted schoolmarm hadn't shown up early...But she was here and his responsibility for a whole month longer than he'd planned. You'd think she could tell January from February. Maybe she couldn't read. He shook his head. Remembering her rule book, he knew better than that.

She didn't look like a schoolteacher. In his opinion a good teacher ought to be old and homely. She was plain enough but she was so little that most of the kids were bigger than her. She'd never be able to handle the bigger boys. Besides that, she was much too young.

Logan buried the carcasses. Since his gloves were full of holes, he had to use his bare hands to sprinkle a few drops of musky beaver scent over the area. Satisfied he'd left no trace of his presence, he gathered the furs and began the ten-mile trek up the draw and over the ridge to his home.

On the hill above the homestead, he paused to watch the last rays of sunlight slink into the forested hillside, leaving the meadows cloaked in an ever-deepening purple haze. Taking a moment to enjoy the serenity, he traced a thin line of smoke as it spiraled up from the chimney and dissolved into the twilight

sky. *Suppertime.* His belly growled in response to his thoughts. He could already taste a bowl of the savory rabbit stew he'd seen Granny Jo preparing early that morning. His mouth watering with anticipation, he hurried down the hill.

Logan deposited the skins on a table in the barn and headed for the house. When he raised a finger and rubbed the side of his nose, he grimaced and jerked his hand away. "Whew! I smell worse than a polecat." He stopped at the pump and drew water to wash even though he knew nothing would remove the potent scent.

Ruefully gazing at the lantern lit window, he curled his lip in resentment. Granny probably wouldn't let him in the kitchen. The teacher, with that stuck up nose of hers, would more than likely faint. *Might be a good way to get rid of her.*

When his stomach rumbled, he glared at the house. Dammit! A man had to eat and right now he was hungry enough to eat a mule--hide, ears, and all.

His chin set, he stomped up the steps and entered the dogtrot. After booting a couple of cats out of the doorway, he marched into the kitchen.

"Logan," Ruth squealed, running toward him. She stopped in midstride and grabbed her nose.

Granny Jo turned away from the stove and made a face. She peered up at him. "Logan Winfield, what have you been into?" Catching another whiff, she shuddered. "Mercy, what a stink!"

Miss Eastgate looked up from the table she'd been setting. Covering her nose, she quickly stepped to the far side of the room, placing herself as far away from him as possible.

A slow flush crept up Logan's body. Feeling about as popular as a skunk at a prayer meeting, he stalked toward the door. He jerked it open, then paused to glance across the room. When he caught the smug smile on the teacher's face, his blood rose to a quick boil. No, by God! This time she wouldn't get away with it. He slammed the door with such force it rattled the windows.

All eyes in the room widened in shocked surprise.

Logan crossed his arms across his chest and met each in turn. "I'm not leaving! This is *my* house! I work hard all day and *I* put the food on this table." His eyes locked on the teacher's. "Anybody that doesn't like the way I smell can either hold their nose or do without. Now, dammit, I'm hungry. Let's eat." Logan strode to the table and took his seat.

Not another word was said. Granny Jo hastily set the food on the table. Miss Eastgate and the others slid into their places.

Logan thought the teacher looked a little paler than usual when he took her hand for the blessing, but even though he'd watched her all through the meal, she didn't even once wrinkle her nose. But while she hadn't said a word, the gleam in her eye and the determined set of her chin told him the only thing he'd won was a hot meal.

Later, heading for the barn, he remembered that first night when she'd poked him in the chest and told him she didn't intend to leave. Apparently she'd meant it, because since then she'd taken over his house, his family, and generally made his life a misery. He didn't intend to stand for any more. He'd had enough.

She'd pushed him to the wall and now he intended to push back. One thing he knew for certain, the place wasn't big enough for the both of them.

One of them had to go--and it wasn't going to be him!

Chapter 4

After helping the children with their studies, Elizabeth could see she had her work cut out for her. Since there had been no school in Devil's Hollow for more than a year, each of the children was at least one grade behind. As their teacher, Beth decided to start with basics and go from there.

Kneeling by her trunk, which Nate had brought by muleback from the Lathams', she flipped the latches and lifted the lid. When she reached inside to retrieve her tablet and pencils, a disagreeable odor assailed her nostrils. Sniffing, she stared about the room. Her gaze stopped on the covered chamber pot. Sally Mae must have forgotten to empty it, she thought. Guiltily remembering that she hadn't taken a turn since her arrival, Beth got to her feet. Holding her breath against the pungent smell, she hoisted the pot by its bale and carried it from the room.

She carefully negotiated the front steps, then hearing footsteps crunching in the gravel, she glanced up to see Logan headed for the house. "Wouldn't you know it?" she muttered under her breath.

She hesitated. Should she retreat to her room? No, he'd already seen her. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Maybe she could beat him through the gate. Hiding the container next to her skirt, she quickened her step, hoping to avoid an embarrassing confrontation. But she hadn't counted on the length

of his stride. Disconcerted to see him directly in front of her, she stumbled. The lid clinked against the rim.

"Having a problem, Miss Eastgate?" he drawled.

"Nothing I can't handle, Mr. Winfield." Mortified, her face flaming, she dodged around him and ran toward the privy.

Grinning, Logan leaned against the porch post and watched her disappear inside the outhouse. "I'll bet she's never done that particular chore before."

He'd straightened to enter the house when a glimmer of movement behind the convenience caught his eye. *Seth*. Curious, Logan watched. "Now what is that boy up to?"

Logan grinned when Seth crept forward and turned the latch on the outhouse door. "Wonder how she's going to *handle* that little situation?"

An outraged shriek exploded from the building. Muffled pounding came from inside the walls. "Help! Let me out!"

Off to one side, Seth convulsed with laughter. After a while, when all grew quiet, he ran off toward the barn.

"Guess I'd ought to let her out." Logan started down the steps, then he stopped. Damned if he would. A vengeful smile crossed his face. No. He'd leave her right where she was. Shooting one last

gleeful look at the privy, Logan left the porch and went into the house.

It had been hours before Ruth, answering the call of nature, had found Beth and freed her from her odorous confinement. Although no one had admitted locking her in, Beth knew it had been no accident. Remembering the mocking look on Logan's face, she wouldn't put it past him.

Elizabeth touched a light scent to her collarbone and ears. It was impossible after all the scrubbing she'd done, but she still imagined she smelled of the outhouse. She checked her appearance again, then went to join the others for supper.

Beth entered the kitchen and saw Logan already at the table.

"Evenin', Miss Eastgate." He looked up and gave her a knowing grin.

Fixing him with an icy stare, she sat down at her place.

He wrinkled his nose. "Is that some new kind of perfume you're wearin'?"

Ignoring Seth's giggle, she replied tersely, "No, it isn't."

"Did you hear what happened, Logan?" Ruth asked innocently.

"No, tell me," he said, his eyes never leaving Beth.

He knows all right. Beth gritted her teeth. *He probably did it.*

"Poor Miss Eastgate got locked in the privy," Ruth said solemnly. "She was there most the whole

day."

"Well, now, ain't that a shame," he said in a tone that told her he wasn't in the least bit sorry. To her mortification, he leaned closer and sniffed. "Yep, that explains it."

"Oh!" Maybe it wasn't her imagination. Maybe she did still smell. "Excuse me, I--I'm not feeling well." Fleeing from his delighted grin, she bolted from the room.

After scrubbing herself from head to foot for the second time, Elizabeth donned her nightclothes and sat down on the bed. Her skin was red and tingled from the coarse cloth and strong soap, but at least she was positive she didn't stink. For that matter, she probably hadn't smelled before either.

Remembering the pleased look on Logan's face, she clenched her fists. Why had she let him get the best of her? That was the second time today he'd seen her run like a scared rabbit. Well, Mr. Winfield, I certainly won't give you the satisfaction again, she vowed.

Sally Mae entered the room, a covered plate of food in her hands. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Thank you." Beth uncovered her supper and took a bite. "I feel so silly."

"Seth did it, you know. He's locked me in more than once," Sally Mae said with a grin. "Granny Jo told him to apologize."

"Seth?" Beth said. "I thought it might have been Logan."

The blond girl's eyes widened. "Logan? Oh, no. He gets grumpy, but he would never do anything like that."

"He certainly doesn't like me. He's made that clear."

"It isn't just you." Sally Mae frowned and sat down on the bed. "Nowadays Logan doesn't take to many people. He didn't used to be like that. When he was married to Annie, he was so happy. He always whistled and sang. You could hear him all over the mountain." She gave Beth a solemn look. "The war changed him. I guess it changed all of us."

"I didn't know he'd been married," Beth said. "Where is his wife?" She sat her empty plate aside.

"Yankee raiders killed her, along with Ma and Pa. Logan purt near went crazy. He's never been the same since."

Beth had heard about the war and seen soldiers in their blue uniforms many times in the city. But Chicago had been so far removed the battles that somehow it hadn't seemed real. Now to realize how that conflict had affected lives, changed personalities left her shaken.

She went to the window and parted the curtain to stare out at the night. She thought of Logan, of the tragedy in his life and the hard existence he had here on the mountain. She'd seen the weariness in his face, noticed the calluses on his hands.

Stricken with guilt for the way she'd been behaving, she made a resolution to be more tolerant. It wouldn't be easy. She didn't know why, but the man seemed to bring out the worst in her.

"Elizabeth," Sally Mae said softly. "Don't tell Logan I mentioned it. He wouldn't like me telling his business."

"I won't say a word." Beth turned from the window and smiled to relieve the somber mood. "I understand you have a birthday coming up. I remember when I was fifteen. I finally got to put my hair up and had my first floor-length dress. It was an exciting time."

"Could you show me how to fix my hair?" Sally Mae asked eagerly. She held out a stringy lock. "Every time I try, it looks like a pack rat's nest."

Beth nodded. "Sit down here and let's see what we can do." After experimenting with half a dozen hairstyles, Beth brushed the girl's hair and braided it for bedtime. "This keeps it from getting so tangled at night."

Noticing that Ruth had entered the room and was quietly watching, Beth opened her bag and removed two ribbons, one moss green and the other robin's-egg blue. She snipped each in half and tied the green ones on Sally Mae's braids. "There."

"Thank you!" Her face shining with happiness, Sally Mae gave Beth a kiss on the cheek then darted to the mirror.

Ruth gave her a hopeful look.

"Would you like for me to braid yours, too?" Beth asked.

Ruth's freckled face split in an ear-to-ear grin.

When the child had settled on the floor in front of her, Beth lifted the hairbrush and drew it through the pale gold hair, carefully removing the snarls until it lay smooth and shining, the color of new corn silk, against the girl's head. Beth then fashioned the locks into twin braids and tied each with a length of the blue ribbon. "There, you're done."

"Thank you, Elizabeth." Ruth turned with a bright smile and gave her a hug. "I'm so glad you came early. Now we'll have lots of time to spend together before school starts."

Elizabeth frowned. "Early?"

Ruth nodded. "That's one reason Logan's so upset." She glanced at her sister. "But we're glad, ain't we?"

"Aren't we," Beth corrected.

Sally Mae preened before the mirror, admiring her own neat braids and bows. "I wish you'd been two months early."

Two months early? Beth arched a brow. Had she made a mistake? She removed the letter from her handbag and carefully unfolded the tattered pages. She peered at the writing. A faded blob of ink

smear the date. ...uary. Dismayed, she stared at the page. *Not January. February!* A whole month too soon. A month she'd neither been expected--nor wanted.

A month she could have spent with Teddy. Concern for the little boy tightened her insides. Had his pain grown worse? How was he managing with her not there to comfort him?

Reflecting on the sullen-faced man in the barn, she sighed and bit her lip. She hoped Teddy was dealing with her absence better than Logan Winfield was handling her presence.

The next morning Beth watched Logan from her window. As he labored bright rays of sunlight caught in his golden hair. Her mouth thinned into a grim line. Even though she resented his attitude, she had to give him his due. She'd never seen anyone work harder.

He rose at dawn to tend the stock, mend fences, chop wood, and hunt meat for the table. With all the mouths he had to feed, she could hardly blame him for not welcoming one more. But drat it, he could have said something. He didn't need to act like she'd come early just to plague him. Aware of the growing animosity between them, she knew she couldn't allow things to get any worse. She and Logan Winfield had to talk.

She checked her spinsterish image in the mirror and adjusted her spectacles. Praying the right words

would come to her, she left the house and headed down the hill.

Enjoying the heat of the warm sun on her back, she walked briskly toward the small pasture where Logan busily chopped an uprooted oak into firewood. Reluctant to disturb him, she stood quietly for a moment and gathered her courage.

She watched him, marveling at the way his shoulder muscles bunched and rippled under the worn blue work shirt as he raised the ax and drove it deep into the wood, splitting the thick rounds as easily as slicing fresh baked bread.

As she took in the long, rangy length of him, in spite of herself her pulse quickened. Even though he had the disposition of a wounded bear, she had to admit, with his narrow waist, trim hips, and his lanky legs spread in a wide stance, he presented a picture of magnificent, rugged masculinity and seemed as much a part of the land as the hills and trees surrounding them.

Detecting her presence, he turned. "Mornin', Miss Eastgate," he drawled, his tone coldly polite.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, she nervously clasped her hands in front of her. "M-Mr. Winfield, I need to talk to you."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?" His mouth curved into a crooked smile. "Let me guess." He leaned on the ax handle. "You've had enough. You decided I was right, and now you're ready to go home."

"No! You aren't right, and I have no intention of leaving."

"Then I can't see that we have anything to talk about." He turned away from her and lifted the ax.

"Good day to you, too, Mr. Winfield." Furious at his curt dismissal, she spun on her heel and stalked toward the house. Halfway there she halted. No! Whether he liked it or not, they were going to talk.

Determined, she reversed her direction and returned to the woodlot. She stepped close behind him and raised her hand intending to tap him on the arm.

Furious at the woman's stubbornness, Logan swung the ax over his shoulder to begin his forward drive. "Ohhh!"

Eyes widening, Logan froze. He dropped the blade and whirled. "My God! I thought you'd gone."

He fell to his knees and reached an unsteady hand toward the white-faced woman on the ground. "Miss Eastgate, are you cut? Where did I hit you?"

Big dark eyes stared through the gold-rimmed glasses. "I don't think I'm bleeding," she said shakily. "It only grazed my shoulder."

His face somber, Logan brushed aside her fluttering hands and swiftly unbuttoned her dress.

"Mr. Winfield!"

"Hold still! I've got to see how badly you're hurt." Ignoring her protests, Logan parted the garment

and yanked it down to uncover her right shoulder. He gently probed the delicate bone structure and the reddened, already swelling flesh. "Nothing broken," he said, letting out a deep relieved sigh. He traced the outline of a beginning bruise with his fingertips, hating that anything, especially his own action, had marred the milky whiteness of her skin.

When he felt her tremble, he raised his head to meet half-closed eyes the velvety deep color of woodland violets. A sensation, sharp, sweet, and long-forgotten, jolted through him.

When he heard her suck in a quick breath, he knew she felt it too.

"M-Mr. W-Winfield?"

"Yes?" he said. Unable to help himself, he allowed his fingers to slowly retrace the path down the slender column of her shoulder.

"C-can I get dressed now?" she asked, her face growing rosy.

Reminded of where he was and what he was doing, Logan jerked his hand away. Too unnerved to answer, he cleared his throat and got to his feet. He knew he should turn away, but could not.

After examining the injury, she drew the dress up, covering her shoulder, but at the same time, unknowingly exposing a good portion of her lacy chemise.

Finding it hard to breathe, Loan fought the desire that coursed like a raging fever through his body. Angry at himself for gawking like a green kid at his first glimpse of woman-flesh, he gritted his teeth and

closed his eyes, praying that by the time he opened them again she would have the pale tops of her small, melon-shaped breasts hidden from his view.

"M-Mr. Winfield?"

Logan raised his lashes, relieved to see her, all buttoned and prim as ever, standing before him.

"Please. Can we talk now?"

Observing the decisive tilt of her small chin where it rose above the high ruffled collar, he sighed. "Well, I guess I have no choice, if I don't want to end up accidently killing you. Have a seat." He motioned toward a pair of unsplit rounds. "Now what's so all-fired important that you'd run under an ax blade to get it said?"

"I want to apologize," she said softly.

"What?" He raised a brow, doubting if he'd heard correctly.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"You should be. You damned near got yourself killed."

"Not that. I'm sorry because I came a month early. The ink on the letter was smeared. I thought it said January." She chewed on her quivering lower lip. "I know you don't want me here, but for reasons of my own, I have to stay."

She got to her feet. "I'll do my best not to be a bother, Mr. Winfield. And, in spite of what you

think, I will be a good teacher," she finished solemnly.

"Call me Logan," he said, suddenly ashamed of the way he'd been treating her.

"What?"

"No more Mr. Winfield. My name's Logan." He motioned to her shoulder. "And I'm sorry as hell about that. When you get to the house, have Granny Jo fix a comfrey poultice for your arm. It will help relieve the pain and swelling."

She gave him a dazzling smile. "All right, Mr.--Logan."

"Is that all, Miss Eastgate?"

"Elizabeth. My name is Elizabeth," she said. "Yes, Logan. For now, that is all."

"That's enough, Elizabeth," Logan said to himself observing the swing of her trim hips as she walked toward the house. His pulse quickened as he remembered what he had seen and imagined the rest of the soft womanly curves hidden beneath that compact, almost too neat package. How her eyes had sparkled when she smiled. Why, if a body could overlook the glasses and the hairdo, she could almost be pretty.

Cursing, he shoved the vision from his mind, wishing he hadn't noticed. In his situation, the last thing he needed was to get involved with a woman. After shooting one last uneasy glance in her direction, he picked up the ax and returned his attention to the woodpile.

Chapter 5

A week had passed since Elizabeth made her apology, and although she counted her blessings at not having to see Logan's scowling face, the knowledge that he still avoided her made the situation even worse.

When they received her letter from Chicago stating the date of her arrival, she now realized the Winfields had been too polite to write her not to come. And even though Granny Jo and the children did everything possible to make her feel at home, Beth felt obligated to earn her keep.

She insisted on doing the washing and ironing and the mending that had stacked up when Granny Jo suffered bouts of rheumatism. She also helped the elderly lady in the kitchen, along with Sally Mae and Ruth, who usually cleaned the floors and did the dishes. Tonight, because of a restlessness she couldn't shake, she'd shooed the girls away and done the dishes by herself. It was a relief to keep busy. That way she didn't have time to brood about her predicament--or Logan Winfield.

She rubbed her shoulder where only a slight discoloration remained and her thoughts drifted back to the day he'd struck her with the ax. Too well she remembered the touch of his fingers on her skin and the delicious, breathtaking shivers they'd sent up her spine. Maybe he'd felt something, too, she thought,

recalling how he'd jerked his hand away. She perversely wondered what would have happened if she hadn't spoken. Would he have kissed her? Shocked by her thoughts, she grabbed up a plate and scrubbed it with a vengeance.

The dishrag slowed. She'd never been kissed. After Tess's experience, she had regarded anything in pants with apprehension. Her own dealings with men had not been pleasant.

But Logan Winfield hadn't made any advances. Far from it. On his good days he was barely civil. He was too big, she mused. And what she could see of his face under the bushy beard was too rugged to be called handsome. He certainly was no gentleman. His manners were as rough and callused as his hands. Maybe it was her inexperience. She could think of no other reason why just being around the man put her in a state of confusion.

The vision of him wielding the ax flashed before her. The brawny strength of his arms, the lithe gracefulness of his body, the way the sun turned his hair to burnished gold. What was there about him that called to something deep within her, making her want to comfort the man hidden beneath the thick beard? Was it the shadows in his steel-blue eyes? The mysterious wariness he always exhibited in her presence? The cynical bitterness? She wished she knew.

She placed the last of the dishes on the cabinet and covered them with a cloth to drain. After removing her apron, she joined the family, who, with the exception of Logan, had gathered in front of

the fire as they did every night after supper. Settling into the rocking chair opposite Granny Jo, Beth smiled at six-year-old Joseph. He climbed into her lap, where he would stay until his grandmother told him to go to bed.

At the table, Nate and Seth huddled together, both engrossed in the bobwhite quail that Seth painstakingly carved. Seated on a bright braided rug to her left, a giggling Ruth brushed Sally Mae's hair into one outlandish style after another. Granny Jo, watching the youngsters, rocked and hummed to herself.

Feeling the closeness of this special time, Beth realized how much she'd been denied in not having a family. As she smoothed Joseph's dark hair out of his eyes, she thought of Teddy and was grateful that Hannah had promised to spend as much time with him as possible. She had a stack of letters ready to mail, but since the Winfields neither traveled to Devil's Hollow nor had any visitors, it would probably be the start of school before she could post them.

Her hairstyling finished, Ruth crept closer to the fire. "Granny Jo, tell us a story of the olden days."

The elderly lady smiled. "Lawdy mercy, child. A body would think you'd be tired of hearing them old tales by now."

"I never get tired of them." Ruth turned to Beth. "'Sides, Elizabeth likes them, too."

Beth leaned forward. "Please, I'd love to hear them." Beth found herself captivated by tales of

Granny Jo's girlhood and other stories of the time when the young Josephine Winfield had come as a bride to live with her husband, Joshua, in the mountains. She listened, fascinated, when the old lady's voice grew soft and wistful as she shared her memories of special places on the homestead.

When she finished, Granny Jo sat silent for a moment as if reliving that time. Finally she looked up to see everyone watching her. "Now that's enough of that," the old lady said, wiping her moist eyes. She clapped her hands. "I'm in the mood for some music. Sally Mae, hand me my zither." When Sally Mae carefully placed the instrument on her grandmother's lap, Granny Jo played several sprightly tunes.

Beth could tell by the way she handled it that the zither, a wedding present from her husband, had been a great source of pleasure to the elderly woman. Beth, thinking the musical instrument sounded like a miniature harp, watched intently as the gnarled fingers deftly plucked the strings.

After a while Granny Jo stopped playing and motioned for Joseph to get down from Beth's lap. When the child had settled on the hearth at her feet, she placed the flat, boxlike instrument on Beth's lap. "Now, Lizabet, you give it a try."

"Me?" Beth shook her head. "I don't know how."

"I'll show you."

Under Granny Jo 's tutelage, Beth picked at a multitude of strings with the fingers of both hands. When she finally managed to play a tune she recognized as "Annie Laurie," everyone clapped their

encouragement. "Now it's someone else's turn," she said, handing the zither back to Granny Jo.

Nate placed the zither in its case on the top shelf out of harm's way, then picked up his guitar from the corner. He pulled a chair close to where Sally Mae sat on the floor. He strummed a few cords. "Your turn," he said to his sister.

With Nate accompanying her, Sally Mae sang old hill ballads, her clear, sweet voice emotional as she retold tale after tale of unrequited love. When Nate and Sally Mae finished their repertoire and all began to sing the old hymns, Beth shyly joined them. Sitting in front of the fire and singing with the family, she had a special sense of belonging and a unique comprehension of how the Winfield history passed from generation to generation through the shared stories and songs.

Even though their own memories wouldn't be as pleasant, she hoped to provide a home like this someday for herself and Teddy.

As the last strains of "Church in the Wildwood" faded, Ruth glanced at the door. "It's too bad Logan won't come in and sing with us. He has a real nice voice." Beth felt a twinge of guilt, knowing it was her presence that kept him away.

When the musical session ended, Beth read *Daniel Boone, the Story of a Mountain Man* to Joseph until he fell asleep. After blowing out the lamp, Nate lifted Joseph and carted him off to bed. Preoccupied by her own thoughts, Beth hardly noticed when the others quietly filed out of the room.

Warm and comfortable in front of the crackling fire, Beth rocked and nodded, mesmerized by the flickering red-and-orange flames. Before long, exhaustion overcame her, the rocker stilled and her lashes closed in sleep.

"Logan," Ruth cried in delight.

"Howdy, you all. Thought I'd join the festivities for a change." Logan crossed between the lamplight and the fireplace, casting a long wavering shadow on the parlor wall.

Beth shifted uneasily in her chair. Her breathing raced into double time when he sat down on the large log that served as a footrest and leaned back against the rock-fronted chimney.

She tried to ignore him, but the strong smell of soap mixed with his own clean masculine scent wrapped around her senses. She sneaked a peek, and her eyes widened. Gazing back was the handsomest man she'd ever seen.

"Hello, teacher," was all he'd said, but the rich huskiness of his voice reached inside, plucking her senses like a master's hand on a fine instrument.

"Hel-lo," she stammered when she could breathe again. His hair, neatly trimmed and combed, shone deep polished gold in the firelight. Long, sooty lashes lowered seductively over shining smoke-blue

eyes. The soft light played on his face, exposing dimples on clean shaven cheeks. His jaw was strong and long; his nose straight and finely sculptured. Above a square stubborn chin, his mouth curved in a twisted smile, exposing white even teeth. "Do I pass inspection?" he drawled.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, tucking her head. A rush of heat told her she blushed pink from her toes to the roots of her hair.

He chuckled.

"Aren't you going to finish the story, Elizabeth?" Ruth asked, from somewhere nearby.

"Of course, if you want me to." Flustered, Beth opened the book, hoping she could remember her place. *What must he think of me, gawking at him like that?* Using the bright firelight to see the words, she nervously turned the pages, making her way through the story without having the faintest notion of what she'd read. Even though she hadn't looked up, she was startlingly aware of only one thing, the amused blue eyes that never left her. "The end," she said a bit breathlessly.

Silence made her raise her head. Why was everyone looking at her so strangely?

Her eyes dancing, Granny Jo stilled her rocker and got to her feet. "Ruthie, time you went to bed. Sally Mae, you, too."

Giggling, the two girls called out good night and followed their grandmother from the room.

"G'night, you all," Nate drawled, taking the old lady's cue. "Come on, sprout," he said to Seth,

herding him toward the dogtrot.

Before he exited, Seth paused and flashed her an indignant look. "I never heard of Daniel Boone a-kissin' no forty Injuns."

Beth's eyes widened. *Kissing Indians?* Bending over the book, she thumbed back through the pages. *Boone claimed he killed forty Indians before they gave up.* Her mouth open, she raised her head. Her horrified gaze met Logan's. "I didn't."

Grinning broadly, he nodded.

"My stars!" Aghast, she stared at the book as if it would bite. "What must they think of me?"

"Don't fret, teacher," Logan said lazily. "Everybody's mind wanders occasionally. Yours was just in a little more interesting territory than most."

"I think I'd better go to bed," she said, jumping to her feet. She placed the book on the mantle and whirled, ready to run out the door.

Logan reached out and grabbed her arm. "I wouldn't just yet," he said softly.

His warm breath tickled the fine hairs beside her ear, making her shiver.

"Ruthie and Sally Mae will be full of questions. Give them a little time to get to sleep," he suggested.

Too aware of the masculine form standing so near, she brushed his hand off and turned away. She

tugged at the high neckline of her black dress. "It's very hot in here."

"My thoughts exactly. Let's take a walk. I want to show you something."

Before she could protest, she found herself wrapped in a shawl and led like a child from the house.

Outside, a full moon lit the landscape, making it almost like day. The night was windless, with only the hooting of an owl to break the silence.

Afraid of falling prey to its magical spell, she gulped a mass of cool air, hoping it would clear her mind. It only made her more aware of the tall man at her side. Realizing he still held her hand, she tried to pull it away.

He wouldn't let go. "Come on. It's only a little ways farther."

"What is?"

"The lookout. That's what I wanted you to see."

"At night?" she protested, stumbling along beside him.

"That's the best time. Watch out for the path. It's a little uneven in spots." He led her up a steep trail that ended at a flagstone-covered terrace. There beneath an arbor of trees sat a rock bench just big enough for two. Leading her past the romantic niche, Logan gripped her shoulders and turned her toward the valley. "Now, wasn't the climb worth it?"

"Oh," she cried in wonder. The moon silvered the light coat of frost on the trees and mountains,

making them mystical, fairylike. Water rushed and gurgled, splashing somewhere near. "It's wonderful," she whispered, clapping her hands in delight. The sound repeated itself time and time again, resounding over the canyon.

"Hear the echo?" Logan asked. "The kids play up here just to hear the sound of their own voices. My grandfather built the lookout for Granny Jo when she came here as a bride," he said softly, his breath warm and caressing on her cheek. "It's her favorite place."

His hands still on her shoulders, he eased his fingers beneath the lace collar. In a slow circular motion, he massaged the back of her neck with his thumbs, gently rubbing her tension away.

She sighed, relaxing against him for a minute. Then snapping to her senses, she stiffened. "Mr. Winfield, please!" She twisted free and stepped away.

Suddenly a sharp cry and a rush of huge wings fluttered close by her head.

Startled, she reeled back toward the edge of the precipice. "Oh!"

Logan's strong arms closed around her. "It's all right," he said. He drew her to his long, lean frame.

Trembling with shock, she clung to him. Her arms wrapped around his waist, she laid her head against his powerful chest. His heart drummed against her ear.

"You're safe now," he said, gently smoothing a lock of hair away from her face.

The tone of his voice touched something locked deep inside her. She looked up. Eyes as silvery and

bewitching as the landscape met hers.

He trailed a hand down her cheek, knocking her spectacles crooked. "You don't need these." He removed the glasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket, then bent forward. Lips, cool and firm, brushed against hers, taking her breath away.

She shivered, completely undone by his change in behavior.

"That noise--the thing that flew at me. What was it?" she asked, trying to concentrate on anything but the mouth nibbling at the corner of her own.

"A great-horned owl," he murmured, tugging on her lower lip *again*. "They get a little touchy when they're mating."

"It was so big," she said when she was able, finding it hard to think when he was so intent on kissing her.

Kissing her? Her eyes flew open. "Mr. Winfield!" The indignant words she intended came out as a barely audible sigh.

"Hmm?" he said, nuzzling her neck.

Ignoring the delicious quivers crawling up her spine, she attempted to push him away.

A faint smile on his face, his eyes dreamy, he gazed down at her. "I think it's time for little girls like you to go to bed," he said huskily, lifting her to her feet.

"Uh huh," she agreed breathlessly. She raised her arms and encircled his neck. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she drew his head down to meet hers. She sighed and pressed her lips to his in a long lingering kiss.

"Miss Eastgate!"

Beth blinked, focusing on the startled bearded face so close to her own. Her eyes widened. "My stars!" She jerked her arms from around his neck.

Stunned to find herself back in the cabin, she gazed wildly around the room. "How did we get here?" Confused, she peered up at him. Her mouth forming a small *O*, she raised her hand and touched his beard. It was soft, silky, and *full* under her fingertips. "It can't be."

He frowned. "What's the matter?"

"You shaved it off." She shook her head. "I don't understand. We were at the lookout. The moonlight...The owl ...She stared at him. "You were kissing me."

He raised a brow. "Oh?"

Rubbing the crick in her neck, she eyed him suspiciously. "We weren't?" she whispered.

"I don't think so." He ran a hand down his thick beard. His lips twisted into a mocking grin. "When I came in to wash up, you were sound asleep."

"Asleep?" Her eyes widened in horror. "Then we didn't--you didn't?"

His eyes dancing, he slowly shook his head.

"My stars!" Mortified, she clamped her hand over her mouth. She backed away from Logan as if he were the devil himself.

Fleeing from his delighted laughter, she bolted from the room.

Chapter 6

Beth raced to her bedroom and quietly pulled the thick plank door shut behind her. She leaned against it and buried her face in her hands. *What must he think of me?* It was bad enough that the man barely tolerated her, avoiding her to the point that most times he didn't even enter the room when she was there. And tonight--he'd waited until he thought every one was in bed asleep before he'd entered the house.

She bit her fist to keep from crying aloud. She couldn't believe she'd grabbed him around the neck and kissed him. And to make matters worse, it wasn't just any kiss. She remembered that part of the dream vividly. She'd kissed him wantonly, passionately. Of course, she'd been asleep at the time. But he was so arrogant, he'd never believe it.

Being careful not to awaken the girls, Elizabeth crept to her bed. She removed her dress and hung it on a wall peg. She went to the dresser and sloshed water from the pitcher into the basin, then barely aware of the chill in the room, she quickly washed her face. Rubbing the wet cloth against her overheated neck, she closed her eyes for a moment and relived the feel of Logan's warm, strong fingers massaging her flesh. The dream memory quickened her pulse. Her very audible sigh jolted her back to

the present. *What on earth is wrong with me?*

After hurriedly removing her underthings, she slipped into her nightgown. She drew the hairpins from the knot, then brushed and braided her hair. When she heard footsteps in the hall outside her door, she froze, letting out her breath when they passed by her room and went down the steps. Unable to resist, she tiptoed to the window and lifted the edge of the curtain. She watched until Logan's long stride carried him into the darkness of the barn.

"He requests a spinster or a man, someone with impeccable morals." Hannah's words haunting her, Beth thought of her last two positions, where she had been dismissed as a woman of easy virtue, a seductress, even though she hadn't been the one doing the seducing. The fact that she'd been struggling desperately to get free both times hadn't mattered.

But this time he'd been the one who'd resisted. Remembering his startled "Miss Eastgate," she closed her eyes. Good grief, she'd practically attacked the man. And knowing him, he'd never let her forget it.

She told herself she couldn't be attracted to him. The crude, woolly-looking backwoodsman scared her to death. She ran a hand across her face. Maybe it was her lack of sleep, but her whole world seemed a bit out of kilter ever since she'd arrived on this mountain.

She padded barefoot across the cold floorboards and eased into her bed. What a mess! The man not

only didn't want her there, she'd further raised his hackles by arriving a month early. Then the business with the ax, and now this. She uttered a soft groan. Her six month trial period didn't start until school opened next month. *What on earth am I going to do? How can I face him again?* She buried her face in her pillow, hoping it would smother her unwelcome thoughts. When that didn't work, she turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling. *My stars! I've only been here two weeks and I'm already in trouble.*

Beth awakened to a bright morning sun beaming through the window curtain. Forcing her eyes open, after spending most of the night awake, she found the room empty and the sun high in the sky. She'd overslept. After making the bed, she hurriedly washed her face, then twisted her hair into a knot and slipped into the rest of her clothing.

Reluctant to enter the kitchen, she paused in the dogtrot to give Beau, the gentle old bloodhound, a pat. Hoping everyone had already eaten, she crept into the large main room, then breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Granny Jo was alone and busy at the long kitchen counter.

The old lady glanced up and smiled. "Mornin', honey."

"Good morning. I'm sorry I slept so late." Beth helped herself to a cup of coffee from the ever simmering pot and sat down at the table. "Where is everybody?" she asked cautiously, wondering if

Logan had said anything to the others.

"The girls took a walk in the woods to look for spring flowers. The boys are cleaning out the barn."

"They won't be for long," Logan said from the doorway.

Beth clutched her cup with both hands and shut her eyes. She should have known it was too good to last. Logan stepped into the room and closed the door. He raised his head and sniffed the air. "I knew I smelled apple pie." He crossed to the table and pulled out a chair across from her. "Morning, Lizzie." Giving her a devilish grin, he slowly stroked his beard. "Have pleasant dreams?" he asked in a voice so low only she could hear.

"Oh!" A rush of heat turned Beth's face to flame. *Lizzie, indeed!* Mortified to be reminded of her disgraceful behavior, she tucked her head, wanting to die when she heard him chuckle. But determined not to give him the satisfaction of humiliating her further, she raised her chin and fixed him with a look that could have driven nails into stone.

Logan, seeing her violet eyes blaze, couldn't hold back the insolent grin that split his face. She looked mad enough to spit. *Lizzie*. He liked the way it rolled off his tongue. The name had a sassy, feisty sound to it. In spite of her attempt to hide behind the spectacles and gloomy dresses, he had a feeling the name fit.

His gaze locked on hers. His grin faded and another emotion took its place. His eyes traced the

outline of her full, naturally red lips, bringing back the memory of how warm and soft and full of passion they'd been when she pressed them against his last night. He couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if he had kissed her back. But being so used to her stiff, prickly attitude, he'd been so surprised when she kissed him, he hadn't thought of it.

Seeing her blink back tears, he guiltily changed his tactics. He rose from the table and strode to where Granny Jo was dishing up large slices of steaming apple pie. He removed some forks from a tin on the cabinet, and taking a couple of the plates to the table, he placed one in front of Elizabeth.

"I'll bet you never tasted pie as good as this. Granny Jo is famous in the hill country for her dried apple pies." He sat down and lifted his fork, filling his mouth with a savory portion. "Mmmmm!" He smiled, watching her cut into the flaky crust and take a small bite.

She licked a bit of juice from her lip and nodded. "It is delicious. Do you think I could learn how?" she asked his grandmother.

Granny Jo, bringing her own piece to the table, nodded. "Tain't hard. It's my secret ingredient that adds to the flavor."

"Secret ingredient?"

"I soak the dried apples in cider before I make the pies."

Logan shoved in another bite to keep from laughing. His grandmother soaked the dried apples in

hard cider--applejack--, before she cooked them. But he knew she'd never admit it.

His piece finished, he watched Lizzie's small pink tongue curl around a speck of crust on her lip as she downed the last of hers. Seeing she'd missed another piece on her cheek, he leaned closer, reached out a finger, and gently brushed it off. The skin beneath his fingertip was smooth and soft, her cinnamon scent warm and enticing. Her startled gaze met his. Logan had to battle the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

Almost as if she could read his thoughts, she shrank away.

Heaving a sigh, he got to his feet and caught his grandmother's amused glance. "You sure haven't lost your touch, Granny Jo." He shifted his gaze from the old lady to the dark-haired woman at her side. "Delicious," he murmured softly.

"Why, thank ye, Logan--if you was referring to my pie," the elderly woman teased.

Not at all sure what he was referring to, Logan decided he'd better get the hell out of there before he made a complete jackass of himself.

Shaken and confused by his feelings, he avoided the barn and instead strode toward the woods. Ever since she'd arrived, Elizabeth Eastgate had turned his world upside down. He'd vowed to make her leave. He'd told himself he'd be happy if she left. But now he had the uneasy feeling that if she did, he'd miss her.

In spite of his intention to avoid her, he found himself watching for her. When he entered a room, he couldn't stop himself from inhaling that special spice-filled scent that told of her presence. He shook his head. What was there about the homely little minx that made him want her? Last night he'd dreamed about peeling off that awful dress and finding her warm, soft, and yielding. He'd even dreamed he made love to her, but when he'd finished, she turned into Annie. He raised a trembling hand and ran it through his hair. *Annie.*

Old, familiar pain returned to torment him. Annie, his wife, his childhood sweetheart, the only woman he'd ever loved. His Annie, her hair the color of ripe wheat, her eyes blue as a summer sky, raped and murdered, along with the child she carried.

His thoughts drifted back to that time during the war when his regiment had fought and lost the Battle of Pea Ridge. After that he'd been in so many won and lost battles they'd merged in his memory. Wounded in the shoulder and burning with fever, he hardly remembered where it was that he'd been captured and shipped north to that Yankee prison camp. After a year of captivity he'd awakened one morning with a frantic need to get home. Dodging a hail of bullets, he had escaped.

He'd returned to the homestead to find Annie and his ma and pa buried, and a good portion of the house burned and seemingly abandoned. He feared the worst, but found Granny Jo and his younger siblings starving and living in a nearby limestone cave.

He and the kids had managed to repair the salvageable part of the house. Then, after hunting enough food for them to get by on, he'd left to rejoin his regiment. When he reached his unit, he discovered that most of the men had deserted and gone home. But he hadn't been ready to give up the fight. He'd burned with the need for vengeance. Nothing mattered but making the Yankees pay for what they'd done. That's when he'd joined Anderson.

Logan sat on a fallen log and buried his face in his hands. He'd never be free of the memory. Now, even after the war, he remained a wanted man.

A hard day spent in the woods, cutting and peeling cedar fence posts, had helped Logan work through his problems. Now, exhausted and dirty, he stuck his head under the hand pump and washed away as much of the grime as possible, then he strode toward the house to join the family for supper.

He knew that Seth had managed to bag three squirrels that day, and his mouth watered in anticipation. He also knew Granny Jo would have made them into his favorite meal, a thick stew topped with big, fluffy dumplings.

He absently ran a hand down his face, brushing excess drops of water from his beard. Stroking the thick bush, he paused and became thoughtful. When he'd first come home from the war, he'd grown it to

hide his face. Now he kept it out of pure laziness. It seemed easier than heating water to shave every morning. He'd had it so long he probably wouldn't recognize himself without it.

He recalled what the teacher said the night before. She dreamed he'd been clean-shaven.

His mouth drew into an obstinate line. He'd be danged if he cut it off now. She'd think it was because of her, and it wasn't, although he'd never thought of getting rid of it before last night.

He frowned. The woman was trouble, but he couldn't fire her because of a dream. He snorted in disgust. Hell, he couldn't fire her anyway. The community school board had to vote to do that. And since he couldn't very well tell them what had happened without making a complete idiot of himself, she'd have to stay, at least for the present.

Logan scowled. Apparently the fool woman was getting ideas about him. Why, he couldn't imagine. He'd certainly never given her any reason to think he was interested.

He ran a hand through his hair. That's just what he needed. Some moon-eyed female falling all over him, dreaming about him, popping up in his path, hoping he'd kiss her.

But dammit, he had wanted to kiss her. When he lifted her from the chair last night, he remembered too well the way she fit into his arms, all warm, soft, yet firm in all the right places.

Going up the house steps, he prayed she'd behave herself tonight and leave him alone. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman...and in his present condition he didn't know how much more he could

take.

After spending most of the afternoon in her room, Beth went to help Granny Jo and the girls with dinner. As she entered the kitchen Ruth bounced forward, holding a cup full of spring flowers.

"Look, Elizabeth."

"Oh, how pretty."

Ruth held her bouquet closer and pointed to each tiny blossom. "The purplish buds are henbit, these little white flowers with the brown tops are pepper and salt. And the tiny white ones with the pink veins are early spring beauties."

"I think they are all spring beauties," Beth said with a delighted laugh. "Spring." She sighed. "In Chicago it would still be the dead of winter."

"We'll have more cold weather," Sally Mae said from the kitchen. "But thank goodness spring comes early in the hills."

"Do you miss the city?" Ruth asked.

"Sometimes I miss all the activity, the street vendors and the ring of cable trollies," Beth admitted. "But I don't miss the cold or the smoke. Or the stench of stale fish," she added, wrinkling her nose. "It's

nice to breathe clean mountain air."

As her thoughts turned to Teddy and the possible consequences of her behavior last night, Beth grew somber. Did Logan intend to fire her? She'd certainly given him enough cause. But if that were the case, why hadn't he mentioned it this morning? Maybe he had said nothing because Granny Jo was present. Could he be waiting until tonight? She nervously ran a hand over her tightly bound hair.

In spite of her determination to put him out of her mind, she remembered the flutter in her middle when he removed the crumb from her cheek. The quickening of her pulse when their eyes met. That one moment when she could have sworn he wanted to kiss her. *Kiss her?* "My stars! I must be losing my mind." "Did you say something, Elizabeth?" Sally Mae asked.

"No. Nothing at all." Avoiding the girl's puzzled expression, Beth crossed the room, took the plates from the cabinet and quickly set the table, then hearing footsteps in the dogtrot, she armed herself with her most schoolmarmish manner.

The door opened and Logan stepped into the room. He tilted his head and gave her faint smile.

Drawing her lips into a thin line, she fixed him with a glacial stare that would have frozen boiling water. Then, turning her back on him, she went to help Granny Jo put the food onto the table. *I might have made a ninny of myself last night, Mr. Winfield, but I can guarantee it won't happen again.*

Later, on his way to the barn, Logan felt like a fool when he recalled his earlier thoughts that the teacher was sweet on him. She hadn't appeared to be mooning over anybody. In fact her face was so sour when she looked at him, she'd practically curdled his milk. The woman was a mass of contradictions. One minute all kissy-faced and the next so stiff and proper he wondered if she starched her underwear.

Last night she'd practically seduced him. But tonight, if he could believe her actions, she plainly wanted nothing to do with him. Why she'd acted like he'd invited her to drop her drawers when all he'd said was "pass the salt."

Pausing at the doorway of the barn, Logan glanced back at the house. If she was stuck on him, she sure had a strange way of showing it. Despite his declarations otherwise, he felt a strange sense of disappointment.

Chapter 7

Elizabeth tied her bonnet strings under her chin and took one last look in the mirror before leaving her bedroom. Well, she looked respectable enough. Now, if she could only get to town in one piece.

Town? In spite of her apprehension, she chuckled. In no shape, form, or fashion could Devil's Hollow be called a town. But whatever it was, she would be happy to get there and look the school over before she started her duties as teacher next week. There was only one drawback; the roads were still too muddy for the wagon. She had to ride the mule.

Head held high, she tried to still the trembling in her knees as she negotiated the porch steps and crossed the yard to where Molly, the mule, stood half-asleep by the hitching rail. Beth stared at the animal. I did it once, she told herself. I can do it again. She drew in a steadying breath and smiled at Nate, hoping she showed more confidence than she felt.

Molly eyed her, then stretched her neck and showed her teeth, releasing a loud bray.

Beth's nerves jumped, but she held her ground, refusing to yield to her inclination to run for the safety of the porch.

"Miss Elizabeth, are you sure you don't want me to help you?" Nate said, raising his hand to rub the

back of his neck.

"Thank you, Nate. I can manage. After all, I rode her yesterday. I'm sure I can do it again." She knew it wouldn't be quite the same today. Yesterday even Joseph had ridden the cantankerous Molly when Nate led the mule around the yard.

A skeptical look on his face, Nate shrugged and handed her the reins.

The smile Beth had pasted on her face disappeared once Nate was out of sight. "I can do it," she said aloud as if to reassure herself. Determination tightened her jaw as she stepped onto the mounting block Nate had provided then swung herself into the saddle. To her amazement the mule didn't move.

"There, that wasn't so bad." Proud of her accomplishment she gathered her reins and nudged the animal with her heels as Nate had instructed. When Molly slowly and obediently ambled out of the yard, Beth found it hard not to grin.

Apparently she'd worried for nothing. She'd been so afraid she'd embarrass herself, she'd insisted the children go on ahead and meet her at the schoolhouse. Because Logan had not yet returned from selling his furs, Nate remained at home with Granny Jo, since at her age he didn't want her to be there alone. Beth found Logan's absence an unexpected reprieve. After that appalling incident when she'd had the dream, she'd been afraid he might fire her, but strangely enough in spite of her outrageous behavior, he seemed almost friendly. That bothered her more than his surliness. Fearing he might expect

a repeat performance, she'd been careful not to let down her guard.

Beth avoided the road and took the shorter trail through the woods. She inhaled the scent of newborn leaves and moist vegetation and watched rabbits playing among the mayapples. She spotted lizards on sun-warmed rocks and snakes with their scruffy, winter-darkened skin hanging in shreds and tatters.

Along the edge of a noisy rain-flooded creek, pungent yellow flowers sprouted from the naked gray branches of the spicebush. Delicate white-blossomed sandwort lay on the ground like a light snowfall, while blue Johnny-jump-ups carpeted deep mossy glades. Cardinals made scarlet splashes against the budding but still-bare-limbed trees.

It was the last week in February and the hint of spring hung like an aphrodisiac in the balmy air. It was a time of rebirthing, of tender beginnings. And Beth was no exception. She dreamily watched a trio of bright butterflies flit across the trail, and giggled when one tried to land on Molly's nose.

They had traveled about half of the seven miles when Molly slowed, took two more steps, then came to a halt.

Puzzled, Beth glanced down at the trail. She didn't see a snake or anything. Why had the mule stopped? She nudged the animal with her heels. "Come on, Molly. Git along now."

Molly didn't budge.

"Giddap!" Beth kicked her again, harder.

The mule only wheezed and closed her eyes.

Beth scanned the way ahead and behind her. Not a soul in sight. "Now what am I supposed to do?" she muttered. She bent forward and eyed the sleeping mule. Nate hadn't mentioned anything like this. Then a slow smile crept across her face.

She did know what to do. Sally Mae told her to cut a switch in case the mule got balky. This must be what she meant.

Spying a patch of slender-limbed bushes at the edge of the path, Beth dismounted. "I'll give you one more chance to behave yourself, Molly." Beth grasped the bridle in both hands, dug her heels into the dirt and pulled. "Get up!"

Molly opened her eyes. Then, giving Beth a deliberate look, the mule leaned back, tugging against the reins until it sat on its haunches.

"My stars!" Beth stared at the animal, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. The mule sat in the middle of the road, twitching its ears like an overgrown, long-eared dog.

"All right, Molly. You asked for it." Beth spun on her heel, walked to the bushes, and broke off a stout switch. Holding it in front of her, she stalked forward. "See this?" She waved the limb under the mule's nose. Molly took one look and lurched to her feet.

Relieved, but still holding the stick, Beth picked up the reins and led the mule to a nearby rock. She climbed onto the stone and tried to mount.

The mule shied away.

"Hold still." She had managed to get one foot into the stirrup when the mule swung its head and bared its teeth. Before she could move, the mule had a mouthful of her bottom.

"Owww!" she cried, landing in the dirt. Her bonnet askew over one eye, her glasses dangling from the end of her nose, she scrambled to her feet. "Dammit!" She rubbed her bottom then gathered up the reins and stared the mule straight in the eye. "You ornery, contrary, long-eared, stubborn jackass, I am going to ride you, so you'd just better make your mind up to it."

Holding the reins firmly, she stepped up onto the rock.

Molly flattened her ears and arched her back.

"Whoa!" Came a shout from somewhere on the trail behind her.

Startled, Beth teetered on the boulder, then toppled backward and sprawled in the dirt--again. Horrified to be caught in such a position, she scrambled to her knees, straightened her bonnet, and peered out. She groaned. *Logan Winfield!* You might know he'd pick now to return home!

Logan jumped from the saddle and ran forward. He lifted her to her feet. "Are you all right, Lizzie?" He brushed at the dirt and leaves that clung to her dress.

"I'm dandy," she snapped, slapping his hands away. "Just dandy."

Eyeing her, he bent double and laughed until he gasped for breath. Bleary-eyed, he straightened. When she shot him a look of outrage, it set him off again.

Hands on her hips, she stared at him. "I suppose if I had broken my neck, you would really have found that hilarious."

Wiping his eyes, Logan shook his head. "I couldn't help it. I never saw anything so funny."

"Funny? Mr. Winfield, you have a most peculiar sense of humor. And that animal--" She pointed to the mule.

"It wasn't all Molly's fault." Logan removed his hat and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "You tried to mount her from the wrong side."

"Wrong side?" Beth gave the mule a skeptical look. "Both sides look the same to me."

"It's the truth. You have to get on from the other side." Logan motioned to the black he'd been riding. "If I tried that with Lucifer, he'd raise such a ruckus I have my brains addled."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"But why wouldn't she go?"

"Because she thought you wouldn't make her. Mules are naturally cantankerous and lazy. Like

some people, they won't do anything they don't have to do." He stepped closer, ran his finger up the bridge of her nose to adjust her spectacles. Then he straightened her bonnet. "Now brush yourself off and try again." He grinned. "From the left side this time."

Elizabeth shook the dirt from her skirts. Her heart pounding, she stepped to the top of the rock and swung into the saddle. Taking the switch he held out, she gazed into his twinkling blue eyes and returned his smile. "I guess it's all in knowing how."

"You'll learn." Logan mounted the black, touched his hand to his hat, then galloped down the trail toward home.

Beth watched him for a moment, then tapped the mule with the switch. To her relief, Molly obediently turned and trotted toward town. The rest of the trip continued without incident and Beth soon found herself on the outskirts of Devil's Hollow. Since this was her first visit, she slowed the mule and stared curiously about her.

A dozen or so dwellings of various types and sizes were scattered around the tree-dotted basin. The town proper consisted of only two buildings, a combination saddlery, smithy, and harness shop and a mercantile/post office. Off in the distance she noticed the roof of a long narrow building she thought might be the school.

After introducing herself to Arnold Plunket, the mercantile owner, she posted her letters to Hannah

and Teddy. She learned the other structure she'd seen was the community hall, where church services as well as dances and other gatherings were held. Mr. Plunket told her the school was a mile past the hall.

Following the store owner's directions, she arrived at the schoolhouse and found the door open and the Winfield children waiting outside.

"Miss Elizabeth, wait till you see," Ruth said with a sob.

"See what?" She scanned their glum faces. "What's wrong?" She dismounted and tied Molly to the hitching rail.

"It's just awful." Sally Mae pointed at the open doorway.

Beth stepped inside the one-room log building. She gasped. The cheery schoolroom she'd envisioned vanished in a burst of reality. In the year it had set idle, vandals had wrecked, or varmints had chewed, everything in sight. Books, papers, and mouse and bird droppings littered the floor. Of the furnishings, one lone bench remained intact. Everything else, including the teacher's desk, had been reduced to kindling.

A lump in her throat, she stepped back onto the porch. Fighting tears, she removed her cloak and bonnet and laid them over the porch railing. Would this be the excuse Logan needed to send her home? She straightened. Not if she wouldn't let it be.

Seeing the woebegone expressions on the children's faces, she forced a smile. "Well, looks like we

have a lot of work to do. Will you help me?"

Their faces brightening, the children nodded.

"Good. Then here's what we will do. Seth, you and Joseph bring everything outside but the one good bench. Ruthie, you pick up what's left of the schoolbooks and stack them here on the porch. Sally Mae, let's see if we can find some brooms, mops, and buckets."

Leaving the children to their designated tasks, Beth and Sally Mae rode back to the general store.

Mr. Plunket expressed outrage when she told him what had happened. "Those hooligans." He shook his head. The sudden movement set his jowls swinging, reminding Beth of Beau, the old bloodhound, when he'd been out in the rain. "The school board will hear about this." He waved his hand toward the untidy but vast array of goods that were stacked helter-skelter about the store. "Take what ever you need. I'll hitch up the buckboard. You can return it when you're finished."

Thanking him, Beth and Sally Mae gathered an assortment of brooms, mops, soap, and buckets and piled them in the wagon. At the school, they unloaded the supplies and each began their appointed task.

After hours of backbreaking work and hours more to go, Beth glanced up when a tall shadow crossed the doorway.

A well-scrubbed but grim Logan entered the room. "Good Lord, what a mess." Shaking his head, he strode across the floor and drew Beth to her feet. He lifted a cobwebby smudge from her cheek and

wiped it on his pants. "I had no idea. I'm sorry."

Beth dragged a grimy hand across her forehead and brushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. "It looks like someone didn't want the school to reopen."

His mouth tightened. "We'll see that it does, won't we?"

Nodding, she raised a hand to massage her neck.

"Lizzie, you're plumb tuckered out. Go outside and sit a spell. Let me work for a change." Ignoring her protests, Logan escorted her to the door. When she was seated under a tree, he rolled up his sleeves and disappeared into the building.

Beth leaned against the trunk and closed her eyes. Every bone in her body ached with weariness and still they weren't finished. School opened in two days. How could she hope to teach with no desks and no books? She envisioned the children's disappointment when they were told that school would be canceled until the supplies could be replenished.

And how long would that take? she wondered. Weeks? Months? Or another year? Her lower lip trembled. Hearing the crunch of footsteps on the gravel, she opened her eyes and made a valiant attempt to gather her composure.

Ruth and Sally Mae, each carrying a broom, came around the corner. "At least the privy's all right," Ruth said. Her freckled face split in a wide grin.

"And now it's so clean it even smells good," Sally Mae chimed in.

Beth couldn't help but smile. "I guess we can be grateful for that." She got to her feet and dusted herself off.

Remembering her earlier teachings at the orphanage, she counted her blessings. She had a bare but clean schoolroom, an intact privy, and a wealth of young minds eager to learn. What teacher worth her salt could ask for more?

Although every muscle throbbed, she felt rested after her brief reprieve. Determined to get the job done, she stepped inside to help Logan.

When she'd adjusted to the dimmer light, her eyes widened. "My gracious. You're almost finished." The smell of wet wood and strong lye soap permeated the air.

Logan scoured the last section of boards and got to his feet. "How does that look?"

She looked around at the freshly scrubbed plank floors. The mud-splattered logs walls now gleamed like warm honey. The smoke-blackened windows now sparkled with rainbows of sunlight. Except for the absence of furniture, it was the schoolroom of her dreams. She gave Logan a warm smile. "It looks wonderful."

Logan and Seth moved the lone bench into place. Then they placed a plank over two whiskey barrels they found out back, fashioning a temporary desk for their teacher.

Placing his hands on his lean hips, Logan gazed into her eyes. "Well, at least it's clean. If I can make another bench in a day or two, can you manage with the barrels until we can get something better?"

"I'm sure I can."

When he glanced away, she timidly raised a hand and tugged at his sleeve. "Logan?"

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"Before school starts, could you build a back on that bench? It must be terribly uncomfortable for the children."

He walked over and studied the seat. "Come to think of it, I suppose they would get mighty tired. I'll get it fixed."

"And while you're at it could you build a smaller bench for the younger ones?" She remembered hours of agony when her own legs went to sleep from dangling in midair.

Logan nodded. "Anything else?"

She scanned the room and noticed the shelf for lunches and pegs for coats. "I think we can manage the rest nicely."

"I'll start on it first thing in the morning." He ran a hand down his beard and removed a long gray string of spiderwebs, then stepped to the door. "You kids take that stuff back to Mr. Plunket. Tell him thank you kindly for the loan of his wagon and goods. Miss Elizabeth and I will lock up here, then we'll

meet you on the trail."

Beth heard the rattle of harness and creaking wheels as the wagon rolled out of the schoolyard.

He stepped close behind her and together they admired the fruit of their labors. The hands he placed on her shoulders felt warm, reassuring. She tilted her head and gazed up into his face. Despite the lines of weariness, his blue eyes gleamed.

"Well, teacher, we can do no more today. Let's go home." He dropped an arm to her waist and herded her toward the door.

While Logan secured the schoolhouse, Elizabeth climbed atop the mule.

He gave her such an admiring look that Beth couldn't help but sit a little straighter in the saddle. She knew in his eyes, she was still too young and too small and dirty from the tip of her top-knotted head to the toes of her high buttoned shoes, but he had called her teacher. He could have used the destruction as an excuse to close the school and send her home, but he hadn't. He'd cleaned and repaired and promised to make the benches needed for her students. For the first time since her arrival she'd believed she had a chance to succeed.

Chapter 8

True to his word, Logan had risen early the following morning and gathered his hammer, saw, and other things he might need for the school. Since Simon Latham had donated the lumber from his sawmill on Lick Creek, and Arnold Plunket had provided the nails from the mercantile, the only thing Logan had to supply was a strong back and hours of labor. He'd recruited Nate's help and by Saturday night the new benches and long-planked tables that would serve as the children's desks were in place.

On Sunday Beth and the remaining Winfield children joined Nate and Logan, and they all spent the Sabbath day smoothing the wood so the students wouldn't pick up any splinters. At noon the laborers gathered beneath the trees for a welcome picnic lunch.

Munching on a chicken leg, Logan watched Beth help Joseph to his third piece of applesauce cake. He felt a warm glow when she lifted a lock of unruly dark hair out of the small boy's eyes. She was good with children, he thought, and if the little hellions gave her a chance, she would be a fine teacher.

Laying back on the grass, he noticed the dark clouds beginning to gather overhead. *Due for a shower, tonight or tomorrow.* Remembering he hadn't yet checked the schoolhouse roof, he frowned and hoped whoever had done the rest of the damage had been too busy to go up there. But not wanting a

leaky roof to ruin all their hard work, he got to his feet, stretched to relieve his aching muscles, and went to investigate.

He climbed atop the porch railing and pulled himself onto the roof. He inspected the surface thoroughly and found it sound. Because the wood heater hadn't been used in a year, he peered in the metal stovepipe and found a large abandoned bird's nest. He stuck his hand down the tube to dislodge it, but the mass of twigs and grass remained out of reach.

Knowing he'd have to take the chimney apart, he wrapped his arms around the length of pipe and pulled. When it wouldn't budge, he tugged again, harder this time. It parted with a whoosh and shot up into his hands. He staggered backward. "Oh, hell!" He rolled down the steep pitch and tumbled to the ground. The soot-laden pipe clanged noisily as it bounced off the roof to join him, dumping a mass of crystallized ashes on his head. "Dad burn it!" he yelled, tossing the sooty pipe to one side.

Elizabeth ran around the house. "Logan, what happened?" Her eyes grew wide. "Are you hurt?"

A wry grin on his face, he shook his head. Fine black particles fell from his hair onto his shirt. "Just my pride," he said, bringing his hand up to wipe his face.

She giggled.

"What's so funny?" he asked, perturbed that she could find his plight so amusing.

"Your face. It's all black."

"Where?" he said, touching various spots.

A mischievous look on her face, she touched his bearded cheek. "Right there." She ran her fingers across his nose. "And there." She did the same to his forehead. "And there."

She covered her mouth to muffle her laughter.

Realizing what she'd done, Logan decided he'd have some fun, too. He blinked. "I think some got in my eye."

"Let me see." Instantly contrite, she bent toward him.

He cupped her face between his soot-covered hands. "Can you see it now?" he asked, locking his gaze on hers.

"Not yet," she said softly, peering at him intently.

"How about now?" Rearranging his hands, he rolled his eyes and leaned closer.

"What on earth are they doin'?" Seth said from behind them.

Logan and Beth whirled to stare up at the astounded faces of the children.

Her face red as a ripe strawberry, Elizabeth scrambled to her feet. "Uh, he fell off the roof and I trying to get something out of his eye," she explained.

Nate snickered and whispered something to Sally Mae.

"Elizabeth! Your face," Ruth said in horror.

"What's wrong with my face?" She patted it.

"It's black as Logan's," Joseph said, laughing.

"My stars!" She whirled and stared at him. "Oh. You--"

Logan grinned. He had to admit, she was a sight. The only place not black was where she had her glasses.

Accompanied by the girls, she hurried toward the well.

Logan turned to Nate. "Since I can't hardly get any dirtier, you want to help me fix the stove?"

"If you don't black my face, too."

They cleaned out the rest of the stovepipe and fixed the chimney. Then, since the school bell had been melted for ammunition during the war, they hung a large brass ship's bell that Mr. Plunket had uncovered in his storeroom.

Because of the soot, Beth and the children wouldn't let him and Nate back in the schoolroom, so they found things to keep busy outside. They removed dead limbs that might prove to be a hazard and cleaned up the schoolyard. They mended the corral fences and cleaned out the small lean-to that sheltered the students' animals in the coldest weather.

Logan took the new rope Mr. Plunket had donated and replaced the rotted one on the oak-tree swing. Then he called Joseph outside and set the boy on the new board seat. "Try it," he ordered, giving him a

push.

"I'm a bird," Joseph shouted with glee, swinging high into the air. After a while he stopped and looked up at his brother. "Now let Elizabeth have a turn."

At Joseph's insistence Elizabeth soared in the swing. Her skirts streaming out behind her, she stretched her feet to touch the lower tree limbs. "It's wonderful," she called to him.

After everyone, including Logan, had swung, they stood at the schoolhouse door and admired their labors one more time before locking up.

"It's perfect," Elizabeth said. "Thank you, Mr. Winfield." She gave him a brilliant smile.

Logan saw the happiness on her soot-smeared face and the light in her violet eyes, and his chest swelled with pride. "You're welcome, Miss Eastgate." Then, lifting a hand to cover a yawn, he pointed to Joseph, who had fallen asleep on the porch. "Now, before I join that little feller, I think it's time we headed for home."

They arrived at the farm just before the rain Logan predicted began to fall. After a bowl of Granny Jo's soup they all said good night and headed off to bed.

In the barn loft, Logan closed his eyes and listened to the whisper soft rustle of raindrops against the rooftop. His thoughts filled with Lizzie and how funny she'd looked with her soot blackened face. He was surprised she hadn't gotten mad. Most women would have had a fit. *Teacher, I'm beginning to think*

you might almost be human.

The first day of school dawned bright and sunny. And now that it was time, Beth pulled the rope and the schoolhouse bell rang loudly, sending an echo throughout the glen. Well, at least they heard it, she thought, eyeing several children who had paid it no mind. Determined they wouldn't make her fetch each one of them personally, she turned her back and walked into the schoolroom.

The sight of the immaculate room and the new benches and desk brought a smile of delight to her face. Even if she didn't have the proper books and slates, teaching in a room like this would be a joy.

She picked up a piece of chalk and started to write her name on the newly painted blackboard when something stung the back of her neck. Holding the spot, she whirled to see a dirty-faced redheaded boy slip a peashooter into his pocket. She walked toward him and held out her hand. "Give it to me, please."

The boy gave her a mutinous look then slowly drew the slender reed from his britches and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said firmly. "You may have it back after school. I'm Miss Eastgate. Who are you?"

"James Lee Quinn," the boy muttered.

"I'm happy to meet you, James Lee." She glanced up to see the other children filing into the room. An exact duplicate of James Lee, only larger, stalked forward to stand behind his brother.

"I've met James Lee. Who are you?" Beth asked politely.

"I'm Jacob." His green eyes narrowed in his freckled face. "And I don't like school."

"We'll have to see if we can change that, won't we?" she said, determined not to let him start the morning with a fight.

She smiled at the rest of her pupils. "And now, class, let's take our seats. The first and second grade will sit here." She pointed to the smaller bench. "Third on up will take the second seat. The higher grades will sit on the one behind that." She went to the board and pointed out her name which she had both printed and written in cursive. "I'm Miss Eastgate. You may call me Miss Elizabeth, if you like. And I will call you by your given names."

"Starting with Joseph, I would like each of you to stand up, give me your name and age, and tell me what you like best about school."

The smaller bench in the front row held Joseph, who liked the swing best, James Lee Quinn who didn't like anything, and a towheaded girl who said she was Mattie Jenkins, age six and she liked stories. Next came a dark-haired girl, who bore no resemblance to her sister and who shyly said she was Jenny Jenkins, age eight, and she liked spelling.

On the larger bench sat Seth, who liked Saturdays because there was no school. Jacob Quinn, nine, came next with the same answer as Seth's. Ruth beamed her a bright smile and said she liked everything. A girl, whose mousy brown hair was done up in elaborate curls, announced she was Elmira Palmer, age twelve. She also stated that tomorrow she would bring her own desk from home as she didn't like to have her dress mussed by being so crowded.

Sally Mae, seated on a new bench in the back row, rolled her eyes at Elmira's remark. Her companion, fourteen-year-old Mary Latham giggled. Next came a stick-thin boy with sandy hair, who had to be poked by Nate before he said he was Alvin Jenkins, age fifteen, and he liked ciphering. Nate, who drawled he liked reading best, came last.

Making use of the odd assortment of things she'd brought in the trunk, Beth found that in spite of her lack of lesson materials, she was able to find something to keep the children busy. With her few tattered copies of *Youth's Companion*, an old almanac, two blue-backed spellers, and several larger picture books, she managed to make do.

She was thankful that Seth still liked the tales of Daniel Boone and was able to interest Jacob in the book as well. The older girls found Louisa May Alcott's *Merry's Museum* magazine enjoyable. They also exclaimed over a worn copy of Miss Alcott's *Flower Fables*.

Elmira sniffed at all of Beth's offerings and spent her day drawing pictures on the tablet she had

brought from home.

Alvin claimed the almanac and made bets with Nate as to which state had the coldest temperatures.

With all the children occupied, Beth opened her teacher's diary and entered each of her students' name and age. She found she had an even dozen at school, ranging from six to sixteen, with Joseph being the youngest and Nate the oldest. At one dollar a month per pupil, that was a salary of twelve dollars. And after the six-month trial period it would be raised to one dollar fifty cents. Not a fortune, but since she would be receiving room and board, most of it could be sent home to Teddy.

After lunch, which consisted of everything from raw peanuts in the Quinn boys' sacks to elaborate petits fours in Elmira's, Beth had everyone gather items to study for science. Things went quite well until James Lee dropped a caterpillar down Ruth's dress. Furious, Ruth retaliated by walloping him. Beth separated the battling youngsters and declared the lesson ended.

They spent the rest of the time telling a round robin, in which each child spun a tale until Beth thumped the desk with a spoon. Then the next child would take over, adding his own twist to the story. It was outrageous and fun, and when it was finished, Beth felt she had gained considerable ground.

When time came for school to be dismissed, she sighed with weariness. She'd found the strain of dealing with the exuberant children and sitting erect all day on the backless bench exhausting. When she'd asked Logan to put backs on the children's benches, she'd neglected to mention her own. But

watching the children carefully place their few school supplies on the corner of their desks, she forgot her discomfort.

Although she had managed quite well today, she knew they could not go on like this. The class needed regular schoolbooks if they weren't to fall behind.

She penned a letter to Hannah explaining her plight, then added a quick note for Teddy. After straightening up and locking the schoolhouse door, she rode Molly to the mercantile and mailed her letter.

With Mr. Plunket's permission, Beth poked about the odd assortment of dusty items in the store's cluttered back room, searching for some way to advance the children's lessons. Seeing the varied price tags and the different ways things were measured, she began to get an idea. Dusting off her hands, she went to find Mr. Plunket.

Beth convinced the shopkeeper to help her by telling him he would also be cultivating the goodwill of future customers. When he asked what he had to do, she told him of her plan.

Once a week, she said, the students, with make-believe money in hand, would wander through his store, carefully planning their pretend purchases. Beth reasoned this way they would not only learn to add and subtract but would learn to manage their funds and become more prudent shoppers.

The kindly man added a plan of his own saying when the weekly session came to an end, he would

allow each child to pick a penny's worth of candy as a reward for his labors.

Beth knew the learning would be less painful and getting candy would sweeten the pot. They both agreed it was a good idea. She shook Mr. Plunket's hand to seal their bargain, then, excited about her venture, headed for the Winfield homestead.

When Beth arrived at school the next morning, a wagon was tied to the hitching rail. Puzzled, she opened the door to find Elmira Palmer and her elegantly dressed parents waiting inside.

"See, I told you I would bring my things," Elmira said, pointing to a highly polished cherrywood desk. "These are my books." She held out a pile of leather-bound, gilt-edged volumes. "I also have my slate and chalks. Those dirty things you use have germs," the girl said haughtily.

"I'm Patricia Palmer." The prune-faced woman motioned to a small, sharp nosed man. "This is my husband, Percival."

The weasel-eyed man took her hand in his moist limp one and stared at her so intently, Beth found it hard not to shudder.

"I'm glad to meet you," she forced herself to say.

Freeing herself, Beth turned to the girl. "Now that you have your own things, maybe you can participate in class." When Elmira nodded, Beth felt a sense of relief, since all the girl had done yesterday was disrupt the others and whine.

When the other children arrived, the Palmers left and Beth was not sorry to see them go. She'd learned to her dismay that Patricia Palmer's brother was the county superintendent of schools. She also discovered that Patricia's husband, Percival, was head of the community school board, instead of Logan, as she had previously thought. Sensing the Palmers' antagonistic attitude toward her, she knew she didn't dare make a mistake or her job as teacher would be instantly jeopardized.

After lunch, Beth put her shopping program into effect. The only one who didn't appreciate her efforts was Elmira, who announced her family bought everything they needed in St. Louis. In spite of Elmira's attitude, the rest of the children responded with enthusiasm. Locking up after school, Beth reflected on the day and knew her plan had been a great success.

Chapter 9

The days that followed became easier and, although she still didn't have all the tools she needed, Beth knew the children were making some progress without them.

Despite their inclination to be reserved with outlanders, she felt she'd made great strides toward making friends with her students. The only exceptions were Elmira and the Quinn boys. The boys' sullen attitude and manner made her wonder if they were the ones who'd wreaked such havoc on the schoolroom. Their presence also produced another problem. They smelled.

Attempting to teach the children reverence for their books, in case they ever did get new ones, Beth required them first to wash their hands with soap before they were allowed to handle them. When a few of the students, namely the Jenkins girls and especially the Quinn boys, had reluctantly done so, Beth noted with chagrin that their hands appeared to be the only clean spot on them.

After dismissing the class for recess, Beth studied the quickly emptying schoolroom and wondered how she could approach the problem without hurting anyone's feelings.

When the rest of the children were filing out of the room, she held her breath when Ruth waylaid Jacob Quinn on the porch. Afraid the two were about to get in another fight, she was surprised to hear

Ruth ask Jacob if he ever put on clean clothes.

"These are clean clothes," he replied defensively. "I ain't wore them more'n a month." He spat over the porch rail. "'Sides I don't have no others. Ma's too sickly to do the wash."

"If your ma is so sick, why don't you do the washing?" Ruth asked, as if determined to make her point. Jacob tucked his head and dragged his bare toes across the boards. "I don't know how."

At once, Ruth's attitude changed. She took his hand and made him sit on the step beside her. She patiently explained how you fill the wash kettle with water. "After it's hot," she added, "you boil the clothes. That loosens the dirt. Then you scrub them with soap until they are clean."

James Lee, apparently wondering what could be keeping his brother, came around the side of the school and joined the pair.

"What do you think?" Jacob said, looking at his brother.

James Lee shrugged. "Maybe we could do it. 'Cept we ain't got no soap."

"I'll bring you some soap," Ruth volunteered. "And since you'll be heating all that water anyway, maybe you could use some of it to take a bath."

Jacob's eyes widened. He drew away.

"You mean wash all--all over?" James Lee asked, clearly horrified.

"Uh-uh. Not me." Jacob shook his head. "'Tain't healthy."

Ruth leaned closer and glared at him. "If you intend to sit in the same room with me, it ain't healthy not to."

"What do you think, Jake?"

"Well, one of us might give it a try," Jacob said dubiously.

Ruth got to her feet and dusted her hands together. "That's settled, then. I'll bring the soap tomorrow." She gave them a bright smile of approval and dashed off to play.

Beth, witnessing the scene from the schoolroom, covered her mouth to keep from laughing. She saw the brothers give one another a bewildered look, then each shrugged and joined the others in a game of tag.

"Bless you, Ruth," she whispered. After more than a week of sitting next to them, Ruth, in her usual forthright way, had handled the matter for her.

After supper that night Beth asked about the Quinns.

Granny Jo shook her head. "Strange people. Harlan Quinn especially. His wife, Ada, no sooner buries one child than he's got her carryin' another'n. No wonder the poor woman's sickly."

"Could we pay them a visit?" Beth asked, concerned.

The old lady sighed and wiped her hands on her apron. "Child, I've tried that more'n once. Harlan wouldn't let me get out of the wagon. Don't want no charity, he said, even refusing the pot of soup I brought for his sick wife."

"But that was only being neighborly," she protested.

"I know that. He knew it, too. It was like he didn't want Ada to get well. Nobody from the hollow ever visits the Quinns." Granny Jo raised her head. Her face grew troubled as she gazed at Beth. "That's why it seemed strange when Harlan insisted you board with them, too."

"I intend to board with all my pupils' families. It's only fair."

Her blue eyes anxious, Granny Jo leaned forward in her rocker and gripped Beth's arm. "Lizabet, I know you feel you must do what's right, but be on your guard. There's somethin' not quite right about Harlan Quinn."

Suddenly Granny Jo raised her head and sniffed the air. "Mercy sakes! My bread!"

When the old lady scurried away to rescue her loaves from the oven, Beth left the house to wander about the yard. Noticing the faint light in the barn, she gave the place a wistful look. Logan was there again tonight.

She would have liked to tell him about her progress, but she'd hardly seen him since school started. He seldom appeared at meals, apparently grabbing a hasty bite in the morning and disappearing into the

fields before anyone was up. When she'd left for school, she'd spotted him and the mules in the distance, a good portion of ground already plowed.

At suppertime he seemed exhausted the few times he had joined them. One night he'd fallen asleep in his chair at the table. And when he did eat with them, he had little to say, excusing himself immediately afterward to vanish into the barn.

She shifted her gaze beyond the two-story outbuilding to where the ridges and hollows were coated with an eerie orange glow. Like most of the hill people, Logan had been burning underbrush as a defense against summer wildfires, as well as in preparation for clearing the land for pastures. Smoke drifted toward her in thin veillike strands on the air. She wrinkled her nose against the acrid smell.

Drawn back to the light, she wondered what he could be doing so late every night. Not having the courage to find out, she turned away from the barn and headed toward the lookout instead.

Picking her way through the moonlight, Beth climbed the hillside path. When she reached the crest, she settled into her favorite place on the rock bench. She inhaled the cool air and allowed the sounds of the night to caress her exhausted senses.

From somewhere in the woods a tiny screech owl called, spring peepers chirped from the edges of the small pool below the hill. Tree frogs and crickets joined in a joyful chorus. Surrounded by their melody, she gazed over the valley, amazed that she could have ever thought it ugly.

In Granny Jo's special place, Beth remembered the night she'd fallen asleep in the rocker. The night she dreamed Logan had kissed her. She closed her eyes, reliving the dream as the magic of the mountains wrapped around her.

Logan and Nate left the homestead at dawn and reached the schoolhouse before anyone else had arrived. While Nate unlocked the door, Logan carefully unloaded his prize from the packhorse and carried it inside. Laughing like mischievous children, he and Nate removed the whiskey barrels and the rough board that Beth had used for her desk and placed them against the wall.

Logan unwrapped the layer of quilts, then using his sleeve, he wiped a smudge of dust from the otherwise shiny surface. He glanced up as Nate carried a matching chair into the room. When Nate disappeared outside again, Logan took the chair, wiped it off, and placed it in front of the new desk. He straightened other things in the room then stood back to admire his handiwork.

Nate strode back into the room and stood beside Logan.

"What do you think?" Logan asked.

Nate cocked his head and looked at the furniture. "Needs something."

"What?"

Nate grinned. "Maybe a bouquet?" He held out a fistful of Johnny-jump-ups, bluebells, and the white-blossomed branches of a service berry bush.

"So that was what you were doin' lollygaggin' in the bushes for so long. I thought maybe something you ate was giving you problems." Seeing Nate blush, Logan chuckled. "Well, better find something to stick your posies in. She'll be here before you know it."

After a few minutes Nate returned with a battered blue enamel pitcher filled with his bouquet. "It might leak, so I'd better set it on the stove instead of the desk."

Logan nodded his approval. "It looks real springlike." He raised his head and listened. A light tinkling laugh drifted on the early-morning air. "She's here. I'd better be going."

Reaching the schoolyard, Beth dismounted and stared after the man who galloped away. *Logan?* Then she saw another familiar horse tied to the hitching rail. *Nate?* He was certainly here early. Could something be wrong? she wondered. Afraid someone had vandalized the school again, she hurriedly ran up the steps and swung open the door. Nothing was out of place.

Nate sat on a bench, his face creased in a broad smile. "Mornin', Miss Elizabeth."

"Good morning." She took off her bonnet and cloak and hung them on the peg by the door. "Was

that Logan I saw riding away?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, giving her a sheepish grin.

"What have you two been up to?" She gazed about the room. Her eyes widened. "Oh." She hurried to the oak desk and ran a hand over its polished surface. "It's beautiful."

Filled with wonder, she carefully pulled out and examined each of the two drawers, then as if she were afraid it might break, she gingerly lowered herself into the chair. Closing her eyes, she let out a deep sigh and relaxed against the curved back. No more aching back muscles. No more splinters.

She raised her lashes and stared at Nate. Then she knew. This was what Logan had been doing all those nights in the barn. Despite the exhaustion she'd seen on his face after working in the fields all day, he'd worked late every night making this desk and chair--for her.

The idea of him spending the little bit of spare time he did have to do something like this brought a lump to her throat. Overcome with emotion, she could no longer hold back the warm tears that coursed down her cheeks.

Nate jumped to his feet. "Don't--don't you like it?"

She ran her palms over the desktop and gave him a tremulous smile. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Nobody's ever given me a present before."

"Never?"

"Never anything new," she said quietly. "Never anything especially for me."

Nate shook his head. "Well, doggone. That's too bad."

"Of course, I'm being silly," she said, wiping her face. "This is for the school."

"No," Nate disagreed. He bent and pointed out the initials carved on the railing that ran at the back of the desk top. "See. E.E. It's yours, all right."

For once she was grateful Logan wasn't there, for she would have hugged or kissed him, shamefully embarrassing both of them. Wiping her eyes, she got up from the desk and turned toward the window. She spied the pitcher of spring wildflowers on the small wood stove. "How pretty! Did Logan ...?"

"No, ma'am. I thought they might brighten up the place a bit," he said, his face crimson.

"They are lovely." She bent to examine the delicate blossoms. "Thank you, Nate."

In spite of the youthful exuberance of the children, the rest of the day Beth felt enveloped in a state of bliss. She sat at her wonderful desk, feeling the warm sun beam through the spotless windows, and sniffed air fragrant with the scent of the spring flowers. But the best thing, she thought, was the fact that

someone--no, two someones--cared enough to do something special just for her.

Clearing the table after supper late that night, Beth was keenly disappointed that Logan hadn't joined them. Now that the days were getting longer, he took full advantage of the twilight and cooler temperatures of the evening hours.

When the dishes were done, Granny Jo prepared a plate of food, along with eating utensils, and covered it with a cloth. She handed it to Beth. "Child, would you take this to Logan? He must be pert near starved by now."

"I'd be happy to." Beth hung her apron on a peg by the door. The food would be a good excuse to thank him for the desk.

When she was leaving the dogtrot, old Beau came from beneath the porch to join her. She paused to rub his long silky ears and smiled when he groaned his gratitude. "Come on, boy. Let's see if we can find your master."

The bloodhound at her heels, Beth walked toward the zigzagging split-rail fence where she'd seen Logan working earlier that day. In spite of the lateness of the hour, the ring of the ax told her he still chopped at the thick brush lining the far side of the pasture, and she made her way through the sweet-

smelling grass to join him.

Remembering her last encounter with the ax, she stayed at safe distance and called his name.

He turned, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "What are you doing out here so late?"

She held out the plate. "Granny Jo sent you this. She knew you must be hungry after working so hard all day."

"I could eat a bite or two." He took the plate and sat on a nearby log. "Have a seat, then you can take the plate back after I finish. Granny Jo gets real upset if one of her dishes gets broken." He watched her gracefully settle on the other end, arranging her skirts on either side of her. Like a butterfly on a flower, he thought. He waited. *Well, did she like it?*

She raised her head and gazed at the stars. "It's beautiful out here."

He looked at the piles of slash to be burned. Acres of scrub brush yet to be cleared. The field he couldn't finish, because he'd broken the plow. "Looks like a lot of work to me," he said, taking a bite.

"The air's so clean and fresh."

Logan sniffed. Good thing she was sitting down there. From where he sat, the only thing he could smell was his own sweat. He shot her a slightly perturbed look. She still hadn't said a word about the desk. He shoveled the rest of the stew into his mouth and sopped the remaining gravy with a biscuit.

Every bone in his body aching, he got to his feet. "Here you go." He handed her the plate. "Tell

Granny Jo it was mighty good."

"I know she'll be happy to hear you enjoyed it." She covered the plate with the cloth. Like a big-eyed, little owl, she peered up at him through the glasses. "Logan?" she began, her voice warm and soft as a summer wind.

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"I--I wanted to thank you for the desk and chair. They are beautiful--and comfortable, too. I know how hard you must have worked."

Gazing down at her upturned face, he clenched his fists, his mind warring with the inclination to grab her and kiss her silly. Then the breeze brought the scent of stale perspiration, reminding him of his unwashed state. Not wanting to embarrass both of them, he cleared his throat and stepped away.

The idea that he'd wanted to kiss her put him in such a disgruntled state, he practically snarled at her. "You don't need to thank me. I would have done it for anybody."

A stricken look came over her face. Even in the moonlight he could see her eyes fill with tears. "Of course you would have. I didn't mean to imply that I was anyone special." She clutched the plate to her chest and ran from the field.

Beau cocked his head, gave Logan a puzzled look, then trotted after her.

"Dammit!" Logan felt like the worst kind of miserable jackass. She'd been so sweet, and he'd

practically bitten her head off. Why had he done it? He shrugged. Hell, he didn't know. Just naturally contrary, he guessed. Releasing a weary sigh, he picked up the ax and stalked toward the brushy stumps.

Chapter 10

Gazing over the classroom, Beth thanked God for giving her a friend like Hannah. When Beth had written about the destruction of the classroom, she'd lamented the fact that the children had no slates and no books except for the odd assortment that she'd packed in the trunk. But along with the last mail delivery, she had received several large boxes and had opened them to find a wealth of slates, pencils, chinks, blue-backed spellers, McGuffey readers, and a slightly dented but still usable globe.

Even though the items were well used, the students treated them as treasures to be handled carefully and put away at the end of the day. Now in their second month, they labored over such favorites as the *Pictorial Spelling Book*, whose interesting reading lessons were interspersed with numerous etchings.

To her delight, even Seth, who'd been so reticent, now showed a fondness for an old *Peter Parley's Geography*, containing nine maps and seventy-five engravings. Fascinated by the tales and customs of faraway peoples and lands, he always wanted to be the one to locate them on the globe.

But even with the books, she'd had little success with mathematics until she'd changed the lessons to something the children could relate to. By replacing words like oranges and bananas, which most of them had never seen, with words like hides and traps, for the boys, and yard goods, needles, and pins for

the girls, she'd managed to get their interest.

She ran her palms over her oak desk and wished other things could be handled as easily. Logan's remark the night she had tried to thank him had hurt her more than she was willing to admit. He'd let her know in no uncertain terms that he didn't consider her anything special. That made her even more determined to prove to him that she was a competent teacher.

She felt herself blush with embarrassment, remembering how he had moved away from her. *Probably afraid I'd kiss him again. Well, he needn't worry about that.* He'd certainly never given her any encouragement, and heaven knows she wasn't the type to go around throwing herself at the man.

It was as though he had built a wall around himself and wasn't about to let anything or anyone make it crumble. She traced her initials with her fingertip and sighed. It would have been nice if they could have been friends.

Beau let out a soft woof, diverting Logan's attention from the harness he was mending. The old bloodhound sniffed the air. Then bounding from his place at Logan's feet, he loped toward the house to join Elizabeth for their usual evening stroll.

Logan's gaze trailed the pair, wishing he might join them, but he was too ashamed. He hadn't seen

her since she'd come to the pasture that night. Tearing his eyes away, he focused on the broken bridle, but found he couldn't concentrate.

In spite of his determination to do otherwise, he'd thought of nothing but the glow on her face when she'd tried to thank him. The glow he'd wiped out with his defensive remark. He still didn't know what had made him say what he did, but he could have bitten his tongue off the moment the words left his mouth.

Even though he was exhausted, he couldn't sleep. The wounded look in her wide pansy eyes haunted his dreams. Because he couldn't face her, he'd kept to himself, only going to the house for meals when everyone else was in bed.

He had the feeling Granny Jo knew what he'd done, even though he doubted Elizabeth would have told her. He shook his head. At times it was uncanny how that old woman knew things, especially things pertaining to him.

He watched Beth and Beau disappear over the top of the ridge. Now that it was warmer, she went there most every night. Knowing she wouldn't return for hours, he placed the harness aside and strode to the house to get a bite to eat.

When he entered the dogtrot, he noticed the younger kids engaged in a game of tag in the yard at the other end of the house. Even though he knew it was past their bedtime, he hadn't the heart to break up

their game. When he stepped inside the kitchen, Nate was stretched out on one of the floor rugs sound asleep.

Sally Mae sat before the fire, sewing. "Logan! Look what I did with those dress goods you bought me." She got to her feet and flattened a half-finished garment to her body. "Isn't it pretty?" She whirled. "Elizabeth helped me cut it out."

"It's real nice, honey." He smiled, remembering what a tomboy she'd been before the teacher had arrived. Wouldn't be long before he'd have to beat the boys off with a stick.

Feeling his age, Logan turned toward the stove and saw Granny Jo set a steaming plate on the table. A disapproving frown on her face, she picked up the enameled pot and poured him some coffee. "I figured you'd come sneakin' in about now."

"I'm not sneakin'." Avoiding her sharp eyes, he slid into his chair. He didn't know how Granny Jo did it, but since he was a toddler he'd never been able to get away with anything. She'd known every single bad deed he'd ever done.

The old lady put her hands on her hips. "Yes, you are. You're ashamed to face Lizabet."

"I am not." He felt like a kid about to get a lickin'.

"She's a fine girl and the best teacher we've ever had." Granny Jo shook her finger at him. "There was no call for you to make her cry."

A sinking feeling walloped him in the pit of his stomach. *I made her cry?* His food stuck in his throat. He took a swig of coffee to force it down. Dammit, he wished she hadn't told him that. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"You did it, anyhow." Granny Jo's blue eyes narrowed. "Now you can make amends."

Logan saw the determination in his grandmother's eyes. "All right." He sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

Granny Jo placed her blue-veined hand over his. "Well, you might tell her you're sorry."

Logan scowled.

"Or..." She paused.

"Or, what?"

She smiled. "The circuit preacher's comin' back to the holler on Sunday. There'll be a meetin'. Maybe she might like to go to church with you."

"And maybe she wouldn't," he mumbled.

"She'll go." A smile creased her wrinkled face. "If you ask her."

"I'll ask her. Won't get no peace till I do."

"Well, now that we've got that settled, guess I'll finish the dishes." She picked up his plate and took it to the sink.

Logan grinned. He got up from the table and gave his grandmother a hug before leaving the house. Feeling better than he had all week, he followed the path to the lookout.

Beth sat on the bench under the sweet-gum tree.

His mouth dry, his heart pounding, he felt as nervous as a kid about to ask for his first date. He tried to speak, but when his voice came out a croak, he ended up clearing his throat.

She glanced over her shoulder. When she saw who it was, she turned away.

"Nice night, isn't it?" he ventured.

"Uh-huh."

"Mind if I sit down?"

"It's your bench," she said, her voice cool.

He sighed and gingerly eased down on the opposite end of the rock seat. He could tell she had no intention of making this easy. Well, he'd try another tactic. He sniffed the air. "Smell that?"

"I don't smell anything."

"That's because you aren't mountain-born." He inched closer. "Try it." Together they took a deep breath.

"I still don't smell anything."

He leaned back and stretched his arms along the edge of the seat behind her. His eyes moved over hers. "Wild honeysuckle, in that canyon to your left. Behind us is fresh dirt from the field I plowed today." He pointed toward the bluff. "That musky smell is mushrooms in the glade below us by the spring." He gazed at the sky. "That sharp scent coming from behind us is spicebush."

He noticed other things as well, things he dared not mention. The freshly washed fragrance of her hair. The clean spicy cinnamon perfume of her skin, as well as the lavender, old-lady scent that clung to the faded black dress she wore.

"What else do you smell, Logan?" Through the spectacles, she gazed up at him, her deep purple eyes wide and innocent.

"Woodland violets," he murmured, drawn into their depths. A cool breeze wafted up from the rim of the canyon. He saw her shiver. "You're cold and it's getting late. I'll walk you down the hill."

"No." A guarded look in her eye, she put out a staying hand. "I know the way. You stay for a while." With Beau by her side, she rose and walked away.

"Lizzie?"

She turned. "Yes, Logan?"

"Would you like to go to church with me tomorrow?" he blurted before he had time to change his mind.

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head. "I'd like that. I have missed going to meeting." He didn't realize he been holding his breath until he was forced to let it out. "Good night, Lizzie." She gave him a faint smile, then snapping her fingers to call Beau, she headed down the mountain.

Chapter 11

Elizabeth ran her palms over the sides of her head, then finding one stray hair that wouldn't behave, she moistened a fingertip and plastered it flat. Since the circuit preacher only came to the hollow every two months, this would be the first time she'd attended services and she wanted to look her best. She straightened her collar, then paused to touch her brooch, as she often did when she was nervous.

A frown wrinkled her brow. She discovered this morning that apparently all the children had come down with colds, which seemed strange since they had all been fine the day before. Since Granny Jo thought it would be better if they stayed home, Beth would be alone with Logan on the ride into town.

She thought of the night before when he had come to the lookout and invited her to church. Rather than his usual surly self, the man had actually been pleasant. Why? she wondered. His sudden change in attitude unnerved her. She almost preferred him to be disagreeable. At least then she knew what to expect.

He'd certainly kept his distance the night she had attempted to thank him for the desk and chair. Evidently he'd thought she was throwing herself at him again.

With the getup she'd adopted, he'd made it quite clear he didn't find her attractive, which was exactly

what she wanted. But life would be a little easier if they weren't snarling at each other all the time. She'd even hoped they might become friends. A wistful expression crossed her face. When she caught her reflection in the mirror, it instantly vanished. Disgusted with herself for harboring such a ridiculous thought, she turned away from the glass. "Save your friendship for someone who wants it, Elizabeth. Logan Winfield most certainly does not."

She eyed the door, and found herself reluctant to leave the room. Now that she'd spent all morning getting ready for church, she doubted he would even show up to take her. She stood, wondering what to do, when Sally Mae bounced into the bedroom.

"Do you mind if I ride in to church with you and Logan?" Sally Mae asked, yanking the rag curlers from her hair.

Beth smiled in relief. So he did intend to go. "Of course not." Actually she'd be delighted to have company. Now, during the trip to town, she wouldn't be on pins and needles trying to make polite conversation.

Sally Mae quickly changed her dress and ran a comb through her freshly curled hair. "There. How's that?"

"You look lovely." Beth gave her reassuring smile. She picked up her Bible and her reticule. "Shall we go?"

They reached the porch just as Logan pulled the wagon up in front of the house. Holding the reins, he scowled at his sister. "I didn't know you were coming, too. I thought you had a cold."

"Well, I feel better now. Besides, I wanted to show off my new dress." Sally Mae eyed the empty wagon. "It's not like you don't have enough room." She gave him a teasing smile. "Unless, of course, you wanted to be alone with Elizabeth."

Beth glanced up and met his eyes. A flood of crimson rose to paint her cheeks.

"No! That's not it at all," he said quickly. "You're always making us late." He pulled his watch out of his pocket and checked the time. "Like now. If you're going, get in."

When Sally Mae climbed up the wagon side and plopped herself down next to Logan, Beth felt a strange sense of disappointment. Don't be a goose, she told herself. He doesn't want you along any more than he wants his sister. Then why did he ask me? another voice whispered.

The rest of the trip she kept busy trying to stay on the seat. Logan, apparently determined not to be tardy, sent the wagon lurching over the mud-filled ruts. Since the trip was too hair-raising for any attempt at speech, at least she didn't have to wonder how to converse with him.

White-knuckled tense, she let out a shuddering sigh of relief when they careened into the yard of the long log building that served as a community hall and church. Her bonnet askew, her dress splattered with mud, she straightened her dangling spectacles and peered at her companions.

"Whew! Mercy, I'm glad that's over," Sally Mae said, glaring at her brother. "You trying to outrun the devil or something, Logan Winfield?" She flicked a splotch of mud off her cheek. "Never saw anybody in such a hurry to get to church."

Seeing that Logan had no intention of helping her, Beth grabbed hold of the wagon seat and lowered herself to the ground.

Muttering under her breath, Sally Mae followed. The blond girl waved a hand toward the empty churchyard. "After all that, we're the first ones here." She made a face at her brother, then bent to wipe at her dress. "Probably a good thing, too. It'll take an hour to get the mud off our clothes." She swished her skirts. "Come on, Elizabeth. I'll show you to the pump."

Beth glanced at Logan, who still sat on the wagon seat.

Through the beard, he gave her a halfhearted smile, then turned the team toward a stand of trees.

She stared after him in amazement. Could he be upset because Sally Mae had come along? Not knowing what to make of him, she followed Sally Mae to the back of the building.

Beth barely finished removing the last of the mud when a trio of wagons pulled up in front of the church. When Sally Mae gave a breathless sigh, Beth looked up to see a man in a Stetson hat and black Price Albert coat making his way toward them.

"That's the preacher," Sally Mae whispered. "Isn't he handsome?"

Beth nodded. Perfectly groomed from the tip of his hat to the toe of his highly polished boots, the man fairly oozed self- confidence and charm. He gave her a smile so engaging that it made her a bit giddy. With his dark good looks one might have taken him for a gambler. He certainly didn't resemble any clergyman she'd ever met.

"Hello. You must be the new schoolteacher," he said in a deep voice. "I'm Reverend Johnson, the circuit minister." He held out a hand.

"Yes." She extended her own icy fingers. "I'm Elizabeth Eastgate." Her heart raced when his warm grip closed over hers.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Eastgate."

"Please call me Elizabeth," she blurted. Wondering what had ever possessed her, she felt a blush of embarrassment rise from the tip of her toes.

He ran a finger across the side of his well trimmed mustache and grinned. "Only if you'll call me Joe."

"Somebody better call you to the pulpit," Logan said from behind them. "That is, if we are going to have services today." He took Beth's arm and guided her toward the church door.

She hadn't realized until that moment that the preacher still held her hand. Feeling like a worm caught between two roosters, she glanced up at both men.

Logan, wearing a beard and glaring.

The preacher, clean shaven and smiling back.

Her, caught in the middle.

Sucking in a breath, she pulled free and ducked between them. Not daring to look behind her, she grabbed Sally Mae's hand and fled into the building. Finding an end spot on a bench just wide enough for two, she slid into the seat.

Giggling, Sally Mae eased in beside her.

Even though she couldn't see him, she knew that Logan had found a seat directly behind her, for all during the service she felt his eyes on the back of her neck.

And from the pulpit, the minister watched her so intently that others in the congregation turned and stared. Her face scarlet, she kept her downcast eyes fixed on her Bible and longed for a place to hide. When the last song was sung and the services brought to an end, she realized, much to her chagrin, that she could not remember one word of the sermon.

As the congregation stood, preparing to file out of the building, Sally Mae bolted for the door.

Anxious to escape, Beth made ready to follow. But to her dismay, Logan stepped into the aisle and blocked her way. A disapproving frown on his face, he took her arm and escorted her from the church. When she would have balked, he slid his arm firmly around her waist and herded her toward the wagon.

Mutinous at being treated like a wayward child, she pulled from his grasp. Before he could stop her, she straightened her dress and hastened her steps toward the spot where Sally Mae stood talking to the Lathams.

"Dammit," Logan muttered behind her.

Striving to maintain her dignity, she ignored him and walked straight ahead. "Good morning, Kate," she said to a red-headed woman. "Hello, Simon." She turned to the stout, balding man. "Isn't this a lovely day?" She smiled at their daughter, Mary.

"Hello, Elizabeth," Kate Latham answered. Her freckled face crinkled in a warm greeting that lit her willow-green eyes. "Mary has told us such wonderful things about the school."

"Our chick thinks you are a quite a teacher," Simon Latham added. "We think so, too."

"Thank you. Mary is an excellent student."

Engrossed in conversation, Beth was surprised when she noticed the handsome reverend standing by her side.

"May I join you folks?" he asked, removing his hat.

"You don't need to ask, Joe," Simon said, a teasing smile on his face. "I guess you've met our new schoolmarm."

"I have indeed had the honor," the minister said. He looked at the two giggling girls. "Sally Mae,

does Granny Jo still make those corn dodgers I like so much?" he asked.

"She sure does." Sally Mae cut her eyes sideways to where Logan stood with his hands jammed in his pockets. "Say, Reverend, why don't you come for supper?" she said loud enough for her voice to carry. "I'm sure Granny will whip up a special batch of corn dodgers just for you."

"Why, how kind." He smiled at Beth. "I'd be delighted."

She saw Logan had disappeared around the side of the building. He returned shortly, driving the team. "Let's go," he called out from the wagon seat. "Granny Jo will be waiting." He looked at the minister. "And we're havin' biscuits, not corn dodgers."

The reverend chuckled. "Well, I'm sure whatever she has will be delicious." He looped his arms through Beth's and Sally Mae's and escorted them to the wagon.

He helped Sally Mae in and watched her take the seat next to Logan. When Sally Mae twisted and called goodbye to Mary Latham, the handsome reverend turned to Beth and took both her hands. "I have a couple of babies to baptize, then I'll be right out."

Her eyes widened when instead of offering her a hand up like he had the younger girl, he bent, slid an arm beneath her knees and deposited her onto the wagon seat.

"Thank you," she murmured, not knowing what else to say. Then seeing the outraged expression on Logan's face, she bent her head and straightened her skirt.

"Haw!" Logan slapped the reins on the mules' backsides and sent them leaping toward the road.

Startled, Beth grabbed her hat with one hand, the edge of the seat with the other. *My stars! Not again!* She glanced behind her.

Joe Johnson cocked his head and winked.

She blinked in shock. Not having much experience with men, she didn't know whether she should be flattered or insulted to have him take such liberties. With the mules bolting down the road, she was too busy trying to stay in one piece to be either.

When the wagon finally lurched to a stop in the ranch yard, she was amazed they were still alive. Her bonnet dangled by one string. Her hair drooped every which-a-way. Her dress was so rumpled and splattered with mud, she looked like she'd been through a tornado. Sally Mae looked much the same.

"Logan Winfield, you are a disgrace," Sally Mae wailed. "Look at me. You ruined my new dress. You wait till I tell Granny Jo!" She swatted Logan on the arm, then she leaped from the wagon and ran toward the house.

Embarrassed to be caught looking so untidy, Elizabeth wanted to hurry after her, but found her legs were too weak to hold her. She gasped, reeling unsteadily. Her bonnet toppled to the ground. When she thought she might follow it, rough hands slid under her arms and lifted her to safety.

His face grim, Logan jumped down beside her. He bent and handed her the bonnet. His steely-blue

eyes locked on hers, he ran a rough finger down her mud-splattered cheek then wiped it on his pants. "Better go wash your face," he said coolly. "Wouldn't do to have that fancy preacher man seeing you lookin' like such a mess."

Beth shut her gaping mouth. Her fury rose like a wildfire in a hot wind. "You're d-despicable," she stammered, finding it hard to get her breath.

"Yeah, ain't I?" He ran a hand down his beard as his insolent gaze roved the length of her muddy dress. A crooked smile twisted his face.

"Oh!" Incensed by his scandalous behavior, she whipped up her hand and gave him a resounding slap. *Laugh about that!* Not waiting to see his reaction, she whirled and ran for the house.

Chapter 12

Adding an extra swipe to his already plastered-down hair, Logan critically studied his image in the mirror. "Never seen such goings-on. You'd think the good Lord himself was coming to Sunday dinner instead of that Bible-toter."

They'd had the preacher for three days after Christmas. It should have been someone else's turn. He didn't know why the Winfields had to be blessed twice in a row.

The Reverend Joe Johnson made his rounds on horseback to the various mountain communities, visiting Devil's Hollow every two months, and usually with all the mamas with marriageable daughters competing for the bachelor's attention, the Winfields only had the pleasure of the traveling minister's company once a year. But that was before he'd seen Lizzie, Logan thought, slamming the brush down. Why, he'd caught the man holding her hand in broad daylight--before the whole congregation!

A rush of jealousy flowed through his veins. He fumed, remembering the way the preacher had stared at her all during the service. Everybody else had noticed, too. It had been quite clear the man had more on his mind than the lesson he'd been trying to deliver. Not that Logan remembered what it was.

Still, the preacher's ogling Lizzie had been downright embarrassing.

She must have felt that way, too. She'd turned beet red and stayed that way for most of the sermon. But, he noticed, she sure hadn't done anything to discourage his attention.

If Sally Mae hadn't stopped to lollygag with the Lathams, he might have been able to get them out of there before the man wrangled an invitation to dinner. Good thing those babies needed baptizing, or they would have been forced to put up with him all day.

Logan straightened his string tie. It wasn't that he didn't like Joe Johnson, because he did. "But he doesn't have to make such a blamed nuisance of himself."

Scrutinizing his own spit-polished image in the mirror, he thought of how the reverend's dapper appearance appealed to the ladies. He had to admit that Reverend Joe, with his dark hair and mustache, cut quite a dashing figure in his fine broadcloth suit.

He peered at his own bearded face, then wiped a speck of mud off his worn black suit jacket. How could a rough-cut backwoodsman like himself hope to compete?

Compete? Hell, he had no intention of competing for any woman's attention, let alone the teacher's. Slamming the tackroom door, he left the barn and strode toward the house.

"Supper's ready," Sally Mae called from the porch, giving him an unfriendly look. "My, ain't you all shined up."

He guiltily noticed she'd changed clothes. "A man's got a right to look decent once in a while."

"I guess he'd better when another feller's fixin' to steal his girl." Escaping before he had a chance to answer, Sally Mae stuck her nose in the air and marched into the house.

"She's not my girl," he muttered, but anger drew his mouth into a thin line when he opened the dining-room door.

Sitting in Logan's own place beside Elizabeth at the head of the table and already holding her hand, Joe Johnson gazed deeply into her sparkling violet eyes.

Logan cleared his throat and banged the door shut. The two, so engrossed in each other, barely noticed. He stalked to the head of the table and stood until Joe glanced up at him. "Preacher, I believe you've got my seat."

"Sorry, Logan." His eyes still on Beth, Joe Johnson got to his feet.

Ruth piped up from the other side of Beth. "Preacher Johnson, you can sit in my spot."

The reverend smiled. "Thank you, Ruth. I believe I will."

Ignoring the murderous expression Logan threw at him, the preacher took Ruth's place next to Beth.

Logan flopped into his own chair. "Let's eat."

"Mercy, you must be starved to be in such a hurry," Granny Jo said. "I just took the corn dodgers out of the pot."

"Corn dodgers?" Logan drew his brows into a point. "I thought we were having biscuits."

"We were," Ruth said. "Granny Jo knew how much the reverend liked her corn dodgers, so she made them instead."

"I am partial to them." The minister grinned at Logan, then waited until Granny Jo was seated. "And now shall we have the blessing?"

"May as well, since you already been holding the teacher's hand the last half hour," Logan grumbled. He latched onto her other one, locking it securely in his. When he felt her wince, he relaxed his hold a bit but still held it tighter than usual.

Logan thought the preacher's blessing was longer than his sermon. He was sure the minister did it deliberately so he could continue to hold Elizabeth's hand. When Joe paused for breath, Logan shouted, "Amen. Pass the vittles."

The preacher gave him a startled look, then chuckled. "Amen, brother."

All through the meal Logan found it hard to take his eyes off of Elizabeth. He could have been eating straw for all the attention he paid to his food. But he did notice Joe Johnson put away a goodly portion of the platter of fried chicken, potatoes, and gravy as well as most of the corn dodgers. The preacher also tucked away three pieces of dried apple pie, including the piece Logan had hoped to have for a late-night snack.

When he had finished his supper, the preacher raised his napkin and dabbed the crumbs from his

mouth. "That was delicious as usual, Granny Jo. I'll have to visit more often. The hollow might be a good place to have a tent revival meeting," he said, eyeing Beth as if she were another portion of dessert.

"Now, Joe, that wouldn't hardly be fair to your other flocks, us keeping you around here so much," Logan said evenly. "Why they might take to sinning for sure with you not there to ride herd on them." He pushed his chair back from the table. "Now I guess I'd better show you to the barn so you can saddle up and get back to town before too late."

"Back to town?" Joe frowned. "But I thought..."

"There's been some changes around here since Miss Eastgate arrived," Logan said smoothly, guiding him toward the exit. He reached for the wall peg and removed the man's hat. "I'm sorry, old son, but there just isn't any room. And while I know you wouldn't mind bunking with me in the barn, the Lathams have that nice spare bedroom all ready and waiting."

"But--but--," Joe stammered, peering around Logan.

Logan raised his arm to open the door, just missing the man's nose in the process. "My goodness. Almost got you that time, preacher," he said slyly. "Sure wouldn't do for you to show up in town with a black eye. Would it?"

Joe sighed. "Guess I'd better be hitting the road. Good evening, ladies. Granny Jo, thank you for the delicious meal."

When the preacher acted like he would say more, Logan shoved the hat into his breadbasket. Joe's breath left him in a whoosh. Before he could recover, Logan had him out the door.

The minister turned in protest when Logan gave him a gentle shove toward the barn. "Logan, what is the matter with you?"

"I don't know what you mean, Joe." He glared at his friend. "Should something be the matter with me?"

"I was hoping to spend some more time with Miss Eastgate before I left. Maybe take a walk in the pasture," Joe suggested.

"You wouldn't like it. Too many cow pies. Besides, you've spent more than enough time with her already," Logan growled.

"Ho-ho." Joe Johnson chuckled. "So that's it. You're afraid I'll beat your time."

"No. That's not it at all," Logan assured him. "Since she's staying here, she's my responsibility. I'm just watching out for her like I would Ruthie or Sally Mae."

"If you say so." The preacher shoved his hat to a jaunty angle, then tossed the saddle on his gelding and tightened the cinch. "Goodbye, friend." Joe stuck out his hand. "I'll say a prayer for you." He grinned. "You'll need it."

Logan shook his hand, then watched the preacher mount his horse and ride toward town. Too

confused by his emotions to go back to the house or go to bed, he wandered up the hill to the lookout.

Beth tossed in her bed, angry at Logan for his boorish behavior. She'd never seen him like that before. He was always generally disagreeable, but tonight his behavior was disgraceful. How could he expect the children to grow up decent when he set such a bad example?

Joe Johnson, on the other hand, represented everything a gentleman should be. Recalling his dark good looks and his engaging ways, she sighed. My, he was a handsome man.

Logan Winfield, on the other hand, resembled a cross between a grizzly bear and a caveman. He also had the disposition to match. She drew her lips tight remembering her bedraggled appearance when he'd brought her home. She'd noticed he wasn't caked with mud.

Her thoughts returned to the circuit preacher. Why, it was positively scandalous the way he'd held her hand all night. But despite Granny Jo's muttered declaration that Joe Johnson was a scalawag, Beth was flattered. If she wasn't careful, that man could turn her head. In spite of his impetuous ways, she liked him. She thought Joe liked her, too. Earlier he'd suggested an after-supper walk in the moonlight. That was before Logan threw him out.

She wondered, if they had taken that walk, would Joe have tried to kiss her? She perversely

contemplated what Logan might have done if he'd seen them.

She grinned, recalling Logan's comments when Joe had held her hand. He'd certainly hustled the preacher out the door and on his way. *But why?* Realization flashed like lightning. *Could Logan be jealous?* She hastened to dismiss the thought. *Probably afraid I'll get married and leave, then he'd have to find another teacher. But then again, that idea should make him happy.*

When Sally Mae groaned, Beth punched her pillow and forced herself to close her eyes, but Logan's image still lingered.

Logan Winfield jealous? Ridiculous. She didn't think there was a romantic bone in the man's body.

Chapter 13

After a restless night Beth awakened with a raging headache. She blamed her lack of sleep on Logan, since he was the one who had invaded her dreams. Seeing the sun already high in the sky, she leaped from the bed, had a quick wash, and scrambled into her clothes. As she twisted her hair into the familiar tight knot, she wished, because of her headache, she dared to leave it loose. To make matters worse, she also had the sniffles. Apparently she had contacted the children's cold. She shoved her spectacles on her nose and hurried from the room. Fine way to start a monday morning with the teacher being late for school.

When she entered the kitchen, a scowling Logan waited at the table. "Did you forget you're supposed to teach school today? Or is this some sort of holiday I didn't hear about?"

"It's no holiday and I didn't forget. I overslept," she snapped, in no mood to put up with his peevishness.

"I thought you might be so busy dreaming about the preacher you forgot it was Monday."

"Maybe I was," she said between gritted teeth. Not in a million years would she give him the satisfaction of knowing it was he who kept her awake. "Anyhow, who I dream about is none of your

concern."

"Can we say the blessing before the brawl starts," Nate complained. "I'm hungry."

Shooting daggers at Logan, Beth plopped into her seat. She stuck out her hand. He engulfed it in his, squeezing it so tight she was tempted to jab him with a fork.

Watching her out of the corner of his eye, Logan bent his head. "Dear Lord, bless this food and the hands that prepared it. Help us in our daily work, and uh, ease Granny Jo's rheumatism. Help me get the field cleared, and, uh..."

He droned on about one thing and another, all the time squeezing her hand and stroking the top of it with his thumb.

Mortified, she tried to free herself, but he only tightened his grip. When he showed no indication of concluding his oration, she could contain her temper no longer. She drew back her boot and gave him a swift kick in the shin.

"Ow!" He shot her a resentful look. He rolled his eyes toward heaven. "And Lord, please put Miss Eastgate in a better mood before she teaches her class."

"Logan Winfield, that's positively sacrilegious," she hissed.

Logan rubbed his bruised ankle. "Don't seem like kicking a body who's trying to say the blessing is too Christian-like either."

Feeling anything but Christian-like, she glared at him.

"Dear Lord, please give us some peace in this house. Amen," Granny Jo finished. "Now, children, quit your fussin' and pass the vittles."

Sally Mae giggled and poked Nate. "You'd think they were married the way they're always arguing."

"Maybe they're in love," Nate chimed in. Claspig his hands together, he closed his eyes and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

"Heaven forbid!" Beth said, staring at Logan. In love with him? She'd have to be out of her mind.

"Amen to that!" Logan snarled back.

Granny Jo noisily stirred her coffee, bringing a tentative truce.

Beth bent her head and concentrated on her meal.

Logan finished his in silence, then to Beth's relief he left the table.

More than late, due to Logan's lengthy sermon at breakfast, Beth dashed into her room and retrieved her bonnet. She also whisked up her lesson satchel and the letter she'd written on Saturday to Teddy. Hurrying down the steps toward the waiting mule, she saw Logan standing there holding Molly's reins. "Now what?" she asked. "Another lecture?"

"It wasn't a lecture. I was trying to look out for you."

"Hah! I don't appreciate being treated like a child," she said, slamming the gate. "I can take care of myself." She snatched the reins. "And I don't need you to choose my friends." When he continued to block her way, she fixed him with an icy stare.

He closed his hand over hers. His face was stern, but the eyes that met hers were like deep pools of quicksilver blue. "I do intend to watch over you--whether you like it or not."

Captured in their light, Elizabeth was unprepared for the warm tingling sensation that shook her from head to foot. "I-I ..." she began, then forgot what she was going to say. Her heart pounded so erratically she feared she might faint.

He released her hand. "Guess you'd better get to school before those younguns tear it down."

"What?" she asked, coming back to earth.

He grinned and pointed toward the mule.

"Oh. School. Of course. I have to get to school." So flustered she considered it a miracle she got into the saddle, she lifted the reins to leave the yard.

"Lizzie?"

"What now?" She turned in the saddle to see him holding up a white envelope. It was her letter to Teddy!

"You dropped this," he said coolly. "Another *friend*?"

"Yes," she said, not liking his attitude. "A very *dear* friend." She snatched the envelope from his hand and tucked it into her satchel. Before he could say another word, she kicked the mule into a trot.

Pausing only long enough to post her letter, Beth arrived at the school to find pandemonium had broken out in her absence.

James Lee Quinn, grass snake in hand, gleefully pursued the shrieking Jenkins sisters while Jacob Quinn and Seth circled each other, ready to engage in fisticuffs.

Ruth ran to meet her. "Miss Elizabeth, somebody put a frog in the water bucket."

"Oh, dear." Beth touched her hand to her throbbing temples, wondering if she would make it through the day. She hurriedly dismounted and separated the boys. Then she turned Molly over to Seth to put in the corral with the other mounts.

James Lee got the job of fetching a fresh pail of water.

Snake and frog confined to jars for science, she seated the children and marked their attendance in her teacher's diary.

"You were late," Elmira said nastily. "Are you going to mark yourself tardy?"

Not daring to answer because if she said what was on her mind, she might get fired, Beth gave her a disgruntled look and went back to her entries.

With her cold progressing from bad to worse and with the children doing everything possible to try

her patience, Beth thought the school day would never end. When it did, she gratefully locked the doors and staggered toward the mule.

The blood roared in her ears, her eyes burned like they were coated with pepper. No matter how much water she drank, her mouth felt dry as cotton. Having all she could do to stay in the saddle, she looped the reins over the pommel and gave the mule its head. "Go home, Molly."

Logan, weaving a hackamore under a tree by the barn, glanced up when Molly ambled into the yard. He watched the mule meander here and there to snatch up a mouthful of new green grass and shook his head. "Lizzie will have that mule so spoiled, the critter won't take a step without wanting to stop and eat."

He squinted, noticing the way Beth drooped in the saddle. She usually sat ramrod straight. He chuckled. She must have had a hard day.

When the mule halted at the hitching rail and she still didn't dismount, a cold fist gripped the pit of his stomach. Realizing something was wrong, he dropped the bridle and raced up the hill to her side.

Her face flushed, her eyes closed, she hunched over the saddle, not even aware he was there.

"Elizabeth, what's the matter?" When she didn't answer, he reached up and grasped her arm. Even

through the thick fabric, he could detect the heat of her skin. "My God! Lizzie?"

Clutching the saddle horn so tightly her knuckles were white, she opened her red-rimmed eyes. "Logan?" She swayed, then her eyes closed. She toppled, unconscious, into his arms.

Scooping her up before she hit the ground, he sprinted toward the house. "Granny Jo!"

"I'm right here, Logan. No need to holler." Grumbling, his grandmother bustled out of the back bedroom. She stopped, her eyes growing large. "Mercy sakes! What's wrong with Lizabet?"

"I don't know. She's burning up."

"Put her in here," Granny Jo instructed. She scurried back into her room and pulled the covers down on the freshly made bed. "We'll move Joseph in with the girls. Until we know what it is, it's best not to expose the rest of the children."

Shaken by her words, Logan gently laid Elizabeth on the bed. "What do you suppose could have made her so sick?"

Granny Jo placed her palm across Beth's forehead. She raised her head, her blue eyes dark and serious. "She's got a fever for sure. Better send for Dr. Brown."

Logan raced to the end of the dogtrot and yelled for Nate to saddle Lucifer and ride for the doctor. Then he spun on his heel and hurried back into the room.

Beth's black dress and petticoats lay over the end of the bedstead, her shoes and stockings on the

chair. Clad only in her chemise and drawers, she lay still as death.

Logan twisted his hat in his hands. Lord, she was little. She'd always been so sassy. He never realized how vulnerable she was until now. He stared helplessly, wishing he had the power to take the sickness away. "What can I do?"

"Fetch me some cool water and towels, then get a fresh nightie from her room," his grandmother instructed.

He ran to do her bidding, returning moments later with the water. Then he'd gone to Elizabeth's room and found the night garment his grandmother had requested. "Anything else?"

"Better gather up some clothes for you and Joseph."

"Why?" Logan's heart leaped into his throat.

Granny Jo met his eyes. "I think it might be scarlet fever. Sally Mae said the Lathams told her of an outbreak in Oakridge. That's just over the ridge as the crow flies."

"But what about you?" he asked. He'd gladly take the risk, but his grandmother was old and feeble.

"Shucks, I had scarlet fever before you were born. I can't get it again." She held out her hand. "Give me that nightgown you're hanging on to, then scoot and let me get her sponged down. It might help the fever till the doctor gets here."

Logan relinquished the old but immaculate, and well-patched nightgown. It was the best he could

find. He never realized Lizzie had such pitiful belongings until he'd gone through her trunk. Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't realized Granny Jo was waiting for him to leave until she ordered him from the room.

Logan paced between the bedroom and the front porch, too restless to settle in either place. He checked on the rest of the children and found them unnaturally quiet and huddled around the fireplace. "How's Elizabeth?" Joseph asked, his small face wreathed in concern.

"Granny Jo's taking good care of her. The doctor will be here by morning. Now it's time you all got to bed." He hoisted Joseph onto his back and gave him a piggyback ride to the girls' room. He tucked him in then returned to the kitchen to see Seth standing by the fire.

"She ain't gonna die, is she, Logan?" Seth asked in a serious voice.

The question pierced Logan like a sharp knife. "No, Seth. She's not going to die." He raised a hand and ruffled his younger brother's hair. "Better get on to bed now."

Seth sighed and walked to the door. "That's good. I like her. And she is a good teacher."

Logan nodded, then unable to stay in one spot, he went back to the porch. Hearing Lizzie cough, he gazed at the darkness, wishing he could hurry the night on its way. Seth's question shook him more than he cared to admit. Scarlet fever was serious. And Elizabeth was very ill.

An owl hooted from somewhere on the hill. A bad omen. Logan raised his head and stared at the sky. She wasn't going to die. She couldn't. He wouldn't let her.

Logan spent a vigilant night, waiting for the doctor to arrive. The first rays of the sun showed Nate and the physician riding into the yard.

After a brief but thorough examination the elderly man stepped into the dogtrot.

"Scarlet fever?" Logan held his breath, waiting.

"No." The physician scratched his head. "Your Miss Eastgate has the measles," he said, peering over his glasses.

"Measles." *Not scarlet fever.* Logan sagged with relief. "Will she be all right, Dr. Brown?"

"Measles can be serious, especially with a fever like she has. And she is such a delicate little thing. Hopefully the medicine I left will break the fever. After the spots appear, she'll be pretty uncomfortable for a few days." The doctor removed a handkerchief and wearily wiped his brow. "Right now she's pretty sick. But I'd say in a couple of weeks, barring complications, she'll be ready to go back to teaching school."

"What kind of complications?" Logan asked.

"Any disease, like measles, weakens the body. With a bad case sometimes patients recover from the measles only to catch diphtheria or pneumonia. There lies the danger. If her fever continues after the spots break out, better come and get me."

She could get well. Or she could still die. The thought left Logan feeling hollow.

The doctor patted Logan's arm. "Don't worry, son. If she stays in bed and doesn't get chilled, then she should be fine." He turned toward the bedroom. "Josephine, where did you say that coffee was?"

When Granny Jo left to fix a bite for the doctor, Logan heard Lizzie cough as she had throughout the night. Worried that she might need something in his grandmother's absence, he slipped into the room and pulled the ladder-backed chair close to the bed.

With her dark hair in braids and the glasses gone, she looked no older than Ruthie. He reached out and lifted a stray curl out of her eyes. The satin skin beneath his fingers was still very hot. "I told you I intend to take care of you, Lizzie. And whether you like it or not, I aim to do just that."

Elizabeth tossed and moaned in her sleep. Opening her eyes, she called for water. Logan gave her a few sips and she drifted off again.

Lost in his thoughts, Logan jumped when a hand closed on his shoulder. "Granny Jo." He ran a hand over his eyes. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Son, I'll sit with Lizabet. You go eat your breakfast."

He nodded. Going to the kitchen, Logan sat down at the table. After a few bites he shoved the plate to one side.

He did his chores then spent the rest of the day pacing between the sickroom and the front porch. It had been hours now and she still wasn't any better.

Heading back from the outhouse, he stared up at the sky, astonished to find it dark. He hadn't even noticed the sun going down. He paused at the well and splashed his face with cold water before entering the house. Even though he'd only been gone a short while, a sense of unease made him hurry to the sickroom.

When he opened the door, Granny Jo looked up and shook her head. Logan's gaze swept the bed. *Still the same.* In the lamplight the girl's skin had the color of alabaster, but the pink spots in her cheeks told him the fever remained.

He looked at his grandmother, seeing the weariness in her eyes. "I think it's time you got some rest." "What about you?"

"I can't." He managed a faint smile. "But no sense in both of us staying up all night." He motioned toward the smaller bed that had been Joseph's. "Get some sleep."

Granny Jo pursed her lips and gave him a strange look. "All right. If you need me, I'll be close by."

Logan retreated to the dogtrot while Granny Jo got ready for bed. When she called, he came back in, turned the lamp down to a soft glow, and took over her vigil. Within minutes, he heard the even breathing that told him his grandmother was sound asleep.

He picked up Elizabeth's hand and traced the thin blue veins with his fingertip. So fine-boned, so fragile. He could crush it just by tightening his fist. Holding her palm in his, he felt the faint flutter of

her pulse against his own strong vibrant pounding. He continued to hold her hand, imagining that by doing so, he could will her his strength.

His eyes burned with lack of sleep, but he didn't dare close them, fearing that if he did, she might need something and he wouldn't hear. Twice more in the night, he lifted her head and forced her to swallow the medicine.

Near daylight, he noticed her palm felt moist. He placed his hand on her brow and felt small beads of perspiration.

He sighed, the tight band of fear in his chest loosened. Thank the Lord. The fever had broken.

Another spasm of coughing racked her body. She kicked at the covers, leaving them in a tangle about her feet. She was so little. But in spite of her size, the slender exposed legs and softly rounded hips reminded him she was a full-grown woman.

She moaned, then turned onto her back. Her nightgown stretched over the soft mounds of her breasts, revealing their dusky pink crests beneath the thin fabric.

Logan stared, a sudden rush of heat infusing his body. Ashamed of his thoughts, he forced his gaze away. When she moaned and thrashed again, Logan remembered what the doctor said about pneumonia. Keeping his eyes on her face, he jerked the sheet, as well as the two quilts, up to her chin. When she made another attempt to kick them off, he pulled them up again and tucked them under the

edge of the mattress. "You have to stay covered, darlin'."

She sleepily opened her eyes. "Logan?"

He bent closer and smoothed a lock of curly hair away from her eyes. "Yes, Lizzie?"

She clasped his hand between the two of hers and gave him a weak smile. "Logan," she whispered. Holding fast to his hand, she closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 14

Granny Jo peeped through the kitchen curtain and saw Logan hurrying back from doing his chores. *Coming to see about Lizabet.* But she knew he wouldn't admit it, not for the world.

She'd had high hopes when he'd sat by the girl's bedside until the fever broke. That had been two nights ago, and outside of looking in when he knew Lizabet was asleep, he hadn't been in the room since. She really couldn't blame him. Now that Elizabeth was awake and broken out in spots the girl had been as prickly as a hedgehog. She'd dodge under the covers every time Logan came near. *Doesn't want him to see her.* Granny Jo grinned. Lizabet did look a fright.

Logan had been alone too long. He needed someone to care for, and someone to care for him. Lizabet could be that someone. *If only I could get them to see it.* But how? Both of them were stubborn as mules.

Lizabet grew stiff around Logan, almost as if she feared to let down her guard. And Logan did have a tendency to be high-handed. But Granny Jo had a feeling that that wasn't the problem, for when he'd gotten too bossy, the girl hadn't hesitated to put him in his place. *No. It had to be something more.* She dropped the edge of the curtain and went back to stir her kettle of chicken soup. Regardless of what it

was, she had no time for matchmaking, not with the younger children sick too. *Good thing my rheumatiz ain't actin' up, cause if it was...*

Hearing Logan enter the room, Granny Jo grew thoughtful. For someone who pretended not to care, he was spending an awful lot of time at the house. She smiled. *Maybe I ought to give him something to occupy his time.*

"How are the kids?" Logan asked, pouring a cup of coffee.

"They're sleepin'." Granny Jo heaved a long, weary sigh.

"You sound wore-out." He slipped an arm around the old lady's shoulder. "Maybe you should go to bed."

"I cain't," she protested, shaking her head. "Somebody has to take care of Lizabet. Sally Mae ain't had the measles, so she cain't do it." She moaned and rubbed her hip. "I guess I just have to keep goin', even if my rheumatiz is painin' me somethin' fierce." She gave him a pitiful look.

"I didn't know you were feeling poorly. Why didn't you say something? I'd have been glad to help."

"What could you do?" She peeped up at him.

"Well, since I'm the only one, besides you, that's had the measles, I could take care of Elizabeth."

She considered him thoughtfully, then she smiled. "All right." She took off her apron and hung it on a hook. "You talked me into it."

After she left, Logan finished his coffee, then went to check on the teacher. He entered the room to find Elizabeth asleep with one hand tucked under her cheek. Not wishing to disturb her, he settled into the chair.

Measles. She looked like a speckled pup. He remembered when he'd had them. Lord, he wouldn't want to go through that again. He'd been so itchy, and his eyes had hurt like fury.

He noticed a long rip in the sleeve of her nightgown. It was her best and so threadbare it was little more than a rag. Knowing how proud she was, he realized she would be embarrassed that he'd seen her things. She must have been awfully poor, he thought.

He frowned. She'd never mentioned her family. Could she be ashamed of them? She didn't seem to be that kind of person, but it would explain why she never talked about her home. He eyed her for a moment then quietly left the room.

When he stepped into the kitchen, he spied Sally Mae sewing in front of the fire. Her hair was neatly braided into a golden crown, her face scrubbed, her dress clean and freshly ironed.

Remembering how she'd looked a few months ago, he had to give the teacher her due.

Sally Mae glanced up at him. "How's Elizabeth?"

"Sleeping." Watching his sister wield the needle, he began to get an idea. "How would you like to do something for me?"

When she nodded, he outlined his plan.

Waking from her nap, Beth felt more miserable and knew she looked worse than she ever had in her life. Itchy red spots covered her body from head to toe. And her chest ached from the hard, dry cough. To make matters worse, every time she opened her eyes, she saw Logan either peering through the door or sitting by her side, grinning like a witless fool. Probably laughing because I look so dreadful, she thought ruefully. The first few times she'd shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep, but being as tired as she was, she didn't have to pretend for long.

Now, after sleeping for most of the last three days, she felt restless and cranky, yet not energetic enough to get up. Tired of lying flat, she plumped her pillows and eased herself upright. She'd just gotten settled when the door opened and Logan stuck his head into the room.

"Lizzie?"

Not again! She closed her eyes and pretended sleep.

"I'll bet you're hungry," he said, sitting on the chair.

She didn't move, hoping he'd go away. He didn't. Hearing the soft whisper of cloth, she opened one eye a crack.

Watching her, he uncovered a bowl. A whiff of fragrant steam rose and drifted toward the bed.

Her nose twitched as she inhaled the delicious aroma. *Chicken soup*. She bit her lip. *Maybe he'll set it down and leave.*

"Looks delicious." He sighed. "But since you're still asleep..." The chair leg scraped against the floor.

She peeked. He was leaving--but so was the soup! "Wait."

He turned, a broad grin on his face. "Hello, there."

"Hello," she muttered. He didn't have to look so danged happy.

"Granny Jo isn't feeling too pert, in case you're wondering why I'm here."

"Has she got the measles, too?" Beth asked, concerned.

"No, but Ruthie and Joseph do. Between Granny Jo's rheumatism and all this nursin', she's plumb tuckered out."

"Oh," she said, feeling guilty.

He nodded toward the bowl. "Figured you might be hungry."

"I am."

He moved a small table close to the bed, then set the bowl and spoon where she could reach it. Then, much to her dismay, he sat down to watch her eat.

She managed a few mouthfuls, then reluctantly placed the spoon to one side. "I'm too tired to eat," she whispered.

"I'll feed you." Before she could protest, he had her propped on pillows and was spooning the soup into her mouth. When she'd finished the bowl, he wiped her chin. "Feel better?"

She nodded and attempted a smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He leaned over and rearranged her pillows. "Anything else you need?"

She hesitated, blushing. "C-could you help me across the room?"

"Across the room?" He followed her gaze to the screen hiding the commode. "Yeah, I reckon I could do that."

Instead of helping her walk as she'd expected, he lifted her in his arms and carried to her destination. He set her on her feet. "I'll be right outside. Call me when you're finished."

Too embarrassed to answer, she nodded. He shut the door and waited until she called, then he carried her back to the bed.

"Anything else, Lizzie?"

"A drink of water?" When she'd had her fill, he lowered her to the pillows and tucked the covers under her chin.

"Now get some rest." Taking the dishes, he left the room.

Amazed, Beth shook her head. Never in a million years could she have imagined having Logan Winfield for a nursemaid.

She must have been more tired than she realized, for it was late that night when she opened her eyes and saw Logan slumped in the chair beside her bed. How long had he been there? She vaguely remembered another time earlier in her illness when she'd awakened and found him there.

Seizing the opportunity to observe him, she watched his chest rise and fall with soft snores. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, erasing the harshness, making him appear younger. His deep gold beard gleamed in the pale lamplight. The shadows under his eyes told her he needed the rest.

She marveled that a man who had made a habit of biting her head off would now be taking care of her, let alone be sitting at her bedside all night. Strangely comforted by his presence, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Bright rays of sunlight slanted through the part in the window curtains and reached into the room. Beth smothered a yawn, then pushed up a sleeve to examine her arm. "Thank goodness," she said,

relieved to see the spots were fading.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

Startled, she blinked. She hadn't heard him come in.

A freshly scrubbed Logan smiled at her from the foot of the bed. Steam rose from the tray he held in his hands. "I've brought you some breakfast. Oatmeal, hot biscuits, and coffee."

"Sounds wonderful." She tried to scoot up in the bed, but found she was still too weak.

Logan set the tray on the table. "Let me help." He propped the pillows behind her head then lifted her back against them. He put the tray on her lap. "Do you want me to feed you?"

"I think I can manage." She shakily raised the spoon to her mouth. Half its contents dribbled down her front. "Drat it." She stared at the stream of oatmeal and milk that was fast soaking the nightie. She touched the lace edging. *This isn't mine. It must belong to Sally Mae.* She glanced at Logan, her eyes widening in dismay. "Oh, dear, I've just spilled my breakfast all over Sally Mae's pretty nightgown."

"Here, I forgot this." Logan yanked a napkin from his back pocket. "Don't worry about the nightgown. It's yours. And if it's dirty, you've got three more."

"But it can't be mine." She dabbed at the lace ruffles. "I don't own four nightgowns." *Let alone anything as nice as this.*

She fingered the fine batiste.

"It's yours, all right. I picked out the goods and Sally Mae stitched it up."

"You--you bought me nightgowns?" she stammered. "Oh, my." She flushed crimson. "But that isn't decent."

"Course it's decent. It's cut clean up to your chin."

Beth tucked her head. "I meant it isn't proper."

"How do you figure that? I only bought the material, I didn't put it on you."

"I'll have to pay you for it, otherwise I can't accept it."

"No. I won't take it back and I sure won't take your money." He frowned at her. "It's a gift. Hasn't a man ever given you a present before?"

Remembering the desk he'd made, she nodded. "Once. But it wasn't anything as personal as a nightgown," she added quickly.

Seeing the stubborn set of his mouth, she knew he wouldn't give in. She'd enjoyed the truce of the last week, and even though she was better, she wasn't up to resuming the battle.

She eyed the patches on his shirt. Maybe there was a way. She peered into his smoky blue eyes. "I will keep the nighties--on one condition. You have to let me make you a new shirt."

He thought about it a minute, then grinned. "It's a deal."

"Thank you for the nightgowns, Logan." She held out her hand to seal their bargain and smiled.

He took her hand in his. "You're welcome, Lizzie," he said brusquely. "Now eat your oatmeal."

By the week's end Beth's spots were gone, and even though she was still weak as dishwater, she insisted on being up and around.

Holding Logan to their agreement, she had him purchase the fabric for his shirt. Using one of his old garments for the pattern, she cut out the blue broadcloth and stitched the seams. She held it up. Would it fit? It looked huge. But then nothing about Logan was small. The idea of doing anything so intimate as fitting it on him made her nervous. Maybe she could tell if she tried it on instead.

Since no one was around, she went into Granny Jo's room and slipped the shirt over her dress. Surveying herself in the mirror, she giggled. The sleeves hung to her knees, the shirttail brushed her ankles. The bedspread would have come nearer to fitting her. She sighed in exasperation. There was no other way, he'd have to try it on. She carried it back to the kitchen.

When Logan came into the house later that morning, she greeted him with a smile. "Good. Now you can try on your shirt." She held it up for him to see.

"You have been busy." His eyes gleaming, he strode forward. "I washed before I came in, so I won't get it dirty," he assured her. He removed his work shirt. He wore no undergarment. His bronzed chest gleamed, still damp, and smelled of soap.

Oh, dear. Beth swallowed, her pulse beating a rapid tattoo.

Taking the shirt, he held it up and nodded his approval, then he slipped it on.

He was so tall she had to stand on tiptoe to smooth the fabric over his broad shoulders. *Perfect.* She nervously ran her hands under his arms to check the side seams. Lord, he was big, but the for the life of her she could not detect an ounce of fat. She ran her fingertips down his back, measuring the length for the hem. *Just below the middle of his lean hips.*

He twisted to peer over his shoulder. "How's it look?"

"F-fine," she stammered, coming back to her senses. "At least this part seems to fit."

She ran her hand down his arm, to gauge the length of his sleeve. Through the shirt, muscles coiled and rippled under her fingertips as if they had a life of their own. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the effortless ease with which he carried her when she'd been sick. She blinked them open.

"Turn around." When he faced her, she found it hard to get her breath. The shirt hung open at a level with her eyes, exposing a broad expanse of bare chest. Dark gold hair formed a triangle of damp ringlets from his neck to his waist, then disappeared into the waistband of his denim pants. "Oh, my,"

she exclaimed before she could stop herself.

He bent and peered down at her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Blushing furiously, she looked away. Her hands shaking, she grasped the front of the shirt and pulled it together. Now that she had him covered, she found she could breathe again. Forcing herself not to think about the magnificent chest just beneath her fingers, she quickly measured for the buttonholes and buttons. There. Relieved, she smiled up at him. "I think it will fit."

"Feels perfect." He ran his hands down the sleeves and the front then gave her an admiring look. "It's a nice shirt, Lizzie. You did a good job."

His unexpected praise filled her with a sudden rush of happiness. "I'm glad you like it, Logan," she said, feeling as proud as if he'd just given her a medal.

By the end of the week Beth's spots were gone and she was eager to return to school, even though Logan thought she should wait longer. He argued that she was still too weak, but when Monday arrived, he found her dressed and ready to go. Filled with misgivings, he watched until she and the children disappeared down the trail toward town.

Logan turned away from the kitchen window and shook his head. "Stubborn female."

Granny Jo tucked her head to hide a smile. When he went outside, she peered through the pane to see him doing a bit of this and a bit of that but never really accomplishing anything.

After he'd popped into the kitchen for the fourth time, she gave an exasperated sigh. "Mercy sakes, Logan, I wish you'd light somewhere. I can't take a step without fallin' over you." She eyed him curiously. *Somethin's botherin' him.*

"All right, I'm going. Just wanted some company," he said, ambling toward the door. "Are the kids any better?"

"They're doing fine. Probably be back at school by tomorrow. They weren't as sick as Lizabet." She saw him frown. *That's what's wrong. He's lonesome.* She punched down the bread dough. "If you ain't got nothin' to do, why don't you go to town and fetch me some flour?"

"I bought flour last week. What happened to it?"

"I've still got it. But a body cain't never have too much fixin's," she said quickly. She drew a hand across her brow. "I've been a little worried about Lizabet, this being her first day back at school and all." She peered up at him. "Since you'll already be in town, you could go by the school--if you took a notion to, that is."

His face brightened. "If it would make you feel better, I guess I could check on her for you."

"It would ease my mind," she said solemnly.

"Don't fret, Granny Jo. I'll take care of her for you." He bent and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then hurried for the door.

A grin on her face, Granny Jo wiped her hands on her apron and peeked through the window. A few minutes later she saw Logan race out of the yard. She returned to finish her loaves. "Land sakes, I don't know what I'll do with all that flour. Got enough now to bake bread for half the county."

Beth waved goodbye to the last of the children and wearily returned to her desk. They'd been so sweet, and amazingly enough, they'd all been on their best behavior. During her absence, the children, on their own at home, had prepared a multitude of papers for her to correct. Painstakingly written stories, poems, even elaborate math problems littered her desk along with apples, cookies, and other assorted gifts.

She gave extra credit for each of the papers then piled them in a stack. After all their hard work it would be a shame to just file them away in a drawer. But what could she do with them? She eyed the far end of the room thoughtfully, then nodded. She would arrange them above the blackboard in a border around the top of the wall. She gathered the papers, along with a hammer and some tacks, and carried them to the end of the room.

Knowing she was too small to reach it on her own, she rolled a barrel to the area to stand on. Once

it was situated, she grew engrossed in her project. She spaced the offerings an equal distance apart and anchored each with a tack. So far so good, she thought, admiring the ones in front of her. *Now if I can just reach one more.* Using the blackboard for support, she stretched as far as she could, the paper in one hand, the tack and hammer in the other. *Drat! One more inch.* She stood on her toes.

Her eyes widened as the barrel teetered, then toppled. "Oh!" Hoping to save herself, she grabbed at the blackboard--and missed. The barrel lurched to one side. She let out a scream as she, the barrel, tacks, and papers crashed to the floor.

The door flew open and banged against the wall. "Lizzie?" Logan rushed into the room. "Where are you?"

"Here," she said faintly, raising herself up on one elbow.

"Are you all right?" He knelt beside her. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Only my dignity," she muttered. Managing to get to her knees, she peered at him over the rims of her glasses.

"Here, let me help." He scooped her up from the floor. "What were you trying to do?"

"Put me down and I'll show you." When he set her on her feet, she dusted off her skirt.

"Well?" He crossed his arms and gave her a stern look.

She told him about the papers and the pictures the children had drawn. "They worked so hard. I

couldn't let them go unnoticed. I wanted to display them there so that everyone could see them." She pointed at the few she had managed to fasten.

His blue eyes warm, he smiled. "Sounds like a good idea."

Together they gathered the papers and the fasteners. When she picked up the hammer, he took it from her hand. "That's my job, teacher. Now show me what to do and we'll get them hung."

She directed which paper went where until all the schoolwork was displayed. When he hammered the last one into place, she almost felt sorry they had finished.

Logan looped an arm around her shoulders. "There. Looks nice," he said, admiring the children's work. He put a finger under her chin and gazed into her eyes. "I want you to promise me, the next time you need to stay after school to do something like this, you'll make Nate wait and ride home with you." He lifted a strand of hair off her cheek. "What if you had gotten hurt? It would have been hours before anyone found you."

Realizing the truth of what he said, she admitted, "It was foolish. I promise to be more careful." Fighting the impulse to lay her head against his chest, she peeped at him. "What were you doing here, Logan?"

"Granny Jo sent me to get some flour, and I thought as long as I was in town, I may as well see you home."

"Oh." She hoped he'd ridden in just to see her. "Did you get the flour?"

"Uh, no, I didn't." He gave her a sheepish grin. "I forgot all about it."

She shifted her gaze to the window and saw the fast-approaching darkness. "The store's closed by now." "That's all right, Granny Jo has two sacks left at home."

Beth's heart sang. He had come to see her.

Chapter 15

After a sweltering spring day, the sun retreated from view behind the row of trees edging the field, bringing a welcoming coolness to Logan's sweat-rimmed brow. Hearing voices, he turned to see Elizabeth and the children riding into the yard. She raised a hand and waved, then followed the group into the house.

Since that night at school, he'd made sure she'd arrived with the rest of his brood. Although the fall had not injured her, he was still disturbed by the chance she had taken.

He found he'd grown quite fond of the little minx. Too much so for his own good, he thought ruefully. Most of the time, especially when she was around him, she was still prickly as a cocklebur. But instead of irritating him, as it had before her illness, he now found her behavior intriguing. When she forgot herself, as she had around Joe Johnson, he caught a glimpse of another Lizzie, one full of mischief and laughter, altogether different from the starchy image she tried so hard to maintain.

He leaned on the ax handle and wondered what she'd look like without that getup. The only time he'd seen her without the glasses was when she'd been sick. He chuckled. She'd looked so bad then it hadn't affected her looks one way or another. He tried to envision her in something pretty, with her hair

loose. After a moment he gave up. He couldn't feature her any different than what she was, a small, owlsh, straitlaced schoolmarm.

From what Sally Mae had said, he knew the teacher had a beau in Chicago, a man named Theodore Charles. Sally Mae also said Elizabeth wrote to him almost every night and that she always began the letters "My darling Teddy."

Logan scowled, finding the idea irritating. He squinted into space and tried to conjure up a picture of "darling Teddy". He wears glasses, Logan decided. He's also short, bald, and prissy. "Probably fat, too." He imagined them together, holding hands and whispering love words. Why, they might even get married. To write a letter like that they must be serious.

He plunged the ax into another root, then yanked the bush from the ground. If she did decide to get married, she'd leave the hollow. He drove the ax again. *She can't do that. The children need a teacher.* According to the contract, she had to stay for six months, but after that? He cussed. "She can't leave. The younguns need her."

Suddenly Logan smiled. He didn't know what he was worried about, he'd just find a way to keep her here. Logan gazed thoughtfully at the house. With the first spring dance being held tonight, he knew the place would be a flurry of petticoats and rag curlers. He also knew Lizzie, and every other eligible female in the county, would be there.

He glanced at the brush pile he'd planned to burn this evening. Since it had rained today, it probably wouldn't burn anyway. Rubbing the crick in his neck, he gazed upward where a sprinkling of silver stars already dusted the clear twilight sky. The air was warm, almost balmy. It would be a beautiful night.

Whistling a lively tune, he strode toward the barn to put the ax away. Today he'd worked long and hard. Tonight he felt like dancing.

Elizabeth had the sensation of being caught in a whirlwind, what with Sally Mae and Ruthie both twirling about the room.

Sally Mae resembled a bright spring flower in the new yellow dress Logan had provided after he'd ruined the other one in the race home from church. Her blue eyes sparkled. Her cheeks were pink with excitement. Her hair fell in a shining cascade down her back. She was the picture of proud young womanhood.

Beth smiled, remembering the unkempt tomboy Sally Mae had been only three months ago. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, the young girl had grown up almost overnight.

Ruthie, her usual madcap self, darted here and there, getting in everyone's way. Even Granny Jo had a spring to her step tonight.

Beth eyed her own image in the mirror. With her best gray dress, her hair screwed into the knot, and the gold-rimmed spectacles, she was the epitome of the prim, proper schoolmarm she tried so hard to project. She scowled, wishing she might leave her hair down and wear something bright. She'd give anything just this one time to be pretty.

She gazed wistfully out the window and wondered if Logan would be going to the dance. She hadn't seen much of him since the night he'd escorted her home.

The journey home from school had been so special, with the moonlight and Logan riding by her side. She'd pretended that he was her beau. She sighed. She'd even hoped he might kiss her good night. But he hadn't. In fact he hadn't treated her any differently than he would have Sally Mae or Ruth.

The next day she'd wondered what in the world she'd been thinking of and was grateful that he'd behaved himself. As it was, he occupied too much of her thoughts. She told herself she couldn't afford to get distracted. She knew the danger in that. And besides, even if he had been interested, which he plainly was not, nothing could come of it because of Teddy.

Teddy. He was the reason she had come to the hollow in the first place. She was still desperately short of the funds she needed for his surgery. Even though she felt more comfortable around the Winfields, she hadn't told them about either Teddy or the orphanage. If Logan knew she was someone's bastard child, he certainly wouldn't have anything to do with her. Others had made that plain to her all

her life. She couldn't bear to have Teddy go through the same thing. And even if Logan were able to overlook her background, he had more than he could handle already without taking on two more mouths to feed.

The girls giggled and whirled each other about the room.

Brought back to the present, Beth nervously chewed her lower lip. *What if I say, or do, the wrong thing?* She couldn't afford to make a mistake. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. She'd never been to a play-party before. She didn't know how to dance. *I don't want to go.* But Granny Jo said if she didn't, folks would be offended and would think she was too uppity to associate with them. "Oh, Lord, what am I going to do?"

"Hey, teacher, let's go!" Nate sang out from the doorway.

Surprised to find herself alone in the room, Beth grabbed her shawl. After managing a halfhearted smile for Nate, who was also in his best bib and tucker, she hurried out the door to join Granny Jo and the children, who were waiting in the wagon. As she squeezed onto the seat Beth glanced around, hoping to see a familiar golden-haired figure. Her spirits fell further when she discovered that Logan was nowhere in sight.

Even though Nate kept the mules at a walk on the muddy road in order not to splash the ladies' dresses, for Beth, Devil's Hollow appeared all too soon.

All around the community hall a score of wagons of all sizes and shapes were parked here and there under the trees. The building itself was ablaze with light, and excited talk and laughter exploded from within.

Nate wheeled into a spot apart from the others and secured the mules. Then he stepped to the side of the wagon and helped each of them to the ground. His hair was slick with pomade and a new bandanna adorned his freshly ironed shirt. A wide smile split his thin face as he carefully handed each of them a covered basket, then he took Granny Jo by the arm and guided her toward the building. "Okay, ladies, let's go dancing."

Despite the fact that Granny Jo and the girls stopped to chat with everyone they met along the way, they soon entered the brightly lit, noisy building. Butterflies warring in her stomach, Beth helped unpack platters of fried chicken, molasses beans, and fresh-baked bread, along with two dried apple pies, and placed them on the already heavy-laden tables.

From the size of the crowd she knew every person within wagon distance had come to join the fun, from infants at their mothers' breasts to old-timers so feeble they used canes to walk. Every eye was bright with anticipation, and even though the music had not yet begun, the very air seem to throb with an invisible cadence.

Beth hung her shawl on a peg beside the others and turned, hoping to find an out-of-the-way seat. But Granny Jo, seeing her intention, drew Beth back into the throng, introducing her to one person after another until the names blended into a welter of sound in her brain.

Finally, when the building was so packed there was hardly room for another person, the food was uncovered and everyone filled their plates. With her face stiff from smiling, Beth was glad when they all sat down to eat.

Sugar-cured hams, golden turkeys, crisp fried chicken, and racks of ribs sat in the middle of the groaning table, along with a variety of beans, gumbo, and potato salad. Cakes and pies of every kind and size sat on a separate table.

Plates were piled high as each family sampled the others' fare, but since everyone was eager to get the party under way, the food was eaten in a hurry.

Beth ate sparingly, afraid to place an added burden on her already queasy middle. Even so, before she could finish her plate, the food was repacked and the tables moved to one end. The long benches were placed against the walls.

While mothers arranged pallets in quiet corners for their smaller sleepyheads, other children grew wide-eyed in hushed expectation when the musicians began tuning their instruments.

Finally every eye was on the podium.

"Whee! Grab your partners, boys," the fiddler shouted then swung into a hoedown. The guitars strummed an accompaniment, bones clattered and a twanging Jew's harp chimed in.

The dancers formed a circle around the room, each clapping in time to the lively tune. One couple after another joined those already on the floor, boots stomping, skirts swinging in a spirited, whirling splash of color. Everyone danced, from the toddlers to the old-timers. Not even the oldest or the most feeble was allowed to sit.

When she saw Granny Jo kicking up her heels in the arms of the storekeeper, Mr. Plunket, Beth took advantage of the confusion and retreated to a quiet corner. Watching from the sidelines, she had to admit it did look like fun. Wondering why Logan hadn't come, she turned to peep out the window at a night bright with stars.

"Here, here, little lady," a voice boomed in her ear. "We don't allow no hiding in the corners."

Caught up in the burly arms of Simon Latham, Beth tried to protest. "I've never danced before. I don't know what to do."

"Why, that's wonderful," the jovial man teased. "That means I get to teach you."

Bounced around the room, passed from hand to hand in a boisterous reel, Beth felt like a rag doll that had lost most of its stuffing by the time the dance ended. Her toes throbbed from being smashed under galloping feet, her dress hung wrinkled and limp from her partners' clammy hands. Breathless and

dizzy, and afraid she would be captured for the polka that was just beginning, she saw her chance to escape when the merry makers paused to applaud the musicians.

Easing to the side of the room, she opened the door and stepped outside. Inhaling the clean fresh air, she made her way to the shadowy end of the lantern-lit porch and collapsed onto a wooden bench. The dance would be fun, she thought, if she wasn't so afraid of making a fool out of herself. But she knew the community expected a certain amount of decorum from the teacher. She couldn't afford to take the chance.

Chapter 16

Beth sat alone in the darkness and listened to the music. When a plaintive ballad wafted on the air, she closed her eyes and hummed the melancholy tune.

A faint rustling sound made her aware of another presence. She whirled to peer into the darkness.

"Hello, Lizzie," a familiar voice drawled from the unlit side of the porch.

Her hand splayed over her pounding heart, she let out a sigh of relief. "Logan Winfield! You scared me half to death."

He left the post he'd been leaning against and swayed toward her. "Whatcha doin' hidin' out here in the dark?"

Frowning, she squinted at the face silhouetted above hers. "Logan, is that you?" It sure didn't look like him.

"Far as I know." He stepped into the lantern light.

"You've shaved!" she said in amazement, catching sight of a clean-cut square jaw. He wore the blue shirt she'd made him and new jeans tucked into highly polished boots.

He grinned, showing a gleam of white teeth in the midst of a well-shaped mouth. His newly

trimmed hair shone burnished gold.

Her eyes wide with wonder, Beth felt her heart beat a frantic tattoo. Lord, he was handsome.

He slid onto the bench beside her and stuck out his chin for her inspection. "Clean as a baby's bottom." He took her hand and ran her palm down his jaw.

The heat of his skin against her hand did strange things to her middle.

"See?" He drew her fingers across his mouth then planted a kiss in her palm. Retaining his hold, he leaned closer.

Sucking in a frantic breath, Beth caught the scent of shaving soap, pomade--and something else. Suspicious of his strange behavior, she took another sniff. Recognizing the odor, she eyed him with disgust. "Logan Winfield, you're drunk."

"Maybe I am--and maybe I'm not." Flashing her a devastatingly wicked smile, he slipped his arm around her shoulder. "You never did answer my question, Lizzie. Why are you hidin' out here in the dark instead of dancin' like everybody else?"

With his sharp gaze piercing her defenses, she couldn't lie. "I--I don't know how to dance."

"Naw." He shook his head. "That can't be the reason. Mountain girls can dance from the time they can walk." His eyes narrowed. "Are you being stuck-up?"

"Of course not!" She leaped to her feet, incensed that he'd think such a thing.

Quick as a cat he stood beside her.

Finding him even more intimidating without the beard, she backed away until she smacked into the side of the building. He moved right along with her.

He placed his arms on the wall on either side, trapping her between them. His lips twisted in a crooked grin and slate blue eyes locked on hers. "Prove it," he challenged.

"Prove that I'm not stuck-up?" Confused and a little frightened of this new Logan, Beth swallowed. "How?"

A burst of noise and light came through the entrance as a giggling young couple escaped to the darkness, leaving the door open behind them.

"Like this." Before she could protest, Logan slid his hand around her waist and pulled her into his arms. He captured her other hand and swept her through the open door and back into the room. "Hey, folks, look what I found hidin' on the porch."

Beth closed her eyes, wishing she could melt into the floor. *So much for decorum.*

"Howdy, Logan," a towheaded farmer said. "Suppose I could find one out there, too?"

Amid cheers and whistles, she heard another shout, "Save a dance for me, teacher."

Mortified, she twisted and turned, trying to push herself free, but arms like steel bands tightened, holding her fast. The fiddles began a slow, dreamy tune, and to her horror, Logan whirled her onto the

floor.

The more she struggled, the tighter he held her, until finally she was clamped so firmly against him she found it difficult to breathe. "Logan Winfield, people are staring. Let me go," she protested.

He laid his cheek against the top of her head. "Not on your life, darlin'."

Darlin' indeed! It must be the whiskey talking. *All right, Mr. Winfield, we'll see if you'll release me or not.* Making herself stiff as a board, she deliberately trod all over his newly polished boots. When that didn't work, she pried her face free of his shirt buttons and glared up at him.

The eyes that met hers were bright with amusement. He grinned, then hoisted her to where her feet didn't touch the floor.

"Oh," she squeaked. "Logan, put me down!"

"Can't hear you." Ignoring the music, he increased the pace, whirling her so fiercely that her skirts swung out wildly behind her.

The fiddlers joined him in his mischief, playing faster and faster until the floor cleared, leaving her and Logan alone in the middle.

"Logan Winfield, you're showing my drawers," she said in a scandalized whisper.

"Whee! Swing her again, Logan," a man yelled from the sidelines.

He did.

"Atta boy, show her how country boys dance."

The enthusiastic crowd lined up along the walls and clapped in time with the frenzied music.

Good Lord, they'll make his outlandish behavior even worse. Afraid of what he might decide to do next, she conceded defeat. "All right, Logan," she hissed. "You win. Now put me down."

Grinning broadly, he raised his head and shouted to the crowd. "The lady says I win."

Finding it hard to hear anything above the whistles and cheers, Beth noticed Logan's frantic pace slowed. When the laughter died down and the fiddlers swung into a waltz, even though she was seething inside, she knew from experience she didn't dare do anything else but follow his lead.

Logan gazed fondly down on the shining head just below his chin. Her glasses were crooked. Her violet eyes blazed. Her hair was escaping every which way, but she had never looked cuter. Seeing the high color in her cheeks, he gave her a wink, fully realizing that if she were able, she'd have him drawn and quartered on the spot. "Now, is that so bad?"

"You've made me a laughingstock, Logan Winfield, and I'll never forgive you."

"What I've done is make you the belle of the ball. Look at all the fellers lining up for a chance to dance with you. I'll be lucky to get near you tonight."

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away."

"I'll let you go for now," he said with a sigh of resignation. "But the last waltz is mine." He tilted her head back and gazed into her pansy-soft eyes. "You can bet I'll be back to claim it." The music sighed to a stop and he reluctantly relinquished Lizzie to another set of arms.

Dizzy from the white lightning and the whirling waltz, Logan propped himself against the wall. He knew he'd misjudged her. She really hadn't known how to dance and she'd been too shy to try. He watched her twirl by, smiling up at her partners. He felt good inside realizing that now that she had learned how, she was enjoying herself after all.

After a brief intermission, during which Beth was surrounded by admirers, she was drawn onto the floor again and again. Passing time by dancing with all the ladies present, Logan gave her a wink every time she glided past. He chuckled when she tightened her lips and lifted her nose. Doggone, he'd hoped she be cooled off by now, but judging by the sparks in her eyes, she had no intention of letting him off that easy.

Despite her intention to ignore him, Beth found herself searching for Logan on the floor. By far the handsomest man there, he was surrounded by an eager throng of women, each batting their eyes, hoping

they might be chosen for the next dance. He was more than happy to oblige, she noticed.

The next dance was a polka. Logan galloped past her with a buxom redhead in his arms.

Eyeing the woman's low cut dress, Elizabeth gasped in shock. *My heavens, one more bounce and she'll disgrace herself.* But the hussy didn't seem to mind. Neither did Logan. Beth shot him a look of outrage. He grinned back.

The next dance was a waltz and instead of seeking a new partner, the redhead clung to Logan like a wet shirt. It was positively indecent.

Captured in the arms of a lumbering farmer, Beth peered over his shoulder. Logan was kissing the witch! "Isn't it, Miss Elizabeth?"

"What?" She frowned, trying to remember what the man had been saying. *Something about the weather.* "Yes, very nice."

He gave her a peculiar look, then shrugged. When the dance drew to an end, he thanked her and walked away.

Instead of leaving the floor, Logan and the redhead stood clasped together. He whispered something and the woman gave a high pitched giggle.

Beth gnashed her teeth, fighting the urge to snatch the woman bald-headed. Then, embarrassed to find she was the only other person on the floor with the exception of the cooing couple, she quickly

turned and walked away.

When a scowling man claimed the redhead, Beth felt a strange sense of relief. After a few heated words the woman gathered her things and the pair left the building.

Beth also noticed Logan was nowhere in sight. So much for his boast about the last dance. Even if he had dared approach her, after his scandalous behavior she'd never let him claim it.

Standing in the darkness, Logan stared at the building. He'd hoped to make Lizzie jealous, but outside of a slight narrowing of her eyes, she'd acted like he wasn't even there. He'd have to square things with Tom later and reassure him that he wasn't trying to steal his girl. Whew! The redhead was an armful, though. If it hadn't been for the teacher, he might have been tempted.

Then he remembered how Lizzie had fit in his arms. She was so little he'd had to hold her tight to make sure she was there. When he'd teased her, she'd gotten mad as a rain-wet hen. It was all he could do to keep from kissing that mutinous pout from her mouth. He closed his eyes and thought about the way she'd felt, so soft and warm, and that cinnamon scent--she smelled good enough to eat. His body tightened and he let out a groan. Of all the women in the world, why did he find himself attracted to a priggish, owl-eyed, irritating little spinster?

* * *

When one family, then another, left the building, Logan escorted Granny Jo and the girls to the Winfield wagon. Returning to the hall, he noticed the sparks in Beth's eyes had faded to a blank stare. She was exhausted.

He watched from the sidelines until the lanterns were turned to a soft glow, signaling the last dance. He pushed away from the wall where he'd been standing and stepped forward to claim her. When her partner reluctantly released her, Logan took her into his arms. After holding the redhead, he felt as if he was dancing with a feather. "Tired, Lizzie?"

Surprised to hear Logan's voice, she raised her head and gave him a weary look. "Oh, it's you." She peered over his shoulder. "Where's your big-chested hussy?"

"I told her I promised you the last waltz," he said, nuzzling her temple.

"Well, you needn't have broken up your tete-a-tete on my account." She twisted her head away.

"I don't know what that is, but it sure sounds interesting. Maybe we should try it," he whispered into her ear.

"When pigs fly!"

"Why, Lizzie, I do believe you're jealous." He cuddled her closer. "To tell the truth, I didn't like them fellers cozying up to you much either."

"I'm surprised you had time to notice," she said dryly, but inside, her heart picked up speed. He had been jealous. Of course, she had been, too, but she'd never let him know it.

His hand cupped her head and she heard his heart beat strong and steady against her ear. Her senses were lost to everything except Logan and the strength of his arms as he guided her across the floor. Despite her weariness, Beth sighed in contentment.

He tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. "You did have fun tonight, didn't you? Admit it."

"Yes. I did. They were all wonderful." So tired she could hardly stand, she snuggled against him. "Logan?"

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"Can we go again sometime?"

He held her close. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Lost in the magic of Logan's arms, she was half-asleep when the music stopped and the lanterns flared to life. Startled, she peered up at him. "What...?"

"The dance is over, sweetheart," he said softly.

Stunned, she stared around her.

Except for Logan and herself, the musicians and two more couples, the room was empty. "Where is

everyone?"

"Gone home, most likely. Granny Jo and the kids left some time ago."

"They went home?" She stared at him in horror. Without her? They wouldn't have left her here all alone. They couldn't have. Her reputation would be ruined.

"Nooo." Hoping he was teasing her again, she raced to the doorway and peered into the darkness. The wagons were gone.

Maybe she couldn't see them from here. She left the hall and raced to the spot where the Winfield wagon had been parked. "Granny Jo?" she called. She spun in a circle. The yard was empty. They weren't there.

"They're gone, Lizzie," Logan called from the porch.

"No, they have to be here somewhere." She dashed off in another direction.

"Lizzie, look out!"

The toe of her shoe caught on something in her path. A sharp pain shot through her ankle. "Ow!" She pitched through space, coming to land facedown in a mud puddle. "Oh, no!" Water streaming down her face, she raised herself on her hands and tried to extricate herself from the mess.

Logan ran to her side and lifted her to her feet. "I was trying to warn you about the buggy traces."

"Well you could have said it sooner," Beth said with a sob. "Look at me." She shook the water

from her hands. "I'm mud from head to foot and everybody's run off and left me."

"I haven't," he said softly. He took her arm and guided her back to the community hall. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He entered the building and snatched up a forgotten tablecloth. Wadding it in his hand, he went outside.

Lizzie stood like a forlorn waif, her clothes grubby and dripping wet. Tears streamed in muddy trails down her cheeks.

He took a corner of the table linen and wiped her face. "There now, it'll be all right." Then, as he would do to a child, he took his hand and attempted to scrape the bulk of the mud from the front of her dress. When his hand slid over her bosom for the second time, he heard her suck in a breath. He looked up. Her eyes blazed into his. She slapped his hand away. "I'll clean my own self, thank you." She snatched the cloth from his hand. "Now get away from me."

"I was only trying to help."

"Help! Ha!" She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I can certainly do without any of your help. Thanks to you, I'm mud from head to foot and my reputation is ruined."

"I didn't push you in the mud," he reminded her, resenting her attitude. "And I didn't do a damn thing to your reputation."

"And you won't either. Now go away." She fixed him with an icy glare, then turned her back to scrape the mud from the front of her dress.

Sensing something different, he studied her. The glasses. She must have lost them in the puddle. He observed her for a moment then strode off into the darkness. He bent by the mud hole and trailed his fingers through the mire. He drew the wire-rim spectacles to the surface. After he'd swished them in the horse trough, he wiped them dry and tucked them into his pocket. Intending to return them, he strode toward the porch. Halfway there, he changed his mind. She seemed to be doing fine without them. He stood in the shadows and watched her. From her stance, he knew she was as prickly as ever. For a while tonight he'd seen another Lizzie, one soft and warm and full of fire. One that set his blood to a slow boil and kept it there until, to save both of them from disgrace, he'd been forced to leave the building.

In spite of her determination to hide it, he had a feeling that under those high-necked dresses and that old-lady knot she always twisted her hair into was a woman of great passion. But how to find that Lizzie was the problem.

He gazed at the stubborn little spinster, then he smiled. Before this night was over, he was determined to give it a try.

Chapter 17

Logan strode to the back of the building and removed the crock of liquor the men kept hidden inside a hollow tree. After he'd hoisted the jug and taken a swallow, he carried it to a weathered stump at the side of the building where he could observe Lizzie without being seen. Watching her, he took a couple of sips and considered his options.

She was already mad enough to spit. If he tried to reason with her now, he would only make matters worse. He'd end up losing his temper, too. Hell, he was already mad. The way she was behaving you'd think he pushed her into the mud. Thoroughly disgruntled, he raised the jug and let the fiery liquid flow down his throat.

He had to take her home. He couldn't leave her here all by herself, although right now he was tempted to do just that. He jutted his chin out. But by God he didn't have to be in any hurry about it. He only hoped she wouldn't ask anybody else to take her home in the meantime. Angry as she was, he knew she wouldn't go with him if she had any other choice.

A brilliant crest of moon crept over the mountain and tangled in the pines, coating everything around with a silvery glaze. He stroked his bare chin and eyed it moodily. Then he smiled. He wouldn't

give her any other choice. Corking the jug, he waited until the last lantern was extinguished.

Lizzie continued to scrub at her dress. The moon was so bright she hadn't even noticed that the building behind her had grown dark.

Two men left by the rear door and climbed into a wagon. When they disappeared down the road, Logan placed the crock back in the hollow tree.

Feeling ornery after the white mule he'd imbibed, he decided to give Lizzie a taste of her own medicine. His steps unhurried and deliberate, he bypassed the buggy he'd borrowed to bring her home. Instead he untied Lucifer from the hitching rail and led him toward the community-hall porch.

Elizabeth straightened at his approach. Her hands clenched at her sides, she glared at him. "I look like I've been rolling in a hog wallow and it's all your fault." She threw the muddy cloth at him. "Where have you been?"

He grabbed at the tablecloth and missed. He managed to retrieve it from the ground, then carefully placed it on the rail of the porch. He grinned up at her. "Did you miss me, Lizzie?"

"No!" When he walked toward her, she held up her hand as if to push him away. "You're drunk." She shook her head. "I might have known."

"You planned this whole thing, didn't you, Logan Winfield? You're trying to make people think I'm a loose woman so I'll get fired." She straightened her collar. "Well, it won't work." She peered past him

into the shadows. "Now, where is the wagon?"

"I told you everybody's gone home." He paused to point to the darkened building. "Except us."

"They can't all be gone. They were here a minute ago." She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hello. Anybody there?" Receiving no answer, she tried the door. When it wouldn't open, she whirled toward him. "Now, how am I supposed to get home?"

"You could ride Lucifer." Logan slowly ran a palm down the black's satiny neck. The gelding pranced nervously.

"Lucifer?" She took a step backward. "And what are you going to ride?"

He lifted his lips in a roguish smile. "Lucifer."

She shook her head, loosening muddy tendrils that snaked down her face. "I'm not about to ride with you."

He rubbed a finger across his bottom lip. "Well," he drawled, "there is one alternative..."

"What?"

He drew a dull metal object out of his pocket, flipped it in the air, then caught it. Watching her eyes widen, he waved the key between his thumb and forefinger. "We could spend the night here," he said silkily. He motioned to the pitch-black building.

"No," she said with a strangled gasp. She backed away. "You--you devil!"

He shrugged and put the key back in his pocket. "Well, if you won't spend the night with me, then I guess I'll go home." He climbed aboard the horse.

"You--you--" she spluttered. Her bosom heaved, her violet eyes blazed.

He picked up the reins. "Are you coming?"

She stared at the building, then at him. "Apparently you've left me no choice." She gathered up her skirts and attempted to mount behind him. But without the mounting block and hampered by her wet garments, she couldn't get her foot in the stirrup.

"I suppose you want me to help you."

"Yes," she hissed.

Instead of taking the hand she extended, Logan bent and hooked an arm around her middle. He lifted her, kicking and squealing, into the air and plopped her onto his lap.

She pushed at his arms and tried to get down. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Why, I'm taking you home, Lizzie," he said innocently. He kneed the horse and set him at a brisk trot, forcing her to either hold on to him or fall off. She held on.

He cocked his head and gave her a quizzical look.

To avoid his scrutiny, she turned her face into his shirt.

Why are you hiding from me, Lizzie? Why are you afraid to behave like a woman? Disturbingly

aware of her closeness, he fought the devil that tormented him and made his body respond to her against his will. His mouth tightened into a ruthless line. *Well, darlin, we've got the whole night, and I don't intend to take you home until I find out.*

Logan deliberately took the longest route home. To further lengthen the process, he pulled Lucifer to a slow walk. Although he felt the rage building in Lizzie's rigid body, she didn't say a word.

After a while her tenseness left; exhaustion had taken its toll. Her chest rose and fell with the easy breathing that told him she was asleep. Afraid she might get chilled in her wet clothing, he cuddled her close and his anger drained away. He watched her sleep and wished there were no secrets between them.

Sighing wistfully, he looped the reins over the pommel and gently removed the mud from the front of her hair. Ebony ringlets curled riotously around his finger. *Soft as satin. Why would she hide her pretty hair in such an ugly knot?* Yielding to temptation, he slowly removed one hairpin, then another, tucking each into his pocket. Freed from the confining lump, luxuriant tresses, black and shiny as a raven's wing, coiled over her shoulders. When she moaned and lay back against his arm, he tensed, afraid she would waken.

A shaft of moonlight penetrated the tree branches and lit her features. Silken locks gently framed her heart-shaped face. Without the glasses to hide them, long, sooty eyelashes lay against delicately boned, ivory cheeks.

How could he ever have thought her plain? She was the most exquisite creature he'd ever seen. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Maybe because she'd taken such pains to hide it?

Unnerved by his discovery, he remembered his outlaw past and wondered what else she could be hiding. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gold-rimmed spectacles and held them toward the moon. Clear glass. She didn't need them any more than he did. Then why did she wear them?

Maybe she wasn't a schoolteacher at all. But judging by the way she'd instructed the children, that couldn't be a sham.

Worry knotted his middle. If she wasn't a teacher, she'd have to be a damn good actress. And if she was pretending, why would she be so upset about losing her job? Unless it was to cover up her real purpose for being there.

His emotions in turmoil, Logan gazed at the sleeping woman. His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. He held her closer for a moment, battling an uncontrollable urge to kiss her. He killed the longing, knowing if he did, he'd never want to let her go.

Love and distrust waged a fierce battle within him. Distrust won. Because of Granny Jo and the children, until he knew the truth, he couldn't afford to let down his guard. His family depended on him. Without him they couldn't survive.

But still, when she sleepily stirred in his arms and pressed her warm woman's body against his, he

was shaken by the discovery that if he could have her for his own, he would risk it all.

His hand trembling, he picked up the reins. "Well, Lizzie, for both our sakes I'd better get you home." He nudged the horse with his heels.

Lucifer leaped forward.

Settling the horse into a smooth gallop, Logan pointed the animal toward the mountain.

Jolted awake by the running horse, Beth clutched the front of his shirt. "Logan? What's wrong?"

Hearing the fear in her voice, he slowed the horse to a walk. He stared into her wide violet eyes and knew he was lost. Uttering a curse, he pulled the gelding to a halt.

"Logan?" She lifted her head. Her spicy fragrance rose to assail his senses.

"Damn." Unable to help himself, he wrapped her in his arms and tangled his hands in her glossy hair. "Oh, Lizzie." His pulse racing, he slowly bent his head and claimed her open mouth. The lips beneath his were warm and sweet as newly harvested honey. He gently traced their soft curves before easing his tongue between her teeth. Savoring every delicious crevice, he plundered the succulent core.

She moaned and raised her arms to pull him closer, turning the flickering flame in his groin into a raging wildfire.

He struggled with himself, wanting to claim more, but knew by the way she returned his kiss, her mouth was untutored, her innocence real.

Shaking with overwhelming need, he savagely tore himself away from her and released a ragged breath of air. He raised his gaze to the night sky and ran a trembling hand through his hair.

She whimpered softly and he saw her eyes were wide as a startled doe's. She covered her lips and twisted away.

Not wanting to frighten her further, Logan kicked the black and sent it leaping forward.

She gasped and tightened her grip around his waist. With the motion of the horse, her breasts rubbed against his chest.

His blood hot with unleashed desire, Logan clenched his teeth. This time he didn't dare stop.

When they reached the homestead, he silently lowered Elizabeth to the porch, then he rode away into the darkness.

Stunned by Logan's behavior and horrified by her own response, Beth shakily touched her bruised lips and watched him disappear from view. She absently tossed a lock of hair out of her eyes, then stricken with guilt and shame, she quietly slipped into the bedroom and closed the door. She tiptoed to the far side of the room and stripped off her soiled clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. After a quick wash to remove the mud, she put on her nightgown and eased into bed.

She lay in the darkness and rubbed her fingertips over the neck of the silky garment, her thoughts filled with the man who had become such an important part of her life. Imagining his handsome face and flaming kisses, she breathed a hopeless sigh.

Afraid she was falling in love with Logan, she also knew that if she lived a hundred years, she'd never understand him.

Chapter 18

Logan spent a sleepless night, and before dawn he left the barn and strode toward the house. He stealthily entered the dogtrot and glanced up, surprised to see Granny Jo standing by the kitchen door.

"I've been waitin' for you." She motioned him inside. "Figured you might need someone to talk to."

He stared at her and then shook his head. "You always know, don't you?" He poured himself a cup of coffee, then joined her at the table.

His grandmother gave him a sad smile. "Sometimes knowing is a curse, and sometimes it's a blessing. Most of the time it's a little of both." She put her hand over his. "You love her, don't you?"

Logan frowned. "I don't know." He drew in a breath. "I do know I don't trust her."

"Why do you say that?"

"For one thing she's beautiful."

"Oh." Granny Jo chuckled. "You hold that against her? I'd think you'd be tickled."

"That isn't all. Those spectacles are clear glass. Why would anybody that looked like that try to hide it, unless there was a good reason?"

"And you think you know that reason."

A pain knotted his chest. He knew all right. He nodded.

"You don't know anything."

"Well, if you know so much, why don't you tell me?"

"Logan, I know the girl is keeping secrets, but I also know Lizabet is a good person." She gave him a sideways glance. "Your problem is, you're afraid."

Logan choked on his coffee. He hadn't expected her to say that. "Afraid? I'm not afraid."

"Yes, you are." She tapped her temple. "I know. Because of your past you're afraid to get close to anyone. That time during the war, when you were in that Yankee prison, it changed you, son. You're afraid to trust. Afraid to feel."

Logan cradled his head in his hands. She was right. He was afraid--afraid he'd end up in another prison. He still woke in the night, drenched in his own sweat, remembering the screams of men in surgery without any anesthesia. The maggoty food, the beatings, the never-ending darkness.

Then there was the night he'd ridden with Anderson's Raiders. Remembering, he shuddered.

Granny Jo touched his arm, bringing him back to the present. "You didn't kill anyone, son."

"But I was there. Maybe if I hadn't gone, some of the others wouldn't have joined him either. The man was a bloody butcher," he said with venom. "I kept thinking of Annie and knew if I took part in the raid, I'd be no better than the men that killed her."

"Logan, all that has nothing to do with Lizabet," Granny Jo said gently.

"Maybe it does. What if she was sent by someone to find the money? The railroad has never given up looking for it. For that matter, neither have the other raiders. Sooner or later they are going to figure out I have it and show up here." He gave her a desperate look. "Damn, I wish I'd never touched the cursed stuff."

"At the time you did what anyone would have done," his grandmother said softly. "The man was dying. He told you to take it, and you did. I don't fault you for that."

He gave her a crooked smile. "You make everything sound so simple."

"You don't believe that bit about Lizabet any more than I do." Granny Jo sighed. "Maybe she has a good reason for behaving like she has. Could be she's afraid to trust, too."

"Maybe." Logan finished his coffee and set his cup on the counter. His thoughts troubled, he bent and gave Granny Jo a kiss on the cheek, then left the house. His grandmother had assured him he had nothing to fear from Elizabeth, but she had also admitted the girl was keeping secrets. Granny Jo was the wisest person he'd ever known, but what if this time she was wrong? Determined to make some inquiries on his own, Logan saddled Lucifer and headed for town.

By the time Beth opened her eyes, it was nearing noon. She scrambled from the bed and into her clothing. After a quick wash at the dresser, she picked up her brush and drew it through the tangles, removing flakes of splattered mud until her hair lay in a soft, shining canopy about her shoulders. She drew it into the knot and reached for her hairpins. They weren't there. After making a frantic search of the bureau top, she suddenly remembered the running horse and the way her hair had whipped in the wind. The pins must have fallen out. She'd been so busy trying to hang on, she hadn't even noticed.

Something else is missing. She frowned. *My glasses! I must have lost them, too.* She sucked in a breath and raised a hand to cover her mouth, recalling how bright the moon had been last night. She'd seen Logan quite clearly, which meant he must have seen her as well.

In spite of her apprehension, her pulse quickened with excitement. Even though she was afraid of what the Winfields might think, she was relieved that she had no choice but to abandon her disguise. Now, at least around the homestead, she wouldn't have to pretend to be something she wasn't.

She gazed at her reflection in the mirror. Would Logan think she was pretty? she wondered. She bent closer and raised a finger to trace the faint shadows under her eyes. "My stars!" Her lips looked like she'd been stung by a bee.

She grew pink thinking about Logan and the kisses he'd given her last night. But observing her image, she saw something else. She positively glowed with happiness. For the first time in her life she

knew what it looked like to be in love.

Beth left the bedroom and nervously entered the kitchen, but to her disappointment Logan wasn't there. Only Granny Jo and Ruth were in the room.

"Elizabeth!" Ruth said, raising her head. The pea pod she'd been shelling fell to the floor. "You're beautiful!" she said in an admiring voice.

Granny Jo glanced up from kneading her bread dough and nodded her approval. "Now that's more like it. I wondered when you'd shed them dowdy feathers."

"You knew?"

Granny Jo's eyes twinkled. "Child, after livin' all these years, there ain't too much I don't know."

Trying not to be too obvious, Beth peered through the front window.

As if reading her mind, Granny Jo answered her unspoken question. "Logan was up before dawn. He's gone into town. Probably wanted to get the Lathams' buggy back in case they needed it."

"Buggy?" Beth dropped the edge of the curtain and strolled toward the table. "What buggy?"

"The rig he borrowed last night to bring you home." Granny Jo raised an eyebrow. "He did bring you home in the buggy, didn't he?"

Buggy. Beth's mouth soundlessly formed the word. He'd borrowed a buggy? The only buggy she'd seen was the one she'd tripped over when she fell into the mud. "Why that..." She stormed to the

window and yanked back the curtain.

Granny Jo chuckled. "I guess he didn't."

"He said..." Beth bit her tongue. Lord, she couldn't tell the old lady what he'd said. "He--he carted me home on that devil horse of his," she fumed. "Carried me on his lap like I was a sack of salt."

"More like a sack of sugar, I'll bet," Granny Jo teased.

Beth crossed her arms in front of her and hugged her elbows. He'd threatened to make her spend the night. He'd made her ride the horse with him. He'd wrapped her in his strong arms and kissed her till she thought she'd swoon.

But in spite of her resentment for his high-handed actions, she closed her eyes, remembering the passion of that kiss.

Reality intruded with a shock when she also remembered that after the kiss, he'd raced home, dumped her on the porch, then ridden off without so much as a good night.

Perplexed, she sat down beside Ruth to help her shell the peas. Being in love with a complicated man like Logan Winfield certainly wasn't proving to be easy.

Beth nervously waited all day for Logan to come home, wondering if he'd have some excuse for his

outrageous behavior, but when he returned just in time for supper, the buggy wasn't mentioned. He seemed aloof and quiet, saying little to anyone.

In spite of her irritation, she felt a twinge of disappointment. Even though she'd taken special care with her appearance, even wearing the lavender dress she had hidden in the bottom of her trunk, for all the notice he took of her she might as well have been a stick of wood.

When the family was seated at the table, she held out her hand to close the circle for the blessing.

Logan encased her fingertips in his. After mumbling a few words, he hurriedly released her hand, leaving her with the impression that if he'd had an option, he wouldn't have touched her at all. She felt hurt and rejected, and her own manner toward him became icily cool.

The meal progressed in silence, with the others sneaking a glance first at her and then at Logan. When everyone's hunger was satisfied, they rose from the table.

Nate poked Sally Mae. "Maybe I'd better throw another stick on the fire before we all freeze to death."

Ruth frowned. "What are you talkin' about, Nate? It's warm outside. We don't even have a fire."

"More of a fire than you know, sprout," Nate said with a laugh.

Realizing they were the subject of Nate's conversation, Beth flushed crimson.

Logan swore under his breath and stomped out the door.

"Whew, Logan's in a foul temper," Sally Mae said, gathering up the dishes. "Maybe he needs a dose of your sulphur and molasses, Granny Jo."

"Logan's got an itch he cain't scratch and he don't know what to do about it." She winked at Beth. "He'll be fine in a day or two."

My stars! Beth closed her gaping mouth. Stammering a hasty good night, she fled from the room.

Standing in the darkened hallway, Logan saw Elizabeth leave the kitchen and head for her room. Before she could reach the door, he caught her by the arm. "Not so fast, missy. You've got some explaining to do."

"Let me go, Logan," she said, attempting to push him away.

Ignoring her protest, he led her from the house and trotted her down the hill to the barn. He pulled her inside and closed the door, plunging them into pitlike darkness. "Stay put," he growled.

He lit the lantern and turned it down to a soft glow. His mood grim and unyielding, he stalked toward her. She backed away from him until she smacked against the stall wall. When he raised a hand, he saw her flinch away as if she expected him to hit her.

"Dammit!" he shouted, angry that she could think him capable of such a thing.

Her eyes filled with fear and she bit her lip.

"Dammit," he said more softly. Unable to help himself, he wrapped a hand in her hair and pulled her toward him. "Pretty as a picture, aren't you?" He ran a finger down her satiny cheek. "Why'd you try to hide it?"

"Because of the letter. You said you wanted a man or a spinster. I tried to make myself older and ugly because I was afraid you wouldn't hire me otherwise." She pulled against his grasp until tears came to her eyes.

"I don't believe you." He tightened his hold, yanking her into the light so that he could see her expression. "Why did you come here? You could have done better."

"Because I didn't have any experience. Devil's Hollow was the only place that offered me a job."

He stared into her eyes, trying to see if she was lying. But gazing into their violet depths, he only grew more confused.

She looked up at him, her heart-shaped face honest and sincere. "That's the truth, Logan, whether you want to believe me or not." She wrenched herself away from him and ran toward the house.

Left alone in the barn, Logan stared after her, shaken by the knowledge that whether he believed her or not, if she had remained a moment longer, he would have kissed her.

Chapter 19

Beth tried to put on a brave front as she packed the last of her belongings into her horsehide trunk. She had been at the hollow for three months and had remained with the Winfields all that time. Her contract stated that she would board with each of her student's families, and during that time she was to do what she could to make up for the year that the children had no teacher. Now that it was nearing May and the weather had warmed, she had no excuse for delaying her move any longer.

Gazing wistfully around the room that had been home since her arrival, she paused in front of the mirror and tucked a stray strand of hair into her spinsterish knot. Her violet eyes dark and unhappy, she straightened her glasses, remembering the night she had returned to her room and found them and her pins wrapped in a kerchief on her dresser. Unable to face the painful memories of the days that followed, she took a deep breath, picked up her reticule, and stepped into the hall.

Crying, Ruth ran into her arms. "I dooon't want you to go, Elizabeth."

Beth bit her bottom lip. "We'll see each other at school, Ruth," she said in a choked voice. Blinking back tears, she made her way to the wagon where the rest of the Winfields waited.

Granny Jo turned to call to out to the tall, golden-haired man who stood off to one side. "Logan, tell

her she can't go. It ain't safe for her to live with that poor white trash. You know Harlan Quinn--and those Jenkinses..." She shook her head. "Half them younguns don't even know who their daddy is."

Beth flinched, the words striking a painful chord. Being an orphan with no idea of who her parents were, she wondered if the Winfields would consider her "poor white trash" as well.

His face grim, Logan stood silent.

Beth half hoped he wouldn't let her go, but apparently he didn't care. The tears she could no longer contain flowed down her cheeks as she bid Granny Jo and the children goodbye.

She turned to Logan, wistfully meeting his blue-gray eyes.

His face void of emotion, he stepped forward and held out his hand. "Take care of yourself, Elizabeth."

Fighting the urge to throw herself into his arms, she quickly shook his hand. Even though his coldness was like a knife through her heart, she had too much pride to let it show. She wheeled away and climbed onto the seat. She stared straight ahead as Nate drove the wagon out of the yard.

Hours later, when the wagon rolled into the Quinns' front yard, Beth found it hard to hide her dismay.

The squat board dwelling was little more than a hovel--apparently three rooms long, if she could judge by the doorless entrances. Perched inside the frame of the only window visible, a rooster stretched his neck and crowed. Chickens as well as other animals wandered in and out of the rooms at will. The building looked more like a stable than a home.

Thinking no one was there to greet her, she touched Nate's sleeve, ready to have him take her on to the Lathams'.

"Miss Eastgate, wait!" James Lee and Jacob Quinn dashed around the house and ran toward the wagon.

"Miss Elizabeth, we been waitin' all day. See?" James Lee pointed to his still-dripping pants. "We washed our britches. We took a bath and everything."

"I see," Beth said, smiling. She admired the hands they held out for her inspection. "It looks like you did a good job, too." She gripped the wagon seat, ready to get out.

Nate grabbed her arm. "You aren't really going to stay here, are you?" he whispered.

Gazing down into the little boys' beaming faces, she nodded. How could she do anything else?

It was twilight when Nate wheeled the buckboard into the Winfield yard and headed for the barn to

unhitch the team.

Logan, seeing him drive in, strode forward. "Where is she?"

"She's at the Quinns'." Nate looked confused. "You knew that's where I was taking her."

Logan yanked off his hat and slapped his leg. "Dammit! I never thought she'd stay after she saw the place." He glared at Nate. "I expected you to bring her back home."

Nate dropped the harness over the corral post. He put his hands on his hips and glared back. "Then why the hell didn't you say something, 'stead of standing there this morning like a bump on a log? If you had of, she probably wouldn't have left in the first place."

"Damned stubborn female," Logan muttered under his breath. He stalked toward the pole corral, opened the gate, and whistled. Lucifer trotted forward.

"Where are you going?" Nate asked.

"I'm going to get her," Logan said, tossing his gear on the gelding's back.

Nate leaned against the corral fence. "It won't do you any good." He crossed his arms and sighed. "She won't leave."

"Why not?" Logan swung into the saddle. "She can't be serious about wanting to stay in that pigsty."

"Logan, wait." Nate grabbed Lucifer's bridle. "You'd just embarrass her. It isn't that she wants to

stay. She feels she has to." He solemnly shook his head. "If you could have seen those little boys, you'd know why."

"What about the boys?" Logan stepped down from the horse.

"You remember James Lee and Jake? Well, they had taken a bath and scrubbed their clothes. Their britches were still soaking wet. You should have seen them smile when she drove up. They were so excited." Nate gazed into his eyes. "She can't leave now. And you can't ask her to."

Logan climbed aboard the horse and nudged him forward.

"Logan, didn't you hear me?"

"Don't worry, she won't even know I'm there. But I'll make damn sure Harlan Quinn knows I am." His face grim, he remembered another run-in he'd had with the man when he gone sneaking around after Annie. *If he lays a hand on Lizzie, I'll kill him.*

He knew there were things Elizabeth wasn't telling him, and because of that, he couldn't trust her. But he sure as hell wasn't going to take any chances with her safety.

After stopping by the house and grabbing a bite to take with him, Logan told Granny Jo he wouldn't be home before morning. He tied the food sack and a blanket behind the saddle. Nudging Lucifer into a gallop, he headed for the Quinns'.

Locating a good spot to overlook the place, he dismounted and stripped off his saddle gear. He

hobbled Lucifer out of sight in a patch of grass on top of the ridge. His eyes on the dwelling, he carefully made his way on foot down the hill.

He reached the edge of the bare brush-edged yard, then passed the house, picking his way over chicken, pig, and dog dung. Wrinkling his nose in distaste, he followed the scent of sour mash to a patch of bushes where he knew Harlan hid his still.

He didn't have long to wait. A bobbing lantern and the crunch of footsteps in the dry grass told him that Harlan was coming for his nightly nip. Logan backed into the shadows.

Quinn entered the clearing and sat his lantern on a stump. The fat man bent and cut wind, then he straightened with a crockery jug in his hand. After pulling the cork with his teeth, Harlan took several swigs, then belched.

Knowing the man was unaware of his presence, Logan stepped from cover. "Hello, Quinn."

Eyes bugging, the man whirled. "Shit! Logan Winfield, you scared the bejesus out of me." Scratching his flabby belly, he gave Logan a sly grin. "Betcha came for some shine." He held out the jug.

Logan waved it away. "I'd sooner drink cow piss." He hooked his thumbs in his belt and squared his shoulders, making himself as intimidating as possible. He stared down at the smaller man. "You know why I'm here."

"Ya come to see the teacher?" Licking his lips, Harlan nervously shook a thumb toward the house. "She's up there."

"I didn't come to see Miss Eastgate. I came to see you."

Harlan took a hasty step backward. "I ain't touched her."

"She's a lady, Quinn." Logan jabbed a finger into the man's chest. "And I expect her to be treated as such."

Harlan snickered. "So that's the way the wind blows. She's your own private piece o--"

Logan fist smashed into Harlan Quinn's mouth with such force that the fat man was lifted off the ground

Mewling, Harlan crashed to the earth.

Logan stepped forward. Legs spread, he towered over Quinn's groveling figure. "Like I said, she's a lady." Figuring he'd proved his point, he strode off into the darkness.

In the tiny room she was to share with the two smaller girl-children, Beth gazed in dismay at the filthy bed. Her stomach rolled as the stench of unwashed bodies and stale urine reached her nose. "Oh, my," she said, wondering what to do. "Did someone have an accident?" she asked gently.

"Accident?" five-year-old Pearl asked. She followed Beth's gaze. "Oh, the pee. May did it." She shrugged. "She does it every night. She's too scared to get up and go to the privy."

"Don't you have a chamber pot?" Beth asked faintly.

"Yeah, but Ma uses it."

"Well, tonight I guess we'll have to make the trip to the necessary." But as soon as possible, Beth vowed, she intended to have her own facility.

Reflecting on the condition of the bed, she opened the trunk and took out several yards of the silky batiste fabric left over from the material Logan had purchased for her nightgowns. Although she hated to use it for something like this, she loathed the idea of crawling into that bed worse. Hesitantly taking out the quilt Granny Jo had helped her make, she turned to see the little girls' eyes widen with wonder. She smiled. "Who'll help me remove those covers?"

Eager small hands reached out to yank the soiled blankets from the bed. Holding her breath against the odor, Beth piled the stained, ragged quilts by the door. She eyed the filthy ticking on the straw-stuffed mattress. It would have to do tonight, but tomorrow she'd do something about that as well.

With the children's help, she dragged the mattress out the door and each took a turn wailing it with a stick. Then they brought it inside and laid it across the ropes stretched across the wood-framed bed. At least the back side of the ticking was clean, she noticed. Apparently it had never been turned.

When the bed was freshly made with the immaculate fabric, and the quilt, with its delicate appliqued pattern of pink flowers and pale green ferns, had been spread over the top, the girls stared at it in awe.

Pearl doubled her fist and turned to May. "If you pee in this bed, *I'm gonna* throw you outside with the hogs."

Little May's eyes filled with tears. "I won't, Miss Eastgate. I promise. Even if I bust, I won't."

"I know you won't, dear." Beth ran a hand over the child's tangled hair. She knelt beside her. "And if you should need to go, wake me, and I'll walk you to the privy."

"But there's wild razorbacks out there at night," May said, her eyes wide. "That's why I'm so scared. Pa said them hogs'd eat me iffin I went outside."

Beth angrily wondered what kind of man would tell such a tale to a four-year-old child. "Well, they won't dare eat me, so you needn't worry." But uneasy herself about the story, she pulled her trunk across the opening, blocking the entrance to the doorless room.

Wanting to remove the dust from her person, Beth poured water from the bucket James Lee had found somewhere into a cracked china basin and started to wash her face. She frowned, looking about for the soap. She gave a startled gasp when she saw May licking it. Beth gently took it from her grasp. "It's soap, dear. You can't eat it."

"But it smells so good."

"It's to wash with." She made a lather on her arms and hands. She rinsed it off then held out her hand. "See?"

"You smell just like the soap. Can I try it?" Pearl asked.

"Me, too?" May said hopefully.

"Of course." Beth handed them each a washcloth and instructed them in how to bathe their faces and hands. Apparently James Lee and Jacob had kept their knowledge of cleanliness to themselves, she thought. It was certain their father hadn't encouraged it.

Their mother, poor soul, hadn't been able to. Beth felt certain Ada Quinn suffered from consumption. Even though she had yet to meet the woman, she had heard her coughing, and from her years at the orphanage she knew Ada Quinn wasn't long for this world.

She lifted a lock of hair out of the smallest child's eyes. *What will happen to you when she's gone, little one?*

After Beth and the girls had made a trip to the outhouse, they climbed into the simple but clean bed. With the little ones snuggled next to her, Beth thought of the girls' lot in life. She realized with a shock that compared with the Quinn household, the orphanage hadn't been such a bad place after all.

From the nearby hilltop, Logan kept a silent vigil. In spite of his encounter with Harlan Quinn, he felt uneasy when he discovered Lizzie's room had no door. He'd watched her dust the mattress and walk the girls to the privy. He'd also seen her pull her trunk across the doorway.

Remembering her passion for cleanliness, he felt a twinge of guilt. "Well, darlin', you've sure got your work cut out for you here. And you won't just have to contend with an ornery backwoodsman either."

He stretched out on the blanket. Keeping one eye on the room, he waited for the far-distant dawn.

Chapter 20

Over a huge iron wash pot in the Quinns' backyard, Beth had no choice but to spend the Sabbath doing laundry. She'd been taught cleanliness is next to godliness. If that was true, she thought, the good Lord must have thrown up his hands in despair after seeing this mess.

As she washed the soiled bedding she discovered the children had never been inside a church. Remembering her own Sunday-school days, she told them Bible stories and taught them hymns. She giggled and thought the Lord himself must have smiled to see the little boys singing "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" as they energetically whaled the filthy laundry with a stick.

Since the Quinns had no laundry soap, she boiled the blankets and quilts until she feared they might fall apart, then when they were passably clean, she and the boys wrung them out as best they could. It wasn't until she had her arms loaded with the sodden quilts that she discovered the Quinns had no clothes lines either. With the children's help, she managed by stringing the weighty mass over bushes that dotted the bare dirt yard.

Finished, she and the exhausted children collapsed onto a rickety bench to rest. It was then that she noticed Harlan Quinn stretched out asleep on another bench in the shade of a chinaberry tree. Angered

over his laziness, she hefted the wash stick, wishing she had the nerve to give him the thrashing he deserved. Then she recalled how he looked when he'd shown up at breakfast. He'd looked like somebody had already whopped him a good one. With a swollen jaw and two missing front teeth, he'd glared at her as if she'd been personally responsible, even though she had no idea what happened. She'd also noticed that even at that early hour he had moonshine on his breath.

After persuading James Lee and Jacob to dump the dirty water, she'd helped them refill the big iron pot with water from the well. When it was hot, they carried it in buckets to the room she shared with the girls, where she intended to fill another, larger barrel she'd found hidden behind the barn.

Entering the room, James Lee and Jacob stared in horror. "You can't put water in that. That's Pa's shine barrel."

"That's too bad, because it's my bathtub now," Beth said, dumping her pail into the chest-high vat.

"What'd you do with the stuff that was in it?" Jacob asked.

"It stunk," Beth said, wrinkling her nose, "so I poured it out for the chickens. Why?"

The boys looked at each other, then burst out laughing. "Pa's sour mash," Jacob said. "Boy, he's gonna have a fit." His laughter died as he stared at his brother.

"He won't if he can't find the barrel," James Lee said.

Jacob's eyes lit. "Maybe we can hide it."

"Not until we get our baths," Beth said firmly. She hoisted the boys' buckets and added them to the barrel. "Ladies first. "You boys keep watch outside for any unwelcome visitors."

When the girls were scrubbed clean and their hair combed and trimmed, Beth used the dirty water to clean the bedroom floor. Anxious to get her own bath before her pilfery was discovered, she'd just removed her glasses and shoes and was in the process of taking the pins from her hair when the boys let out a yell. Wondering what had them in such an uproar, she stuck her head outside. "What's wrong?" She lifted a lock of hair out of her eyes just in time to see the boys and the pigs in a tug of war over her freshly washed blankets. "No!"

She stuffed her feet into her shoes and grabbed the cornhusk broom from beside the door. Brandishing it before her, she charged into the fray. "Take that," she said, whacking a challenging sow across the nose. One blanket rescued, she wheeled in pursuit of another just as James Lee swung his stick.

"Oh!" Pain riveting her head, Beth plopped backward into the dirt. Braced on her outstretched arms, she watched the landscape spin around her.

"Miss Elizabeth," James Lee cried. "Are you all right? I didn't mean to hit you." His eyes were big as dollars in his small freckled face.

The little girls hugged each other and cried.

Beth raised both hands to her head, surprised to find it was still attached. "I'm all right, children," she said faintly. "Just a bit dazed." She blinked, trying to focus.

Jacob bent close and squinted at her. "Wow, are you gonna have a shiner," he said admiringly.

Filled with dismay, Beth gingerly touched the already swelling flesh. My stars! How would she ever explain this?

"It's a bad omen," Granny Jo said solemnly. "Bad."

Amid his grandmother's predictions of gloom and doom, Logan drove a nail and reattached the horseshoe, prongs up, over the front door. "There."

"Somethin' awful's goin' to happen." She shook her head. "You mark my words, Logan Winfield. With that horseshoe hanging by one nail all night, all the luck ran out of this house."

"Granny Jo, the nail rusted off. Nothing's going to happen." He gave the horseshoe one more whack. "Look. Good as new."

Granny Jo anxiously twisted her handkerchief between her gnarled fingers. "Luck's all gone," she said woefully. "And now we're gonna have company."

Logan scratched his head. "How do you figure that?"

"Them two roosters fightin' in the front yard, that's how. Two men comin'." She sighed. "More than likely they'll be hungry." She pointed toward the birds. "Catch them fellers and wring their necks. I'll be a boilin' water for their pluckin'."

"We're sure going to have a lot of chicken to eat for supper," Logan said with a wry grin.

The old lady gave him a reproachful look. "They'll be a- comin'. Just you wait and see."

Two hours later Lucifer raised his head and let out a loud neigh. Logan glanced up his perch on the corral fence and saw two men wearing black dusters riding down from the ridge. His gut twisted as he recognized the riders. As he remembered his grandmother's prediction a chill slid up his spine. "Granny Jo, you don't know how right you were. Trouble and company all rolled into one big ball." He put on his hat and strode toward the advancing horsemen.

"Howdy, Logan," said the younger of the two.

"Hello, Jesse." Logan nodded to the other man. "Frank. What brings you boys down this way?"

Jesse James scanned the area with rapidly blinking cold blue eyes. "A posse." Chuckling, he looked behind them.

Logan turned and uneasily scanned the hillside.

Frank, his face sober, stepped down. "Logan, we could use some grain for the horses, and a bite to eat if you have it."

"There's grain in the barn. You boys wait here and I'll check with Granny Jo about the vittles." Hoping they wouldn't follow, Logan hurried toward the house. When he entered the kitchen, he found his grandmother placing a large platter of chicken on the table. He felt a quiver of foreboding when he saw the two extra plates.

"Was I right, Logan?" Granny Jo asked quietly.

"You were right. We have company," he said grimly. She'd hit it right on the nose. He prayed she wasn't right about the luck part as well. He turned to Sally Mae and Ruth. "I want you girls to take a plate and go to your room. Don't come out again tonight. Seth, you and Joseph go with them."

The girls looked at one another, but quickly did as he said. "Nate, stay close, but don't start anything. I don't think there will be any trouble, but I can't be sure."

Granny Jo wiped her hands on her apron. "Tell the boys to come in before the gravy gets cold."

"Do you know who's out there?" Logan asked incredulously.

His grandmother nodded. "I know. But even if it was the devil himself, I'd never turn away a body that's hungry."

"All right, I'll get them." Logan left the house and strode back to the barn where the two men stood waiting. "Granny Jo says to come and get it before it gets cold." He reached out and touched Jesse's sleeve. "I've got children in there, and I don't want trouble. You're welcome to eat, then I'd appreciate it

if you'd go."

"You've got our word," Frank said, speaking for both of them. He nodded his head toward the house. "Come on, Dingus."

Jesse gave him a chilling look and shoved a long lock of hair behind his ear.

When they stepped inside the dogtrot, Logan held up his hand. "Guns on the porch, boys." He pointed to the pegs beside the kitchen door. "Granny Jo don't abide them in the house."

After Jesse had reluctantly parted with his weapons, Frank hung his gun belt on the peg beside it.

The outlaws took their seat on the opposite side of the table, where they could watch the door. They were quiet and ate with relish, but no one watching could have mistaken the meal for an ordinary family gathering. Logan prayed the younger children did as they were told. He had the feeling that Jesse was a lit fuse, waiting to explode. He didn't want his family anywhere around when it happened.

When they had finished eating, the outlaw brothers politely thanked Granny Jo for the meal and turned to leave.

Holding his hat, Frank left Logan and Jesse at the door and came back to the old lady. He pressed a twenty dollar gold piece into the palm of her hand. "My ma says you got the sight, Granny Jo. Can you see how far behind us they are?"

Granny Jo tucked the gold piece back into Frank's shirt pocket. "They won't get you this time." She

shook a finger at him. "But you're riding the road to hell along with Jesse if you don't change your ways, Frank James." She shook her head. "You got a pack of trouble on your trail." *I just hope it don't get Logan.*

"We'll be on our way, Granny Jo. Thanks again for the meal." Closing the door behind him, he retrieved his gun and joined Jesse and Logan.

Breathing a sigh of relief when they were clear of the house, Logan walked them to the barn. He filled a small sack with grain, then held it out to Frank. "Which way will they be coming from?"

Frank James took the corn and tucked it in his saddlebag. "Russellville." He gave Logan a solemn look. "We got a good haul this time. Might just lay low for a while. Maybe take a trip to California. Always wanted to see the ocean." Frank held out his hand. "Good luck and thank you, Logan."

Jesse, whirling the cylinder on his Remington, stepped past them and climbed on his horse. "Winfield, there's a rumor you got the express money from that Centralia job. Any truth to it?"

Gathering a tight rein on his emotions, Logan met Jesse's eyes and smiled. "Where did you ever hear such a crazy tale?" He uneasily watched Jesse's ruthless gaze scrutinize the farm. "You'd better be going, boys," Logan said quietly. "We don't have enough food for a party."

Frank, taking the hint, touched a finger to the rim of his hat. He turned to his brother. "All right, Jesse. Let's ride."

When the brothers were out of sight, Logan walked slowly back to the house. Not knowing whether Jesse believed him or not, Logan worried about the way the man had eyed the farm. While he felt he could trust Frank, it would be just like the snake-eyed Jesse to come back.

His mind troubled, Logan thought of Elizabeth. With the possibility of the outlaw returning and the likelihood of a posse on its way, there was no way he could leave home tonight.

Praying she would be all right, he raised a hand and made sure the horseshoe was secure before he entered the kitchen.

By Monday morning Beth both looked and felt like she'd been through a war. Every bone in her body throbbed with pain and she had not one, but two black eyes. Because of little James Lee's tender feelings, she concocted the story that she'd been walking backward and fallen over the horse trough.

Although the fable was satisfactory to the other students, Nate took one look and stalked out the schoolhouse door. When she followed to talk to him, she heard his horse galloping away.

Outside of a few commiserating remarks about her eyes, the morning progressed as usual. She took roll and helped Joseph with his math. She was right in the middle of the class spelling lesson when the door crashed back against the wall.

Logan stood in the doorway, his eyes strange and wild.

She gasped as her gaze focused on the gun tied low to his side. She'd never seen him wear a weapon. She jumped to her feet. "Logan, what on earth?"

Not answering, he strode forward. He gripped her chin and yanked off her glasses. He uttered a curse. Still holding her captive, he stared into her eyes. "So it is true." He released her and whirled on his heel. Ignoring the white-faced schoolchildren, he headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" She put on her glasses and ran after him. She grabbed his arm before he'd left the porch. "Logan?"

"I'm gonna kill the snake that did that to you," he said fiercely. Beneath her hand she felt him tremble.

"W-what?" she stammered, astounded at his words.

Behind her James Lee let out a wail and leaped from his seat. He caught her around the waist and buried his face in her skirts. "Help me!"

Jacob jumped to his brother's aid. Darting around her, the copper-haired child grabbed Logan around the leg. "You better not hurt my brother!" He drew back and kicked Logan in the shins.

"What the...?" Logan frowned. "Ow!" He tried to pry the youngster's teeth loose from his thigh. "I'm not going to hurt your brother." Freeing himself, he held the struggling boy at arm's length. "Stop

it!"

Held at bay by Logan's outstretched hand, Jake raised furious tear-stained cheeks. "Yes, you are. You said you were going to kill the snake that did that to her."

Logan raised his head and gave Beth a bewildered look. "James Lee?"

Hugging both little boys, Beth nodded. "It was an accident," she explained. "James Lee swung at the pig." She gave him a lopsided grin. "I got in the way."

Logan looked like someone had walloped him in the stomach. He slid down onto the steps. "I thought..."

"I know." She stepped inside and clapped her hands to get her pupils' attention. "Surprise. We're going to have an early recess. Class dismissed until I ring the bell."

The children, including Jacob, formed an orderly line as far as the door. Giving Logan a wide berth, they scattered in every direction.

Still clinging to her dress, James Lee shot a fear-filled look at Logan. "It's all right, dear," Beth said, smoothing his tousled red hair.

Logan entered the room and sat down on the vacant bench. "Come here, James Lee. I want to talk to you," he said quietly.

Peeking at him from behind Beth, the little boy offered a quivering smile. "You ain't gonna shoot

me?"

Logan leaned forward and ruffled the child's coppery hair. "Naw." He smiled at her. "In fact I want to shake your hand for taking such good care of Miss Elizabeth."

"You do?" James Lee took a tentative step forward.

Logan nodded and held out his hand. "Friends?"

The boy's face split in a wide smile. He stuck his hand into Logan's and gave it a hearty shake. "Friends."

"Now better run and play. You don't want to miss recess." After the youngster raced from the room, Logan turned and gave her an amused smile. "Now would you please tell me what the hell's been going on?"

She explained about the bed, the laundry, the pilfered whiskey barrel, and the blanket-stealing hogs. She told Logan that to save James Lee embarrassment she'd made up the story about falling over the water trough. She also mentioned Harlan Quinn's missing teeth. She cocked her head and looked at him. "You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

Logan grinned. "Maybe he fell over the water trough."

"So it was you." She removed her glasses and gently rubbed her swollen eyes. "I didn't see you there."

"You won't be seeing much of anything for a while," he teased, getting to his feet.

"I'm sorry I've been so much trouble to you."

"Yeah. You have been that."

Fearing she looked like a violet-eyed raccoon, Beth shyly held out her hand. "Friends?"

Not answering, Logan took her hand and pulled her into his arms. *More than friends, darlin'.* He cupped her head and pressed it against his rapidly beating heart. *Much more than friends.*

Chapter 21

Doing supper dishes in the Quinn kitchen, Beth tensed when she heard Harlan shuffle into the room. He slammed an almost full bowl of soup down on the counter. "Stay out of my wife's room. She don't want no company."

"I didn't disturb her," Beth said defensively. "In fact, she was asleep."

"You mind what I say, missy. Keep them kids out of there, too." He fixed her with an angry glare, then wheeled on his heel and left the house. A short time later he drove a wagon loaded with casks out of the yard.

"Pa's going to deliver some shine over to Oakridge," Jacob said. "He won't be back till morning."

Puzzled by Harlan's words about his wife, Beth looked at the children. "When's the last time you saw your mother?"

James Lee shrugged. "She's been sick a long time."

"How long?" Beth insisted. Something didn't seem right.

"Christmas, I reckon." He looked at Jacob for confirmation.

Beth gasped in disbelief. She knelt beside them. "None of you have seen your mother since

Christmas?"

"Pa said since she's gonna have another baby, she's too sick to bother about us," Pearl said. "Jake tried once, but he got a beatin'."

Beth sat down in the rickety ladder-backed chair. Good Lord, these children were as much orphans as if they had no parents at all. Had their own mother really refused to see them? "Stay here and have a cookie," she said gently. "I'll be back in a minute."

She stepped onto the porch and glanced around the yard, half expecting Harlan to be lurking in the bushes. But apparently he had gone to Oakridge as Jacob had said.

She lifted the curtain strung across the Quinns' bedroom door and stepped inside. "Mrs. Quinn?" she asked softly. "It's Elizabeth Eastgate, your children's teacher. May I come in?"

"Harlan?" came a muffled voice from the bed.

"No. Your husband's gone to Oakridge."

"Oh, thank God," the woman cried. "Please come closer."

Beth gasped when a skeletal hand snaked out of the darkness and clutched her arm. "I'm not leaving," she reassured the woman. "What is it? Are you feeling poorly?"

"Are you sure he's gone?" Ada Quinn asked desperately.

"I saw the wagon leave."

"Light the lamp," Ada said panting. "There isn't much time." A spasm of coughing racked the woman's frail body. Moaning, she fell back onto the bunk.

Beth fumbled for the lamp and found a match on the table beside it. After adjusting it to a soft glow, she turned toward the bed. "Oh, no!"

"It's--my time," Ada gasped, apparently in the last throes of labor. "I know--I won't make it. I pray--the babe goes with me."

Beth stared helplessly. She'd never delivered a baby. She had no idea what to do. If only Granny Jo were here, she thought. Then she remembered that Logan told her he'd kept watch from the ridge top the first night she was there. "Oh, Lord, please let him be there," she prayed. She ran outside and faced the ridge. "Logan! Logan, I need you." Within seconds Lucifer thundered into the yard.

"Lizzie?" Gun drawn, Logan leaped from the horse and faced the house. "Where is he?"

"He's gone," she cried. She clutched his shirtfront. "It's Ada. She's having a baby. She says she's going to die," she whispered, noticing the children were standing on the porch.

Logan shoved the gun into his holster. "Where?"

"In there." Beth pointed to the lantern-lit room. Rushing past the white-faced children, she followed him inside.

"My God!" Logan exclaimed.

Hands clutching her swollen abdomen, Ada Quinn writhed in agony on the filthy bed. She let out a pain-filled scream.

His face white, Logan whirled. He ran outside and knelt by the wide-eyed youngsters. "Any of you kids know how to ride?"

"I do," Jake said.

"Take Lucifer and head over that far ridge. That's where I live. Tell Granny Jo that your ma's having a baby. Tell her to hurry." He helped the boy into the saddle and watched him race the gelding out of sight.

"Stay with the kids," he ordered Elizabeth. "I'll need some hot water." He glanced around and sighed. "Is there anyplace clean around here?"

Beth pointed to her own room. "There."

She ran to put the kettle on to boil and stoked up the fire, then returned to the porch to see he'd yanked the curtain from the doorframe to allow more light inside.

Ada Quinn held gently in his arms, Logan followed Beth into the far room. "Much better." He nodded approval at the clean bed and floor. "Remove the quilt and the top sheet. We may need them later." He placed Ada on the bed and patted her thin hand. "I'll be right back."

Logan took Beth's elbow and led her outside. "I've never delivered a baby, but I've seen mares like

this. Baby's coming out the wrong way. Even if it wasn't, it's too large for her to birth it. I'll do my best." He took a breath. "But I'm afraid that no matter what I do, she's not going to make it."

Beth wadded her fist and held it over her mouth to muffle an anguished cry.

Logan pulled her close for a minute, then held her away. His face white and serious, he said, "Lizzie, I need you. And they need you." He pointed toward the sobbing children. "Get cloths, rags, anything clean. Also soap and a sharp knife."

Beth wiped her eyes. Attempting a quivering smile, she led the children back to the kitchen. She sat down beside James Lee. "Our friend Logan needs your help. Can you keep the girls busy while I help him and your mother?"

His eyes big, the little boy nodded. He went to a corner and came back with his tablet. "Come on," he said to his sisters. "I'll teach you how to cipher."

Beth gathered up the things Logan requested and hurried down the porch. When she started to enter the room, Logan stepped in front of her. He took the kettle of water, the knife, and the rags out of her hand. She tried to follow him in, but he held up his hand. "Stay outside." From the doorway she saw him bend by the bed. A moment later he carefully placed a small covered bundle on the floor. Sensing Beth's presence, he turned.

"Logan?"

He shook his head. "Go check on the children."

Unnerved, Beth nodded and went back to the kitchen. Seeing the children were occupied, she didn't disturb them, but walked to the end of the porch and stared into the twilight sky. When she could remain no longer, she hesitantly returned to the room. She saw Logan leaning over the exhausted woman.

Ada whispered something. He nodded. A moment later he turned. "She wants you to come in."

Beth forced her trembling legs to carry her into the room. She knelt by the ashen-faced woman and took her hand. "Ada?"

Ada Quinn opened her eyes and made an effort to smile. "The baby's dead."

"I know. I'm sorry." Beth swallowed. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Ada nodded. "Paper."

Beth retrieved a pencil and paper from her satchel. Struggling to hear the woman's instructions, she wrote down a name and address. "You want me to notify them?"

Ada nodded. "My folks." Her eyes pleading, she clutched Beth's arm. "The children. Harlan-- mustn't--have them." She gazed up at Logan. "Promise me."

"We promise," he said softly. "Ada, would you like to see them?"

Her eyelids fluttered then closed. There was no answer.

Logan walked to the bedside and gently lifted the tiny bundle from the floor. "Go with your ma,

little one." He placed the tiny babe in its mother's arms and covered them both with the sheet. His face etched with pain, he closed his eyes and reached for Beth. "It's over."

"I feel so guilty," she sobbed. "I knew she was sick. I should have made him let me see her."

"It wouldn't have mattered. She didn't want to live," he said, his voice strained. He blew the lantern out and stood in the dark as if ashamed to let her see his tears. Locked in his arms, she felt his body shake. Her own tears dampened the front of his shirt.

After a while he sucked in a ragged breath and released her, then walked to the water bucket and washed and dried his face. He returned to loop an arm around her shoulders. "God knows it won't be easy, but we've got to tell those little children their mama won't be with them anymore."

"What about Harlan?" she asked bitterly. Even though he knew his wife was desperately ill, he not only wouldn't help her, he hadn't allowed anyone else to either. The thought of the children suffering a similar fate filled her with desperation. "What if he won't let the children go?"

"I made a promise to that poor dying woman." Logan's voice hardened. "A promise I intend to keep."

Granny Jo, Nate, and Jacob arrived toward dawn. Lucifer was tied behind the wagon. Simon

Latham accompanied them in his own rig. At Logan's insistence, Nate drove Beth and the children to the Lathams', where Kate and Mary made them welcome. Granny Jo and Simon came in later in the wagon with the bodies.

Logan stayed at the house and waited for Harlan.

After the burial, Harlan hadn't protested the children's leaving. He knew if he tried, Logan would kill him on the spot.

Weeks later someone saw a glow in the sky. The town folk investigating found Harlan Quinn's body in what remained of the kitchen. They also found the lardy remains of a large black hog. They reasoned that Harlan had passed out drunk and the sow had wandered into the house and knocked over the table and lamp. Both Harlan and the hog had perished in the flames.

After the Quinn children left for their grandparents home in the east, Beth was relieved when the Jenkins family refused to board her. By the dismal look of the place, it would have been worse than the Quinns'.

Knowing Beth had been shaken by what had happened at the Quinns', Granny Jo wanted her to come back to the mountain, but Beth was reluctant. After the children had gone, Logan had seemed quiet, almost reserved, in her presence as if he, too, had been changed by the experience. Knowing that she loved him, she had to have time to get herself together before she ruined both their lives. When the

Lathams urged her to stay on with them, Beth gratefully accepted.

She'd seen how affected the Quinn children had been by having no one to care for them. While Logan was fond of her, he had Granny Jo and the rest of the Winfield clan. Teddy had no one but her. For a while Beth had dared to dream an impossible dream, but now it was time to face reality.

She had another reason for staying in town. Arnold Plunket allowed her to help out at the store after school to earn a few extra dollars a month. Even though the work was hard, she enjoyed putting some order into the mercantile's chaos and the extra job kept her too busy and exhausted to miss the Winfields or Logan.

Finished for the day, Beth said goodbye to Arnold and took the two letters she clutched to her breast back to the schoolhouse to read in private. Filled with emotion, she sat at her desk and opened the letter from James Lee and Jacob Quinn.

Tears welled in her eyes when she read that their grandpa had bought each of them a pony and that the girls had more dolls than they could count. Beth smiled when Jacob added that May didn't pee the bed anymore, since they had two bathrooms *inside* the house. She read that their grandma was teaching Pearl how to sew. Jacob said Pearl wanted to make a pillow to match the quilt Beth had given her.

Down lower in a crooked but painstaking hand, James Lee had printed, "Tell our friend Logan, we love him."

At the bottom, both boys had put their names. The little girls had added their Xs.

Beth carefully folded the letter and tucked it inside the envelope. She'd send it home by Sally Mae for Logan to read. In spite of his gruff exterior, she knew he would be touched, too.

She gazed out the window and noticed the red roses along the schoolhouse fence had burst into a fresh mass of blooms. Maybe Sunday, after church, she could take some to Ada's grave.

She thought it fitting that while Ada had been buried in the town cemetery, Harlan lay buried next to his hog under a sycamore tree in back of his barn.

After reading Hannah's letter, which said Teddy's condition was getting progressively worse, she read a short note from Teddy. Her mind troubled, she locked the schoolhouse door and walked to her room at the Latham's.

Reaching the house, Beth heard laughter coming from the kitchen. Her heart skipped a beat. *Logan?* But when she stepped inside, the minister, Joe Johnson, came to greet her.

"Hello, Miss Eastgate. My, you are lovelier than ever," he said, kissing her hand.

"It's Elizabeth, remember?" she said with a smile. "How are you, Reverend Johnson?"

"Joe. And I would never forget--Elizabeth."

"The reverend will be staying with us until Monday," Simon Latham said. "I know you ladies will be glad of the company. And I will be glad of the peace." He winked at his wife.

"Peace?" Kate said with a laugh. "All we have is peace. It's nice to have a little excitement."

After dinner Kate suggested Beth and Joe sit on the front porch and enjoy the evening while she and Mary did the dishes.

Settling themselves in the wooden swing, Beth and Joe made a bet as to who could count the most fireflies. After a while, sensing she was preoccupied, he gave up the game. "I heard you had a hard time of it at the Quinns'."

"It was awful," she admitted, "but everything is fine now." She told him about the children's letter.

"God works in mysterious ways, Beth. At least the children are cared for and happy." He gazed down at her. "I was surprised when Kate said you were here. I expected to find you at the Winfields'."

Beth didn't comment.

"In fact, I thought you and Logan might be courting."

"Courting? Why would you ever think that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Must have been something someone said."

"Now that I'm in town I hardly ever see the man."

Joe gave her a brilliant smile. "Do you have any objection to taking a walk with the minister? It is a

lovely night and I need to check on something at the church."

"I'd love to." Beth got to her feet. "I'll tell Kate, then I'll be right back."

Watching her go inside, Joe stretched his arms along the back of the swing and smiled. "You had your chance, Logan, old man." He raised a finger and smoothed his mustache. "Now it's my turn."

Chapter 22

It was May, and since Joe Johnson, the circuit preacher, had returned to Devil's Hollow, Logan loaded all the Winfields, dressed in their Sunday best, into the wagon and headed into town for church services.

Arriving at the community hall, Logan pulled the mules to a halt in the shade of a large oak tree, then he helped Granny Jo and the children down.

For May the weather was already unseasonably warm, and in his worn black broadcloth suit, he sweltered in the heat. Sweat poured down the collar of his shirt and made a sticky trail down the center of his back. He longed to remove his coat, but wanting to look his best, he didn't. Instead he removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his damp brow.

Trying not to appear obvious, Logan glanced at the various groups gathered in front of the building, hoping to catch a glimpse of Elizabeth. Since she had decided to stay in town, he hadn't seen much of her. And now he'd discovered how much he missed her.

When he spotted her with the Lathams, his lips curved into a smile. But the smile turned to a scowl when he saw Joe Johnson slip her arm through his and escort her toward the church. Logan quickened

his step. *Dad burn it, Elizabeth is my girl.* Logan slowed then halted. But she wasn't. And she couldn't be. He'd seen that the night Ada Quinn died. A woman needed a man she could depend on. Someone who would be there for her, hell or high water, and no matter how badly he wanted it, he couldn't be that man for Elizabeth.

Since the James brothers' visit, Logan felt he was living on borrowed time. Even though the posse hadn't shown up, when he saw a stranger, he fought the urge to run. He knew one day they'd get him. When that day arrived, he didn't want a wife and maybe a little one to have to share his shame.

Jesse James had boasted about the Russellville bank haul, mentioning that a man named Gonzales in San Antonio, Texas, would convert gold into greenbacks for a "cut" of forty percent. Knowing Granny Jo would need the money to survive if he did get caught, Logan made sure she knew where to find the gold and told her how to contact Gonzales if it became necessary. In the meantime Logan could do nothing but pray--and wait.

Following the last group into church, he sat in the very back pew. From there he could drink his fill of Beth without her seeing him. He heard her lilting voice raised in a hymn, but afraid she'd recognize him if he joined in, he remained silent.

When the minister gave him a puzzled look, Logan shifted in his seat, ill at ease. He knew Joe wondered why he hadn't sat by Elizabeth. At the thought of Elizabeth, a pain sharp as a knife sliced

through Logan's breast. He had to talk to Joe, but not where Beth could see him. When the sermon ended, he mouthed the word *cemetery* and pointed toward the hill. Joe nodded. When the final hymn was being sung, Logan slipped out the door.

He walked slowly, stopping to spend some time at the school. With the parishioners gathering outside the church, he knew the minister wouldn't be able to leave for a while yet. Granny Jo wouldn't be ready to go either, as she had mentioned wanting to swap pickle recipes with Kate Latham after the services.

Logan went up the school steps and stopped in the shade of the porch. He hadn't been there since the Quinn children had left. Taking in a deep breath, he swore he detected Beth's cinnamon scent in the air. It was impossible, but he liked to think that even in her absence a part of her might linger there.

On his way out of the schoolyard, he paused at the fence and picked a few roses to take to the cemetery for Ada Quinn and the babe. He thought it was a shame the poor woman never had anyone that cared enough to give her flowers while she was alive.

When he reached the graveyard, he placed the blooms on Ada's grave, then removed his hat and said a few words to pay his respects. Detecting the sound of feminine voices, he glanced down the road and spotted Kate Latham and Beth. To avoid being seen, he quickly walked away and stepped behind a sycamore tree.

Beth knelt at the same grave site and placed another bouquet of bloodred roses beside the ones he'd brought. She and Kate talked quietly, then after a few moments Kate left. Remaining behind, Beth shaded her eyes and scanned the cemetery as if she knew he was near.

Afraid she'd find him skulking in the bushes, Logan moved from the shadows and walked toward her. "Hello, Elizabeth."

"Logan. You did bring the flowers," she said, smiling. "I didn't see you at church."

"I sat in the back." Catching her spicy scent, he turned away. "I saw you earlier with Joe. I didn't want to intrude."

"Intrude?" She peered up at him through her glasses.

"He's a fine fellow," Logan said, twisting his hat brim in his hands.

"He says the same thing about you." Beth stepped closer and gazed into his eyes. "He also said something else. He had the misconception we were keeping company."

"He did? Wonder where in the world he got that idea?"

"I'm quite sure I wouldn't know," she said coolly. "Are you going to the dance next Saturday?"

Logan shaded his eyes and traced the path of a flying redbird. "I might be too busy."

"Oh. I'll probably be too busy, too," she added quickly.

Logan frowned and stared past her. A familiar figure in a Prince Albert coat and a black Stetson

walked toward them.

She followed his gaze. "Why, it's Joe."

"Since you two seem to be so cozy, he's probably looking for you," Logan said peevishly.

"Not likely, since he didn't even know I was here."

"I didn't know you were here either and I found you."

"You didn't *find* me," Beth pointed out. "*You* were hiding behind a tree." She turned and gave Joe a warm smile. "Apparently you have some business with this man, so I'll be on my way." She took a step toward the road.

"I won't be long," Joe said, catching her hand. "If you'd like to wait...?" He took off his hat.

"I wouldn't dream of interrupting your meeting." She smiled and added, "I'll see you later at the house." She cast a sideways look over the preacher's shoulder. "Goodbye, Logan."

"What was that all about?" Joe asked, when she walked away.

"Damned--darned if I know," Logan growled through clenched teeth.

Joe chuckled. "You still sweet on her?"

"Course not. Where'd you get that idea?" Logan jammed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his boot heels. "That's why I needed to see you. I thought I'd ought to set you to rights, especially since you saw fit to tell her we were courtin'."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Well, we're not." Logan glowered at him. "So you can forget it."

Joe held up his hands. "It's forgotten."

"All right. Long as you've got it straight." Logan shoved his hat on his head and held out his hand. "Goodbye, preacher."

After they shook hands, Joe watched his friend stalk off toward the trees. "You crazy galoot. You're hurting so bad, you can't even talk about her. I wish I knew how she felt about you." He ran a hand through his hair and placed his Stetson back on his head. Then, wondering how he could advance his own interests, he straightened his tie and headed back to town.

Two days after she'd seen Logan at the cemetery, Beth signed her pay voucher and slipped it into the envelope along with a letter for Hannah and Teddy. Even though she seldom kept any of her wages for her own needs, she was still desperately short of the funds required. Time was running out. The paltry sum she'd earned at the mercantile barely covered stamps and her few personal items. If only she could find some way to get more money.

Five hundred dollars. She sighed, thinking it might as well be a million. Where could she ever hope to come by such a sum?

When she reached the Lathams', she found the preacher waiting by the gate. "Hello, Joe."

"I saw you coming up the hill." He took her hand. "Elizabeth, I'm your minister as well as your friend. Won't you tell me what's troubling you? Whatever you say will be held in strictest confidence," Joe said gently.

Maybe he could help her find a solution and she did need to talk to someone. "Not here," she whispered.

"Let's take a walk, then."

His calm manner put her at ease and she found herself wanting to confide in him. Once she started, she couldn't stop. She told him about being abandoned at the Chicago orphanage, and her life there, about Tess and Teddy and how when Tess died, Beth had promised to raise the baby. She also told the minister that she planned to adopt the little boy. Her voice broke when she told of Teddy's accident and his need for the operation. "And now if I don't get five hundred dollars, he may never walk again."

"Oh, my dear." Joe gently pulled her into his arms. He closed his eyes, wishing he could help her, but if he did, the last three years of his life would be wasted. He couldn't risk it. "I would gladly give you the money if I could, but as a minister most of my income comes in the form of meals and trade goods. I seldom get any money." He took a handkerchief and wiped her tears. "Have you told the Winfields?"

Horrorstruck, Beth looked up. "No! I would die if they found out about my background. And the

school board...I haven't told anyone but you. Promise you won't say anything."

"Of course not." He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "Elizabeth, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You can't help the circumstances of your birth. It's what you are inside that counts. You are beautiful in goodness and in spirit. Anyone should be honored to have you for a friend."

He took her hand and led her to a patch of green grass beside the road. He removed his frock coat and spread it near a fallen tree. "Now, if you'll join me, we'll take your problem to one who can help."

In the shade of a towering sycamore tree, she knelt next to him and bowed her head.

The clergyman intoned a heartfelt prayer, then, reflecting on his own secret, he added a silent plea.

The next afternoon Joe drove the borrowed buggy into the schoolhouse yard, arriving just as the children were leaving. This would be his last night at the Lathams' and since he wouldn't see Elizabeth until his return two months from now, he intended to make the most of the time he had left. He parked the rig in the shade of the trees, then leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms, content to watch her work.

Unaware of his presence, she removed her glasses and placed them to one side, then continued to

grade the papers.

Frowning, Joe studied her for a while, then, not wanting to startle her, he knocked on the door facing. "May I come in?"

She looked up. "Oh. I didn't know anyone was here." She grabbed her spectacles and started to put them on.

He reached out a hand to stop her. "More secrets?" he said, gesturing toward the glasses. "I thought we were friends."

She nodded. "They're clear glass. I was afraid if I didn't look like a schoolteacher, they wouldn't let me keep the job."

"Elizabeth, you are priceless. I suppose the dress and the hairdo are part of the same ploy?"

"Yes," she admitted guiltily. "You must think I'm terribly deceitful."

"On the contrary, I think you are wonderful." He pointed to the papers. "Are you almost finished?"

"Yes. That was the last one. Why?"

He took her hand and led her to the doorway, then made an extravagant bow. "Your carriage awaits, madame."

"What on earth?"

"I intend to kidnap you and ply you with fried chicken and apple pie, and who knows what else Kate

packed." He gave her a hopeful look. "If you're willing, of course."

"It sounds delightful." Her violet eyes sparkled. "Where shall we go?"

"Down by the river. It's quite lovely this time of year."

"I'll lock the door."

When she returned, he took her hand and helped her into the buggy. Joe gave her a smile and lifted the reins. The horse took off at a trot.

Logan pulled Lucifer into a stand of trees and watched the couple drive by. "He certainly isn't wasting any time," he said resentfully. Nate had mentioned that the reverend had stayed over. He'd also said Joe walked Beth back to the Lathams' every day after school. Mighty convenient, him staying there, too, Logan thought. "Wonder what 'darling Teddy' would think of that?"

Consumed with jealousy, Logan continued on to the store and took care of his business. Afterward he spent some time jawing with Arnold Plunket. When Logan could think of nothing else to say, he rose to his feet and bid the old man goodbye.

Mulling over what he'd found out, Logan climbed aboard Lucifer and pointed the gelding toward home. Apparently things hadn't been going well for Elizabeth. Arnold said after she'd gotten the last

letter from Chicago, she'd seemed unhappy. Logan wondered if that was why she'd been seeing so much of Joe.

Riding past the Lathams', Logan remembered the note that Granny Jo had given him for Lizzie. Knowing he'd allowed the couple ample time to get home, he reined Lucifer into the yard, dismounted, and looped the reins over the hitching post.

A little uneasy, remembering their last encounter, Logan removed his hat, ran a hand through his hair, and knocked on the door. She might not even talk to him. Still, he felt a sharp tinge of disappointment when Kate Latham answered the door.

"Logan. Come in."

"Hello, Kate." Feeling awkward, he followed her into the parlor. "Granny Jo sent a note for Elizabeth."

"She isn't here. She and the reverend went on a picnic down by the river. It's such a lovely night. I don't blame them for not being in a hurry to get back." Kate released a long sigh.

"I think our preacher might be smitten."

Logan grunted.

Kate laughed. "They do make such a handsome couple."

"They're a pair all right," Logan said under his breath. When Kate rambled on about how good-

looking and what a catch the minister was, Logan crushed his hat between his hands. Then, unable to listen to another word, he muttered, "Good night," slapped his battered hat on his head, and headed for the door.

"Logan?"

"Yeah?"

"You forgot the note." Kate held out her hand.

"Right." Logan fished in his pocket, then handed her the folded piece of paper.

"I'll see that she gets it," Kate said with a smile. "Good evening, Logan."

Logan mumbled goodbye. Disgruntled, he yanked the reins loose and swung into the saddle. Wheeling the horse, he urged him toward the road.

Ahead of him a lover's moon crept over the ridge, coating the landscape in its silvery brilliance. Crickets and frogs sang a soft serenade while a warm perfumed wind sighed wistfully through the trees. A perfect night for romance, he thought miserably. *If the other feller wasn't out with your girl!*

Telling himself he was seven kinds of fool, he turned the horse and rode back to the schoolhouse. He tied the gelding out of sight in the rear, then settled himself in the shadows to wait. Unless that buggy had wings, it had to come by here sooner or later. He glanced grimly at the moon. It was already later. Why wasn't she home? Didn't she know she had school tomorrow? He clenched his teeth. *She's always*

worried about being so proper, then she stays out half the night with the preacher. "If that's proper, I'll eat my hat," he growled. As for Joe, Logan fumed, the rest of his congregation's going to hell while he's out ruining the teacher's reputation.

Getting madder by the minute, Logan paced the school grounds. Then, hearing the tinkling of harness bells, he quickly moved out of sight. The buggy slowly rolled past. His sharp vision picked out Beth's small figure. Her hair was down! She had her head on the minister's shoulder!

Uttering a muffled curse, Logan mounted Lucifer and headed cross-country. Reaching the Lathams' before the buggy arrived, he reined the gelding into the trees.

Soon the carriage rolled into view and stopped in front of the house. Logan burned when the preacher bent his head and kissed her good night then watched her enter the house.

When Joe led the team toward the barn, Logan stepped out of the shadows. "Keeping the teacher out kind of late, aren't you?"

Joe gave him a startled look. "Not that it's any of your business, Logan, but I guess I did at that. She is quite attractive, you know."

"What do you mean by that?" Logan leaped forward and grabbed the front of Joe's shirt. "I won't have you taking advantage of her," he warned.

Joe's eyes blazed into his. "If I weren't a man of God, you'd be eating dirt by now, Logan Winfield."

He knocked Logan's hand away and straightened his coat. "I like Elizabeth and I think she likes me, too."

"Apparently you don't know about 'darling Teddy'."

Joe glanced up in surprise. "What did you say about Teddy?"

"You know about Theodore Charles?" Logan asked, amazed.

"Of course. But I didn't know you knew. Beth said she hadn't mentioned him to anyone."

"If she was trying to keep the man a secret, she shouldn't have left her letters laying around."

"You read her mail?"

"Of course not. Sally Mae saw one of the letters Elizabeth was writing. She said it started 'My darling Teddy'."

"Oh." Joe grinned.

"You know she's writing that kind of letter to some man and you don't mind?" Logan asked incredulously, trying to control his own jealousy.

Joe picked up the team's reins. "No, I don't mind at all."

"You're either the biggest fool that ever lived or a saint."

"Neither, my friend, I can assure you of that. Good night, Logan." Whistling, Joe led the horses toward the barn.

Logan untied Lucifer and swung into the saddle. His brows drew into a puzzled frown. Why did he

feel like he'd missed something? The preacher knew about Logan and Teddy and he didn't mind a bit. Logan knew about both of *them* and it was driving him crazy.

He stared into the darkness a minute before kneeing the gelding onto the trail and kicking him into a trot. "Come on, old horse. Let's go home." He shook his head. "I must not be getting enough sleep."

Chapter 23

It was Saturday and the night of the community dance. Beth gazed about the room and noticed all the Winfields were present, except Logan. "Guess you were too busy," she whispered. She hadn't seen him since their strange conversation last Sunday. Despite the throng of people around her, she sighed, suddenly feeling very much alone.

Joe had departed on his rounds early Thursday morning. He'd left an address where she could reach him if she needed, then, in front of Kate and Simon, Joe had kissed her goodbye. Beth had grown fond of him and was touched by his gentleness, but another kiss still haunted her dreams.

It was important that Joe knew about her secrets, her background as well as her plans to provide a home for Teddy, and that to him neither mattered. For the first time in her life she knew a sense of worth as a person. For the first time she felt someone liked her for who she was. She considered Joe a true friend.

Lost in her thoughts, she jumped when Granny Jo touched her arm. "Lizabet, how are you child? Did Logan give you my note?"

"Granny Jo." Beth smiled and gave the old lady a hug. "I'm fine. And thank you for the invitation.

I wasn't home when Logan came by, but Kate gave me the note the next morning."

"Will you come?"

"If Mr. Plunket will let me make up the time," Beth said.

"I'm sure he'd let you have a couple of nights off. Let's ask him," the old lady suggested.

"It isn't that, Granny Jo." She hesitated. "I need the extra money. With the Quinn children gone, my salary isn't quite as large as it was."

"Is that so? Those skinflints pay you by the head, do they? Well, we'll just see about that."

Beth turned. Following the elderly woman's gaze, she saw the elaborately dressed Palmers and Elmira had entered the room. When Granny Jo started toward them, Beth realized her intention and put her hand on the old woman's arm. "Granny Jo, please don't say anything. I thought you knew. I'll manage somehow." Beth smiled, trying to distract her. "I'm sure I can at least come out long enough for Joseph's party."

"He'd be awful disappointed if you didn't." Granny Jo brightened when the fiddler drew his bow as a signal for the men and boys to choose their partners. The fiddle struck up a lively tune, and a twanging Jew's harp joined in.

When Arnold Plunket claimed Granny Jo, a stocky, young farmer swept Beth up in "swing around the circle." After that came the "balance all," the "gallop," then the "Virginia reel."

Beth noticed the Palmers didn't dance, and when no one urged them to join in, they left a short while later. She thought it strange they had come in the first place, as she heard they never attended any of the social functions except church.

After a brief intermission the strains of the beautiful "Blue Danube" turned the mood slow and dreamy. Watching from the sidelines, Beth felt a strong arm go around her. By the way her pulse quickened she knew before she raised her head that it was Logan.

His clean-shaven face set, his smoky eyes dark and brooding, he swirled her onto the floor. Held securely in his arms, she felt she'd come home. Unlike the first dance when she'd tromped on his feet, tonight they moved in perfect accord.

When the waltz ended, Beth sighed and pivoted toward the platform to applaud the musicians. She turned back and was stunned to find Logan gone. Thinking he might have stepped outside, she waited, hoping he might return. He didn't.

Finally the fiddlers called it a night. It was only then that she realized Logan had come all that way for just one dance. And from the time he'd arrived to the time he left, he hadn't spoken a single word.

Riding toward home, Logan cursed himself for going to the dance, but he hadn't been able to resist

the temptation of holding Lizzie again. He closed his eyes, tormented by the memory of how she'd felt in his arms. Even now her light cinnamon scent still lingered. He'd been a fool. Going to the dance was probably the worst thing he could have done. Now he missed her more than ever.

Beth's heart pounded like a trip-hammer when Simon Latham wheeled his wagon into the Winfield yard for Joseph's birthday party. It had been a week since the dance, a week since she'd seen Logan. She'd climbed down from the wagon to follow Kate and Mary into the house when Logan stepped from the porch.

"Miss Eastgate, can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Of course, Logan," she said, puzzled by his formality.

"I have four new pupils for you--if you don't mind the color of their skin," he said somewhat sarcastically.

"If they are human children and not four of your mules, I'd have no objection if they were pea green," she countered, resenting his attitude.

He gave her a one-sided smile. "I guess I deserved that. All right, I'll see that they are in school tomorrow." He started to walk away then turned back. "They are Indians, Osage. I thought you ought to

know in advance in case you want to change your mind."

"I won't," she assured him. "In fact I think it would be very interesting to the others to have them in the class."

Logan's eyes turned frosty. "They aren't animals or objects of curiosity. They are friends of mine and I wouldn't want them embarrassed."

She glared at him. "Logan Winfield, how could you think I would ever stand for them being ridiculed? I only meant it would be nice for the class to be introduced to a different culture."

"They're a different culture all right. They are probably the most civilized folks I know. Their people will be paying for their schooling, not the school board, so the Palmers shouldn't have any objection." He met her eyes. "I didn't realize until Granny Jo mentioned it that you were being paid for each pupil and not a set salary or I would have settled that before you started."

He stood silent for a moment, then hooked his thumbs in his pockets and stared toward the barn. "The tribe would be happy to pay for extra tutoring, but that would be a little difficult with you living all the way in town. And since you're having so much fun with your *picnics and all*, I sure wouldn't think of asking you to move back out here."

"That's good," Beth said defensively, "because I'm perfectly content boarding with the Lathams'. And don't forget," she added, "I have a job at the store."

"Well, I didn't intend to suggest you do anything different. Like I said, the kids will be there tomorrow." He stalked off toward the barn.

Hands on her hips, she stared after him. Good gracious. It seemed they couldn't carry on a conversation without practically coming to blows. Then she remembered the night of the dance when he didn't talk at all. That was the only time she could recall that they hadn't had a fight.

At school the next morning, three raven-haired, dark-eyed children arrived on horseback with the Winfields. Sally Mae made the introductions. "This is Sarah. She's six."

The little girl bobbed her head, her wide smile showing a gap between her front teeth.

"That's John. He's eight." A boy solemnly nodded his head.

"This is Ann, and she's fifteen, my age."

"I'm very happy to meet all of you," Beth said. "Do you have a last name?" she asked, unsure of their customs.

A lovely girl with soft doe-like eyes and long braids gave her a shy smile. "Our father's name is Killer of the Deer on the Mountain. The missionaries gave us the last name of Killdeer."

She noticed the girls wore calico dresses and high-topped shoes and John wore denim pants and a

blue shirt. Beth didn't know what she had expected, feathers and paint perhaps, as would most city people, but except for the bronzed color of their skin and their dark eyes, they looked no different from the rest of her pupils. "I thought Logan said there would be four of you."

"My brother is coming with Nate," Ann said. "And he would not let the missionaries change his name. He's sixteen."

Beth smiled. "Whatever he wants to be called is all right with me." She glanced up as Nate and a tall, handsome youth rode into the yard. After they hobbled their horses, the boys came toward her. Beth smiled and held out her hand. "Hello, I'm Elizabeth Eastgate. You may call me Miss Elizabeth."

"I am Rider of the Swift Wind. You may call me Rider," the boy said with dignity. He solemnly shook her hand. His shoulder-length hair was neatly groomed and gleamed black as her own. Although worn, his denim pants were immaculately clean as was his homespun shirt. Around his throat hung a necklace of deer-horn beads and bear claws. Unlike the heavy boots worn by the rest of the boys, including his own brother, Rider's feet were covered by knee-high moccasins. His dark eyes were wary but intelligent.

Staring with curiosity, the other pupils gathered around the newcomers. Beth introduced each one by name. When Elmira Palmer sniffed disdainfully and turned away, and the younger Jenkins girl muttered something about dirty Injuns, Beth stepped forward. "Class, these children are members of the

proud Osage tribe. We are very honored to welcome them here." She gave the Indian children a warm smile. "I know we will all learn a lot from each other. Maybe when they get to know us better, they might be willing to teach us some of their language and customs." She glanced at Ann and Rider, hoping for confirmation. She breathed a sigh of relief when both nodded. Beth was delighted to find the Indian children had an exceptional knowledge of the English language, with none of the grammar or speech problems that she'd been trying to correct in her other pupils. Their manners were exemplary and their cleanliness delightful. They seemed almost too good to be true.

She was surprised to find that they seemed at almost the same academic level with the others of the same ages in her class, with the exception of Rider. She discovered from Ann that rebelling against the missionaries efforts to divorce them from their tribal customs and ways, Rider had refused to go to school. When their parents left Kansas for the northern Ozarks, Ann had continued to educate the children on her own. The other teacher in Devil's Hollow refused to admit Indians to the classroom, Ann said shyly.

Suddenly Beth knew why Logan had said the things he had. But she felt hurt that he would believe she would have the same prejudices as the previous instructor.

The day went more smoothly, the only flaw being the Jenkins children's attitude toward their darker-skinned peers.

That evening Beth asked the Lathams if they had any objections to her giving Rider special lessons on the evenings she didn't work at the general store. Even though she hadn't mentioned it to the boy yet, she wanted to get the Lathams' permission since the tutoring would be held in their home.

To Beth's surprise, Mary spoke up and asked her parents if she might help Rider on the evenings that Beth did work. The Lathams looked at one another for a moment, then Simon said why not. He added later that if the young man was as decent as everyone seemed to think, he would rather his daughter take a shine to him, Indian or not, than to Alvin Jenkins, who'd been coming around lately.

Even though Beth was happy about Rider's acceptance by the Lathams, she felt a twinge of concern. Later that night in her room, she recalled Alvin's animosity and hoped that by offering to tutor Rider, she hadn't created a new set of problems for the Indian boy.

Chapter 24

Granny Jo solemnly pondered the situation between Elizabeth and Logan. Stubborn as mules, both of them, she thought. She knew they loved each other, but also knew they'd die before they'd give in to it. She was very fond of the teacher, even more so than she had been of Anne, Logan's first wife. "Lizabet has spunk. She won't take no sass off of him." Knowing her grandson's tendency to be high-handed and arrogant, she nodded. "Lizabet is just what he needs."

A little spice adds flavor to the cake, she thought. The same thing applied to a marriage. It had been lonesome and dull around here with the kids at school all day and Logan moping about like a sore-tailed bear. Things would never get any better with Elizabeth living all the way into Devil's Hollow. Why, the girl might even decide to marry that scalawag preacher feller.

While she had nothing against Joe Johnson, other than the fact that he didn't always tell the truth, she'd already decided Lizabet and Logan would be a perfect match. "Plain as the nose on their faces." Whether the two of them wanted it or not, she was determined to get them together. The problem was how. She peered out the window and saw Logan coming in from the barn. "'Bout time for the kids to be comin' home, too." She gazed at the china cup she held in her hand. She only had one of the

cherished set left.

"Forgive me, Lord." She released the cup and watched it drop to the floor. Carefully avoiding the shattered glass, she stretched out beside it and let out a pain-filled moan when Logan stepped into the room.

"Granny Jo!" Logan fell to his knees beside her. "Are you sick? Did you fall?"

Her head cradled in his arms, she slowly raised her eyelids. "W-what happened?" She clutched at his sleeve. "Is the good Lord callin' me home?" she asked weakly.

"Granny Jo, don't say that," Logan whispered, his face pale. He slid his arms under her and lifted her from the floor. As carefully as if she were made of glass, he carried her to the bedroom, where he placed her on the feather bed and covered her with a quilt. After bringing her a drink of water, he sat down beside her and took her hand. "Do you feel any better?"

"No. But I wisht the children would get home before it's too late."

"I'm going for the doctor," Logan said, preparing to rise.

Gracious, she couldn't let him do that. "No! I don't want no doctor." She gave his hand a feeble squeeze. "But I would like to see Lizabet one more time before I meet my Maker."

"Oh, Granny Jo." His face stricken, he raised his head. "I hear the kids."

She heard him run to the end of the dogtrot and yell for the children. You should have been an

actress, Josephine, she thought. Now one more thing before they came back. She rummaged under the pillow and removed a small box. *Don't want to overdo it.* She sat up and peered into the bureau mirror. *Just right.* She smiled, then uttered a moan and lay back on the bed.

Logan waited impatiently for the children to reach the house. *Granny Jo, you can't die.* Ever since he could remember she'd been there for him. Somehow he couldn't imagine life without her.

"What wrong, Logan?" Sally Mae said, hurrying toward him.

"It's Granny Jo. She's in a bad way," Logan said, ushering his family into the room.

Granny Jo lay limp, her face even paler than before. "My babies," she whispered, making an attempt to hold out her arms. "Come closer so I can see you better." Her eyes on Logan, she gathered the sobbing children to her breast.

"You need a doctor," Logan repeated.

"I said I don't want no doctor. I want Lizabet." She raised her trembling hand in a plea. "Son, would you do this one last thing so your pur old granny can die happy?"

"You aren't going to die." He drew in a ragged breath. "But if that's what you want?"

She nodded and batted her eyes.

"Hang on, Granny Jo. I'll see she gets here." Logan wheeled and sprinted from the room. He tossed his gear on Lucifer and raced for Devil's Hollow.

Sliding the animal to a stop in front of the Lathams', he leaped to the ground, then raced for the house. He raised his fist and pounded on the door.

Kate Latham pulled it open. "Logan, what in the world?"

"Elizabeth," he panted. "Is she here?"

"No. She's over at the mercantile."

Logan ran back to his gelding. A few minutes later he reached the store and hurried inside.

Elizabeth stood on a ladder, rearranging items on a shelf.

Having no time for explanations, he scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder.

"Logan!" she screeched. "What do you think you are doing? Put me down."

"No time to argue. You're comin' with me."

"Here, here, Logan," Arnold said, rushing from the back of the store. "You can't run in here and carry her off like that."

"Granny Jo needs her." Logan tossed the sputtering woman onto the saddle and climbed on behind her. He picked up the reins and sent the horse leaping down the road.

Beth fastened her hands into the front of his shirt to keep from falling. "What did you say about Granny Jo?" she asked fearfully.

"She's calling for you." Logan blinked and grimly stared straight ahead. "I think she's dying."

"Oh, no." She stared at the pain racked face of the man above her. *It must be true. Dear Lord, please, not Granny Jo.* She rode in silence so as not to distract Logan as Lucifer's thundering hoofbeats ate up the miles.

Logan slapped the reins against gelding's dark satiny neck. He pushed the horse ruthlessly as if engaged in a desperate race with time.

Her heart anguished, Beth tried to imagine the homestead without Granny Jo. Tears coursed down her cheeks. It was like trying to envision a world with no sunshine. Silently she urged the horse to an even faster pace. When she feared Lucifer would not be able to go any farther, Logan galloped him into the yard.

Nate ran to meet them.

"How is she?" Logan said. He lifted Beth from the saddle.

"The same. Calling for you and Elizabeth."

His eyes red and puffy, Nate came down the steps. "I'll take Lucifer."

Logan rushed her into the house.

Shocked by the children's tearful faces, Beth knelt and held out her arms, placing her head on Granny Jo's thin chest. "Oh, Granny Jo. I'm here," she cried.

The old lady's wrinkled blue-veined hand reached out and feebly stroked her hair. "Lizabet. Child, I

prayed you'd come."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," she whispered.

Granny Jo blinked. Raising a hand as if to shade her eyes, she peered around the room. "Logan? Son? Where are you?"

"I'm here, Granny Jo," he said, kneeling beside Beth. He leaned forward and kissed his grandmother on the cheek.

The old lady clutched their hands and clasped them together between her own. "You won't leave me?" the old lady begged, looking at Beth. "Promise you won't go back to the holler?"

"I promise, dear," Beth said. "I'll stay right here."

"Logan? You'll stay close by, too?"

"We'll both be right here, Granny Jo." Logan raised his other arm and tightened it around Beth's shoulder. Granny Jo gave them a weak smile. "That's all I wanted to hear." She looked at the other children. "Don't worry, my dears. I think I'm goin' to be much better now." She released a weary sigh. "If all of you will leave me be, I think I'll take a little nap." She closed her eyes and waited until they left the room. Although she was ashamed of herself for causing them such sorrow, her face wrinkled in a naughty smile. "Things are progressing right nicely." She rummaged under her pillow and removed a small container. "Now that I'm better, I'd better get rid of this blamed rice powder." One eye on the

door, she crept to the cupboard and hid it under a sheet. She dusted her hands and got back into bed. Worn out by her play acting, within minutes she was sound asleep.

Detecting no sound in the room, Logan knocked softly. He waited for a while longer, then quietly stepped inside and lowered himself into the chair next to his grandmother's bed. His gaze softened when he saw Beth's small frame under a quilt on the smaller cot. She'd been so concerned about Granny Jo's health, she'd insisted on sleeping near her.

Puzzled, he eyed his grandmother's sleeping figure. When he and Beth brought her a bowl of soup for supper, he noticed Granny Jo sure had a hearty appetite for someone who'd been at death's door only a short time before. Her sudden illness seemed a little strange, too. Especially when he couldn't remember her ever being sick a day in her life. Had she been pretending? he wondered. He immediately dismissed the idea. Granny Jo was too honest for anything like that. Besides, when he left the room to fetch the children, she'd been white as the curtains when he'd come back in. You sure couldn't fake anything like that.

He had the feeling Beth's appearance had something to do with his grandmother's amazing recovery. The old woman had immediately brightened and gained strength from the time Beth had entered the room. He slouched in the chair, crossed his feet at the ankle, and clasped his hands across his middle. He leaned his head against the high back and shifted his gaze from Granny Jo to the woman curled up

asleep in Joseph's bed. If it took Lizzie being here to keep his granny strong and well, then here's where she'd stay. A smile on his face, and more content than he'd been in weeks, Logan closed his eyes and went to sleep.

In a few days Granny Jo was well enough for Beth and the children to return to school. But when the old lady grew agitated at the idea that Beth might decide to stay in town, she had to promise to move back to the homestead.

After school Beth packed her belongings and placed them in the Winfield wagon. She bid the Lathams goodbye then went to the mercantile to see Mr. Plunket. She gazed at the elderly man. "I'm sorry I have to leave. I didn't even finish getting all the shelves arranged. Some of them are still a mess."

"Yes, thank God," he exclaimed softly, then quickly added, "Don't worry about the store. I'm sure it will be just fine." He touched a finger to the side of his nose. "In fact I noticed something strange, the neater it got, the less business I had. People in the hollow aren't in a hurry like those in the city. When they have to move everything to find what they want, they discover all sorts of things they had forgotten to buy."

"Then you really don't need me?" she said, glad that she wouldn't be leaving the man shorthanded.

"Granny Jo needs you more." He turned and rummaged through the contents of a still-unpacked carton of goods that had been delivered three days before. A smile on his face, he straightened and held out a small brightly painted tin box. "Give this to Josephine from me." His eyes twinkled. "At the dance she expressed a fondness for them."

Beth took the tin and tucked it into her reticule. "I know she'll love the chocolates. Thank you." She bent and gave the old man a kiss on his withered cheek, then she left the store and headed for the schoolhouse to find Nate.

As she walked down the dusty road she remembered Mr. Plunket's words and smiled. The poor man would probably have remained silent even though he might have gone to the poorhouse if she kept on at work. It seemed her decision to move back to the Winfields' had solved more than one problem. Mr. Plunket wouldn't go bankrupt and now she could tutor Rider. Logan told her the boy's parents would be happy to pay for additional schooling.

When she'd mentioned giving him lessons at the Lathams', the boy refused, saying he would not permit his sisters to travel home alone. He'd explained that while a white girl might ride safely, some men considered Indian women fair game, and even though he would have liked the extra instruction, he could not take a chance with their safety.

Beth had reluctantly accepted his decision, realizing the wisdom in the sixteen-year-old boy's words.

The Osage children were some of the finest people she'd ever met. How sad some people still regarded them as animals. She recalled the lesson where she'd read that all men were created equal. In this part of the country, she thought ruefully, they should have added "as long as their skin was white."

When Nate and Lizzie drove into the farmyard, Logan got up from the step where he been sitting and hurried toward them.

Beth scrambled off the wagon seat. "Logan?"

"'Bout time you got home," he said with a scowl.

She raised a shaking hand and clutched his sleeve. "Did something...? Is Granny Jo...?"

"No, nothing like that. She's been fretting, that's all. Afraid you wouldn't come back."

"But I promised her I would."

"She still worried." He bent over the wagon side and lifted her trunk. "Maybe you'd better go ease her mind while I bring your things inside."

Following with her belongings, Logan watched her rush up the stairs and felt a pang of guilt. Granny Jo hadn't said a word. He'd been the one who had worried.

Chapter 25

Granny Jo spent the next few days "recuperating." She had managed to achieve part of her plan, for all the good it did. At least Lizabet was back where she belonged. But instead of getting together as she hoped they would, the girl and her grandson circled each other like two stray cats. She shook her head. She had to do something. She couldn't play sick forever. Besides, she was tired of pretending to be a feeble old lady. The whole thing was getting on her nerves, especially with one or the other of her grandchildren standing guard over her all the time.

From the porch swing she eyed the bright sun overhead. *Another hot one.* She gazed across the yard to her garden and frowned. *The weeds will take over if I don't get out of this blamed chair.*

"Granny Jo, you want some cool cider?" Ruth said from a spot next to her feet.

"That would be nice, child." What she needed was a swig of applejack. Might help her think better. But since she didn't want to shock the children, the cider would have to do. "Drivin' an old lady to drink, that's what they're doin'," she muttered.

"Here's your cider." Ruth stood on tiptoe and peered toward the ridge. "Looks like we got company."

"Company?" Granny Jo stood up and leaned over the porch rail. "It looks like Rider." She smiled. He might be just what she needed to get the rest of the younguns out from underfoot. "Better go tell Sally Mae. I know she'll want to do some primpin' before he gets here."

"She's always in front of the mirror, whether Rider's here or not." Ruth ran her hand over her own hair in an exaggerated gesture and batted her eyes. "Just like this."

"Go tell her anyhow."

"Sally Mae, your beau's here!" Ruth shouted from the dogtrot.

Granny Jo shook her head. Young love. How intense it was. She could still recall how she'd felt about Joshua Winfield when she'd been sixteen, and how they'd gotten married just six months later. Sadness filled her. Even after all this time the pain of his loss still brought tears to her eyes.

When the better part of a week had passed and things still hadn't gotten any better, Granny Jo was growing desperate. She had the feeling Logan was, too, although she knew he'd wouldn't do anything about it unless she pushed him into it.

Every morning he'd stop whatever he was doing and gaze after the mule until Elizabeth was out of sight. All through the day, she'd catch him staring wistfully into space.

Then when time came for school to be over, he'd pace the floor, restless as a caged cat until the teacher arrived home. He'd peek through the curtains waiting for her to come into the house, but after she was inside, he hardly said a word to her.

Eyeing both of them from her rocking chair, Granny Jo was at a loss as to how to handle the matter.

Finished with the dishes, Elizabeth hung up her apron. "It's so nice, I think I'll take Beau and go for a walk."

"It is warm," Granny Jo agreed. "Logan, will you help me out to the swing?"

"I'd be happy to," he said, crossing the room. He took her arm and escorted her to the porch, then settled on the steps at her feet. His face glum, he stared after the girl and the dog.

Watching his expression, Granny Jo muttered to herself. "Mercy. This is gonna be harder than I thought. Unless..."

"What?" Logan, his eyes still on the hillside trail, shot her a sideways glance. "Did you say something, Granny Jo?"

"I was thinkin' that maybe Lizabet would like more privacy. Now that it's so warm, maybe you could fix her a place of her own, outside. In our room at night, I hear her tossin' and turnin'. My old bones welcome the warmth, but she's probably smothering, being closed up in there with me."

Granny Jo ran her hand over Logan's hair as if he were no larger than Joseph. She tilted her head to

one side and gave him a smile. "I remember sometimes in the summer, your grandpa would fix us a tent under that old black walnut tree yonder." She pointed toward a tall spreading tree on a knoll between the house and barn. "It was so nice and cool. I purely enjoyed it. I bet she would, too."

Logan scratched his head. "A tent?"

"That's right. First he'd build a platform. You could use some of those pine boards you had left from the barn. Then he'd build a frame, so's it would look almost like a house. After that, he'd cover the upper part with a piece of canvas to keep out any rain." She sighed. "That man made my life a real delight. Maybe that's why I loved him so much, him being so thoughtful and all."

Logan squinted toward the tree. A few minutes later he ambled off in the direction of the barn.

Granny Jo chuckled. "Well, at least I got him out from underfoot for a day or two. Now let's see what else I can do."

The next day the homestead rang with the sound of Logan's hammer. He sawed and measured and carted boards until Granny Jo wondered if he had decided to build another barn instead of a tent. Shortly before time for the children to come home, he wandered into the house. "Guess you're too busy with your sewin' and all to take a bit of a rest," he said in an offhand manner.

Deciding to tease him a bit, Granny Jo nodded. "Busy as a bear with both paws stuck in a honey pot."

"It's nice outside. Sure you wouldn't care to take a little walk?"

"Now why would I want to do that?" She bent her head to keep from laughing. "I can see everything I want to see from right here."

"Doggone it, Granny Jo."

She smiled. "Son, I was just a-funnin'. Help me up. I've been dying to see what you were doin' all morning."

Holding on to Logan's arm for support, she made her way to the tree. "My gracious!" She eyed the sturdy structure. "Ain't that grand?" She touched one of the peeled logs that formed one of the no fewer than eight uprights. "Might even use that when a tornader comes by," she teased.

"Think it's too big?"

"No." She patted his arm. "You did good, boy. At least we don't have to worry about it fallin' down on her, do we?"

"Do you think she'll like it?"

Granny Jo pointed to where Nate was leading Molly toward the barn. "She's home. Why don't you ask her and see?"

When they entered the kitchen, she saw Beth already at work peeling potatoes. "Sally Mae can do that, honey." She took the potato from Beth and placed it to one side. She smiled at her grandson. "I think Logan's got something he wants you to see."

Beth wiped her hands and removed her apron. "What is it?"

He lifted the edge of the window curtain. "It's there by that big old walnut tree."

"Well, go on down there and show it to her," Granny Jo urged.

Beth smiled as he hurried her out the door. Her heart raced with excitement when she saw the canvas-topped building.

"Granny Jo thought you might like to have your own room."

Beth clasped her hands in delight. "It's for me?" She ran to the edge of the platform and raced up the stairs. The tangy fragrance of newly cut pine filled her nostrils. The walls extended halfway up from the wide-planked floor. Sun-bleached, white canvas stretched over a log frame that formed the top of the walls and roof. It was raw and new and empty, but she'd never seen anything prettier in her life.

Logan went to the end of the structure, unfastened a rope, and pulled. The sides of the canvas covering rose like a stage curtain, allowing the fresh breeze to come inside. "If you get cold, you can let it down," he said. He let the rope run through his hands. The canvas fell back into place.

"Oh, Logan. It's wonderful." She walked toward him. "Thank you." Her gaze met his smoky-blue

one. His eyes locked on hers for a minute, then he looked away. "Don't thank me," he said gruffly. "It was Granny Jo's idea." Without another word, he stalked out of the tent.

"Now what's wrong with him?" Thoroughly puzzled, she left her outdoor room, her thoughts troubled as she walked up the hill to the house.

The next day while Elizabeth was at school, Logan built a new pine bed to put in her outdoor room. To make sure it was comfortable before he took it inside, he stretched out on the rawhide frame and clasped his hands behind his head. *Like sleeping on a cloud.* Tired from his labors, he stared into the hazy blue sky and traced the path of a circling red-tailed hawk.

The walnut leaves rustled overhead, making dappled patterns of shade on the sun-parched ground. The big tree gave welcome relief from the sweltering June heat. It was a good spot and he was glad Granny Jo had given him the idea. Wanting to have things nice before Beth came home, he rose from the bed then moved it inside the tent.

He picked up the new mattress his grandmother had sewn and held it to his face, inhaling the sweet grass fragrance of its stuffing. Granny Jo had suggested that, too, saying it would be much cooler in the summer than one with feather ticking.

He arranged the mattress on the bed and covered it with a wide muslin sheet. After placing another sheet over that, he topped the whole works with a colorful wedding-ring quilt. Adding a touch of his own, Logan spread a rug made of soft rabbit fur on the spot beside her bed. When he was finished, he stood to one side and made sure everything was in place.

A blue-rimmed pitcher and bowl sat atop a piece of Granny Jo's fancywork on a small table he'd brought from the house. Beside it, he'd made a bookcase. On a larger table sat a lamp and a supply of tinned matches. In front of that, he'd placed a ladder-backed chair so she would have a spot to do her schoolwork if she was of a mind to. He arranged her horsehide trunk at the end of her bed. On the opposite end he'd placed a chamber pot.

"Snug as a bug in a rug. I wouldn't mind moving in here myself. Wonder if she'd care?" For a moment he allowed the dream to blossom in his mind. Sweeping his gaze over the cozy room, he stared at the newly made bed and imagined the two of them sharing it. Keeping it warm with their passion at night. Waking in each other's arms in the morning. Maybe even creating a child on its sweet fragrant platform.

Then another vision rose, Lizzie, pregnant, crying for an absent husband. A child being raised with the shame of a father in prison. Or worse, like Ada Quinn and her babe, both perishing because they needed a man who hadn't been there.

Hurting, Logan dropped the canvas door and turned his back on the shattered dream.

That night after supper the family retired to the coolness of the front porch swing. Logan, sitting on a stump a short distance away, found it impossible to keep his eyes off of Elizabeth.

Glowing with excitement, her hair long and swinging about her shoulders, her violet eyes dancing, she was like a kid at Christmas. She had an almost breathless quality to her voice when she told the family a story she remembered from one of the books she'd received from her friend Hannah in Chicago. Even though Logan watched and listened intently, when she finished he had no idea what she'd said.

Seeing her surrounded by the rest of the family, he felt a sense of peace. At least here he didn't have to worry about her. Even at the Lathams', he'd been driven to distraction when she'd been out late. Knowing she'd been keeping company with Joe hadn't helped either.

He knew he had to let go of the idea of ever having Lizzie for his own, but he couldn't. And the agony of that fact made him grumpier than ever. He felt like a kid tantalized by a delicious piece of candy that was within reach, tempted to snatch it and run, but knowing if he dared, he would get slapped flat.

His mood black, he watched Ruth and Joseph squeal and run here and there collecting lightning

bugs to put in a jar. After gathering quite a few, Joseph crashed to the ground. The jar rolled away, his bugs making tiny pinpoints of light as they escaped into the surrounding night.

When the crying child hobbled back to the porch, Elizabeth examined his scraped knee. Logan sucked in an envious breath when she gently brushed a hand through the little boy's hair.

Joseph cuddled in the crook of her arm and remained there until Granny Jo announced it was bedtime. The youngster hugged his grandmother's and Beth's neck and both gave him a kiss on the cheek. The boy plainly worshiped Beth, as did the rest of the clan. Unable to bear the nearness of her presence another moment, Logan got to his feet and strode into the darkness.

After making sure Granny Jo was comfortable and had everything she needed, Beth left the house and strolled toward her new room. Excitement beat a rapid tattoo in her breast. This would be her first night in the tent and she could hardly wait.

She'd gone there after school to find Logan had provided everything she could ever want or need. Remembering the new chamber pot, she blushed. He'd even put covers on her new bed. She thought it had taken forever for the sun to go down, to get supper and the dishes finished. Not wanting to appear rude, she'd forced herself to spend time with the others until they'd retired. But now...She walked around

the canvas covered structure, admiring it from every angle. It was perfect. It was beautiful. And Logan had made it for her.

She frowned, recalling how happy he'd seemed when she'd moved back. At times he'd been almost pleasant. She could tell he'd taken great care in the construction of the room, as if he wanted to be sure she'd be comfortable. But today, after he'd finished the cabin, he'd been like a bear with a sore paw. At supper he'd been so out of sorts he'd even snapped at Granny Jo.

Beth didn't know what to think. She sat down on a fallen log and chewed on a piece of summer-sweet grass and thought about the way he constantly watched her. Feeling his scrutiny, she'd turn only to have him scowl and move away. It was positively unnerving. Just being around the man was like ice-skating at the edge of a hot-water spring.

Maybe he was upset because the room had taken up so much of his time. But she hadn't asked him to do it. Regardless, there was no call for him to bite her head off every time she spoke to him, she thought resentfully. No call at all. Today, when she'd thanked him for all the lovely things, it seemed her very presence had been enough to send him into a rage.

He was behaving like a spoiled child, she thought, glaring at the house. "Logan Winfield, if you *were* a child, I'd spank you."

"Well, I'm not a child, and you're not big enough," he drawled.

She sprang to her feet and whirled to see him leaning against the tree. "How long have you been spying on me?"

"Long enough." He prowled toward her.

"What do you want?"

"This." His movement lightning swift, he reached out and pulled her tight against his chest.

"Logan!" She pushed, trying to get her breath.

Ignoring her protest, he nuzzled the hollow of her neck. "Wonder if you taste as good as you smell?"

Shocked, Beth's gaze met one as mysterious and dark as the evening sky.

His mouth curved in mocking smile as he tangled his fingers in her hair. He gently forced her head back against his arm. "Think I'll take a bite and see." His mouth captured hers.

Though his lips were cool, they seared her tender flesh. His teeth nibbled, taking tiny sharp bites until she moaned, finding a strange delight in his savagery. His tongue took advantage of her parted lips and plunged inside to ravish her mouth. After a long, breath-robbing moment he raised his head and gave her an insolent smile. "I've tasted sweeter." He trailed a finger down her cheek.

Dizzy and confused, she stared up at him. "What?"

"I said I've tasted sweeter."

Furious, her mouth bruised and tingling, she twisted free. "Logan Winfield, you're despicable!"

"You want to know where?"

"No!" She shoved at the hair straggling around her face and attempted to straighten her rumpled dress. "I have tasted sweeter," he continued. "At the dance. You remember the redhead?"

"Why you..." So mad she could spit, she drew back her open palm and slapped his face. The sound cracked like a pistol shot in the silence.

He gripped her shoulders and held her immobile, then gave her an arrogant smile. "Miss high-and-mighty schoolteacher, I'll bet you another kiss that before a week is up, you'll come runnin' into my arms."

Too outraged to speak, she lifted her heel and drove it into his foot.

He grimaced and let her go.

Backing away, she gave her hair a toss. "That's the most insane thing I've ever heard. I'll just take that bet because there is no way it is going to happen."

"One week," Logan said softly. He held up a single finger, then he grinned and ambled toward the barn.

Chapter 26

The following day being Saturday, the Winfields had a leisurely breakfast then went outside to work in the garden. When Granny Jo made an excuse and left, too, Beth wondered if it was some kind of conspiracy to leave her alone in the house with Logan.

Even though he had finished his meal, he seemed in no hurry to go anywhere. Still at the table, he leaned back in his chair, crossed his feet in front of him, and dawdled over a third cup of coffee.

Ignoring him, she cleaned off the table and piled the dishes into the pan of soapy water. She was still furious with him for his caveman behavior of the night before. With her cheeks scraped raw by his whisker-rough chin and her swollen lips red as an apple, she was certain the whole family knew what had happened. As she scrubbed the dishes her thoughts returned to his remark about that redheaded Jezebel he'd kissed at the dance. *And then he'd had the nerve to kiss me on the way home.* She slammed a plate into the rinse water, sending a deluge over the edge of the pan and onto the floor. *Well, he certainly won't find me that easy the next time he wants a kiss.*

She shot a sideways look toward the table. Why wouldn't he leave? Surely he had something else to do. Hoping he'd take the hint, she snatched the tin coffeepot from in front of him and banged it down on

the stove.

Outside of a faint twitch to his lips he acted like he hadn't heard a thing. He looked like he was set for the day.

Her temperature rising, she finished the dishes and hung up the dish towel.

"Lizzie? You forgot to wipe the table. I'll do it if you like."

"Keep your seat," she snapped, not wanting to give him an excuse to get that close. Staying out of reach, she carefully removed the crumbs and wiped the top clean.

"There's some over here." He pointed in front of him.

Removing those, too, she eyed Logan warily, confident that no matter how sweetly he behaved she was not about to let him win that ridiculous bet.

But he didn't behave sweetly. He didn't snarl either. He grinned!

Beth spun away. Why was he so confident? She sneaked a peek over her shoulder.

Catching her, he held up one finger.

Beth felt like mouse about to be eaten by a hungry cat.

She could handle his ill temper. Heaven knows she was used to that. But the way he was behaving now unnerved her. She bit her lower lip. What was he up to?

* * *

The next day being Sunday, much to Beth's relief, Logan ate his meal without comment, then said he was going hunting and left the house. Deciding to take advantage of his absence and gather the eggs, Beth picked up the basket and headed for the barn.

When she climbed the ladder into the loft, a noise made her turn. She saw Logan bent over a mound of hay. Ready to beat a hasty retreat, she took a step backward.

"Lizzie?"

His serious tone made her pause.

He held something tiny and wiggling in his palm.

"What is it?" She climbed one more rung.

"Kittens. I found the big calico dead this morning. This must be her litter. Damn, I hate it when something like this happens." He moved toward her. "Can I borrow your basket?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Drown them, I suppose. I don't want to, but I don't know what else to do."

"No. You can't," she whispered, scrambling into the loft. She picked up one of the four mewling kittens and held it to her cheek. "Can you get me some milk?"

"Sure." He hurried for the ladder. "I'll be right back."

A few minutes later he knelt beside her, a pan of freshly drawn milk in his hand. "They're too little to drink."

"Give me your neckerchief." When he handed it to her she dipped the corner into the warm liquid, then squeezed a drop into the largest kitten's mouth. "Oh, look."

The calico kitten stuck out a tiny pink tongue and lapped at the milky bubble.

"Here, give me a piece." Logan tore off a strip and did the same with a spotted sibling. "Hey, look at this." The greedy youngster sucked the end of the red cloth until not a drop remained. "He might be smaller but he sure has the biggest appetite." After a half-dozen-or-so refills, the satisfied cat rested his head on Logan's fingers.

Since Elizabeth was still feeding the first one, Logan picked up another and fed it, too. Watching him with the helpless kittens, Beth felt a rush of emotion, so warm and so fierce that it threatened to take her breath away. He would make a wonderful father, she thought. Along with that conviction came an almost unbearable sadness as she pictured him with another woman's child in his arms.

Finally three of the four kittens had been fed and were curled up asleep in the straw-filled basket. Beth picked up the last one, the smallest and the most lethargic. "I can't get this little one to eat," she said in dismay.

"Let me try." Logan dipped his rag into the milk and tried time and time again to get the tiny black

kitten to lick at the milk, but the baby refused. Finally it mewed feebly and then lay still.

"Is it...?"

"I guess he was just too small," Logan said quietly. He carefully wrapped the little kitten in the untorn portion of his neckerchief and placed it to one side.

Beth had to stifle a sob.

Logan reached out and tenderly wiped away a tear that trailed down her cheek. "Don't feel bad. Look." He handed her the basket in which the three healthy kittens were coiled together in sleep. "You did save these three. That's more than I would have been able to do."

He rubbed the swollen middle of one of the sleeping babies. "Now you've got three more Winfields to take care of. Think you can handle it?" he said, his voice soft and warm.

She touched one of the tiny cats. "I'll certainly do my best."

"Darlin', I'm sure you will."

Her pulse pounding erratically, she gave him a tremulous smile. Then cuddling the basket full of kittens, she left the barn and headed toward the house. She smiled dreamily, recalling the very gentle man she'd left in the loft.

She realized with a start that he could have won the bet easily, if he'd been of a mind to. When he was like this, he could mold her to his will as easily as if she were a bowl of soft butter.

As she entered the house the kittens were quickly claimed by Sally Mae and Ruth, and while she felt a little sad at giving them up, she knew they were in the best of hands.

The end of the week arrived to find the little cats as fat as furry butterballs. In another few days they'd have their eyes open, Beth thought. Her own eyes widened. *End of the week!* She'd forgotten all about the bet.

Apparently Logan had, too, since she'd hardly seen him after they'd found the kittens in the barn. And the few times she had seen him, he certainly hadn't tried to kiss her. In fact, he'd seemed so preoccupied he'd hardly seemed to know she was there. She told herself she would have been furious with him if he tried, but still it irked her vanity that he'd given up so easily.

Exhausted after a hard day at school, Beth decided to forgo her usual nightly walk and retire early. After finishing the supper dishes, she told the family good night and made her way to her tent.

Even though the warm summer evening was inky black, she knew from the sky last night that a full moon would be rising later. As she entered the bower of tall trees cicadas sang a duet with a multitude of tree peepers. From a damp spot somewhere near, a chorus of deep-voiced bullfrogs added their bass.

She paused a moment to gaze at the brilliantly spangled sky and inhaled a breath of clear mountain

air. Her contentment was as delicious as the aroma of honeysuckle, roses, and summer-green grass that tickled her senses.

Suddenly she thought of Chicago and Teddy and the city's summer heat and smoke, and wished she could bring the child to the mountain. If Teddy could be here with her, she'd never want to leave.

Amazed at her discovery, she reflected on her change of heart from when she had first entered the hollow. Then she had found it dank and dismal and wanted only to go home. Now this seemed like home. She couldn't imagine ever living in the city again.

She entered the tent and undressed in the dark, then neatly folded her clothing and placed it on her trunk. As she slipped into bed the summer-sweet smell of dried grasses rose from the ticking of her mattress, reminding her of Logan's effort to make her comfortable. "If only things could be different," she whispered wistfully. Her thoughts filled with the tall, bronzed backwoodsman, she drifted off to sleep.

Puzzled at what had awakened her, Beth blinked and opened her eyes. She raised her head and listened. There. A snuffling sound from the brush beside her tent. Something scratched the side of the canvas. A mouse? She immediately dismissed the idea. It was making too much noise. One of the

dogs? The scratching sound came again. She sat up and placed her feet on the floor. She gasped when a large shadow blocked out the full moon and threw a frightening silhouette on the side of the tent. Her eyes widened. A bear! She dived beneath the covers.

When the scratching came again, along with a shuffling, she was certain she was about to be eaten. She raised the quilt and peeped out.

The upright bear raised his paws; his giant shadow covered the entire side and top of her room.

"Lord help me!" Unable to stay put any longer, she uttered a stifled scream and raced out of the tent. Casting a terrified glance behind her, she crashed into something hard and unyielding.

"I told you you'd run into my arms," Logan said silkily. He pulled her close.

"Logan! What are you doing?" She twisted in his arms and pointed behind her. "There's a bear!"

"I know," he said. "But it won't bite."

It won't bite? She stared up at him.

He grinned.

She turned to look at the bear.

It was a skin complete with head, strung on wires between two limbs. It was all a trick!

He bent his head and nuzzled her neck. "I won, darlin'," he breathed into her ear. "So pucker up."

"I'll do no such thing." Beth gave him a furious shove. "You didn't win. You cheated."

"Didn't we bet that before the week was up you'd run into my arms?"

"Yes. But... "

"Did you?"

"Yes. But..." she stammered, trying to find some fault in his reasoning.

"Then I won." His mouth closed over hers, halting her spluttering words.

In spite of her determination to do otherwise, she delighted in his kiss. His arms tightened, bringing her so close she felt as though they had become one. Held against his hard body, she felt the rise of his passion as he molded himself to her skimpily clad frame. From deep within her a rush of unfamiliar heat sparked then burst into an answering flame. Her senses left her as her emotions raced down forbidden paths.

His persuasive tongue pushed its way between her teeth, gently teasing, coaxing until she shyly allowed her own to explore timidly.

"Oh, Lizzie. My sweet Lizzie." He took her mouth, her face, her neck, and the exposed tops of her bosom. His fierce passion robbed her of the ability to think, let alone reason. She felt the rapid pounding of his heart against the sheer, batiste nightgown. Her own echoed its thundering pace. She was lost in the magic of his gentle strength, a part of her hoping the moment would never end.

"Marry me," he whispered, his voice husky with emotion.

"What?"

"I said I want you to marry me." He slid his hands down her body and pulled her hard against his throbbing desire. "Right now." He buried his face in the crook of her neck. He nibbled the lobe of her ear. *Right now?* She frowned, wondering if she'd heard him correctly. Her eyes widened as he pressed her against his rigid body. *My stars! He didn't mean stand up in a church in front of a preacher. He meant...* Outraged that he could suggest such a thing, she shoved him away. "Never!" Twisting free of his embrace, she ran back into the tent.

Logan sucked in a ragged breath and gazed after the fleeing woman. Marry him? He stared up at the sky, dazed that he'd even asked the question. What was the matter with him? He clasped his arms over his chest, recalling the way she'd felt in his embrace, remembering the passion of her kiss. It was a good thing she had run away. A few minutes more and he wouldn't have been able to help himself. He would have lowered her to the grass and claimed her right here under the tree.

Suddenly getting married didn't seem like such a crazy idea. He would ask for nothing more than to live a lifetime with her by his side. His past tried to overshadow his thoughts, but he willed it away. The lawmen hadn't found him yet; maybe they never would.

Clinging to that spark of hope, Logan strode to the other side of the tent and lowered the bearskin to the ground. He cringed, imagining the scolding he would have taken if Granny Jo or the kids had seen it.

He turned and saw his own shadow on the side of the tent. Knowing she was watching, he extended his lips in an exaggerated pucker. When he heard her hiss of breath, he chuckled.

"Never?" he said softly. "We'll see about that." His grin widened, taking her rejection as a challenge. He hefted the skin to a secure position on his shoulder and sauntered toward the barn. Getting her to marry him might take longer than a week, but now that she'd refused him, he was determined to make her his.

Her body still tingling from Logan's embrace, Beth stared at the unbroken pattern of moonlit canvas. She shook her head, recalling his preposterous pucker after he'd taken down the bear. He'd known she would see him. He was the most insane man she'd ever met, also the most outrageous...and the most thrilling.

Marry me? he'd whispered.

What if he hadn't meant what she'd thought? Thinking about her assumption, she felt herself grow warm with the scandalous idea. What if he had been serious about getting married? Imagining the two of them being bound by wedding vows, she released a wistful sigh.

Marry him? She'd have to be crazy even to consider it, but the memory of his kiss filled her with

unsatisfied longing.

Unable to sleep, she tossed in her bed. Finally she got up and poured a measure of cool well water into the china cup and took a sip, then set the glass back on the table. When she turned toward the bed, her hand brushed a small lake-washed stone she'd brought from Chicago. Her hand tightened around it. *Teddy*. How could she have forgotten? Even if she wanted to marry Logan, she couldn't. A vision of the fair-haired child drifted before her. She imagined she saw his small face twist with pain. Her heart aching, she stared into the darkness.

As she lay down on the bed she felt a tear creep from the corner of her eye and make a wet trail to her ear. She loved Logan, but the remembrance of her background and *Teddy* dissolved any foolish notion she might have had for them to be together. For her, marriage with Logan, or anyone else, as out of the question. Besides, Logan had enough burdens of his own.

She told herself *Teddy* and teaching would fill the void in her life. She would need nothing more. But her heart told her she lied.

She closed her eyes, but Logan's dark handsome face and resolute slate-blue eyes wouldn't allow her to sleep.

Remembering his determination and the lengths he'd gone to in order to claim a simple kiss, she wondered if she continued to refuse him, what wild scheme he might devise to make her his own.

Chapter 27

In the days that followed, Elizabeth did her best to avoid being alone with Logan. Knowing it couldn't bring them anything but further grief, she put any idea of them being together out of her mind. Instead she threw herself into her teaching, assigning homework to the point that the children complained. After school she arranged for the Osage children to remain at the Winfields' for an hour or two so that she could tutor Rider. The girls had been delighted, as it had given them more time to visit. Rider, too, made the most of the opportunity, absorbing things so quickly Beth was hard put to keep him busy.

Each night, after supper, she made a habit of retiring to her tent to grade papers. This night she'd also written to Hannah and Teddy and, before sealing the letter, had tucked in the funds she'd received from Rider's parents. The Killdeers had been more than generous in rewarding her efforts and had insisted, in spite of her protests, on paying double the amount she received for teaching her other students. But even with the additional funds, she still had a long way to go before she would have the money she needed.

Adding the sum from Rider's instruction to the column of figures in her diary, she frowned. If she

sent every penny she earned back to Chicago, counting the raise she would get after the six months when her contract was renewed for the rest of the year, she would be short over two hundred dollars. Where on earth could she get that kind of money?

Out of habit her fingers went to her neck and rubbed the brooch. She glanced down, then removed it from her dress and held it to the light. It was very beautiful, but would it be worth anything? The ivory cameo in a setting of engraved gold, tiny sapphires, and pearls gleamed in the soft glow of the lamp. She gazed at the engraving on the back. *Elizabeth*. The name she'd taken for her own. It had been pinned to her blanket the day she'd been found and Hannah had kept it safe until Beth had been old enough to wear it. It would be strange to be without it, but if it did turn out to be valuable, the money was more important than some unresolved tie to the past.

Her decision made, she opened the seal on the letter and tucked the piece of jewelry inside; along with it, she enclosed a note for Hannah. Mixing a dab of flour and water together to make a paste, she glued the envelope shut. Then for additional safety, she secured the packet with a length of string. Finished with her correspondence, she placed it to one side.

Because the envelope was heavier than usual, it would cost more to mail it. Frowning, she opened her reticule and examined the meager pile of coins. Even her letters would have to be restricted this month or she wouldn't have enough for postage.

She drew the strings closed. Sooner or later she hoped to find a better-paying position. Even if she did manage to scrape together enough money for the surgery, she wouldn't be able to adopt Teddy if she couldn't make enough money for them to eat.

Bone weary and low of spirit, Beth turned out the lamp, undressed, and got into bed.

Logan, watching from the darkness, waited until her lamp went out and knew she'd retired for the night. As he reflected on the events of the last week, his forehead knitted in a deep frown. He had hoped she would accept his marriage proposal, even though he would have been surprised if she had. He had expected her to be mad. But instead she'd seemed withdrawn and very quiet and so preoccupied with her own thoughts she hadn't realized half of what she was doing. He remembered the overflowing butter dish he'd rescued from the top of the stove. She hadn't read Joseph stories or visited with the family after supper. She hadn't even taken her walks with Beau.

Something was definitely wrong and he didn't think it was entirely his doing. Wishing he had the power to help her, he gave the tent one last pensive glance, then rose and headed for the barn to go to bed.

"Elizabeth," Ruth called from outside the tent. "Breakfast is ready."

Beth opened her eyes. "Ruth?"

The tent flap opened and the towheaded child appeared. "You're still in bed? Are you sick? It's almost time for school. Hurry up or breakfast will get cold." She dropped the flap. Her footsteps crunched in the gravel as she ran toward the house. .

"School!" Beth leaped from the bed and yanked on her clothes. She drew a brush through her hair and fastened it into a bun at the back of her head. She bent and tugged on her stockings then shoved her foot into her shoe and hooked the buttons. *Drat!* She stared at it in dismay. The whole side of the boot was coming unstitched. Scrambling into the other one, she hooked it and noticed that it, too, was coming undone. Well, no time to worry about it now, she thought. She gathered up her letter and raced for the house. At least the footwear still covered her feet.

After dismissing school that afternoon, she discovered to her embarrassment that this statement no longer held true. The shoes were now undone from the toe to the shank, and she couldn't even keep them on her feet. She chewed her lowered lip and wondered how she was going to solve her problem.

She'd seen the mail rider leave. Her money was on its way to Chicago. Mr. Plunket would probably be willing to sell her some shoes on credit, but she wouldn't get paid for another two months. Not

wanting to reveal the state of her finances to the shopkeeper, she decided on another course of action.

She removed her shoes and stockings and tucked them into her satchel. Then, as if she were embarking on the greatest lark, she skipped her way out of the schoolroom. When she paused to lock the door, she heard a startled gasp behind her.

Ann pointed at her feet. "Where are your shoes?"

"In my bag." She held up the satchel. "It is such a nice warm day and my feet were hot, so I thought I'd go barefoot." She held her breath, hoping the children would buy her tale.

"That's a good idea," Ruth spoke up. "Think I'll try it."

Sarah gazed at her sister, Ann. "Can I take my shoes off, too?"

"I suppose, as long as you don't expect me to do the same," Ann said, helping her little sister with the laces. "And don't you dare cry if you step on a bur."

Almost before the words were out of Ann's mouth, Beth found one of the prickly things lodged in the middle of her own instep. Gritting her teeth to keep from crying aloud, she raised her foot and plucked the bur from her tender flesh. Yet even with the sticker out, it still hurt like blazes. She hoped her pride wouldn't cause the children to suffer a similar fate.

Making her way gingerly across the schoolyard, she was grateful that Nate had tethered Molly in a patch of dust. She climbed into the saddle, fastened her belongings, and gave a satisfied sigh. At least

her feet wouldn't have to suffer anymore until she reached the Winfields'.

Upon reaching the homestead, she was relieved to discover that Rider had planned to go hunting with Nate and wouldn't be staying for his lessons. She could use the time before supper to try to restitch her shoes.

When the girls went to join Granny Jo in the garden, Beth entered the house and removed a spool of the old lady's stoutest quilting thread from the sewing basket. After sticking it and a heavy needle into her pocket, she hobbled toward her outdoor room.

Rider, waiting for Nate at the edge of the woods, watched Elizabeth. He knew why she was barefoot even if the others didn't. Her tracks had told him. He would have known, even if he hadn't seen her shoes, that her footwear was worn beyond repair. Trained from birth to be observant, he detected many things that white eyes never saw. Rider frowned. Knowing Miss Elizabeth's pride, now that he had discovered her secret, he didn't know what to do.

Beth stared at the mess in her lap. The shoes had not only come undone, there was nothing left to stitch. "Now what am I going to do?" She picked up a piece of the rotted leather. Her attempts to salvage her shoes had made matters even worse. Now they lay in shreds before her.

"Why did you have to pick now to fall apart?" she said as if the footgear could hear. Angry and frustrated to tears, she picked up the worse of the two and threw it out the door.

She bowed her head and clasped her hands, never dreaming she would ever be so desperate as to pray for a pair of shoes.

Coming back from a successful hunt, Logan carried the gutted, antlered buck to the barn. Between himself, Nate, and Rider, only Rider had not gotten a deer. The boy must be in love, Logan thought, thinking of his own distraction. It was the only explanation he could give to the Osage boy's behavior. Rider hadn't gotten off a shot even when another, larger buck had threatened to run him down. That boy had seemed as preoccupied as Lizzie.

Thinking of her, Logan raised his head in time to see something hit the ground outside her tent. Curious to see what it could be, he changed his direction. When he bent to pick up the discarded

footwear, he heard her weeping. So that was her problem. He tucked the shoe inside his shirt and quietly made his way toward the barn.

When Elizabeth didn't show up for supper, Logan said she had a headache and told the children to stay away and leave her alone. He ate his own meal quickly, then fixed a plate for her. He covered it with a clean cloth and carried it to her tent.

The sounds of quiet snuffling came from inside.

Not wanting to embarrass her further, he lifted the canvas only far enough to set the plate on the plank floor. He placed a knife and fork beside it. Then, dropping the flap, he made a noise so she would discover the food. When he heard her rise, he quickened his step and hurried toward the barn.

Logan worked throughout the night, cutting and stitching a fine piece of cured leather. He had learned the craft from his grandfather, who had been known as an expert bootmaker in his time. The skill had come in handy around the homestead, with so many children to keep shod.

Almost finished, he examined one of the pair by the lantern light. The new footwear wouldn't have hooks like the ones she'd had before. Instead he'd fashioned trim black boots out of the glove-soft leather. He thought they should prove quite a bit more comfortable than the shoes she had been wearing. He wished he could have measured her foot. With only a ragged scrap of leather to go by, he hoped they'd fit.

Logan finished his task shortly before dawn. He stealthily went to her tent, lifted the flap, and set the boots by the trunk at the end of her bed. He paused for a moment and gazed at the sleeping woman. He would give her the moon and stars if he had the power--and the right. But since he had neither, he would do the best he could without making her feel uncomfortable.

As he turned to leave he grimaced at the sight of the heavy rust-colored dress. Even at this early hour he could tell the day would be a scorcher. Maybe he could do something about that, too. He'd discuss it with Granny Jo. Dropping the flap, Logan eased away without making a sound.

Rubbing his neck, he yawned widely and headed toward the house. He knew his grandmother had trouble sleeping and was an early riser. If she was up, maybe they could have that talk. He yawned again. And even if she wasn't, he could sure use a cup of coffee.

It was shortly before dawn when Beth opened her eyes and wondered what had awakened her. She hadn't gone to sleep until very late and then only because exhaustion had claimed her. She sat up in the bed and stared the spot where she'd left her shoe. It hadn't been a bad dream. The ragged footwear sat where she'd left it. Whether she liked it or not, she would have to go to town barefoot, then ask Mr. Plunket to sell her a pair on credit. The new shoes wouldn't fit, she knew that from being familiar with

his stock, but at least they would hide her shame.

Her gaze rested on the empty plate from the supper someone had left inside her door. Most likely Sally Mae, Beth thought, grateful for the kindness. She wondered what the family thought last night when she hadn't shown up for the meal. Worse yet, what would they think when she arrived at the breakfast table barefoot?

Chapter 28

Resigned to her shoeless fate, Elizabeth rose from the bed and walked to the trunk where she had left her clothing. Her eyes widened in disbelief. Beside the dress she had folded so neatly the night before sat a beautiful pair of black leather boots. "Oh!" Staring in wonder, she lifted one of the pair to examine it. The shiny ebony leather was as soft as a piece of her own skin, the seams finely sewn, the soles well cut, the heels delicate but sturdy. Her eyes filled with tears, she hugged them to her breast. In her whole life she'd never dreamed of owning anything half so fine. She raised her gaze Heavenward. "I don't know how you did it, Lord, but I do thank you."

As she hurriedly washed and slipped on fresh clothing, she never took her eyes off the shoes for fear they'd vanish as suddenly as they'd appeared. After putting on her stockings, she lifted one of the boots and slipped it on. She sighed with pleasure. It hardly seemed possible but they felt as good as they looked. She pulled on the other one and held out her feet, tilting them this way and that to admire them from every angle. They felt good standing up, too. "Must have been an angel who put them there, because no mortal man could have done it."

When she opened the tent flap and prepared to step out, her eyes widened even more. There on the

step sat a finely beaded pair of white deerskin moccasins. "Oh, I can't believe it." First she had none, and now she had two pairs of the prettiest shoes she'd ever seen. The Lord must be able to hear better up here in the mountains, she thought, for he'd never been so quick to answer any of her prayers in Chicago. She picked the soft cream-colored shoes and held them to her cheek. She didn't know who she had to thank for the boots, but Rider definitely was responsible for the moccasins.

Tucking the slippers under her arm, she headed for the house to show Granny Jo. She found Rider and Logan seated at the kitchen table. Her throat tight, she walked toward the Indian lad. "Rider, they are beautiful, but I can't accept them." She held out the shoes.

Rider got to his feet. "My mother and father wanted to give you something of our people to thank you for the extra time you are spending with me. Those are a token of our appreciation."

"But they're paying me too much already."

"They would be insulted if you refused their gift," Rider said, his face tense.

Logan, rising behind the lad, nodded for her to take them.

"I would never dream of insulting them," Elizabeth said, watching the stiffness leave the boy's face. "I would be honored to accept the shoes. Please thank them for me."

Rider smiled, showing a brilliant flash of white teeth. "They will be pleased." He left the table and strode to the door. "Now I must go. The girls are waiting."

Beth hugged the moccasins to her breast. "Today is a day of miracles," she said softly. She turned to Logan. "Last night I had no shoes at all. Today I have two pairs."

Watching his eyes light with pleasure, she knew who she had to thank for the boots. She also noticed the weariness in his face and the shadows under his eyes. He must have worked all night. That he could care enough to do that for her brought a lump to her throat. Unable to help herself, she placed the slippers on the table and slowly walked toward him. Then she raised her arms and fastened them around his waist. "Thank you, Logan."

"You're welcome, darlin'." His arms tightened around her. He tilted her head and molded his lips to hers in a gentle kiss.

As he held her in his embrace a feeling, knife sharp and sweet, swept through her body. At that moment she knew, whether they were able to marry or not, that her heart would always be his.

They were still locked in each other's arms when Ruth and Joseph burst into the room. "Lo--?"

Beth raised startled eyes to see the pair of youngsters collapsing in a fit of the giggles. Glancing at Logan, she thought his face was as red as hers, but his mouth was split from ear to ear in a delighted grin.

"What in the world is goin' on?" Granny Jo said, bustling into the room. "Oh, my," she said, spying Beth and Logan. "Excuse us." Her eyes dancing, the old lady slipped an arm around the children and led them back through the door.

"Oh, dear," Beth murmured, attempting to extract herself from Logan's arms.

"There's two boots," he hinted, retaining his hold. "Ought to be enough for two kisses, don't you think?" "Logan Winfield, you're shameless," she whispered. "But shameless or not..." She closed her eyes and surrendered to the warmth of his second kiss.

To Beth the rest of the day passed as if she were in a dream; even the animosity of the Jenkins children couldn't dampen her spirits. The girls refused to play with Sarah, but as the other children sought the Osage child's company, quite often the Jenkins girls were left with no one to play with but each other.

Alvin Jenkins dogged Mary Latham's footsteps, much to her consternation. Sally Mae never took her adoring eyes off Rider. Beth was grateful to notice that Rider, preoccupied with his studies, paid no attention to any of them.

On the way home Ann made the comment that Rider, as the son of a chief, had an obligation to help his people. She said the government had continually broken their treaties and had appropriated more and more of the Osage lands. With no one to act in the tribe's behalf, they, too, would someday be moved to reservations like the Cherokees and Seminoles had been. Her voice sad, Ann continued. Even though he knew their people would be helpless to resist, Rider wanted to be able to speak for the tribe when that time came.

Elizabeth was touched by Ann's story. Apparently there was a good deal the history books didn't bother to mention. She thought of the burden that had been placed on Rider's young shoulders. No wonder he had resisted the missionary teachings. No wonder he had shown an almost desperate need for an education. Riding into the farmyard, where she found him already waiting, she hoped she would be equal to the task. After spending longer than usual with Rider, Elizabeth, exhausted from school and the worrisome slumber of the night before, retired to her tent early. Another reason she wanted to be by herself was Logan. For she realized now that he had been serious when he'd asked her to marry him. Seeing the love in his eyes when he'd held her that morning, she wondered how she could ever have thought otherwise. But the kiss, though pleasurable, had been a mistake. The hopeful gleam she'd brought to his eyes worried her. There was no chance for them, and letting him dream of a future that could never be was cruel.

One month remained before her six months was up and she would be leaving the hollow for the summer. And even if her contract extension was approved, she knew it would be better if she never returned.

Before she retired for the night, she wrote to Hannah asking her to be on the lookout for another position. Beth knew that since she now had experience as a teacher, it shouldn't be difficult to find something new. Her heart heavy, she sealed the envelope and went to bed.

After finishing the breakfast dishes, Beth felt at loose ends, wondering how she would pass the day. Everyone else seemed to be occupied with their own projects. Granny Jo busily sewed on a new quilt. Logan had gone to Devil's Hollow. Seth and Nate were hunting. Joseph played in the yard with the frisky kittens. Beth smiled when Sally Mae bounced into the room.

"Elizabeth, Ruth and Joseph and I have decided to hike to Wildcat Ridge. Why don't you come with us?" Sally Mae continued with scarcely a breath; "We'll have a picnic and explore the old cave where we hid during the war. We might even go swimming at the big spring. I think you'd enjoy it."

"I would love it! What can I do to help?"

"You can make the sandwiches and I'll fill our jugs with cider. We can use the knapsacks Logan made us to carry our lunches. That way our hands will be free for the climb." Her blue eyes bright, Sally Mae tossed her long braid over her shoulder. "It is so pretty there. Wait till you see."

Several hours later Beth paused to wipe her perspiring brow and wondered how she'd gotten into this. The trail was long and almost perpendicular in spots, even though the Winfield children scrambled up the rocks like young mountain goats. But in spite of her exhaustion, she had to admit that the scenery was beautiful.

The path wound over ridges and down into deep forested glades where the tangy scent of pine hung

heavy in the air. Bright birds of every color flitted through the trees. Admiring their song, she removed her cider jug and took another sip, then returned it to her pack.

"Elizabeth," Ruth called, running back to find her. "We're almost there. Hurry."

"Hurry?" She had all she could do to put one foot in front of the other. And fatigue must have been making her dizzy, as she found it hard to stand upright. Hoping she didn't topple over, she giggled and trudged to the top of the hill. From a densely wooded area below, she detected the sound of splashing water.

"Come on, Elizabeth. We're here."

"Thank goodness." She found the damp coolness of the canyon welcome relief after the sunbaked trail. The sight of the spring brought a cry of joy to her lips.

Water so deep a blue it was almost black nestled in a bowl-like depression that was surrounded on two sides by towering cliffs. Those same sheer rock walls were emerald with mosses and lichens, their lower regions covered with fern-draped waterfalls. Enchanted, she listened, thinking the millions of falling droplets sounded like fairy music.

"See, I told you it was pretty," Ruth said from behind her.

"It's more than that." Beth turned and smiled. Ruth wore only her shift. "Where are your clothes?"

"Over there." Ruth plopped another partridge berry into her crimson-stained mouth and pointed to a

patch of grass. "We're goin' swimmin'. Want to come?"

Beth shook her head. She didn't know how.

Sally Mae, in her shift, and Joseph, wearing only his drawers, stepped from the trees.

"Last one in is a rotten egg," Ruth shouted, racing to beat the other two.

With a cry of glee, the three plunged into the water.

"I guess you're it, Elizabeth," Sally Mae said with a laugh. "Oh, it feels good."

Filled with envy, Beth looked at her own dust-covered clothes. The dress was suffocating enough. She didn't know why she had bothered with the heavy petticoat. Thinking she could remove it, she glanced at her moccasin-covered feet. Wading should be fairly safe, she decided. She hurried to the grassy area, where she quickly stripped off her ruffled undergarment and removed her new shoes. After tying her skirt into a knot to keep it from trailing in the water, she ran to join the others. "I can't believe it's so warm."

"It's not out here," Sally Mae said from a deep shaded area. "Be careful. The ledge goes out about ten feet, then it drops off into the spring. It's so deep there that even Logan has never been able to find the bottom."

Heeding Sally Mae's warning, Beth was careful to remain on the shallower rocky shelf.

After a refreshing romp in the pool, they all dressed then gathered beneath the trees. Hungry from

the swim, they devoured thinly sliced venison between pieces of freshly baked bread. Applesauce cake served as dessert.

"Granny Jo only had enough cider for one jug in case you're wondering why the rest of us have apple juice," Sally Mae informed her.

"It's delicious and still cold," Beth said, taking several sips from the thick crockery jug.

"Um, that was good," Sally Mae said, popping the last bite of her meal into her mouth. She dusted her hands and got to her feet. "We're going to explore the Indian cave." She pointed to a point high on the next ridge. "Do you want to come?"

"I don't think so," Beth said, covering her mouth to stifle a yawn. "You children go ahead. I think I'll stay here where it's cool and take a nap." She took another sip of her drink and recorked it. After waving goodbye to the others, she stretched out on the grass and closed her eyes.

After exploring the cave, Sally Mae, Ruth, and Joseph came back to the spring. "Shh!" Sally Mae cautioned, seeing Beth asleep. She grinned and waved her hand. Their plan was working just fine. They'd pick a few berries, then check on her one more time before heading for home. Logan should be back by then, just in time for a "rescue." She motioned for the two younger children to follow her, then

they tiptoed from the scene.

The sun and a lone pesky fly woke Beth from a dreamless sleep. She yawned and stretched her arms above her. The sun had crossed the canyon and was now sinking behind the trees on the other side. She frowned and looked around. Except for a doe drinking from the edge of the spring, she was alone.

Where are the children? she wondered. They should have been back by now. She gazed toward the pockmarked ridge and picked out a distant black hole that she thought must be the cave. Were they still there? Why hadn't they returned?

Suddenly all the stories she'd heard of people wandering into caves never to return came back to haunt her. Worried for the children's safety, she quickly tugged on her moccasins, then took a drink of water and set off toward the ridge.

She panted up one path to the top of a hill only to descend down another. When the trail split in several directions, she became confused. The thick layer of pine needles hid any sign of the children's footprints. Take the one that looks the most traveled, she told herself. Apparently all of them were animal trails. She shuddered, hoping she wasn't following a bear.

When that track ended in a rocky slope, she had no idea which way to go. She gazed up at the twilight sky and chewed her lower lip. Soon it would be dark. From the hilltop she scanned the surrounding area, hoping she could locate the ridge. To her dismay, she saw several and they all looked

exactly alike.

She cupped her hands and shouted, "Sally Mae! Ruth! Joseph!" She called until she was hoarse. No one answered. As the sun sank from sight and darkness appeared, another horrible truth hit home. She not only hadn't found the children, but now she was lost as well.

When Sally Mae and the children dashed into the house, Logan glanced up from his seat at the table. "Bout time you got home."

"Elizabeth," Sally Mae panted. "Is she here?"

"No. I thought she was with you."

The white-faced children stared at each other. "Oh, my Lord. She's lost," Sally Mae whispered.

Joseph's face crumpled in tears. "She wasn't supposed to really get lost. But now we can't find her."

Logan jumped from his seat and gripped Sally Mae's arms. "What do you mean you couldn't find her? Where is she?"

Sally Mae sniffed. "I don't know. We went to Wildcat Ridge. We left her at the spring asleep. We went berry picking. When we came back, she was gone. We called and called, but she didn't answer. We thought she'd gone home."

Logan stared at his sister in horror. "You left her out there all alone? There's snakes, and bears and

mountain lions in those hills."

Her face white, Granny Jo rose from the table. She clutched Logan's sleeve. "Son, the child thought she was safe at home. Go after her, boy. I'll pack some food and things while you saddle Lucifer." The old lady paused, her face wreathed in concern. "Awful rough country up there. Might not be a bad idea to send Nate for Simon and his dogs."

Logan nodded, his throat so tight with fear he couldn't speak. He left the house and sprinted toward the barn.

Chapter 29

The scream of a panther split the night and echoed through the canyon, sending a chill of terror up Elizabeth's spine. She shivered and scooted even closer to the large oak tree. She stared into the darkness and drew her knees to her chest, as if making herself as small as possible would help protect her.

From somewhere overhead an owl hooted and flapped his wings.

Remembering the dream where she was attacked by the other owl, Beth hoped this one wasn't of a mind to do the same. In spite of her best efforts to stop them, hot tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks. She wiped them away. Crying wouldn't help her, nor would it help the children.

Frantic with worry for their safety, she'd called till she could call no more. Even if the fiercest beast decided to have her for its dinner, she wouldn't be able to make a sound. Her only hope was Logan.

She closed her eyes, bringing his golden-haired visage before her. She hugged herself and imagined being enclosed in the safety of his arms. He would be looking for them by now; she knew that as surely as she sat there. She only hoped he found the children first.

Logan leaned from the saddle and held the lantern so Lucifer could see the rocky trail. Beau, his nose to the ground, trotted along in front of them. Logan had put the old bloodhound on the trail with a chemise he'd taken from Elizabeth's room. He prayed the dog's love for the girl would aid his aging nose to find her. The children had confessed their plan to get him and Elizabeth together. They had intended to leave her at the spring, then return home and tell him she was lost so he could rescue her. When their plan backfired, they didn't know what to do. Now Logan hoped he could save their misbegotten plot from a tragic end by finding her before something bad happened.

Nate had ridden to Devil's Hollow to fetch Simon Latham and his dogs. Logan knew others of the community would join in the search as well.

Three years ago a child had wandered from its home, and despite the best effort of men and dogs, it wasn't found until a year later. Logan shoved the memory out of his mind. He couldn't bear to think of Elizabeth suffering a similar fate.

"Lizzie," he called again and again, but still there was no answer. *Darlin', where are you?* He peered into the shadows, but beyond the gleam of the lantern, the woods were black as the devil's heart. It chilled him to know, that if she was asleep or injured, he could pass her by and never know she was there.

When he reached the spring, he dismounted and removed the saddle, leaving Lucifer free to graze. From here on, the country would be too rough for the gelding. Logan knelt beside the pool and drank deep of the cold, sweet water, then filled his jug with more of the same. He splashed his face to clear his mind.

When he carried his saddle gear and food supplies to the patch of grass, he saw her knapsack and abandoned petticoat. "Lizzie," he yelled, hoping she might have returned. When he received no answer, he whistled for the bloodhound and again held the petticoat to the dog's moist nose. "Find her, Beau."

The grizzled old dog threw back his head and bayed, then, nose to the ground, he headed up a deer trail. Logan snatched up the lantern and jug of water and followed. They plodded up one ridge and down another, finally circling at the base of a hill. They'd gone for miles and still he hadn't found a trace of her. "Lizzie," he shouted again and again.

Beau lifted his head and bayed. The clear bell-like tone echoed through the deeply forested canyon. After glancing back at Logan, the dog sniffed the air and trotted down a faint path.

Had the old dog found something? Logan's heart pounded with fresh hope. Holding the lantern high, he ran, following the hound to a small mound huddled at the base of a giant tree.

The dog wagged his tail and whined. He'd found her.

Elizabeth uttered a hoarse cry, then raised her arms and wrapped them around the old bloodhound.

"Lizzie." Logan set the lantern down and gathered the sobbing woman into his arms. "Thank you, Lord," he murmured shakily. Closing his eyes, he held her close and smothered her face and hair with frantic kisses. Feeling her tremble in his arms, he vowed she'd never have a chance to get lost again.

"Oh, darlin'. We were so worried." He brushed a lock of hair out of her red-rimmed eyes.

She anxiously gripped the front of his shirt. "Logan, the children!" she whispered, her voice little more than a croak. "They're lost in the cave. We have to find them."

"No. The little devils are at home." He kissed her forehead. "They came to get help. That's how I knew you were missing."

"They're home? Are you sure?"

He tilted her head and gazed into her eyes. "I give you my word, sweetheart. They're safe at home with Granny Jo."

Beth sighed and sagged against him. "Thank the Lord."

Even though he could sense her exhaustion, Logan was loath to let her go. After giving her a drink of water, he held her tight against him, as if that was the only way he could assure himself that she really was all right and safe in his arms.

Her teeth chattered.

"Are you cold, sweetheart?"

"I guess it's nerves."

"Can you walk?" When she nodded, he looped one arm around her waist, picked up the lantern, and led her back up the trail. He walked slowly this time, not wanting to tire her any further.

To take her mind off her ordeal, he explained what made the different sounds in the night. When they saw three sets of eyes peeping at them from the woods, Logan lifted the lantern and showed her a trio of raccoon babies.

"It's a lot more reassuring with you and the light," Beth said with a hoarse laugh.

At the spring, he helped Lizzie to the grass where he'd left his gear, then undid the blanket he'd brought and spread it around her shoulders. From the exhausted slump of her shoulders he could tell that she was too spent to make the journey home.

He took a clean rag from his saddlebag and dampened the cloth in the spring. Then he knelt beside her and gently washed her tear-stained face. "There. How do you feel?"

She clasped his hand and held it against her cheek. "Much better," she whispered, "except my throat hurts." She pointed to the knapsack. "Maybe some of the cider would help."

Logan opened the sack and removed the slender pottery jug. He took a small sip for himself and frowned. It wasn't cider. It was Granny Jo's applejack. The drink was cold and strong, and in her condition it was just what she needed. He held it to her lips. "Drink it slowly. It will ease your throat."

She did as he said. After a few minutes she smiled. "It's better already."

"Granny Jo sent some food if you want it."

"I'm not very hungry." She placed the blanket to one side and pulled at the front of her dress. "But I am hot, and sticky as molasses." She flashed him a shy smile. "Would you be offended if I went wading?"

Logan shoved his hat on the back of his head and chuckled. "Darlin', nothing you could do would ever offend me in the least. Here, let me help you with your moccasins."

After he removed her shoes and she'd taken off her stockings, Logan propped himself on his elbow and watched his dark-haired water sprite splash in the pool. Captivated by the sight, he absently slapped at a mosquito, then ran a hand down his dust-coated cheek. "Not a bad idea at that." Deciding to join her, he pulled off his boots, then he straightened and glanced toward the pool. He froze.

A slender dark object bobbed and weaved, cutting through the water toward her.

"Water moccasin!"

"What?" She smiled at him.

She didn't see it! Logan spun toward his gear and yanked his rifle from the saddle boot. Whirling, he levered a bullet into the chamber and fired.

Elizabeth screamed.

The object splintered into bobbing pieces.

"It's all right," he called. "It was only a stick." Weak with relief, he slid the gun into the scabbard. When he turned to the spring, Lizzie had disappeared from sight.

"My God! Lizzie!" Logan ran into the pool and dived off the shallow ledge where she'd been wading. Unlike the water along the edge, the bottomless spring was frigid and black as the night. Holding his breath until his lungs threatened to burst, he dived deep, groping until he felt her dress. He pulled at the heavy material until he'd captured her waist in the crook of his arm. Kicking his feet, he lunged to the surface.

Panting with exertion, he carried the spluttering woman to the bank, then fell to his knees and pushed on her back to expel the water she had swallowed.

Still coughing, she sat up. Her frightened eyes met his. "Why did you shoot?"

"I thought I saw a snake. I was afraid it would bite you. After I shot, I found it was only a stick." He heard her teeth chatter and reached out to touch her skin. She was ice-cold. "Take your clothes off."

"What?"

"You'll catch cold if you don't." He picked up the blanket and held it in front of her. "You can undress behind this."

Quivering so hard she could hardly manage the buttons, Beth quickly removed the dripping dress.

Still freezing, she hesitated, then removed the rest of her sodden garments. "Logan?"

"Yes, darlin'?" he said from the other side of the outstretched blanket.

"I'm undressed."

Forcing himself not to look, he wrapped the quilt tightly around her, then took her abandoned petticoat and helped her dry her hair. When she was as comfortable as he could make her, he wrung out her clothes and hung them on a limb to dry. "Feeling better?" he asked, his own teeth chattering so hard he could hardly speak.

Beth nodded. Her heart pounding, she raised a hand and pushed a lock of wet hair from his face. The love she saw in his blue-gray eyes took her breath. She thought of all the other times he'd been there when she needed him. Never questioning, never asking anything in return.

Drops of water clung to his eyelashes, falling to make icy trails down his rugged face.

She raised her hand and wiped his cheek. When he turned his head and gently pressed his cold lips into her palm, she sighed and melted into his arms.

Logan held her close and tenderly covered her face and mouth with soft kisses. Suddenly he stepped away. "Look at me. I'm getting you all wet again." He hugged his arms across his chest. His body shook with a shiver.

"Logan, you're freezing. I think it would be a good idea if you got out of your wet clothes, too," she

suggested timidly.

Shuddering, he turned his back and stripped off his shirt and pants. His skin gleaming like muscled bronze, he turned and gave her a hesitant look.

"Those, too," she said gently.

He stripped off the sodden drawers, then looked uncertain.

A little shy, yet filled with love, Beth opened the blanket. "Come here." When he joined her, she felt him tremble. "Are you still cold?"

"No," he said, his voice tense. "Lizzie?"

She gazed into his eyes, then nodded in answer to his unspoken question.

"Are you sure?"

She snuggled close, flattening her breasts against the pool-slick brawniness of his chest. His breathing was rapid and he quivered from head to foot, but still he made no move to hold her. She put both arms around his neck and smiled into his dark eyes. "Yes, Logan. I'm very sure."

He pulled her full length against him. Their damp flesh clung, each molding to the other as if to share every particle of their heat. They kissed tentatively, almost hesitantly, as if unwilling to rush the moment. Their flesh warmed, heating until their mouths opened and their tongues met. The kisses grew in intensity until, swept up on a flood tide of desire, Beth moaned deep in her throat. In reply Logan

tightened his embrace, his manhood rising hot and throbbing against her stomach.

The last shred of Beth's restraint melted, her response becoming urgent, needy, as her body flamed with a hunger that only he could feed.

He smothered her face and hair with eager kisses. "Lizzie. My darlin' Lizzie."

Quicksilver eyes locked on hers, and he swept her up in his arms then carried her to the velvety green carpet. As if she were something very fragile and precious, he gently lowered her to the ground. His body already fully aroused, his eyes light and gleaming, he murmured, "You don't have to do this. I'll love you just the same."

Her eyes filled with tears and she reached up to capture his hands. She pulled him down beside her. "Love me, my darling. Make me your own."

His breath caught.

Smiling, Beth surrendered without restraint to the tall backwoodsman. She clung to him, giving herself completely on this one night to the man she knew she would respect and love for the rest of her life.

Logan carefully and gently introduced his precious Lizzie to a hill song as old as time. As he lost himself in her sweetness his heart sprang free from the steel band that had made him distrust for so long. He was reborn in her arms, made whole by the wonder of her love. His spirit melded to hers in the

white-hot rapture of their joining. With a glad cry and a rush of long-withheld passion, he carried her with him to soar into the diamond-spangled midnight sky.

Chapter 30

The whining of hounds and the gleam of lantern light was the first clue Logan had that he and Lizzie were no longer alone. Muttering a muffled curse, he raised himself to stare into the startled eyes of Simon Latham and Percival Palmer.

"What is it, Logan?" Lizzie said, snuggling closer to his side.

"Well, I take it you found her," Simon said, holding the lantern away from them. "Thank the Lord for that."

Logan felt her stiffen.

"Looks like that's not all you did," Percival Palmer said primly, holding his light even closer. "This is outrageous! The school board will certainly hear about this."

As well as everyone else in the country, Logan thought grimly. He knew the man would see to it that Lizzie's reputation would be ruined. "Douse that damned light, Palmer."

"Percy, I think it's time we let these people have some privacy." Simon whistled up the dogs and turned his horse back up the trail.

Instead of leaving, Percival, his eyes glittering, edged his horse closer to get a better look.

Logan trembled with rage. Shielding Elizabeth with his body as best he could, he fixed the man with a menacing glare. "Get the hell out of here. Now!"

Percy sniffed, then still ogling Elizabeth, he slowly reined his mount to follow Simon.

When they were out of sight, Logan gathered the now sobbing girl into his arms. "They're gone, darlin'." He ran a hand down her cheek, brushing a strand of raven hair from her eyes. "Doggone it, honey, I'm sure sorry this happened." He cursed himself for falling asleep.

"It wasn't your fault, Logan."

He pulled her close, hating himself for not being more careful. Hating himself for allowing anything to hurt her.

"What must you think of me?"

Logan cupped her chin and gave her a gentle kiss. "I think you are the most beautiful, the most desirable woman in the world." He frowned, suddenly worried. "You're not sorry about last night, are you?"

"No," she said quietly. "It was wonderful."

"It was more than that." Never in his life had he experienced anything like it. Who would have ever believed that under that prim exterior was a woman of such passion, such fire? His body throbbing with renewed hunger, Logan squeezed her tight against him. Every pounding heartbeat urged him to hold her

close and claim her once again. But afraid someone else might find them, he battled the yearning and denied himself the pleasure.

"I'm afraid we'd better get dressed, sweetheart." Postponing the moment, he ran his palm down her satin skin, tracing her slender curves. "Lord, what I'd give to stay right here and spend the day making love to you." "I don't know what difference it would make now," she said with despair. "It was plain as the nose on Percival Palmer's face what he thought of me."

Logan forced her to look at him. "Don't ever regret what we've done. I'll take care of Palmer." If it were only that easy, he thought. Trying to keep that man quiet would be like trying to gag a rooster that had just discovered a fox in the henhouse.

He lifted Lizzie to her feet and gazed into her big violet eyes. He wanted to keep her close, cherish and protect her with every fiber of his being. But because of his rash action, he had to take her back to face censure and ridicule instead.

Love for her raged through his body. The intensity of the emotion shook him. The thought of her being lost still tormented him. Life without her wouldn't be worth living.

Vowing never to let her get that far away again, he slipped an arm around her waist and led her toward the spot where he'd hung their clothing.

Donning his own pants and shirt, he watched her dress. He smiled warmly when he saw her pick up

the moccasins that Rider had made and caress them before pulling them on her feet. He wondered how she'd like the length of blue calico he'd purchased for her yesterday when he'd ridden into town.

For the first time in his life Logan wished he was a wealthy man. He wanted to give her the best of everything, fine silks and satins, along with the moon and the stars, if he was able. But being a poor backwoodsman, he'd be doing good to have food for their bellies and a roof over their head.

Sad, he put his gear on Lucifer and gathered up the rest of their things. "Well, darlin', I guess it's time to go."

"I suppose." Tears glittered in her eyes.

The sight of them pierced him like a sharp knife. He drew her into his arms, wishing he had the power and the right to protect her from this. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't erase what he'd done.

But he could protect her. He smiled as an idea formed in his mind. After last night she'd have to marry him. Once they'd said their vows, their indiscretion would quickly be forgotten.

"Don't worry, Lizzie. Everything is going to be all right."

Filled with joy, he took her in his arms and gave her a passionate kiss. "When we get home, we'll hitch up the wagon and head for Oakridge. By tonight you'll be Mrs. Logan Winfield."

Her face twisted with pain. "No." She moved out of his arms. "I can't marry you."

Thinking he'd not heard her correctly, Logan gripped her arms and made her face him. "What did

you say?"

"I can't marry you," she said, her determined lip quivering.

"Why? Because of last night?" He grinned. "Darlin', lots of folks have the honeymoon before the wedding. That's--."

She held up a hand to stop his words. "I won't marry you. I can't. I am committed to another."

Logan stared at her. *Committed to another?* "Who, Joe Johnson?" he said, not about to relinquish his claim. "We'll just tell him different."

"No, Logan. You don't understand. It's not Joe." She turned her head, as if unable to meet his eyes. "My heart belongs to someone else."

Her words filled him with a murderous rage. He gripped her arms and gave her a shake. "Who is it?" Suddenly he grew cold. "Is it Theodore Charles?" he demanded, remembering the letters to "darling Teddy."

"Yes. I love him."

Logan dropped his hands as if the touch of her seared his flesh. He couldn't believe he'd heard right. How could she say it? After giving herself to him last night, knowing the magic they'd experienced, how could she stand there and tell him she loved another man? He swayed with the pain.

Wanting to hurt her as much as he was hurting, he grated, "Well, I hope your darling Teddy doesn't

mind secondhand goods."

She flinched as if he'd struck her. The color drained from her face. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice strained.

"Would you tell me one thing?" he asked bitterly. "I think you owe me that. Why did you come to Devil's Hollow if you were so *committed* to someone in Chicago?"

"I had to have five hundred dollars. I've saved part of it, but--" She brought her fist to her mouth. "Oh, no!"

"What's wrong?" he asked, surprised to find he cared.

"I'll be fired." Tear-swamped violet eyes met his. "Now I'll never be able to get the rest."

Damn, she had cut his heart out and had it on a stake and still he found himself wanting to comfort her. "Why do you need so much money?"

How could she tell him about Teddy without revealing all the rest? Even if he wouldn't scorn her, Teddy's surgery would be expensive and it might not be the last. She knew Logan's generosity would make him want to assume the added burden. She loved him too much to allow that to happen. "I can't tell you."

The pain in her desperate cry pierced his very soul. Cursing himself for seven kinds of fool, he drew her into his arms. He remembered she'd never told him that she loved him. Because he loved her so

much, he'd taken it for granted that she felt the same way. He stroked her hair and felt her arms tighten around his waist. In spite of his anger, his heart ached at her sorrow.

Heartrending sobs shook her body, her tears soaked the front of his shirt. She clung to him as if she never wanted to let him go.

"Lizzie, darlin', don't cry," he said, his own voice unsteady. He sensed that whatever she was keeping from him was tearing her apart. But he also knew he couldn't force her to tell him what it was.

When her violent outburst had subsided to quiet sniffles, Logan felt drained of spirit as well as strength. He took his neckerchief and gently wiped her tear-splotched cheeks, then pressed his lips to her forehead and gave her a sad but tender smile. "We have to go."

Noticing how unsteady she was on her feet, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the horse. His emotions raw and bleeding, he cradled her in front of him and rode Lucifer slowly toward the homestead.

Encased in his arms, Elizabeth rode in silence. His pain was too deep to allow him to speak. He held her close, saving each precious moment for the time he would be alone. She clung to him, as if realizing this would be the last time they would be together. All too soon the cabin came into view. Logan rode up to the front door and dismounted, then carefully lifted his precious Lizzie down beside him.

"Well, isn't this touching?" Percival Palmer sneered from behind them. "Took you long enough." He gave Logan a sly smile. "But then again, I guess you were in no hurry."

Logan escorted Elizabeth past the man. He opened the front bedroom door and gently eased her into the room. "I'll take care of this. You wait here and rest."

When she nodded, Logan shut the door and whirled, his fists knotted at his sides. He stalked toward the leering man. "You keep your filthy mind and mouth off of her."

Percival's face twisted in a malicious smile. "Or what?"

Logan grabbed the front of the smaller man's shirt and lifted him kicking and squealing into the air. Strengthened by his rage, he threw the man off the porch and sent him rolling end over end into the yard. He battled the urge to leap over the railing and finish the job and his voice shook with fury. "Get off my land before I kill you."

Percival staggered upright and hurried to his horse. "You'll pay for this, Logan Winfield." His weasel eyes narrowed. "And that harlot as well."

Logan let out a roar and jumped from the porch.

One foot in the stirrup, hanging desperately to the pommel, Percival raced the bay out of the yard.

"Damn. I'm sorry about that, Logan," Simon Latham said from behind him. "I tried to get him to leave with the others, but outside of tying the bastard on his horse, there was no way I could do it."

Logan gave his friend a sad smile. "I know, Simon."

Simon hooked a thumb toward the bedroom door. "How is she?"

"Upset." Logan drew his hand over his eyes. "I don't know what came over me. How could I let her go through that?"

"It's plain as the nose on my face that you love her and that she loves you, too."

"Yes," Logan agreed. "But she won't marry me. Outside of forcing her at gunpoint..." He shook his head. "She's so stubborn, that wouldn't work either." He shrugged hopelessly. "God help me, I don't know what to do."

The older man sighed. "Kate and I care for the girl, too, Logan. Granny Jo and I discussed the situation while Percy was outside. We think it might be better for everyone concerned if Elizabeth went back to town with me."

Not wanting Lizzie to go until he found out what was wrong, Logan shifted uneasily, but held his peace.

"Patricia Palmer won't dare say a word about Beth with my Kate around. Kate would be on her back like feathers on a duck. But I won't be able to do much about the school committee. After they hear Palmer's story, they won't let you vote on the matter of whether to fire Elizabeth or not. Mine and Arnold Plunket's vote won't count for much. The Jenkins bunch got their nose out of shape over the Osage kids,

so they won't vote with us. And with the county superintendent being Patricia's cousin..." Simon extended his hands in a hopeless gesture. "I'm afraid we won't be able to save her job, but we can make the time she has left here as painless as possible."

Logan agonized over her having to bear the brunt of the stares and whispers. He turned and slammed his hand against the wall. "Damn, I ought to be horsewhipped!"

Simon put a hand on his shoulder. "Son, you aren't the first man to yield to temptation. Kate would kill me if she knew I told you this, but I did the same. Kate was so sweet and pretty, I just couldn't resist." He grinned. "Must have got my little angel with child the first time we did it." He winked. "Mary wasn't premature, in fact she was late."

Logan wanted to shout obscenities. He'd taken no precautions. He'd loved Lizzie with every fiber of his being. "My God, Elizabeth could be..." he said softly.

"Maybe it might be better if you had another talk with her," Simon suggested. "She might change her mind." The older man sniffed. "I think I smell one of Granny Jo's apple pies." Flashing Logan an encouraging smile, he strode toward the kitchen.

His brow knitted with concern, Logan raised his hand and tapped softly on the bedroom door. Elizabeth cracked it open, then seeing who it was, stood back and allowed him to enter.

"Are you all right?" he asked, frowning at the paleness of her face. When she nodded, he led her

toward the bed. "I think we need to talk."

Perching gingerly on the bed, she seemed relieved when he pulled up the footstool and sat at her feet.

"Lizzie, I asked you to marry me and you said no. Now I'm asking you again. Before you answer, listen a minute. When a man and woman share what we did, sometimes there might be consequences." He hesitated. "I might have made you pregnant." When she gasped, he took her hand. "Darlin', you are such a precious innocent. That never even occurred to you, did it?"

She shook her head. "I--"

"You know I love you more than life itself, and I wouldn't care who's child you carried." He squeezed her fingers, his heart feeling the same tight pressure. "But this Theodore--would he feel the same?"

"I--I don't know." She shifted uneasily.

He knelt and took both her clenched fists, then he opened her hands and brought them palms up to his lips. He locked his eyes on hers. "Miss Elizabeth Eastgate, will you marry me?" he asked softly, holding his breath. Pain etched her face. She pulled away and went to stand by the window. Her shoulders shook with silent grief. "I can't. I love Teddy."

Logan got up from the floor and wheeled her toward him. He angrily caught her in his arms and

bruised her mouth with a fierce kiss. When he realized how fragile she was, his touch gentled. When she kissed him back, he pulled away and stared at her. "You love me, too. I know you do." He captured her mouth again, lovingly, tenderly. He felt her melt against his frame. "Lizzie, please marry me," he said, surprised to hear himself beg.

Tears streaming down her face, she tenderly ran her palm down his cheek. "Logan. Please don't hate me, I couldn't bear that. But we can never marry."

"It has something to do with that damned money you need, doesn't it?"

She gulped back a sob and nodded.

Unable to stand further torture, Logan whirled on his heel and stalked out of the room. A few minutes later he mounted Lucifer and galloped out of the yard.

Chapter 31

A silent Elizabeth accompanied Simon Latham to town in the borrowed Winfield wagon. After bidding goodbye to a sorrowful Granny Jo and the wailing children, she had no tears left. She felt hollow, drained, like a withered leaf in a fall wind, certain she would crumble into dust if she had to endure any further pain. By the time they reached Devil's Hollow, she had withdrawn into a cocoon of numbness. She hardly knew when Kate Latham helped her into the house.

Kate urged her to go straight to bed, even though it was still daylight outside. Once there, Beth sank into a slumber so deep it was as though she had died.

A sharp tapping on her window woke her shortly before dawn. She turned her head toward the pane of glass.

A tall dust covered figure stood in the faint early morning light. It was Logan.

Filling with mixed emotions, she rose from the bed and went to the window. She raised the sash. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"I need to talk to you." When she backed away from the opening, he stooped and stepped inside. "I had to make sure you were all right."

Beth leaned through the opening and looked around. It would be just like Percival Palmer and his snoopy wife to be hiding in the bushes. Releasing a sigh, she pulled her head back inside.

She didn't know why she had worried. She could dance stark naked down the street and make love to a dozen men on the front porch of the mercantile and it wouldn't damage her reputation any more than it already was.

"Are you all right?" Logan asked, his face wreathed in concern.

"I'm fine," She was surprised that he cared.

"I'm glad." His smoky eyes were ringed with weariness. He'd been riding all night by the look of him. Crumpling his hat brim in his hands, he gave her a smile so sad that it tore at her heartstrings.

She took his hands in hers. "Logan, I gave you my answer. For both our sakes, why won't you let it be?"

"Because I know you love me," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, Logan." Her eyes filled with tears. How she wished she could tell him the truth. She stared at the floor, fearing that if she met his pain-filled blue eyes, she would throw herself into his arms. Instead she stood as if frozen in place, not daring to let herself feel.

"I don't know why you're so desperate for money." He ran his fingers through his unruly dark gold hair. "Since you won't tell me, I can guess it has something to do with Theodore Charles."

He knelt by the window, then hoisted a heavy pack into the room and placed it in the middle of her bed. "If getting the man means so much to you, then maybe this will help."

She trembled when he cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her forehead. "I only want you to be happy." He turned and was out the window before she could say a word.

His departure left her with a feeling of loss so keen that it robbed her of breath. Unable to bear it, she whirled and trust her head through the opening. "Logan. Wait."

But she was too late. Hooves thundered as Lucifer disappeared from sight. Logan was gone.

Shaken by what she'd almost done, Beth backed into the room and closed the window.

As she remembered his words her brow wrinkled in consternation and she twisted toward the bed. The weight of Logan's pack pushed it deep into the covers. Perplexed at what could be that heavy, she untied the rawhide thong and lifted the flap. "My stars!" she whispered. "Gold!"

She dug her hands into the shiny coins, lifting them, only to let them trickle through her fingers in a sparkling metallic rain. Twenty-dollar gold pieces. And not just a few. The sack contained a fortune.

Where had he gotten it? The Winfields didn't have any money. Reflecting on Logan's mysterious entrance and exit, she raised her hand and clutched the front of her nightgown. *Surely he didn't...?* But try as she might, she could find no other explanation. A sick feeling gripped her middle. She'd made him a criminal. He had stolen the gold--for her!

An imperious knock sounded on her door. "Miss Eastgate, are you all right?" a man asked.

Not recognizing the voice, Beth frowned. After hastily slipping on her robe, she opened the door a crack.

A short, stocky man with a bushy mustache stared at her. "I'm renting the room next door. Since I understood you were alone, I grew concerned when I heard voices and saw a man leaving by way of your window."

"Logan," she blurted, wishing she could bite back his name the minute she said it.

The man's eyes narrowed. It was obvious from his curiosity that the new boarder had already heard the incident about her and Logan.

"I'm fine," she said primly. She stared indignantly at the foot he had wedged in the doorway. "Now, if you will excuse me?" When he removed it, Beth, as composed as if she had men crawling in and out of her window all the time, calmly closed the door.

Now that she was alone, she leaned trembling against the jam. Even though the man himself seemed less than imposing, something in the new boarders's manner frightened her, and she had the uneasy feeling his visit had nothing to do with concern. She recalled what he'd said about Logan exiting her room, and her gaze shot toward the gold. Her eyes widened in dismay. Against the dark quilts, the pack and the bright coins glimmered in conspicuous array. Remembering the gleam in the boarder's eyes, she

whirled and quickly snapped the lock on the door.

Had the man seen it? She didn't know. Either way she couldn't leave the money there for him to find. To protect Logan, she had to hide it, at least until she could figure out what to do. She slowly moved toward the bed, eyeing the bag as fearfully as if she were approaching a coiled snake. Then, hearing footsteps in the hall, she scooped the heavy coins back into the sack.

Hiding the bag beneath a quilt, she found it strange that when she had no money at all, she wanted it desperately. Now that she had an abundance, she wished she'd never seen it.

Anxious to avoid the man she'd met earlier, Beth skipped breakfast and went straight to the school to face the board members.

When she reached the building, she found the door open and the committee waiting inside. "Good morning," she said in an attempt to be pleasant.

"Good morning, dear," Arnold Plunket answered, his wizened face wrinkled with worry.

"Now that she's here, let's get to it," said a tall, cadaverous man in a frock coat.

Beth didn't recognize him.

Patricia Palmer patted his shoulder. "Now, Ingram, let me handle this." A vengeful smile on her

face, she turned to Beth. "My brother and I agree that you should be fired. There will be no severance pay. We want you out of town immediately."

Her brother? Beth closed her eyes. *Of course, I. E. Dayton, the district superintendent.*

"Now hold on," Simon Latham said, striding into the room. "I figured you'd try to pull something like this." He placed himself between Beth and the trio. "The girl is our guest and she can stay as long as she likes. And as for her salary, you will pay her what's due. You will also arrange for her transportation back to Chicago. Furthermore you *will* give her a letter of reference."

The Palmers drew themselves up like a pair of pouter pigeons. "We will not," they said in unison.

Staring at Percival Palmer, Simon rummaged in his pocket. "I forgot. I have a message for you from Oakridge. Now where did it go?" Simon wrinkled his brow. "I can't seem to find it, but it was from a Miss--"

"W-we will pay the woman what's due--and give her a letter of reference," Percival sputtered, interrupting his words. "Anything to get rid of her."

"And you'll pay for her transportation?" Simon watched Percy turn purple in the face. Simon hadn't been in Oakridge or anywhere else, but he'd heard rumors that Percy frequented Miss Charlotte's Emporium for Gentlemen. Realizing the man wouldn't want his wife, Patricia, to know of his association with the soiled doves, Simon pressed his point. "Agreed?"

"All right!" Percival glared at Beth. "The mail coach leaves tomorrow afternoon. Be on it." He spun toward his wife. "Now that that's settled, can I have my breakfast?"

"Yes, dear." Patricia Palmer looped her arm through her brother's and hurried out of the building.

Percival raised his finger and pointed it at Beth. "By tomorrow afternoon." He whirled and stomped out the door.

"Thank you, Simon." Beth took his hand. "And you, too, Arnold."

"I don't care what he said, Elizabeth, you don't have to leave," Simon said, his face sympathetic.

"Under the circumstances, I think it best."

"I'll see you later, honey." Arnold Plunket patted her hand.

She kissed his jowly cheek.

When Simon started to leave, Beth hesitated, then called him back. She took a breath. "Simon, Logan came to see me this morning before daylight. I wanted you to know." Not wanting him to think the worst, she quickly added. "Logan only stayed a minute. He came to say goodbye." She bit her lower lip.

"What is it, Beth?"

"That man in the room next to mine," she asked anxiously. "Who is he?"

"His name is D. G. Bligh. He's a Pinkerton detective from Louisville."

"My stars!" She gasped as the room tilted and whirled around her. She swayed on her feet.

Simon steadied her and helped her to a bench. "Good Lord, Beth. What's wrong?" He glowered. "He didn't...?"

"No," she whispered, "nothing like that. It's Logan. The man saw him leave my room. He saw something else, Simon." Stricken with fear, Beth stared at her friend. "When we left the farm, Logan knew I needed money. This morning he brought me a sackful of gold."

"Gold?" Simon flopped down on the bench. "Where would Logan Winfield get gold? Unless..." His gaze locked on Beth's. "My God!"

After Simon escorted her home, Beth wanted to go to the Winfields' and talk to Logan, but Simon told her it would be safer if he handled things. Without asking why she required the money, Simon urged her to keep what she needed of the more than five thousand dollars the sack contained. Beth packed the funds in the very bottom of her trunk and hoped she wouldn't have to use it. But if it did become necessary, she vowed to pay back every cent.

Although she and the Lathams hated to believe Logan had stolen the gold, there seemed to be no other explanation. They all agreed the Pinkerton man must not find it. Not wanting Logan to get into

any further trouble, Simon promised to hide the remainder of the money and keep it safe until he could figure out a way to have Logan return it to wherever he'd gotten it.

While Beth packed the rest of her things Simon and Kate made numerous trips to visit her her room and each time left with their pockets filled with coins.

Her thoughts on Logan, Beth remained closeted in her room. If he had stolen the gold, what would happen to him? And who would have that much gold in the first place? Had he robbed a bank? The thought of him taking such a dangerous chance filled her with desperation. The intelligent bulldog look of the detective flashed into her mind. If D. G. Bligh was after Logan, she knew he wouldn't give up. For Logan's sake, she had to avoid the man at any cost.

She managed to do just that until the next day when Bligh attempted to waylay her after breakfast. Rescued by Kate, Beth stayed into her room until she saw the detective ride out.

Remembering the seasickness she'd suffered on the riverboat on her way from Chicago to Arkansas, Beth left the house and headed for the mercantile in the hope of obtaining some raspberry leaves for tea and several peppermints. They'd make her trip to Chicago a little easier.

She was near the store when someone rode up behind her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw it was the detective. She kept on walking, hoping she could discourage his attention.

He dismounted and walked along beside her. "Good morning, miss. I trust you are feeling better?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, not breaking stride.

"I understand you've been staying at the Winfields'."

Beth fought to keep her voice even. "Yes, I stayed with them as well as most of my other pupils' families."

"That's right. You were the teacher here."

Were. He didn't miss much, she thought.

"I understand you know Logan Winfield quite well," he said smoothly.

She kept walking.

"A strange one, that Winfield. Quiet. Keeps to himself. Almost like he's trying to hide something. You wouldn't know what that was, would you?"

Beth halted and whirled to face him. "Logan Winfield is a fine, decent man. And he doesn't go poking his nose into other people's business. I find that admirable." She drew herself up rigidly and fixed him with a glacial stare. "Now Mr. Bligh, is there something else you want to know? If not, please excuse me."

"I think you've told me enough. Thank you." The man gave her a knowing look and tilted his hat.

Trembling like a leaf in a brisk fall wind, Beth watched him walk away. *Thank you? I told him enough? My stars! What did I say?*

Frowning, Beth glanced up, surprised to see Nate standing a few feet away. Before she could greet him, he gave her a fierce look, mounted his horse, and galloped away.

"Now what's wrong with him?" she said. Bewildered, she walked up the steps and into the store. Touching her temples, she added headache powders to her list.

It was time for her to leave. Midafternoon found Beth and the Lathams waiting for the mail coach to roll into the mercantile yard. "There it is," Beth said with a sigh. She turned to her companions. "I want to thank all of you for being so kind."

A tearful, but silent Kate Latham squeezed her hand.

"No thanks necessary, honey," Simon Latham said with a sad smile. "We consider you family and don't you forget it." He lifted Beth down and gave her a hug, then held up his arms for his wife.

Mary, her eyes reddened with tears, jumped down on her own and stood by her father's side. "I wish you didn't have to go, Elizabeth."

Beth, her throat tight with grief, gripped the girl's hands. "Will you write to me, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "If you promise to answer."

Beth embraced her. "Of course I will." She turned to Kate. "Will you write, too?"

Kate grabbed her and squeezed her so hard, Beth thought her ribs would break. "You are like my own child. Do you think I would let you go away and not keep in touch?" She drew a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the tears from Beth's face. "Now, that's better."

"Elizabeth." Arnold Plunket came out of his store waving a white envelope. "This came in the mail for you. It looks important." He handed her the letter.

On the outside of the packet, Hannah had marked in red letters the word *URGENT*.

Her hands trembling, Beth opened the message and scanned the lines. "Oh, no!"

Come home. Teddy needs you. We can't wait any longer, The doctors say Teddy must have surgery immediately.

Beth stared at the letter. The day she'd dreaded for so long had arrived.

Swiping at fresh tears, her mouth tightened. Teddy would have his operation. Because now, thanks to Logan's gold, ill-gotten or not, she did have the money. She had no choice but to use it.

Chapter 32

Nate paced back and forth at the edge of the barn, his eyes trained on the woods at the edge of the pasture. *Damn, why did Logan have to pick now to go hunting?*

Afraid he might miss him, but deciding he couldn't afford to wait any longer, Nate headed toward the ridge. Topping the crest, he cupped his hands and bellowed out Logan's name. A moment later he saw his brother's long, lanky figure coming out of a draw.

Stooped under the weight of the buck deer he had draped over his shoulders, Logan lifted his gun in greeting.

Nate raced to meet him. "Logan!"

Logan dropped the deer and laid down his gun. He gripped Nate's arms. "What's wrong? Is it Granny Jo?"

"No. The family's fine. It's Elizabeth." He hesitated. "She's a Pinkerton spy."

Logan stared in amazement. "How can you say such a thing?"

"I saw her in Devil's Hollow. She was talking to D. G. Bligh."

Squinting against the hot afternoon sun, Logan took off his neckerchief and wiped the sweat off his

face. "Who the hell is D. G. Bligh?"

"Bligh's a Pinkerton."

Logan gave him a dubious look. "That don't mean a thing."

"Logan, I know what I saw and heard, otherwise I wouldn't have believed it either."

"Well, spit it out."

"I saw the man in town. When I went into the mercantile, I asked Arnold Plunket who he was." Nate slid his hands into his pockets. "Plunket said he was D. G. Bligh, a detective from the Pinkerton Agency in Chicago. He saw the man's badge." Nate paused. "He's also the Lathams' new boarder."

"Damn!" Logan stiffened. He must have been the man in the room next to Elizabeth's. The man who'd looked out the window and caught him leaving Lizzie's room. "Damn!" he repeated.

Nate clutched his arm. "Logan, you've got to run. He'll catch you if you don't."

"Why should I run?" He studied his brother, wondering how much he knew.

Nate looked him square in the eye. "I know all about Centralia. I know you rode with Anderson."

"How did you find out?"

"I heard you and Granny Jo talking one day. You thought I was asleep, but I wasn't." Nate dragged his boot toe through the dirt. "I just didn't say anything."

"You haven't told anybody else?"

"Course not!" Nate shot him an injured look. "Damn, Logan, you're my brother."

Logan mussed Nate's hair and gave him a lopsided grin. "Sorry, kid."

"What are you going to do?"

"First we're going to take care of this buck," he said, hoisting the animal over his shoulders. He squatted, picked up the rifle, and tossed it to Nate. "Then you're going to tell me exactly what you heard."

After they'd cleaned and hung up the deer, Logan bent over the hand pump and washed the animal's blood off his hands. He straightened and dried on a clean flannel towel. "Are you positive Bligh said she told him all he needed to know?"

"Something like that. I was so dumbfounded I just stood there. Anyhow, when Bligh left, she turned and saw me. I guess she figured I'd heard 'cause she sure looked scared."

"She probably was scared." With all that gold, she had good reason, Logan thought. "What did she say?"

"Nothing. I didn't talk to her. I just came home."

"Well, hell." Logan heaved a disgusted sigh and shook his head. "Then you didn't really hear anything, now, did you?"

"No," Nate admitted. "But if she isn't a spy, then why is Bligh here?"

"He's more than likely trailing Frank and Jesse," Logan said grimly. *And I hope I don't get caught in the net.* But after Nate left, he sat on the stump and stared into the darkness. Lizzie was no spy, he told himself. But the tiny seed of doubt Nate had planted sprouted and took root. If she was innocent then why did Bligh say what he did? He remembered all the letters she'd written to Chicago. *Could Bligh have some connection to the mysterious Theodore Charles?* Logan felt a chill creep up his spine. If that was true, then by giving Lizzie the money, he'd just put his own neck in a noose.

After three days of traveling in the slow-moving wagon, Beth was grateful to reach the Crowley plantation, where she had stayed previously on her trip to Devil's Hollow.

Mrs. Ellen Crowley, an old friend of Hannah's, greeted Elizabeth as if she were one of her own daughters. After providing a bath and a delicious meal, she tucked Beth into bed. When Ellen urged her to spend some time with them before continuing her journey, Beth declined, saying that it was absolutely vital that she reach Chicago as soon as possible. In fact, she confided, it could be a matter of life or death.

The Crowleys, seeing the seriousness of the situation, put their own private coach and swift team of horses at her disposal. Beth left the plantation before dawn and reached the dock early the next morning,

where she thanked the coachman and bid him goodbye. Then she boarded the waiting three-tiered steamboat.

Nothing like the simple keelboat she'd arrived on, the *Delta Queen* was the epitome of luxury. But Beth paid no mind to her sumptuous surroundings. Her mind on Teddy, she lingered on the passenger deck and waited impatiently for the boat to cast off and enter the current of the muddy Mississippi.

When the whistle blew and the engines moved the large stern-wheeler away from its moorage, she sighed in relief. She walked along the deck, trailing her hand along the elaborate wrought-iron railing.

Upstream, at another landing, she noticed several men waiting to board a smaller boat. A stout figure at the edge of the crowd caught her eye. She studied him, wondering why the man seemed familiar.

As if sensing her scrutiny, the man lifted his head and stared in her direction. Suddenly he smiled and doffed his hat.

Recognizing him, she gasped. *Mr. Bligh!*

He turned to the group behind him and motioned. Two other men yanked a third man toward the gangplank. When the tall man seemed about to protest, one of the two gave him a blow that knocked off his hat, revealing a mass of dark gold hair.

Beth clutched her throat and uttered a pain-filled cry. "Logan!"

Logan's head shot up. Slate-blue eyes drilled into hers. Fury flashed for an instant, then disappeared behind unreadable shards of ice. Deep lines etched his handsome face as his lips twisted in a mirthless smile.

Bligh jerked Logan forward.

Beth cried out in protest. *Logan was in chains.*

Logan gave her one last contempt-filled stare and then turned away.

He thinks I did it, she realized with horror. "No! Logan, no!" she cried, leaning over the railing.

The *Delta Queen* bucked the choppy current. Picking up speed, it swiftly left the dock and the men behind her.

Her heart breaking, Beth watched helplessly until tears clouded her vision. She couldn't leave him like that. She had to help him. She had to go back.

She whirled and ran toward a passing purser. "You have to stop the boat. I have to get off."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "The *Delta Queen* don't stop for nothing till she reaches St. Louie." He touched his hat and went on his way.

Wishing she knew how to swim, Beth followed the whitewater wake back to shore. "Oh, Logan, how could you think I'd do that to you?"

Logan watched the paddle wheel of the majestic riverboat churn the foaming water as it headed into the current. Squinting against the glare of the sun-lit water, he watched the small figure leaning over the *Delta Queen's* ornate upper railing. Wasn't the gold enough, Lizzie? he thought bitterly. Did you have to have my hide as well? As he thought of her betrayal, bile rose in his throat. He turned to the detective. "Make sure Miss Eastgate gets the reward," Logan said harshly. "She's earned every dime."

Beth spent the rest of the trip in a daze, her heart ripped asunder by wanting and needing to be in two places at once.

Three days later, the *Delta Queen* shuddered to a halt at the Rock Island dock. Traveling by train from there to Chicago, Beth reached the city the next afternoon. She had her luggage loaded into a hansom cab and gave the driver directions to the orphanage.

When she opened the doors and stepped inside the building, she felt as though she'd never left. If only that were true, she thought, thinking of the far-reaching pain and misery she'd caused Logan and his family.

"You can put my luggage there." Beth pointed to a spot next to the door. She paid the driver for the

fare and added a meager tip. Closing the door behind him, she felt a familiar chill ripple up her spine. Even though several children of various ages roamed the halls, the place was abnormally quiet, with little of the exuberant rowdiness one would expect from a place housing a number of children. What was there about the place that sapped the spirit? she wondered. After making certain her luggage was secure, she walked a short distance down the dark paneled hall and opened a glass-fronted-office door.

Hannah Parker glanced up from the stack of papers she'd been sorting and peered over the rim of her glasses. "Beth!" Her plump face wreathed in a bright smile, the gray-haired woman dropped her pencil and got to her feet. She rushed around the desk and clasped Beth to her ample bosom. "My dear, you look exhausted." She held Beth at arm's length to study her, then hugged her again. "But I am glad you came so quickly."

"Is Teddy all right?"

"He'll be fine now that you are here." Hannah hustled her into a chair, then poured her some jasmine tea. "I have wonderful news," she said excitedly, handing her the cup. "Dr. MacGregor said he won't make Teddy wait any longer. He's accepted the money you sent as partial payment. The rest can be paid later in installments you can afford. Teddy is already at the hospital. The doctor plans to proceed with the operation immediately." Anxious to bring Beth up to date, Hannah rattled on, scarcely taking a breath between sentences.

"That is wonderful news," Beth agreed, dizzy from the whirlwind conversation. But hearing Hannah's words, Beth thought of Logan and felt her heart breaking. How ironic that, out of love, Logan had done something desperate to get her the money she wanted. And now, as it turned out, she discovered she didn't need the gold after all. She bit her lip, knowing Logan would pay a terrible price for his misguided actions unless she could find some way to help him.

Hannah came around the desk and took the empty cup from Beth's hand. "Let's drop your things at my apartment, then we'll visit our boy."

Eager to see Teddy, Beth picked up her reticule and followed Hannah from the room.

After leaving Beth's trunk and smaller bag at Hannah's, the coachman drove them across town and stopped in front of a large ivy-covered brick building.

Inside, they paused just long enough for Hannah to introduce Beth to the nurse in charge, then proceeded down a long hall to a room toward the end. "Hello, Teddy," Hannah greeted happily. "I've brought you some company."

"Mama!" From an iron-railed hospital bed, the golden-haired boy squealed with delight. His blue eyes sparkling, he held out his arms.

"Teddy, darling." Beth hugged him tight, distressed to find he was even more thin and fragile than she had remembered.

"I missed you so much," he cried, clinging to her as if she might disappear if he let her go.

"I've missed you, too, love." She sat down beside him on the bed and rumbled his unruly mop of blond hair.

"Please don't leave me anymore," he whispered.

Anxious to erase the lost, frightened look in his eyes, she kissed his cheek. "I'm here now and I'm not going anywhere until we make you better."

"Promise?"

"I promise," she said softly, the words costing her more than he would ever know.

The doctor operated on Teddy the following morning. When the long and difficult procedure was over, the physician told them it was a success.

For Beth, the days following the surgery blurred one into another. The memory of Logan in chains haunted her. The idea that he thought her responsible for his arrest was more than she could bear. Unable to sleep, she spent most of her time by Teddy's bedside.

She was elated to know that Teddy would walk again. She had God and Dr. MacGregor's skilled hands to thank for that. But his recovery would be long and difficult. Teddy would have to lie immobile

for a time in order for the bones to knit correctly. After that happened, the little boy would have to learn to walk all over again.

In spite of the pain Teddy remained cheerful, telling everyone he met that when he was better, he intended to play ball and run races.

Now that Teddy's recuperation had begun, Beth was even more tormented by the need to help Logan. For a while she had to remain in Chicago; the doctor said it was important for Teddy's recovery. But as soon as the little boy was better Beth knew she had to return to Devil's Hollow.

When she'd first reached Chicago, she'd penned letters to Granny Jo, the Lathams, and Arnold Plunket in an attempt to find out what had happened. So far they hadn't replied. She sadly wondered if they, like Logan, blamed her for Logan's arrest.

Returning to the apartment she shared with Hannah, Beth paused before trudging up the front steps and raised her head to gaze at the smoke-filled sky. No wonder most of the orphanage children developed a cough. She wrinkled her nose as the odor of sewage, dead fish, and stockyards assailed her, drifting on the suffocatingly humid air.

She closed her eyes for a moment and longingly recalled the warm fragrant breeze and sparkling clear skies of Devil's Hollow. She vowed that when Teddy was better, she would take him someplace where he, too, could breathe clean air.

Exhausted, she forced her feet up the stairs and opened the door to the apartment.

"Here she is now," Hannah said, bustling into the parlor. "I knew she wouldn't be long." Dressed in gray from head to foot, Hannah resembled a plump, very pleased pigeon. The elderly woman smiled. "You have a visitor, dear."

When a long shadow crossed the doorway, Beth gasped. "Logan?"

"I wish I were, Elizabeth," the tall man said. His face solemn, Reverend Joe Johnson followed Hannah into the room.

"Joe!" She ran into the preacher's arms. "Do you know what's happened to Logan?"

"Yes. That's why I'm here." He released her and took her hand, then led her to the floral couch. "Logan's in very serious trouble and he won't do a thing to save himself."

"What do you mean?"

Hannah patted Beth's shoulder. "You children need time to talk, and I need some fresh air." She picked up her parasol and turned with a smile. "Think I'll take a nice *long* walk."

When the door closed behind Hannah, Joe reclaimed Beth's hand. "Granny Jo sent a message telling me that Logan had been arrested. She figured I might be able to help. I went to Devil's Hollow, then I went to Springfield to see Logan."

Beth choked back a sob. "How is he?"

Joe gave her a sad smile. "I know Logan loves you, and I know why you left Devil's Hollow." Remembering their indiscretion, she tucked her head.

"It's all right. I could see from the start that you loved him, too. That's why I knew you'd want to do what you could."

"I saw Logan with Bligh by the river shortly after I'd boarded the boat," she said. "Logan was in chains. He saw me, too." She swallowed against the pain. "He looked at me like he hated me, Joe."

"That was Bligh's doing. He told Logan he would never have caught him without your help."

"He lied. I didn't tell him anything."

"I figured that. But hearing it plumb took the heart out of Logan. He doesn't care if he lives or dies."

Beth buried her face in her hands. "How could he believe that awful man?"

"If I didn't know why you came back to Chicago, I might have believed him, too, Bligh was that convincing." He tilted her head up. "I also know about the gold. Simon Latham told me about the part you'd left with him. Granny Jo showed me where to find the rest. I turned all except the portion you have over to Logan's attorney."

"I don't want it," she said, shuddering with revulsion.

"I know. We're going to give it back. I just hope we can use it to buy Logan's release. If not, maybe

at least we can get him a reduced prison sentence."

Almost afraid to ask, she whispered, "Where did he get it?"

"During the war Logan rode with Anderson's raiders against Centralia, Missouri. The raiders looted the town and robbed the bank. They also robbed the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railroad of more than ten thousand dollars. A lot of people were killed and the money was never recovered."

She covered her mouth in astonishment. He hadn't stolen it for her, thank God. But had he really stolen it? Recalling the rest, she shook her head. "No, he couldn't have done such a thing."

Joe patted her hand. "Logan didn't take part in the attack. Granny Jo told me the whole story. She said when the shooting started, Logan realized he wouldn't be any better than the Yankees who'd butchered his family if he took part in the raid. He split from the raiders and was riding out of town when he saw a man lying in the street. The man had been badly wounded but was still alive. Logan dragged him to safety and tied up his wound. Bullets were flying in every direction. One ricocheted and creased Logan's head. When he woke up, he was alone, lying in a pile of weeds. The raiders and the man he had helped were gone. The town was on fire and people were running everywhere. Logan knew if he was captured, he'd be hanged on the spot.

"On his way back to the farm, he ran across another raider who'd also been shot. Not in the best shape himself, Logan tried to help, but the man didn't make it. Just before he died, he told Logan to take

the money he had in his saddlebags and run. Logan did, but he didn't want the money. He felt it was tainted with blood. Not knowing what else to do, he buried it." Joe sighed. "And that's where it stayed until he gave part of it to you."

"Why did he ride with Anderson in the first place?"

"I guess Logan thought he had good reason after finding his folks and wife murdered." He shook his head. "During the war men did a lot of things they were sorry for later. After the peace was signed, the rest of the soldiers went home to resume their lives. But the men who rode with the guerrillas were not given amnesty like the rest. They were branded as outlaws. Some of them, like Bill Anderson and Quantrill, deserved it, but others, like Logan, didn't."

She ached inside, imaging Logan's plight. "How he must have suffered, knowing that anytime he could be captured and put in prison." Puzzled, she shook her head. "I still don't understand why Bligh would lie about me."

"Because he believes Logan is guilty. And Logan did have the express money." Joe sighed. "I learned that one of Anderson's men had been captured. In order to save his own hide, he named Logan as one of the men who rode against Centralia. But before the man could come to trial he was murdered. Bligh heard about you and Logan. I think he figured if Logan thought you had turned him in that it would take all the fight out of Logan and he might confess."

"But Logan is innocent."

"I know." Joe gave her a worried look. "But the question is, how are we going to prove it?"

Chapter 33

The next morning Elizabeth and Joe Johnson went to the Pinkerton office in Chicago. They found out that since robbing a railroad was not a federal offense, Logan would be sentenced in the state where the crime occurred, in Springfield, Missouri.

To their dismay, they also discovered that Alan Pinkerton was not the least bit sympathetic to their cause.

Later that afternoon Joe, Hannah, and Beth sat in the apartment and decided on a plan of action.

After hearing the story, Hannah took Beth's hand. "You can't wait. You must go right away."

Beth hesitated. "What about Teddy? He's still far from well and I promised I wouldn't leave him again."

"Teddy's improving daily." Hannah smiled. "You know I adore him. And while he will miss you, he will be just fine."

Joe and Elizabeth spent the rest of the afternoon and evening at the hospital. After Teddy beat Joe in a game of checkers, Beth folded the board and took his hand. "Darling, I have something to tell you." She paused, searching for the right words. "I have to make a trip."

Teddy's lip quivered. "No, Mama. You promised."

"I know. But a friend of mine and Joe's is in trouble. His name is Logan. He needs our help very badly."

Teddy looked at Joe. "Is he nice, too?"

Joe nodded. "He's very nice." He winked. "But I bet you could beat him in checkers."

Teddy frowned and picked at his blanket. "If Logan's your friend, you have to help him," he said, showing a wisdom far beyond his five years. "But would you hurry up and do it so you can come back? I want Joe to teach me how to play catch."

Joe laughed. "That's a promise, sport."

Leaving Teddy in Hannah's loving care, Joe and Beth boarded the morning train. Once again the gold had been loaded into Beth's trunk, but this time it would be returned to Missouri.

Upon reaching Springfield, Beth and Joe found rooms at Widow Kincaid's, a modest, but clean, boardinghouse. After freshening up a bit, they went to the jail to see Logan.

Although Beth was no stranger to institutions, she found the close confines of the rock-walled building claustrophobic. She could only imagine the horrors it held for Logan. Filled with apprehension,

she followed Joe down the long gloomy corridor toward a room where the prisoners were permitted to have visitors. Knowing Logan thought Joe had come by himself made her even more nervous. Realizing she needed time to explain to Logan the truth of what had happened, Joe told her to go in alone. When the barred door swung open, Beth entered the room.

Unshaven and unkempt, Logan slumped in a straight-backed chair. His clothing hung loosely on his frame, testifying to the startling amount of weight he had lost. Even though he must have heard the door open and close, he didn't bother to look up.

Beth could not hide her shock. She closed her eyes, fighting tears. She wanted to rush forward and comfort him, but knew she dared not. It was as if the Logan she knew had died, leaving behind this miserable human shell. *Oh, my darling, what have I done?* She swallowed and took a breath. "Logan?"

He raised his head. His eyes darkened with pain before they became hooded and cold. "Well, Miss Eastgate." He peered toward the door. "Did you and Theodore come by to gloat?"

"I came with Joe," Beth said quietly. "We want to help you." She motioned to the empty chair. "May I sit down?"

He waved a hand. "Sure. Why the hell not?"

Beth eased into the chair. She raised her head to meet his bitter gaze. "Logan, I didn't--"

"Don't!" His hands tightened into fists. "I know exactly what you did. Nate heard you. Then Bligh

confirmed it."

"I came to help you," she cried.

"Help? How?" he snarled. "Make sure the knot's tight when they hang me?"

Beth gasped. She felt the blood drain from her face. "Hang you?"

"Did you think they would give me a medal?"

"I didn't think--"

"No. You didn't." He let out a ragged sigh. "And I didn't either or else I would have known you were too good to be true."

She reached across the table and touched his hand.

He recoiled as if she had burned him. He got up and stood behind his chair, making it a barrier between them. "Now, Miss Eastgate, I want you to get out." He strode to the door and pounded for the guard. When the door opened, Logan's bleak, cold eyes bored into hers. "Do us both a favor and don't come back."

Devastated, Beth left the room and allowed the guard to escort her back to the foyer, where Joe sat waiting.

Joe took one look and folded her into his arms. "Elizabeth, I should be horsewhipped for letting you go in there alone."

"I made you do it."

"Even so, I've known Logan long enough that I should have realized what would have happened." He glanced at the guard. "I need to talk to him."

The guard nodded. He returned, shaking his head. "He won't see you. Says he's had enough visitors for one day."

"Come along, dear. We're doing no good here." Joe led her from the building and back to the rooming house.

After persuading the landlady to fix them a pot of tea, Joe lifted his cup and took a sip. "Since he won't see us, we have to find another way. I've instructed the widow to send you up a bath and then I want you to rest." When she started to protest, he held up a hand. "That's an order."

She looked pale as porcelain and about as fragile. He had to go see Logan's lawyer and he didn't want her anywhere near. After the visit with Logan, she couldn't stand any more stress or she'd shatter to bits. Leaving her in Rose Kincaid's capable hands, Joe packed the gold in a valise and left the house.

Joe entered the office with *Christopher Calvin, Attorney-at-Law* stenciled on the door. He found the lawyer seated behind his desk. After counting and surrendering the gold to the attorney, Joe asked about Logan.

Chris leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his thin dark hair. "I heard you took someone

to see Winfield. The lady you mentioned?"

"Yes. Elizabeth Eastgate."

"I don't know what happened, but Logan damn near tore the jail apart after she left. Now they've got him locked up in solitary confinement."

"At least he's not sitting there willing himself to die."

Chris chuckled. "That's for sure. He was so mad it took three men to hold him." He scratched the side of his nose. "Maybe that's a good sign. How's the lady?"

"Not good." Joe heaved a weary sigh. "She's been through a lot lately. I'm not sure how much more she can stand."

"I thought bringing her here might help. Winfield won't talk to me, you know." Chris picked up his pencil and doodled on a piece of paper. "I don't know how I can defend him if he doesn't cooperate."

"Any suggestions?" Joe asked hopefully.

"Well, since the railroad recovered all their money, you could ask the governor to grant him a pardon."

"Any chance of that happening?"

Chris snorted. "I doubt if that son of a bitch would pardon his own mother, but it's the only chance Winfield's got."

Joe let out a breath. "It's that bad?"

Chris nodded. "The trial starts next week. Good thing you're a prayin' man, because it is going to take a miracle for Logan Winfield to get out of this mess."

On his way back to the boardinghouse, Joe passed by the local church. He hesitated a moment then sighed and walked on by. With the amount of liberties he'd taken with the Good Book lately, the place would probably fall down on his head.

The next morning, Joe and Elizabeth boarded a train bound for Jefferson City to see the governor. Even though the chance was remote that the former Union colonel would give a Confederate guerrilla a pardon, they felt for Logan's sake that they had to take the chance. By late afternoon the next day they still had not been able to see him.

Tired after sitting on the hard bench outside the governor's office for most of the day, Beth glanced at Joe. "He knows we're here. And I know he's in there," she said furiously. "I saw him peeking through the door when that woman took in a stack of papers."

"If we don't see him today, it will be too late. Tomorrow's Saturday." Joe stepped over the luggage and leaned back against what appeared to be a closet door. "We can't force our way in there, and that

hatchet-faced woman isn't about to let us in."

Beth thought for a moment. "Maybe she would--if she wasn't here to stop us."

"What do you have in mind?"

A few minutes later Joe returned with a parcel in his hand. He made an elaborate show of opening the package and displaying a box of chocolates. He lifted the lid and offered one to Beth.

She popped it into her mouth. "Mmm, delicious." She sneaked a peek across the room at the secretary.

The woman positively drooled.

Beth slowly ate another. "Chocolate cream." She stared at the Regulator clock on the wall. "Oh!" She jumped to her feet. "My goodness, I forgot the time," she said loudly. "We'll miss the train." She grabbed her reticule and small traveling bag.

Joe lifted the carpetbag and offered his arm. She winked at him, then dropped the box of chocolates on the floor in front of the closet.

Without a backward glance, she and Joe clattered noisily down the hall. After a few moments they tiptoed back.

The broad derriere of the secretary was bent over the spilled box of candy. She gathered one piece after another into her fat hands and plopped them into her mouth.

"One, two, three," Beth mouthed. "Now!" she said.

Joe darted around the woman and opened the closet door.

Hands extended, Beth rammed the secretary from behind. Before the startled woman could make a sound, they had her locked securely inside.

Beth dusted her hands. "Now let's go see the governor."

Ten minutes later they left the governor's office.

"Chris Calvin was right," Joe said grimly. "That man would operate the gallows personally if they'd let him."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Get out of town before he puts us in jail." Joe said, quickening his pace down the capitol steps.

"Joe, I forgot! That woman is still in the closet."

"I didn't. I heard her hollering when we left." He hurried her toward the depot. "And you can bet she won't forget about us."

Instead of using their return tickets to Springfield, Joe purchased two tickets to Centralia.

"Why are we going there?" Beth asked, anxious to get back to Logan.

Joe shrugged. "I started to hand him our tickets when I found myself saying Centralia." He stared at her. "Something told me to do it, but I don't have the faintest idea why."

They reached Centralia later that evening, and since their funds were running low, Joe obtained permission for them to spend the night in the barn of a local farmer.

Sitting in the hayloft, Beth opened her reticule and counted the few remaining coins of the small horde Hannah had given her. Joe was down to a few dollars. She'd learned he had sold his saddle and chestnut to get the money to travel to Chicago. "If a voice tells you to go somewhere else, I hope He provides the means to get there."

Joe grinned. "He's never failed us yet."

Beth was wondering what they were going to eat when the farmer's young pregnant wife, Katie, invited them for dinner. After the meal the four of them sat around the table and talked.

Joe cautiously mentioned the raid.

Clay pushed back a shock of pale yellow hair. He looked across at his wife. "We didn't live here then, but Cade Hill, the feller that sold us the place, told us all about it. It must have been awful from what he said. He danged near died that night, but somebody saved him."

Joe caught Beth's eye. "Do you know who it was?"

Clay rubbed his chin. "That was the strange part. It was one of the raiders."

Beth closed her eyes and murmured a fervent prayer.

"Does the man you bought the place from still live around here?" Joe asked casually.

"Naw." Clay shook his head. "After he sold the place, he took off." He looked at Katie. "Do you know where he went?"

"Cain't say I do. Oughter be somebody around here that would know, though." She gave Joe a curious look. "Kin of yourn?"

"Sort of," Joe said. "Aren't we all brothers under the skin?"

The farmer shrugged. "You might try Jonah Bates. I think he's lived here since Creation. He lives down the road a piece. If this is one of his good nights, he might be able to help you."

Beth and Joe got up from the table. Beth turn to Katie. "That was delicious. Can I help you clean up?"

"Shucks, no," the young woman said, struggling to rise from the table. "Gonna be a full moon tonight. If you want to see that old man, you'd better hurry."

"Why?" Joe asked. "Does he go to bed early?"

The farmer laughed. "He's a little tetchd. Once that moon comes up, he'll sit out there and howl like a dog all night long."

Joe and Beth stared at each other. Had their quest finally ended with this?

Joe took Beth's hand and hurried out the door. He only hoped the voice that told him to come here would also tell him how to communicate with a raving lunatic.

Chapter 34

Joe and Beth returned to the farm house later that evening after their trip to Jonah Bates's place had proved fruitless. While the elderly man apparently knew Cade Hill, he didn't seem to know much else.

Before they'd left, the moon rose full and round, and as the Fuller's had predicted, Jonah Bates went to a knoll some distance from the house and began to howl.

Beth shivered as the eerie sound lingered on the midsummer- night air. "What would make a person do that?"

"There is all kinds of crazy, Beth. People went through a lot in the war. If it makes the old man feel better to howl at the moon, what harm is there in it?"

Reaching the Fullers', they climbed the ladder to the barn loft. In a mound of straw obviously intended to be their bed, Beth noticed a pile of several quilts. Embarrassed, she glanced at Joe. "Oh, dear. They must think we are married."

"That's what I told them when I asked if we could stay. I hope you don't mind."

"No. But..."

Joe smiled. "You sleep here. I'll take one of the quilts and sleep over there. In the morning we'll

put the bed back together."

Beth touched his hand and frowned.

"Why did you lie, Joe?"

"To save a lot of questions. We're after answers people wouldn't give otherwise." Feeling her hesitate, he added, "Do you think they would have permitted us to stay, let alone told us anything, if they thought we weren't married?"

"No, of course not." He was right of course, but it still made her uneasy to hear a minister tell a lie.

The next morning they rose before dawn and fixed the bed the way they had found it. They were going down the ladder when Clay Fuller came in to milk. He gave them a warm smile. "Katie's got breakfast goin' and youall are welcome to join us."

"I see you've got two buckets." Joe pointed to one of the pails. "How about letting me have a try?"

"Help yourself." Clay grinned and held out the container.

He glanced at Beth. "I think Katie also has some news about that feller you're lookin' for."

"Really? I'll go in and see if I can help her," Beth said, eager to hear what the young woman had to say.

When the men came in from the barn, Beth met Joe at the door. "Katie found an address Cade Hill gave her. It's his sister's place on Wilson Creek near Springfield. She thinks he might have gone there."

After breakfast they bid the Fullers goodbye and thanked them for their hospitality. Then, baggage in hand, they caught the train back to Jefferson City and from there on to Springfield.

Because the next morning was Sunday, Joe and Beth attended services at a small church in Springfield, then they hired a rig to go to Wilson Creek. Three hours later, under a darkly clouded sky, they located the residence of Clara Hill.

The small one-story structure needed a coat of paint, but the grounds around it were scrupulously clean. Garlands of red rambling roses festooned the rail fence that bordered the front yard. Pink hollyhocks and yellow sunflowers made a bright splash against the house's weathered walls.

"At least it looks like somebody lives here," Beth said, encouraged by the sight.

Joe tied the reins of the rented horse and buggy to the hitching post and helped her to the ground. When she trembled, he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. Hand in hand they walked to the door. Overhead, thunder rumbled.

"Don't need to knock," said a female voice from inside. "I heard you comin'. What do you want?"

"We're looking for Mr. Cade Hill," Beth said quietly. "Is he here?"

"Maybe he is, and maybe he ain't. What do you want him for?"

Joe spoke up. "I'm Reverend Joe Johnson from down Branson way. A friend of his asked me to look him up."

Beth stared at Joe. *Another lie?*

He frowned, signaling her to stay silent.

"What friend?" said a gravelly voice behind them.

They turned. Beth saw an old man with one leg and a crutch under his arm. Cradled in the crook of his other arm was a shotgun--pointed straight at them.

"Logan Winfield," Joe answered, moving in front of her.

The man spat a wad of tobacco juice. "Never heard of him."

"You didn't know him by name," Joe said. "He saved your life once. And now, if you are of a mind to, you can save his."

The balding gray-haired man narrowed his eyes. "I don't recall no Logan Winfield savin' my life." He glanced up at the storm-darkened sky.

"It was in Centralia. The night of the raid."

Beth saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger. She gasped. Did he intend to shoot them?

"The man that saved my life warn't no better than the rest of them butchers. And more times than not, I'd wished he'da let me die." The man waved the gun toward the buggy. "I ain't got no more to say, so you can git!"

Joe stood his ground. "Nevertheless you would have died if not for him." He took a step forward.

"And now Logan is about to die for something he didn't do."

"That don't make me no never mind, but what didn't he do?"

"He didn't rob the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railroad, that's what. His trial is tomorrow and he will hang unless you come to Springfield with me and tell the judge what you know."

The man cackled. "I ain't been off this place for three years and I don't intend to leave it now. So you might as well go tell him that."

"He didn't send me. His grandmother, Josephine Winfield, did. Logan doesn't care if he lives or dies. But if he does hang, it's others that will be left to suffer."

The man studied them, as if remembering something from long ago. "Did you say Josephine Winfield?" He leaned toward them. "Do they call her Granny Jo?"

"Yes, they do," Beth said, stepping from behind Joe. "Do you know her?"

"I met her once." The man's face took on a faraway look. "It was during the war. We'd got whipped awful bad at Pea Ridge. We stopped back by that little place of hers on the side of the mountain. We were all barefoot. Some of us was hurt real bad. Most of us starvin'. She doctored our wounds as best she could, and then she made us apple pie. It was all she had. Best apple pie I ever et before or since."

He stared at Beth and Joe, then glanced toward the house. "What'cha think, Clara?"

"I think you ought to go," the feminine voice answered. A tall silver-haired woman came to the

door. "Not for the raider, but for the lady you called Granny Jo."

A clap of thunder shook the ground. The rain began in earnest. The man sighed. "Guess there's no mind for it. Preacher, get that horse put up, then come on in out of the wet. We'll put you and the little lady up tonight. Tomorrow, God willin', I guess we'll go to Springfield."

Monday arrived, along with an early-morning fog. Logan peered out through the narrow bars. The depressing mist matched his mood. He'd heard no more from Elizabeth or Joe. And even though he would have refused to see either of them, he discovered that their total abandonment of him hurt. He snorted. After today it wouldn't matter. He knew what the verdict would be. Now he only wanted to get it over with.

He'd bathed and changed into the clean suit of clothes that his attorney, Christopher Calvin, had brought for him to wear. Logan found the pants too short and the coat so tight he was afraid to move for fear it would burst at the seams.

The attorney had been such a pest that a few days ago Logan had finally agreed to see him. At least the man had been honest, Logan thought ruefully.

Chris had shook his head and told him he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of getting out of

this mess. The only thing they could do, the attorney said, was to throw themselves on the mercy of the court and beg for clemency.

Remembering Elizabeth's treachery, Logan answered he'd only begged one time in his life and this was where it got him. He wasn't about to beg for anything ever again.

The lawyer had shrugged and thrown up his hands, then he'd asked if Logan had any druthers as to where he wanted to be buried.

Logan told himself he was prepared to die, but that question shook him more than he cared to admit. Sounded so final somehow. He also didn't cotton to the idea of hanging. But then a lifetime behind bars sounded even worse. For the first time in a long time, Logan bowed his head and prayed.

A few hours later the mist cleared. By nine o'clock the day was already hot and muggy. It was shortly after ten when the guards came to get him. Manacled between them, Logan was led to the Springfield courthouse. At least inside the thick limestone walls there was a little relief from the oppressive heat. The judge, garbed in his heavy robe, looked to be in no mood to tarry. He banged the gavel on his desk and growled, "Sit down."

The people who had come to observe settled on the wooden benches. The gavel banged again. The

trial was under way.

The lawyer from the railroad made his case short and sweet. He accused Logan of being one of the men who had robbed the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railroad on September 27, 1864, the day of the raid on Centralia. After stating that fact, he turned and asked Logan point-blank if he'd been with Bloody Bill Anderson on that date.

"Yes. I was there," Logan said. "But--"

"You admit you were with the raiders?" the lawyer interrupted before he could explain.

"Yes, but--"

"Did you intend to ride against the town?"

"Yes." Logan scowled at his attorney. Calvin sat there with his eyes shut and his feet crossed in front of him. *Dammit! The man was asleep!*

"Is this one of the gold pieces from that robbery?"

Logan stared at the shiny twenty-dollar gold piece the prosecutor held under his nose. *Lizzie*. Logan thought of her betrayal and all desire to defend himself evaporated like the morning mist. He shrugged. *Why bother?*

"Is it?"

Tired of the man's attitude, Logan leaned forward in his seat. "Hell, yes, I had a whole sackful.

How come you ended up with just one?"

Chris Calvin's feet hit the floor. He strode forward. "Your Honor, my client doesn't know what he is saying."

Logan scowled. "I'm not going to lie. I'm going to meet my Maker anyway, so why not go with a clear conscience?"

"That's what I say, son," rang out a voice from the back of the courtroom.

Pandemonium broke out among the onlookers.

"Order! Order in the court!" the judged shouted. He glared at the intruder. "Who are you, sir? And what business do you have interrupting my courtroom?"

"I'm Cade Hill, and this man couldn't have robbed any train because he was with me. He saved my life the day of that raid."

When Cade was sworn in and gave his story, Logan stared at him in stunned surprise. He was totally confused when the stranger turned to him and told him to give his kindest regards to Granny Jo.

The judge banged his gavel and brought the court to order. "It seems the railroad has failed to prove its case. All the money has been recovered, and since there is no other charge against this man, I am going to end this proceeding." He looked at Logan. "Logan Winfield, you are found innocent of robbing the train and of any other charges that may be filed against you regarding that day."

He paused and gave Logan a solemn look. "I only want to know one thing. Where did you get all that money?"

"I found it. It was on--" Logan began.

"That's good enough." The judge turned to the railroad man. "Since you've got your money back, it seems to me this man has a sizable reward coming, him being such a good Samaritan and all. Yes, I think one thousand dollars should cover it."

The prosecutor's eyes bulged. He leaned over the podium. "Dammit, Your Honor! You can't do that!" he shouted.

The judge banged his gavel and glowered at the man. "It's my court and I'll do as I damned well please. And right now I please to find you in contempt. Fine this man fifty dollars."

The judge smiled at Logan. "Son, I'll see that you get that reward. Now you are free to go."

"Thank you, sir," Logan said, dazed by his sudden freedom and unexpected wealth. He turned to his attorney, who looked as stunned as Logan felt. Logan held out his hand. "I don't know how you did it, but thank you."

Chris shook his hand. "I didn't do a thing. I never saw that man before in my life."

Logan gave him an incredulous look, then he walked toward Cade Hill. He held out his hand. "Thank you, sir." He frowned. "You aren't the man whose life I saved."

Cade put a finger to his lips and motioned him outside. "No, I'm not. That was my brother. He's dead, so he couldn't testify, but I heard the story often enough that I felt I'd been there, too." He winked. "I did meet your granny, though, back before the war when I still had both legs. That gal could dance the legs off a june bug."

"She still can," Logan said with a laugh. "But how did you know I needed help?"

Cade flipped his thumb toward a waiting buggy. "Them two. Made themselves such pests I had to come if I ever expected to get any peace. Why, they even stayed at my place last night, just to be sure I'd make it."

Logan stared at the rig where Lizzie and Joe sat side by side. He slowly walked toward them. "I want to thank you both for what you did."

"We only did what you would have done for us," Lizzie said quietly. She was thin as a rail and had deep shadows under her eyes, but her smile was bright as a new spring day.

"Are you folks gonna jaw all day? I've had enough of this city life. I'd sure like to get home before dark," Cade Hill complained, hobbling up behind them.

"Joe?" Logan hesitated, his gaze on Elizabeth.

Joe turned to her. "It's a long ride out and back, my dear. Why don't you stay here? I'll see you when I come back later."

"All right, Joe." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Logan helped her from the buggy and she stood on tiptoe and kissed Cade Hill goodbye. "Thank you and thank Clara. If you are ever in Chicago..."

"I ain't never gonna be anyplace but Wilson Creek, and you're always welcome." He kissed her forehead. "Goodbye, lovey."

Beth watched until the wagon rolled out of sight. "He's a wonderful man."

Logan nodded, his throat tight. "Yes, he is," he said, not knowing if she was talking about Cade or Joe, but either way she was right.

Her face troubled, she turned to him. "Logan, I didn't tell Bligh."

"I know. At the time there didn't seem to be any other explanation." He still had a lot of questions but sensed that now was not the time to ask them. She looked so frail he was afraid she would keel over any minute. He took her arm and led her across the courtyard square to a wrought-iron bench. "You sit here and I'll buy us a lemonade." He pointed toward the vender.

Halfway there he turned and came back. "I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "I forgot, I don't have any money."

Lizzie opened her reticule and took out two coins. "Today it will be my treat."

Logan took the coins and purchased two glasses of the cold mixture. He returned and handed one to

her. "There, this should taste good on such a hot day."

She took a sip. "It's delicious." She glanced at the sky. "It is rather warm for this time of year, isn't it?"

"Yeah, real warm." Logan took a swallow of the tart drink and heaved a melancholy sigh. It seemed ironic, after the love they'd shared and the trials they'd been through, that they didn't have anything more to talk about than lemonade and the weather.

Chapter 35

The next day both Logan and Joe saw Beth to her train. Logan felt a keen sense of disappointment that she seemed so eager to leave. He really had mixed emotions when Joe bent his head and tenderly kissed her goodbye. But the crowning touch came when Joe told her to give his regards to Teddy.

Logan glowered when Joe added that he would be seeing both of them soon and to remind Theodore that they had some unfinished business.

When it came time for him to say goodbye to Beth, Logan could do no more than shake her hand.

Her eyes, sad and gentle, locked on his. "Goodbye, Logan," she said softly, then turned without another word and climbed aboard the train.

The locomotive released a hiss of steam, then the wheels screeched and caught. A few minutes later the train moved down the track.

Logan, torn between wanting to cuss or run after it, did neither. His vision blurred, he stood there like he'd turned to stone and watched her go out of his life.

Finally Joe put a hand on his arm. "How about me buying you some supper?"

Logan nodded, too filled with emotion to speak. They left the station and walked to a nearby diner.

They found a table in the corner where Logan wouldn't draw unwanted attention. It seemed as if everyone in town suddenly considered him a celebrity. Strange, he thought, when yesterday they all wanted to hang him.

When the meal arrived, Logan picked at the steak. Although he hadn't eaten for days, he couldn't swallow a bite. His thoughts were too full of Lizzie.

"She's a wonderful girl," Joe said, reading his thoughts. "Too bad she's taken."

Logan's heart ached with the pain. "What did you think of Theodore?"

"I think he's an exceptional person," Joe said, eating his own meal with relish.

"That's good," Logan said gruffly. "She deserves someone nice."

"She's much too good for the likes of us," Joe agreed.

"Yeah, I suppose so." Logan jabbed the steak again. "What's he look like?"

"If you're referring to Teddy, he's very handsome. Blond hair, blue eyes. Great smile."

"Tall?" Logan asked, attacking the same bite of steak for the fifth time.

"Not yet." Joe took another bite.

"Not yet?" Logan said puzzled. He pointed his fork at Joe. "Either the man is tall, or he isn't. What kind of an answer is not yet?"

Joe burst out laughing. "Because, you idiot, Teddy is only five years old."

"Five years old?" Logan asked incredulously. Teddy wasn't her lover. He wasn't even a man. All this time he'd been jealous of a child? A shiver of joy ran up Logan's spine. His face erupted in a brilliant smile.

"I should have let you suffer," Joe grated, "but dammit, they both need you. I don't know why." He dabbed his napkin at his mustache. "I'm much better looking. And I have a better job."

"Better job?" Logan laughed. "A traveling preacher?"

"Well, I guess that cat's out of the bag."

"What cat? What are you talking about now?"

"I'm not really a preacher." He looked at Logan. "I'm a detective. I work for the railroad." Joe's mouth lifted in a crooked grin. "Are you mad?"

A railroad detective? Logan stared at him in amazement. "Mad? Hell, that isn't the half of it."

"I kept you from hanging," Joe reminded him.

"Yeah, I guess you did at that." Perturbed, Logan glared. "How did you know about me, anyhow? Were you the one...?"

Joe raised his hands. "I didn't have anything to do with you getting arrested," he said, his tone serious. "I'm after much bigger fish."

"The James boys?" When Joe nodded, Logan wondered how he could have been so blind.

Pondering what Joe had told him, Logan saw his friend in a different light.

No wonder Joe Johnson had never acted like any preacher he'd ever seen. Especially when he'd been around Elizabeth. Logan scowled. "All the times you stayed with us, sleepin' under my roof, eatin' my vittles, and *courtin' my girl*, you were a detective?"

Joe let out a regretful sigh. "Afraid so."

Shaking his bruised knuckles, Logan stepped over his unconscious friend and headed for the railroad station. Halfway there, he came to a halt. He couldn't go anywhere. He didn't have any money. He rubbed his chin and glanced down at the borrowed suit. When he'd hit Joe, the jacket had split right up the middle of the back. He couldn't show up on Elizabeth's doorstep looking like an overgrown scarecrow.

Another realization struck him. He couldn't find her doorstep. Chicago was a big city and he had no idea where she lived. But Joe Johnson did. Joe also knew who Teddy was and why the boy had such a strong hold on Elizabeth. *Why did she tell Joe about Teddy and not me?*

Logan turned on his heel and headed back to the restaurant. He pushed the door open and strode into the dining room.

Joe sat at the table eating supper--the supper Logan had left. Joe tensed and gave him a wary look. "I thought you were gone."

Logan pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'da thought you'd have gotten enough to eat by now." He eyed *his* steak.

Joe rubbed his swollen jaw. "Why aren't you on the train?"

"I don't have any money." He paused. "And I can't go anywhere looking like this." Logan pointed at his suit. "Besides, I don't know where she lives."

He snatched his roll off the plate, then glanced at Joe. "I'd also like to know more about Teddy." His stomach rumbled. Suddenly ravenous, Logan stared at the yet uneaten half of his supper. "You gonna eat all my steak?"

"Here." Joe shoved the plate toward him.

While Logan devoured the rest of his meal Joe told him about Elizabeth, the orphanage, and about Tess and Teddy. Joe also told him of the little boy's surgery.

"That's why she was so desperate to get the money," Logan said, heartsick because of what he'd put her through. "Why didn't she tell me? Maybe I could have helped."

"Any more help from you and she would have ended up in jail, too." Joe took a sip of his coffee. "She didn't tell you because she felt you had enough responsibilities without taking on two more. And

then there was her background. She believed you'd think less of her if you knew."

"You mean all that time she wouldn't marry me, that was the reason?" He shook his head. "I never heard of anything so silly."

"It wasn't silly to her. All her life she's been scorned because she was an orphan. She couldn't bear to have you feel that way about her, too."

Logan remained silent, remembering how mean he'd been to her when she'd arrived early. And other times when he thought she was being stuck-up. "Damn! I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to me again. But if I ever do convince her to take a chance on me..."

He gave Joe a speculative look. "If you work for the railroad, could you make them hurry up the paperwork so I could get that reward a little sooner? I can't very well go to Chicago lookin' like somethin' the dog dragged in."

In her small bedroom at Hannah's, Beth lifted the trunk lid and sorted through her belongings. Lifting the moccasins Rider had given her, she sighed, thinking of Devil's Hollow and the people she'd come to care for.

Logan would be on his way home by now, with his name cleared and able to go on with his life. She

closed her eyes and remembered the love they had shared. She swallowed against the ache. He would soon forget her. Now that he wasn't wanted by the law, he might even remarry. She told herself that was as it should be. She wanted him to be happy.

She had a life of her own to get on with. Two days after her train had pulled into Lakewood Station, Beth had made an application to adopt Teddy. The adoption hearing had been set for tomorrow. Now that Teddy was making such a rapid recovery and she didn't have to spend all of her time at the hospital, it was time to think of their future.

Hannah had been wonderful, but Beth knew she couldn't impose on her friend forever. In order to support herself and Teddy, she needed to get back to work. Using the reference Simon had managed to obtain for her from Devil's Hollow, she had applied for a teaching position in Whittington and had been accepted. She vowed that this time when she left Chicago, she wouldn't go alone. Teddy would go with her.

Beth removed her teaching certificate and other papers she might need for the hearing and put them in her satchel. Now she had that taken care of, she gazed down at her clothes.

The clean, but faded gray garment was practically threadbare and it was her best dress. She looked like a pauper. The board would never let her adopt Teddy if she went before them looking so bedraggled.

Her fingers went to the neck of her dress to touch the brooch. She dropped her hand. She'd

forgotten, she'd sent the pin to Hannah to sell. But since Hannah hadn't mentioned it, maybe the jewelry hadn't been worth anything after all. Beth left the bedroom and went into the parlor, where Hannah sat doing some mending.

Hannah glanced up. "Hello, dear. I've just put the kettle on, then we'll have some tea."

"Sounds good." Beth took a seat next to her. "Hannah, you remember the brooch I sent you? Did you sell it?"

"Oh, my." Hannah waved her hand. "I forgot to tell you. The catch was broken and I took it to the jewelers on the corner to have it repaired. It's still there. They said they might be able to find a buyer for it." Hannah drew Beth to her feet. "Instead of having a cup here, let's go check on your piece and have tea at that nice little shop around the corner. We can even stop by and see Teddy before we come home."

"I could use some exercise, and I would like to see Teddy. I'm nervous as a cat about the hearing tomorrow." Beth held out her skirt and gave a wistful sigh. "I do wish I had something decent to wear."

Hannah eyed her critically. "That gown will never do." She brightened. "Wait, I remember something. Someone ordered a dress from Mrs. Donitelli--she's the seamstress, you know. Anyway, they never picked it up. She tried to sell it to me the last time I was in there. Of course it was much too small, but with some alterations, it might do for you. Lovely piece of cloth. A soft lavender, edged in fine lace," she mused. "We'll stop by and look at it."

Beth shook her head. "I'm afraid I'll have to make do, dear. I really can't afford anything new."

"Nonsense." Hannah patted her hand. "It will be Teddy's and my gift to you. You have to make a good impression, you know. If you're dressed poorly, they might think you aren't able to care for the boy."

Beth bent forward and kissed the older lady's cheek. "Thank you."

When they stopped in front of the jewelers, the shop had a "closed" sign on the door. "Oh, well. We'll try again later," Hannah said, then she smiled. "Now let's go see the dress."

Beth discovered the dress had not been sold. Mrs. Donitelli was so glad to get rid of the garment, she offered it to them for a fraction of its worth. Although it was much too long, the rest of it required little alteration. They all agreed the lavender color was very becoming to Beth's skin and eyes. When the dressmaker promised she could have it early the next morning, Beth gave her a grateful hug.

Their shopping finished, she and Hannah went to the hospital.

When they walked into his room, Teddy gave them a mischievous smile. "Today I walked," he said. Alarmed, Beth glanced at the nurse. The woman shook her head. "Teddy?" Beth chided.

"Well, I almost walked," he said, peeping at her from under long lashes. "I walked in my mind and

I ran"--he sighed--"anyhow, I played ball with Joe and--"

"Darling, it's all right if you pretend," Beth assured him. "As long as you know it was only make-believe and not real."

"The doctor says I can walk real soon."

"I'm sure you will." She smoothed his hair. "Now, how about a game of checkers?"

They played until the little boy's eyelids began to droop, then she folded the checkerboard and put it away. She kissed him good night and tucked him into bed, remaining until his even breathing told her he was asleep. It won't be long now, sweetheart, she silently promised.

Beth tiptoed out of the room and joined Hannah, who had left earlier to gossip with the front-desk nurse. Beth greeted the nurse then turned to her friend. "Ready to go, dear?"

Hannah's blue eyes sparkled. "Yes. Let's get you home to bed. You are going to have a big day tomorrow." She grinned at the nurse. "A very big day indeed."

Logan and Joe peeked around the door at the end of the hospital corridor. "Coast is clear," Joe whispered.

"Whew! That was a close one," Logan said, wiping the perspiration off his forehead. "I thought we

would have to stay in that hot closet all night."

"Beth likes to spend as much time as she can with the boy," Joe said. "The nurse said the adoption hearing is tomorrow. I hope all goes well."

"Let's say good night to the tyke then head on back to the hotel."

Since he and Joe had arrived in town, they'd spent every moment possible with Teddy, with the nurse acting as a lookout to warn them of Elizabeth's arrival. To Logan's relief, he and Teddy had gotten along famously and the boy had been delighted when Logan mentioned he might become Teddy's new daddy. They had sworn Teddy to secrecy until Logan had a chance to broach the subject to Elizabeth.

Logan eased the door open to Teddy's room and stepped inside. "Aw, shucks. He's asleep." As he watched the child a strange emotion filled Logan's chest, making it hard for him to breathe. Noticing a small foot dangling over the edge of the bed, Logan tucked it back under the covers. "Sweet dreams, son." He brushed a gentle kiss on the boy's forehead and turned to leave the room.

"Good night, Daddy Logan," Teddy murmured sleepily. "Good night, Joe."

"Good night, Teddy," Joe said huskily, from the doorway, plainly touched by the little boy's words.

Logan blinked to clear the mist from his eyes and smiled. After one last fond glance, he followed Joe into the hall. "Did you hear him? He called me Daddy."

"I heard," Joe said. "You're a lucky man, Logan Winfield. And I know you'll be a good father."

"I do my damndest," Logan said, loving the child already. They smiled good night to the nurse then exited the building.

Gazing up into the inky black sky, Logan sighed. "Well, I think Teddy's ready to give me a chance. Now all I have to do is convince Lizzie."

Chapter 36

At the Tremont Hotel the next morning, Logan and Joe went downstairs to the restaurant to have breakfast. Nervous as a hog on thin ice, Logan gave Joe an anxious glance. "Do I look all right?" He wiped his boot toe on the back of his pant leg to remove a smudge of dust. He straightened his string tie and looked down at his new black suit.

"Fine as a preacher going to meeting," Joe said with a grin. "Are you sure you feel like eating?"

"Hell, yes. I'd never be able to handle anything like this on an empty stomach."

When they were shown to a table, Logan placed his new Stetson on a chair. Picking up the menu, he sighed. "I wish everything in this town didn't smell and taste like fish."

"That's because the city was built on a swamp. They even had to jack this hotel up out of the mud or it would have been buried to the second floor by now. I hear tell the old water tower is so full of fish you can catch your dinner and get a drink at the same time."

Logan snorted and gave him a skeptical look.

"It's true," Joe said. "The water has so many fish eggs in it that the cows that drink it have minnows in their milk." Joe leaned back in his chair. "Why, last night after you went to bed, I saw a man open a

bottle of champagne and a frog jumped out with the bubbles."

Logan chuckled. "Now, I sure don't believe that."

"I'll prove it." Joe snapped his fingers and called the waiter to their table. The man reluctantly verified Joe's story, then took their order for breakfast.

"That doesn't sound healthy to me," Logan said after the man left. "Why, a body might start growing gills." He poured his milk into a teaspoon so he could see what he was drinking. He took a sip. "Phew!" He shuddered and pushed the glass aside. He examined his eggs, giving them a suspicious sniff. "At least the eggs don't have fish in them." He made a silent vow to get Lizzie and Teddy out of this city before they all got sick.

After they finished their breakfast, Joe caught a cable car to the hospital to visit Teddy.

Logan bought a newspaper and took a hansom cab to Hannah's apartment. He had to know how Lizzie felt about him before he made too many plans.

Not wanting her to see him, he got out of the vehicle a block away and paid the driver. His heart pounding, he checked his watch and walked to the corner across the street. He leaned against a lamppost. The hearing was today. She should be leaving anytime. His eyes on the brownstone, he pretended to read the paper and waited.

Before long the apartment door opened and Beth stepped inside a waiting cab.

Afraid she would recognize him, Logan hid behind the sheet of newsprint. When he heard the clop, clop of a horse's hooves on the wooden street, he sneaked a peek and saw she was on her way.

He tucked the newspaper beneath his arm, then headed for Hannah's building. When he pounded on the door, a plump gray-haired lady answered his knock.

"My, my," she said, giving him an appraising look. "Logan Winfield, I presume. My, you are handsome and even bigger than I'd imagined." She smiled, meeting his gaze. "I'm Hannah Parker, but then you probably already know that. Well, come in, boy. Don't stand there letting flies in all day. Elizabeth isn't here. She's gone to the adoption hearing, you know. I hear you've been to the hospital to see Teddy. The nurse told me all about you," she confided. She pointed to the parlor. "Have a seat and I'll get you some tea."

Logan closed his gaping mouth. She'd said all of that and he hadn't even taken a breath. *Tea?* His stomach rolled. "Ma'am, about that tea..." he began, but she'd already disappeared.

He went into the parlor and frowned at the delicate slender-legged furniture. Picking the only piece that looked like it might hold him, he carefully lowered himself onto the couch. His eyes widened as his weight settled into the down-filled cushions. Another two inches and he'd be sitting on the floor. He peered over his knees and saw Hannah, tea tray in hand, come back into the room.

She set the tray down and lifted the pot. "Don't worry," she said, noticing his reluctance. "I get my

water in bottles." She wrinkled her nose. "I can't abide fish in my tea."

"In that case, I'll have some."

"Are you going to marry her?" She handed him a steaming cup.

"What?"

"Are you going to marry the girl? I do hope so, because all she's done since she's gotten back is mope and stare into space." Hannah settled herself in the chair across from him. "Besides, Theodore needs a father." She eyed him over her spectacles. "You do like children, I hope. I'm sure Beth would like to have lots of children. She's very good with them, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, are you?"

Logan went back over the conversation, wondering just which remark she was referring to.

"It just wouldn't do at all if you weren't going to marry her." Hannah frowned. "I like that Joe Johnson, but in spite of the fact that he is a minister, he doesn't seem like a marrying man to me."

Logan chuckled. *You don't know the half of it, lady.* Perched with his knees up to his earlobes, in the midst of the fragile furniture and knickknacks, he felt about as comfortable as a bear in a pigeon coop. He gulped his tea, then sensing Hannah was as anxious as he was about Elizabeth, he reached over and clasped her fluttering hand. "Hannah, don't worry. I love Elizabeth, and I certainly do intend to

marry her--if she'll have me."

"Oh, thank goodness." The old lady sighed in relief. "I've been so worried about what would happen to her and the boy."

Logan sat the tea cup down and extricated himself from the couch. "Now, if you will give me directions to that hearing, I think I'll take care of that matter right now."

When Hannah told him the board was meeting at the orphanage, Logan kissed her cheek and told her not to worry.

He left the apartment and waved down a passing cab. After giving the man directions to the orphanage, Logan leaned back in the leather seat and admired the scenery. Elated after his visit to Hannah, Logan found it hard not to grin. *Hannah said Lizzie loves me. Now, if I can only get her to admit it.*

When the horse-drawn vehicle drew up in front of a brick building, Logan shuddered. At the end of a crude boardwalk, the orphanage sat grim and forbidding, with not even a tree or bush to soften its harsh lines. Logan paid the driver and went inside.

Although the day was warm and sunny, the interior of the building was dark and cold as a tomb. He'd never seen a more depressing place. When he caught himself tiptoeing down the dark paneled hall, he wondered if the institution had the same effect on the children who lived there. Even though he'd

spotted several groups of children, there hadn't been a sound. Stunned by their silence, he decided it must have. How had his bright Lizzie ever endured it?

A wide-eyed little girl peeked around a doorway. Spying him, she quickly disappeared from sight.

Logan sighed. "Poor little kid is scared to death." It broke his heart that Elizabeth and Teddy could have been raised in such a place.

He followed the long hallway to its end. An open door revealed a meeting room where several stern-faced people sat behind a table. Opposite them, on one of two hard-backed oak benches, Elizabeth sat with her back to the entrance. The room was as gloomy as the rest of the place, without even a picture to relieve the starkness of its gray-plastered walls. It did, however, have a large Regulator clock, which whirred and bonged loudly as it reached the quarter hour.

Not wanting to intrude in the meeting, Logan stood out of sight in the hall and listened.

"Miss Eastgate, I'm sure you have the best intentions, but we cannot in good conscience permit the adoption," a thin-faced man said.

Logan stiffened.

"But why? I don't understand," Beth said. She got to her feet and held out a packet of envelopes. "I have shown you my teacher's certificate and a letter of recommendation from Devil's Hollow, my last position. You've seen a statement from Whittington, saying I have a position as teacher there as soon as

Teddy is able to travel." She held up several more papers. "I also have letters from people in the community verifying that I am of good character."

"That has nothing to do with it," the man said.

"Then what? Why won't you let me adopt him?" Her voice broke. "No one could possibly love Teddy as much as I do."

"We know all of that. And while I am sure you would make an excellent mother, there is a problem, my dear." The man removed his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. "You have no husband." He put them on and peered down at her. "It isn't deemed proper for a single woman to raise a child."

"But I'm a good person. I could do it."

"I'm afraid our decision is final." He looked at the rest of the board. "If there is nothing else...?" When they shook their heads, he gathered up his papers.

Seeing Elizabeth's shoulders slump in dejection, Logan could stand no more. Glaring at the people behind the desk, he stalked into the room. "Now wait just one damned minute."

Elizabeth whirled around. "Logan!"

"Who are you, sir?" the man with the glasses demanded. "And how dare you interrupt our meeting?"

"Young man, what is the meaning of this?" barked another member of the panel.

Logan flashed Elizabeth a reassuring smile, then he turned to the adoption board and scrutinized each of the five faces behind the table. "I heard your decision and it seems a shame. It appears to me the only objection you have to this lady is the fact that she's not married. If Miss Eastgate had a husband, would you approve the adoption?"

"Well, that would put a different light on the matter," the man with the glasses said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," said a thin-faced woman, glancing at the others.

"Would you?" Logan repeated, not intending to stand for any ifs, ands, and maybes.

The board members looked at each other and nodded.

Logan turned to Elizabeth.

"Logan, you don't know..."

He pointed at the board. "Stay put!"

He took Elizabeth's arm and led her into the hall. He gazed down at her. "I know everything."

She turned away.

He gripped her shoulders and made her face him. He gave her a gentle smile. "I don't claim to be the smartest man in the world. And God knows I'm not the richest or best looking, but darlin', I love you to distraction."

Her eyes filled with tears. "But there are things you don't know."

"If you mean the fact that you are an orphan, I think it made you a better, stronger person. And if you are referring to Teddy, well, he and I have already settled that." Logan smiled. "He thinks I would make a fine daddy."

She gazed at him in wonder. "He does?"

Logan nodded. He took her icy hands in his. "Now, how about you? Would you be willing to take a chance on a no-account backwoodsman?"

"I can't."

"Don't you love me?" he asked, hurt that she would refuse.

"No." She avoided his eyes.

Lizzie, you're a terrible liar. He tilted her head and made her meet his gaze. "Now tell me you don't love me," he demanded.

Tears filled her eyes and ran down her face. "Logan, you have enough responsibilities already. I can't burden you with two more."

"I guess that's my choice, isn't it?" he said, using his thumbs to gently wipe away her tears. "We may not have a lot of money, but tell me honestly, did you see any of the Winfields going hungry?"

"No," she admitted.

"Do you think I'd let you and Teddy starve?"

"Of course not!"

"Maybe you think I wouldn't be a good father," he said, frowning.

"You'd be a wonderful father."

"Then I guess we're back to the first question." He locked his eyes on hers. "Do you love me?"

"Yes, I love you," she finally admitted.

He let out a relieved sigh. "Then it's settled." Before she could voice any more objections, he slipped his arm around her and took her back into the meeting room. When she had taken her seat, he placed his hat on the bench beside her, then he sank to one knee. He took her hand and gazed deep into her pansy-soft, violet eyes. "Miss Eastgate, would you do me the honor of being my wife?"

A smile as bright as the sun after a rainstorm broke over her pink face. "Yes," she whispered.

"What did you say?" he asked, turning to the board.

"Yes," she repeated in a louder voice. "Yes, Mr. Winfield, I would be very proud to be your wife."

The adoption board clapped in unison. "It looks like she's got a husband." The senior member banged his gavel. "Adoption approved. Upon receipt of the wedding certificate, of course." He shook a finger at Beth. "You'd better marry that man. I wouldn't want to go through this again."

Logan slipped a protective arm around her shoulders and drew her close against his side. "Don't

worry. I don't intend to let her get away this time."

He picked up his hat and led a blushing Elizabeth out of the gloomy building. There on the board sidewalk, under a smoky Chicago sky, Logan waved his Stetson and let out an exuberant Rebel yell. "She's gonna marry me," he called to a trio of swooping pigeons. Then in full sight of the leaving adoption board and curious passersby, he drew Lizzie into his arms and kissed her till she swooned.

Chapter 37

Later that evening Elizabeth and Logan visited Teddy and told him the happy news. Then, leaving the excited youngster to get some sleep, Logan escorted Elizabeth back to Hannah's. When the cab pulled up in front of the brownstone house, Logan had the coachman circle the block. He'd waited so long to hold his precious Lizzie, he wasn't in any hurry to let her go.

He nuzzled her neck. The satiny surface beneath his lips was warm and spicy and sent his pulses racing. He closed his eyes, his blood running hot as he yearned to explore every inch of her exquisite softness. He slid his palm down her shoulder and cupped her full breast, his thumb circling her nipple until it pouted against the fabric. He was fumbling with the tiny buttons when the sound of a passing carriage reminded Logan of where he was and what he was doing.

Gritting his teeth, he let out a frustrated groan and refastened her dress. He shifted in the seat, his pants painfully tight. It was making him crazy to have her so near and not be able to love her as he wanted. "Can we get married tomorrow?" he asked in desperation.

"Logan!" Somewhat breathless, she ran a hand down his cheek and gave him a dreamy smile. "I want to get married as badly as you, but you don't have the license," she chided. "And besides, we

haven't even asked Joe to marry us yet."

"Joe Johnson is not going to marry us," Logan broke in. He'd waited too long to risk her getting away. Besides, knowing Joe's true vocation, he wanted to make sure this wedding was legal. He gazed down at her radiant face and gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"I thought Joe was your friend."

"He is my friend." Logan chuckled. "He's also a lot of other things, which he probably wouldn't care to have me mention." He took his fingertip and erased the frown from her brow. "Don't worry, he'll be there. I've asked him to be the best man." *But I'm not about to let him do the marrying.*

Asking the driver to circle the block one more time, Logan lifted Lizzie onto his lap. He cuddled her close, covering her face with hungry kisses. "So sweet I could just eat you up." His body aflame with thwarted need, he tucked a finger beneath her chin and gazed into her velvet eyes. "Seriously, darlin', when will you marry me? If I have to wait much longer, I'm going to die."

She smiled. "Give me two days. I'll enlist Hannah's help to make the preparations."

"It won't be anything big or fancy?" he said, fearing that would delay things even longer.

"Every girl wants a fancy wedding," she teased. "But I think a small ceremony in the hospital chapel will do just fine."

He gave his approval to the plan by giving her several long lingering kisses. They were both

trembling when he let her go. "Two days." He sighed in dismay. He glanced up and saw that the cab had stopped. "Now, before we disgrace ourselves in the back of this buggy, I think I'd better see you to the door."

The next day Logan and Joe made a trip to Stewart's Jewelry Store on State Street to pick out Elizabeth's wedding ring.

"May I suggest this, sir?" The clerk, who had introduced himself as John Stewart, held out a ring with a deep blue stone entwined with a filigreed network of vines and roses.

Logan held the ring up to the light. The stone shimmered, the deep indigo color the same rich shade as the mountain spring where she'd gone wading. Reminded of the special place where he'd claimed her sweet innocence, Logan grew warm with anticipation, knowing that soon she would be his wife. "Yes. It's perfect." He smiled and handed it to the jeweler.

"Excellent choice, sir. The sapphire is known as the stone of love in many ancient civilizations. I am sure your young lady will like it."

"She will love it," Joe agreed. He idly scanned another case. "Logan, look. That is just like Elizabeth's brooch," Joe said, pointing at an antique piece.

"Sure looks like it." Logan peered at the brooch. He grew thoughtful. She'd worn it every day in Devil's Hollow, but he hadn't seen her wear it lately. He glanced at Mr. Stewart. "Is that for sale?"

"Yes, it is. A lady brought it in to be repaired, then left it here for us to sell."

"Do you remember the lady's name?" Logan asked.

"Why, yes. I believe the owner is a Miss Eastgate."

Logan smiled at Joe. "It is Elizabeth's." He turned to the jeweler. "I'll take it, too."

The clerk took the currency Logan handed him and wrote up the sale. Then he put the wedding ring and brooch in separate boxes and tied them together with a velvet ribbon.

"There you go, Mr. Winfield. I hope you and Miss Eastgate will be very happy."

Logan winked at Joe. "I'm sure we will be."

It was her wedding day, and lifting the skirt of the heavy silk wedding dress, Elizabeth sighed dreamily and waltzed Hannah around her apartment. "I feel like a fairy princess." Because of the shortage of time, Mrs. Donitelli, the dressmaker, had suggested making over a gown that had belonged to one of her daughters. Beth quickly agreed; that way she could save most of the money Logan had given her for things they might need later.

Even though the gown was not new, it was by far the finest thing Beth had ever owned. Aged to a deep cream, it had a scooped neck accented by a bertha of point d'Argentan lace. The dressmaker had refashioned the bell-shaped skirt into a more slender line and made an apron of the same lace-trimmed fabric to drape the front. The rear of the drape was brought to a point in back and fastened with a large silk bow. The dress was simple yet elegant and set off Beth's slender figure to perfection.

"Dear, I'll never get your hair just so if you don't stand still," Hannah protested.

"All right." Beth sighed, once again coming to a halt in front of the cheval mirror. She raised a hand to smooth the wide lace collar. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed. "I can't believe it. By this afternoon I'll be Mrs. Logan Winfield." She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes, bringing Logan's beloved visage to mind. She would be his wife through good times and bad, share his bed, have his children. Joy so intense that it felt akin to pain flowed through her body.

In the small candlelit chapel, Elizabeth drifted through her wedding in a dreamy state of bliss. She was now married to Logan and soon the adoption could be finalized and Teddy would be their son. Encased in her husband's arms, she gazed warmly at their small circle of friends. She gave her husband a loving smile. And now she wasn't an orphan, she had a family.

After a small celebration with champagne and cake, Joe turned and clapped his hands. "Now, good people, it's time for the bride and groom to bid us adieu." He grinned at Teddy. "And it's time for my little friend to get some sleep."

Logan and Elizabeth told each of the well-wishers goodnight. Together they bent over Teddy. "Good night, son. We love you," they whispered.

"Good night, Mama. Good night, Daddy. Joe and Hannah are going to tuck me in tonight." His eyes sparkled. "Joe says when I am better, he is going to buy me a baseball."

Beth and Logan smiled at each other.

In a shower of rice and happy wishes, Logan escorted Beth to the hospital door. The coach and driver stood waiting.

When the coach set out for the hotel, Logan reached in his pocket and pulled out a small box. "This is for you."

Elizabeth removed the lid. "It's my brooch. Mr. Stewart said it had been sold. How--?"

"He did sell it--to me. I knew how much you valued it."

"It was the only link I had to my family. Somehow, wearing it made me feel like I was not so alone."

He nuzzled her temple. "You'll never be alone again."

Beth gazed into her husband's smoke-blue eyes. When she saw the love there, her heart raced into triple time. "Oh, Logan, I do love you so."

"Lizzie, my own precious, Lizzie." He drew her into his arms and covered her mouth in a breath-robbing kiss.

In her husband's arms Elizabeth blossomed like a flower opening to a warm spring sun. Knowing the depth and the beauty of their love, she had no desire for wealth, or jewels or gold. She had Logan and soon they would have Teddy. And back on the mountain, their other loved ones waited to welcome them home.

~ The End ~