

NOTHING LESS THAN LOVE

by

Janet Mills

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful people who have supported me and encouraged me to keep creating stories. Your acknowledgement of my love for writing is appreciated more than I can say.

Chapter 1

July 1886, Wyoming Territory

“They’re a-comin’ now!”

A welcome breeze blew strands of hair into Catherine Campbell’s face as she turned in the direction of the young boy’s shout. She lifted one hand to the brim of her straw hat to help ward off the harsh glare of the sun and watched as the cloud of sandy-brown dust grew near.

The trail boss led a long parade of bellowing Texas cattle into town, their hooves kicking up puffs of Wyoming dirt as they began the short trek down the main avenue.

A child darted out into the street, and all of Catherine’s senses snapped to attention. She was about to lift her skirts and vault over the railing along the boardwalk when a man on the other side of the street grabbed the little boy and yanked him back to safety.

Just as Catherine let out her breath in relief, a furious bull, tossing its head in rage, exploded through the crowd. Women screamed. Men shouted. Everyone scrambled to get out of the creature’s way. Catherine’s frantic glance sought an escape route, but she was jostled from behind. In one hot instant, she faced the huge beast, its

black eyes fear-glazed, its nostrils flared, flanks heaving. Powerful hooves marred the wooden planks of the boardwalk.

Catherine opened her mouth to scream, but terror clutched her throat. She stared in horrified silence, her body still as a tombstone as the animal lowered its massive head. The sharp tips at the ends of the bull's long, curved horns gleamed in the sun. Catherine squeezed her eyes shut and mouthed a fervent prayer.

Suddenly an arm encircled her ribs, lifted her in one fluid motion, and slammed her back against a rock-hard body, forcing the air from her lungs. She found herself breathless and astraddle a distinctly masculine thigh as her feet dangled off the side of a large black horse. The pandemonium faded as the animal jumped the railing and galloped away from the boardwalk.

"Easy now...easy..." The voice sounded low and gentle in Catherine's ear. Whether the cowboy wanted to soothe the horse or the woman anchored against him, she felt a peculiar comfort from his words and tone. Her racing heart began to slow, and she mouthed a silent prayer of thanks. As Catherine twisted to offer her earthly savior her gratitude, the horseman's grip on her shifted. Words jammed in her throat as his thumb brushed against the underside of her breast.

"Pardon me, miss, but you shouldn't be wigglin' around."

Catherine wasn't aware whether she slid or fell, but suddenly she was in her father's arms.

“My God, Catherine. Are you all right?” He lowered her to the ground, his weathered face lined with concern. “I tried to get to you, but I couldn’t make it though the crowd in time.”

“I’m f-fine,” she stammered, briskly smoothing down her skirts. Catherine turned back to the mounted cowboy. Deep blue eyes held her gaze for several ticks of the timepiece fastened to her blouse. They studied one another in silence. Regardless of the layer of trail dust covering him from head to toe, her rescuer had the brand of looks that would turn any woman’s head. He sat tall in the saddle, gracefully muscular and golden brown. His black mustache lifted as he smiled at her. Removing his gray Stetson, he revealed a crop of thick dark hair plastered by sweat to his head. A dingy red bandana ringed his neck.

“Thank you,” she murmured, lowering her gaze. It wasn’t right to stare at a man that way.

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

She sighed inwardly. He’d called her ‘miss’ only a moment earlier. Before he’d gotten a good look at her face.

“Catherine?” Her father’s voice rang with irritation.

She glanced at him. “This man—” she started.

“I know. I saw what he did.” Her father scowled at the cowboy. The curt nod he gave the younger man had to suffice as a thank you. He turned back to her. “Let’s get you home.”

She took a quick breath and gathered her scattered wits about her like a cape. Catherine allowed her father to lead her away as the remaining cow-

boys riding drag and the wrangler-driven remuda passed by. The crowd began to disperse.

"I'll be fine walking home on my own," she said as they neared the sheriff's office and town jail. He hesitated, concern evident in his hazel eyes. "You needn't worry, Father. I just got a little shook up."

She knew he watched her as she moved slowly down the boardwalk. Once she was out of his range of vision, Catherine changed her pace, hurrying home to the small white clapboard house on a corner lot at the north end of town. She let the screen door shut with a bang behind her and headed straight for her bedroom. Laying her hat aside, she poured fresh water from a blue and white porcelain pitcher into a matching basin on her dressing table, dampened a cloth, and brought it to her face.

"Oh, this unbearable heat!" she exclaimed aloud. And that man. She'd been struck almost mute by his dark and devilish good looks, while his touch—accidental, or not—had been shamefully thrilling. Catherine frowned at her counterpart in the dressing table mirror and shook the cowboy's image from her mind. Men like him came through Rocklin regularly. She'd do well to remember the danger of becoming too friendly.

Her frown deepened, causing more lines around her eyes. How many spinster schoolmistress jokes had she spawned today? An unmarried woman nearly forty years old, being swept into a strange man's arms—and practically fondled in public! She was no doubt the laughing-stock of Rocklin after such a debacle.

Coaxing dark hair tinted with gray back into a neat bun, Catherine scolded her reflection. She wished it didn't matter what others thought, but she knew she could lose her teaching certificate if she didn't live up to the school board's high code of moral conduct.

Lifting her chin a prideful notch, Catherine straightened the prim collar of her white cotton blouse and smoothed her skirts, then marched to the kitchen to begin preparing the sheriff's evening meal.

* * * *

Luke Matthews took his turn at the bathhouse, relaxing in the tepid water. The dirt rolled off his skin and stained the liquid surrounding him a ruddy brown. It was sure to leave a dark ring around the tub.

His clothes lay in a heap on the rough wooden floor, most of the items in desperate need of laundering: a pair of worn and faded copper-riveted denim trousers, a plaid flannel shirt, wool vest, leather batwing chaps with wrap-around leggings, red bandana, socks, shorts, and, at the top of the pile, his gray plainsman-style Stetson. A pair of custom-made brown leather boots with fancy stitching, begging for a good polishing, stood in tired attention nearby. His most prized possession, a Colt .45 six-shot revolver, lay within reaching distance. He trusted the young wrangler to take care of his saddle.

Luke grunted, thinking how some people were touting this as the last cattle drive on the Good-night-Loving Trail from Texas to Montana. If he

had his way there'd be one more, where he would lead his very own herd right smack into the heart of Wyoming Territory and start his own ranch, as he'd wanted ever since he'd joined his first drive at the age of sixteen. He'd spent that many years again trailing other men's cattle and working other men's spreads.

Taking a breath, he plunged his head into the water, coming back up with a shout. Damn, a real bath felt good! He'd even splurged and paid for fresh water this time. He grabbed a brick of soap and hummed a merry tune as he set to scrubbing his scalp and hair, working up a fine lather before lounging back against the edge of the tub to let his weary mind and body rest. After being dirty for nigh on two weeks there was no telling what foul creatures might have set up housekeeping in his hair. The strong-smelling soap would take care of them.

If only he'd been clean when he'd held that little lady.

Luke vividly recalled his sudden taste of fear and sense of responsibility when that bull charged hell-bent into the throng of spectators, though the pretty little thing he'd rescued had sure felt like heaven in his arms. She'd smelled like vanilla and fresh air. Though he hadn't meant to touch her the way he had, he'd been delighted to learn she wore no corset. No bustle either. The lady's round bottom had felt wonderfully soft on his leg. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never forget the feel of her.

The lazy grin that the woman's memory inspired turned to a frown as Luke recalled the man

with the sheriff's badge who'd claimed her, calling her Catherine. The lawman's scowl attested to his utter contempt for Luke, even when he'd clearly saved the woman from deadly harm. He had a healthy respect for the law, although he didn't always see eye-to-eye with the men sworn to uphold it.

Luke let out a gust of breath. He had wanted to say something—anything—to that pretty woman today, but her fetching pink blush coupled with her husband's dark glower had effectively tied Luke's tongue. Conversing with loose-skirted dance hall girls and rough, hard-drinking trail buddies came easy to him, but he was well out of practice with the more respectable sort. However, if he had the good fortune to cross paths with the lovely Catherine again, he'd try to make amends.

Even if she belonged to the sheriff.

He rinsed his head and body as best he could and stepped out of the tub to dry off on a coarse towel hanging on a hook above his war bag. The bag held all the items he valued. He pulled out a set of clean clothes and placed it aside. A quick inspection of the wooden box at the bottom of the bag produced a comb, a mouth organ, and a thin New Testament Bible he'd owned since boyhood. Tucked inside the book was a well-traveled picture of his family: his ma, pa, brothers, sisters, and himself as a much younger man. Underneath the Bible were a few more odds and ends such as a needle and some heavy thread, a couple of mismatched buttons, a pencil, and a few scraps of paper.

Buried beneath all that, safely hidden under a false bottom in the box, was a pouch containing all the money Luke had managed to save from his earnings as ranch hand and cattle drover. It wouldn't seem like much to many men, but to Luke it was a fortune. With it, he could buy several hundred head of cattle and a fair piece of land to graze them on.

He pulled on clean clothes. Tomorrow the little town of Rocklin would celebrate the Fourth of July, then the cattle drive would continue the long trek north into Montana. Tonight, he could live a little.

He shoved the idea of pretty married ladies out of his head. His mother had taught him better than that. Besides, he knew he was more suited to the kind of woman who took a man's money. He'd all but forgotten how to court a respectable female when every cow town he visited had a bonanza of practiced ladies-of-the-line. All he really wanted, he assured himself, was a good hot meal, a shot of fine whiskey, and a warm and willing woman.

Luke combed through his damp hair, repacked his war bag, then headed out into the gathering dusk.

* * * *

Catherine stepped out of the mercantile and onto the covered boardwalk, holding the prized book by Henry James she'd wanted for several years. She was pleased that the elderly couple who ran the store were finally ordering quality literature and not just the dime novels so popular with the younger women in town.

The early evening air felt refreshingly cool, but now wasn't the time to dawdle on her walk home. She could hear bawdy music being played on bar-room pianos, sultry female voices, men's boisterous laughter, inventive swearing. The clamor rose and fell as drunken men spilled out of the saloons and into the street. She narrowly missed a disgusting brown puddle of tobacco juice as she hurried around a corner.

Catherine bounced back from a sudden collision with a hard chest. Her first thought was that the man smelled clean. Her second was for the paper-wrapped bundle that she'd dropped. She bent to retrieve it.

"Allow me, ma'am."

She recognized that low, smooth voice. Her heart pounded. He'd called her ma'am again. The man crouched, setting a large cloth bag down beside him. He rescued Catherine's parcel before she could touch it. Glancing up, their faces whisper-close, her gaze immediately locked with his. The color of his eyes, even in the fading light, reminded her of the Wyoming sky. The cowboy winked at her, and the skin around his eyes crinkled appealingly. Catherine felt her entire body respond in a highly disturbing and undignified manner.

"It is 'ma'am,' isn't it?"

He grinned boyishly. Deep dimples appeared at either end of his mustache. A gust of wind tossed glossy black hair away from the chiseled features of his face. Strands of it curled intriguingly around his ears. The man's tanned cheeks and square, firm jaw were shaved smooth.

Sweet heaven, he cleaned up good.

"Surely that's no concern of yours." Catherine's brusque retort made the cowboy's dark eyebrows arch in surprise. "Thank you," she added hastily, her manners returning as an afterthought. "Again." She stood on unaccountably weak legs. "Good day." Thunderation! Normally prolific in conversation, she was suddenly having difficulty putting more than two words together.

He grabbed her arm. "Hold on there, little calico."

Catherine's glare traveled from his hand to his face. "Let me go."

He tilted his head. "I only wanted to apologize."

"Pardon me?"

"I'm sorry." He appeared sincerely contrite, though for what, Catherine was uncertain. He released her arm.

"There's no need for your apology. I'm very grateful... Oh!" Catherine covered her mouth with her hand. They weren't talking about the same thing at all, and here she was, thanking him!

"I didn't mean to, uh... What I mean is..." His gaze fastened on the bodice of Catherine's blouse as though he'd find the proper words inscribed there. She let out a squeal of indignation and instinctively crossed her arms over her chest. His rich baritone halted her before she could hurry off.

"Don't forget, I've got somethin' of yours."

He held her parcel out in front of her, but when she reached for it, he raised it high above her head. "Tell me what's inside and I'll give it back."

She gave him what she hoped was a haughty stare. "It's a book."

"A book?"

She nodded.

"What sort of book?"

"A book to *read*."

He seemed to take delight in her sarcasm. In return, he gifted her with another disarming grin. "What's the title?"

Catherine swatted the air above her head in a vain attempt to knock her purchase from his grasp. He rewarded her with a low, rumbling laugh.

"Hand me the book and let me by," she demanded with as much dignity as she could muster.

"As soon as you tell me what it's called." The man shrugged impressively broad shoulders. "I might want to borrow it."

Catherine almost snorted. Surely, the man was illiterate. Considering she'd need a stepladder to retrieve her book, however, she decided she'd play along.

"You don't think I can read," he said quietly, reading her mind, or at least her expression. His gaze narrowed on her. He lowered the book and ripped the paper wrapper from it. Glaring at Catherine, he read the title.

"The Portrait of a Lady."

Her heartbeat sped up. She'd managed to offend him without saying a word. What would he do now? She glanced around, but they were the only people on the side street.

"Will you read it to your husband?"

She snatched the book from his hand and hurried away before he could see the reaction his words caused. Obviously, the man assumed she was married because she looked so old. He'd studied her face long enough to see the lines of age etched around her eyes. Catherine felt ashamed for being attracted to a man who was surely ten or more years her junior.

She hoped she'd never see him again.

* * * *

Luke glanced down at the cards in his hand and suppressed another grin. He was going to clean up the table again this round. The pile of coins in front of him had grown at a healthy rate, and it was about time to quit.

The feeling of being watched nagged him. He kept his head slightly bowed but allowed his gaze to dart around the smoky room. The sheriff stood at the polished wooden bar, his posture erect and menacing as he stared in Luke's direction. Had the lawman spoken to his pretty wife since Luke's encounter with her on the boardwalk? Night had fallen, and the woman was no doubt at home, secure in the knowledge that her husband guarded their little town from the rough men who'd invaded it earlier in the day. Did children surround her? Luke could picture the scene but couldn't visualize the sheriff's place in it. The man seemed too stern and forbidding—and too old—to have such a lovely and spirited young wife.

The tension filling up the space between Luke and the bar grew like weeds on a neglected grave.

The lawman fingered the butt of his holstered pistol in mute threat.

A woman stepped into Luke's line of vision. She spoke to the sheriff, then turned and sauntered toward Luke's table. He smelled lavender water and sweat as she approached, a combination that normally had him thinking of squeaking bed-springs and earthy pleasures. The blonde's bold presence at Luke's elbow now just invoked distaste.

He played out his hand, collected his earnings, and started to rise from his chair. The adventuress quickly landed in his lap and wriggled her bottom. The view of her plump bosom encased in a tight bodice at eye level enticed him, but the kohl-black of her painted eyelashes and brows along with the odor of other men ruined her appeal. Her bawdy proposition earned laughter from the card players nearest Luke. He produced a lopsided grin as he declined her offer.

"Let me know if you change your mind later, sugar," she drawled before leaving his lap and moving on to her next potential customer.

She had a taker in no time. Luke watched the couple head for the open stairway.

He shook the image of entwined limbs and tangled sheets from his mind. If the prostitute had been auburn-haired and vanilla-scented, he might have been the one climbing the stairs with her.

"You missed yer chance, Matt. She wasn't half bad lookin'. You been with worse."

Luke turned to his trail buddy, Dexter. He'd just taken most of the man's money, but they both

knew Luke would give him the opportunity to win it back at a later date.

“She didn’t appeal to me, I guess,” Luke replied with a shrug.

“Since when does that matter?” Dex gave a bark of laughter. “I wager she’ll be back soon. Clark don’t have enough money left to pay her for much of her time. ‘Sides, she’ll probably offer you a discount.”

“Most of ‘em do,” another drover added to grunts of agreement from around the table.

Luke grinned good-naturedly and stood up. “A walk sounds better tonight.” He glanced toward the bar, but the sheriff was gone. Taking the last swallow of his whiskey, Luke nodded to his friends. “You boys enjoy yourselves.”

Chapter 2

A cannon blast rent the tranquil stillness of dawn. Catherine woke with a start. Windows rattled throughout the house, making her wonder how many glass panes had been broken in town this year. She'd never get accustomed to the way Rocklin ushered in the patriotic Fourth of July holiday. The only good coming from such a horrendous explosion was that the sound could be heard for miles. She hoped the signal would beckon ranch families to town for the celebration, bound to be a lively one.

Claire and Emmett Saunders arrived later in the morning to join Catherine on the boardwalk. She hugged Claire and exchanged tidbits of news with her friend before the parade began.

Children in festive outfits marched to the staccato beat of a drum. Several girls and boys located Catherine in the crowd and waved to her. She smiled and waved back. Wagons decorated in red, white, and blue bunting rolled past them, followed by fancy buggies carrying the most prominent citizens. The leaders of the Women's Christian Temperance Union walked proudly down the center of

the street. Cowboys mounted upon prancing horses brought up the rear of the procession.

Catherine's heart fluttered like the little flags on the bridle of the man's horse when she spotted her rescuer. She couldn't help but note how tall and handsome he looked in the saddle. He caught her gaze and smiled. She felt dazzled by the flash of straight white teeth. He nodded and tipped his hat in acknowledgment. Catherine turned quickly toward her companions, but neither Claire nor Emmett seemed to notice how the temperature had suddenly risen, or how bright the sun seemed to be at that instant.

They followed the stream of people headed for the festivities in the town park. Catherine and Claire laughed when Emmett took part in the children's footrace as he did every year. He clutched his gunnysack and stumbled for the finish line, intentionally sprawling flat on his belly in the grass just before he reached it. Claire's good-humored and fun-loving husband never ceased to entertain children and adults alike. Catherine could remember Emmett as a mischievous little boy who'd made her laugh with his antics. She'd been Claire's first teacher as well. Although she was much older than both of them, she counted Emmett and Claire Saunders as two of her best friends.

When the women's footrace was announced, Catherine found herself surrounded by schoolchildren clamoring for her to participate.

"You won it last year," her young neighbor Eddie Harris reminded her. "You're the fastest lady I know!"

“Please, Miss Campbell?” Sarah Beth Mitchell begged. “I’ll hold your shoes for you.”

“Go on, Cath,” Claire said with a laugh. “You don’t want to disappoint your adorable students.”

Emmett reappeared beside his red-haired wife, making faces at the children who delighted in returning them. “You have to defend your title,” he added.

Catherine looked around at all the young, eager faces. She couldn’t resist. “All right,” she conceded. “I’ll race one more time.”

“That’s what she said last year,” Emmett told his wife.

Catherine removed her shoes and stockings and handed them to Sarah Beth, who clutched the items like a hard-won prize. Catherine padded to the starting line, bolstered by a chorus of encouragement. She glanced at the finish line a hundred yards away where her father waited to declare the winner.

The nine women competing raised their skirts to show a scandalous amount of leg. The mayor fired his pistol and Catherine dashed off, determination racing through her veins. Near the end of the improvised track, a dark-haired man stepped out from behind her father. Catherine veered off-course to avoid a collision with the man who had invaded her dreams throughout the night. Her sudden movement caused a chain-reaction behind her, and several women ran headlong into the spectators. Like a domino effect, they went down, bringing anyone they encountered with them.

Catherine felt mortified and thoroughly humiliated when her father pronounced her the winner. Thank goodness, no one had been injured. While most of the townspeople seemed to regard the incident as highly amusing, a few did not.

"You cut me off!" Susan Applegate shouted after she managed to untangle herself from the chaotic dog-pile. She hadn't allowed Catherine to help her stand.

Apologizing for the umpteenth time, Catherine glanced from Susan's hopelessly grass-stained skirt to her anger-mottled face. "Someone blocked the way and I...I just reacted." She scanned the crowd, her gaze hesitating on every man wearing a gray Stetson, but the cowboy she searched for had vanished as surely as her enthusiasm for taking part in any more activities.

"Why on earth did you do that?" Claire asked as the two women found a shady place to sit and watch the baseball game scheduled next.

"One of those...those cowboys jumped out from behind Father, and I thought I would run into him," Catherine explained. She was ready to tell her friend everything that had happened since the previous afternoon, but Claire's attention diverted to her tall, brown-haired husband as he stepped up to bat. Emmett knocked the baseball over the heads of the competing team. Claire sprang up to cheer.

"Congratulations on your first-place finish."

Catherine whirled. The cowboy in question stood nearby, leaning against the trunk of a poplar tree. Olive-yellow leaves filled the air with a sweet,

resinous scent as Catherine reminded herself to breathe. She lifted her chin. His grin broadened.

"You didn't need to send your competitors into the crowd. I'd have caught you."

"That's what I was afraid of," she replied, turning back to the game. She tried to concentrate on the action before her, but she felt the man's steady gaze on her back. Despite the heat and her recent exertion, a shiver of awareness raced up her spine.

"Emmett got to third base!" Claire squealed, her freckled face animated with infectious excitement. The next batter hit a single that sent Emmett home, scoring the first point for the rancher's team.

When Claire's hurrahs died down, Catherine leaned close and whispered, "He's right behind us."

Claire turned. "Good afternoon, Sheriff Campbell," she said politely, throwing her friend a curious look.

The sheriff returned Claire's greeting, then studied Catherine. "Are you all right, dear? I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the race."

Catherine nodded, glancing past her father to the place where her rescuer-turned-tormenter had been.

"Someone said a man startled you." Her father's intent gaze searched Catherine's face. "It wouldn't have been the same man who—"

"I didn't see anyone," she lied in a rush, deftly switching the blame for the fiasco onto herself. "It was a stupid thing for me to do." She forced a bright smile. "I guess that's the last footrace for

me." *You're too old for such games anyway*, she chastised herself.

"Yes, well," the sheriff scanned the crowd while he spoke, "you'll let me know if anyone bothers you."

"Of course." A few hours later when Catherine and her guests went home to prepare for the evening festivities, she was keenly aware that she was indeed being bothered. Only it was a restless kind of discomfort she was feeling, and not anything she could pinpoint, much less discuss with her father.

* * * *

The late-day breeze began stirring and cooling the dry Fourth of July air. Catherine gave the bowl of potato salad one last stir and joined the Saunders' on the short walk back to the park. Her nose picked up the delectable aroma of a potluck supper already underway. Claire carried her own offering while Emmett toted a patchwork quilt and four table settings. They deposited their dishes at the serving tables and joined the line to fill their plates, and then found a vacant spot on the grass to spread the quilt.

"So, Cath," Claire began between bites of barbecued chicken. "What's going on with you? It's been so long since we've had a chance to really talk."

Catherine shrugged. "There's not much to tell."

"Did you watch the cattle come in yesterday?"

Catherine nodded.

"Emmett says it was the last drive. He would have liked to come to town yesterday, but we can

only stay one night, and I wanted to go to the dance.”

“And you always get your way,” Catherine said with a smile. Emmett would do nearly anything to please his wife. Catherine's gaze slid to the rancher. He was engrossed in conversation with another man on a nearby quilt. Catherine leaned closer to Claire. Quietly, she admitted, “There was a man who rode in with the cattle yesterday. He...well, he probably saved me from being gored by a bull.”

“Heavens to Betsy!” Claire shrieked. She put a hand over her mouth when Catherine shushed her. “Not much to tell?” she whispered loudly. “Ye gods, Catherine. You mean you were nearly killed?”

“I guess so, but—”

“Were you injured?”

“I wasn't hurt, I was just—”

Claire dropped her chicken wing onto her plate. “Wait a minute. What did he look like?”

“Look like?” Catherine repeated, confused. “Well, he was big and black with huge pointed horns and—”

“Not the blasted cow!”

“Oh.” Catherine felt her face bloom with heat again. “The man?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Yes, Teacher. The man.”

“He was...handsome.”

“And?”

“And later I bumped into him on the street. Literally.” Catherine smiled at the memory. The man's playful teasing the evening before had made

her feel as young as a schoolgirl. Her smile sagged when she remembered her nerve-jangling encounters with him today. He had managed to infiltrate nearly every waking thought since she'd first seem him.

"And he was the one who surprised you at the race?"

Catherine nodded.

Claire giggled as her friend recounted the event, but her tone changed when she asked, "Has your father run him out of town yet?"

Catherine shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I know that man's type and I don't want anything to do with him. He's too young and, besides, he'll be moving on by tomorrow anyway."

"I bet he'll be at the dance tonight."

"I hope not."

"Liar." Claire laughed knowingly.

"And just what has tickled your funny bone?" Emmett inquired, glancing at them. He smiled and reached over to wipe a spot of barbecue sauce from his wife's cheek. When he licked his finger, Catherine looked away, feeling like an interloper. Her thoughts focused on the couple beside her. They were so happy together. Emmett was a gentleman, loving and funny, and he had never had eyes for anyone but Claire.

Catherine gazed around the park. People considerably younger than she were paired up. She sighed again. Sometimes she felt as though she belonged in an old widow's home. But, she'd never been married, so she wouldn't belong there either. As her mind wandered through what-could-have-

been, a tall figure slowed in front of her. A strange, tingling feeling began in her stomach, churning with the spicy barbecue sauce. Before she looked up, she knew with an odd certainty who would be standing there. His eyes collided with hers. As he moved on with a full plate, he tapped a spot on his chin just below his bottom lip, and grinned mischievously, those dimples of his showing at the ends of his mustache.

Catherine raised a finger to find a speck of dark sauce right where he'd indicated. Before a new blast of embarrassment could overtake her, the man disappeared again like a fleeting shadow.

"Cath, what is it?" Claire said. "Are you sick?"

"No, I just had a bit of sauce on my face."

"I guess we're not eating like proper ladies, are we?"

"Ladies and gentlemen." Mayor Selby cleared his throat, as he stood framed by the supporting beams of the newly built gazebo in the center of the park. Catherine braced herself for another of the local politician's lengthy speeches.

"The great territory of Wyoming is experiencing many changes through our esteemed governor Francis E. Warren. As I speak, plans are being made to build a capitol building in Cheyenne, a university in Laramie, and an insane asylum in Evanston. Yes, we are progressing toward statehood!" Townspeople cheered.

"We will soon have a new water commissioner assigned to our area to help settle all water rights disputes. Railroad-grant land will be subject to taxation just as any other land." Ranchers crossed

their arms over their chests and muttered to each other. The assessment rolls would spiral with such a law.

The mayor continued his oration in a dull monotone. Catherine noticed children and young people wandering off to engage in more interesting activities and found herself wanting to do the same.

“Again, on behalf of the citizens of Rocklin, Wyoming,” Selby finally concluded, “I’d like to extend a warm welcome to trail boss Jack Briscoe and his fine crew. Have a good time tonight, enjoy the dance and the fireworks, but be prepared to visit with Sheriff Campbell if you overindulge!”

Mayor Selby gestured toward Catherine's father, who nodded good-naturedly. The lawman's gaze touched many people in the audience, and then narrowed at a point beyond his daughter. Catherine glanced in that direction to see the cowboy sitting with a group of men several yards away. She answered his smile with a quick turn of her head.

Catherine handed her father a plate a few moments later when he appeared at the Saunders' quilt.

“Catherine, dear, you’ve barely touched your supper.”

She smiled weakly. “I guess my eyes were bigger than my appetite.”

“Hmm. Well, I thought I’d walk you home after you’ve finished eating,” he said loudly. “We haven’t spent much time together today.”

Claire jumped into the conversation. "Sheriff," she said, "Catherine was planning on attending the dance and fireworks tonight with Emmett and me, weren't you, Cath?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Of course she is," Emmett chimed in. "Claire and I will keep tabs on her this evening, and I'll have both gals home by daybreak!"

Few people cared to argue with Emmett. Catherine's father gave a rare chuckle. "Well then, you all have fun, and I'll catch up to you later."

* * * *

Bales of hay lined the interior of Ronald Jessup's new barn. Apple cider and beer flowed freely. Children darted in and out of the merry throng while adolescent boys sat in the hayloft, exchanging flirtations with giggling young women below.

Catherine stood near Claire and Emmett, watching the fiddlers warm up. People began to move back from the middle of the floor, making way for the first couples out. On the other side of the large room, the man whose image had possessed Catherine's imagination all day stood with a beer in his hand, talking to several other cowboys. She decided to take a better look at the man who could cause her stomach to flutter like so many hummingbirds' wings.

As couples glided back and forth in front of her, Catherine studied him, mesmerized momentarily by dark eyebrows that bounced as he spoke. His blue and white-checkered shirt pulled tautly across a broad chest. His boots were brown and

clean beneath faded denim pants that hugged the lower half of his body.

When she finished her bold appraisal, she glanced back up, pausing at the wisps of black hair showing at the man's throat where the top two buttons of his shirt were undone.

Her gaze fused with his, and once again, she fell victim to the pull of his incredibly blue eyes. She must have held her breath a bit too long, because the room began to tilt. She felt for the wall behind her and leaned against it.

"Cath? Have you heard anything we've said?"

Catherine blinked, and the room came back into focus. She turned toward her friend. "I'm sorry, Claire. I was...just watching the dancers." She nodded a greeting at Samuel Applegate, who stood beside Emmett. Samuel taught the older children during the fall and spring months, while Catherine instructed the younger children in the summer. Susan appeared at her brother's elbow to regard Catherine coolly.

"How is the summer term coming, Miss Campbell?" Samuel asked.

"Just fine, thank you." Catherine hoped the conversation wouldn't turn into a discussion of their widely different teaching styles. "The children are enjoying the lessons and our various outings."

He frowned. "I trust you are teaching them the basics."

"Certainly. We spend the morning working in the classroom, then I take them outside to work in the school garden and—"

“I shudder to think what those children will be like when they come to me.”

Catherine paused and took a breath. Samuel Applegate shuddered often, but she was accustomed to defending her teaching practices. She believed a well-rounded education included more than just book learning.

“They will be eager to learn all you can teach them,” she countered diplomatically.

“But will they be able to sit still?”

Catherine’s good manners were beginning to slip. “I’m certain they will soon discover your expectations.” And if the children didn’t, she knew they would be severely punished. Samuel wielded a birch rod like Emmett swung a baseball bat. The other teacher’s idea of discipline was to inflict grave consequences for even the slightest transgressions. Tardy pupils were made to stay outside until recess, even on the coldest days. Some were dealt the sentence of balancing on a small block of wood in one corner of the classroom. If the unlucky child fell off, the punishment increased. Students caught fighting would be ordered to “lay on and cut jackets.” If they didn’t flog one another hard enough, Master Applegate would demonstrate.

Catherine abhorred his tactics but found they met with widespread approval among the majority of parents in Rocklin. She always warned her students what to expect when they left her charge, yet she constantly worried about her young graduates.

The Applegates’ wandered off, and Catherine sighed with relief.

Claire leaned toward her to whisper, "Are you sure he's better than the teacher who laid his six-shooter on the desk the first day of school and informed the children there'd be no misbehaving?"

Catherine shook her head. "I'm beginning to wonder." She glanced back across the room to the spot where the cowboy had stood, but he was gone. Despite her disappointment, she had to smile. She'd grown somewhat accustomed to his hasty departures. Perhaps she had conjured him up and he didn't really exist outside her fantasies.

"Miss?"

Good lord, she could even imagine his voice and the absurdity of him calling her Miss. She'd do well to head home while her legs still worked.

"Would you care to dance?"

She turned to catch the man's twinkling gaze. His open and friendly smile coaxed an answering one from her. He held his hat against his chest like a true gentleman.

Catherine opened her mouth to speak. Two firm hands settled on her shoulders, and her father's authoritative growl from behind her cut off any real reply she might have attempted.

"My daughter does not dance with strangers."

Undaunted, the cowboy continued, dividing his glance between father and daughter. "Then allow me to introduce myself. I'm Luke Matthews, born and raised in Nebraska. Been workin' cattle for a number of years now, though some say the drives won't last much longer 'cause of the railroad's progress and all. I think that's a pure shame, but I'm

glad to be passin' through your pretty little town during our country's celebration of independence."

Catherine's father scowled but begrudgingly held out his hand to shake Luke's. "Sheriff Harlan Campbell," he said.

Claire nudged Catherine forward. "And this is Catherine Campbell, who'd love to dance."

"Miss Campbell?" Luke held out his arm.

Catherine hesitated, but before her father could protest again, Luke commandeered her elbow and propelled her into the moving crowd on the dance floor.

With her partner's expert guidance, Catherine found herself moving gracefully to the lively music, as free as cottonwood seeds on the summer wind. Strong hands across her back sent flickers of hot and cold over her skin.

"The lady wears a bustle tonight," Luke said, his voice low enough that only she could hear it. "And a lovely gown in my favorite color."

Catherine glanced down at her simple apricot dress. It could hardly be considered a fancy gown, yet the man's appreciative remarks made her feel young and nearly giddy. She had to remind herself who—and where—she was.

"Your father's watchin' us."

She nodded. "I know. He always watches me."

"I thought he was your husband, but I asked around and learned different. I guess it's my lucky day."

Catherine stiffened. Did she look that old? And just whom had he asked?

"I know a lot of older men marry pretty young women," Luke went on, "but I'm glad that isn't the case here."

She didn't know if he was complimenting her or suggesting that no one would consider her pretty...or young.

The sounds of music and laughter faded. Catherine toyed with the idea of giving Luke Matthews a good shove. If doing so wouldn't bring more attention to her than she already had, she might well have done it. Instead she smiled at Sarah Beth's parents as they danced past, and promised herself she'd go home as soon as the fiddlers stopped playing.

"I was afraid you were fallin' off my horse yesterday, Miss Campbell. I had to grab you."

"I think my father and the entire town witnessed how you...grabbed me."

"I do apologize."

She hesitated, avoiding his gaze. "Apology accepted."

"Good."

When the music stopped, Catherine stepped back with relief. "Thank you, Mr. Matthews." She gave him a brief smile and turned toward the familiar safety of family and friends.

Luke caught her wrist. "Not so fast, Miss Campbell. We haven't had us a full dance yet." The fiddlers struck up their next tune and he whisked Catherine across the floor once again. When they passed Claire and Emmett dancing together, her friend winked and grinned.

Another couple bumped them. Catherine felt Luke's body tense. She stole a glance at her dance partner and watched the handsome features of his face cloud. His eyes darkened, narrowing to slits as his mouth tightened into a grim, hard line. His breathing quickened. Yet it didn't seem like anger exactly. More like...fear. Was it her father he was staring at so intently? She glanced around but couldn't see him in the crowd. What in the world had come over Luke Matthews?

He looked down at her and she met his gaze. He offered her a worried half-smile. Uncertain what to make of what had just happened, Catherine smiled back and let him lead her around the floor.

"Sorry," he said, pulling her closer, his breath near her cheek. "I thought I saw someone."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied.

She got the feeling it mattered, and greatly, to him. When he tensed again, she glanced up sharply, ready to bolt if she saw the same haunted expression on his face. This time he was glaring down at a young man standing near them.

"May I cut in?"

Catherine smiled at Brandon Dempsey.

"No," Luke answered, pulling her into the middle of the floor.

"That was incredibly rude, Mr. Matthews."

He spun her around and caught her easily in his arms. "Don't tell me you're interested in that young pup."

“Of course not. Brandon used to be a student of mine. He’s a sweet boy and you shouldn’t have insulted him like that.”

“Well then, next time you see him, you can apologize for me.”

“I will do no such thing.”

Luke chuckled.

Before Catherine could ask him what was so funny, the music ended and Luke maneuvered her out the open doors and into the blessedly cool evening air.

Chapter 3

“Aw, that feels good now, doesn’t it, Miss Campbell?” The light spilling out of Jessup’s barn reflected in Luke’s eyes as he smiled down at her.

Catherine nodded, focusing her attention on a shiny silver button on his shirt. It had been a long time since she’d been taken outside during a dance. Memories best left forgotten began to nudge their way back into her head. She shook them aside.

“Cat got your tongue, little Cat?”

She glanced up quickly. “My name is Catherine, Mr. Matthews, but I’ll thank you to call me Miss Campbell.”

“Yes, of course. Where are my manners?” He gave her a boyish grin. “I didn’t see you after the ball game today, Miss Campbell. I caught the greased pig.”

Catherine nearly choked on an unflattering retort. “How proud you must be,” she replied instead. Inside the barn, her favorite square dance was beginning. She was sure she’d find Brandon Dempsey or some other former student to partner with her.

*“Four hands up and here we go,
Around and around and a dose-y-doe
Chicken in a bread-tray pickin’ up the dough,
One more change and on we go!”*

“I’m going to go back inside now, Mr. Matthews.”

“Aw, the fireworks will be startin’ soon,” he said. “We could find ourselves a good spot to sit and watch before everyone else comes out.” He smiled at her. “Unless you’d rather not be seen with me.” He shrugged. “What would folks say?”

It unnerved her how well he could gauge her thoughts. Words rushed from her mouth. “Do you think I wouldn’t want to be seen with a cowboy, or is it that you’re so much younger than me?”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. Good evening, Mr. Matthews.”

She half expected him to grab her arm again, but he didn’t. She turned and took a step in the direction of the barn.

“Catherine.”

Her name sounded so good when he said it like that, low and husky as though they knew one another well. She stopped.

“You’re not any older than I am.”

Catherine rounded enough to give him a cold glance. “Save your flattery for someone who hasn’t heard it a hundred times before.”

“I’m not tryin’ to flatter you, Miss Campbell. I’m past my thirtieth birthday, and if you’re any older than that, I need to get my eyes checked.”

She nearly smiled. "I do believe you need glasses."

"Thirty-one," he said.

"Oh, please."

"Thirty-two?"

She shook her head. He was either half-blind or desperate for female companionship. A man who looked like Luke Matthews, however, would not be starving for feminine attention. He probably received plenty of it everywhere he went.

"Thirty-three then, but not one day beyond it."

It was almost funny how hard he was trying to win her affections. Part of her wanted to laugh while the other could so easily cry. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Matthews. I'm sure there are a number of young women who would enjoy your company for the fireworks tonight."

"The young woman I'm askin' is mighty stubborn." Humor lurked in his tone. "I give you my word I won't lead you into the shadows, Miss Campbell. We'll stay right where everyone can see us, includin' the sheriff." She hesitated. "Here he comes now."

Catherine spun on her heel to see her father coming out of the barn.

"A woman of thirty-three shouldn't need to worry about her daddy."

Anger and humiliation forced her around to face Luke one last time. "I'm thirty-nine. Now leave me alone."

* * * *

Claire plopped into a chair in Catherine's kitchen and stifled a yawn as she accepted a cup of

coffee. The couple had stayed out late while Catherine had lain awake for hours listening to the sounds of festivities drifting through her bedroom window.

“Your father looked upset when you left with him last night, Cath. What happened with you and your cowboy?”

“He’s not my cowboy,” Catherine clarified.

“Who’s not your cowboy?” Emmett walked into the room. “And what’s that delicious smell? I’m starvin’!” He bent to plant a quick kiss on his wife’s forehead.

The front screen door closed with a bang as Harlan came into the house. The four of them sat down to the hearty breakfast Catherine had prepared, though she could eat little of it herself.

“That’s the last we’ll see of that sort,” her father said around a mouthful of egg.

“What sort is that, Sheriff?” Claire asked.

Catherine cringed. Her friend had never been timid where Harlan was concerned.

“The drovers. It’s high time the railroad moved cattle through Wyoming. That feeder line will change the way we do business around here. Now we won’t have to put up with men the likes of what we’ve seen the last couple of days.” He looked pointedly at Catherine.

“I was impressed with the manners of many of those men,” Claire went on. “Especially Luke Matthews. Emmett, don’t you think Mr. Matthews was polite?”

“Catherine’s cowboy? Why, sure.”

Harlan's fork hit his plate. Catherine jumped and shot her friend a quelling look.

"Father, there's nothing to get alarmed about. I told you last night that Mr. Matthews was a gentleman and treated me with respect. Besides, as you said, they're gone."

"Well, they haven't left just yet," Harlan grumbled. "Jack Briscoe got as pie-eyed as his crew last night, and they're all sleepin' it off. I hope they'll be gone by noon, and good riddance."

The remainder of the meal passed in silence. Catherine was relieved when her father finally left the house.

"Go uphold peace and justice in Rocklin and let your daughter live her own life," Claire said once he was out of earshot.

"Now, darlin'..." Emmett began.

"It's ridiculous how he treats Catherine," Claire fumed. "She's not his baby girl anymore."

"Claire," Catherine interjected, "I appreciate your concern, but you needn't continue to worry about me. Father and I get along just fine...most of the time."

"That's just it!" Claire exclaimed. "You seem content to spend your days teaching other people's children and keeping house for your father."

Her friend's words hit their mark. "Did you come to town to visit or just to rile me up, Claire Saunders?"

"Did I rile you up? Well, thank goodness!"

"If our children are born with red hair like their mother..." Emmett began.

Catherine gasped and grabbed her friend's hand. "Are you pregnant?" When Claire nodded, Catherine pulled her out of her chair and hugged her. "You're only getting away with offending me because you're expecting and because you're my dearest friend."

"I don't mean to offend you, Cath, I just want you to be happy."

"I am, Claire. I love my students and I love teaching. My father needs me and—"

"Don't get me back on the subject of your father, Cath."

A short time later, they took the Saunders' wagon into town. Emmett left to pick up ranch supplies while Catherine helped Claire shop for items she would need until their next trip into Rocklin. Too soon, it was time for the Saunders to head home.

"You'll come to stay with us in August after the summer term, won't you, Cath?" Catherine nodded, giving her friend a final hug. "I'll be looking forward to your nagging."

She waved as her friends and their full wagon rumbled down the road and out of sight. She headed back to the kitchen, donning a white apron to start afternoon chores. When a knock sounded at the front screen door, she assumed it was the Saunders' back to claim something they'd forgotten.

"Come in!" Catherine called.

The door opened and shut, then heavy footfalls approached the kitchen.

"Did you leave something, Emmett?"

“Why, no, Miss Campbell.”

Catherine whirled from her position at the stove. Luke Matthews stood just inside the kitchen doorway, hat in hand. She swallowed a shout of alarm and placed one hand over her thundering heart. “You frightened me.”

“Pardon me, Miss Campbell. You said to come in.”

“I thought you were someone else.”

He nodded, then gave her one of his wide grins. Blast the man and his dimples. He was too handsome by half, and she needed to send him on his way. Leaning back slightly, he glanced down the hallway, and then looked at her again.

“Your daddy home?”

“You’re here to see my father?”

“Nope.”

Catherine wiped her hands on her apron as silence wrapped around them. “Then you’re here to see me.”

“Yep.” He chuckled. “Boss has the fever, so to speak. He wanted another day of rest. And one of our men was shot last night.”

Catherine gasped. Her father hadn’t mentioned a shooting.

Luke shrugged. “Got drunk and put a bullet through his own foot, but the doc says he’ll walk on it in a month or two.”

“Well, thank goodness it was a minor wound.”

“He was lucky, I reckon.” Luke played with the brim of his hat. “I came by to invite you on a ride along the Platte, Miss Campbell. I hear there’s some cool, shady spots there this time of day.”

Catherine looked out the window to see a pair of horses tethered at her gate. "That wouldn't be proper without a chaperone."

He cocked his head and regarded her. "That might be true if we were both younguns."

"I teach younguns," Catherine said. "I can't be seen alone with a man."

"You won't be alone if you're with me," he said with a smile, "and besides, no one needs to see us."

"You don't understand. I—"

"Sure I do. But we're both adults. I can behave like a gentleman and treat you like the fine lady you are."

She could hardly believe she was considering his invitation. But it was hot, and the idea of sitting in the shade near the river was a tempting one.

"Well?" His dark eyebrows rose in playful challenge. "Need to ask your daddy first?"

Catherine felt indignation pulse in her cheeks. "I make my own decisions, Mr. Matthews. And I will go for a ride. Just let me get my hat." She marched past him and down the hall to her room. The deep rumbling sound of the cowboy's chuckle followed her, and she almost changed her mind. She gave her door a good kick and it closed with a bang. Ask her daddy, indeed!

She checked her attire. Her yellow cotton skirt wouldn't do at all. She removed her apron, skirt, and blouse, and then changed into a blue divided skirt appropriate for riding and a white long-sleeved blouse with a high stovepipe collar to protect her from the sun. She slipped off her shoes and donned a pair of riding boots, re-pinned her

long hair into a tight chignon, and adjusted a lightweight straw hat onto her head, securing it under her chin with a brightly colored scarf.

“What harm could a little ride do?” she asked her reflection as she studied herself in the mirror.

She returned to an empty kitchen. A whistled tune drew her back into the hall and out the front door, where Luke waited on the porch, whittling a stick with a small pocketknife. He glanced at her and nodded in approval. She refused his offer to help her onto the smaller of the two horses, but sensed his smile as she placed one booted foot in the left stirrup and grasped the saddle horn to pull herself onto the horse’s back.

The two horses trotted next to one another for a while, their hoof beats raising dust and providing the only sound for the time it took to leave Rocklin behind. Catherine was glad her house was on the outskirts of town. She didn’t think anyone had witnessed her departure. When her leg bumped against Luke’s, she urged her mount ahead.

He caught up and grinned over at her. “Wanna race?” he said in a drawl he’d probably picked up in Texas.

Catherine nudged her mount in the flanks and took off before she could worry over the consequences of racing a horse she’d ridden for less than fifteen minutes. She heard Luke shout something that sounded like “This lady means business, boy!” and she wanted to laugh out loud. Determined to beat him, she headed west at a fast clip, aiming for the trees lining the river.

A war whoop sounded close behind her, and she urged her horse to gallop even faster. She'd make Luke Matthews eat her dust, no matter how much her body would hate her tomorrow. When she dared to glance back at her competition, her hat flew off her head to bounce on her shoulders. Sections of hair sprang from the bun on her head and blew around her in reckless abandon. She hadn't ridden like this in years, and though she'd surely pay for it with plenty of aches and pains later, she was having too much fun to stop now.

Luke shouted again, drawing alongside her. The wind tousled his dark hair as the cord of his Stetson ringed his throat. "Whoa already!" he yelled. "I give up. You win." He reached over and caught her horse's reins. Catherine wouldn't admit to him that she was grateful to slow down.

"As much as I like watchin' you bounce around in that saddle, Miss Campbell, we better quit before we wear out the horses."

Catherine stopped her mount when they reached a shady area near the convergence of the Platte River and Running Bear Creek. She turned to Luke. "Did you let me win?"

"Nope. You beat me fair and square. I'm no match for a rider like you."

Catherine nearly snorted in disbelief. She reached up to smooth her hair back into some kind of order.

"Leave it, please," Luke requested gently. "It looks real nice that way."

She couldn't help but smile. Perhaps he hadn't noticed the gray. Quickly, she placed her hat back

on her head. The man made her feel a bit reckless and wild...and young. When her sense of decorum threatened to ruin her high spirits, she shoved it aside. Nothing was going to mar the wonderful feeling she had at this moment. She would not think of her students or the school board...or her father.

Catherine slid off her horse before Luke could dismount and help her. He regarded her silently for a long moment after he hobbled the animals near the edge of the water.

“Don’t worry about other people’s opinions, little Cat,” he finally said, effectively reading her thoughts. She didn’t correct him or insist he use her formal name.

“Thirsty?” he asked.

Catherine nodded. They walked upstream from the horses and knelt to drink cool river water by the handful. Luke walked off for a moment and returned with a blanket and a small paper-wrapped package that he must have carried in a saddlebag.

“I asked Mizz Thompson at the café to fix up a little picnic. I’m not guaranteein’ what condition it’s in now after that wild ride you took us on.” He winked at her, and Catherine could only hope he hadn’t told Eva whose company he’d planned to share. Her father stopped by the café at least once a day.

Loosening the scarf from beneath her chin, Catherine sat down on the blanket Luke spread beneath a tall cottonwood. He settled next to her and began to unwrap what vaguely resembled two roast beef sandwiches, handing one to her. He

chuckled. "There's a squished chocolate dessert in here too, if you're interested."

She laughed softly, recognizing and appreciating Luke's attempt at light chatter. She began to relax in the unexpected gentleness of his company, though her insides still roiled from their ride and her nervousness at being miles from home in the sole presence of a man she'd known such a short time.

"What part of Nebraska are you from?" she asked him.

"You remembered." A grin split his face. "I lived near Omaha, but I've been a lot of places since I left home."

"Do you have family back there?"

He nodded, chewing a bite of sandwich and swallowing before he spoke again. The man had better manners than many people Catherine knew.

"A whole bunch of kin. There's my ma, my pa, my sisters and brothers..." His voice trailed off for a moment, then he shook his head as if clearing away an unwanted image. "Aunts, uncles, cousins," he continued. "I even have a couple of little nieces and nephews, although they aren't so little anymore. My oldest brother, Caleb, has taken over most of the work on the farm."

"Your family sounds wonderful," Catherine said. "I don't know any of my relatives. They all live back East. My mother's folks lived in Missouri until they passed away, but I never met them." She saw the silent question in Luke's eyes. "Mother died twenty years ago."

"I'm sorry, Cat." He spoke the nickname softly, like an endearment, and again she didn't object. For this one afternoon, before he rode away forever, she would enjoy the attention.

"Tell me what a cattle drive is like," she suggested, changing the subject.

"You really want to know?" He posed the question as though no one had ever asked him about his work. He looked genuinely pleased when she nodded.

"Well, you learn a lot about the outdoors, about animals, and stars—"

"Stars?"

"A cowboy spends a lot of time layin' on his back in the dark. But what's more important is you'll never get lost if you know the night sky." Luke put his sandwich down and faced her. "When it's time to break camp for the night, the cook points the chuck wagon toward Polaris, the North Star, so the boss can get his bearings in the mornin'."

"You must have to get up awfully early."

"It feels like I never get enough sleep." He chuckled ruefully. "My first trail boss told me to quit my bellyachin', 'cause once we reached Montana I could sleep the whole winter if I wanted to."

"Did you?"

"Nah." He grinned. "But I bet I slept for two whole days without movin' once."

Catherine smiled. She liked the sound of Luke's voice. She'd never traveled, and the idea fascinated her. "Go on, please. It's very interesting."

His eyes probed hers for a moment. "You sure?" At her nod, he continued. "The longhorns are real wild—well, heck, you know that."

Catherine's memory of her close encounter with the bull would not fade anytime soon.

"There used to be millions of 'em roamin' Texas. Many of the men who raised 'em went east to fight in the war. When they returned, they found the cattle herds had swelled clean out of control. The landowners had to do somethin'. The railroad came to Kansas, and men started drivin' huge herds up there to be shipped back east for slaughter. Others drove them up here and into Montana and Dakota to sell as brood stock."

Luke's expression became wistful. "That's what I'm goin' to do someday, Miss Catherine Campbell. I'm goin' to have my own spread and I'm goin' to drive my own herd right onto it."

She smiled. "I do believe you will, Mr. Matthews."

"My friends call me Matt."

She tilted her head. Were they friends? She already knew she couldn't think of him as anyone but Luke. She'd repeated that name too often in her mind since he'd introduced himself.

"If it's all right, I'd rather call you...Luke."

There. She'd said it out loud.

His smile warmed her like a brandy on a cold winter day. "Okay," he agreed, "but only because you're special."

Catherine smiled back. "Tell me more."

"You're real pretty too. You have the silkiest-lookin' hair I've ever seen and—"

“I meant about your job.”

He let out a crack of laughter. Catherine laughed with him, although her cheeks felt hotter than a Fourth of July rocket.

“What do you want to know?”

She thought a moment. “Do you really sing to cattle?”

“Yep, though a cowboy sings for himself just as much. It helps a man on watch feel, well, less lonely, I reckon. The cattle seem to like it, even when I’m off-key.” His cheeks dimpled.

If Catherine could muster a bit more nerve, she’d ask him to sing her one of his songs.

“It settles ‘em down. About midnight some of ‘em get up and wander a bit, like they’re tryin’ to find a more comfortable spot in the beddin’ ground. The singin’ makes ‘em lay down quicker.”

“I imagine that’s important. I’ve heard about terrible stampedes where the cattle run for miles in every direction.”

Luke nodded solemnly. “And good men sometimes get killed.”

Catherine sensed a change in his mood and scolded herself for bringing up the subject. She wondered how many men he’d known who’d been hurt, but she didn’t ask.

“It’s a dangerous way to make a livin’,” he said quietly. Shaking off the gloom Catherine had inadvertently created, he turned to her and smiled. “But I love it anyhow.” He jumped up and grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet.

“How about a dip in the water, schoolteacher?”

Chapter 4

Luke led her to the edge of the river. Catherine watched, dumbstruck, as he pulled off his boots and socks, then rolled up his pant legs. Her heart hammering, she looked away, unsure where to pin her gaze.

“Your turn,” he said.

She glanced back at him, forcing herself to see only his face and quell her urge not to look at his ankles and feet. It didn’t seem proper.

There was that grin again.

“No, thank you, Mr. Matthews.” Although the water looked refreshing, she wouldn’t lift her skirts in this man’s presence.

“I thought you were going to call me Luke.”

“I’ve decided that’s not such a good idea.”

He shrugged. “All right, Miss Campbell, but I promise I won’t peek while you remove your shoes and stockings.”

Luke turned and waded out into the creek. His loud sighs of pleasure sent Catherine to the blanket where she unfastened the hooks on her boots. She watched him out of the corner of her eye but, true to his word, he wasn’t looking at her. Quickly,

she pulled up her riding skirt enough to roll her stockings down and off. Her toes delighted at the freedom.

He met her at the bank to offer his hand. She took it and slowly entered the water, holding up her skirts no higher than her calves with her other hand. The coolness of the water came as a shock, and she squealed. Luke chuckled, squeezing her hand to support her as she felt for a foothold on the slippery rocks beneath the surface.

"That's far enough," she told him. When she pulled back on her hand, he released it. Catherine's heart raced as he leaned toward her. He reached out, plucked her hat from her head, and tossed it onto the shore with his. Surprised and embarrassed, her hands flew to her hair, and in that instant she slipped and fell backward onto her bottom in the shallow water.

For a moment, she was too stunned to do more than open and shut her mouth as river water quickly soaked into her clothing. Then she glared up at Luke.

"Why'd you have to go and grab my hat?"

Luke threw his head back and laughed. The more Catherine struggled to pull herself out of the water, the harder he laughed.

She leaned over and gave him a fierce shove, knocking him off balance. He landed in the water beside her with a splash. The sight of his face, contorted with shock, sent a ripple of mirth through her. A controlled snicker quickly turned into a giggle until she was laughing outright.

“Cat...got...your tongue?” she asked him between gulps of air.

Luke’s expression turned decidedly wicked, and he slapped the water with one cupped hand, throwing a curtain of cool, clear liquid over her.

She sputtered, took a breath, and splashed him back, full in the face.

He let out a shout and spun to kneel on the slippery rocks in front of her. When he grabbed her arms, she was sure she was about to be dunked. Catherine closed her eyes and held her breath, waiting.

Wet lips touched hers.

Startled, she opened her eyes and jerked away. If he hadn’t been holding her, she might have fallen backward into the river. She stared up at him as he leaned toward her again. The pounding behind her ribs grew stronger. She squeezed her eyes shut, half-afraid he would kiss her again, half-worried he wouldn’t.

The tip of his tongue rimmed her mouth slowly, tentatively, tasting the droplets of water there. She shivered.

“You leave a man thirstin’ for more, little Cat,” he murmured. She felt him back away. Opening her eyes, she caught his gaze. He smiled. “We best get out so you can dry a bit before we head back.”

She nodded. When he stood, she tried not to look at the damp shirt that clung to his chest or the wet denims that hugged his thighs in a way that made her feel much warmer. He took her hand and helped her up, leading her out of the water and

onto the riverbank, where they both sat down in the sun.

Silence hung in the air like the last notes of a Sunday hymn. Finally, Catherine broke it. "Thank you for inviting me to come with you...Luke." She couldn't look at him.

"Thank you for comin' along. A man like me doesn't get to spend much time in the company of such a pretty lady." He began to unroll his pant legs. "I didn't rightly know if you'd come with me or not, but I'm sure glad you did."

He got up and fetched their hats. She thanked him for hers and tucked her damp hair back into a bun, then placed the hat over it, pulling the brim down to keep most of her face in shadows.

"Have you lived here all your life?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I was born and raised in St. Louis. My father was a deputy there. We came to Rocklin when we heard they needed a sheriff."

"How long you been teachin' school?"

Catherine smiled. She tilted her head, thinking. "Long enough to see some of my first students grown up with families of their own."

"And what about a family for you?" he asked gently.

She stiffened and turned to look at him. "If you're referring to the fact that I'm well past marriageable age..."

"I was just thinkin' aloud, Miss Campbell. No offense. It just seems to me that a pretty lady like you would've been snatched up a long—" He stopped. "Before now."

She didn't tell him that there had been suitors. Plenty of them. It was none of his business.

They sat silently for a time, and Catherine tried to push away the memories that nudged their way into her head. She didn't want to think about the young men she'd known—what seemed like a lifetime ago—who'd pulled at her heart and made her dream of a home of her own, filled with love and the laughter of children.

"We should get you home," Luke said, and Catherine was relieved for the interruption to her thoughts. They put on their stockings and boots; then he stood and helped her to her feet. They packed up the picnic remains in silence, leaving the dessert untouched. Luke collected Catherine's horse and held the bridle while she mounted. His fingers touched hers as he handed her the reins.

"Thank you for comin' with me, Miss Campbell," he told her again quietly.

She nodded and pulled the reins from his grasp. She rode ahead of him all the way back to town, her anger rising like smoke all the while. Blast Luke Matthews for making her remember things best left forgotten.

At her yard, Catherine nearly sprang from the saddle, barely glancing at him. He tipped his hat in a polite gesture. "Goodbye, Mr. Matthews," she said tersely, hurrying through the gate and up the walk to her house. She opened the screen door and let it slam behind her. In the entryway, she stopped and leaned against the wooden wall to take a deep breath before continuing through the house.

Passing the parlor, she heard her father clear his throat. "Where have you been?"

"Father!" She spun and faced him, her words tumbling out in a rush. "I went for a ride. It was so hot, and I just didn't want to stay cooped up in the house." She paused. "I'm sorry—I should have left you a note."

"You were galavantin' around with some no-account cowboy while I was here worried sick about you. Do you know the school board can take your job for ridin' out with a man like that without a chaperone?"

"No one saw us," she assured him.

His gaze narrowed on her. "And what in Sam Hill happened to your clothes?"

"We...I...I fell in the creek." Catherine watched her father's face go through several shades of purple. "It was fun, Father. And nothing happened for you to worry about. Luke Matthews will ride out of town tomorrow and we'll never see him again."

"You sound disappointed," he growled.

Maybe I am. Unsure if she'd spoken the words aloud or in her head, she turned and hurried to her room.

* * * *

Luke groaned as the man across the table from him won the round of cards. If Boss Briscoe hadn't drunk himself into a stupor the previous night, and if one of their crew hadn't shot off a couple toes, the drive would have continued today, and he'd still have all his winnings.

He also would have missed spending the afternoon with a lovely lady.

Glancing up, he caught Sheriff Campbell's scowl across the noisy, smoke-filled room. The lawman advanced, carrying himself with authority.

Luke smiled and nodded congenially. "Evenin', Sheriff." He gestured to an empty chair between himself and the man at his left. "Join us?"

"No."

Luke shrugged. "Probably a smart move. I should quit myself."

"I'd like to speak to you, Matthews."

"All right."

"Alone."

Luke looked around at his companions, who had fallen silent. "Sure." He tossed his cards down on the table, scooped up his meager winnings, and stood. "You boys will have to keep playin' without me."

Campbell turned and left the bar. Luke followed him down the boardwalk, across the street, and into the man's office and jailhouse. Campbell dismissed the deputy on duty and strode to his heavy wooden desk, turned and leaned back against it, then crossed his sturdy forearms in front of him.

Luke stood a short distance away, wary. Obviously, the lawman wanted to talk to him about his excursion with Catherine. He could only imagine what her father had thought when she returned with her clothes in a sodden and wrinkled mess. He almost smiled, but thought better of it, stuffing his hands deep into his front pockets instead.

“Stay away from my daughter and any other decent woman you may have set your sights on. Your kind isn’t welcome here.”

Anger began to bubble in Luke’s blood. “And what kind is that, Sheriff?”

“The kind that takes advantage of a proper young lady.”

“I did not take advantage of your daughter to-day.” *She enjoyed that kiss as much as I did.*

Campbell glanced toward the two small jail cells, and Luke noted that several drunks were already passed out on the cots beyond the bars.

“We usually have a nice little town here. My job is to keep it that way. I don’t take kindly to strangers riding in to woo our young ladies then leaving them behind in the dust.” He turned his steely gaze on Luke. “Do we understand each other, Mr. Matthews?”

“Perfectly.” Luke turned to go but stopped in the doorway. He looked over his shoulder. “I don’t take kindly to badges tryin’ to tell me my business.” He continued out the door and headed back to the saloon, shaking his head and muttering words he rarely spoke aloud. Pausing for a deep breath of fresh evening air, he impulsively changed directions, walking down a short alleyway between two buildings. Well out of sight of the sheriff’s office, he turned and headed for the lawman’s house.

* * * *

In her dream, Catherine rode bareback on a wild chestnut pony, the animal’s mane and her own unbridled hair blowing in the wind. A dark-haired man rode beside her, urging his horse faster

to keep pace with hers. She threw her head back and laughed, riding even harder, slowing only when she reached a wooded area near a clear-flowing river. She dismounted before the man could rein in his horse, and then fled on foot through the tall native grass. The man followed, catching her easily. He scooped her up in his strong, tanned arms and carried her to the edge of the river where he kicked off his boots and proceeded to walk into knee-deep water. She clasped the man's neck and shoulders tightly as he lowered them into the cool water. She tingled and shivered all over, but warmed instantly when his hot, moist mouth claimed hers...

Catherine awoke to the sound of a dog barking. She lay on her back in bed, her eyes wide and her breath coming quickly. The sense that someone else was present in the room could only be caused by her vivid, interrupted dream. She swallowed hard and rose up on her elbows. A cool breeze wafted through her open window, setting the lace curtains waving and sending a chill over her damp body. She closed her eyes and lowered herself back to the mattress.

She'd had variations of the dream before, many times, but this was the first time she'd seen her dream lover's face. She'd known the man immediately, and she'd wanted the dream to continue. Her body ached now from an odd sense of loss. She rolled onto her side and hugged the extra pillow to her breast.

For too many years, she'd wondered what it would be like to lie with a man. She'd nearly suc-

cumbed to James Tippen's charms long ago, and to other men who'd courted her over the years, but somehow she'd known it wasn't right. What would someone like Luke Matthews think if he knew she'd never known a man's loving? A woman her age?

Men like him came and went through Rocklin on a regular basis. She'd avoided them for years, keeping to her house or the schoolroom anytime the cattlemen drove their herds through town. But this had been the last cattle drive and she'd wanted to be there, wanted to experience the closing of an era.

Men like Luke would have no reason to travel through Rocklin again, and although that might be a negative thing for the businesses in town, it was probably best for the people in general. Catherine knew of several young women who'd been compromised by transient cowboys, then left to bear the consequences. She'd sworn that would never happen to her. Now an illicit thrill spun through her body at the mere idea. She clutched the pillow tighter.

The night air brought the muted sounds of music and merriment into Catherine's room. Where was Luke right now? What was he doing? Was he smiling? She pictured his face, the crinkles around his blue eyes when his lips curved into a grin...and those appealing dimples. It was easy to recall the low, husky timbre of his voice and his laughter.

The dog resumed barking, breaking her reverie.

"Damn mutt."

Catherine gasped at the sound of the man's voice and sat straight up in bed, pulling the cotton sheets to her throat. She scanned the darkened room frantically.

"Here," he said, moving out of the shadows toward her.

"I shall scream and alert half a dozen people in a matter of seconds," Catherine warned, her voice shaky, her body quivering with alarm and excitement.

He sat on the edge of her bed, his muscular form in silhouette before her. She could not make out his face, though she knew without a doubt who he was.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Matthews?" she whispered.

"I came for more."

"More...what?"

"More of this." He moved his head toward her and she did not turn away. She wanted him to kiss her, to touch her. His lips found hers in the dark as if by instinct. He sweetly caressed her mouth with his own. Catherine responded in kind, feeling as if she were still dreaming, reveling in the heady sensation of this man's hands in her hair, on her body. His fiery touch sent a ripple of heat through her depths. She wanted him with all her being.

No one will ever know...

Catherine drank in the sound of his guttural groan as she tentatively touched her tongue to his. He moved to loom above her, pressing her into the mattress with his body.

She went willingly.

The woman in Luke's arms was no innocent, of that he was sure. A woman of her age, with her beauty, shape, and sensual allure, would have tempted many men before him. Inexplicably, a sudden biting jealousy washed over him. He didn't know why the idea would rankle. He'd bedded well-practiced women countless times before.

At his hesitation, she pulled him closer, her movements a bit jerky and unsure.

Just take what she's offering and get the hell out.

He slid one hand slowly down her body, feeling the warmth of her through the thin cloth of her night rail. At the throaty sound of her acquiescence, he explored the contours of her breasts, the tuck of her trim waist, the gentle flare of her hips. She felt as lush and sultry as an August night in Nebraska. Their kiss deepened. He couldn't get enough of the taste of her mouth. When he shifted his weight upon her, he discovered he fit indescribably well between her legs.

"I envy the man who had you first," he murmured thickly.

Catherine tensed and pried her mouth away from his. Her warm breath fluttered over his cheek, as she took several panting breaths.

He shouldn't have said that.

"Tell me to stop and I will, little Cat," he said, raising enough to see the outline of her face in the shadows. Even in the dark, she was beautiful.

"Please..." she whispered, grasping his neck and pulling him back for a heady kiss.

He sent his tongue deep into her mouth, and she arched against him. That was all the encouragement he needed. She damn well knew what she'd started, and he was going to see it through. He rained ardent kisses down the soft, slim column of her throat. Her tiny whimpered cries inflamed him. There were lessons he badly wanted to teach her. As he pressed his hardened, aching body to hers, he tried to think of a way to remove his clothes without having to let her go.

"Please, tell me what to do..."

He heard her quietly uttered words and attempted to give them meaning. Like a small, frightened animal, she flailed at him awkwardly, grasping any part of him she could reach.

"...never have to see me again..."

He watched her face in the pale moonlight, caught the glisten of tears on her cheeks, and something clutched at his heart.

"Show me, Luke, please..."

The enormity of her request shook him to the core, and he eased off her. It was impossible, wasn't it? She had admitted to being nearly forty. She couldn't actually be a—

"Damn you," she sobbed, scrambling back on the mattress until they were no longer touching. He keenly felt the loss of her warmth. "I wanted this...wanted you to—" She batted angrily at her eyes. "Before I get so old..."

It took a long moment before he could instruct his vocal chords to work. "Catherine, I..."

“Just get out.” She turned away, her slim shoulders trembling, her long, shiny dark hair tumbling around her.

He tried to think of something to say, but the only words that stumbled from his mouth were, “I’m sorry, little Cat. I didn’t know.”

He stood. At the open window, he gave Catherine one last look. She was still huddled on the bed, clutching a pillow. He wanted to go to her, hold her, comfort her...love her.

But it was too late.

Chapter 5

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...”

Sitting next to her father in their pew in church, Catherine recited the prayer she’d learned as a child, and easily imagined a temptation. The vivid memory of Luke’s fiery touch and kisses sent a shiver up her spine. She trembled, wrapping her light shawl closer around her shoulders. Her dream and the cowboy’s presence had unleashed a desperate kind of hunger in her, and she’d been drugged with the taste, smell, and feel of him.

When he’d realized she was virgin, he must have been thoroughly stunned. If no other man had ever touched her, then surely he had to believe there was something wrong with her. He’d beaten a hasty retreat, leaving her frustrated and humiliated in his wake.

And now she remembered she was in church.

After the service she stood outside to wait for her father, speaking politely to townsfolk and students who walked by. When Catherine saw Susan Applegate coming her way, she resigned herself to another reminder of her shortcomings.

“Did you have a good time at the dance Friday night, Catherine?” Susan asked sweetly. Without waiting for a reply, she added, “Luke Matthews was a wonderful dance partner.”

“You danced with him?” Catherine asked, immediately wishing to bring her words back. It was absurd for her to think the man wouldn’t have danced with anyone else after she left Jessup’s barn. But the jolt of jealousy she felt at the woman’s next words was decidedly more alarming.

“Oh, yes!” Susan gushed dreamily. “I lost count of how many times. What a handsome fellow. And so strong...”

“I didn’t really notice.” Catherine turned to meet the sheriff as he headed out of the churchyard. She bid a terse farewell to Susan and grabbed her father’s arm. So, Luke had danced with Susan. It wasn’t surprising. Susan was pretty and much younger than she was.

As Catherine walked home with her father in silence, she couldn’t stop the questions that crowded her mind.

Had Luke walked Susan out into the moonlight, taken her on a picnic...kissed her?

And, after leaving Catherine’s bedroom, had he stolen into Susan’s under the cover of darkness?

* * * *

Luke glanced over at the new man. Brandon Dempsey had been hired to replace the injured cowhand. The boy was still wet behind the ears and had no experience driving cattle, but Boss Briscoe said he could shoot and ride. Briscoe couldn’t offer much for pay since the drive was on

the last leg of its long journey. No other men had volunteered to join up.

The boy threw Luke a cold stare much like the one he'd given the night he'd tried to cut in on Luke's dance with Catherine. Now they'd have to make peace or risk their jobs. Driving cattle was dangerous enough without harboring bad feelings toward another man in the outfit.

Luke led his horse to the remuda. He watched Dempsey dismount and rub his buttocks. Luke smiled to himself. Maybe the youngster could ride, but Luke bet he'd never spent eighteen hours a day on the back of a horse. He waited for the boy and matched his slow stride as they headed for the chuck wagon and noon meal. They'd have close to an hour before they were back in the saddle.

"I'm Luke Matthews." He stuck out his hand. "You can call me Matt."

Brandon scowled but shook Luke's hand. "I know who you are."

Luke nodded, regarding the tow-headed boy thoughtfully. "And I imagine you don't like me much, but we've got to get along if we're gonna ride together."

The younger man shrugged. "I s'pose so."

"How 'bout we forget how we met the first time?"

"I reckon I can do that." The boy peered at him. "But I'd like to know why you wouldn't let me dance with Miss Campbell."

"It was the middle of the dance." *And I didn't want to let her go.*

“She left soon after. I never got a chance to ask again.”

“Do you have a hankerin’ for her, boy?”

He shook his head. “She used to be my teacher. She’s always been real nice to me, and she’s purty too. I thought it would be fun to dance with her.”

Luke remembered that it was. “I’m sorry, Demp, but you’ll have your chance with plenty of other pretty ladies before long.” They reached the wagon. “Now I suggest you rest while you can. We’ll be back on the trail before you know it.”

At sundown, the men brought the cattle into the bedding ground Boss had scouted earlier, circling the herd until they settled down. Luke removed his saddle to use as a backrest now and pillow later. He felt the new man’s eyes on him, imitating his actions. Supper was the usual fare of bland stew, beans, sourdough biscuits, and coffee. Brandon cleaned his plate without a complaint, which was good because the cantankerous cook wouldn’t have put up with any.

Some of the men laid out their bedrolls near the chuck wagon right after eating and went to sleep beneath the brilliant stars. A few stayed by the campfire where they shared a whiskey flask and a few stories. They laughed when Brandon took a swig and choked on the stout liquor.

“Some real purty little fillies back in that town, eh?” someone said, and that started an animated round of discussion. The men joked about the dance-hall girls and painted ladies they’d encountered in Rocklin. Nice girls were held in reverence while the other kind was fair game.

Luke let the flask pass him, though a drink might have helped blur the image of glorious auburn hair and big chocolate brown eyes. Thoughts of a certain schoolteacher had plagued him all day.

He dumped the dregs from his coffee cup into the sandy soil and rose, carrying his saddle back to the rope corral where he selected a night horse from his string, leaving his personal mount, Dollar, to a well-deserved rest. A short distance from the remuda he mounted, giving the fresh horse a gentle nudge in the flanks with his work spurs.

"It ain't ten yet," O'Rourke said when Luke rode out to relieve him of his watch.

Luke shrugged. "Go ahead and get some sleep."

"Well, heck, you don't have to twist my arm. Thanks, Matt."

Luke slowly rode the perimeter of the herd. He could hear the other watchman humming. He'd told Catherine that cowboys sang to soothe the cattle and to stave off their own loneliness.

Lord, he felt lonely tonight.

Few things had ever surprised him as much as learning Catherine was a total innocent. That she was a true lady he had no doubt. But even proper ladies gave in to temptation now and again. The fact that she never had was still hard to get his mind around. He was certain she hadn't been playing a game with him. He would've seen through it. She really hadn't known what to do, and her request for his tutoring had been sincere...and heart wrenching.

Damn, but she had brought out the gentleman in him every time he'd been near her.

Was every man in Rocklin, Wyoming stupid and blind?

Dexter, the other nighthawk, began to sing softly from the opposite side of the herd. It was a tune Luke knew well, and he joined in.

*"I'm up in the mornin' afore daylight
And afore I sleep the moon shines bright.
No chaps and no slicker, and it's pouring
down rain,
And I swear, by God, that I'll never night-herd
again..."*

The cattle were restless. They hadn't crossed water after leaving the Rocklin area at dawn, and it had been a long, hot, dry day. An unexpected noise now could start a stampede. Luke wasn't much for smoking, but even if he had been he wouldn't have lit a match in the uneasy silence. He hoped Dexter read the same caution into the situation.

Luke was restless as well, but not for lack of water. His canteen was nearly full. He continued the cowboy lullaby.

*"I went to the boss to draw my roll,
He had it figured out I was nine dollars in the
hole.
I'll sell my horse and I'll sell my saddle.
You can go to hell with your longhorn cattle..."*

Luke met Dexter riding in the opposite direction. The two men nodded to one another.

"That new boy is on next watch," Dex said quietly. "Think he can handle 'em, Matt?"

Luke frowned. Putting Brandon on the mid-night watch was probably Boss's way of getting him used to the hardships of the trail right off; the kid wouldn't have slept more than two hours.

"I'll ride with him," Luke decided. He'd get less sleep himself, but if the boy got into trouble, no one would be sleeping tonight. Luke believed it was better to be on watch if the beasts stampeded than to get a rude wake-up call off-watch. He'd been sound asleep more than a time or two when he'd wakened to a deep rumbling in the sod beneath him.

"I was hopin' you'd say that." Dexter faded into the dark and Luke smiled ruefully. No doubt the older man would have taken the extra watch if Luke hadn't offered first.

He loosened the reins of his mount. The horse, trained for stealth, stepped quietly through the sage and dry grass. A rabbit skittered out from behind a rock, and Luke tensed like a fiddle string. But the horse only hesitated briefly, shook its thick mane, and continued along the path. Luke exhaled long and low, patting the animal's neck gently in praise.

Some time later, he gazed into the heavens to mark the progress of the Big Dipper around the North Star. Midnight. The horse beneath him would have known the time even if it had been cloudy. As if on cue, the cattle rose to their feet and milled around before lying down again. Luke finished his own rotation, waiting until he saw Dexter's relief-man join the watch, then he headed back to camp.

"Demp," he called low-voiced to the new man as he leaned over the bedroll. The boy slept as still as death. Luke knew better than to shake him. He couldn't risk causing a startled shout or having a disoriented cowboy reach for his gun.

"Demp. It's your watch."

The boy sat up with a jerk and stared at Luke for a long moment as if trying to figure out where he'd seen him before. Then he let out a breath and nodded. "I'm comin'."

"Ride into the beddin' ground real quiet-like," Luke advised. He regained his mount and headed back to the cattle. Brandon didn't look pleased when he caught up to Luke a few moments later.

"What're you doin'? It's my watch."

"Lower you voice, boy," Luke said. "I'm ridin' with you."

"I didn't ask for any help," he whispered fiercely.

"The beeves are restless as pigs in a parlor tonight." Luke watched the new cowhand's shadowy face. "Do you know what to do if they get the urge to run?"

Pride and alarm mingled in Brandon's expression. "You—you circle 'em."

"You ever try turnin' stampeding longhorns when they're dead-set on goin' right over you?" To the boy's stubborn silence Luke added, "Of course you haven't. Now ride slowly and sing. If you don't like singin' you can sure as hell hum."

Brandon rode on ahead and Luke followed. Three men circled the herd of nearly two thousand

longhorns. During the day, it took all twelve cowboys riding in formation to control the cattle.

Luke listened as Brandon sang a song he must have learned in church. Or from his early years with Miss Catherine Campbell, schoolmistress.

Damn, he was thinking about her again.

* * * *

They rose at first light, eating quickly and breaking camp before the sun had a chance to rise in the sky. The cattle were allowed to graze for a few miles, then the cowboys rode into position and the pace picked up.

Luke rode point, a place of honor and privilege on a cattle drive. He'd earned it. Though the boss often rotated his men through the swing, flank, and drag positions during the day, only the best rode at the head of the herd. Luke's main task was to keep the leaders—two steers—on course and stave off stampedes.

He glanced toward the rear of the formation, seeing Brandon riding drag as he had the entire previous day. The boy would be covered with an inch of dust by midday. If Boss was done breaking him in, the new hand would be grateful to ride flank in the afternoon. Had Brandon Dempsey joined the drive on the outset, he would likely have been relegated to the job of wrangler. The boy who held that dubious honor was about the same age as Brandon. The wrangler had to know all the horses by sight and name and know if any were missing at any given time. Luke could well remember when he'd been wrangler, then drag man. He was thankful those days were over.

Around noon on the second day out of Rocklin, the boss led them to a small stream where the cattle dispersed to drink. The men ate, refilled their canteens, and changed horses. Then they rounded up the cattle and trekked on, Brandon now riding flank.

Fluffy clouds gathered in the late day sky, lending welcome relief from the harsh summer heat. When the clouds grew dark on the horizon, however, Boss stopped the drive. Luke knew Wyoming was famous for its afternoon thunderstorms, and they were looking to run right smack into one now. He could smell the moisture in the wind. The cattle stirred uneasily as the men led them toward an impromptu bedding ground.

"We'll be eatin' hardtack for supper," O'Rourke muttered.

Luke nodded grimly. It would take everyone, including the cook, to keep the beeves from spooking tonight. In pairs, the men rode to the remuda to saddle their night horses and don slickers. The rain came in buckets while the cowboys repeatedly sang "Little Joe the Wrangler" in unison. Luke glanced at Brandon. The boy looked as miserable as a wet dog in the wind-whipped rain, but by the third repetition, he was singing the words along with everybody else.

A crack of dazzling blue and green lightning that hit nearby an instant later was immediately followed by a cannon shot of thunder. The terrified cattle took off in a fury.

"Ride!" Boss yelled.

His heart hammering, Luke struck out hell-for-leather, spurring his mount for the point of the stampede. Longhorns could cover ground faster than anyone who'd never witnessed a stampede could ever fathom. Another horse and rider drew abreast of Luke, and they ran like the wind, over a hill and down into a rapidly flooding gully. Luke and the other man made it to the front of the herd and reined back in an attempt to slow the charge. Luke unholstered his Colt, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. The men behind him pressed in to try and turn the beeves. The animals raced at break-neck speed for what seemed like hours before finally slowing, circling, then milling.

The danger wasn't over. The cattle were jammed together so tight a horseman could be jostled from his mount. Over the years, Luke had lost friends to trampling hooves. His gaze now searched for Brandon in the inky darkness, finding the boy wide-eyed, clutching his saddle horn for dear life, but safe at the edge of the herd. Tears shone in the young cowboy's eyes, but Luke honored Brandon's need to be left alone. He well remembered the first gut-squeezing time he'd fought a stampede. Experience had done little to temper his own fear every time the cattle ran.

The men were in the saddle all night. At daybreak they estimated the missing and set out, taking nearly the whole day to round up the scattered beeves. The losses were minor, about twenty head. More significant was the longhorns' weight loss. If the animals continued to spook, they'd arrive in Montana stringy and unpalatable.

No telling how the men would look.

* * * *

Catherine entered the schoolhouse and began preparing the lessons for the day. Her students arrived shortly. Sarah Beth came at once to her teacher for their customary morning hug.

“Good morning, Miss Campbell.”

“How good that feels this morning. Thank you, Sarah.”

The little girl giggled and curtsied, taking her seat. The rest of the children made their manners to their teacher, and then recited the Lord’s Prayer. Catherine took roll. Eddie Harris was tardy or absent. The boy would have a hard lesson to learn when he moved into Master Applegate’s class come fall.

Thinking of the male teacher caused Catherine to smile sadly at little Dahlia Evans. The child favored her left hand when writing. Samuel Applegate considered the practice a bad one, and would surely punish such nonconforming behavior when the girl landed in his class in a few years. Catherine encouraged Dahlia to use her right hand, but she wouldn’t force the child to trace her letters in a way that seemed unnatural to her.

Catherine assigned a lesson from McGuffey’s Second Eclectic Reader for the children reading at that level, then worked with the others on their arithmetic.

“I don’t think I’ll ever learn my numbers,” Sarah Beth whined in frustration when Catherine checked on her progress. The girl was using her copybook for figuring, while other children who

couldn't afford paper etched their problems onto slates.

"I don't need to know arithmetic anyway," the girl went on. "Mothers don't need to know their numbers."

Catherine suppressed a smile. "Sarah, you accompany your mother on her errands in town, don't you?"

"Yes. We go to the mercantile, the grocery—"

"And how does she get the items she needs?"

"Why, she pays for them, of course."

"Do the merchants count out her money for her?"

"No." Sarah giggled. "My mother can count her own money." She looked up into her teacher's face and grinned when she realized where the conversation was heading. "Oh, I get it. Mothers need to know their numbers too, don't they?"

"Absolutely. And besides, Sarah," Catherine added, "some day you may decide you want your own career. This is Wyoming, and a woman can do many things here." She pointed to a column of digits in the girl's copybook. "Now, let's get back to your lessons. Pretend these numbers stand for things you need to buy at the store. Add them up so you can pay the correct amount of money."

"This will be fun!" Sarah exclaimed, looking at her lesson with renewed enthusiasm.

Catherine kept the children busy with their reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons in the morning; then they went outdoors for lunch and stayed there the remainder of the afternoon, working in the school garden and observing nature. The

day passed quickly and Catherine found blessedly little time to think of anything...or anyone.

Chapter 6

Montana Territory

Lincoln Richards drew an uneasy breath, locking gazes with the pint-sized woman clothed in dull gray who stood on his front porch. “Beg your pardon, ma’am, but I reckon I’d remember if I’d ordered a wife.”

A flare of alarm lit her dark brown eyes. For a long moment, the only sound drifting on the warm afternoon breeze was that of Linc’s ranch foreman attempting to smother a chuckle.

“I told her you’d be mighty surprised,” Neil Carter said, amusement ringing in his gruff voice. “It’s a good thing I was in town when they got off the stage or they would’ve had to hire someone to bring them out here.”

Linc pulled his gaze away from the woman to glance at the empty wagon in the yard behind her. “Them?”

Carter nodded, grinning. “Your wife...and daughter.”

On cue, a tiny wisp of a girl in a lime-green pinafore stepped out from behind her mother’s

wrinkled skirt. Curly blonde hair bounced around her cheeks. The child was barely tall enough to see over the stack of suitcases gathered about her dusty, lace-up shoes. Large hazel eyes that took up most of her face rounded at Linc. "Are you my new papa?"

Linc bit back the curse he wanted to shout. He wasn't this child's father or anyone's husband. He frowned in reply.

"I can see we're not what you expected," the woman said, giving Linc a weary half-smile. "Your sister said—"

"My sister? You mean Tara?"

At the woman's nod, relief flowed through Linc like creek water over smooth stones. "Ah," he said, smiling back. "Now I understand. Tara and I are always playin' practical jokes on one another." He shook his head fondly. "She really outdid herself this time. It's going to take me awhile to think of something as absurd as this." Linc threw his head back and let out a crack of laughter. "A wife and kid? Tara knows I'd never bargain for such a plate of trouble. How much did she pay you anyway?"

The laughter stuck in his throat and died a swift death when he looked at the woman again. Her face had turned bright red. Every visible muscle in her small body clenched. Her stricken look hit him hard, like buckshot behind the knees.

"Lincoln?" Neil Carter's voice penetrated the strange buzzing in Linc's ears. The man's bushy gray eyebrows furrowed. "She has a legal paper with your signature on it."

"I indeed have proof of our marriage, Mr. Richards." The woman inclined her head to yank open the drawstring of the reticule dangling over one wrist. A lock of golden-brown hair slid out from beneath an unflattering gray hat adorned with a clump of wilted feathers. With a trembling hand, she thrust a folded paper at Linc.

"We were married one week ago, by proxy."

When he didn't take the document from her she let it flutter to the porch floor. Linc stared down at the paper, his vision blurring as a memory flashed in the back of his mind. He didn't need to verify his signature. It would be there. His half-sister Tara had come to the ranch for a visit several weeks earlier. She'd brought the family lawyer, a case of imported brandy, and numerous documents for Lincoln to sign. Their father's recent death had placed Tara at the helm of their family's investment firm in Nebraska, a business Lincoln himself had no interest in running. He'd gladly signed over all power to Tara. After the first half dozen documents and several snifters of brandy, he'd stopped reading the fine print and just scribbled his name.

And now he had a wife.

She turned her back on Linc. "If you could return us to the train station, Mr. Carter, I'd be extremely grateful."

"Of course, ma'am."

"But, Mama," the little girl cried, clutching her mother's skirts, "I don't wanna go back to Nebraska!" Her frantic glance darted from the woman to Carter before it came to rest on Linc.

The silent appeal in those huge hazel eyes tugged at something inside him.

"We'll be fine wherever we end up, Jessie," her mother said in a voice that didn't sound at all certain. She took the little girl's hand. Before they could reach the porch stairs Linc stopped them with a light touch on the woman's arm.

"Why wouldn't she want to go back home?"

Without looking at him she replied, "It's really none of your concern, Mr. Richards. We made a mistake coming here. I regret the inconvenience—for all of us." She pulled away from his hand.

"Where will you go?"

"Somewhere else."

He reached down to pick up the marriage certificate he'd inadvertently signed. "What about this?" He waved the paper in front of her face.

"It's just a joke," she whispered, turning and walking away.

Her words and the disheartened tone behind them produced more guilt than Lincoln had experienced in a very long time. It raced through him, sending him pounding down the porch steps and across the newly sprouted grass in his front yard. He halted the young mother and child again at the wagon.

"Are you two in some kind of trouble?"

Narrow shoulders sagged under the weight of whatever it was that had forced the woman to make such a journey. She turned slowly to meet Lincoln's gaze. "Your sister was hiding Jessie and me in her home. She said we'd be safer here," the woman gestured about the ranch yard with her

hand, “out in the middle of nowhere, under the protection of your name.”

“Safe from what?”

She glanced down at the girl attached firmly to her hip. Her hand still trembled as she stroked the child’s blonde ringlets. “Get in the wagon, Jess,” she commanded gently. Carter scooped the girl up in his burly arms and set her on the wooden bench.

“I’ll take her over to the corral,” Linc’s foreman offered. The conveyance dipped and groaned when he lifted his bulk onto the driving platform. The little girl watched her mother and Linc with enormous eyes as the wagon lurched forward.

The woman who was Linc’s wife placed her hands on a pair of slim hips and tilted her head back to face him.

“It seems my late husband owed some men a great deal of money. They tried to collect...from me.”

Linc stared at her in stunned silence. What in the hell had his sister gotten him into? He certainly didn’t fashion himself a storybook hero, and the skinny female before him was no beautiful damsel in distress. She was nothing like the kind of woman he’d choose as a mate.

He muttered an oath.

“There’s no use bringing the Lord into it,” she said matter-of-factly.

He paused. “Have those men followed you here?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Tara snuck us onto a train leaving Nebraska a few days ago. No one has bothered us.”

“But your daughter seems terrified.”

The finely boned features of her face softened at the mention of Jessie. “I’m afraid she overheard me discussing my predicament with your sister.”

Lincoln rubbed the back of his neck the way he usually did when thinking hard. The woman watched him intently. She did have striking eyes, he conceded. They were the color of the rich, dark chocolate he often craved. And she wasn’t exactly ugly. Her delicate china-doll face held a certain appeal. From what he could tell, she had an abundance of golden-brown hair. But she was much too scrawny. Her drab clothes hung loosely over her diminutive frame. As he continued to study her, he realized her situation could well have warranted a drastic drop in weight. Linc couldn’t help but grin as he imagined Hattie, his housekeeper, endeavoring to put some meat on this woman’s bones.

“I assure you I am telling the truth. It really is no joking matter to me.”

“What?” Linc’s grin inverted to a frown.

She threw her hands into the air. “This whole thing is ridiculous. I considered Tara my friend, and now look what she’s gotten me into.”

“Gotten *you* into? Look, lady—”

“Mary Katherine,” she interjected, fixing him with a steely glare, “even though you haven’t been gentleman enough to ask. My name is Mary Katherine—or Mary Kate—Richards.”

Lincoln swore roundly.

“No matter what you think of me, I’m grateful for the use of your name.”

“Well, Mrs. Ri—” Linc stopped mid-word. He couldn’t say it, couldn’t call this stranger by his family’s name. Her cheeks turned pink and she glanced away while he started again. “It’s too late in the day to head back to town. I can offer you a bed for the night.”

Mary Kate’s gaze darted back to Lincoln. Her mouth gaped open in obvious alarm, and her golden-brown eyebrows arched. “Just what do you mean by that?”

He was appalled at what she must be thinking. His remark had been strictly polite regardless of the fact that her legal document indicated they were married. He wasn’t about to consummate their marriage by sharing his bed with her. Besides, Lincoln liked his women taller and plumper.

“I meant that you and your daughter are welcome to stay the night in my home. I have several guest bedrooms.”

“Oh, thank good—” She stopped. “Well then, thank you.”

She appeared greatly relieved by his clarification, and for some absurd reason that bothered Linc. He was accustomed to women enjoying his company. His frown grew into a full-blown scowl when a gust of wind riffled through an errant lock of her hair. In the light of the late-day sun, the strands glowed like a fine almond liqueur.

“Mama, lookit me!”

Both of them turned to catch the sight of Jessie perched atop one of Lincoln’s best mares. The child’s gingham pinafore and petticoats bunched above a pair of knobby little knees. Carter led the

horse and rider out of the corral. The girl clutched the bridle's reins and the saddle horn in two small fists. Her proud smile eclipsed her face. A chuckle rumbled out of Linc's throat.

"Her name's Samantha, Mama, but Carter says I can call her Sam if I want to."

"That's Mr. Carter, Jess," Mary Kate corrected firmly.

"Aw, the youngun can call me Carter. Everyone else 'round here does."

"You're very kind, Mr. Carter." Mary Kate bestowed a dazzling smile upon the grizzled old foreman. Another deep scowl worked its way across Linc's forehead.

"Jessica and I will be staying the night," the woman went on, "but we'll need a ride into town tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," Carter said, touching the brim of his sweat-stained cowboy hat. "Looks like you can ride a bit longer, little Jess," the foreman told his charge. "That is, if it's all right with your ma."

Mary Kate nodded, smiling again. It annoyed Lincoln more than he cared to admit that this particular woman looked quite pretty when she smiled like that. His legally wedded wife had no call to look fragile and pretty when she was leaving in the morning.

"I didn't know we had company!" Hattie Merriweather shouted from the front door of the ranch house. Lincoln's two guests whirled toward the boisterously cheerful sound of Hattie's voice. The well-rounded, gray-haired housekeeper bustled across the covered porch and down the steps.

“Shame on you, Lincoln Nebraska Richards, for not introducing me to your new lady friend right off.’

Linc let out a long breath and faced the woman who had worked for his family since he was a baby. In truth, she’d been the closest thing to a mother he’d ever known.

“This is Mary Katherine and her daughter Jessica,” he said, hoping Hattie wouldn’t notice he’d skipped over their last names.

“Well, how do you do?” Hattie tramped over the tender new shoots of grass in the yard. She pumped Mary Kate’s hand then stepped toward Samantha and Jess, her face beaming with unabashed delight at the tiny girl.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest little thing!” She patted Jessie on the arm. “It’s been ages since we had such a young visitor out here. Now, when Sam and Carter are through giving you the grand tour, you come on inside and I’ll have some cookies and lemonade awaitin’.”

The child must have been starving or nearly dying of thirst, because she leaped off the horse’s back and hit the ground running, her skirts flying like a banner behind her. She slid to a stop when she reached the front screen door.

“Can I, Mama?”

“May I?” Mary Kate corrected.

“May I, Mama, please?”

Mary Kate nodded her permission. The screen door sailed open, struck the outer wall with a bang, then closed just as loudly. Hattie laughed and

started to follow Jessie's trail. She paused near Mary Kate.

"I didn't catch your last name, dear."

Mary Kate's gaze landed quickly on Lincoln before returning to the housekeeper. "Richards," she replied.

"Is that so?" Hattie laughed a deep, full belly laugh that jiggled every spare ounce of flesh on her body. She looked at Lincoln, her gray eyes sparkling. He mentally braced himself for the outrageous remark she was bound to make. "Now that's fate for you. Marry this one and she won't even have to change her name."

Lincoln winced. Hattie was always after him to "get married and have a dozen babies," though she was rarely this enthusiastic. Couldn't she see that Mary Katherine was a complete contrast to the kind of women with whom he usually kept company?

"Hattie," he said somberly. "Mary Kate and I are married."

"What's that?" the older woman asked, her wrinkled brow creasing further with confusion.

Linc filled his lungs with much-needed oxygen and faced his housekeeper squarely. He'd never imagined—not for years down the road, anyway—that he'd be making an announcement such as this one today. He glanced at Mary Katherine Richards. She held no smile for him.

"This woman is my wife."

Chapter 7

Luke leaned against his saddle and stretched stiff legs toward the campfire. The cattle drive would arrive in Miles City the next afternoon. For some of the men surrounding him, this was the end to a way of life, while for others it was merely a diversion.

"I'll be goin' back to Kansas to help my pa run the farm," young Jacob Robertson, the wrangler, announced.

"I aim to find me a mountain woman!" This from the oldest member of the group, Noel Webster. He'd had several wives in his checkered past.

"No skirt's gonna hold me," proclaimed Daniel Craven. "I'm headin' west, to California."

"The gold rush is long over, you idiot!" someone yelled.

"There's gold in the forests there," Craven argued. "The west coast has trees with trunks bigger'n a house. The lumbermen who're cuttin' them are makin' lots of money."

Ross Dexter took a long drink from his flask. "I'm gonna hole up in some nice hotel for a week. Sleep on a real bed, drink good whiskey..."

“...Spend all your money...”

“Shee-it! What’s it good for if you can’t enjoy it?”

“Me and my sweet Laurie will be hitched just as soon as I get back to Texas.” For David Trippy, the drive had been a last chance to sow his wild oats before settling down. And he’d sown them in every cow town and watering hole along the trail.

“I’m goin’ travelin’,” Brandon stated proudly. Luke grinned at the boy. He’d done a lot of growing up in the last four weeks. Luke liked to think the young cowboy had learned a lot from him.

He recalled a day just a week ago when they’d neared a river fouled with alkali. A long drink would kill the cattle. Boss had ordered a deliberate stampede to get the beeves through. Brandon had stared at Luke and mouthed “On purpose?” When Luke nodded, the boy had gone white as a Sunday shirt. Luke rode over to him and instructed him to stay close and do what he did. On a signal, all the men flapped their rain slickers, and the cattle took off on a splashing run. It took all the cowboys’ energy to keep the beeves from doubling back, but they’d made it in the end.

“What about you, Matt?” Dexter asked. “You’re awful stodgy tonight. What’re your plans?”

Luke looked around the circle of men he’d grown fond of over the last six months. They’d soon break up and go their own ways, probably never seeing each other again after tomorrow. Still, he couldn’t bare his soul to them.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “But the best of luck to all of you.” He raised his tin cup in tribute. The cups and flasks clinked as they all toasted one another and the end of their brotherhood.

Luke took the midnight watch later, slowly circling the cattle as they shifted about, changing positions and bedding down again under the soft light of a full summer moon. As he hummed he pondered all he’d learned about Catherine Campbell from Brandon. According to the boy, who’d lived in Rocklin all his life, the sheriff closely scrutinized any man who took the slightest interest in his daughter. Rumor had it that years earlier he’d run off Catherine’s betrothed before the young man could marry her and move her to Cheyenne. Brandon said the sheriff didn’t want his daughter to marry because no man was good enough.

Luke felt sympathetic to the woman’s plight. The whole situation posed a challenge, and he’d always loved a good challenge. But it was more than that. Somehow he’d cultivated tender feelings for a woman he’d only known three days. Maybe it was just the loneliness of the trail, or the idea of defying the sheriff...or the thought of her innocence...but he had a powerful desire to see the pretty schoolteacher again.

The plodding steps of his night horse lulled Luke into a gentle reverie. He was bone tired. How easy it would be to let his chin bounce against his chest. He sat up straight, shook his head, and widened his eyes in a bid for attentiveness, blinking against the dangerous fog-like stupor. Sensing another presence, his gaze darted around. A nearly

perfect mirror image of himself appeared in the shadows. Luke smiled grimly. The only thing different between him and the other man was the color of their eyes.

“What do you think I oughta do?” Luke whispered into the darkness. The phantom figure gave no reply. It irritated Luke that he could see this man, this unearthly twin, and no one else could. Sometimes it made him as furious as a wounded bull. Other times it scared him half to death. He’d given up trying to explain it to anyone, and recently the appearances had lessened. The last visit had been the night of the Fourth of July dance in Rocklin. He knew Catherine couldn’t have seen what he did, so he’d said nothing and hoped she hadn’t noticed his tension.

“Dammit,” he muttered aloud. *I speak to ghostly images of myself. What self-respecting woman would have anything to do with the likes of me?*

They brought the cattle into Miles City the next afternoon. People lined the streets as they had all along the route. The cattle were exhausted and subdued. There were no skirmishes with the spectators, no pretty women to rescue. Once the beasts were in the holding pen on the far side of town, the job was over.

Luke collected his pay and shook Boss Briscoe’s hand. He clapped Brandon Dempsey on the back and wished him luck. Then he headed for a bath and a good meal. He wasn’t part of the wild band that turned the cow town upside down that night.

The next morning he bought provisions, saddled up Dollar, and headed south the way he'd come. He would make good time alone.

* * * *

Catherine hung laundry out on the line behind the house. It would dry quickly in the August heat.

"Miss Campbell!"

She set her basket aside and rose on tiptoe to peer into the adjacent yard. Eddie Harris waved excitedly at her.

"Hello, Eddie. What are you up to?"

"Come see, Miss Campbell. Margo had five kittens!"

Catherine hurried through the shrubbery dividing the two yards. When Eddie motioned for her to be quiet, she nodded and followed him across the grass to a small shed. Once inside, she waited impatiently for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. There in one corner, on a pile of rags, the mother cat nursed five very tiny newborn kittens.

"When did she have them, Eddie?"

"Must've been last night. I checked on her before I went to bed. She'd been acting kind of funny. Ma said I had to leave her alone to do her business."

"They're darling." Catherine bent down to get a closer look. "Would Margo let me pet them?"

Eddie shrugged, crouching with her. "She trusts me, and you're my teacher, so I reckon she'll trust you, too."

Catherine reached out cautiously to pet the mother. The cat nuzzled her hand. "What a good mother you are, Margo. You should be so proud."

Her hand gently stroked a tiny ball of fur and the kitten lost its hold on a teat and gave a plaintive mew.

"I can't keep all of 'em," Eddie said meaningfully.

She glanced at him. "Oh, Eddie, I don't know if I could take one or not. My father doesn't like having animals around the house."

"But you're a grown lady." He slapped one hand over his mouth and stared at her with big green eyes. "I'm sorry, Miss Campbell." He looked down at his bare toes.

Catherine regarded him silently a moment. She knew everyone in town, including the children, thought her too old to be living with her father. "That's all right, Eddie. No harm done. I'll tell you what. You let me come visit them from time to time, and I'll think about taking one."

He grinned at her. "You bet. You can come see them anytime you want."

"Thank you." She straightened, smoothing her skirt. "Now I'd better finish hanging up my laundry before everything wrinkles."

"G'bye, Miss Campbell."

Catherine gazed down at the furry little creatures again. "Bye, Eddie, and goodbye, Miss Margo. Take care of those precious babies." She left the shed, squinting in the sun. She didn't see the figure watching her from the lilac bushes until she was nearly back in her own yard.

"Mr. Matthews?" Her heart skidded to her feet before climbing back up to pound against her ribcage.

“Good afternoon, Miss Campbell.” The fascinating dimples she remembered all too well appeared as he tipped his hat and grinned at her. “What’s so interestin’ over in that shed?”

She glanced behind her. Eddie had disappeared, just like her composure. She studied the shrubbery a moment, taking a much-needed breath. “Eddie’s cat had kittens,” she finally replied, facing Luke again. “Where did you come from, and what are you doing here?”

He chuckled and his blue eyes danced. “Surprised you, didn’t I?”

“Some.”

“Well, the truth is, I like it here. Nice little town, Rocklin, Wyoming. Quiet, friendly.” He paused. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why should I mind? It makes no difference to me.” Catherine moved past him to finish hanging the damp clothing. She hesitated over some personal garments, not wishing to hang them up in this man’s presence. “How long are you staying this time?” she asked, trying to sound aloof, her heart’s incessant pounding threatening to betray her.

“That all depends.”

She felt his gaze, warm and waiting, on her face. What did he expect her to do—ask him what he meant? It didn’t matter whether she wanted to know or not. She wouldn’t ask.

“I can see you’re busy,” he said. Instead of leaving, however, he came closer. “I used to do this for my ma.” He bent over and reached for a pair of white petticoats.

“Mr. Matthews!” Catherine rounded on him with her hands on her hips. “I don’t need your help, and I would appreciate it if you would keep your—your grimy hands off my laundry!”

Luke raised an eyebrow and grinned at her as though he enjoyed being insulted.

“Good day, Mr. Matthews.”

“Be seein’ you, Miss Campbell.” Luke dropped the garment back into the basket. “Soon.” The low timbre of his voice sounded full of promise.

She turned her back on him, knowing her face had to be a deep, flaming red. When she looked over her shoulder, he was gone.

The next day after school, she found him leaning against a birch tree in the schoolyard beside the path to town, waiting. She pretended she didn’t notice as she made her way down the front steps. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him rake his fingers through his hair and settle his Stetson back on his head. She’d have to march right past him.

“Whoa there, Miss Campbell. Where are you headed in such an all-fired hurry? Don’t I even get a ‘How d’ya do’?”

“How do you do, Mr. Matthews,” she said without slowing her pace.

“Bad day at school, little Cat?”

She halted in her tracks and spun on him. “Quite the contrary.”

He pushed away from the tree, a knowing grin crossing his face. “I came to walk you home.” He caught up with her and offered his arm. His masculine scent filled her nostrils. He probably

wouldn't leave her alone until she consented to his company.

"Fine." Catherine ignored his arm. "I'm going this way." She switched direction and headed toward a narrow trail along the river, away from town and any curious eyes, all the time hoping the children hadn't dawdled on their way home.

Luke matched her quickened strides. "You don't want your daddy to see me with you."

"Why would you think that?" She kept her eyes on the path.

"This isn't the way you usually walk home."

"It's not?"

"Is it?"

She sighed. "Mr. Matthews—"

"I know the sheriff doesn't like any man who gives attention to his lovely daughter." She glanced at him in surprise. "I've got my sources."

Catherine diligently avoided his gaze, though it attracted her like a bee to honey. "My father watches out for me. I'm his only child, his only family. He knows what's best for me."

"You're hardly a child." To her outraged gasp, he added, "And I don't mean that in the way you're takin' it. You're real sensitive about your age, but I don't see why. Any man would count himself lucky to spend time in such lovely company."

"Is that so?" He was baiting her, using pretty words to woo her. Why had he come back? If he thought she would just continue with him where they had left off his last night in town, he had another trick coming.

Luke took her wrist and pulled her off the path to a cottonwood tree, planting his large hands on the trunk on either side of her shoulders. She blinked at him in stunned surprise.

“I have my own idea of what’s best for you, Miss Campbell.”

His mouth neared hers in slow motion, and Catherine had the absurd desire to lean toward him. She was unaware of any sound save the strange buzzing in her ears. His lips finally met hers, then time seemed to speed by as he kissed her into the middle of next week.

Was he twirling her around, or was that just her senses reeling out of control? The fluttering that had started in the vicinity of her heart now spread to other places. He took her hands, brought them up to encircle his neck, and pressed closer to her.

She really should push him away.

When he finally released her, she was breathless and panting. He watched her silently for a moment, his gaze hooded and intense. She wanted to yank him back to her and continue his amorous assault. His cheeks dimpled and she wondered if he really could read her mind. She didn’t care if he could and was startled at the realization. All she wanted was for the whole wonderful adventure to begin once more.

“Do that again,” she pleaded, sliding her lips beneath his when he leaned toward her. His soft mustache tickled her mouth, his warm breath mingling with hers.

The shrill whistle of an approaching train interrupted the moment. Catherine broke the kiss and moved back. Unsure what to do with her hands, she smoothed down her skirts, fixing her gaze on the ground.

"I'd like to know how long you're staying in town," she said.

"I'm in no hurry to leave."

She took a breath. "I mustn't be seen with you."

"I don't see what harm it could do."

Catherine lifted her gaze. "You don't know the school board, or my father."

"I'm not afraid of either of them, little Cat." He tilted his head to regard her. "I think you're worth the risk." He paused. "Am I?"

Her heart cried out yes, but the more practical side of her demanded restraint. She held a respected position in town, one that could be lost if she were seen with a younger man. He would be on his way in due time anyway. She would be nothing more than a distraction to him.

"I'm afraid not," she replied, looking away when his expression clouded. She hurried down the path, putting distance between them.

* * * *

Undaunted, the man seemed to pop up everywhere Catherine went.

He came into the mercantile when she went there to purchase a length of cloth for a new summer-weight dress. He'd actually snorted at the material she picked up, and suggested a deep green calico print instead.

"This would look better with your eyes," he explained.

"I was just going to look at that, if you don't mind," she'd retorted, snatching the bolt from him. Green was her favorite color, after all.

He walked into the bakery behind her one afternoon. "I need a half dozen rolls, please," Catherine told the baker's wife while blatantly ignoring Luke. When the woman asked him what he needed, he'd casually remarked, "Just lookin'," though Catherine had felt his gaze on her and not the array of baked goods on display.

The following day he was sitting in the swing on her front porch when she came home from school.

"Afternoon, Miss Campbell," he said, tipping his hat at her.

She climbed the porch steps warily and glared at him. "You have a lot of nerve."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment, Mr. Matthews. What if I had been my father?"

"I think I would've noticed that right off."

She bit her lip to stop a smile at his remark and went inside the house, only to hear him knock on the screen door a few moments later.

"Ready for our walk?" he called.

"No!" she shouted from the kitchen.

"Then I'll just have to wait around until you are."

She stomped to the door. "Mr. Matthews—" "Luke."

“Mr. Matthews, I would appreciate it if you would leave.”

“And I’d appreciate a walk...or a glass of lemonade.”

“A glass of lemonade?”

He grinned. “Thanks for askin’. I’d love one.” He looked down the porch. “Hey, you must be Eddie,” he said as Catherine’s neighbor came around the corner. Luke’s twinkling blue eyes found her again. “Make that two glasses, Miss Campbell—or three, if you’d care to join us.”

She managed a smile for the boy when she came outside a short time later holding a tray of glasses filled with lemonade.

“Thank you for invitin’ us, Miss Campbell,” Luke said politely, ignoring the glare she sent him. “There’s nothing like a nice cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer day—unless, of course, there were some cookies to go along with it. A man would really appreciate a plate of cookies about now, wouldn’t he, Eddie?”

The boy nodded eagerly.

Catherine rose from her chair, intentionally bumping the swing where Luke sat as she marched back into the house. A satisfactory amount of lemonade splashed into his lap.

Eddie was partway through his third oatmeal cookie when his mother called him home. “Gotta go, Luke. Thank you, Miss Campbell, ma’am.” He hurried down the porch steps and disappeared.

“You think you’re mighty clever, don’t you, Mr. Matthews.”

“Ma’am?” His dark brows rose innocently.

Catherine faced Luke squarely, feeling as though she were scolding a mischievous child. "You've been pestering me for days now."

"But you have to admit it's a fun kind of pestering'."

She opened her mouth with a ready retort, and then quickly slammed it closed, thinking of how to phrase her words. "I believe you have the wrong impression of me, Mr. Matthews," she said finally. "I may have said some things I shouldn't have during your visit to my...my..." Heat bloomed in her cheeks.

"Bedroom?" he prompted softly.

She nodded, taking a breath. "And the other day on my way home from school, when you were waiting for me and I..."

"Let me kiss you thoroughly?"

Catherine nodded again, unable to meet his steady gaze. She would have taken a sip of lemonade had she trusted her hands not to tremble. Swallowing, she continued. "I think I may have led you to believe I would have..." She paused, waiting for him to fill in the gap. He didn't. She tried again. "If I've made you think..." Thunderation! Why couldn't she just say the defamatory words?

"You've made me do a lot of thinkin', little Cat." His low voice no longer teased. She felt it like a tender caress. Lowering her gaze to her lap, she fought the sensation.

"I'm not that sort of woman."

"I know."

Her gaze darted to his. He smiled gently, and her heart nearly ceased to beat.

“Don’t you have a job or something to occupy your time?”

His head fell back against the swing and he laughed. “Are you worried about me findin’ one that will keep me here in Rocklin?”

Oh, yes. That worried her enormously. It also worried her to think he might leave again. Catherine shook her head. “I don’t care what you do.” She rose, ready to move past him for the sanctuary of her house. He grabbed her arm and pulled her down into the swing beside him.

“I will not sit here with you in full view of anyone who happens to walk—”

He silenced her in the most delicious way, his mouth warm and spicy upon hers. She tasted the lemonade, the cookies, and another flavor that she was learning belonged uniquely to Luke. When the kiss was over, she found herself reclining in his arms. With a gasp, she got to her feet. The sound of his chuckle followed her into the house.

Chapter 8

The end-of-term exams at school had gone well, and Catherine would miss working with the children. She looked forward to the tutoring jobs that often came her way during the months Samuel Applegate taught at the school. For now, Catherine was plenty ready for a holiday. The mid-August heat was unrelenting, and she hoped it would feel cooler at the Saunders' ranch. She thought about the other reason she needed to get away. Though Luke Matthews hadn't reappeared since she'd begrudgingly served him lemonade and cookies on her front porch earlier in the week, she still felt uneasy every time she turned a corner.

When Emmett's wagon pulled up in front of her house Saturday morning, she was packed. Claire had remained at the ranch. Catherine hurried Emmett and her father through a cool lunch, then offered to pick up supplies around town while the rancher attended to other business. By mid-afternoon, they were set to leave.

Catherine stopped by her father's office to say goodbye. She found him sitting quietly at his desk, perusing some wanted posters that had come in by

train. He looked startled when Catherine crossed the threshold and he stood hastily, covering the papers with a logbook when she came in.

"Anything interesting, Father?" she asked, gesturing curiously at the partially hidden papers in front of him. He seemed unusually distracted.

"No, not really, dear." He smiled and moved around his desk. "Are you leaving now?"

Catherine nodded. "Emmett's watering the horses, then we'll be on our way. I've done all your laundry and cleaned the house. Now remember, Father, Eva will be expecting you at the cafe for your meals. I gave strict orders for her to hunt you down if you miss one!" He smiled indulgently, promising he wouldn't.

"There's Emmett now," Catherine noted, looking out the window. They exchanged a quick embrace before her father walked her out and helped her onto the wagon seat. Her bags were stowed in back along with various household and ranching supplies.

"See you in a few weeks, Father."

"Don't worry about a thing, Sheriff," Emmett said, nodding goodbye and guiding the horses down the street. Catherine turned to wave as her father stepped back into his office.

Emmett and Catherine chatted amiably along the way. It was almost dark by the time they reached the Saunders' ranch. The house and outbuildings were nearly hidden behind a sturdy windbreak of cottonwood and elm trees. Claire literally bounced down the front steps of the ranch

house, giving her husband a quick kiss and her friend a warm hug.

"I'm so glad you're here, Cath."

"My wife longs for female companionship," Emmett remarked, smiling lovingly at Claire. He gave her hand a squeeze as he went by carrying Catherine's suitcase. The women began unloading the wagon.

"Not the heavy stuff, darlin'," Emmett admonished as he reappeared to take a large sack of flour from his wife's hands. "You gals go on in. It won't take me but a few trips."

"Well, you heard him, Cath. Come in." Claire beckoned, and Catherine followed her into the cozy house filled with wonderful smells. "Tell me you're staying awhile, please?" Claire begged.

"Father is taken care of for a couple of weeks."

Claire waved her hand. "Oh, he could take care of himself for any amount of time. I'm just so excited you're here, Cath. We're going to have a wonderful visit!"

Catherine smiled at Claire's infectious cheer. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better, Oh, mercy me!" Claire exclaimed. "You probably want to freshen up after that dreadful trip. Go ahead, Cath, you know where the guest room is. I'll just finish getting supper on the table."

Catherine found her room and suitcases. She gratefully washed the road dust from her face and hands and changed into fresh clothes. She brushed and re-pinned her windblown hair, then went to help Claire in the kitchen.

Catherine sat with Emmett and Claire in the parlor after breakfast the next morning while they took turns reading scripture from the Bible. It was as close to church as a ranch family normally could get. Some time later Emmett excused himself and went out.

"No day is sacred on a ranch," Claire sighed. "Emmett and the hands don't do as much on Sundays, though, thank goodness." Catherine rose when Claire did, helping attend to her chores around the house, making sure the mother-to-be didn't overdo it.

"You're the one on a holiday, Cath. I feel fine, really." Claire glanced at a clock over the cook stove. "Look at the time. I've got to do a few things. I want you to just relax awhile. You look a little tired."

Catherine had to admit she was. "You sure you don't need me?"

"Absolutely. Go on." Claire flapped her hands, shooing her out of the kitchen.

Catherine went back to the front room and settled on the comfortable davenport. She looked around at all the homespun touches Claire had made to an otherwise masculine room. Soft curtains hung over the windows, framed pictures adorned the wooden walls, and hand-crocheted blankets spilled over the furniture. Their marriage certificate was prominently displayed on the main wall near the fireplace. Several thick rugs covered the floor. Emmett had gotten into the ranching business at the height of the beef bonanza, making

considerable profits, and this ranch was proof of his prosperity. Catherine leaned her head back on the plump cushions on the sofa and promptly dozed off.

A knock on the door made her jump. "Claire?" she called toward the kitchen. When there was no answer, Catherine opened the door and gaped in astonishment. Her heart did a flip-flop inside her chest.

Luke Matthews stood on the front porch steps, looking as surprised as Catherine felt. Claire appeared behind her, holding a picnic basket. She stopped short when Catherine rounded on her.

"What are you doing, Claire?" she demanded.

"I fixed a lunch, for you and Luke." Claire glanced nervously back and forth between the two people, clearly confused. "I hoped you'd be pleased, Cath."

Catherine flung her glare at Luke. "You arranged this, didn't you?" she accused, shaking an index finger at him. He tried to appear innocent, but she wasn't buying it.

"Mrs. Saunders asked me to come meet a friend of hers. I had no idea it was you, but I'm mighty pleased it is."

How pleased would he have been if it had been someone else?

Catherine turned on Claire. "What is he doing here?"

"Luke works for us. I didn't tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise." She paused, plainly disappointed. "I guess it is." Claire sighed and

shook her head. "I'm sorry, Cath. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

Sudden shame arced through Catherine. Her friend had tried to do something special for her and she was ruining it. She just wasn't prepared for this sort of surprise.

Luke backed down the steps. "Excuse me, Mrs. Saunders, but I think I'll just be goin' back to the bunkhouse to take the midday meal with the rest of the men. Thank you anyway, ma'am."

"Wait," Catherine said. Luke stopped in mid-stride and turned toward her. She couldn't let the knowing grin on his face change her mind. "I'm sure Claire made us a fine lunch, Mr. Matthews. The least we can do is eat it."

He looked at Claire, who nodded at them both, clearly still hopeful. He shrugged. "All right." He took the basket Claire happily handed to him.

"Have fun," Claire whispered to her friend, pushing a throw blanket from the davenport into Catherine's hands as she added, "and be nice."

Luke and Catherine walked away from the house and along a path that led toward the creek running through the Saunders' property. Catherine clutched the blanket tightly, feeling awkward. She hadn't expected to see Luke during her visit, yet she was secretly pleased that she might be able to spend some time with him without worrying about her father or other people in town.

Luke glanced at her. "This really wasn't my idea."

"I know. It was Claire's. She means well."

"You've been friends a long time, I take it."

“Since she was a child.” She smiled. “I was her teacher. Emmett’s too.”

“Fine people, both of them.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. At the creek, they laid the blanket under the shade of a cottonwood tree. Catherine was transported back in time to another picnic. Luke must have thought the same thing, because the warm smile he produced looked retrospective.

“We could force ourselves to have a nice afternoon,” he suggested amiably.

Catherine sat on the blanket and tucked her feet under her skirts. “You honestly didn’t know I was here?”

He settled down across from her. “Nope. Mrs. Saunders asked me to come by the house today and meet someone. I wasn’t really interested in bein’ set up, but I didn’t want to appear rude to the boss’s wife when I just started workin’ here.” He moved toward her and she leaned away. “Just tryin’ to get to a sandwich.” He opened the lid on the basket beside her. Claire had made egg salad sandwiches and cool tea. Luke poured a glass for Catherine and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She regarded him over the rim of her glass while she took a drink. He looked very handsome in new denims and a red and white-checkered shirt. She noticed the way the muscles in his jaw moved when he ate. He looked up and she quickly averted her eyes.

“How do you like Emmett?” she asked.

He didn't hesitate. "I like him a lot. He's a great man to work for, treats his help well. That bunkhouse is one of the better ones I've lived in. Most ranchers I've worked for don't think much about where their men sleep as long as they put in a hard day's work." He paused, taking a bite of food, then swallowing. "Claire's friendly, puts a person at ease right off. They seem happy."

"They're having a baby." Catherine squeezed her eyes shut a moment. She'd spoken impulsively. The subject of having babies was much too intimate for discussion.

Luke's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "A baby? I didn't know."

"Do you like children, Mr. Matthews?" Confound it, she'd done it again.

"Call me Luke, would you? I think we've gotten past the 'Mister' already."

"All right. Luke."

"I like other people's children just fine."

"Other people's?" she echoed. "You don't want your own?"

"No."

She'd plunged in, so she might as well continue. "Why not?"

He put down his sandwich. "I don't think I'd make a very good father."

She regarded him a moment. He was confirming what she'd imagined was true. "I suppose you aren't the type to settle down and raise a family."

He didn't reply, and she wondered if she'd insulted him again, or if she'd hit the mark. It didn't matter anyway. He was a young man with plenty of

time for wives and babies later, and she was a spinster whose time for motherhood had come and gone.

They had nothing in common.

* * * *

Luke's day began before Catherine rose from bed each morning, and many times, depending how far out they were working, the men didn't come in for lunch. Claire explained how ranch hands rode the fence in the summer months, tightening the barbed wire between wooden posts. Water became scarce as the heat intensified, and windmills were erected or repaired where wells had been dug. The native grasses and hay were cut and stored for the winter. Ranch hands treated cattle for blowflies and mange. It was a busy time.

"Today," Claire went on, "I think Emmett and Luke, and some of the others are plowing new firebreaks in case we have a lightning fire." She glanced at Catherine and smiled. "They'll be good and hot after a day in the wind and sun. No doubt every man on the ranch will be cooling off in the creek before supper." Claire bounced her eyebrows suggestively. "Sometimes, if you walk to the end of the porch, you can just see the swimming hole. Of course, I only have eyes for Emmett."

Catherine laughed. "Of course." She took a deep breath when Claire turned to the stove. The mere idea of Luke cooling off at the creek worked to raise her own temperature.

To Catherine's embarrassment and quiet delight, Luke had a standing invitation for supper at the ranch house while she was a guest. After the

supper dishes had been cleared from the table, Emmett would take out a deck of cards for partner games. Claire always declared Emmett her partner, of course, leaving Luke as Catherine's. It was funny how easily Catherine began to think of the four people as two couples.

On the third evening of her visit, after a rousing game of California Jack, Luke pushed his chair back, stretched, and thanked Claire for the meal like he normally did. When he excused himself, he invited Catherine to walk him outside. On the front porch, they sat on a hanging wooden swing while Luke's long legs rocked it slowly back and forth.

After a time, he put one arm around her. His fingers lightly stroked her elbow, sending little ripples of pleasure through her. Tentatively, she leaned against him, finding she fit snugly in the crook of his arm. She liked the smell of him.

"Tell me more of your stories," she requested quietly.

"What kind of stories?"

"True stories...about you."

"Well, I'm sure you've guessed I was an adorable baby."

Catherine laughed. She listened while he told her about growing up on a homestead in eastern Nebraska. Catherine knew she would like the kind, hard-working people in his family as he spoke affectionately about them. She found herself wishing she could meet them. When he described his older brother Caleb, Caleb's wife Anna, and their children, Catherine felt a poignant emptiness that

drew her a bit closer to Luke. When he coaxed her head to lie against his shoulder, she kept it there.

She was discovering many different and complex sides to Luke Matthews. He could tease and poke fun at her, make her feel special and beautiful, and stir up emotions—and heat—within her. She also sensed an odd vulnerability in him, as if he weren't as tough and in control as he wanted her to believe. It reminded her how he'd stared off into the crowd the night of the dance in Jessup's barn. She'd felt him tense up, while the expression on his face had been a mixture of anger and fear. Before she could screw up the nerve to ask him about it, he changed the subject.

"Enough about me. I want to know more about you."

"Nothing exciting has ever happened to me," she said, "except nearly getting gored by a crazed bull during a cattle drive."

She felt his breath on her cheek as he chuckled. His hand ventured up her arm to stroke her hair.

"You were once engaged to marry." He held her shoulder when she tried to move away. "Easy there, little Cat. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"How do you know about that? Did Claire tell you?"

"I said I have my sources."

"Who?"

"Will you tell me about it if I say who told me?"

Catherine's experience with James had been humiliating. But she desperately wanted to know

who'd been talking about her past. "All right," she conceded.

"You first."

She didn't have to look at him to know he was grinning. Her story came out in a rush. "I was engaged to a man named James Tippen. He wanted to move us to Cheyenne where he was going to open a clothing store. My mother died during the engagement period. Father asked James to postpone the wedding while we were in mourning. A short time after the funeral, James came to see me and called off the whole thing before I got a chance to tell him I'd decided not to marry him. Father needed me too much, and I couldn't bear to leave him alone in Rocklin."

"That's not quite the way I heard it."

When she pulled back, he let her go. She scooted toward the other end of the swing, crossing her arms in front of her. There was no telling what Luke had heard.

"Now tell me who your source of information is."

"Brandon Dempsey told me your father ran Tippen off."

"That's not true."

"Then why haven't you married someone else, Catherine?"

She gave him a cold stare. "That should be obvious. I'm well past marriageable age."

"No, that's not it. Your daddy scares everyone away."

She studied his face in the thin streaks of light coming from the house. He looked almost angry.

She was close to a boiling rage herself. "He does not. I've had suitors."

Luke nodded. "I'm certain that a beautiful woman like you has had plenty of beaux." He hesitated a moment, as though unsure whether to say anything else. Then he took a breath and went on. "From what I hear, most people in Rocklin think your daddy should have retired his badge years ago but hasn't because of you. As long as he has the title of sheriff, he can intimidate any man who gets a hankerin' for his pretty daughter. And that is just what's happened, Catherine. Every one of your suitors backed off, didn't they? Doesn't that seem a bit odd to you?"

"No." She stood and he rose to block her escape into the house.

"I want to court you, Catherine Campbell. If you tell me you want that, too, I swear I won't let your daddy intimidate me."

"He doesn't—"

Luke grasped her arm. "He does. He's already tried with me."

She stared into his eyes. The darkness couldn't hide the truth shining in them. She didn't know what to say. Her father could be over-protective at times, and it was clear he was getting too old to continue as sheriff, but she didn't think he had actually used his authority to keep men away from her. Yet, here was Luke saying that very thing.

"You haven't answered me, Cat. May I court you?"

She nodded, unable to make a sound save the wild beating of her heart. Part of her was alarmed

at what Luke had said about her father tonight, while the rest of her felt excited and nervous about the prospect of being courted again after so long.

Luke's warm smile melted the tension between them, and he pulled her to him once more, planting a gentle kiss in her hair.

He held her a little while longer after that.

* * * *

"What should we talk about tonight?" he asked as they sat on the porch swing a few days later. Their nightly conversations had brought them closer, and Luke was beginning to feel more than a physical attraction for Catherine. When he paused to think about it, there'd been more to his feelings for her all along. She was an incredible woman. And when she leaned into his embrace like she did now, he was struck by the fact that she fit so well.

"You," she said.

"Me? I've told you all about me. You know about my family, my boyhood growing up on the farm, how I left home to wander the wild west..."

"I've told you about the men I've known. Now I want to hear about your other women."

His foot stopped the steady movement of the swing. "No, you don't."

She straightened to look him in the eye. "Yes, I do."

Luke met her probing gaze as she continued to watch him, waiting for a response.

He exhaled and shifted position, removing his arm from around her and placing his hands on his thighs. He looked out past the porch railing, feel-

ing like a longhorn treading dangerously close to a bog hole.

"I've said what they wanted to hear, to get what I wanted."

"And what did you want?"

He shook his head. "Catherine..."

"Have there been many?"

"Don't ask me for numbers." Funny how he'd once bragged about his conquests. Now he didn't feel very proud of all the times he had taken advantage of having the brand of looks women seemed to admire.

"What about Susan Applegate?"

He turned to look at Catherine. "Who?" It took him a moment to recognize the name. "Oh, there's nothin' to tell," he replied truthfully. He sensed her next question. "No picnics, no stolen kisses. Only a dance or two."

"Just how old are you?" she asked boldly.

He laughed, relieved at the change of subject. "How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know, but you're much younger than I."

"You're wrong. It's this baby face people tell me I have, but I'm actually thirty-three," he revealed. "Is that so bad?"

"No, but, that does make you six years my junior."

"That doesn't bother me, Cat. Don't let it bother you either, all right?"

"I'm trying," she said with a sigh. "Now it's your turn. Ask me anything."

“Anything?” To her brave nod he ventured, “How many men has your father run out of town?”

She laughed softly. “Don’t ask me for numbers.”

He chuckled, glad she wasn’t angry with him for bringing up her father’s interference again. “I guess I deserve that.” He shrugged. “But it doesn’t matter. I’ll just ask my sources.”

“Brandon went back East.”

“I have other ways of findin’ out.”

Catherine glanced toward the house. “Claire,” she stated flatly. “What has my dear friend said about me?”

“Some very interestin’ things, I can assure you.”

“Like what?”

He pantomimed buttoning his mouth shut, his lips pressed tight.

“Tell me now,” she demanded, poking a finger in his ribs. He jumped. Mischievous delight at his reaction transformed her frown and she began prodding and tickling him mercilessly. Luke squirmed and laughed, grabbing her hands to halt her attack. He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them one at a time, and she stilled. He opened her right hand and kissed her palm.

When he released her hand, she left it quivering there, near his face. She tentatively touched his cheek then moved her fingertips down, across his chin, over his throat, tenuously circling his Adam’s apple...making it almost painful for him to swallow.

Luke closed his eyes and felt the blaze of heat from Catherine's touch. Her trembling fingertips moved slowly back up to stroke his mustache. She grazed his sideburns, traced his left earlobe, then her hand came behind his neck and she pulled him to her.

Luke came eagerly, watching Catherine's lips part before he took her mouth in a long, deep kiss. Good Lord, her mouth was so sweet, tasting of peaches from the cobbler Claire had served after supper.

Catherine's hand dove into his hair. Luke's arms encircled her slender body, pressing her to him. Her breasts swelled against his chest and he fought the desire to touch them. He felt as though he were being tested, and dearly, but he was determined not to rush things with her. He reluctantly broke free of her lips, hearing his own heart-felt groan and her disappointed sigh.

"Tell me about your mother, little Cat."

He watched as a smile eased away a pretty frown. "My mother was a wonderful person. She was kind, generous, and patient. She filled our house with love. I could tell her almost anything. She gave me advice when I asked for it," Catherine laughed softly, "and often enough when I didn't. I missed her terribly for a long, long time, and sometimes I still imagine she's here. Father had a very hard time after she died."

Luke didn't want to talk about her father. "How did she die?"

"Influenza."

He pulled her close again, kissed the top of her head. They sat quietly awhile. "It's late," he said finally.

Catherine sighed again and nodded, lifting her face to him. He kissed her lightly. "Sweet dreams, Kitten."

But his dreams would be of a more tortured variety.

Chapter 9

Catherine hummed cheerfully as she helped clean up the kitchen after breakfast.

“Do I sense romance in the air?” Claire asked with a laugh.

“Let’s just say that Luke and I are getting along well,” Catherine replied with a broad smile. Somehow, the air smelled fresher, summer colors appeared more vivid, and the calls of birds sounded sweeter. She awoke each day anticipating the precious time she’d spend with Luke. He was becoming a part of her life. When the man was anywhere near her, she just wanted to be closer to him. Although she felt there was something he had yet to share with her, something troubling him, she longed to be there for him when he finally decided to talk about it.

“He’s a good man, Cath,” Claire noted with a smile. “Emmett says Luke’s about the hardest worker he’s ever met—besides himself, of course.”

“You gals discussin’ me?” Emmett winked as he came into the room. “In case anyone’s interested, Luke will have some free time this after-

noon." He glanced out the kitchen window. "Nice day for a picnic."

"We could fry up a chicken," Claire suggested.

Catherine eyed the two matchmakers. "I wouldn't suppose you could find Luke and ask him to come over later, could you, Emmett?"

"He'll be here around two."

Catherine laughed as the couple traded conspiring glances. "You're both quite good at playing cupid."

At two o'clock Luke appeared with the Saunders' horse-drawn wagon. Catherine had expected to travel astride. "Are you worried you might lose another race?" she asked coyly. He grinned and helped her up onto the wooden seat. When they were settled and on their way, Catherine asked, "Where are we going?"

"I'm takin' you to a little spot I found not too far from here." Luke maneuvered the team out of the yard, through the gateway, and down a rough road leading toward the western foothills. They rode in companionable silence. After several miles of bumpy terrain they came to a stand of timber and rock through which a small stream gurgled. Luke halted the wagon, set the brake, and wound the reins around the lever.

"It's lovely, Luke."

He hopped down and came around the wagon to her side. She held out her hand but he ignored it and reached to encircle her waist. He lowered her to the ground, then handed her a blanket while he took the basket she'd prepared.

“Smells awfully good.” Luke’s blue eyes twinkled. “Did Claire make it?”

“I let her help,” Catherine declared around a smile.

They walked to a spot shaded by tall evergreen trees near the edge of the water. Spreading out the blanket together Luke remarked, “Seems like we’ve done this before.”

Catherine couldn’t seem to wipe the girlish smile off her face as she sat down on one corner of the blanket. Luke deposited the picnic basket and joined her. They began to eat, listening to the tranquil sounds of the breeze humming through the trees and water bubbling in the stream. An occasional bird twittered above them. Catherine took small bites of chicken, sneaking a few glances Luke’s way, feeling like a schoolgirl with her first beau. Feeling like giggling out loud.

“Do I amuse you?” he asked, one dark brow arched.

“No. Well...yes, maybe a bit.”

“Do I have something smeared on my face?”

She peered at him closely. “No.”

“Well, you do.” He lifted a finger to wipe away a morsel of chicken near her lip.

Catherine rolled her eyes. “I never could eat finger food like a lady.” She wagged her chicken leg at him. “You embarrassed me terribly that day of the barbecue when I had sauce on my chin.”

“Don’t play with your food, Miss Campbell.”

She laughed, dangling the drumstick in front of him. He made a grab for it. Impulsively, she tossed the meat aside. It landed with a plop on the grass

beside Luke. He looked surprised and she laughed harder, feeling very young and very much alive. When her mirth subsided, she pulled his head to hers and kissed him timidly, then waited for his response.

He released her hair with one skillful hand and pushed her to her back on the blanket. Her stomach felt as though a swarm of June bugs had been set loose inside her. He lowered his face to hers, kissing her leisurely. She closed her eyes and heard her own sound of pleasure as his tongue tasted and explored.

Luke moved his body over hers, exerting warm pressure. She watched him intently as she shifted beneath his weight. His gaze held her captive as his hand blazed a path up and down the length of her, gently caressing. His touch lingered at her breast. She squeezed her eyes closed and allowed herself to just feel. He scattered hot kisses along her face, down her throat, then back to her lips. When his tongue entered her mouth again, she couldn't stop her body from responding. Blind to every risk, she let her hips move slowly against him. He groaned and held her tighter.

Her hands began their own curious exploration, and she was surprised to feel him tremble.

"Damn," he muttered softly, leaning away from her touch as his breath came in short puffs.

"What is it, Luke? What did I do wrong?"

He sat up and gathered her in his arms, kissing the top of her head before resting his chin in her hair. "You did nothing wrong, little Cat."

“Then don’t make me stop.” She searched his face. “I don’t want us to stop.”

His voice was gentle. “I don’t want to rush you into something you might regret later.”

“I won’t regret it, Luke. It’s something I’ve wanted for a long time, and now I want it with you.”

“Have you ever touched a man the way you just touched me?”

“No. I never wanted to, not like that.” She lowered her gaze, confused. Didn’t he want it too? She’d felt his attraction to her from the start. When a niggling voice in her head suggested she was too old to be talking so intimately with a younger man, she silenced it. She had every right to feel what she felt, to want what she wanted. “Didn’t you like it?”

His hand came under her chin, lifting her face to look at him. “Your touch does things to me, Cat. Good things. But there’s more to it than just touching and kissing.”

“I know that,” she said almost in a whisper. “I want you to show me.”

Silence engulfed them. Luke exhaled deeply, fighting his raging desire for this sensuous creature who was offering herself to him. He had never refused such temptation before. This was his chance, what he’d been waiting for since the day he’d met her. Part of him was saying ‘Show her, right here and now,’ while the other demanded a gentleman’s restraint, something he often sorely lacked.

"I can't," he said finally. What in the hell was he doing?

"You don't want me."

"Oh no, never that." He pulled her back into a fierce embrace, rocking her back and forth with him. "I want you, more than anything I've ever wanted. But you deserve better than a roll on a picnic blanket, Catherine." He swallowed around the tight knot in his throat. "I want to do things right with you. Do you understand that?" He didn't know if he understood.

"I think so," she said, her voice shaky. "But I'm feeling things I've never felt before."

"So am I."

She tilted her head back again to see his face, as though she found his words hard to believe.

"I swear it."

She snuggled closer to him then and he closed his arms around her. They sat that way for a long time, neither one speaking.

His heart tapped out the words "I love you." He had never said them before, and now he was bursting to say them to a woman he'd known only a few weeks. Why did it seem as though they'd been together forever? She made him think of things he'd never thought possible.

Luke knew he should explain his fears to her, but he was reluctant. Would she laugh at him when he told her he often saw a man who looked just like him, a man who seemed to be a reflection of himself? What would she think?

Yet, if he didn't take the chance that she'd somehow understand, he might lose the only

woman he'd ever imagined could love him in spite of his madness.

Catherine slipped from his arms. He watched as she pushed her shoes off from the heels, then lifted her skirts knee-high to roll down her stockings. She tossed them onto the blanket, rose, and bounded toward the stream. Splashing into the water, she called over her shoulder, "Need some cooling off, Mr. Matthews?"

Do I ever. He swiftly dispatched his boots and socks, rolled up his denims, and loped down the embankment to join her.

* * * *

"If I just knew for sure he was staying," Catherine said with a sigh as she sipped tea with Claire the next day. She studied her cup. "You know, I can't help but think he'll be gone some morning and there I'll be..." Her voice drifted off.

"There you'll be what?" Claire sounded slightly alarmed.

Catherine looked up. "Alone again. Only this time it'll be so much worse."

"Because...?" Claire prompted.

"Because I care for Luke more than I've ever cared for any man. I know it sounds silly when I haven't known him very long, but it feels so right, Claire. He's such a gentle, kind man. He's thoughtful, funny, handsome." She sighed dreamily. "Strong and utterly charming..."

"Cath, have you and Luke—"

"Oh, his kisses, Claire. Sweet heaven, he knows how to..."

"Cath!"

“What?”

“Have you and Luke made love?”

Catherine frowned. “No. But not because I don’t want to. He says he wants to do things right with me.”

“So you’ve talked about it?”

“Sort of.”

“And he’s willing to wait?”

Catherine felt another frown inch across her face. “He insists on it.”

“Good for him.”

“That’s easy for you to say—you’re married and going to have a baby.” Catherine shook her head. “Luke doesn’t want children. He doesn’t think he’d make a good father.”

“You’ve already talked about children?”
Claire’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

Catherine nodded, her thoughts moving faster than her voice. “And I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I feel as if he’s afraid of something.”

“How so?”

“He gets this look on his face sometimes, like he’s just seen something or someone he doesn’t want to. It’s downright spooky.”

“Do you think it might have something to do with him not wanting to have children?”

“Maybe.” She threw her hands in the air. “I don’t know.”

Claire regarded Catherine over her own cup. She waited a moment before she spoke. “Luke wouldn’t have taken this job if he wasn’t intending on staying awhile. He’s a responsible man, and he seems very confident to me. That’s going to come

in handy, because if anyone can stand up to your father, Luke Matthews can." Claire paused and met her friend's gaze. "Your father is a powerful man. He can persuade people to do what he wants."

They had argued about this before. But Catherine remembered what Luke had said, about how her father had already tried to intimidate him. Though she couldn't believe her father would intentionally hurt her, part of Catherine now agreed with what Claire was saying. Her father had always been protective of her, especially when a man took an interest in her, and his concern had increased twofold since Marie Campbell's death. It was as if he were trying to be both father and mother, regardless of the fact that Catherine was a grown woman.

A new worry suddenly etched Catherine's brow. "Father's not going to like this, is he?"

"Probably not. If he had his way you'd likely stay single the rest of your life. But if Luke means as much to you as you're saying, you'll have to stand your ground. Both you and Luke."

Catherine nodded, thinking back over past relationships. Had they fizzled because the men had lost interest in her, or because of something her father had said or done? Yes, he was an intimidating man, stronger and healthier than many men his age. Did Luke care enough about her to stand up to her father? He'd said he would, but...

That night after supper, Luke politely declined Emmett's invitation to play cards. He excused himself and Catherine, and led her out onto the porch.

"I sat in the saddle most of the day, and I can honestly say my backside could use some stretchin'."

Catherine smiled and took his proffered arm. They strolled away from the glow of the ranch lights and into the darkness. She felt warm and safe next to Luke as he led her along the creek bank. After a spell, they stopped and gazed at the moon and the stars in the clear night sky. Luke pointed out the North Star, then the Big and Little Dippers. Catherine knew the familiar constellations.

"Follow the arc to Arcturus, and spin on the Spica."

She'd never heard that. "What does that mean?"

"See the arc the Little Dipper makes? Follow the arc—to Arcturus, that bright star there." His face leaned close to hers as he pointed into the heavens. "Now spin," Catherine followed his curving finger, "on the Spica."

"Oh, Luke. Show me more."

They lay down on their backs in the native grass, close together, gazing into space. Shadowy cottonwood branches stabbed the night sky.

"What about your...backside?" Catherine asked boldly.

Luke laughed. "I'm deeply touched by your concern for the welfare of my buttocks, Miss Campbell." He winked slyly at her. "Actually, they're quite accustomed to being on the back of a horse all day. That was just an excuse to get you away from the house and into the dark with me."

“Mm-hmm, I see. You're a rogue and a scoundrel.”

“Shamelessly so,” he admitted. “Now.” He snapped his fingers for attention, pointing upward again. “See that cluster of stars there?” Catherine nodded eagerly. “Trace them with your finger and they form the letter H. That's Hercules.”

“Really?”

“Now look just off to the right from Hercules.”

Catherine looked.

“See a U-shaped cluster?”

“It looks like a queen's crown.”

Luke chuckled. “Such a smart lady. That's Corona, which means ‘crown’ in Latin.”

“There's Arcturus again.”

“Look below it and you'll find Libra.”

“I was born in October,” Catherine announced proudly.

“You can see most of Scorpio, close to the horizon, near those trees. And there's Sagittarius, the Archer.”

“I see them, Luke, I see them.”

“You're a mighty good student, teacher,” Luke said softly, leaning over Catherine to kiss her gently. “Want to learn more?”

She nodded enthusiastically and Luke chuckled again. Catherine wasn't sure if he wanted to teach her more about the stars or about kissing, but she was eager for both.

He let out a breath and lay back down beside her. “You see the Archer, right?”

“Left. Of Scorpio.”

She felt his smile. "Go straight up then, to Aquila the Eagle. That bright star there is Altair, at the top of the body, and the wings spread out from both sides."

"I see them!"

"And above him, slightly to the right, is Lyra the Harp—that bright star with her is Vega."

"What's that other cluster called—the one above Aquila and to the left of Lyra?"

"What does it look like?"

"Well, it almost forms a cross, or a diamond."

"That's Cygnus the swan. Her bright star is called Deneb."

"A swan? Hmm." Catherine turned her head in several directions, trying to make out the swan.

"No. It still looks like a cross to me."

"Then we'll call it Catherine's Cross."

Catherine clapped her hands happily. She gazed into the heavens, knowing she'd never again look at the stars without remembering this night and the special man who had taken the time to show her all this. It would be a memory to cherish.

"Oh, Luke, this is absolutely fascinating. How did you learn it all?"

"I had a good teacher."

"Who?"

"A man named Ray Combs. When I left home at sixteen and joined my first cattle drive, he showed me how to orient myself by the night sky. I can travel at night and never get lost."

"As long as the sky's clear."

A chuckle rumbled up from his chest. "That helps."

“What else did he teach you, Luke?”

“Oh, lots of things.”

Luke grew quiet as he lay beside Catherine. She was gazing up at the sky, repeating all she'd heard. She was a hell of a quick study in astronomy. But he wasn't really thinking about the constellations right now. Her question about Ray Combs had brought back many memories.

The man had been like a father to Luke. He'd taught him the art of survival in the outdoors. He helped perfect Luke's natural aim with a loaded gun. He'd shown him how to gut a deer or antelope, how to cure the venison. Ray had defended Luke against the occasional hothead drover who wanted to fight him until Luke was strong enough to defend himself. And when that first cattle drive had reached the first town of any size, Ray Combs had seen to it that Luke was introduced to love-making.

He could still remember his first woman. She'd been a prostitute, of course, as most of the women he'd known were, but as a young man, he'd thought she was the most beautiful and alluring creature he'd ever seen. Her name was Velda, and she was a good ten years older than he. Ray knew her, trusted her.

As Catherine lay quietly beside him, Luke's mind replayed that first night.

“He's so sweet, Ray! Where'd you find him?”

“Luke's a farm boy from Nebraska, honey. And he ain't never been with a woman before.”

“Never? Well now, we'll have to fix that, won't we, Luke darlin'? Lord, you have the cutest dim-

ples. Smile again for Velda, sweetheart. Lordy, Ray—those eyes, that hair—he's plumb gorgeous!"

"You're breakin' my heart, Velda."

Laughter. Velda kissing Ray, hard on the mouth.

"This is Luke's night, Velda."

Whispered words.

"You come upstairs with me, Luke sweetheart. I'll even give you a free one."

"A free one what?"

More laughter. "Oh, sugar. Just you wait and see."

"Be good to him, Velda."

"I will, Ray. I will..."

For the first few years of his cowboying, Luke got plenty of free ones. It seemed like every prostitute in every cow town wanted to teach him something.

"Luke? What are you thinking?"

He squeezed his eyes shut a moment, then turned to Catherine. "About Ray."

"Where is he now?"

"He's dead. He was shot in a gunfight in Texas last summer."

"I'm sorry, Luke."

He nodded, pulled Catherine to him, pressing his lips against hers in a keen sort of desperation. He had to force himself to remember what kind of woman he was holding now. Catherine was no loose skirt, though it didn't help matters any that she was so eager for his touch. He sprang back into a sitting position and ran splayed fingers through his hair.

“Man alive, you’re a temptation!”

Catherine laughed softly. She seemed pleased and not a little proud that she could tie him in knots. She moved to sit in the place he made for her between his knees.

“I have a secret to tell,” she whispered.

Chapter 10

Luke sensed the seriousness in Catherine's voice and his heart began to beat faster. They had already bared so much of their lives to each other in their short time together, and he was cautious about knowing too much about her or revealing too much more of himself. Yet...

"Tell me," he encouraged.

She positioned herself so that her head rested just under his chin, with one side of her face touching his chest. Lord, she felt good there, nestled against his heart.

"I had a dog. He was just a little thing with a short brown coat, short soft ears, and a long wagging tail. My father said he was the ugliest dog he'd ever seen, but I thought he was cute and I loved him." Luke stroked her arm. "My mother was allergic to animal fur, so Buddy had to stay outside all the time. I'd come home from school and he'd greet me at the gate. I saved him table scraps and fed him right out of my hand.

"One day we decided to go on a picnic, just me and Buddy. We went to that little meadow on the other side of the river, stopping at the bridge. He

loved to fetch sticks and bring them to me so I could toss them off one side of the bridge and run to the other side to see them go downstream.

“We picked a nice sunny spot among the prettiest wildflowers in the meadow. I unpacked the basket I’d brought, and then realized all I had was chicken. My mother had warned me not to give Buddy chicken because of the bones, but there he was, looking so hungry, staring at me with those big brown eyes, wagging his tail and begging for a taste. So I gave him a piece and he devoured it in no time. He was perfectly fine, so I gave him another piece, a drumstick.”

Catherine’s voice slowed, and Luke was fairly certain what was coming next. He gave her a gentle squeeze.

He started to eat it and...and I could hear the snapping and cracking of the bones inside his mouth.” She shuddered in Luke’s arms. “He started choking and making these terrible hacking sounds. I screamed at him and tried to open his mouth and take the bones out, b-but I couldn’t get his jaws apart. I thought water would help so I picked him up and carried him to the river, but he wouldn’t drink—he just sat on my lap, writhing horribly...”

Catherine shook with the painful memory. “I couldn’t believe he was dead, so I pushed him off me and tried to set him on his feet, but it didn’t work... he...he just fell over.”

Luke kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

“I didn’t have any way of burying him and I...I couldn’t take him home and let my parents see

what I'd done, so I just laid him in the water and let the current take him away." She swiped at her tears. "I went home and told my mother he drowned in the river. I couldn't bear to see her face if I had told her the stupid thing I'd done...so I lied." She looked up at Luke, new tears streaming down her face. "I think that's the only time I ever kept anything from my mother, and I've never told another living soul, until now."

Luke was touched. He watched as she fought to control her old grief. She sniffled. "It's silly, I know, to cry about it now, after all these years, but he was the only pet I ever had. I didn't have any brothers or sisters... But I moped around and carried on so much that Father said he'd never allow me to have another pet."

Luke rubbed her arm. "It's not silly, little Cat. There's something special between a child and a pet. I know, because I had pets of my own when I was young. I mourned their deaths too. But it wasn't really your fault. You were a little girl and your dog was hungry. I would've done the same thing."

"Really?"

He produced a handkerchief and smiled as she loudly blew her nose into it. "Yes, really."

She let out a little whimpering sigh and leaned back against him again. "Sometimes when I eat chicken I think about Buddy."

"That's natural."

"You know, I think it helped to finally talk about it. It was like some deep dark secret that I thought made me a bad person for a long time."

They fell silent, listening to the nighttime croaks of frogs, chirps of crickets, and an occasional mooing from the range.

“Your turn,” she said quietly.

“Me? I don’t have any deep dark secrets. Sure, I lied when I was a kid, but I usually got caught and took a whippin’ for it, or I confessed in my prayers later.”

“What about now, as an adult?”

He was quiet a moment, contemplating making up a story to satisfy her curiosity.

“What troubles you, Luke?”

He stopped breathing for an instant and his arms went limp around her.

“You can tell me,” Catherine said, looking up into his face again. “We’ve shared so much. I feel close to you, but I know there’s something.” Her last words were whispered, but they felt like alcohol on a wound. “What haunts you, Luke?”

Luke pushed her away and she gave him a hurt, confused look that only heightened his irritation. Somehow she’d pierced his armor. He’d wanted to tell her, but not like this. He heard his own voice throb with emotion. “Why in the hell do you think something haunts me, Catherine?” he demanded.

She reeled back as if he’d struck her. “I thought maybe you’d tell me what you’re thinking when your eyes get that...” She paused, biting her lower lip. “That tormented look in them.”

Troubled, haunted, tormented. The lady had him pegged. She’d run screaming away from him as soon as he told her.

"I've seen it, Luke. Please, tell me about it. You'll feel better, I know you will."

He stood up, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at her. "Is this what you had in mind all along? You set me up, didn't you? You tell me some story about a dog that probably never even existed, work up some tears, and then I'm supposed to spill my guts to you?"

She rose to face him, her dark eyes ablaze in the moonlight. "I told you the truth, Luke Matthews. I revealed something that was near and dear to me, and what do I get in return? Nothing, that's what!"

He could see she was trembling from head to foot, but he didn't reach out to steady her.

"I was wrong about you, I can see that now." She spun and began to storm back toward the ranch.

"Catherine, wait!" Luke shouted, catching up to her and reaching out to take her arm. She flinched and began to run. "You'll fall and hurt yourself in the dark," he called after her. "At least let me walk you back."

"Don't bother!" she yelled.

His heart felt heavy, filled with regret, as her shadowy figure sped clumsily across the rough terrain.

He lay awake in his bunk that night knowing he was between a rock and a hard place. If he didn't explain himself to Catherine he would lose her. If he did tell her what troubled him he'd lose her. Surely, no woman would want a man who saw

visions of himself everywhere he went. Either way he was going to lose.

The thought occurred to him that maybe it was for the best if she wanted nothing more to do with him. A man such as he shouldn't marry and have children who might be cursed with the same madness. It was something he'd known for a long time, and he'd traveled all over the West enough to know it wasn't something he could run away from.

But the time he'd spent with Catherine had made him want things that could never be. He'd always wanted his own ranch, but a wife? That hadn't been part of the picture. Definitely not children. He had grown accustomed to the idea that he would remain a bachelor all his life, to not allow himself to get too close to another person for fear of what that person would think when his insanity was discovered.

By morning, he decided he had to tell her, then he'd pack his few belongings and leave.

* * * *

"For goodness' sakes, Cath, enough." Claire stood by the kitchen table and stared hard at her friend. "You've been moping around here all day. Now you'd better tell me what happened before I go crazy. What in the world did you two fight about?"

Catherine was peeling potatoes for supper, taking off more than the skin. She brandished the paring knife like a sword while large chunks of potato fell into the scrap pan on the table.

Instead of answering Claire's questions, she posed her own. "How did you get so lucky? Em-

mett is so open and honest. I'm sure he tells you everything. But most men, let me tell you," she pointed the knife at Claire, shaking it dramatically, "most men are so stubborn and full of pride they can't bear anyone to see them in a moment of weakness."

"Most men, Catherine?"

"My father couldn't share his grief with anyone when Mother died, not even me, and I was mourning too—I needed him. And he's always got this look on his face like he's...invincible or something!"

"Put the knife down before you hurt one of us with it." Claire sat opposite her friend. "I don't think this has much to do with your father, Cath."

"Yes, it does. Don't you see? I've gotten involved with a man who is just like him. Luke Matthews is so damned stubborn. He acts like he hasn't a care in the world when I know he does." She let the paring knife fall to the table and struggled to regain some sense of calm. "I see it in his eyes, Claire. And I don't feel like I can know him, I mean really know him, until he tells me what it is."

"And you want to really know him, don't you."

Catherine's eyes filled with tears she thought spent. She dashed them away. "I want that so badly. And I thought we were getting there. Oh, Claire, it was wonderful. Last night Luke showed me the stars..."

Claire gasped. "You mean—"

"He named all the constellations we could see, showed me how they formed their shapes. He even named one after me—Catherine's Cross."

“Then?”

“Then I told him about Buddy and how he died.”

Claire nodded. “I remember when he drowned.”

“He didn’t drown, Claire. He choked to death on a chicken bone that I gave him. I pushed him into the river so no one would know. I never told anyone about that—not you, not my mother. I was so ashamed. But I told Luke, last night.”

“And he wouldn’t tell you anything of himself in return.”

“No.”

Claire looked thoughtful. “Did you tell him about Buddy because you wanted to?”

“Yes, of course. Why else?”

“It didn’t have anything to do with wanting to know what troubles him?”

Catherine narrowed her gaze on Claire. “He accused me of the same thing.” She shook her head and sighed. She couldn’t be angry when it was partly true. “I did want to tell him about Buddy, I honestly did, and it felt so good to talk about it—look how easily I was able to tell you. But I guess I also did it to see if he would tell me his secret.”

“He has to want to, Cath.”

“I know that now.”

They finished their chores and began to set the table. “Three or four?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe Luke will join us, maybe not. Oh, Claire, what will I do if he doesn’t?”

“Give him some time, that’s what.” She smiled. “You think living with Emmett has always been

easy? As much as we love each other, we still get on one another's nerves sometimes. It's all part of being together." She placed a fourth setting on the table. "We'll plan for him and just wait and see."

Emmett came in awhile later, eyeing Catherine curiously, as he moved through the house to clean up. She wondered if Luke had confided in him the way she had with Claire.

At supper, she picked at her food, pushing the mashed potatoes and gravy around her plate like a child who wants to trick her parents into thinking she's eaten something. Her gaze kept shifting to the empty chair and the untouched dishes and silverware at Luke's place.

I've really made a mess of things, she thought, chastising herself for the umpteenth time since the night before. She looked over at Emmett and Claire, eating quietly, sending occasional glances her way.

"I'm not very good company tonight," she finally said by way of apology. "If you don't mind, I think I'll go to my room."

Claire nodded and said goodnight. A short time later, Catherine heard a knock at the front door and her heart started pounding again.

"Come in, Matt," Emmett called. "We missed you at supper."

"I'd like to speak with Catherine."

"I'll go get her." Claire hurried down the hallway to the guest room. Catherine stood in the doorway. "He looks as miserable as you," Claire said, adding, "if that's possible."

Catherine followed her friend into the living room to meet Luke. She smiled hopefully at him but he barely looked at her.

“Would you come outside with me?” His tone was solemn.

He didn’t offer his arm or meet her gaze as she walked toward him. They crossed the porch and descended the steps in silence. Luke led the way through the moonlit night to a wooden table and benches set under a tree in the front yard. Catherine sat at one end of the closest bench, Luke on the other, straddling the seat.

He faced Catherine. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“So am I. I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

“But you did.”

Catherine filled with new regret. She hoped Luke could see it in her eyes.

“And so there’s nothing else for me to do but tell you.”

“You don’t have to, Luke.” She reached over to touch the arm he rested on the table, but he moved it away.

“I want to. But I need you to just sit there and listen. If you touch me the way you do, I won’t be able to do this.” Through the moonlight, she saw the dread on his face and it frightened her.

“I’ll just listen, Luke,” she said quietly as her eyes searched his.

“Good. Then let’s get this over with.” He shifted his body on the bench, looking past her while he spoke. “Ever since I was a very small child—my first real memory, in fact—is of an im-

age, a vision, of someone who looks just like me.” He paused and she looked at him, waiting for him to go on. “He has the same hair, down to the mustache, the same nose, chin, ears, everything except his eyes, which are dark, almost black. This guy grew up with me, matured with me, started growin’ whiskers when I did. Sometimes even his clothes look like mine.” He looked down at his shaking hands.

“But he’s not really there. When I walk up to him he disappears—poof—like a mirage.” Luke laughed bitterly. “Hell, I’ve even tried to talk to him, but he doesn’t say anything back. He just appears, long enough for me to see him, acknowledge him, then he’s gone. It’s been like that all my life. It used to scare me—it was like I was lookin’ into the devil’s own mirror. As I got older, I began to get angry. I’d yell and shout curses at him. Of course,” he added wryly, “that only served to draw attention to myself and my insanity. I learned to just ignore him when other people were around.” He stared at her. “At least I thought I was ignorin’ him.”

Catherine’s mouth opened in shock. She hadn’t expected Luke to claim he was insane. She hadn’t expected anything like this. “But your mother, your family—didn’t they help you?”

“I once asked Ma if I had another brother, one who looked just like me. I thought I had a twin who died, and maybe it hurt her too much to talk about him. She was horrified at the idea and told me never to think such a thing again.” He kneaded the back of his neck with one hand. “My mother’s a

good person, Catherine. But I never did try to explain it to her.”

“What about your father, or your brothers?”

“I’ve never been real close to my pa, though I did mention it to Caleb once. He got just as upset, so I decided never to bring it up again. I’ve just dealt with it my own way.”

“Has he—that man—has he been here, in Rocklin?”

“Yeah. I saw him that night at the dance. He’s appeared several times since then, on the trail to Montana, and even right here, at the Saunders’.”

An eerie shiver crawled up Catherine’s spine. “Does anyone else see him?”

He closed his eyes a moment. They were filled with such pain when he opened them again. “No, Catherine. Just me. You see, I’m quite mad.” He laughed in a way that made him sound as if he could indeed be. “You’ve been keepin’ company with a madman and you didn’t even know it.”

“No, you’re not crazy, Luke. It’s just a vision, like you said. Lots of people have visions. I’ve read about them and—”

“Look at me, Cat. Look at my face.” He waited for her to do what he asked. “This never goes away. I’m thirty-three years old and I’ve never gone more than a few weeks without seein’ him.”

“I don’t believe you’re insane.” Her bottom lip trembled. He couldn’t be.

“How about ‘possessed’? It doesn’t really matter what you call it.”

“There has to be some explanation for it, some reason,” Catherine said as she grasped for one. “Maybe a doctor or a preacher could help.”

He snorted. “I’ve tried that too. Most people say I’m a lunatic. A few have ventured to say it’s someone from my past tryin’ to contact me. But I know it can’t be the second one because I’ve asked my family. So it has to be the first.” He laughed again in that strange way. “Hell, one guy even tried to lock me up, but I got outta there just in time. And the preachers, they’ve tried to cast the demon out of my soul, but that didn’t work either.”

“Maybe your mother and brother lied.”

He leaned forward then, his face coming very close to hers. “They didn’t lie, Catherine. I’m insane.” He leaned back again and smiled ruefully. “You know, you were right about one thing—I do feel better for havin’ talked about it. Though that’s the only good’s goin’ to come from this.” He rose from the bench.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leavin’. Tonight. I was a fool to think I could forget about it. I shouldn’t have gotten involved with you, and I’m deeply sorry if I made you think about things that can never be. I’m no good to anyone.” A sad smile touched his lips. “Good-bye, Catherine.”

She stared at his retreating form, stunned. How could he leave now, after what he’d just shared with her?

“No, Luke! You can’t go. What you said—that’s not true.” She ran after him, grabbing his arm in desperation. “You’re good for me. You make me

laugh and feel so alive. I'm not afraid of you because of what you told me, Luke." Unbelievably, she wasn't. What he'd disclosed made her feel even closer to him.

He stopped and blew out a breath. "I'm sorry, little Cat. We have no future. Another man will cherish you."

"But I love you." She barely breathed as she waited for his response.

He didn't move. "Don't," he whispered hoarsely.

Catherine threw herself against him, wrapping her arms around his body. "Too late. I love you, Luke Matthews. Just as you are."

"But I told you—"

"And I told you I love you. We're bound together now, Luke." She leaned back to gaze up into his handsome, troubled face. She touched his heart, then her own. "You...and me."

"Catherine," he murmured, hugging her to him fiercely. "My God, Catherine... I love you." He scooped her up and carried her into the darkness. She clung to him. The lights from the ranch house were tiny specks when he lowered her to a bed of native grass. He held her on his lap, rocking her slowly back and forth. She cried softly into his shirt, never wanting to let him go.

Some time later, he bent his head to kiss her gently on the forehead, nose, cheeks, and then sealed their lips with a soft, warm kiss.

"Oh, Luke," she whimpered, reaching up to draw his thick hair through her fingers.

“We should go back. I just wanted to hold you for a moment, to make myself believe this was really happenin’.”

“It's real, Luke. And I don't want to go in. I want you to keep holding me, kissing me, telling me you love me...”

He groaned and lay back in the grass, bringing her atop him. Their kisses grew hotter, their caresses bolder. The intense yearning Catherine had felt before knew no bounds now. She would do anything to have it fulfilled. Consequences be damned.

She rose to her knees, one leg on either side of his wonderfully hard body. Her skirts bunched to her thighs. He ran his hands up her legs. She leaned toward him and her hair rained down around their faces. She suckled at his tongue when it entered her mouth, and he growled deep in his throat, grasped her hips, and moved her over him.

Catherine nearly cried out at the contact. Even through her drawers and his trousers, she could feel his heat, mingling with her own. There seemed to be a pattern to his movements. She matched it. Her hands pressed against his chest as she rocked upon him, moving with a new, indefinable need.

“Luke...?” She stared down at him, the intensity in his eyes robbing her of any remaining breath. The tempest building within her frightened her and urged her on at the same time.

“That's it, Kitten. Just relax. Let it happen.”

She moved faster, and his hands left her hips to cup her breasts. She wanted to bare them to his touch, but there was no time. Heat and pleasure

pooled at her very center, then peaked. She threw her head back while a glorious, spiraling joy thundered through her.

When she could focus her thoughts again, she looked down at Luke. He wore the grin she loved so much. "Sweet heaven, I didn't know I could do that," she said.

He started to laugh, then stopped abruptly. She moved to kiss him. "No—don't. Just...just be still."

She settled back on him and he groaned. She wasn't so naive that she didn't know what was ailing him. "Luke, I want you to—"

"No." He shook his head. "I told you, I want to do things right."

"That felt very right to me." She shifted.

"Damn, this isn't workin'. I need you to—"

"To what? I'll do anything, Luke. I love you."

"—get off me."

She frowned, wiggling once more for good measure before she moved to kneel beside him. "Aren't you going to make love to me?"

He grimaced in a botched attempt at a smile. "I just did."

"But—"

"Catherine, please. Give me a few moments and I'll be fine."

She waited as long as she could. "I want you to feel what I did."

"Not this time. Not till we're married."

Married? She leaned over him. "You'll marry me?"

He smiled. "Who's doin' the askin' here, you or me?"

“Oh, Luke!”

“Wait.” He sat up, looked her squarely in the face. “Before you say anything else, you have to know. If you marry me, there won’t be any babies.”

The mighty hammering of her heart seemed to cease. “No babies?”

“I can’t take the chance, Catherine. I won’t pass my problems onto a child.”

She’d always wanted a large family. But she wanted Luke more. “All right.”

“You don’t have to decide anything now, tonight. I want you to think about it—”

Her mouth cut him off. It worked as well for her as it had for him. She kissed him silent. After a long, delicious moment, she said, “I can live the rest of my life with only you.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t adopt.”

Her heart took flight. “Oh, Luke. You meant it when you said you liked other people’s children—so that’s what we’ll do!”

He laughed at her exuberance, but it came to a crashing halt as another thought worked its way to the forefront of her mind.

“If we aren’t going to have children, does that mean we aren’t going to—that you won’t ever...”

“Whoa.” He put a finger to her lips. “I never said I wasn’t going to make proper love to you.” His face came closer. “I will. You can count on it.”

“But, I don’t understand—”

He chuckled. “You’re an intelligent woman, Catherine. Figure it out.”

She stared at him. She had no idea what he was talking about. What she’d experienced tonight and

what she felt for Luke was all new to her. She was still in a humming fog. Maybe after she came back to earth—in a few days, surely—she'd understand what he meant.

At the ranch house door she turned to gaze up at him. "You won't leave me?" she asked in a whisper.

"Never." He bent to kiss her. "I love you."

Chapter 11

“You’re damn lucky, sugar.”

“Yes, I am.” Luke smiled at the prostitute’s words, but he was thinking as much about his luck in love as he was his luck of the draw. He’d been in the saloon most of the afternoon and a good part of the evening, and his winnings had increased ten-fold. He would leave this place a richer man. He’d invest it all in a future with Catherine Campbell.

She loved him.

He hadn’t stopped hearing her voice and those words all day. By noon, he’d finished all the work Emmett had assigned him and asked for the rest of the day off. It wasn’t the kind of favor Luke normally would ask for, but then, this wasn’t a normal feeling he was having.

He loved her.

Good lord, it felt good.

He’d seen men smitten before, had laughed at them for being such fools. Now he was one of them, and he didn’t care how many men laughed. Nothing mattered as long as he had Catherine.

We’re bound together now, Luke. You and me.

No one had ever told him that before. You and me.

“Want to share some of that wealth, sweetie?”

“Huh?”

“And there’s something else of yours I’d like to share, too.” The blonde was in his lap again, moving around suggestively. How many times had he had a woman like her? Too many.

“Sorry, doll. I’m only here to play cards.” He gave her a gentle push off his lap. “But Frankie there looks about ready to throw in his hand and try his luck at something else.”

“Hell, yeah. Now that’s somethin’ I never lose at. Come here, girl.”

Luke glanced around the smoky room. It didn’t look like he was going to get anyone else to play with him here. He’d cleaned up real fine. A few of the losers were still at the bar, eyeing him irritably. Luke gathered his winnings, stuffed the money deep in his pants pocket, and rose from the table. He touched the butt of the Colt strapped to his hip just in case anyone thought of taking back what he’d lost.

He left the Red Garter, drawing a breath of fresh air at the door. He pulled out his pocket watch. Nine-thirty. He could play a few more hours, or he could head back home. Luke smiled to himself. The Saunders’ ranch wasn’t really home, but he looked forward to heading there even so. He hoped Catherine wasn’t too upset that he’d been away so long, though he wanted her to scold him a little, just so he could show her what he’d been up to.

Luke hadn't wanted to work for someone else again; he'd wanted to start his own ranch. That had been the plan. But he knew he was a little short of that dream. With his winnings tonight and the pay he'd earn from Emmett, he would have enough by spring. Hell, a few more nights like this and he'd have all he needed. But he'd given his word that he'd stay on at the ranch, and he'd stick by it. A long engagement to Catherine wouldn't be easy, as the previous night had proved. But he'd survive and be the happiest man on earth when they married come spring.

There was an extra bounce to Luke's step as he headed for the livery. The moon was full. He'd have no trouble navigating in the dark.

* * * *

"Wake up, little Cat."

Catherine woke with a start and opened her mouth to scream. A hand clamped over her lips. It smelled of smoke, horses...money. The hand was replaced by a mouth, possessive on hers, tasting lingeringly of whiskey.

"Luke," she breathed.

"Were you expectin' someone else?"

"I wasn't expecting anyone this late."

He chuckled. "Sorry I woke you."

"You don't sound sorry."

"Neither do you."

She swatted him. "You smell like you were gambling."

"I was." He moved back, standing to empty his pockets on her bed. "This is for you."

Catherine sat up, lit the bedside lantern low, and blinked at the money strewn over the coverlet. "What in the world...?"

"I've for sure got enough now to buy us a piece of land and a small herd of beeves." He cocked a dark eyebrow at her. "You're not sore at me for playin' cards, are you? I know enough to quit when I lose a few hands." He shrugged. "I'm just good at it."

"So I see."

"You are angry."

"No, I'm just surprised is all. I've never had a man dump money on my bed in the middle of the night before." She stared at the impressive pile.

"Catherine?"

"Hmm?" Keeping her distracted gaze on the bed, she sifted through the coins and crumpled bills, mentally figuring their value.

Luke put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to meet his. She gazed up into his eyes, losing track of numbers. "Will you marry me?"

Her smile was instantaneous. "You asked me that last night."

"I just want to be sure it wasn't all a dream."

She'd thought the same thing. She hadn't told Claire what had happened because Catherine almost couldn't believe it herself. Luke's heartfelt confession of his troubles, their exchange of love words, the new sensations he'd led her to discover, his proposal...so much had happened last night.

He was asking her again, so it was all real.

Luke wore a worried expression, and Catherine realized he was still waiting for her answer. She

grabbed his arms and pulled him back down to her. "I've thought about it all day, Luke," she whispered, kissing him soundly on the mouth. "Yes," she kissed him again, "yes," another kiss, "yes."

He wrapped her in his arms.

* * * *

"You're what?" Claire's face registered utter surprise as Catherine made her declaration the next morning.

"Luke and I are going to marry. He asked me last night."

"Luke wasn't even here last night."

"Oh, he was here," Catherine chirped in a sing-song voice.

Claire shook her head slowly. "You've known this man for what—a few weeks?"

Nothing was going to dispel Catherine's glorious mood. "How long did you know Emmett before you knew you'd marry him?"

"That was different. We grew up together—"

"How long?" she demanded.

"Oh, all right. I knew it the first time I laid eyes on him." Claire stared at her friend for another moment, then gave a delighted shriek. "Catherine!" They grabbed each other in the kind of warm embrace reserved for best friends. "I'm so happy for you—truly I am."

Happy couldn't begin to describe the way Catherine felt. "I didn't feel anything like this when James asked me to marry him. I've never felt this way. I took a risk—a chance, just like you said." She spun away from Claire and twirled around the kitchen. "And look what happened!"

“Slow down, you’re making me dizzy.” Claire dropped into a chair with a weak laugh. Her face had gone as white as the sheets on the guest room bed.

“Are you all right, Claire?” Catherine moved quickly to her friend’s side, placing a hand on the other woman’s shoulder.

“I will be.” Claire took a couple of deep breaths. “Sometimes I get a little light-headed, and—oh!” She jumped up and ran toward the back door, bending to retch over the garbage pail. Catherine rushed to dampen a towel, then gingerly lifted her friend’s strawberry-red braid and placed the cloth on the back of her neck. Claire finished emptying her stomach, sat back with a groan, and used the damp cloth to sponge her face and mouth.

“Being pregnant isn’t as glamorous as I’d thought,” Claire said with a wry smile. “I usually do this,” she gestured at the pail, “as soon as I get up from bed in the morning. Then Emmett makes me lay lie back down again.”

Catherine nodded. “That’s where you’re headed right now.” She pulled Claire to her feet, ignoring her protests.

“No, I’m fine,” Claire insisted. “It would be silly to go to bed in the middle of the morning like this. Besides, I feel much better now.”

Catherine looked her over with a critical eye. Some of the color had returned to Claire’s cheeks, and her smile was brighter. “We’ll see,” Catherine said, pressing her friend back into her chair. “If you start looking peaked again, I’m sending you directly to your room for a nap.”

"Yes, Miss Campbell," Claire said sweetly, reminding Catherine of the little girls in her primary class. Claire had once been among them. They both laughed, and Catherine warmed their cups with freshly brewed tea before joining her friend at the table.

The morning flew by in a whirlwind of animated chatter over wedding plans. When Catherine admitted that Luke had insisted on a spring wedding, Claire laughed at her girlish pout.

"You'll survive," the rancher's wife assured her.

"It will be a long winter," Catherine said around a heartfelt sigh.

"But well worth the wait in the end," Claire added meaningfully.

"That's what Luke says, too."

"He's right, you know. I think he's very noble."

"And very stubborn."

"Look who's talking," Claire laughed and patted her friend's hand.

The men were working too far out to come in for the midday meal. By the time the women had eaten their own lunch, it was clear that Claire was completely exhausted.

"This time you *will* lie down," Catherine said, authority ringing in her voice again.

"Just for a little while," Claire conceded.

"I'll get supper started later," Catherine promised as she shooed her friend out of the kitchen.

"After I do a bit of laundry."

"Well, you know where everything is."

“Yes, I do. Now are you going, or do I have to tuck you in myself?” Catherine stood with hands on hips, her head tilted in question.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Claire grumbled. “Just as soon as I check the bread.”

Catherine blocked the way to the oven. “I’ll do it.”

“I’d be doing all this myself if you weren’t here.”

“But I am here. And you,” Catherine pointed toward the hallway, “are on your way to bed.”

When she’d seen her friend comfortably ensconced in her room, Catherine gathered her soiled clothing and returned to the kitchen. She found the laundry tub, the washboard, and a bar of handmade soap in the breezeway, and took everything out back to the water pump, where she filled the tub with fresh well water. Humming a merry tune as the afternoon sun enveloped her like a warm blanket, Catherine bent low and happily scrubbed her clothes. She’d never particularly enjoyed doing such a mundane chore as laundry before, but this day she seemed to derive joy from almost everything.

The heated breeze blew several thick strands of hair out of the twisted bun on her head, and she reached up with the back of one hand to wipe them away from her eyes. A shadow fell over her crouched figure. She glanced over her shoulder, startled.

“Oh! It’s you, Shorty.” The bunkhouse cook stood close by, watching her. He was a short, stocky, balding man of about fifty. He’d never spo-

ken to Catherine personally, and he didn't speak to her now. Catherine felt awkward, but turned back to her clothes, bristling as the burly man's dark gaze remained on her. She heard him move closer.

"Sure is hot out, isn't it?" she asked lightly, wishing he'd either talk to her or go away. "Nice breeze, though."

He was standing by the tub now. She could see his boots and the ragged hem of his pants out of the corner of her eye. She felt his gaze on the nape of her neck and knew just when it lowered to her buttocks. Catherine froze, and her breath came in short, frightened gasps. Surely, the man wouldn't make any type of advance toward her in broad daylight. He touched her hair. She jumped up and stepped back. Soapy water dripped from her fingers.

"What are you doing?" Catherine tried to keep the alarm from showing in her expression or her voice. "Do you need something from the house? I-I can get it for you."

"You're a purty little thing, ain't you?"

Catherine could easily detect the cheap whiskey on his breath as it hit her face in vile-smelling gusts. She took another step back toward the ranch house. He grabbed her arm, halting her escape. His grip was biting as he yanked her against him.

"Shorty, please. Let me go. You're drunk." She turned her head away from him.

"Not too drunk to please a woman. And you'd be needin' it. I seen you and him nearly every night on that porch, and I know what you're lookin' for,

girlie. I reckon Matt's just not man enough to give it to you. But I sure as hell am."

His next move sent her sprawling onto her back on the dusty ground. In an instant, he was upon her, more quickly than she ever could have imagined, his breath hot and putrid against her face, his body heavy and threatening over hers. She cried out and pushed at him, throwing her head back and forth so he couldn't put his awful mouth on her. He grabbed a handful of her hair and held it painfully tight, pinning her head to the earth. She saw a fleck of spittle on his dry, cracked lips just before he covered her mouth with his. His horrible kiss silenced her cries while his lecherous hands grabbed roughly at the bodice of her dress, bruising her breasts as he tore the thin summer-weight material.

Catherine felt the bile rise in her throat. She struggled to slide her mouth and body away from his, but was helpless beneath the man's great weight, powerless against the strength in the hands tangled in her hair and clothing. She flailed desperately under his smelly bulk, snatching uselessly at the back of his shirt. With a great effort, she broke free and cried out again.

Shorty's filthy hand came over her mouth to muffle her shouts and she bit it, her teeth sinking into his flesh. He yelped in pain and moved far enough back to strike her hard across the face. Her vision blurred as her eyes teared, but she could still see the frightening determination in his. He pulled at her dress again with one hand while the

other held her at the neck. His grimy fingers touched bare skin.

“Stop...Shorty, please...” Catherine choked, struggling for her next breath as his grip tightened. “Stop now and I...I won't tell anyone...”

“Shut up, you damned wench, and lie still!”

She suddenly realized that all his maneuvering had freed her legs from the confines of her skirt. Her knee came up with all the force she could muster, making swift contact with the bulge between his legs. He grunted and hunched up instinctively, unwittingly allowing her more room beneath him. She kneed him again and he groaned, hurling obscenities as he rolled over onto his back in the dirt, his own knees pulled up to protect his injured groin. Catherine scrambled to her feet. She felt no remorse when she kicked him in the side with one pointed shoe. Then she turned and fled into the house, slamming and bolting the door behind her. She ran through the house like a woman crazed, flinging windows shut before dashing into the living room to turn the lock in the front door.

Claire came around the corner, blinking from sleep. “Catherine! What on earth is going on?” Her tone changed from curious to one of alarm when she got a better look at her friend. “What happened?”

Catherine stared at her and pointed toward the backyard. “Shorty’s out there. He...he tried to rape me.”

Claire gasped, rushing forward to quickly assess Catherine’s torn clothing and battered face. “Oh, Catherine, he hit you.” She turned and raced

to the gun rack near the front door, taking down a loaded shotgun. She peered out the large picture window. "I don't see him anywhere," she said.

The room tilted and spun. Catherine vaguely heard Claire speaking to her, but couldn't understand what she said. She felt her friend's hand on her arm as they moved as a unit down the hallway. Softness met her back...then there was nothing.

* * * *

Luke had just finished currying Dollar and was heading for the bunkhouse when he saw Emmett burst through the open door of the cook shack.

"Shorty!" the rancher roared.

Flies buzzed around a wooden cutting board, feasting on raw meat, as Luke poked his head into the rustic kitchen. Emmett slammed his fist down on a table, and then kicked it over, sending pots and pans crashing to the floor.

"Dammit!" he yelled. "I trusted you near my own wife!"

A quick glance told Luke that the object of the man's ire wasn't in the cook shack.

"Who're you talkin' to, Emmett?" The rancher whirled to face Luke. "And what in the hell are you doin' to Shorty's kitchen?"

Emmett flicked his gaze over the damage he'd caused, and then eyed his ranch hand solemnly. "He attacked Catherine."

Luke hadn't expected such a reply, so it took a moment for Emmett's words to register. Then the fine hairs on the back of Luke's neck prickled. "Where is he? I'll kill the bastard."

Luke moved like wildfire across the small room, kicking open the door to the sleeping area. The tiny cubicle was abandoned, any sign of occupancy removed.

"He's gone," Emmett said needlessly. "Probably hours ago."

Luke spun to face him, his mind still reeling from the shock. "What did he do to her?" he demanded. "Did he—?" Good God, he couldn't even bear to think the words, let alone voice them.

"He didn't rape her. Somehow she managed to get away from him." Emmett paused. "She's all right, Matt. Claire's with her."

Luke shoved past him and through the door. The other men had gathered outside, curiosity brimming on their collective faces.

"You're on your own for supper tonight, boys," Emmett told them. "If any of you see Shorty, come and get me—immediately."

Luke nearly ripped the screen door from its hinges as he flung it open and entered the ranch house. He hurried down the narrow hallway but stopped at the entrance to the guest bedroom. Inside, it was graveyard-still. With one hand on the door jam, he peered into the dimness, the setting sun casting ghost-like shadows across the floor.

Catherine lay on her back on the bed. Her face was turned away from the door, but Luke could see the raised welt on her cheekbone all too well. A muscle clenched in his jaw, and his hands formed tight fists at his side.

Claire rose from her chair and came to Luke. "She's sleeping, I think," she whispered. "I gave her some belladonna."

Emmett appeared and stood beside his wife. The three of them looked at the still figure on the bed. Luke eyed the shotgun leaning against the chair.

"You get a shot at him?"

Claire shook her head no. "Is he gone?"

Emmett nodded. Luke knelt beside the bed and leaned over Catherine. Even in the poor light, he could see the mottled discoloration below her eye. He felt a surge of nearly unbearable tenderness for this small woman who had obviously struggled so valiantly against her attacker. What other marks had that bastard left that Luke couldn't see?

"Catherine?" he called softly.

She stirred and slowly turned her head, opening her eyes to blink at him. Her lips were swollen, from the cook's hand or mouth, Luke didn't know, but he hoped the smile he forced to his own lips hid the pain and rage that threatened to suffocate him. With a trembling hand, he reached to stroke the dark silky hair at her temple.

"Don't touch me."

Luke pulled his hand back as though it had been slapped. The voice hadn't sounded like Catherine's, yet it had come from her mouth. A new kind of pain washed over him, leaving him feeling helpless and uncertain in its wake.

"Thank God you're all right," he said quietly.

Catherine stared at the three people watching her. Her eyes welled with tears, but when Luke

moved toward her again she rolled onto her side, her back to him. “Go away,” she choked. “All of you.”

Luke turned to Emmett, then Claire. He just wanted to hold Catherine, to comfort her. Claire moved to the door, motioning for the men to follow. When they were in the hallway, Claire closed off the room behind them.

“She didn’t mean it, Luke,” Claire said softly. “She loves you. She’s had quite a scare, and I think she’s still in shock. The belladonna has had an affect on her too. Let’s give her some privacy. I’ll stay close by tonight.” Luke knew the thin smile Claire produced was meant to be reassuring.

“I’m sure she’ll be better in the morning,” Emmett added.

Luke hesitated, staring at the closed door. Just last night, in that same room, he and Catherine had held one another tightly, whispering words of love while sharing dreams for their future together. Shorty had tried to steal that from them.

Claire’s hand on his arm brought Luke around. He let her lead him down the hall to the living room before he exploded.

“I’m going after him!”

“Just wait a minute, Matt,” Emmett cautioned, raising his hand but not his voice. “Don’t go off all half-cocked. This is a matter for the law, not you. We’ll get word to the sheriff first thing tomorrow. In the meantime, you’ve got to settle down. There’s nothing more we can do tonight.” He glanced at his wife and back to Luke. “You’re upset—hell, we

all are—but Catherine’s all right. That’s what’s important. Remember that.”

Luke closed his eyes a moment and nodded while releasing a pent-up breath. At the front door he turned. “You’ll bolt the door.” It wasn’t a question. Emmett nodded.

Before the sun rose in the eastern sky, Luke was gone.

Chapter 12

Catherine woke at dawn, rising slowly to sit on the bed, her bare feet dangling over the edge. Every bone and muscle in her body ached as though she'd been trampled by a wild bunch of mustangs. Her head throbbed. Her throat was sore. She reached up to touch her cheek and winced. She realized she was still in her clothes. What had happened?

Images of the previous day intruded, bursting through the fog of her mind with unwelcome, vivid clarity. Shuddering with revulsion, she moaned and bent to hold her head in both hands a moment before coming tenuously to her feet. Her legs barely supported her weight as she stumbled to the dresser and unceremoniously vomited into the washbasin.

The face that greeted her in the mirror was nearly that of a stranger. Her skin was pale and drawn. A dark bruise colored her left cheek, while the eye above it was puffy and bloodshot. Her hair felt dirty. Her body felt dirty. She began pulling off her clothes. A light tap sounded at the door.

“Catherine? It's me, Claire.”

“Come in.”

Claire entered and gaped at her friend’s naked figure.

“I need a bath,” Catherine declared.

A good hour later, after a warm, soothing soak in the Saunders’ deep tub, Catherine joined Claire in the kitchen for a late breakfast.

“I’m all right, Claire,” she said as she watched her friend flit around the sunny room, attending to Catherine’s every need. “Sit down, please. You’re making me feel as helpless as a kitten up a tree.”

Claire smiled and settled into a nearby chair. “You’re so strong, Cath. I’d still be a mess if it had happened to me.”

“Was I a mess last night?”

Claire nodded. “You were in shock. You had me—us—really scared.”

“Was Luke here?”

“You don’t remember?”

Catherine shook her head. “I don’t remember anything after I lay down.”

“Oh, Cath, he was so worried. And angry. We all were.” She peered out the kitchen window. “He went after Shorty,” she said quietly, returning her gaze to Catherine’s.

Renewed fear washed over her. “He shouldn’t have. What if he finds him? Oh, Claire...”

“He left this morning before anyone could stop him. He wanted to leave last night, but Emmett talked him out of it.”

Catherine took a sip of her tea. The cup shook in her hand.

“Emmett sent one of the men to town to tell your father.”

Catherine nodded. She stood up and looked out the back window into the yard where Shorty had attacked her.

“My laundry. You hung it up for me.” She turned to her friend.

“Of course.” Claire smiled.

“You know, I got him good. Right between the legs.”

“Oh, Cath. You amaze me.”

* * * *

Shorty’s trail was gone by noon, the tracks obliterated by the damnable Wyoming wind. There was no way of knowing for sure whether the cook had gone toward Deadwood or into the Badlands.

“Shorty likes his drink,” Luke said out loud. He had heard the man talk about the bars and gaming halls of Deadwood on more than one occasion. Luke would go there first.

A dark-eyed figure on a chestnut gelding appeared a few feet away. The ghostly image shimmered beneath the fierce midday sun.

“What do you think?” Luke asked. “Am I headed in the right direction?”

As expected, the man remained silent. But before Luke rode off toward Deadwood, he could have sworn his twin nodded in agreement.

* * * *

Catherine sat on the porch swing, scanning the horizon for any sign of movement. The wind had picked up considerably since noon. She worried about Luke. She was touched that he cared enough

about her to go after Shorty. She fretted over what might happen if they met. Would there be a fight? Would Luke bring him back to face her father?

Oh, Luke. Be careful out there.

A figure on a galloping horse came into view. Catherine stood up and leaned forward against the porch railing, her eyes squinting in an attempt to identify the rider. It was her father.

She sighed and sat back down in the swing, feeling apprehensive about meeting him. Emmett and Claire came out to join her and they all watched as the sheriff's horse raced into the yard. Dismounting as quickly as a man of his advanced years could, the lawman rushed to his daughter.

"Catherine! I came as fast as I could. Are you all right?" He reached out his hand and she took it.

"I'm fine, Father," she assured him, squeezing his hand. His worried expression made him look so old and frail. She'd never considered her father as anything but strong and vital before.

Campbell looked at Emmett. "Any idea where he headed?"

"Tracks lead northeast. Matt rode out after him this morning."

"Matt?"

"Luke Matthews."

Campbell's eyes narrowed ominously. "He's been here?"

"He works for us," Emmett explained. "Matt's a fine man, Sheriff."

Harlan's dark scowl rested on his daughter. "You'll come back to town with me, Catherine."

Now. I want Doc Gering to have a look at you. And I want you home where you belong.”

“No, Father. I came here to visit Claire for a few weeks and I’m staying.” She paused. “You needn’t worry.”

“Needn’t worry? Catherine—”

“Sheriff, you’ll stay for supper?” Claire asked brightly.

“There’s always an extra bunk,” Emmett added.

“No...no thank you. I won’t be stayin’. I need to get back and send out telegrams, see if we can locate this guy. Emmett, I’ll need a complete description, everything you can think of.”

“Of course.”

Another rider approached. Catherine straightened expectantly, then settled back into the swing with a sigh. The hired hand who’d been sent to town for her father waved and headed for the bunkhouse.

“Let’s go inside,” Emmett suggested, motioning for Harlan to follow him.

“I’m glad you want to stay, Cath, but I’d understand if you went home,” Claire said after the men had gone into the house.

Catherine smiled crookedly, favoring her bruised cheek. “I do want to stay, Claire. I really have had such a wonderful time, regardless of what happened yesterday. I can’t let that ruin everything.”

She stared out across the yard again, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. Was there movement out there?

"I wish Luke would get back. I'm worried, Claire. What if something happened to him? It would be all my fault."

"Don't say that. Luke went after Shorty because of you, yes. But it was his choice. He obviously loves you very much, Catherine." She smiled. "He can take care of himself."

* * * *

By the time Luke reached Deadwood, he had pushed Dollar and himself to exhaustion. Though they both needed a rest, only the animal would get it.

Luke left his horse at a livery stable, paid a boy to feed, water, and curry him, then set off into town on foot. He had a strong hunch he would find Shorty. Inquiries he'd made along the way had led him to believe that a man of the cook's description had come through in the last twenty-four hours. Luke wasn't the only one traveling quickly.

But I'll find you, Shorty. I won't quit till I do.

It was early evening and the town was hopping with activity. The first saloon Luke entered was smoky and noisy, and most of the customers looked as if they had been there a few days. His hardened gaze searched the premises but came up with no one who resembled Shorty. He walked up to the bar and ordered a shot of whiskey. As the bartender poured his drink, Luke again described the cook and asked the man if he'd seen him.

"A lot of fellers 'round here sound like your friend."

"This man is no friend," Luke said darkly. He paid the man, downing the whiskey in one swal-

low. He left the saloon and went back out to the boardwalk, peering up and down the dusty, dung-filled street, his eyes picking out all the seedy places. He'd have his work cut out for him.

By dark he'd been in four saloons and at least that many brothels. His stomach protested its meager sustenance over the days since his departure from the ranch. He headed for the nearest cafe and partook of a good, hot meal, which did much for his body but little for his spirit.

Finally, on his next swing through town, Luke entered another drinking and gambling establishment and found the cook bellied-up to the bar. His fists clenched tight with vengeance, Luke advanced on the man. Shorty looked up to see his swift approach. The cook's bloodshot eyes went wide just before Luke's first onslaught hit him full in the face. The man reeled and fell to the ground, his hands covering his head in a futile attempt to ward off the crushing blows.

With all the ferocity of a grizzly bear, Luke's fists and booted feet pummeled the man's head, face, chest, stomach, and groin. It took three good-sized men to pull him away.

"Someone get the sheriff!" the barkeep shouted. "And a doctor!"

* * * *

The tiny dot on the horizon grew larger as Catherine waited anxiously on the Saunders' front porch. The telegram they'd received from Deadwood Gulch a few days earlier had announced the apprehension of Edgar "Shorty" Wiggins. Luke had been temporarily held in jail in the mining town

until the charges brought against Shorty had been confirmed and transmitted to the sheriff there.

"It's Luke," Catherine breathed, relieved beyond words. Her heart began to beat rapidly.

Her father peered toward the approaching figure on horseback. "I can't see him good enough yet. How can you be sure it's Matthews?"

"I just know," Catherine replied. She turned to catch the scowl on her father's face. She wished he hadn't come out to the ranch, but he'd been checking on her daily since Shorty's attack. He wouldn't be pleased when he learned just how close she and Luke had become. She should have told her father about their relationship before now, but he would find out soon enough. For the first time in her life, she wasn't concerned what his opinion would be.

"You let me handle him when he gets here," Harlan ordered. "He crossed territorial lines and took the law into his own hands."

"He did it for me, Father."

"It shows how much he cares for Catherine," Claire added.

The sheriff made a disgusted sound and shook his head.

Catherine ignored her father and watched Luke gallop toward them. She closed her eyes briefly, offering up a silent prayer of gratitude for his safe return. All she wanted was to be held in his arms the moment he arrived. She stood in anticipation.

"Catherine, wait until I—"

She ran down the steps before her father could move to stop her. Luke vaulted off Dollar as the horse slid into the yard. They embraced on impact.

Catherine wrapped her arms around Luke's dusty body and pressed her face against his chest, inhaling his familiar scent. His arms enveloped her tightly.

"I'm so glad you're back," she whispered. For several long moments, Catherine was oblivious to anyone and anything save the man holding her.

"When did all this start?" she heard her father say through the mist of her happiness. "He's a good, honest man, Harlan," Emmett replied.

Catherine heard her father's boot steps as he walked off the porch and approached them. Luke stiffened but only drew back slightly. She looked up to see him meet her father's glare.

Luke nodded in acknowledgment. "Sheriff."

"You found Shorty," Harlan stated flatly, offering no greeting or thanks, and certainly no welcome. "You oughta save law matters for the law."

Luke offered no apology as he kept his unflinching gaze on the sheriff and his arms around Catherine.

Harlan scowled at her. "You're comin' home with me now."

"I'm staying right here." She leaned her head on Luke's chest and met her father's shocked expression. Rarely had she defied him.

Harlan's threatening gaze narrowed on Luke. "Very well," he said tightly. He marched to his horse and mounted, nodding a stiff farewell to Catherine. He gave a perfunctory wave to the Saunders', blatantly ignoring Luke. Spurring his horse in the flanks, the sheriff rode out of the ranch yard without looking back.

Something in his posture gave Catherine pause. He had received the information that she was attached to Luke without an argument. What would her father do now? Somehow she knew he wouldn't just accept her relationship and impending marriage to Luke without some kind of a fight. A chill raced up her spine, and she moved even closer to Luke's warmth.

* * * *

Catherine nestled against Luke on the Saunders' front porch swing, knowing pure joy and complete protection in his arms. The evening was calm and warm. Crickets chirped, an occasional owl hooted, and the far-off howl of a coyote mixed with the rhythmic sound of the swing rocking back and forth. Catherine's hand lay against Luke's chest, where his heart beat reassuringly steady and strong.

"I never wanted to kill a man before," he said, breaking the silence. His boot stopped the movement of the swing. "But I wanted to kill Shorty. I wanted him to pay for what he did to you."

"Thank God you didn't," Catherine replied, leaning back to look at Luke in the soft light spilling out of the house.

Puzzlement flickered in his eyes. "How can you say that after what he did?"

"If you had killed Shorty," she explained, "you may have been punished."

"I wouldn't have cared."

"I would." She sought his gaze and held it. "You could have been taken from me, Luke, put in jail—

or worse—and then Shorty would have been the one to triumph. Let the judge decide his fate.”

From his expression, Catherine knew Luke hadn’t considered the possible consequences to his actions. He’d only wanted to avenge the wrong done to her and, while she loved him for that, she wouldn’t have wanted him to pay any price for the cook’s death. Shorty wasn’t worth it.

Luke nodded somberly after a moment. “God knows I don’t ever want to be taken from you.” He leaned down to kiss her gently on the forehead. His lips moved to touch her injured cheek with utter tenderness, and warm tears filled her eyes. No one knew Luke the way she did. If she could somehow explain to her father how wonderful Luke was, how gentle and loving, perhaps the man wouldn’t object to their future together.

She offered her mouth to Luke next, and he leisurely took it. Ripples of warmth and pleasure spread to every part of Catherine’s body. She yearned for the time when she’d know completeness with him.

* * * *

Luke took off his cowboy hat and wiped his damp brow on a shirtsleeve. The late afternoon sun burned bright and hot. He had been riding the perimeter of the ranch all day, checking the fence line. He took a swig of water from his canteen and gazed out into the distance.

This was the kind of place he’d always dreamed of owning. The land went on for miles in three directions, the flat prairie broken in a few places by rolling hills and small expanses of trees. To the

west loomed a ridge of rugged, untamed mountains, a wilderness he had yet to explore.

He allowed a flight of fantasy. In it, he pictured himself and Catherine, riding the border of their own ranch, smiling proudly over their vast property, the Wyoming wind in their hair. Their herd of cattle was healthy and strong, bringing top dollar at the local auction.

A hawk cried out overhead and Luke snapped back to reality. He turned toward the direction of the ranch, almost tasting the meal the women would have prepared for the whole crew in the absence of a ranch cook. Emmett had not yet replaced Shorty. The rancher was very cautious now at such an assignment. A man who would be spending most of his days in close proximity to Emmett's wife would be chosen with utmost care.

The knowledge that he had everything he'd ever wanted nearly within his grasp filled Luke with great joy...and not a small amount of apprehension. Something niggled at the back of his mind. It wasn't the usual worry over his sanity, but something else. Catherine's father begrudgingly seemed to accept the idea of his daughter with Luke. Would the lawman give up Catherine so easily, without a battle? Luke didn't think so, not unless the stories Brandon Dempsey had told him were exaggerated.

Uneasiness crept in to crowd the contentment Luke had known during the last few days with Catherine. Shaking off the negative feeling, he nudged Dollar in the flanks.

Chapter 13

Catherine heard the sound of horses' hooves and hurried to the front window of the ranch house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Luke riding in before dark. Disappointment bowed her shoulders.

"What's your father doing back here?" Claire said as she came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "You don't think he's going to demand again that you come home, do you?"

"He won't have any luck there," Catherine said, opening the mesh door to meet him on the porch. She couldn't read the expression on his face. "Father? Is something the matter?"

He nodded curtly in answer. "I need to speak with Emmett. Is he around? It's urgent."

"Emmett?" Claire repeated. "He's out there somewhere," she said, gesturing at the land behind him. "He should be home soon. What do you want with my husband, Sheriff?"

"Don't upset her, Father," Catherine interjected. "You know she's expecting, and she hasn't been feeling well."

Harlan's voice softened as he looked at his daughter's friend. "Not to worry, Claire. This really

has little to do with Emmett. I just need to speak with him about one of his men.”

“Why are you here?” Catherine demanded. Something about her father’s stance and expression sent a ripple of dread through her.

“I wish it weren’t of concern to you, Catherine,” he said harshly, “but I’m afraid it is, since you’ve decided to take up with that cowboy.”

“This is about...Luke?” She barely heard her own voice above the sickening thud of her heart. Her father’s stony silence answered her. “Please, Father,” she begged. “I’m in love with him. Tell me why you’re here.”

He removed his hat and rubbed his lined forehead with the back of one hand. He let out a disgruntled sigh. “You’re a damn fool if you’ve fallen for him.”

Catherine sank down onto a step, trembling. “We’re going to be married,” she announced quietly.

Her father opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

They all heard the rider approaching. Catherine stood and clutched the porch rail for support. Luke slowed his horse as he came through the gateway. He waved at Catherine before dismounting at the hitching post in front of the bunkhouse.

“Matthews!” the sheriff bellowed in his direction.

“Sheriff Campbell.” Luke nodded, walking slowly toward the group on the porch.

“Stop right there,” Harlan ordered, moving toward Luke with one hand on the gun in his holster.

“Father, no!” Catherine screamed, running down the steps after him. Her father reached out a firm hand to keep her behind him.

“Stop or I’ll kill you,” the older man threatened, lifting his revolver.

Luke stopped and put his hands in the air. “Take it easy, Sheriff.”

“I won’t take it easy until you’re behind bars.”

“What?” Catherine cried, looking desperately from her father to Luke. The pain in her chest was squeezing the air out of her lungs.

“What’s the charge, sir?”

“Armed robbery in Cheyenne. You’re under arrest, Luke Matthews.” The sheriff pointed his gun directly at Luke’s chest. “Now step aside nice and easy, away from your horse.”

“No!” Catherine shrieked. “It can’t be true. Tell him, Luke.”

Campbell walked to Luke’s horse, keeping his gun at deadly aim. He reached the saddle, removed Luke’s Colt revolver, and threw it into the dust.

“I’ve done some things I may not be proud of, Catherine, but I’m no outlaw,” Luke assured her. She met his gaze for an instant, quickly spinning toward her father.

“He didn’t do anything wrong, Father. Let him go!”

“Get on your horse,” the sheriff ordered, waving his gun at Luke.

“I’ll go with you, Campbell, to clear my name.” Luke moved slowly to his horse and remounted the animal. Catherine began to cry as he shoved his

arms behind him and allowed her father to bind his wrists together.

Harlan regained his own mount. Looking back at his daughter, he commanded, "You'll come home tomorrow." Then he motioned with his gun for Luke to ride ahead of him.

Luke turned to look one last time at Catherine. "I'll be back, little Cat," he promised. "I love you."

The two men rode off. Catherine's heart wrenched in agony as she fell to her knees in the dirt.

* * * *

"You and I both know I've committed no crime," Luke stated flatly, as he rode slightly ahead of Catherine's father. The lawman had been silent for several miles. Nothing Luke had said seemed to have any effect on the man. "This is some elaborate trick to get me away from your daughter, but it won't work. You've succeeded in the past, Campbell, but this time you're gonna fail. Catherine and I belong together."

The sheriff snorted in derision but didn't reply.

They reached Rocklin after sunset, and Luke was relieved to see few people on hand to witness their arrival. At the jailhouse, Campbell's deputy was sitting in the sheriff's chair with his feet up on the desk, dozing. He jumped to startled attention when the two men walked in.

"Lock him up, Frank," Campbell said. "I'll be back later." He turned and left abruptly.

Luke entered the cell the deputy pointed toward, and the door slammed shut behind him. He heard the key turn in the lock. Although it wasn't

the first time he'd been incarcerated, he'd never been accused of more than participating in a bar room brawl.

"Is there a wanted poster for the man who robbed the bank?" he asked the deputy.

"Yep." Frank had settled back in the sheriff's chair and didn't seem in a hurry to move again.

"Can I see it?"

"S'pose so." A few minutes passed before the deputy rose from his seat. He picked up a paper from the desk and brought it over to the cell, speculating as he looked at Luke. "You sure fit the bill," he decided with a nod. He held the paper just out of his prisoner's reach.

The face on the poster held a striking likeness to him, Luke realized with growing trepidation. The bold words "REWARD" and "DEAD OR ALIVE" made his blood go cold. Below the picture was a short paragraph, and before the deputy lowered the paper, Luke read the words "...took place on July twenty-third..."

Deputy Frank scratched his head. "You're him all right." He turned and walked back across the room.

"This is a mistake," Luke declared hoarsely, his throat closing in fear.

"Sheriff Campbell don't make mistakes."

"I want to see him. Now."

"You'll see him soon enough." The man tipped back in the chair, put his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes.

Luke retreated to the cot and lowered himself onto it. It wouldn't do any good arguing with this

man. He'd speak with the sheriff in the morning and get this whole thing straightened out. He hadn't been in Cheyenne the end of July. The cattle drive had reached Rocklin on the third, and then they'd traveled into Montana. His trail boss and any of the men he'd ridden with could vouch for him.

I didn't do it, Cat. I swear I didn't.

* * * *

Catherine tossed and turned in a fitful sleep. In her nightmare, she watched helplessly as a dark figure pulled a lever on a hastily erected gallows. Luke's intense blue eyes held hers one last time before his body dropped, contorted grotesquely, then swung limply from the thick rope around his neck. The dark figure turned to smile at her, and she saw her father's face.

A scream awakened her. Bathed in sweat, she sat up.

Claire rushed into the room. "Oh, Cath. You've had another dream."

Catherine lay back on the bed and let the new tears flow. They ran down her cheeks and into her hair.

It can't be true. Please, God. Don't let it be true.

She barely touched her breakfast later that morning before excusing herself to pack. She heard Emmett leave the house to hitch the horses to the wagon for the trip into town.

A short time later, Catherine emerged from the guest room with her bag and a forced smile. Claire walked her out onto the front porch.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Claire,” Catherine said quietly.

“I don’t know what to say, Catherine. I feel awful. If I’d only known—”

“He didn’t do it, Claire. There must be some logical explanation for all of this.” Catherine smiled bravely, belying her own fears. “I’ll find out what really happened when I get to town. Not even my father can keep an innocent man behind bars.”

“I hope to God you’re right,” Claire said, pulling her into a hug. “Luke’s a good man, Catherine. Keep believing that and you’ll get through this.” Emmett pulled up in the wagon.

Catherine squeezed Claire’s hand. “Take care of yourself and that baby.” She let Emmett help her up onto the bench. He kissed his wife, placed Catherine’s suitcases in the back of the wagon, and joined her on the wooden seat.

* * * *

Luke sat on the edge of the cot in the small cell, finishing the breakfast someone had delivered from the café. He had to keep his strength and wits about him if he was going to beat the false charges against him. He eyed the sheriff, who had appeared about fifteen minutes earlier. They hadn’t spoken. Campbell talked quietly to the deputy who had relieved Frank during the night; then the younger man left.

Luke pushed his plate through the slot at the bottom of the cell door. The sheriff looked over at him.

“I hope you enjoyed it, ‘cause that’s the last meal you’ll eat in this town.”

Luke stood, his stomach wound tight. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're leavin' here today. The train comes through at the top of the hour. You'll be on it."

"Where am I goin'?"

"Cheyenne. Then anywhere else you want, as long as it's far away."

"Yesterday you accused me of robbin' a bank. You threatened to put a bullet in me if I tried to ride off on you. Today I'm just goin' to leave town, nice and quiet-like."

"That's right."

"The hell it is. I'm not the man on that poster, dammit, and I can prove it!" Luke held onto the jail cell bars, his knuckles white, his face pressed against the cold steel. "I haven't been in Cheyenne since the cattle drive went through there in June. Plenty of men will tell you that."

"I don't give a damn what anyone will say on your behalf. Your face on that poster is all I need to keep you away from my town and my daughter." Campbell stepped forward, carrying his solid bulk with menace. "You've done enough damage already."

Luke squeezed his eyes shut a moment and reined in his rage. "Just what is it you're so afraid of—losing your little girl?" He bit the words out. "What kind of man will go to this extreme to control his own child?" He shook his head fiercely. "She's nearly forty years old, Campbell. Doesn't she deserve a life of her own? Dammit, let her go!"

“My daughter is none of your business,” the sheriff said evenly. He pulled his watch out of his vest pocket and checked the time. “Your ride should be about here.”

“I’ll come back.”

Campbell stared directly at him, his eyes burning with contempt. “This whole town will believe you robbed that bank when they see that poster, and they’ll see it, you can count on that. If you ever step foot around these parts again, I’ll have you shot.” He paused, letting his words sink in. “A lot of people around here wouldn’t mind becoming a hero and collectin’ the reward money the bank’s offered.”

“Catherine will know I didn’t rob that bank. She knows me better than that.”

Campbell had a ready answer. “She’ll take one look at the poster and won’t see anything but your face on it. She’ll be too upset to read the fine print, and even if she does, she won’t question my authority. In time, she’ll forget all about you. In fact, she’ll do that mighty quick. I’ll see to it.”

“You’ve done this before, you son of a bitch.”

“I’ve done what I’ve had to do to keep men like you away from her.”

“She’ll hate you when she discovers the truth,” Luke growled. “If you really cared for her, you wouldn’t—”

“I care for her more than anything alive on this earth!” Campbell roared vehemently. He turned toward the door as it opened. The deputy entered the room, looking cautiously at the two men. A

long whistle sounded as the train pulled into the station.

"Escort this man to the depot and accompany him as far as Cheyenne," the sheriff instructed his deputy. "And," he added, "if he tries to escape, kill him."

* * * *

"Take me straight to the jailhouse, Emmett."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Catherine? Do you really want to see him locked up?"

"I have to see him."

"All right, then, but I'm comin' with you." Emmett stopped at the Campbell house, placed Catherine's suitcases just inside the front door, and came back to the wagon. He turned the rig onto Main and pulled to a stop in front of the sheriff's office.

Catherine's heart thrummed with anticipation at seeing Luke, and anxiety over what her father might have done. She forced a smile to help ease the worry written all over Emmett's face.

"I'll be fine, Emmett. I won't fall to pieces again."

She strode purposely through the open doorway, ready to challenge her father and proclaim Luke's innocence. Emmett followed close behind. She stopped short when she saw the empty cells. Hope rose in her heart. It was all a mistake, and Luke had already been freed.

"Father? Where is Luke?"

He stepped toward her. "He's gone, Catherine."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"He's on his way to Cheyenne."

"No!" she cried. "Oh, Father, how could you?"

"For God's sake, Catherine. He robbed a bank at gunpoint. Someone could have been hurt. He nearly killed Emmett's cook with his bare hands. He's a dangerous man."

"No," she said, fighting the tremor in her voice. "I can't believe that."

"What will happen to him?" Emmett asked.

The sheriff took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't rightly know for sure. It'll be up to the authorities down there." To both of them he said, "It'd be best if you forgot you ever knew him."

Catherine stared straight into her father's eyes. "That will never happen," she vowed.

Emmett looked down at the floor. "What should I do with his things?" he asked quietly.

"I want them!" Catherine cried.

"Catherine—" her father started.

"Next time you come to town, Emmett, please bring me whatever he left."

"I won't have that outlaw's filthy possessions in my house."

"It's my house too, Father." *And he's not an outlaw. He said so himself.*

Campbell gave in with a grunt. "Why don't you take his horse out to your place, Emmett," he suggested. "I'm sure you can use another mount. It's over at the livery."

Emmett nodded somberly. "I've got to be headin' home. Catherine, can I take you back to your house?"

“No thank you, Emmett.” She smiled weakly at him. “I’m grateful for your kindness and hospitality. Take care of Claire.”

“You know you’re always welcome at our place.”

Catherine stood silently in the doorway, watching Emmett go. Her father came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. She pulled away and stepped out the door into the midday sun.

“Will you join me for lunch at the cafe?” he asked.

“No,” she replied coldly. She walked away from him, down the boardwalk. Somehow, she managed to get home before the black grief took hold.

Chapter 14

“I can’t take your money, Mike.”

“Sure you can.” The deputy thrust a wad of bills and coins from his own pocket toward Luke. “I know you left Rocklin unexpectedly. I want to help is all.”

Luke didn’t plan on being away from Catherine, Rocklin, or his savings for very long. Still, the meager amount of money he carried wouldn’t go far. Since he didn’t have a horse, he’d be buying a train ticket back north.

“Much obliged,” Luke said gratefully, taking the other man’s money. “I’ll pay you back.”

Mike shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I just hope you have better luck somewhere else.”

Luke nodded. The two men had become unlikely friends on the train ride to Cheyenne, despite the grim situation Luke was in and the orders the deputy had to shoot him. They’d talked at length.

“So you’re really headin’ back to Rocklin without knowin’ where I’m goin’ or what I’m doin’?” Luke asked.

“Yep.”

“Don’t you want to turn me into the law?”

“Sheriff only said to get you this far. The rest is up to you. If it was me...well, you didn’t ask for advice.”

“What would you do?” Luke prompted.

“I’d catch the next train for Omaha and get on back to where I was welcome. It sure sounds like you’ve got good people there. Yep, that’s what I’d do in your shoes.”

The two men shook hands and parted company. Mike went into the station to buy a ticket on the next train headed north. Luke shoved his hands into his denim pants pockets and walked away, toward downtown Cheyenne, a hot meal, and a room for the night.

* * * *

Catherine lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, willing the darkness to come so she might sleep. “Oh, Luke.” Silent tears poured from her eyes. “Dear God,” she prayed brokenly, “please don’t let him be hurt... Please bring him back to me...”

Her ears rang with the memory of his last words to her.

I’ll be back, Cat. I love you.

She hugged her pillow with a keen desperation. “I love you, Luke,” she cried into the softness, wishing she had told him that one more time before he left. The pain of losing him after their short time together stabbed her heart and pierced her spirit. The nearly debilitating grief that swept through her was similar to that of losing her mother, only this time Catherine was left with a

raw, aching need. She pressed her face further into the pillow, sobbing in despair.

She had never known heartbreak like this.

* * * *

Luke sat on the edge of the bed in the cheap room he'd rented in Cheyenne, watching dust motes drift through fingers of early morning light. He contemplated his next move. For most of the last seventeen years, he had wandered from place to place, hiring out as drover or ranch hand. He'd never had to think very hard about what to do next. He'd always worked toward his goal of earning enough money to start his own ranch, but he'd never known where he wanted to settle until he'd met Catherine Campbell.

But now, as the deputy had reminded him, the one place he most wanted to be was where he couldn't go. He'd be shot on sight.

Luke closed his eyes and let Catherine's lovely face play out once again on the backs of his eyelids. She smiled, beckoning to him. She loved him...believed in him. When her father had accused him of robbery, she hadn't hesitated to come to his defense.

He'd thought about his situation all night, getting little sleep. Now his mind was made up. He knew what he had to do.

He rose and dressed, wishing he had a clean set of clothes. After grooming as best he could, he left the dingy room and asked the hotel desk clerk for directions to the sheriff's office. The man looked at him oddly, and Luke wondered if his face on the wanted poster was plastered all over town.

If so, he'd be lucky to make it to the jail before someone turned him in.

Hesitantly, he stepped outside. His destination was only a few blocks away. The heady aroma of freshly brewed coffee teased him as he passed a small café. There would be time for that later.

When he entered the sheriff's office, a small man with a deputy's badge scowled at him from behind a cluttered desk.

"Yeah, what is it?" he muttered, clearly irritated by the interruption.

Luke recited the words he'd rehearsed all morning. "I'm here to see the sheriff. I was accused of a crime I didn't commit, and I want to clear my name."

The deputy eyed him more closely. A flash of recognition crossed his face and he jumped up from his chair. "You just hold it right there, mister. I'll get the sheriff." Without taking his eyes off Luke, he backed toward a door behind the desk and knocked on it.

With nerves drawn taut, Luke scanned his surroundings. His eyes lit on the same wanted poster he'd seen in Rocklin. His likeness adorned one wall of the room along with dozens of other faces. His stomach twisted. Surely, this sheriff would listen to reason.

The door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered, formidable-looking man stepped out. His dark eyes narrowed as he took his first look at Luke.

"Well, if this don't beat all. Come to turn yourself in?" The lawman shook his head in amazement. "An outlaw with a conscience."

"I'm no outlaw," Luke began. He stood his ground with his feet planted firmly apart. "I know I look like the man who robbed your bank, but only a fool would waltz in here if he were guilty. I'm not a fool, and I wasn't in Cheyenne in late July. I can give you the names of men who will vouch for me." He divided his stare between the two men watching him.

"Lock him up."

The deputy and another man Luke hadn't noticed strode forward. "Wait a damn minute!" Luke shouted, raising his hands in front of him. "Why in the hell would I be standin' here if I was your man?"

The two deputies grabbed Luke's arms and yanked him toward a cell at the back of the room. He resisted with everything he had, kneeling one man in the groin and butting his head into the other's mid-section. He glanced up to see a thick wooden club coming toward him. Then there was nothing.

* * * *

"I've had a belly full of your silent treatment."

Catherine walked several steps behind her father on their way to church. She didn't respond to his comment just as she hadn't responded to anything he'd said since the day of Luke's disappearance. It would do her no good to talk to him. He would only defend what he'd done to Luke...and to her.

Inside the church, she sat at arm's length from Harlan in their pew, ignoring his scowl and his repeated attempts at conversation. After the service,

she stepped out the church doors and headed for home without waiting for him. He could take his noon meal at the café, again.

"Catherine!" Susan Applegate called, hurrying to catch her before she could leave the churchyard. The younger woman tapped Catherine on the shoulder. "I heard about Luke Matthews. Is it true? Did he really rob a bank?"

Catherine stepped away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Wait," Susan said, moving in front of her, oblivious to the emotions Catherine knew were apparent on her face. "He was there at the ranch, wasn't he? He was working for the Saunders'."

Catherine nodded, unable to speak around the too-familiar ache in her throat. She'd kept to the house since the day Luke left. Now she wished she hadn't ventured out at all.

"Did he tell you about the robbery? Why was he working for Emmett Saunders when he had all that money stashed away?"

Catherine blinked at Susan's questions. She barely heard her father when he called her name from across the churchyard. If she could just concentrate on reaching the gate, she could be home in a few minutes. Today the short distance seemed like miles.

Clearly bored with Catherine's lack of information, Susan walked away. Before Catherine made it to the path toward home, her father drew alongside her, halting her escape with a grip on her arm.

"I want to introduce you to someone," he said. She gave him a frigid stare.

“Snap out of it, Catherine. You’re beginning to frighten me.”

“If the lady isn’t feeling sociable today, I understand.”

Catherine turned at the sound of an unfamiliar voice behind them.

“Nonsense,” Harlan said. “She’s been under the weather for a few days, but she’s feeling much better, aren’t you, dear?”

Catherine looked at the man standing before her. She glanced beyond him to see the Pickerings, the elderly couple who owned the mercantile, waiting expectantly.

“Raymond Pickering,” the man said, bringing her attention back to him. “I’m sure you know my aunt and uncle. They’ve told me so much about you, Miss Campbell.” He smiled and reached for her hand, but Catherine snatched it away.

“Pardon my daughter, Raymond,” her father said gruffly. He gave her a nudge with his elbow. “She’s a bit...shy.”

“I understand completely. No offense taken.”

Catherine studied Raymond Pickering while he spoke to her father. The man appeared to be in his mid to late forties. His eyes were hazel, and his hair was peppered with gray and thinning at the top. His clothes were finely tailored, his shoes polished to a high gloss. She recalled Martha Pickering once mentioning a favorite nephew and how the store would one day go to him since they had no children of their own.

“Catherine, dear, I invited Raymond for supper this evening. He just recently moved to town. We

want to show him a warm welcome to Rocklin now, don't we?"

What on earth was her father doing—matching her up with this man?

"I'm afraid my father forgot that I have other plans for this evening, Mr. Pickering. I am sorry."

The man glanced from Catherine to her father, then back to her.

"Oh, well, I understand. Perhaps we can dine together another time."

"I'm sure my daughter's plans can be changed," Harlan said with authority. "Nothing is more important than making a newcomer feel at home in a strange town."

"I don't want to intrude—"

"You aren't, I assure you. My daughter is a splendid cook. Supper is at seven."

"Miss Campbell?" Raymond Pickering turned to her. "Are you sure you're feeling up to company this evening?" His tone dripped with politeness.

She looked past him again and caught the disappointed expression on Martha Pickering's face. The woman had been a good friend of her mother's. It just wasn't in Catherine to be rude to Martha's nephew, and she was too weary in mind and body to continue the battle of wills with her father.

"I'll see you at seven, Mr. Pickering," she said with a forced smile, then turned to go.

"We'll look forward to it," Harlan added behind her.

She really wasn't in a mood to talk to him yet, so she walked briskly along the path toward home.

It was an effort for him to catch up to her, and she felt a bit guilty when she heard him wheezing at her side. She slowed.

"I've come to realize," he began between breaths, "that perhaps you're ready for a home of your own, Catherine. Raymond Pickering is a fine man. He's from good people. He'll be running the mercantile by this time next year." He paused as they reached their gate. "He would make a suitable husband."

* * * *

Luke sat on the edge of his hard jail cell cot, rubbing the lump left on his head by the wooden club. He'd been on his back for the better part of two days. The deputy could have killed him, yet no one had summoned a doctor to check his injury. Luke stood on wobbly legs and grabbed onto the bars of the cell door.

"Hey!" he yelled, the sound ricocheting through his aching head. A few other prisoners shouted "Shut up!" or cursed at him. Luke waited for someone to come, pressing his head against the soothing coolness of the metal bars.

A fat man with a gun and a ring of keys on his belt appeared at the end of the corridor between the cells. "What're ya yellin' fer?" he snarled when he got to Luke's cubicle.

"You fellas are makin' a big mistake," Luke began. "I demand that someone come from the bank and clear all this up. And I demand to see a lawyer."

"Is that so?" The man was clearly amused. "Think yer in a position to make demands? Well, it

just so happens that one of the bank's owners came by while ya was nappin'. He said ya sure look like the right man. He was pretty riled up."

"Is he a witness?"

The man scratched his balding scalp. "Sorta, but ya knocked him out too quick for him to get a real good look at ya. He's still mad as hornets for that, let me tell ya. But he'd like to see ya hang for what ya did to his wife."

A chill raced up Luke's back. Was he being charged with more than robbery? He'd never harmed a woman in his life. "I didn't rob the bank, so I couldn't have done anything to the banker's wife."

The deputy shrugged. "Ol' Peabody sent her back East just so's she could ferget."

"Forget what?"

The man laughed, and his large belly shook. "Ferget how ya kissed her right after ya snatched all that money from the vault."

"What the hell? I didn't—"

The man twisted his mouth to spit a cheek full of tobacco juice onto the floor. He hooted with laughter. "Folks 'round here say she's not gonna be fergetin' yer face for a long time!"

A sick feeling sent Luke back to the cot. He wasn't sure if it came from his aching head or this new information, but he certainly couldn't find any humor in the situation. "Is she the only eyewitness?"

"Yep."

"When's she comin' back?"

The jailer smirked. "Maybe not fer a good long time."

Luke closed his eyes against the throbbing pain. "What about a lawyer?"

The man laughed. "I'll send ya a lawyer, all right." He spit again as he moved back down the row of cells.

Luke held his head in both hands. At least there was a witness. They couldn't convict him until she came back. She'd say it wasn't him who'd robbed the bank. Surely, the woman would remember the man who'd kissed her.

A few hours later, the sheriff banged on the cell door. Luke sat up, relieved to discover his vision no longer blurred. He went to the bars and peered out at the lawman. "I hear there's a witness. When is she comin'?"

The same self-satisfied smirk Luke had seen on the jailer's face appeared on the sheriff's. "Mrs. Peabody has left town for quite some time. She's visiting family in New York."

"Well, she'll just have to cut her visit short. That woman can set all of you straight." Luke shot a challenging glare at the lawman.

"The Peabodys barely escaped with their lives."
"

"I've never heard of anybody dyin' from being kissed."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed on Luke. "So you're admitting you kissed Mrs. Peabody?"

"I'm not admittin' anything," Luke growled. "I was workin' a cattle drive when your bank was

robbed, dammit. You can contact Jack Briscoe's outfit from Fort Worth."

"Save it for the hangin' judge." The sheriff paused and let his words sink in. "You can just cool your heels in my jail awhile, mister. Consider it home sweet home for the time being." He chuckled to himself and left, the heavy door at the end of the cellblock clanging shut behind him.

Luke turned and leaned back against the bars. The image of his ghostly twin shimmered along the far wall of the enclosure, "Hey," Luke whispered, managing a grin. "Where were you on July twenty-third?"

* * * *

Catherine began supper preparations later than usual that evening so she could stay in the kitchen until the meal was ready to be served. She could hear her father and Raymond Pickering talking like old friends in the parlor, and it saddened and angered her at the same time.

It should be Luke.

Catherine knew her father would never have invited Luke for supper in his home, newcomer or not. She closed her eyes, swallowed hard, and tried to force the image of Luke's face from her mind. She'd never get through the evening otherwise. If she focused all her thoughts on playing the hostess, perhaps the time would pass quickly.

Raymond Pickering was polite and charming, full of compliments over Catherine's cooking. Every time he sent her a smile, Catherine felt awkward. She couldn't help but notice that her father didn't seem to mind the man's attention to

her, which was highly out of character for him. He kept the conversation moving, and when Catherine attempted to clear the table, instructed her to relax and be sociable. If she hadn't cared about how she would appear to the Pickerings, she would have walked right out of the dining room.

A knock on the front door a short time later brought the sheriff out of his chair. He returned to the table to announce he was needed downtown, and promptly left Catherine alone with Raymond Pickering.

"I'm sure you have to be going also," she said as politely as she could.

He shook his head and smiled. "I'm in no hurry, Miss Campbell. If you don't mind, I'd like to stay in your refreshing company awhile longer."

She'd barely spoken to him, so she didn't know how her company could be called refreshing. And she did mind if he stayed. She'd much rather scrub pots and pans.

"This gives us a chance to get to know one another better, and I must confess I want to do just that." He stood and motioned toward the parlor. "Please sit with me a spell, Miss Campbell."

Catherine took a breath and complied. She took a chair across from where he settled on the davenport. His presence made her uneasy while her father's absence annoyed her. His summons to town was much too convenient and all too rare. Probably nothing was happening that one of his deputies couldn't handle. He had never left her in a man's company before, not in all her years, and she was highly suspicious of his motives.

"Please tell me about yourself, Miss Campbell," Raymond Pickering requested.

She swallowed a resigned sigh. "There's really very little to tell," she said. "Nothing much happens in Rocklin. It's really a very quiet community."

"Quiet?" He chuckled. "I hardly think so. The day I arrived I saw one of your father's men escorting a man onto the train. A bank robber, Uncle Roland said. I was close enough to touch the outlaw myself."

"He's not an outlaw!" Catherine cried out.

Raymond was silent a moment while her words hung in the air. "So, it's true what I've heard," he said finally. "You were familiar with that man?"

"Luke Matthews worked for friends of mine."

Raymond studied her face. "I'm no fool, Miss Campbell. If I'm going to court you, I should like to know just how closely you were associated with him."

"Court me?" Catherine gaped at him. "Mr. Pickering, I don't even know you."

He gifted her with a confident smile. "Your father has made it clear he would approve of my calling on you."

"I'm not a child, Mr. Pickering. I will decide whether or not a man calls on me, and I—"

"Were you intimate with Matthews?" Raymond leaned forward.

Catherine stood. "You have no right to ask me such a thing."

"As a man wishing to court a woman—"

"I have no desire to be courted by you, Mr. Pickering. I think you should leave."

He rose and regarded her intently in a way that made Catherine feel she was being judged.

"I meant no offense, Miss Campbell. I'm afraid I spoke too hastily. I do intend to court you, and I am not so easily dissuaded."

"There are other unmarried women in Rocklin, Mr. Pickering."

"Ah, yes, but any as lovely?" He stepped toward her and she retreated. He smiled. "I'll be calling on you soon."

* * * *

"Miss Campbell!" Sarah Beth flew into Catherine's arms the minute she stepped out the door of the bakery. Catherine smiled down at the little girl, gathering her close.

"How are you, Catherine?" Lyla Mitchell asked with a smile. Sarah's mother was an old friend.

"I'm fine, thank you." Catherine managed a smile for the other woman as well. She wondered if Lyla had heard any rumors concerning her but decided not to ask. People could just think whatever they wanted.

"We just came from the mercantile, and I helped Mama add up our purchases, Miss Campbell. She says I'm doing real good with my numbers." Sarah Beth beamed proudly. "And that nice man in there said I was a real smart girl."

"Good for you, Sarah." Catherine glanced toward the front window of the mercantile, where Sarah pointed. Raymond Pickering stood watching

them. He smiled and nodded. Catherine looked quickly away.

"That nice man asked about you, too," Sarah went on. "He asked if you'd taught me my sums, and I told him you had."

"Well," Catherine said, feeling the merchant's eyes on her as she regarded the little girl. "I can't take the credit, you know. It's your own hard work that's paying off."

"I'm so glad Sarah has another term with you before she starts lessons with Mr. Applegate," Lyla said. She gazed down at her daughter's head. "I'm not ready for her to be disciplined in such a strict manner."

Lyla was voicing a concern few parents admitted, and Catherine could only agree. "I'm sure Sarah will do fine when the time comes." Her hand smoothed Sarah Beth's blond braid. "But I'm very happy that I'll be able to work with her next spring." Touching the girl's soft, sweet-smelling hair brought out Catherine's own maternal instinct. Her eyes misted a moment, and she blinked back tears. "Cherish the time you have with her now, Lyla. They grow up so fast."

Sarah's mother smiled and nodded. The Mitchells walked on down the boardwalk to finish their errands.

"You think you have all the luck, don't you, Catherine Campbell."

Startled, Catherine turned to find Susan Applegate behind her. The other woman's gaze slid to the window of the mercantile, then back to Catherine.

"First Luke Matthews, now Raymond Pickering. When one leaves, another just takes his place."

"I didn't want Luke to leave," Catherine said quietly. "And the Pickering's nephew means nothing to me."

"I saw you speaking to him yesterday. You were making eyes at him just now."

The warm feeling Catherine had experienced from visiting with the Mitchells turned as cold as Susan Applegate's gray stare. "I beg your pardon."

"Raymond Pickering was standing at that window." Susan pointed.

"Was he? Perhaps he was looking at you, Susan." Catherine walked away. A moment later, she greeted Michael Reeves as she stepped inside the sheriff's office.

"Miss Campbell." The deputy nodded at her politely. "Your father went to check a report of cattle-rustling south of town."

"Good. I wanted to speak to you."

Reeves' brown eyebrows rose. "Me?"

"You were the last person to see Luke Matthews."

"Yep."

"I want to know what happened when you got to Cheyenne."

He spoke slowly. "I left him there and came back on the next train."

"Did you turn him over to the authorities?"

Deputy Reeves turned his head and looked out the front window. A few moments passed before

he spoke again. "I did what the sheriff told me to do."

"Which was?"

"Take him to Cheyenne."

Catherine sighed. "Mr. Reeves, I need to know what happened to Luke."

"It would be best if you didn't." The deputy's lips thinned into a solemn line.

Catherine's stomach began to roll. "You mean..."

"You shouldn't be askin' me such things. Your father's the one who should be explainin'."

"H-How can I find out...for sure...what happened?" Catherine's voice shook with the effort to control her terrifying thoughts. "Would you send a telegram to the sheriff's office in Cheyenne...ask them what's become of Luke?"

"Miss Campbell..."

"Then I'll do it myself."

The telegraph and postal office stood directly next door. Catherine gathered her courage and strode to the counter. She had to find out about Luke, even if the news was bad. She should have done something sooner, but she'd been too distraught to think or act.

"I need to send a telegram to the sheriff in Cheyenne," she told the clerk. "Have it say I'm asking for the whereabouts of Luke Matthews. He arrived in Cheyenne several days ago and he may have been..." She swallowed, unable to voice her most fearful thoughts. "He may have been put in jail." She ignored the clerk's astonished expression. "Send it immediately. Please have the reply

delivered to my house as soon as you receive it.” Catherine paid the clerk and left the office.

At home, she paced the floor, wishing she’d just stayed in town and waited for the return message. A score of what if’s paraded through her mind. What if Luke had already been cleared and released? Then he’d be on his way back to Rocklin, of that she was sure. What if Luke was incarcerated and awaiting trial? Then she’d go to Cheyenne. She’d be there for him, no matter what.

What if Luke had already been executed?

Deputy Reeves’ guarded expression and carefully spoken words had escalated Catherine’s fears for the man she loved.

“No!” she cried aloud. Luke couldn’t be dead. She would feel it. She would know. But yet, as the minutes ticked by and no word came, she steeled herself for the worst. What would she do then?

Catherine batted at her tears and headed down the hallway to her bedroom to pack. If Luke were dead, she would go to Cheyenne to claim his body—God help her, she would—and she’d send him home to Nebraska.

She entered her room just as a knock sounded on the front door. Stifling a cry with her hand, Catherine took several deep breaths, telling herself the message would be good—that Luke was alive and well. Alive and well.

Hurrying back down the hallway, she threw the door open in breathless anticipation. A young man handed her an envelope, smiled hesitantly, and left.

With trembling hands, Catherine tore open the telegram. She read the short printed message and sucked in a ragged breath. The paper fell from her hands to the floor. She hadn't even considered such a possibility.

The sheriff had never heard of anyone named Luke Matthews.

Chapter 15

Raymond Pickering came for supper several times over the next few weeks. Although he was polite to her, Catherine was always relieved when no one called her father to town, and she managed to excuse herself each evening as soon as the dishes were cleared.

She reclined on the settee in her room late one evening in September and listened to the soft ticking of the clock on her bedside table. It felt as though her life was ticking away as well. She'd have a birthday the first week of October. At the age of forty, she would still be unmarried and lonelier than ever.

Her thoughts turned to Luke once again. Plenty of time had passed since she'd spoken to Deputy Reeves about the men's trip to Cheyenne. If Luke wasn't in jail there, where was he? Why hadn't he come back like he'd promised? Why hadn't he contacted her?

The awful possibility that she had been deceived crept like a shadow over Catherine's spirit. It wasn't the first time she'd had such traitorous thoughts, though she'd struggled valiantly against

them. She'd only known Luke a few weeks, and she'd fallen hard for his quick wit and intelligence, his good looks, his surprising tenderness.

But he freely admitted to being a wanderer.

Catherine shook the negative thoughts from her mind. Luke had said he loved her. He'd said he'd be back.

Just words. He probably decided that you really are too old for him.

"No!" she cried aloud, hugging her pillow fiercely.

The seed of doubt had been planted in her heart, however, and with no word from Luke, it grew.

* * * *

"Are you the lawyer?"

Luke peered at the small bespectacled man on the other side of the iron bars. The man nodded. "I'm Byron McCauley." He made no move to shake Luke's hand.

"This whole thing's a mistake. I've never robbed a bank in my life, and I've only been through Cheyenne in passin' till now."

"That poster sure looks like you."

Luke nodded in agreement. "I've seen it. But it's not me." Luke exhaled raggedly, wondering if he was wasting his breath. "You've got to help me. I don't belong in here." Luke hated to ask anyone to do anything for him, but he was in desperate need of help. He'd already spent too many weeks locked up and away from Catherine. He felt dirty, dispirited, and bone-weary.

"You got money?" the lawyer asked.

He was also mad as hell. "I can pay you."

"How much?"

Luke glared at the little man. "Whatever you ask. Just get me out."

Interest flared in the lawyer's eyes, but before he could speak another word, the sheriff stepped out of the shadows in the corridor.

"Thanks, McCauley," the lawman said. "You just got me as close to a confession as I need. You can go now." The little man avoided Luke's enraged stare and hurried away.

"You son of a bitch!" Luke shouted. "I've got money—my *own* damn money!"

The sheriff crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the cell across from Luke's. "If you want to tell me where the money is, we might be able to make some kind of deal."

"Go to hell."

The man smirked. "I think that's where you'll be goin' when this is over, mister, not me."

* * * *

Catherine found it difficult to grasp the change in her father's attitude. He fully welcomed Raymond's frequent visits. The merchant wasn't entirely unappealing, and she could hardly avoid his company without appearing rude. She had even started joining her father and Raymond on the front porch after supper on the evenings when it wasn't too chilly.

"If you're going to keep refusing to let me court you, Miss Campbell," Raymond said one night when her father had disappeared into the house, "I would like to know that now. I can't tell if there's a

spark of interest here or not. I don't wish to waste either of our time."

She gave him credit for being honest and persistent. While part of her would feel she was betraying Luke by seeing another man, another part of her—which grew stronger every day—felt she was the one who'd been betrayed, and possibly played for a fool.

"A simple yes or no will do, Miss Campbell," Raymond said, breaking her reverie.

Catherine looked down at her hands, clenched tightly in her lap. Her birthday loomed ahead of her, as did her lonely future. If Luke had wanted to be part of that, he would have come back.

He'd broken his promise. She owed him nothing.

"You may court me," she replied solemnly. He looked so pleased at her answer that she smiled in spite of herself.

"Now, that's what I've been wanting to see. You have a beautiful smile, Miss Campbell. I'll expect to see many more."

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Depends what it is," he said with a wink.

"How old are you, Mr. Pickering?"

He nodded as though he'd been expecting the question. "I'm forty-nine. I have never been married, same as you. I'd like to take a wife before I'm fifty." He smiled. "I'm not saying that to put any sort of pressure on you, Miss Campbell. That's just a fact. And I'd like you to call me Ray. May I call you Catherine?"

She nodded.

“How are we gettin’ along?” Harlan said as he stepped back outside.

Catherine suspected he’d been eavesdropping. “Just fine, Father.”

“Your lovely daughter just agreed to allow my courting, Sheriff.”

“Did she? Well, I expected her to come to her senses,” Harlan said with a chuckle. Catherine felt her face go hot with embarrassment. He turned to her. “I’m very pleased, dear.”

She was no longer sure she cared whether he was pleased with her or not, but the time had come for them to get back on more cordial terms. Her father may have sent Luke away, but it appeared that Luke didn’t plan on returning, and perhaps she was better off for it.

Ray stood. “As much as I regret the idea, I must be heading home. I’m sure my aunt and uncle have a full day planned for me tomorrow.” He took Catherine’s hand and squeezed it lightly. “I’ll see you soon, Catherine. Thank you for a lovely evening.”

“Good night...Ray.” She watched in amazement as her father clapped Ray on the back as if congratulating him for a job well done.

Had she done the right thing? To look at her father, one would think yes. But inside Catherine’s heart, it felt like no.

* * * *

The annual box social to benefit the school was held the following weekend. Ray had already declared he’d be the highest bidder on the colorfully decorated and beribboned wooden box Catherine

had prepared. The man who bought the box containing a meal for two also claimed the woman for supper and dancing.

The merchant looked smart in brown corduroy trousers and a crisp white shirt when he called on Catherine Saturday afternoon. He wore a bola tie around his collar and new brown leather boots on his feet. He had tucked a picnic blanket under one arm. Catherine smiled as she met him at the door. She wore a flowered skirt and a pale blue blouse, buttoned up to just below her chin. Her hair was pinned under a blue hat adorned with a matching floral scarf.

“You look especially pretty today, Catherine,” Ray said appreciatively.

“And you look quite gallant.” His smile widened as she stepped out the door. He exchanged the blanket for the supper box, and they walked together to the town park. As promised, no one beat Ray’s bid, and he happily settled on the blanket next to Catherine when the boxes were awarded.

Harlan bought Eva Thompson’s supper box, and the other couple sat nearby. Eva ran the café, and Catherine believed she had been sweet on her father for years. As the evening progressed and Harlan’s attention to Eva became more evident, Catherine wondered if her father had decided it was time for him to make plans for his future as well.

Later, as a wonderfully cool autumn breeze tossed the treetops, Catherine and Ray headed for Jessup’s barn. She sensed a growing nervousness

in her companion the closer they drew to the festively noisy building.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’m not much for dancing.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re a fine dancer,” she said, smiling her encouragement. She vowed not to compare Ray’s skill as a dancer to Luke’s, though she knew the memories of the handsome cowboy’s arms around her were etched into her heart and mind forever.

Raymond Pickering is my future, she reminded herself firmly.

They stepped into the warm glow of activity. As Catherine scanned the interior of the barn, she spotted Emmett and Claire near the refreshment table. Catherine hadn’t known they were coming. She suddenly felt self-conscious and ashamed, and quickly released her hand from Ray’s arm. He glanced her way while he talked with some local merchants but didn’t seem to mind when she wandered off in the direction of the Saunders’.

“Catherine!” Claire cried at her approach. The friends embraced. “We were late for the social, and you had already left your house. I hoped you’d be here.” Emmett greeted Catherine, then moved off to visit old friends of his own.

“How are you?” Catherine asked, assessing the other woman’s growing figure.

“I’m feeling great, Cath. You?” Claire looked concerned.

“I’m fine.” Catherine worked up a smile, bracing herself to tell her friend about Raymond Pickering.

"We're staying at my folks' house this trip," Claire explained. "We sort of decided at the last minute to come. I wanted to see you, Cath. Emmett brought..." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Brought what, Claire? Did I leave something at your house?"

She shook her head. "No. Never mind. It looks like you're handling everything well. I've been thinking about you. I'm glad you're all right."

"Luke's things," Catherine nearly shouted when she recalled that Emmett was going to hold onto Luke's possessions until his next trip to town. "You brought them with you?"

Claire nodded. "There wasn't much. Emmett gave the clothes to one of our hands." She paused. "Do you still want his things, Cath?"

"Of course I do."

"It's just that, well, my mother said you're seeing the Pickering's nephew now."

Catherine felt a blush rise to her cheeks. She wished she'd been the one to tell her friend the news. "Yes, I am," she admitted. "It all happened so suddenly, Claire. But he's a fine man. I'd like you to meet him."

"Where is he?"

Catherine gestured across the room to where she'd left Ray. "Over there, in brown, talking to Miles Landen."

"I heard he was nice-looking," Claire said, craning her neck for a better look. "What's he like?"

“Oh, I don't really know him that well. He's very polite. Father even likes him, if you can believe that. Most people have taken to him already.”

“Yes, I can see that, too.” Claire tilted her head thoughtfully.

“Oh, Claire,” Catherine sighed. “Let's talk.” She led them to a bale of hay covered with a blanket for sitting in a private corner, away from the crowd. Catherine poured out all she'd been feeling and thinking, explaining everything that had happened in the time since she'd left the ranch. She was thankful she had a friend she could trust. Claire listened attentively.

When Catherine was through, she asked, “Am I wrong, Claire? Do you think it's too soon to let Ray court me? You can be completely honest with me, you know that.”

“I think,” Claire replied, “that everyone needs to do what feels right for them. If it feels right, that's wonderful, Cath. I just want you to be happy.”

Catherine shook her head slowly. “I don't really know what I think about Ray yet.” Her eyes met her friend's. “But I do know I want what you have of Luke's.”

“The box is at my folks'. Maybe you could come over after church tomorrow.”

Catherine nodded, and the two women were silent for a time. When Catherine glanced across the room a few moments later, Ray caught her gaze and smiled. Although looking at him caused no palpitations to her heart, she felt a certain amount of pleasure in knowing someone cared for her.

“Would you and Emmett come meet Ray now?” she asked quietly.

Claire smiled. “Let’s go find that husband of mine.”

Later they danced. Claire glided gracefully around the floor in Emmett’s arms, while Catherine felt awkward in Ray’s. After several tunes, she was relieved when he claimed exhaustion. They each picked up a glass of punch and went outside.

“Whew!” Raymond exclaimed. “Feels good out here.”

They sipped their drinks and strolled around the yard. Catherine tried not to remember the night Luke had walked her outside for some fresh air.

Ray looked at her and smiled. “I would like to kiss you, Catherine.”

Perhaps that was what she needed to get her mind off Luke. “All right,” she agreed, lifting her face to him.

Ray’s lips touched hers tentatively. They were still wet from his last sip of punch. Catherine pressed her mouth more fully against his, anticipating the tingle that would begin low in her belly. Nothing happened. Ray’s hands rested lightly on her waist. She put hers around his neck, pulling him closer. She parted her lips and again waited for him to take charge of the kiss.

Ray pulled back and stared at her. “Just how many men have you kissed, Catherine?”

“How many?” she repeated. *Don't ask me for numbers*, she almost said. Ray probably wouldn't appreciate the humor.

“Have you had many suitors?” he prompted, his hazel eyes shining intently in the moonlight.

“Some. And you?”

His lips curled up slightly. “Some.” There seemed to be another question lingering in his eyes, but instead of voicing it he said, “Let's get back to the others before someone comes looking for us.”

At her door that night, Ray kissed her once more, his lips pleasantly soft and dry. Again, she felt no spark, no burning desire to prolong the moment.

“Goodnight, Catherine.”

“I had a nice time tonight, Ray. Thank you.” She smiled politely and closed the door.

* * * *

After church, Catherine walked back to the O'Dell's with Emmett and Claire. She followed Claire into the parlor while Emmett discreetly disappeared. Claire handed Catherine a small wooden box.

“This is it?” Catherine asked, staring down at the box in her hands. “A man lives thirty-three years, and his possessions fit in one small box?” Sadness clutched her heart.

“I told you there wasn't much.”

Catherine's bottom lip trembled, and she pressed two fingers against it. Her friend's image blurred as she fought back tears. “Oh, Claire. I don't know if I can open it.”

“Would you like me to leave?”

Catherine shook her head. “Please, stay with me.” Claire moved to sit next to her on the davenport. Catherine’s heart ached painfully as she fingered the box, touching the sides, the corners, places where Luke’s fingers had been... It seemed like so long ago. She blinked, and tears fell unheeded onto the lid as she opened the box.

Inside was a black leather Bible, worn from use, a mouth organ, a tattered map of the states and territories west of the Mississippi River, a few odd buttons, and a writing stick. She picked up the thin Bible with shaking hands, and riffled the pages gently, imagining Luke reading the words she touched. An old photograph slipped out. Lifting it off the floor, Catherine gazed at the portrait, recognizing the young Luke immediately. He stood amid a large group of people. Luke’s mother had the same dark hair and olive complexion she’d passed on to her son, though the rest of the children resembled their father. They were a handsome clan.

Catherine’s eyes blurred again. “His family,” she whispered. She brought the picture closer to her face, gazing at Luke. “Oh, Claire... I miss him.” She wept softly. “I try not to think about him, but it’s so hard.”

“I know, Cath.”

“I want to believe he’s all right, that he’s out there somewhere...that sometimes he thinks of me the way I think of him.” She sniffled loudly and blotted her eyes on a handkerchief. “He said he’d

come back, and for awhile I was angry at him because he didn't."

"And now?" Claire prompted.

"And now I just feel...numb."

"I'm so sorry, Cath," Claire said gently.

Catherine took a long shuddering breath. "He's lost to me now," she said with finality. As she replaced the picture in the Bible and set the book back in the box, her eyes lit on a small scrap of paper at the bottom. She picked it up and turned it over. New tears fell when she read the lone word written there.

Catherine.

Chapter 16

The days shortened, the nights grew colder, and leaves began to change on the cottonwood trees along the creek. At the schoolhouse, full attendance had resumed, and Catherine often walked there in the afternoon to greet former students as they filed out of the small building. She worked as a tutor nearly every day after school, grateful for a reason to continue working with the children, thankful she had a way of keeping her mind busy and off thoughts of Raymond Pickering and the man's growing affection for her.

She didn't return it. Not the way she should.

Catherine caught a glimpse of Eddie Harris as the boy shot down the schoolhouse steps and bounded toward the creek. She knew Master Applegate's methods of classroom order and discipline would be difficult for Eddie to grow accustomed to. The boy had admitted to being in trouble at school just the other day when Catherine visited Margo and the kittens.

"Never mind about school." Eddie had shrugged, looking down at the wriggling animals. "Ma says I've got to find homes for all of them.

Margo's been tryin' to keep them from nursin'. They can drink water out of a dish and eat table scraps now." The boy gazed earnestly at Catherine. "Do you think you could take one, Miss Campbell?"

She had thought about the kittens many times. Though she hadn't discussed acquiring a pet with her father, she was determined to have one again. And, as Eddie had unintentionally pointed out the day after the kittens were born, she was certainly old enough to have a pet without asking parental permission.

"Yes, Eddie, I would love one."

"Ma says these two are girls," he indicated the animals with a pat on each furry head, "and the rest are boys. You get the pick of the litter."

Catherine crouched down. One of the females, a little ball of gray and white fluff, pranced over to her, mewing adorably and staring up into Catherine's face. "Oh, aren't you cute?" she cried, gently lifting the kitten for a closer look. She peered into the tiny face and laughed as the kitten mewed again. Catherine cradled her as gently as a baby, stroking her warm, silky coat. The kitten began purring contentedly.

"I'll take this one."

"What'll you name her, Miss Campbell?"

"Hmm. I don't know. What do you think, Eddie?"

"Aw, I dunno. She's such a pretty little miss."

"She certainly is, and that's what I'm going to call her—Little Miss." Catherine carried the kitten

out into the yard. "She's going to miss her mama and brothers and sisters."

"She can visit anytime she likes. We're neighbors."

"Yes, and what a fine neighbor you are. Thank you, Eddie." Catherine had given the boy a gentle hug and he blushed.

Little Miss was proving to be wonderful company already. Even Harlan didn't seem to mind having the playful little kitten around the house. She was a bright spot in Catherine's otherwise routine day.

Now she waited for her pupil to come out of the schoolhouse, puzzled by the boy's tardiness. The building was quiet as the last child waved to Catherine and turned to amble off into the bright autumn afternoon.

"Patience?" Catherine called, hurrying toward the girl. "Did Dennis Walker come to school today?"

The girl nodded somberly. "He's still inside with Master Applegate." Her gaze cut to the closed schoolhouse door and Catherine's followed.

"Is he in trouble?"

"Yes, miss. He's being punished for not being able to count by eights."

Dennis Walker had been in Catherine's primary class only two years ago. She didn't consider him old enough to have all his math facts memorized.

"Thank you, Patience." Catherine made a step toward the schoolhouse when a terrible slapping

sound followed by an agonized cry shocked her to a standstill.

“What in the world?” She spun to Patience, but the girl was running up the path toward town without a backward glance.

Catherine strode up the steps and burst into the schoolhouse. Dennis Walker leaned over a stool with his trousers and under drawers down to his ankles. Samuel Applegate loomed above him with a birch rod. A furiously red welt was already rising on the boy’s bare buttocks.

“Mr. Applegate!” Catherine shouted, horrified. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Samuel rounded on her, his dark eyes narrowing ominously. “You’ll need to work young Walker here extra hard on those eights, Miss Campbell. He hasn’t quite learned them yet.” The wooden cane sliced the air above the boy’s body like a knife through soft butter, connecting with the tender skin of his backside. Dennis cried out again, and Catherine flew across the room to intercept the next lash.

“Stop it!” she shrieked, snatching the birch rod from the man’s hand. “You’re hurting him!”

“That’s the idea, Miss Campbell.” Applegate made a move toward her, his eyes set on the cane. “Now if you’ll return my stick, I can finish teaching this boy a lesson.”

Catherine thrust the cane behind her back and fixed her own determined stare on the schoolmaster. “You have no right to inflict such pain on this child. Dennis, pull your pants up.”

“Stay where you are, Walker!” Samuel roared.

“He only did it t-twice last time, Miss Campbell. I sh-should think one more w-will do it.”

Catherine’s eyes rounded with new horror. She gaped at the schoolmaster. “You’ve hit Dennis like this before?”

Applegate’s fists clinched at his sides. “I have every right to discipline those students who break my rules or are too stupid to learn.”

“Dennis is not a stupid boy, Mr. Applegate. He has been working with me twice a week and he is doing quite well on his multiplication tables. If he needs more time to learn his eights, then for heaven’s sake, give him more time.”

“Don’t tell me how to run my school.” The man spoke the words darkly, like a threat. “He will know his eights forwards and backwards by tomorrow, or he will be severely punished.”

Catherine looked at the boy’s reddened bottom then back at the teacher. “This isn’t severe?”

“This,” Applegate gestured at the boy, “is a warning to do better.”

“Dear God.” Catherine dropped the birch rod and went to Dennis. “You can get up now.” She bent to help the boy, but he waved her away, understandably embarrassed by his unclothed state. She turned while he struggled to a standing position and pulled his trousers back up.

“I’ll know my eights tomorrow, Master Applegate,” Dennis said respectfully as he followed Catherine to the door. At the steps, she whirled and stormed back into the classroom. She retrieved the birch rod from the floor without sparing a glance

ing a glance at the man. Outside, she stalked to the creek and flung it into the water.

"You won't tell my folks, will you, Miss Campbell?" Dennis asked plaintively.

She walked slowly, in deference to his obvious pain, as they headed for her house. "They should know about this, Dennis. You don't deserve to be treated so harshly."

"If you tell my folks, my pa will wallop me even harder."

Catherine's gaze flew to the boy's solemn face. She wanted to cry at the worry she saw etched on his young brow. "All right. I won't say anything to your parents if you promise to tell me if this sort of thing happens again. Will you do that?"

"Yes, miss."

She didn't know what she could do about the problem short of standing between Samuel Applegate and any child he chose to punish. She'd learned long ago that many parents supported such strict measures in the schoolhouse. Her arguments against corporal punishment had fallen on deaf ears more times than she cared to remember. As far as she was concerned, Samuel Applegate abused his power and prestige as a teacher. The citizens of Rocklin, most of them having never gone to school themselves and wanting an education for their children, allowed it.

At home, Catherine fixed Dennis a tray of milk and cookies, wishing she could further soothe his injured body and pride while knowing they had a long session ahead of them. She reviewed the multiplication facts through sevens, and Dennis did

remarkably well. They worked on his eights until Harlan came home, signaling suppertime, and the end to the tutoring session. The boy was smiling and confident as he left the Campbell's.

"You have to put a stop to it," Catherine implored her father at the supper table that night. "He was striking that boy's naked bottom with a stick!" She described the scene she walked into at the schoolhouse earlier, knowing her father felt much the same way she did. For all of Harlan Campbell's harshness and faults, Catherine knew he would never treat a child the way Samuel Applegate treated his students.

"I'll talk to the school board," he said, "but I can't promise you anything."

Ray came over after the meal, as he normally did on the evenings he didn't eat supper at their house. Catherine washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen while her father and Ray talked in the sheriff's study, then she served coffee and crumb cake in the parlor. Harlan visited a short while longer before retiring.

"Shall I come over there, or are you going to come over here?" Ray asked when her father had discreetly disappeared into the shadows of the house. Catherine eyed the small chair where Ray sat. There was no room for her except on his knee. When she said nothing and made no move, he stood and walked to the davenport, whisked Little Miss off her lap, and lowered himself to a place much too close to her. She smiled nervously and shifted.

“What’s all this, Catherine? Surely you’re not afraid of me.”

“Of course not.”

“We’ve been getting along famously, haven’t we?”

“I suppose we have.”

He leaned toward her and she focused on her hands in her lap. She searched her mind for something to say that would squelch his obvious desire to kiss her.

“Do you believe in striking children, Mr. Pickering?”

That seemed to work. He leaned back and regarded her curiously. “Striking children? Where did this come from?”

She related the events of the afternoon, struggling to keep her abhorrence of Applegate’s form of discipline from coloring her words. She truly wanted to know where Ray stood on the issue.

“He was a bit too enthusiastic, I’d say,” Ray replied after hearing the story. “Although I don’t believe in sparing the rod, I do feel such punishment should be used only as a last resort, when a child is completely out of control of his behavior. Not knowing eights is certainly a poor reason for employing the cane.”

Although his statement wasn’t as strong as Catherine had hoped it would be, she supposed Ray had adequately passed her exam. “Father is going to talk to the school board about Samuel Applegate’s methods.”

Ray frowned. “I’m not so sure you should get involved in such matters.”

“Involved? I’m already involved. I tutor Dennis Walker.”

“Still, it’s not a woman’s place—”

“I beg your pardon?” Catherine met his gaze. “It is my place as a concerned citizen, woman or not.”

He balked at her forceful dialogue. “I would rather you didn’t stir up a hornet’s nest. As a newcomer here and the future proprietor of Pickering’s Mercantile, I need people in Rocklin to view me as—”

“View you? What does this have to do with you?”

He looked flustered at her interruption. “Well, we’re courting, and if we should marry—”

“Marry!” Catherine blinked. “We’ve only known each other a few weeks.”

“Yes, but should our relationship deepen,” he put up a hand to stop her next interruption, “people would think it a wife’s duty to keep such opinions quiet, and to let her husband be the spokesman for the family.”

Family. Ray effectively silenced her with that one word. Catherine badly wanted a family, children of her own to love and nurture whether they were born from her body or not. It was as if his other words about a wife’s duty to keep quiet had filtered right through her head without so much as a niggle of objection.

“Do you want a family, Ray?”

“Of course. Don’t you?”

“Yes.” She breathed her words. “So much.” She smiled warmly at him. When he moved toward her

for a kiss, she welcomed him. Their lips touched. She willed it to feel the way it should, the way it had felt with Luke. Perhaps she could learn to love Ray Pickering after all.

The kiss turned passionate, and Ray sent his tongue deep inside Catherine's mouth when she parted her lips under his. She felt his desire grow, willed hers to do the same. She found that she could...if she imagined Luke.

Ray's arms wound about her, drawing her close. She pressed against him, pretending it was Luke's hard, well-defined chest she was feeling, Luke's hands, Luke's mouth...

"Oh, Luke," she murmured.

Ray stiffened and thrust her away. "Luke?" He nearly spat the word, his angry gaze showing his disbelief. "You called me Luke."

Realizing what she'd done, Catherine slapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, Ray. Please forgive me, I didn't mean—"

"You were thinking about that bank robber, weren't you." It wasn't a question. He put both his hands on her shoulders. "Tell me now, Catherine," he demanded angrily, giving her a quick shake. "Just what went on between you and that man?"

She stared back at him, her own anger rising. "Nothing I'm ashamed of."

"How far did it go? I have the right to know."

"We did nothing wrong. He was sweet and gentle, and..." She felt familiar tears well in her eyes. "And I loved him, but now he's gone forever. There's nothing more to say." She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

Ray dropped his hands to his lap. Silence fell between them as they both battled with their feelings. Then, as suddenly as their quarrel had begun, he pushed Catherine onto her back on the davenport, forcing her hands away from her eyes and down beside her, holding them there. She blinked in shock and struggled to free herself. Ray used his knees and legs to bring hers up onto the sofa, then laid his entire body over her length. His open mouth came down hard on hers, his tongue drove through her lips, invading. He began to move against her motionless body.

Though she was fully clothed, Catherine felt totally vulnerable. Instead of the warm, pleasantly heavy feeling she remembered when Luke had been this close, she felt as if she were suffocating. This felt like Shorty. The memory of the cook's assault came back—vividly, horribly. Ray moved a hand to her breast.

Catherine grabbed a handful of his hair, yanking his face away from hers. He yelped in pain and sat up.

"Don't you dare touch me like that," she cried. "Get out."

He rose slowly, staring at her. "I'll leave," he said between breaths, "but we'll discuss this tomorrow."

Catherine squeezed her eyes shut and leaned back against the davenport, listening for the sound of the front door closing. She looked down at her wrinkled clothing.

She was disgusted with herself as well as Raymond Pickering.

* * * *

“Ray’s been keeping you up too late, eh?”

Catherine looked up from her dinner plate where she was pushing her food into piles like she’d done as a little girl. “I suppose I am a bit tired tonight.” She gave her father a weak smile. “And not very hungry. Would you mind if I just go to my room now?”

Harlan eyed her with new concern. “Is everything all right, Catherine?”

“I’m fine. Well, actually, I do have a slight headache.”

“Are you catching something from those kids you tutor?”

“Oh, I doubt it, Father.”

“Ray will miss seeing you tonight.”

Catherine nodded. She went to her room, undressed and donned a nightgown, then unpinned and vigorously brushed her long hair. When she heard a knock at the front door, she quickly put out the light and climbed into bed. She heard her father and Ray talking, but she wasn’t able to make out what they were saying.

She knew she couldn’t put off facing Ray. She also knew she was largely to blame for their encounter last night, but she hadn’t been prepared for such a reaction from him. His anger at her for using Luke’s name must have spurred his aggressiveness. She would have to be much more cautious in the future.

Harlan was the picture of fatherly concern the next morning at breakfast. “So you and Ray had your first spat.”

Catherine glanced up sharply. "He told you?"

"He said he needed to talk to you about a misunderstanding. He seemed pretty worried. What happened?"

Should she tell him Ray had seduced her, right there on the sheriff's sofa in his own parlor?

"Nothing happened, Father. It was a misunderstanding, just like he said."

"Then you'll clear things up tonight?"

Catherine sighed. "I'm sure we will."

"Good." Harlan smiled. "I like the man."

"I know you do, Father."

He waited expectantly. She returned her attention to her plate. "Catherine? You haven't told me yet what you think about Ray, now that you've known him awhile."

"I haven't known him long enough, Father."

"You knew Luke Matthews a shorter time and fashioned yourself in love."

Catherine's eyebrows lifted in surprise. The sheriff hadn't mentioned Luke since the day he'd arrested the cowboy. "I truly loved Luke."

Harlan grunted something indistinguishable and rose from the table. "I'll stop by the mercantile today and invite Ray to supper this evening."

That night after their meal, Harlan excused himself, and Catherine joined Ray in the parlor.

"So you're no longer angry with me, Catherine?"

"I'm not angry. Let's just forget about it and continue our friendship." She worked up a smile for Ray as he settled onto the davenport. His ex-

pression said he expected her to sit with him, but she took a seat opposite the coffee table instead.

"Surely we have more than friendship." When she avoided his gaze he added, "Don't play so innocent."

She glanced up. "Regardless of what you might think of me, Mr. Pickering, I am quite innocent."

"As you should be." There was a challenge in his voice as he patted the space nearest him on the sofa. "Come here."

"Ray," she said firmly. "I do not wish to sit next to you tonight."

"All right. We'll play it that way. For now."

* * * *

Catherine sat beside Ray in his uncle's buggy as they rode into the hills to view the autumn colors. October fifth, her fortieth birthday, had finally arrived.

Ray talked about the store—his favorite subject, it seemed. He was anxious to take over the mercantile. "Uncle Roland and Aunt Martha will soon be able to relax and enjoy their retirement."

"They deserve it."

"But we'll have to wait awhile before we change anything. We'll modernize. It's such an old-fashioned store." When she was silent, he added, "I'm counting on your help, Catherine."

She remained quiet, pondering his words, his use of "we" as if they'd agreed to run the store together. This wasn't the first time he'd alluded to a union between them.

The road grew steeper and they came to a grove of golden-leaved aspens amid tall lodgepole pines. Ray stopped the buggy.

“How’s this spot for lunch?”

“It’s beautiful, Ray.”

He smiled happily and jumped down, hurrying over to help her. He retrieved the basket she had packed for them, and a blanket he had brought, from the back of the buggy.

As Catherine helped him spread out the quilted coverlet, she couldn’t help traveling back in time to another picnic, another man. Try as she might, she couldn’t shake Luke’s memory free from her head or her heart. Thoughts of him returned to her at various moments each day, especially when she was in Ray’s company and needed to forget Luke the most.

They enjoyed the sandwiches, tea, and the cake she’d packed. “You make a man think about settling down for good, Catherine,” he said quietly. “I love the time I spend with you.”

She gave him a small smile and nodded. “I can see that you do.” She fidgeted with her napkin. “Walk with me, Ray?”

He rose and brushed crumbs off his fine corduroy trousers. He helped her up and she began to fold the blanket. “Leave it,” he said. Arm in arm, they strolled through the trees. The wind rustled the brittle leaves on the aspens. Catherine had always loved that sound. She tipped her head back to look up into the treetops, smiling at the glorious mixture of yellows, oranges, golds, and browns in the canopy above them.

"I love your smile," Ray said. He soon led her back to the blanket, his arm pinning her close to him. Catherine's stomach felt queasy. If he made an advance again, how could she fight him off way out here, surrounded by nothing but forest?

"Ray—"

He stopped and turned to gaze directly into her eyes. Something of great significance loomed over them. Catherine found it hard to swallow. He knelt on the blanket and pulled her down to kneel beside him.

"We've not known each other very long," he began, "but it's been long enough for me to know what I want." She sucked in a breath. "Catherine Campbell..." He stroked her hand. "Will you marry me?"

She stared at him, unsure if she should be surprised that he'd asked or surprised that he hadn't tried to take advantage of her.

"I've already discussed this with your father, Catherine. He's in favor of our marriage."

Our marriage. A family of her own.

Luke was gone. This was surely her last chance.

"Yes, Ray. I will marry you."

* * * *

Ray pulled his uncle's buggy to a stop in front of the Campbell house. He climbed down and went around the vehicle to help Catherine from the seat. He smiled happily and kissed her left hand where a large diamond engagement ring sparkled.

"Sheriff!" he shouted. "We're back."

Catherine's father met them at the door. "Well?"

Ray beamed with satisfaction. "She said yes."

Harlan came forward to shake the other man's hand, pumping it dramatically. "Welcome to the family, Ray," he said. He turned to Catherine. "Good for you." He caught her in a big bear hug. "Congratulations to you both."

Catherine summoned a smile, overwhelmed by her mixed feelings and her father's exuberance. "Thank you, Father," she said quietly.

"When's the big day?" Harlan divided his questioning gaze between Ray and Catherine.

"Soon. Very soon," Ray answered. "I was thinking about December."

Catherine knew a moment of panic. She needed some time to get used to the idea of marriage to Ray, and she didn't want to be rushed. "I'm afraid that's too soon, Ray. There's a lot I have to do and—"

"Nonsense," her father cut in. "I'll do all I can to help."

"And Aunt Martha will be absolutely thrilled," Ray went on enthusiastically. "She'll love fussing over you."

"I'm sure she'll be a big help, but—"

"How does the Saturday before Christmas sound?" Ray asked.

"I think that would be a fine day for a wedding," Harlan decided, nodding in agreement. Neither man seemed to notice Catherine's discomfort.

Ray didn't even look at her as he grabbed her hand. "We've got to get over to my uncle's now and share our good news." Catherine practically flew behind him as he hurried her back to the buggy.

Roland and Martha Pickering were jubilant. "Ray's family is going to love you," Martha cried happily as she embraced Catherine. "We'll have to get busy right away. Let's see, there's your dress and Raymond's suit to be ordered; you can come down to the store and pick them out. The cake, flowers, announcements. I'll take care of everything, Catherine."

"Now give the poor girl some breathing room, dear," Roland said with a chuckle.

"Oh, but there's so little time," Martha went on. "Catherine, you must come down to the store Monday. We'll need to get things ordered right away."

Catherine nodded, fighting tears while attempting a smile. She wouldn't cry...she just wouldn't.

"Catherine, dear?" Ray asked worriedly. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, it's just that...well, I was thinking about...my mother." Her voice choked with emotion. It was true that she wished her mother could be there to help with her wedding plans, but she was also thinking of another wedding that would never be. "I wish...I wish she could be here." The tears began streaming down her face despite valiant efforts to control them.

"Of course, darling, of course," Ray soothed, taking out a crisp linen handkerchief for her.

Martha put her arm around Catherine. "I wish Marie could be here too, dear."

Catherine dabbed at her eyes. "I'd like to go home now." She looked imploringly at Ray. "It's been such a long, wonderful day..."

He took her arm. "Absolutely."

"We'll see you at church tomorrow, dear," Martha said, walking them to the door. "Goodnight."

At Catherine's gate, Ray halted the buggy and turned to her. "Are you having second thoughts already?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not. I'm just tired...from all the excitement."

He smiled with relief and pulled her into an embrace. "I love you, Catherine," he whispered. "Happy birthday, darling." He lifted her chin and kissed her softly on the lips.

"Thank you, Ray. Goodnight," she whispered back. She hurried into the house.

"Back so soon?"

Catherine wanted to be alone with her thoughts. "I'm exhausted, Father. It's been quite a day."

"And it's not over yet. I haven't given you my present." He gestured to a chair beside his. "Sit down, dear."

She sat with a weary sigh. Harlan handed her a small silver box tied with a thin pink ribbon. Opening it slowly, Catherine pulled out a beautiful locket on a delicate gold chain. New tears flowed unchecked. "It was Mother's."

He nodded. Catherine saw tears collect in his eyes.

"I've been waiting for the right time to give it to you." He stood and Catherine stepped into his

arms. "It seems fitting for you to have it tonight," Harlan went on after a moment. "I gave it to your mother when I proposed. I couldn't afford a ring." Catherine squeezed her father a little tighter. "And now that you're in love..." His voice trailed off.

Catherine's heart hammered painfully. Was she in love? Ray had said the words, but she hadn't returned them. She didn't feel the way she'd felt with Luke, but perhaps she loved Ray in a different sort of way. Still, her acceptance of his proposal today left her feeling guilty. Was she going to marry Ray because she was afraid of being alone, of never having a family? Was she marrying for all the wrong reasons?

"Why have you taken so well to Ray, Father, when you've never approved of my suitors before?"

Harlan seemed to consider her question carefully before he spoke. "I realize how selfish I've been, Catherine. I never wanted you to marry because I didn't want to let you go." He pulled back and looked at her, his expression honest. "When your mother died, so much of me died with her. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you, too." He exhaled. "When you fell so hard for...for that cowboy...I knew it was time."

"But you sent Luke away."

"I was protecting you."

"Luke would never hurt me, Father."

"Catherine." He held her arms and stared into her face. "He was an outlaw. No matter how you felt about him, I couldn't allow the two of you to marry. It would have hurt so much worse later,

when the law caught up to him.” He clasped her arms tighter. “I couldn’t let you go through that.”

Though she was finally beginning to understand what had driven her father to do what he’d done, Catherine couldn’t quite reconcile the fact in her heart. “I’d like to go to my room now, Father.”

He released her arms. “Everything I’ve done, Catherine, I’ve done out of love for you.”

She nodded and hurried away. On her bed, she opened the locket. A tiny picture of her mother and father greeted her inside. Catherine ran a finger gingerly across the aged photograph.

“Oh, Mother,” she whispered raggedly. “If only you were here. I need you now more than ever.” She gazed at her mother’s beloved face for a long moment. Then she stood and went to her dresser, opened the top drawer and retrieved the small wooden box hidden beneath her undergarments. Gathering her sewing basket, she brought everything back to the bed. She found the picture of Luke. His face would fit perfectly into the other side of the locket. She clasped her sewing scissors in one hand and made a tiny cut in the family portrait.

Suddenly she stopped. On the eve of her engagement, she longed for another man.

Catherine stared down at the damaged photograph. “Oh, Luke... Why do I feel like I’ve betrayed you?”

But hadn’t he betrayed her first, when he disappeared without a trace? Heaven help her, she would have run away with him...if only he had come back for her like he’d promised.

I'll be back, Cat. I love you.

"Liar!"

Her father's voice came through the closed bedroom door. "Catherine?"

She sniffled, swiping angrily at her tears. "I'm fine."

"Are you crying?"

Catherine swallowed hard around a knot of grief. "I'm just tired, Father." A few moments later, she heard his footsteps as he walked down the hall to his own lonely bedroom.

With trembling hands, she placed Luke's photograph back into his Bible. Then, impulsively, she removed the small piece of paper bearing her name in Luke's masculine scrawl. She folded it and pressed it into the other side of the locket. Snapping it closed, she brought the chain up and over her head. The locket rested, warm and soothing, just between her breasts.

The people she had loved most would stay close to her heart.

Chapter 17

Montana Territory

“You did what?”

Lincoln shifted on the hard-backed chair and forced himself to meet Mary Kate’s gaze. She’d surely heard him correctly, yet she had every right to make this difficult for him. He deserved it.

“I robbed a bank in Cheyenne,” he repeated.

She closed her eyes, opened them again, and stared at him. Hard. “When did this occur?”

“Late July.”

“But it’s—”

“October. I know.” He let out a breath. A child’s laughter drifted from the parlor through the closed door of the dining room where he sat at the table with Mary Kate. Jessie would be playing cards with Hattie, as was their habit in the evening.

So much had happened in the time since Mary Kate and Jessie had arrived at his ranch, unannounced and unwelcome. He hadn’t asked for a wife and child, but there they’d been. Somehow they’d carved out a place for themselves in his

heart. When he should have sent them packing the day after they'd appeared on his doorstep, he hadn't. The little girl had brought out every paternal instinct he never knew he possessed, and Mary Kate... He'd been consumed by the need to find out more about her, and filled with an incomprehensible desire to protect her.

He couldn't send them away.

"Is that why the sheriff was out here the other day?" Mary Kate asked in a hushed voice.

Linc nodded. "He said he'd been sitting on the wanted poster, not knowing what to do about it. We're on friendly terms because I've donated to some of the charities around town and—"

"Hattie's told me." A hint of a smile lifted Mary Kate's lips. "The Widows and Orphans Fund, the Ladies Aid Society, the Volunteer Firemen Fund, the Library Guild, the Books and Slates for Underprivileged Children Campaign...the Save Mary Katherine and Jessie from the Evil Men in Nebraska Fund..." Her voice drifted off for a moment and she turned toward the sound of her daughter's laughter. He knew how much it meant to her that Jessie felt safe at his ranch. She'd told him as much, and the child had thrived under the watchful eyes of her mother, Hattie, Carter, most of the men on his payroll, and Lincoln himself.

"You are a generous man, Lincoln Richards." She looked at him again.

"Doesn't make much sense then, does it?"

"No. Mind explaining it?"

He knew he must tell her everything and accept whatever consequence came from it. He

couldn't keep hiding the truth from her. If they had any chance of a future...

Linc drew in a breath and plunged into his story, his heart thumping painfully behind his ribs.

"I have plenty of money, Mary Kate. I'm sure you've guessed that. Most of it is my father's money—family money—and I've never done much to earn it. I was fortunate to be born into a wealthy family with plenty of business sense. I was the only boy, as I've told you, and I've always had pretty much everything I wanted."

"Spoiled nearly rotten," Mary Kate said, quoting Hattie.

Lincoln smiled. "That pretty much sums it up, yes." He continued, "And I've always thought I was the one who decided what happened in my life. I didn't want to go to a big school back East as my father would have preferred; I wanted to stay in Nebraska till adulthood, then come out West to start my own horse ranch. I did things the way I wanted, and my father was proud of what I built out here. He rarely denied me anything, nor did he criticize once he saw I'd made up my mind about something."

He paused. Mary Kate's intense brown gaze didn't waver. She had a way of looking at him that made him feel as though every word he spoke was important to her. She was one of the best listeners he'd ever known, and he usually told her too much. Yet he hadn't told her the one thing that occupied his mind...and heart...so often of late. He hadn't told her how much she meant to him and how strongly he cared for her and her daughter.

He hadn't yet admitted he loved them.

"As Hattie would say it," he went on, "having you and Jessie show up that day back in July about knocked all the starch out of me. I didn't want to be married, and even if I did, I would be the one who chose who would be my wife, in my own good time...when I was ready. I couldn't believe Tara had tricked me like she did. This was serious business, and I didn't want any part of it. This was not in my plans. I had every intention of annulling the marriage immediately."

Instead of appearing stricken by his honest words, Mary Kate's eyes gleamed knowingly. "But you didn't," she reminded him.

"No, I didn't."

"And you didn't send us away."

"Nope."

"And we didn't leave."

He smiled. "Nope."

"But back to what this has to do with robbing a bank a few weeks after we arrived."

He stopped smiling and rose to stand behind his chair. "A week or so after you and Jessie showed up, I started having some thoughts that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing having a woman and child living here on the ranch, that just maybe my sister knew me a bit better than I cared to admit."

"You started having some tender feelings for us," Mary Kate supplied, watching him as he paced the floor between the table and sideboard.

His heart constricted. "That's right."

"And maybe it scared you some."

How did she do that? How could she tell what he was thinking...and feeling? It was uncanny, how accurately she could hit the mark. "It did, Mary Kate. It worried me more than I can say."

"So you left for awhile, to get some space around you and sort out what you were feeling."

"Yes."

"And robbing a bank helped?"

He stopped pacing and gripped the back of his chair. It was difficult to look at her while he was confessing, but he met her gaze anyway. "Some."

She looked pretty when her eyebrows rose in surprise like that. The features of her face, which he'd considered plain when he'd first met her, were actually quite attractive. She had a small nose, expressive eyes, and soft lips. When her mouth lifted in a smile, his usually answered. Her slender, delicate hands frequently appeared in his imagination, gliding over his bare skin.

True to her nature, Hattie had taken it upon herself to feed Mary Kate and Jessie well, and both of them looked healthy and happy. He admired Mary Kate's petite but subtly curved figure.

"Tell me how, Linc."

He'd also grown to like the sound of the way she spoke his nickname.

"You remember how I told you that I had business down in Cheyenne?"

She nodded. "You were thinking about buying a new stallion."

"Right. So I went to the bank to see about making the financial arrangements. I was the only customer in there and I..." How could he explain it?

That he just went a bit crazy? “I started wondering what it would be like to be a different person, to have a different kind of life. If I did something unlawful and had to run from the authorities, I could avoid all my responsibilities here. I could just take the money and leave the country.”

The room grew silent for several long moments. Then Mary Kate said, “You thought you wanted to get away from me and Jessie, and from the situation you’d found yourself in. You could be free.”

Linc swallowed around the dry knot in his throat. “Something like that.”

“But you came back. Why?”

He stepped toward her, unsure of himself. What would she say if he told her the truth? And now that he’d spilled the information about his crime, would she be able to accept what he’d done? He was ready to make restitution for his dishonorable act, but would he lose Mary Kate and Jessie in the bargain?

Lincoln knelt in front of her chair and searched her face. “I came back because I realized that meeting you was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.”

She was quiet a moment, and he feared what she must be thinking. Then she put one hand over her mouth and whispered, “Oh, Linc...”

Her eyes shone with emotion as she leaned toward him. Their lips came together in a gentle kiss. It wasn’t their first. Shortly after she’d arrived at his ranch, he’d cornered her in his study. The kiss he’d coerced from her that night had left him

breathless and shaken. He hadn't expected her mouth to taste so sweet. She'd pushed him away, accusing him of only wanting the physical part of a marriage, while she'd settle for nothing less than love. She'd give them time to get to know one another, she'd said, but if she found she could not have a loving relationship with him, she and Jessie would have to leave.

This kiss, like a potent summer wine, sent lightning through his veins. Winded and off-center, he finally pulled back to look at her. "I'm in love with you, Mary Kate," he told her in a raspy whisper.

She dabbed at the tears in her eyes. "And I love you, Lincoln." She paused. "But..."

"I'm a thief." He let out a frustrated breath. "I'll return the money, Mary Kate, every bit of it. I'll turn myself in and—"

"No. They'll take you away from us. Oh, Linc, I couldn't bear that. Not now." She sniffled. "But you must make restitution. Returning the money is not enough."

"What do you suggest?" He'd do anything she said. Anything to keep her.

"Whatever you stole, send back twice the amount."

* * * *

"Where the hell are you when I need you?" Luke called into the gloom of his cell, trying to summon up his elusive twin. Was he so miserable that even his phantom companion wanted no part of his company?

At frequent intervals during his incarceration, Luke was denied food and fresh water. Daily, the sheriff or a deputy interrogated him about the location of the missing money. Luke endured the mistreatment, knowing that the banker's wife would soon come forward to vindicate him, and he'd be free to return to Rocklin. To Catherine.

He'd made a friend in the older man in the adjacent cell. Steve Ahrens was an outspoken, friendly type. His presence and incessant chatter during the hungry days had helped Luke pass the time. Ahrens would be released the second week of October.

"Where are you goin' when you get out of here?" Luke asked the man one evening in early October.

Steve shrugged. "Nowhere in particular. Why?"

Luke approached the bars that separated the two of them. "Think you could do something for me? I'll make it worth your time." He still had most of the money Mike Reeves had loaned him. He offered a large chunk of it now.

"Whatcha got in mind?" the other man asked.

Luke explained the task he needed Ahrens to complete. When he was through, the older man nodded his head. "I'll do it," he agreed.

Chapter 18

With Martha's help, Catherine chose a lovely wedding gown of tiered white lace with a large bustle, a matching veil, and gloves. She owned a pair of white shoes and didn't think it necessary to buy another pair, though Ray remarked that he'd prefer everything new. Her fiancé seemed to always be hovering nearby, catching glimpses of the latest in bridal wear, flashing a broad smile Catherine's way whenever she looked at him. Coming up behind her to rub her shoulders, like her father often did, he whispered, "You'll be the most beautiful bride ever."

Catherine's nerves stood on edge. Her wedding day was being rushed. Her wedding night was coming much too fast. And it seemed as if the whole town buzzed over the upcoming event. Catherine had heard the rumors and knew that some people considered it improper she and Ray were having such a short engagement. But what could she do now that the wheels had been set in motion?

Roland and Martha were busy packing up their belongings in the large apartment over the mer-

cantile, soon to be Ray and Catherine's home. Martha would finally get a real house of her own. The Pickerings were already in the process of purchasing a small place on the outskirts of town. Ray had promised Catherine she could redecorate the apartment any way she liked. She was anxious to get started, to make the place her own.

Maybe then she would feel as though she was supposed to be a Pickering.

* * * *

Luke watched a small procession of people march down the corridor toward his cell. A brown-haired woman with downcast eyes clutched the banker's arm. Mrs. Peabody. Luke said a quick prayer and rose from his cot to meet the group.

"You'll have to look at the man, my dear," the woman's husband said. "Just tell the sheriff what he needs to know and I'll get you out of here."

The woman nodded. Luke could easily detect a bright red flush on her otherwise pale face. She seemed to be gathering the strength to identify him, and when she finally lifted her chin to do so, she looked genuinely startled.

"Mrs. Peabody?" the sheriff prompted. "It is him, right?"

The woman's gaze searched Luke's face, continually coming back to his eyes. He held his breath.

"I d-don't think so," she whispered.

Luke allowed himself a flicker of hope.

"You need to be sure," Peabody said, an edge in his voice.

"The r-robber...he had no m-mustache... There was that scar...and..."

All was quiet in the cellblock as the other inmates listened for the verdict. Luke's gaze rested on Mrs. Peabody.

"The r-robber had dark eyes," the woman continued, "dark as sin." She spun away from Luke. "This is not the man who robbed the bank."

"Now, dear—" her husband began.

"I think I can remember the man who kissed me!" she blurted. "This isn't him."

The banker gave a heavy sigh. "You heard her, Sheriff."

"I want to go now," the woman implored.

Luke backed away and crossed his arms over his chest. "Get me the hell out of here, too."

"I'm very sorry, Mr.—?"

"Matthews," Luke told the banker. "Luke Matthews." He caught the surprised look on the sheriff's face. Now was an odd time for the man to be taking an interest in Luke's name. He certainly hadn't listened before when Luke tried to tell him.

"Something wrong with my name?"

The lawman cleared his throat and shook his head no.

"Mr. Matthews," Peabody said, his tone remorseful, "the bank will see to it that you are compensated for your time and inconvenience. I will escort my wife home and return to speak with you." He nodded at the other men and left with his wife clinging to his arm.

Luke held onto the cell bars, his head pressed against them in relief and frustration. There were a

few shouts of congratulations as well as a few muttered curses from the other cells.

He was finally free.

"I did what I had to do, given the circumstances," the sheriff said, meeting Luke's stare when he raised his head. "I'd do it again. Dammit if you're not a dead ringer—"

"You owe me, Sheriff," Luke interrupted. "I could get a lawyer and take on you and your men, but all I really want is to get the hell out of this godforsaken place. I will, however, take an official document, signed and sealed, absolving me of any involvement in the robbery. Now unlock my cell."

The man nodded perfunctorily, removing his key ring from his belt. A deputy appeared with a clean set of clothes, handing them to Luke through the bars. The cell door swung open and the sheriff stepped back. "I'll get what you asked for," he said, and promptly left.

Luke changed clothes quickly, leaving his soiled clothing in a heap on the floor. He'd just reached the outer office when a young man burst through the front doors.

"The money's back!" he shouted. "All of it—plus some—showed up in a suitcase marked for the bank. It just came in on the train!"

"What the hell?" The sheriff followed the boy out the door.

Luke stepped out into the bright October day, blinking at the blessed sunshine. He took a long, deep, cleansing breath of crisp autumn air. A crowd had gathered in front of the bank down the street. He saw Mr. Peabody hurrying toward the

building. A few moments later the banker reappeared on the boardwalk, announcing the safe return of the bank's money, plus a bonus amount for everyone inconvenienced. A merry cry rose from the crowd.

Luke stood and stared at the commotion. He wasn't sure how he felt about this sudden turn-of-events. It was certainly ironic. He wondered what kind of crazy man would rob a bank then return the money, plus extra.

A man that looks just like me.

He was on his way to the depot to check for Steve Ahrens when Mr. Peabody waved him into the bank. The man pressed a substantial amount of cash into Luke's hands, apologizing profusely. The sheriff handed him the paper he'd requested. As Luke gazed down at the document and the money, he knew that somehow the whole mess would be worth it when he had Catherine back in his arms.

This time he would never let her go.

Without a word or a backward glance, Luke left the bank and headed for the train station. If Ahrens wasn't on today's train, Luke would be on the next northbound coach himself.

He found his friend on the platform as the train resumed its journey south into Colorado.

Excitement sent Luke's pulse racing. "Ahrens!" he called. The big redheaded man turned around and Luke caught his expression. His heart stilled.

Steve wouldn't meet Luke's gaze. "You're not gonna like what I found out, Matt."

Panic shuddered through him. "Is she all right? Is she—?"

"She's fine. Healthy and happy, from what I hear. I didn't get a look at her myself, but I got an earful at the café."

"Go on."

"You sure you want to hear this right now? How 'bout I buy you a drink?"

Luke grabbed Steve's arm. "Now. Tell me now."

The other man shook his head and made a disgusted sound. "Women. They can be so fickle."

Luke released his grip on Steve's shirt. "What are you talkin' about?"

"She's engaged to marry some gray-haired man who's takin' over the local mercantile."

The unexpected blow to Luke's spirit hurt incredibly more than his jailhouse injury. He nearly doubled over. "Are you sure? We're talkin' about Catherine Campbell?"

"Sheriff's daughter. Yep. And they're gettin' married soon. The lady in the café said there's some speculation about why the two of 'em are in such a hurry." Steve gave Luke a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, Matt. Damn the female species anyway."

* * * *

"Good evening, dear."

"Come in, Ray." Catherine produced a smile for him

"Something sure smells good," he remarked as he stepped into the house. "I'll have to watch out or I'll get fat on your good cooking."

"Evenin', Ray." Sheriff Campbell got up from his chair in the front room and clapped the mer-

chant on the back. "Come have a drink with me while Catherine gets supper on the table." She watched her father lead Ray into his study. Instead of making her feel comfortable, the same routine every night stirred her nerves to a constant state of anxiety. She should be excited, eagerly anticipating her dream of being a wife and having a family.

So why was she feeling such a debilitating sense of loss?

After the meal, Harlan left Catherine and Ray to the parlor. Their discussions invariably centered on the wedding or the store. Once they were married, what would she and Ray talk of then? Inventory? New merchandise? Unpaid accounts?

"You seem more quiet than usual tonight, dear," he said. "Anything the matter?"

"I'm just tired."

He frowned. They were sitting together on the davenport, and now he leaned closer. "You've been tired a lot lately, Catherine." He turned her chin to look at him. "How come?"

She didn't meet his questioning gaze. "I guess I haven't been sleeping much."

"Are you getting nervous?"

"Nervous?" She looked at him.

Ray nodded. "About our wedding...and our wedding night."

She glanced back down at her lap. "Ray—"

"Is that it?"

"I suppose that's part of it," she said quietly.

Being intimate with Ray took up a major portion of her worries. His kisses didn't thrill her. His touch, when he put his arm around her or held her

hand, didn't produce tingles of pleasure and anticipation. With Ray, she felt none of the excitement she'd known before...with Luke.

There it was again, that aching pang that started in her heart and spread throughout her body until she thought she'd suffocate.

Ray touched her hand. "Your skin is so cold, Catherine. Are you getting sick?"

She shook her head. It would have been impossible to speak.

"Come here."

Dully, Catherine moved toward Ray, and his arms pulled her close against him. He stroked her hair, her back, held her tight. It did feel good to be held like that, and she nestled closer, imagining it was Luke's chest her cheek rested upon. Oh, God, she missed Luke... It wasn't getting easier to put their time together behind her as she'd thought. Luke was always there. He dwelled in her heart and mind. How could she think that marriage to Ray would cure it?

"Catherine." He lifted her face, and his mouth came down hard on hers. His arms pressed her to him. "It will be good...us, together..." he murmured against her lips. His mouth was possessive over hers, and he made small sounds of pleasure in his throat that she couldn't answer. "I wish your father wasn't in the house," he said with a groan.

Catherine took the break in their kissing to move back. Ray followed. His breath came in gasps as his forehead rested against hers. "I want us...to be together...before the wedding."

"No..."

“Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be right, Ray.”

His hand came up to encircle her neck, his knuckles forcing her face higher. There was a desperate quality to the way he stared at her. “It’s not right to go on like this either. Our wedding is just too far away.”

For Catherine, the date was coming much too fast. “Ray, please—”

I know, I know.” He kissed her again, then pulled away with another groan. “I’d better go.”

Catherine remained on the sofa, her thoughts tangled in her emotions long after she heard the front door close.

* * * *

Much had changed at home since Luke’s last visit. Another brother and his youngest sister had gotten married. He had several new nieces and nephews. Luke’s father had aged dramatically. Owen Matthews had farmed all his life and had always been a worrier. He’d worried about feeding his family. He’d worried about the weather and its effects on his crops. He’d worried that he’d be injured and couldn’t work. His worrying had taken a terrible toll.

Helen Matthews announced that her son’s first night home was cause for celebration, though Luke wasn’t much of a mind to feel his mother’s joy. The many hours on the train headed east had only served to make him think of all he’d lost back in Wyoming Territory. He could replace his horse, though Dollar had been a faithful, reliable mount. He could eventually replace the money hidden in

his war bag at the Saunders' ranch; the compensation money from the bank in Cheyenne was a start. He could replace his Colt revolver, though the one he'd had was the first gun he'd ever owned. His few personal belongings claimed sentimental value, but they were losses he could deal with.

He had yet to come to terms with losing Catherine.

Part of him had wanted to go back to Rocklin to win her back. She'd said she loved him, and he'd believed her. He didn't know what had happened in the time he was gone to cause her to become engaged to marry, but if he went back he could find out.

The other part of him—his heart, his badly wounded pride, and his damaged spirit—wouldn't let him go back. Not ever. If Catherine wanted to marry another man, he wasn't going to stand in her way.

On the eastbound train he'd imagined walking into Rocklin Community Church and stopping Catherine's wedding just before the pastor spoke the final words. She would instantly abandon the other man for Luke. She'd run to him, right into his arms...

Like hell she would. She'd taken a fiancé sometime within the six weeks Luke had been in jail fighting for his honor. Obviously, he had meant little to Catherine.

So be it.

Now his baby sister was parading her new husband in front of him. "Luke? This is Jacob O'Brian." Luke's gaze went from his sister's pretty

face to her husband's proud one, then back to Debra. She was heavy with child. Luke forced a smile to his lips as he congratulated his sister and shook Jacob's hand.

Luke's brother Martin Matthews came forward, holding an infant in one arm. "Meet your newest niece, Lila Matthews." A small, pretty, blonde-haired woman stood beside Marty, smiling shyly at Luke. "And this is my beautiful bride, Lily." Marty's free arm came around his wife and drew her close.

"And meet Thomas and Timothy," said Luke's oldest sister, Constance. She'd had twin sons. Two little freckle-faced girls in pigtails, barely a year apart in age, clung to either side of Constance's skirts. They'd been babies last time Luke was home. "Amy and Abigail Torgenson, stop hiding and give your uncle a kiss."

"The Matthews clan is growing," Luke noted after two sweet, sticky kisses. He was surrounded by wedded bliss, new babies, growing children...happiness.

"Well, Lucas, you'd know who these people are if you'd come home more often," his mother chided affectionately. "You are staying for awhile this time." It wasn't a question as much as a maternal command. Luke nodded and let his mother hug him again.

He had no place else to be. On the heels of that thought came guilt for not feeling more grateful that he had a loving family, one that he'd neglected the last few years. He should count himself lucky instead of feeling sorry for himself.

With his older brother Caleb, Luke immersed himself in farm work, performing the chores he'd once been happy to leave behind. The hard work helped to keep his thoughts from traveling to Wyoming. When he fell into his old bed at night, he was often too exhausted to think of anything...or anybody.

He spent most evenings at Caleb and Anna's, who had built their own house on the homestead and lived there with their three children. Luke's oldest brother had been his closest friend while he was growing up. Caleb's home was warm and comforting, much like the bedroom they'd shared years ago. In his mother's house, the constant reminder that his father had grown older than his fifty-eight years added to Luke's feeling of regret for having been absent so long.

Though they filled him with a gentle ache for the children he would never have, Luke looked forward to the warm hugs his nieces and nephews gave at bedtime. One evening near the end of November, Luke sat by the fireplace at Caleb's, watching Anna attempt to get her brood off to their beds. Caleb was being of little help, chasing his shrieking daughters around the house in their nighties, his son perched on his shoulders. Luke waylaid the youngest, seven-year-old Hailey, as she ran past his chair.

"Gotcha!" he shouted, pulling her onto his lap and holding her there while the child giggled and squirmed. "I'll take care of this little critter." He whisked the girl up into his arms and carried her into the small bedroom she shared with her sister.

He dropped her laughing onto the double bed and sat down beside her.

“Unca Luke, tell me a story.”

“I’m not much of a storyteller, Hailey.”

“Pleeese?” she begged, her pudgy face irresistible.

Luke grinned. “All right.” He rubbed the short beard he’d recently acquired. “Let me see. I could tell you a story about cowboys and cattle drives, or wild horses and prairie dogs—”

“Nope,” his niece declared. “I want a story about a princess.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “A princess? You sure?”

“Uh-huh.” Hailey clapped emphatically.

Luke chuckled and began his story, unwittingly drawing himself back to the recent past. “There once was a beautiful princess who lived in a huge castle,” he began.

“What was her name?”

“Her name? Well, it was...Catherine.”

“What did she look like?”

He smiled in memory, forgetting his niece as he was transported back to the first time he’d seen Catherine Campbell, frightened and gorgeous as she faced a raging bull. “She had long auburn hair, curled at the ends, so soft... It would shine in the sun. And big brown eyes that sparkled when she laughed or shot daggers when she was mad...”

“Her father was the king,” Hailey prompted.

Luke frowned and his happier memories vanished like a burst bubble. He nodded solemnly. “Yeah. Princess Catherine had a mean, evil father.

King Harlan didn't want his daughter to have anything to do with the common man who loved her."

And how he'd loved her.

"Did she love him back?"

"She said she did." Luke was quiet a moment, his emotions dangerously close to escaping the hard shell he'd built around them. "King Harlan didn't want the princess to marry such a man. A common man wasn't good enough for the king's only child. It didn't matter how much they loved each other."

"Is that true, Unca Luke?" The little girl's brow narrowed questioningly.

"Sometimes, Hailey."

"What happened?"

"The evil king thought up a way to get rid of the common man. He accused him of a crime he didn't commit and had him banished from the kingdom. The man would die if he ever tried to return."

"Then what?"

Luke blew out a long breath. "That's it. The man never returned."

"What did the princess do?"

"She married a rich prince from another land, someone worthy of her."

"But that's not fair!" Hailey cried in indignation.

"You're right about that, sweetie." Luke bent down to kiss his niece on the forehead. "Go to sleep, little one." He rose from the bed and turned to the door to find Caleb watching him. His

brother's expression revealed he'd been there awhile.

"Some uncle, huh?" Luke remarked in disgust. "Fillin' your daughter's little head with things she doesn't need to know about yet." He pushed past his brother and headed for the front door. The living room fell quiet as Anna herded the other children off to bed.

"She sure must've been something," Caleb remarked gently.

Luke stopped but didn't turn around. "Who?"

"Princess Catherine."

Luke reached for the doorknob.

"Stay awhile, little brother," Caleb said. "I think we should talk about it."

"There's nothin' to talk about."

"Like hell," Caleb swore softly.

Luke puffed out a breath and rounded to lean against the closed door. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Sit down, Luke." Caleb gestured at a chair.

Luke stared at his brother. Caleb had always been the one he'd confided in. Maybe it would help to talk to him now. Keeping his feelings to himself sure hadn't done any good. He pushed away from the door and went back to the warmth of the fireplace and the chair near it.

"I met her in Wyoming," he began, studying the pattern in the rug. "Catherine was so damned pretty...so fresh and pure...a real lady. She made me want to wait to have her." He glanced up at Caleb. "Can you believe that? I wanted to marry her."

"I believe it. And King Harlan?"

"Her daddy was the sheriff. He didn't much like me."

"He gave you trouble?"

Luke nodded grimly, staring into the crackling fire. "He ran me out of town on a rail all because I looked like a man on a wanted poster."

Caleb was silent a moment. "Wanted for what?"

"Robbery." Luke's gaze cut sharply to his brother. "I've done some stupid things, Caleb, but I've never robbed a bank."

"But if the sheriff believed you had..."

"It was just a convenient way to get rid of me."

"So he turned you in for the crime?"

"No. I turned myself in."

Caleb's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Go on," he urged.

"I wanted to clear my name and get back to courtin' Catherine, but I ended up spendin' most of two months in jail. Seems I was a 'dead ringer' for the man the law was after. When the only witness they had finally showed up to absolve me, it was too late." His eyes burned. "She's engaged to another man now. She'll be married by Christmas."

"Then you still have time!" Caleb exclaimed, slapping his thigh. "Go out there and win her back."

Luke shook his head slowly, facing his brother. "No, I won't do that. She's made her choice."

"But if she thinks you—"

"It's over, Caleb. She's goin' on with her life, just like I am."

“Are you?”

Luke scowled. “Damn right.”

“Then what are your plans? Are you ready to settle down here and help me take care of this place?”

“I don’t rightly know what I’ll do.”

“I hope you’ll stay awhile yet. Ma’s so happy to have you back, and Pa...” Caleb’s voice drifted off. “Pa’s not doin’ so well these days.”

“I know,” Luke agreed solemnly. “Ma hasn’t said much, but I know she’s worried about him. I’ll be stayin’ through the winter at least.”

Caleb smiled. “Good. It’ll mean a lot, to all of us.”

The brothers sat in companionable silence for a time. Luke felt somewhat better for having shared his troubles. Then he remembered how the stolen money had been returned to the bank. He laughed wryly and Caleb eyed him with curiosity.

“Do you think ghosts can rob banks?”

“What are you talking about, Luke?”

“Remember that twin I once told you about—the one who looks just like me except for the eyes? Well, that son-of-a-bitch is still followin’ me around. Maybe he robbed the bank.”

Caleb didn’t reply. Luke said goodnight and left his brother’s house. Outside, he walked the half-mile back to his folks’ place in the dark. The night was clear and crisp, the kind of night he usually enjoyed. His boots crunched on fallen leaves, making a sharp sound in the still night air.

In a few days it would be Thanksgiving. Luke didn’t feel that he had much to be thankful for this

year. Of course, he was glad to be with his family again. He'd missed his mother and father, his nieces and nephews, his sisters and brothers. But they all had their own lives now.

He stared up into the stars, wondering if Catherine shared the same sight. Would she be remembering their time together under the night sky? Cygnus—Catherine's Cross—had disappeared into the horizon. Luke picked out other constellations, but he felt no joy in finding them.

Did Catherine remember the night they'd revealed their deepest secrets to one another, the night she'd declared her love for him?

We're bound together now, Luke. You and me.

He muttered an oath and kicked at a stick in his path. Cursing again, he picked up the stick and hurled it as hard and as far as he could.

Damn the female species anyway.

"You were right, Ahrens. Who needs 'em?"

An unbidden image stampeded through his head. Many men would gladly take advantage of Catherine's natural sexual curiosity. Luke's traitorous mind conjured up a passionate picture of the mercantile man with Catherine. The harder he pushed the painful vision away, the clearer it became. He shuttered his eyes tight and pushed his fingers against his temples, forcing the image away into the chill of the night.

Then, after a long moment of yearning for what might have been, Luke gazed up at the heavens again and said a silent prayer that Catherine's husband would treat her well.

Chapter 19

Catherine hurried home to hang up her wedding dress and let the wrinkles fall out. She removed her wool coat in the entryway, took care of her dress, and went to check on the pot roast and potatoes. Almost done. Ray would be over for supper at six. She set the table, and went out back for a load of firewood to tend the stove and fireplace. The December air was as cold as a frog in an ice-bound pond, and she shivered before returning to the inviting warmth of the kitchen.

Her chores complete, Catherine headed for the parlor to peruse the most recent issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. She was immersed in an article on home decorating when Ray knocked on the door. He wore his brown derby hat and a broad smile. He doffed the hat, greeting Catherine with a kiss she managed to deflect to her cheek as he entered the house. They went to the parlor and talked about the store, the main topic of conversation between them when they weren't discussing the wedding. As Ray went on and on about the mercantile business, Catherine grew restless and

bored. She wondered what was keeping her father. Presently, there was another knock on the door.

"Beg your pardon, Miss Campbell," David Smithers said when she answered. The young man worked at the livery and often delivered messages. "The sheriff sent me to tell you he's stayin' at the jailhouse tonight. Thomas is off-duty and Reeves' wife is feelin' poorly. Sheriff says to tell you he's takin' the night shift. He'll eat his supper at the cafe." He nodded at her. "G'night, Miss Campbell."

Apprehension blanketed Catherine as she thanked David and closed the door. Ray stood directly behind her, increasing her discomfort when his presence should temper it.

"So it's just you and me tonight, Catherine."

"Yes, it looks that way," she replied, trying to keep her voice light. "Let's eat," she suggested. Ray held out his arm and she took it, walking with him into the dining room where she served the meal. Her fiancé praised her cooking and cleaned his plate, but he didn't ask for seconds like he often did. Catherine lingered over her own plate, reluctant for the meal to end.

"It seems like we're a married couple already, doesn't it, Catherine?" Ray's eyes focused steadily on her. "Almost, that is," he added meaningfully.

Catherine nodded.

"Of course, we're not married...yet."

"No, not yet," she agreed, glancing at him with a weak smile.

"But we could pretend we are, tonight." His gaze seemed hungrier than before he'd shared the meal with her.

Catherine sat rigidly, unsure what to say or how to act. She certainly didn't want to encourage him. Although Ray was an attentive suitor, he stirred no desire within her. What if she never had such feelings for him? Could she spend the rest of her life with someone she didn't love? Would that be fair to either of them?

Ray stood and walked toward her, pulling her up from her chair and into an embrace. Holding her tightly, he murmured, "Pretend with me, Catherine."

He kissed her soundly on the mouth. She tried to relax, tried to feel what she so desperately wanted to feel for this man who would soon be her husband. She allowed his tongue to meet hers and he responded with passion, his mouth hard and devouring on hers.

Luke had likened kissing her after a meal to having dessert.

She pulled away. "Let's go sit and talk in the parlor."

"No. We've talked enough." He took her hand firmly in his.

"We haven't talked nearly enough, Ray. We never talk about my day or my work with the children, or—"

"Once we're married, your work will be taking care of our home and helping me run the store."

"But I love what I do, Ray. I know the school board won't allow a married woman to continue teaching at the school, but I can certainly tutor and help with the store. You know I can take care of a

home as well—I've been doing it for my father for years."

He began leading her down the darkened hallway toward her bedroom. "I won't have my wife working."

"But, the store—"

He stopped. "That's different."

Catherine stared at him. She'd be giving up a job she loved...for a man she didn't.

Ray's gaze searched her face. "I love you, Catherine. I don't want to talk about your work or my work or the store or anything else right now. I want us to know what it will be like as husband and wife. Tonight is perfect, with your father gone until morning." His grip on her hand grew stronger as he pulled her toward her room.

"Ray, this isn't right." She tried to hold her ground, but her determination was no match for his. "We'll be married in just a few weeks. We should wait."

"I can't wait any longer," he said thickly and pushed open her bedroom door.

She grasped for another reason to postpone being intimate with him. "Don't you want me to be an...an innocent on our wedding night?"

He smiled patronizingly. "I'm not so noble, Catherine."

She yanked her hand out of his. "I think you should go home now, Ray, before this goes any further." She retreated a step.

He held no smile for her now. "I'm not leaving until I've had a taste of what you've been tempting me with for so long."

“But, I haven’t—”

He grabbed her and pushed her into the shadowy room. Little Miss was sleeping on Catherine’s bed and woke up with a plaintive mew. Ray swept the cat off the coverlet with one hand while the other kept Catherine ensnared. Little Miss hissed and scurried out into the hall. Ray shut the door with his foot and sat down on the bed, bringing Catherine onto his lap in one rapid movement.

“Please, Ray,” she pleaded. “I want to wait until we’re married. It’s important to me.”

He was breathing hard as he pulled her hairpins out with one hand. “This will become important to you, too.” He pushed her back onto the bed. Fumbling over the buttons on her blouse, Ray left them to yank impatiently at the waistband of her skirt. His hands came up under her blouse. Catherine’s chemise held little challenge for him. She grasped his eager hands, plowing her mind for something she could say that would stop him.

“Ray, I don’t—”

“It’s all right, sweet Catherine... I’ll teach you everything you need to know.” His mouth came down to silence her next protest. One leg came between her knees, forcing her skirt up and her thighs apart. She felt his hand easing beneath her clothes.

“I don’t love you!” she cried.

He froze. “What?”

Catherine could barely make out his face in the dark, but she knew his expression was one of disbelief. “I don’t love you, Ray,” she repeated firmly. “I’m sorry.”

He sprang from the bed like a schoolboy at the tap of the teacher's dismissal bell. "We're getting married, dammit!" he shouted, facing her. "You accepted my proposal."

She sat up on the bed, her heart hammering sickeningly hard in her chest. She could barely believe the words she'd flung at him, though they rang true. In this one act, she was giving up her dream of marriage and children. "I've wanted it to work out between us, truly I have, but...I just can't marry you, Ray."

"Everything's planned. Your dress, my suit, the service, the reception... Everyone in town's been invited. Good God, my elderly folks are coming down from Billings."

"I'm sorry," Catherine repeated as gently as she could. "I'll see to it that everything gets cancelled. I'll take care of it, Ray. You won't have to do a thing."

His gaze penetrated the darkness between them, and his demeanor was calmer when he said, "You're just nervous, darling, that's all. Aunt Martha told me this could happen before the wedding. It's normal. I'm nervous myself." He leaned close to Catherine again. "If it's that important, I'll wait until our wedding night to have you." He bent his head to kiss her.

Her hands came up to stop him. "I meant what I just said, Ray. It's not just my nerves. There won't be a wedding night."

His face was close to hers. "Why are you doing this?"

"There should be a...a spark between us."

"There is."

"I don't feel it. I don't feel the excitement you do."

"You will."

"No." She shook her head with resignation. "I should have felt it by now. We've kissed. You've touched me. It hasn't happened."

He straightened, blowing out a breath. "If you're such an expert, then you must have felt that way with someone else."

"Yes."

"Your outlaw," Ray stated flatly. "I guess I've known it all along." He turned toward the door. "You've made your choice. Seems ridiculous to save yourself for a dead man." She gasped at his words, and he whirled on her. "You're going to regret this, Catherine, when you're still an old maid and I'm married to another." He held out his hand. "The ring?"

She pulled it from her finger and placed it in his palm.

* * * *

"You what?" Harlan slammed his coffee onto the dining room table.

Catherine jumped at the noise. "I broke off the engagement," she repeated. "Ray and I are not getting married."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"I don't love him, Father," she said with conviction. "It wasn't right to go on with our plans under the circumstances."

He shook his head angrily. "I don't understand that, Catherine. Ray was offering you everything—a home, family, security—"

"Not everything, Father. Would you have me marry someone I don't love?"

"You'll grow to love him. Lots of marriages start out that way."

"Did yours?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Did you and Mother love each other when you married?"

"Of course we did!" her father shouted. "I loved her more than anything, you know that."

"And she loved you!" Catherine shouted back. "You married for love, but it's all right for me not to?"

"Of course I want you to love Ray, and you will. You're just being stubborn. It's that blasted outlaw who's making you think this way."

"That's right, Father. I loved Luke. I love him still."

"He's long gone, probably dead and buried. Forget him, Catherine."

"I can't!" she cried, her hands clenched into tight fists of desperation. Her tears sprang unchecked. "Father, you should know how it feels to lose the one you love."

He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw. She'd hit him in his weak spot and she hated doing it, but somehow she had to make him understand.

His eyes were full of pain when he looked at her again. "It took me a long time to admit it, but

you need a husband, Catherine. Someone who can take care of you."

"I can take care of myself."

He nodded in grim defeat. "And so you shall. You've just made the biggest mistake of your life."

"You're wrong, Father. Thank goodness I realized the truth in time."

"You call two weeks in time? The Pickerings and a lot of other people in this community have gone to a heap of trouble over the wedding, and the school board has already hired your replacement for the summer term."

"I'll take care of it. I'll find another job if I have to."

Harlan got up from the table without another word.

Catherine left the house soon afterward. She walked to town, hesitating when she reached the mercantile. She could only hope Ray was attending to business and wouldn't notice her. When she climbed the exterior stairway leading to the Pickering's living quarters on the second floor and knocked on the door, she was relieved to see that Martha opened it.

"Come in, dear," she said kindly.

"Thank you." Catherine entered the apartment and faced Ray's aunt. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I truly appreciate all you've done for me."

Martha smiled sadly. "Catherine, I could never bear any resentment toward you. Of course I'm disappointed. I loved the idea of having you in our

family. You know you've always been special to me." Tears shone in the older woman's eyes. Catherine hugged her, fighting her own emotions.

"Will you still be moving?" Catherine asked, sniffing. She hoped she hadn't ruined that as well.

"Yes, dear, we most certainly will. I want my house, and Ray needs his privacy, married or not."

Catherine smiled in relief, staying only a few more moments before she hurried on to the livery stable to see about getting word to Claire, her matron-of-honor. David Smithers assured her the message would be delivered within a few days.

Her next stop was Edith Henry's, Catherine's friend who was spearheading the reception and decorations. The woman was also disappointed but understanding. "These things happen," Edith said. "If you ask me, I thought you acted unsure about marrying Mr. Pickering from the beginning. A woman has to follow her intuition. You should marry for nothing less than love."

Catherine performed the rest of her obligations to the open surprise of everyone she met. She well knew the gossips would be trading stories about her for weeks to come.

Harlan chose to have supper at the cafe that night. "I told the members of the school board that your resignation would remain in effect," he told her before he left the house. "No need for them to go to any more trouble than they already have."

Catherine stared at the closed front door long after her father had gone. With a heartfelt sigh, she lowered herself into an armchair near the fireplace. Her acceptance of Ray's marriage proposal

two months ago was having more repercussions than she ever would have guessed. She'd hurt and angered people she cared about. As mixed as her feelings for Raymond Pickering had been, the man hadn't deserved what she'd done, and she was filled with remorse and a tinge of regret. But she'd done the right thing—belatedly, but the right thing nonetheless.

She could still tutor. No one could take that from her. Perhaps she'd look for a teaching position elsewhere come spring. Somewhere far away from Rocklin, Wyoming.

Chapter 20

The storm howling through Rocklin over the holidays that year set records. It began on the Wednesday night before the cancelled wedding and, by Friday afternoon when it stopped, almost thirty inches of snow had fallen. Strong, bitter winds sculpted drifts nearly over Catherine's head. The wedding ceremony would have been a disaster.

Old-timers brimming with wisdom and confidence declared an end to the severe weather at the New Year. But as reports of widespread livestock loss began filtering in from ranches in the area, the elders sang a new tune, announcing they'd never seen a winter such as this one in all their years. Some said it served the cattle ranchers right. The land had been overstocked for too long by men greedy to make a profit in the beef market.

Catherine worried about Emmett and Claire, though Emmett had harvested hay the last few years to supplement his cattle's diet when ice covered the native grasses. Roads were impassable, and all she could do was hope and pray the Saunders' were all right, and that when it came time for

the baby to be born the doctor could make it out to the ranch. Claire had declined to stay in town with her parents during the last months of her pregnancy, wishing to be near her husband instead.

By mid-January, much of the old snow still remained on the ground, and temperatures plunged again. Samuel Applegate's one concession to the weather was assigning the early-morning chore of starting the fire in the schoolhouse stove to the two oldest boys instead of sharing the job with more students. Each child was required to bring two pieces of firewood every day.

Catherine thought school should be postponed during the coldest days. She knew how frigid the schoolhouse could be and how difficult it was for little hands to write when they were frozen. This was just one more area where her philosophies differed from Samuel's. As far as she could tell, no one had even investigated her report of the other teacher's abusive punishment.

She swallowed her criticism as she watched children trudge through the deep snow and biting cold to the schoolhouse. Luckier ones were driven in on horse-drawn sleighs.

One afternoon late in January, as she prepared Eddie Harris' after-school lesson, a sudden gust of wind buffeted the house. She parted the curtains on the kitchen window and looked out. Huge white flakes were coming down faster than small-town gossip, blowing horizontally in the fierce wind. Catherine shivered and rubbed her arms, although the kitchen was the warmest room in the house. She checked her timepiece. It would still be a good

two hours before school was dismissed on a normal day. She hoped Samuel Applegate would send the children home immediately.

A half-hour ticked slowly by as the wind screamed through every crack in the Campbell house. Catherine looked out the window again but could see nothing but a swirling mass of white. If Eddie had walked home at the start of the storm, he'd need to stay put.

Before Catherine could turn away from the frightful sight of the blizzard raging outside, she caught a glimpse of a small figure huddled on the neighbor's porch. Eddie's mother. The young widow soon slipped back into her house. Catherine felt a tug of alarm. If Eddie wasn't home, where was he? An instant later, she was telling herself that Samuel had noted the severity of the storm and decided to keep the children in the schoolhouse. Shortly after that, she could see nothing through the snow and ice-encrusted window.

Another quarter hour inched by. Catherine stirred the thick soup on the stove, knowing her father wouldn't be home to share supper. She was thankful he'd stockpiled a mountain of wood in one corner of the kitchen. As the wintry day darkened, even the combined heat of the cook stove and potbelly stove couldn't keep the chill from Catherine's bones, and she wrapped another shawl around her shoulders.

A muffled pounding on the back door sent her rushing across the wooden-planked floor to open it. Margaret Harris blew in, covered by a thick blanket of white. Catherine gave a startled shout

and ushered the woman toward the heat of the potbellied stove. She pulled a chair from the kitchen table and pressed the woman into it.

Margaret's teeth chattered as she spoke. "Eddie hasn't c-come home."

Catherine poured her a cup of coffee while she fought down her own dread.

"I t-tried to go fetch him, but I couldn't g-get very far."

"You shouldn't have gone out in this weather, Mrs. Harris," Catherine gently scolded. "I'm sure Eddie and all the other children are safe inside the schoolhouse."

Margaret nodded and let out a rattling breath. "Of course Master Applegate would k-keep them, wouldn't he?"

"Of course," Catherine said. She left her visitor briefly and returned with a thick quilt and her favorite pair of slippers for Margaret.

"What will they eat?" the widow asked.

Catherine had been wondering the same thing. "Perhaps some of the children had food leftover from lunch. If not, they'll be more than ready for a big breakfast tomorrow when this is over, won't they?" She smiled through her own worry.

"There may not be enough wood..."

"They can burn the benches and desks if they have to," Catherine assured her.

"You're right." Margaret visibly relaxed. "Everything will be all right. I just wish I hadn't sent Eddie to school this morning. I had a bad feeling about the weather today."

“There’s nothing more you can do tonight, Mrs. Harris. You’ve already taken a terrible chill. Please stay with me. My father won’t be coming home either. We can keep one another company.” She gestured at the pot on the cook stove. “You can help me eat the soup I’ve been simmering all day.”

Margaret agreed with a grateful smile. “It does smell wonderful, Miss Campbell. And I don’t relish the idea of going back out in this.”

“Then it’s settled.”

By the time the two women were ready to go to bed, they’d played several hands of cards. Catherine settled Margaret with two heating stones under the covers of her bed before retiring to her father’s room. The eerie howl of the blizzard kept Catherine awake long after midnight.

In the morning, when Harlan straggled home only to don heavier clothing and leave again, his declaration iced every vein in Catherine’s body. Samuel Applegate had dismissed his students during the middle of the blizzard. From the reports of a half-dozen anxious parents, at least seven children were missing.

Eddie Harris made eight.

Within the hour, Catherine and Margaret bundled into layers of warm winter clothes and set out to join the search. With a team of men, they combed the area between the school and the river. The mere process of walking through thigh-high mounds of snow and ice was exhausting.

Before they reached the schoolhouse, encouraging news came from the group of townspeople searching the southeast quarter. The twin daugh-

ters of Dillon and Greta Taylor had been found at a friend's house, and Zachary Spaur had bedded down at the livery. Fresh hope grew for the remaining children.

The schoolhouse welcomed them with a haunting emptiness. Milton Thurber insisted Margaret stay there and tend the fire he started in the wood-burning stove. Catherine wasn't sure if he'd done so because of the widow's obvious frailty, or because he was afraid of what they might find on the snow-covered path along the river, Eddie's favorite route home.

Catherine labored with Thurber and the other searchers toward the riverbank. Young willow trees stooped under their heavy blanket of snow while cottonwoods showered ice from lofty branches. Catherine's extremities numbed with cold and fear, and she buried her nose further into her thick woolen scarf, falling behind the men.

She heard Joe Ettles shout and looked up in time to see the young man scrambling over the edge of the embankment. Thurber and two other men stood staring down at the frozen river. Milton caught Catherine's arm. "You'd best stay back, Miss Campbell," he said.

She pulled away from him and covered the remaining distance in a few determined strides. At the sight of Eddie's snow-covered form in Joe's arms, Catherine screamed.

Grief nearly paralyzed her steps as she led the way back to the schoolhouse. She entered the building first, hoping to somehow prepare Margaret. The widow rose slowly from her seat near the

stove, an unspoken question on her lips. Joe carried Eddie over the threshold, and the shrill wail that emanated from his mother was the most heart-wrenching sound Catherine had ever heard.

Margaret rushed to Joe and yanked Eddie's stiffened body from him. She collapsed on the floor with her son. "Do something!" she screamed, frantically rubbing the boy in a desperate attempt to bring life back into him. "Get a blanket for my boy! He's so cold... Oh God, he's so cold!"

"Ma'am, there's nothing we can do," Milton said gently, touching her on the shoulder.

"Help me get him by the fire," Margaret demanded, slapping maniacally at the man with one hand while she kept an arm around her son. She half-carried, half-dragged Eddie to the stove.

Catherine had to turn away from the horrible sight, but nothing could stop hot tears from flowing down her face. She'd never forget the image of Eddie lying in his frozen grave at the edge of the riverbank where he'd fallen. She wanted to cover her ears to drown out the sound of his mother singing him a warbling lullaby behind her.

She knew she should go to Margaret and offer comfort, but when her father stepped through the schoolhouse door, she rushed to him and poured out her own grief.

* * * *

Funerals for the five children who died in the blizzard were attended by nearly everyone in town. No one knew when the ground would thaw sufficiently for the small caskets to be buried. Samuel Applegate barricaded himself in the house he

shared with his sister. Many citizens and grief-stricken families called for more than just his resignation. But in the end, no charges were brought against the teacher. He'd made a fatal error in judgment that had resulted in five young deaths, but the circuit judge snowed-in at Rocklin ruled that the schoolmaster hadn't intended any harm.

The trains didn't run for many days, adding to the tension in the community. Coal and dry goods were rationed. Finally, Samuel and Susan left town on the first train to plow through the packed drifts. Catherine was thankful to learn that Claire had delivered a healthy baby girl in March, but it would be a long time before she could visit the family.

May brought signs of spring. Trees and bushes began to bud. The school board asked Catherine to resume teaching duties. She didn't know if she could bear the sight of the empty places where Eddie Harris and his four schoolmates had once sat, but she agreed to take over at least temporarily.

The river overflowed its banks as warmer weather melted the heavy snow pack in the mountains west of town. The muddy ground surrounding the schoolhouse became a pond, and school was postponed once again.

Chapter 21

Owen Matthews died in February, and Luke was thankful he'd been able to spend some time with his father. By May, he was as restless as cattle in a pen. He'd known from a young age that he didn't want to spend his life on a farm. Being home only confirmed that belief. Caleb and the others could manage just as well without him. It was time for him to go, though he didn't know—or really care—where he went.

The night before his scheduled departure, Luke's mother and Caleb came to his room while he packed. "We need to speak with you, son," Helen Matthews said. Luke recognized the urgency in her voice and laid his new warbag aside.

"What is it, Ma?"

"You should sit," Caleb suggested solemnly. "We all should."

Luke and his mother sat on the edge of the bed while Caleb pulled a wooden chair near them. He cleared his throat nervously and straddled the seat. "I don't know how to begin except to just jump into it," he said, leaning his forearms on the backrest. His gaze rested on Luke. "Last fall, when you

first came home, you mentioned a man identical to you who keeps shadowin' you...like a ghost."

Luke glanced from Caleb to his mother. She dabbed at her eyes and wouldn't meet his gaze. He nodded slowly. "Nearly identical."

"You have a twin brother, Lucas," Helen whispered, her voice cracking with emotion.

Luke's heart ceased to beat for an instant. He waited, nearly afraid to breathe.

"I beg your forgiveness, son. I never told you the truth years ago when you asked." The wrinkles that creased his mother's face made her look so old and sad. She finally looked at him. "It all happened so very long ago... I tried to forget, but I never could. I've been haunted by him too, Lucas, ever since the day I gave him up." She clutched her handkerchief. "Now I want to tell you the whole story."

"I'm listenin', Ma," Luke whispered hoarsely.

Helen sniffled and blew her nose. Luke understood her struggle for control. He was battling with it himself.

"I've made mistakes in my life, Lucas. One of them was falling in love with the wrong man, long before I met Owen. His name was Lyle Richards. He lived in Lincoln, where I grew up. I worked for him." She paused, her bottom lip trembling.

"Go on," Luke encouraged her.

"I was the nanny for his three children, all girls. He was much older than I and quite wealthy. He never had any intention of marrying me when I...when I became pregnant. You see, he already had a wife." She wiped at her eyes. Pink splotches

colored her cheekbones. “It wasn’t as sordid as it must sound. His wife was bedridden and had been since the last baby was born—several years before I even met them.”

She was crying again. Luke fought the urge to embrace her. There was still so much to learn, and he was nearly overwhelmed with his own emotions.

“I bore twin sons. We named you Lucas and Lincoln. Lyle took Lincoln.”

“Why were we split up?” Luke managed to ask.

Helen bowed her head as if the memories were too heavy for her. “I was fortunate to even keep you. Lyle was a very powerful man. He could’ve taken you both, but he didn’t. He said he had feelings for me and wouldn’t do that. I didn’t want to split you two up, but Lyle had always wanted a son. I was selfish as well and couldn’t bear losing you both. Lyle gave me some money and moved me to Omaha. He told me never to try and contact him after that, or he’d...” her voice lowered, “he’d come for you.”

“So there really is someone out there just like me,” Luke said with awe, stroking the beard he had yet to shave off. He tried to get his mind around all the information rushing at him. He turned to Caleb. “Owen wasn’t my natural father, and you’re not my natural brother either, are you?”

Caleb shook his head. “But Pa loved you like you were his. So much so that I was jealous of you.” He went on with his own memories. “I’d had my father all to myself before he met you and your

mother. But when he adopted you, I accepted you as my brother.”

Caleb paused to take a deep breath. “I only knew about Lincoln because I overheard the folks talkin’ about him one night when Ma was...” He looked at Helen, reaching to squeeze her hand. “When Ma was crying and I was scared. I thought she was going to leave us, like my first mother did. They brought me in their room and told me the story and swore me never to tell.”

Luke took a moment to study Caleb in a new light. It was true his oldest brother resembled the rest of their younger brothers and sisters but had few physical characteristics that would link him to Luke or Helen. That appeared obvious now, though Luke had never considered it before.

“Oh, we were a pair, Owen and me,” Helen continued. “We were both heartbroken, each of us alone with a small son. I met Owen in front of a restaurant in Omaha where I was trying to find work. He said he needed a housekeeper and someone to watch Caleb while he worked his farm. I was grateful for the job.”

“We were the lucky ones,” Caleb intoned. He shared a warm smile with Helen.

“Why couldn’t you tell me about my twin when I asked all those years ago?” Luke divided his question between his mother and brother. “Didn’t you realize how scared I was?”

Helen answered first. “I was afraid to tell you, son. I thought you’d try to find your real father and Lincoln. Lyle didn’t know that I’d married or what my new last name was. I was so afraid he’d change

his mind and come take you away if he knew where we were. I couldn't bear that, Lucas...I couldn't take the chance. I'd already lost one son. I couldn't tell you, and I'm so sorry." She began crying softly again. Luke slid close to her and put his arms around her.

"It's all right, Ma. I understand."

She had intentionally kept information from him that would have dispelled his fears of being crazy or possessed, yet he couldn't blame her. She had done it, he knew, to protect him and their family. No one should have to go through what she had.

"You scared me to death when you asked me about it," Caleb recalled. "I felt so blessed to have a family, a real family. I didn't want to lose it. Ma and Pa told me I could never speak of the past or it would destroy us all. Nothing on earth would've made me do that." He placed his hand on Luke's arm. "I'm sorry too, little brother."

They sat in silence for a time while Luke took it all in. Thoughts and images swirled in his head. "So I'm not insane," he finally said.

"Oh, Lucas, of course not," Helen said, clutching his hand. "I read a lot about twins when you were growing up, and I'm not surprised that your brother has tried to contact you in some way. Twins have a special bond. Why, I've heard of twin men, separated at birth, who met each other years later, and their lives were incredibly similar. They had actually married women with the same names, had named their children alike—"

"What color were his eyes?" Luke interjected.

“His eyes?” Helen repeated. “Why, they were a beautiful blue, just like yours.” She regarded him curiously.

Luke wasn’t sure how to feel about that. If this twin brother wasn’t the same man who dogged him, or the man who robbed the bank, who was he?

“Do you know where he is?” Luke asked after a moment.

“Yes,” Caleb answered. “When you brought him up again that night at my house, I decided to find out what I could about Lincoln Richards. Ma was so busy looking after Pa—I didn’t even tell her until a few weeks ago, when you started talkin’ about leaving.” He paused, excited now. “We did some research.” He smiled proudly. “My Anna could put a Pinkerton agent to shame. Lincoln Richards lives in Montana. He has a ranch near Bozeman.”

A rancher. The same thing Luke had always wanted to be. He’d been in Bozeman just last summer. So close...

“And Lyle Richards?”

“He died not too long ago,” Caleb replied. “His daughters—your half-sisters—are still in the Lincoln area, all married. Your brother Lincoln, from what I could gather, has never married.”

“I’m going to Montana,” Luke announced.

He stayed a few more days, learning as much about Lincoln Richards as he could. On a bright spring morning at the end of May, Luke boarded a westbound train. He waved to the large group on

the platform—his teary-eyed mother and most of his brothers and sisters and their families.

“You’ll let me know if you find him?” his mother asked, wiping new tears from her eyes. “You’ll tell him I loved him and never wanted to let him go.”

“Yes, Ma. I’ll tell him all about you.” He leaned out the window of the passenger compartment and squeezed his mother’s hand.

Caleb stepped up to the window. “I guess you’ll be goin’ through Wyoming.” He gave Luke a meaningful look.

“Goin’ through,” Luke agreed. “Not stoppin’.” But as the train jerked to a start, he realized he’d have to stop off in Rocklin if he wanted to collect his horse, his gun, and the money hidden in the personal belongings he’d been forced to leave behind. He dreaded stepping foot in the little town, dreaded running into a married Catherine.

When the train reached Cheyenne, Luke didn’t linger but immediately bought a ticket north. He dozed on a wooden bench in the depot waiting for the train and boarded quickly when it arrived, anxious to get the next leg of his journey over with.

Hours later, the train made its scheduled stop in Rocklin. Luke stared out the window at the community, a place he had grown to resent. Still recovering from the long winter, the town looked small and forlorn. Luke remained riveted in his seat while he took in the familiar sights—the schoolhouse, church, bank, cafe, and livery stable. He avoided looking toward the jail or the mercantile.

He stood up slowly and gathered his war bag, moving down the rows of seats as though he had weights strapped around his ankles. The train began moving again and he fought the urge to sit back down and say the hell with it.

With a deep breath, he jumped out the door of the passenger car onto the station platform, glancing about cautiously. Even with his beard, he knew he could be recognized. He had no idea if the people in town knew that the money stolen from the Cheyenne bank had been recovered, but he was willing to bet a certain lawman would've tried his level best to squelch such news. The possibility existed that the citizens of Rocklin remembered him as an outlaw, wanted for armed robbery.

Harlan Campbell's words rang in Luke's ears. *If you ever step foot around these parts again, you'll be shot.*

He watched the train as it picked up speed, becoming smaller and smaller in the distance. He'd never run fast enough to catch it now.

A few minutes later, he walked into the sheriff's office. Campbell stood up from behind his desk, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Well, I never thought I'd see you again."

"Sheriff," Luke said with a curt nod. He was going to stay close to the door in case he felt threatened in any way.

"I thought I'd made it clear you aren't welcome here."

"God knows I'd rather not be within a hundred miles of this place, but you took my horse and my gun, and I want them back."

"I'd be a fool to hand you a gun."

"Then don't load it."

Luke watched as the lawman hesitated, then went to an ammunition cabinet, unlocked it, and withdrew the gun. He picked it up when the other man set it down on his desk.

"I never robbed that bank," Luke said evenly, fingering the shiny Colt. "All the money, plus a matching bonus, was returned."

"That's what I heard. But it doesn't mean you didn't rob the bank."

"The eyewitness absolved me the same day the money was received. I imagine you heard that too." He patted his breast pocket, where the document attesting to his innocence always rode. "And now I've got the papers to prove it."

"I was just doin' my job."

Luke swallowed his angry retort. He had no desire to argue with the man. All he wanted were his things and a quick exit. "Thanks to you, someone might take a shot at me on my way to the livery. I need you to go with me to get my horse, then I'll be out of this godforsaken place."

"Emmett's got your horse, but you can take whichever mount of mine you choose. You can switch at the Saunders' place if you want. I'm no horse thief." Campbell stalked to the door and out onto the boardwalk. Luke followed, casting his gaze up and down the street. He avoided looking in the direction of the mercantile, where Catherine was no doubt at work with her husband. He swallowed around the bitter taste in his mouth.

Luke selected Campbell's best mount at the stables. The livery boy quickly saddled the horse, then Luke tied his few belongings onto the animal's back. He put a foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

"You haven't mentioned Catherine," the sheriff said gruffly.

"Nope."

"You going to see her?"

Luke glared at the lawman, nudged the horse with his boot heels, and rode out of the stable. The road heading north out of Rocklin led directly past the Campbell's, but he had to take it nonetheless. He urged the horse faster as he neared the house, but he couldn't help glancing that direction. The memories came rushing in, unbidden.

Catherine's chime-like laughter. Her beauty and her loving, caring nature. Her sweet, passionate kisses.

Another man took delight in her now.

He spurred the horse to a gallop.

Chapter 22

The first person Luke spoke to in Bozeman gave him directions to Lincoln Richards's ranch. The shopkeeper had been momentarily stunned when Luke asked about it.

"I thought you *were* Richards when you first came in," the man explained. "You look exactly like him, 'cept for the eyes."

Luke had to smile. Here, finally, was a man who had seen both men.

The ranch was only five miles out of town. As Luke neared his destination, he grew anxious. There were so many things he wanted to ask Lincoln Richards, so many things he needed to know. And he had no idea if his twin would welcome his presence.

The double-track road led through a large outcropping of rock and juniper pine. Luke crested a hill and pulled the horse to a stop. He hadn't traded the sheriff's horse for Dollar at the Saunders' ranch nor collected his belongings there. He hadn't stopped because he'd been too driven to put plenty of miles between himself and the stinging memories of Rocklin. There'd be time for that an-

other day...maybe when the pain of losing Catherine wasn't quite so strong.

Surrounded by a lush green meadow, his twin brother's ranch loomed before him, a sight to behold. Large white structures with dark shingled roofs greeted him. The spread looked like a small town. Magnificent horseflesh dotted the verdant land. For several long moments, Luke could only stare.

He watched a man come out of the smithy, while another disappeared into a stable that looked bigger than some of the hotels Luke had seen on his travels. He nudged the horse, and they passed through an impressive gateway with a large sign above it reading "Rocking R Ranch," with an iron rendering of the brand hanging beneath.

Sweat broke out on Luke's brow the closer he came to the sprawling ranch house. He heard a shout from the north and saw a rider wave and gallop toward him. Luke dismounted several yards from the house and tethered the horse.

"Hey, Boss. I didn't know ya went to town without the missus." The gray-bearded man stopped a few feet away and stared at Luke, then his eyes shifted to the animal beside him. "That ain't one o' yer horses." His gaze narrowed. "Not one o' yer saddles neither." He returned his questioning frown to Luke. "What's up, Boss?"

The sound of a door opening turned both men's heads. A man stepped out onto the front porch of the ranch house, and Luke set his eyes on his twin brother for the first time. His eyes were dark as sin.

“What the—?” the ranch hand began, and then he fell silent.

“I’ll be damned,” Lincoln Richards swore after several tense moments.

Disbelief, wonder, pain, and anger all battled for the forefront of Luke’s mind. He didn’t know how to feel or what to say. Finally, after all these years, he was face-to-face with his twin, the real-life image of the ghost who’d dogged him from boyhood, a man identical in appearance save the eyes and facial hair...a man who might have robbed a bank and put Luke behind bars.

“I thought you were dead,” Lincoln said at last. “Hell, I’ve dreamed about you since I was a little kid.” He turned to the older man. “Hey, Carter, I’ve got a real live twin! Doesn’t that just beat all?”

“Sure as hell does,” the older man replied.

Lincoln stepped forward. “Lincoln Richards,” he said, stepping to the edge of the porch and sticking out his hand.

Luke stared at his brother’s hand, then up at the face he knew so well. “Luke. Luke Matthews.” He shook hands with Lincoln.

The front door squeaked on its hinges again, and a child poked her head out. A small, pretty woman with golden-brown hair and deep brown eyes followed her onto the porch. The woman shot a quick glance at Lincoln, then at Luke.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. “Linc?”

“Come on over here, darlin’. I want you to meet my brother.” Lincoln held his hand out, and the woman and child hurried to him. The little girl

clutched the woman's skirts, her hazel eyes round as wagon wheels as she stared up at Luke.

"Luke Matthews, this is my wife, Mary Katherine Richards."

Luke swallowed hard at the sound of the woman's name.

"And this little thing attached to her hip is Jessica, our daughter."

Lincoln's introduction of the child had an odd effect on Mary Katherine, who moved closer to her husband, leaned her head on his shoulder, and blinked back tears. He wrapped one arm around her waist and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"I've only recently married Mary Kate and adopted Jessie as my own," Lincoln explained, pulling his dark gaze away from his wife. He smiled at Luke, and his cheeks dimpled. "I'm a lucky man."

Luke nodded, extending a polite greeting to Mary Kate and the little girl. He saw an uncanny resemblance between Lincoln's wife and the woman back in Rocklin whom Luke had once thought he'd wed.

"Man alive," Lincoln marveled, grinning and shaking his head. "You've been following me around in my footsteps for as long as I can remember. Sometimes I'd have liked to kick your hind end but good!"

Luke laughed then, a sound that had Mary Kate's eyes widening. He wondered if he laughed like his brother. "And I thought you were some ghost who was going to haunt me forever."

“How did you find me? How did you know about me?” Lincoln asked. “How did you know I was here? Hell, I was told you’d died at birth or I would’ve come looking for you. I’ve never been happier to see someone alive in my whole life!”

Luke nodded. He knew the feeling well. “I was told you didn’t exist. I only learned about you a short time ago, from my—our—mother.”

“Our mother.” Lincoln quietly sampled the words on his tongue, and Luke saw his twin’s dark eyes glisten. “I never really had a mother.”

“Linc,” Mary Kate said, “why don’t we bring your brother inside? I’m sure you two have a lot to talk about.”

Lincoln nodded and turned to Carter, politely instructing the man to take care of Luke’s horse. Mary Kate and her daughter led the way into the house. Luke tried not to stare at the signs of wealth and luxury as he stepped over the threshold and into his brother’s home.

“I’ll get you something to drink,” Mary Kate offered, disappearing from the large, well-appointed front room, Jessie at her heels.

Lincoln gestured to a stuffed leather sofa and Luke settled into its comfort. His brother took a seat close by. They looked at one another for a time. Luke knew the shocked expression still on his twin’s face had to reflect his own. Mary Kate served cool tea and Jessica laid a plate of cookies on the end table; then the female members of the Richards’s family left the men to their catching up.

“Tell me what you know about us, about our mother,” Lincoln suggested, excitement clear in his tone.

Luke proceeded to tell his twin everything Helen and Caleb had told him. Lincoln listened raptly, his mouth opening and closing in amazement. When Luke was through, Lincoln gestured at a portrait above the fireplace mantle. “Our old man,” he said. Luke rose and walked to the mantle, gazing up and into the face of the man who had sired him.

“He died last year,” Lincoln added.

“He broke our mother’s heart,” Luke said, inexplicably feeling the man’s power as though he had joined them in the room. “He wouldn’t marry her, and he insisted on splittin’ you and me up. He told her he’d take me away if she ever contacted him again.” Luke turned to his brother. “What kind of man does that?”

“A man who would regret it later,” Lincoln replied with quiet confidence. “He never told me the things you just did, but he said he’d done some things he shouldn’t have, and that he’d never forgive himself for the pain he’d caused the people he loved.” Lincoln joined Luke at the fireplace. “He loved our mother. He said he loved her more than any woman he’d ever known, but he couldn’t have her. He never said why.”

Luke wondered if that were true. Had Lyle Richards really loved Helen? Had she been more to him than his mistress? If he’d cared for her so much, why hadn’t he kept in touch with her and

his other son? Luke was afraid he'd never have all the answers. They'd died with Lyle Richards.

"What did he tell you about me?" Luke wanted to know.

Lincoln faced him again. "He told me I had a twin, but he'd died at birth. He said I was his only son, and that he'd waited nearly his whole life to have me. He loved his girls, but he always wanted a son."

"What about his wife?" Luke asked. He couldn't keep the bitter edge from his voice. "How did he explain you to her?"

"I don't honestly know," Lincoln admitted. "I hardly remember her, except that she was always sick. She died when I was four. Pa never remarried."

"And the girls?" Luke prompted.

"Paula's the oldest. She's never liked me, used to call me a little bastard. I had no idea what that meant at the time, but Pa sure did, and he punished her for it. She didn't bother me much after that.

"Then there's Sandra. She was always nice enough, real pretty. She liked to go to parties, and she had lots of beaus.

"The youngest is Tara." Lincoln smiled. "She's my favorite. A real tomboy growin' up. We played together all the time. She's just a few years older than me—than us. She's the one," he said with a huge grin, "who sent Mary Kate and Jessie to me. Mary Kate was widowed and in a predicament. Tara thought I needed a wife." Lincoln laughed, his happiness evident in his expression and tone.

“Mary Kate was the bride I never asked for, but God knows I couldn’t live without her now.”

The need to tell his brother about his personal life pulled at Luke. He already felt that he could tell Lincoln anything. “I almost married a woman named Catherine. She even looked a bit like your Mary Kate.”

Lincoln regarded him silently. “What happened there?”

Luke shrugged as though it didn’t matter. “She married another man.” He still ached to hear her voice, her laughter. Would he ever be free of her memory?

“Something tells me that chapter of your life isn’t over yet,” Lincoln said.

“It has to be.” Luke faced the portrait of Lyle Richards again, needing to change the subject and wanting more information on his father. “Tell me more about him.”

“He wasn’t a bad person, Luke. Rich, yes, but he earned it all himself. He was an attentive father to me. I admit I never wanted for much, but he made sure I grew up with a sense of right and wrong...though I haven’t always stayed on the straight and narrow path.” Lincoln paused. “I think our father regretted so much in his life. He often got this faraway look in his eyes, as if he were somewhere else...with someone else. Now I find it reasonable to believe that he was thinking about our mother and about you...and all he had given up.”

“He could have tried to find me.”

Lincoln nodded. "But maybe he was respecting our mother's privacy. I wish you could have met him."

Luke wasn't so sure how he would have felt about meeting the man who'd caused his mother so much heartache, but he would try to believe the good things Lincoln had said about their father.

"Ma told me you had blue eyes, just like mine," Luke said, "but your eyes are dark, and they were always dark in my visions."

Lincoln shrugged. "I don't know anything about that except I've heard that many babies are born with blue eyes. I guess mine changed color and yours didn't."

Lincoln greeted someone behind Luke, and he turned around to see a robust, gray-haired woman standing near the sofa.

The woman let out a startled shriek and slapped a hand to her ample bosom.

"It's my brother, Luke Matthews," Lincoln said with a wide grin. "Luke, this is my housekeeper, Hattie, the other woman I couldn't live without."

"But, your father said he'd died."

"He's here, Hattie. In the flesh."

"Sweet heaven!" The woman bustled forward to give Luke a fierce hug. When she released him and backed away, tears flowed down her plump cheeks.

"Hattie has been with my family since I was a baby," Lincoln explained. "Most of the time she's more of a mother-hen than a housekeeper," he added with a chuckle.

"I was just...coming to tell you...that supper's ready," the woman sputtered. "I'll set another place at the table!" She sent Luke one more shining smile before she vanished.

"You can stay with us awhile, can't you?" Lincoln invited. "You're welcome as long as you want. We've got so much to talk about."

"I can stay for a few days," Luke replied, meeting his brother's eyes. "And you're right, there's lots to talk about."

* * * *

After supper, Luke settled in the parlor with Lincoln and his family. As Lincoln and his wife exchanged soft, private looks, Luke envied their obvious love and adoration. He frequently had to turn away from the sight. They all got better acquainted, talking until evening shadows engulfed the house. When Mary Kate explained how she'd been a schoolteacher before she'd married her first husband, Luke was again astonished at the similarities between the woman and Catherine.

"I want to stay up with Papa and Uncle Luke!" Jessie protested when her mother announced bedtime.

Luke smiled at the title of uncle. It felt good to have this little girl, his brother's adopted daughter, call him that. He could tell Lincoln was still in awe of his own title as father when the man scooped the child up in his arms and kissed her lovingly on the cheek. She giggled and kissed him back quickly.

"Aw, you can do better than that, Jess," he teased.

The girl leaned toward Lincoln again and placed her mouth firmly on his cheek. Her kiss sounded noisy and wet. Mary Kate gave a soft laugh and went to retrieve her daughter.

“Wait!” Jessie cried. “I’ve gotta kiss Uncle Luke.”

The feathery-soft kiss she bestowed on Luke’s cheek brought back a flood of memories of his other niece’s sweet kisses, along with hopes for his own daughter’s some day.

“Good night, Luke,” Mary Kate said through a pretty smile. “We’re so glad you’re here.” Both men watched her and Jessie climb the open stairway.

“You have a real nice family, Lincoln.”

His twin nodded, then made a sweeping gesture around the room. “I’d give up everything I have for them. This house, this land, my horses...every penny I own.”

Luke was touched by his brother’s words. He had to wonder what might have happened, how things would have turned out, had their natural father done the same, giving up everything for the woman he’d claimed to love, and for his twin sons.

“Our father did things he shouldn’t have,” Lincoln said, correctly reading Luke’s thoughts, “just like we all have. Is there anyone who hasn’t done something utterly foolish and hurtful, something he wishes he could take back?”

Luke heard the ring of regret in Lincoln’s voice. “Like robbin’ a bank in Cheyenne?” he demanded.

Chapter 23

Lincoln's face went white. "Ah, hell. How do you know about that?"

"I was thrown in jail for the crime."

"No..." Lincoln shook his head. "Why did I ever do it?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Luke's heart beat faster than a stampeding herd of cattle. He had hoped his accusation would have fallen on incredulous ears; then they both could have laughed about it. Instead, his newfound twin had confessed.

Lincoln ran curled fingers through thick dark hair in the manner Luke often did when he was upset. "It just happened," he said, keeping his head bowed. "I walked into that deserted bank and wondered what it would be like—" He cursed under his breath. "I knew as soon as I'd done it that there'd be hell to pay."

"You were right."

Lincoln's eyes were full of torment. "As God as my witness, Luke, never once did I think that someone else would be blamed for what I did. It was a stupid prank that—"

“A prank?” Luke growled. “You steal people’s life savings, scare the banker’s wife, and it’s just a prank?” He was trying to keep his voice down in deference to Mary Kate and Jessica, but it was damn hard to control the rage that was beginning to spread to every cell in his body.

“No, that’s not what I mean.” He glanced at the ceiling. “How can I explain it?”

“I’m still listenin’, Lincoln. But I damn well need some answers.”

His twin took a deep breath and faced him. The story came out in a rush. “I told you I had everything I wanted growing up the son of a wealthy man. I admit I was spoiled. I never had to work too hard to get anything. This ranch was the first thing I really worked to build myself.” He shook his head. “I’m gettin’ off track. I can’t tell you exactly why I robbed that bank. I think it was partly about Mary Kate and all that was happening with us. I hadn’t asked for a wife, yet I was feeling things I didn’t want to feel for her. I was going crazy from wanting her, yet not wanting her.”

Luke didn’t understand a lot of what Lincoln was saying, but he remained quiet and let his brother go on.

“A man down in Cheyenne had a prime stallion that I’d been thinkin’ about buying. I needed to get away from Mary Kate for a while, so I took off and went down there. I walked into that bank to conduct business, but then I realized I was the only customer. I don’t know...” His voice trailed off a moment. “I just wanted to be back in control again. I wanted to take control of something,

‘cause everything in my life seemed to be just...well...crazy.”

“So you pointed a gun at a helpless woman.”

“Yeah. I did.” He traded a look with Luke. “There’s no excuse for it, I know that,” Lincoln went on. “I came home, feeling guilty as Cain. Somehow I kept it from Mary Kate, but it ate me alive.”

“And I was sittin’ in a jail cell for the better part of that time.”

Lincoln grimaced, and he took another deep breath before he continued. “Things were goin’ real good with Mary Kate and me. I realized how much I loved her, how badly I wanted her to stay and be a real wife to me, and I spilled my guts, told her everything.” He glanced upward as though he could see into the bedrooms above them. “Returning the money wasn’t enough. She said I had to match the amount I’d taken, and send it all to the bank in Cheyenne.”

Luke well remembered the joyful shouts of the customers when they learned of the interest paid to their stolen accounts. For many of those people, the extra money was worth more than the outlaw’s neck in a noose. “How come you never were arrested?” he wanted to know. “The picture on the wanted poster looked just like you. The sheriff in Bozeman should have known.”

Lincoln’s expression was full of guilt when he nodded. “I believe he did. He’s a friend. I kept mostly to the ranch, and he only came out once to question me, then he dropped it. I told him later that all the money and more had been returned,

and he didn't press for details. He never posted my description or the reward offered by the bank." Lincoln paused. "When you turn me in, you can't say anything about the sheriff. I don't care what you say about me, but please, leave him out of it."

Silence reigned in the room. Luke swallowed around the dry knot at the base of his throat. He'd just found his brother, his flesh-and-blood twin. A few moments ago he'd wanted nothing better than to take Lincoln out and hang him himself. His brother seemed truly remorseful, however, and now he just wanted to forget the whole thing. What Lincoln had done was wrong, but he'd tried to right it. No good would come from Luke's turning him in now. He felt no need for vengeance.

"I'm not goin' to turn you in."

Lincoln's breath burst from his lungs like a covey of frightened quail. "I'm really not such a bad person either, Luke," he said quietly. "But I made a terrible mistake, one that I'll regret all my life, and even more now that I know it hurt you. I'm sorry, brother."

"I believe you." Luke was amazed at how easily the anger washed away, leaving an unexpected calmness in its wake. "I just have one more question, then we'll call it a night."

"Anything."

"Why in the hell did you kiss the banker's wife?"

The question caught Lincoln by surprise. He gave a rueful chuckle. "I don't rightly know that either. It was impulsive. On some level, I think I was comparing her to Mary Kate. I guess I had to know

if I could feel the same thing for another woman that I felt when I kissed Mary Kate.”

“And?”

“No comparison. Mary Kate’s lips, her sweet mouth...” He glanced upward again. “I don’t want to kiss any other woman, not ever. I love that woman so much.”

“I hope you tell her that.”

Lincoln met Luke’s gaze. “All the damn time.”

* * * *

By the time Luke left the Rocking R Ranch many days later, he felt that he knew Lincoln well. They spent the time talking, sharing memories, and laughing. During the course of the visit, they managed to lay their old ghosts to rest.

“If things don’t work out down in Wyoming, you come back up here,” Linc told his brother the morning of his departure.

Luke had talked to him at length about Catherine and how he couldn’t quite get beyond what had happened between them. In Luke’s heart and mind, it wasn’t settled. If he had to go down there and face her and her husband to let her memory go once and for all, he would do it. Watching Lincoln with Mary Kate only served to convince him of that. Maybe someday, if he were lucky enough, he’d have another chance at that kind of love.

The two men had ridden into Bozeman to send a telegram to Helen in Nebraska. Their mother and some of their siblings were already planning a trip west to meet Linc and his family.

“That bank draft will be waiting in Bozeman when you get there,” Lincoln reminded him. His

twin wanted to share a generous portion of his inheritance from their father's estate. He'd insisted it was what Lyle Richards would have wanted as well, and Luke was overwhelmed at the gift. Now he'd have all the money he needed, and more, for the kind of ranch he'd dreamed of owning for so long.

He just wasn't sure where he would build it.

* * * *

Luke rode into the yard of the Saunders' ranch, hoping to keep his visit short. All he wanted was his horse and his things. He didn't know how he would handle hearing about Catherine from Claire and decided it would be best to avoid the young woman altogether.

"Hey!" Emmett called from one of the out buildings. He jogged toward Luke. "It is you. I was thinkin' I was seeing a mirage or something." Luke dismounted and Emmett clapped him on the back. "Good to see you, Matt. We were all real worried about you."

Luke bit down on the words jamming his throat. Catherine hadn't worried long.

"It's good to see you too, Emmett. I just came for my horse and my things, and then I'll be on my way. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Trouble? How's that? Claire will be happy to see you. She—"

"I don't want to see Mrs. Saunders. No offense."

Emmett frowned. "I have your horse, and I can swap him for Campbell's. That is the sheriff's

mount, isn't it?" He pointed at the horse Luke had been riding.

"Yeah. He told me to leave him with you when I take Dollar."

Emmett's brows drew together in confusion. "So you talked to Harlan?" Luke nodded. "I hope the two of you worked things out and that Catherine told you—"

"I just want my horse and my war bag, Emmett." Luke knew he was sounding rude, but he needed to ride out before the memories of this place overwhelmed him.

"Dollar's in the corral. He's been earnin' his keep while you were away."

"I appreciate you lookin' after him. I'll pay you for his care."

"Pay me?" Emmett repeated. "No. I owe you for all the work you did around here last summer."

"Then we can call it even," Luke offered.

Emmett gave him another long look as though he was trying to read what Luke was thinking. "All right," he said after a minute. "But I have to apologize about the war bag. I don't have it any longer. One of my hands was able to use the clothes, and Claire gave the rest of the items to Catherine."

Luke let out a breath. Now he had to see Catherine, whether he was prepared for the meeting or not. *Ride into town and get your things. Talk to her for a moment. Meet her husband. Then leave Rocklin, Wyoming behind for good.*

He nodded, grateful to see that Emmett wasn't going to press him to talk about Catherine. He was glad to see Dollar again. As he rode out of the yard,

he turned to shout goodbye to Emmett. Claire stepped onto the front porch with a baby in her arms. She called Luke's name. He lifted his hand in acknowledgement, and galloped away.

* * * *

Catherine carried the heavy basket across the yard and set it down beneath the clothesline. She bent to retrieve her pale blue skirt and groaned a little as she straightened back up. Sleep had eluded her the night before, and her back ached. Physical tasks like laundry that she'd performed all her life seemed to have become more difficult since her fortieth birthday. She wondered how women older than she coped with their household chores as they aged. Just as quick, she knew the answer: they endured because it was part of their lives, like it or not.

A sound from the house caught her attention and she turned to watch Little Miss push open the back screen door. Catherine smiled. The cat was a constant companion. Little Miss ran to her and Catherine gently scooped up the furry round bundle. The kittens would be born soon.

A horse whinnied somewhere nearby and Catherine glanced around the yard. "Father?" she called out, walking along the fence toward the front of the house. She stopped still when she saw the horse tethered there. A shiver of surprise washed over her and, for a moment, she couldn't move. The horse looked so much like Dollar, Luke's horse. She knew Emmett was keeping the animal out at the ranch.

“Emmett?” She set Little Miss down in the grass and turned to scan the yard.

Her heart lodged in her throat as she recognized the man watching her from the shade of a tree a short distance away. It couldn’t be Luke, her eyes had to playing tricks on her, and yet...

“Luke?” she whispered, blinking to fully focus on him. She took a tentative step forward.

He stepped into the late afternoon sun. Although he’d grown a beard, his blue gaze was unmistakable. “Catherine.” He nodded solemnly. “You look well.”

“You...you came back,” she said with nearly overwhelming awe, her gaze taking all of him in. Dear heaven, he looked wonderful, even more handsome than she’d remembered in new Levi’s and a blue and white-checkered shirt.

They stood only a few feet apart, but it might as well have been thousands of miles, as neither one moved to bridge the gap between them. Their gazes swept over each other.

“Where’s your husband, Catherine?”

“My husband?” she repeated. “I don’t have a husband.”

Luke stared at her. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

“You’re not married,” he said slowly, carefully. She shook her head. “No.”

“Engaged?”

“No.”

He let out a breath. “But you were.”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

"I couldn't marry him. He wasn't..." She stopped and tried to take control of her trembling voice. "He wasn't you."

A grin tugged at Luke's lips, transforming his hard features and revealing the dimples she loved. "So you thought about me, little Cat?" he asked softly.

She nodded, tears shimmering on her eyelids. He moved toward her. She rushed into his embrace, pressing her face against his chest. She sobbed into his shirt, soaking it with happy tears as he held her close. She'd convinced herself months ago that this moment would never come, and now she thanked the heavens she'd been wrong.

"I thought of you, too," Luke murmured into her hair. "All the damn time." He rocked her slowly in his arms, his hands sliding over her as though he needed to touch her all over to make sure she was real. Catherine did the same, rejoicing in the feel of hard muscle beneath her fingertips.

"Oh...Luke."

He stroked the pulse that beat wildly in her throat, drawing her face to his. "I thought of your sweet mouth...the idea of you being kissed by someone else, and it nearly killed me..." His lips slanted over hers slowly, tenderly. It was a long, deep, healing kiss. Catherine's hands knocked his gray Stetson off his head, and she buried her fingers in thick, dark hair. The old feelings came back and she trembled all over, clutching him desper-

ately as if he'd vanish again if she didn't hold on tight.

Long moments later they finally pulled away and gazed at each other again. Catherine knew she'd never grow tired of just looking at him. Then, grabbing Luke's hand, she led him toward the house. He grabbed his hat as they passed Little Miss lounging in the yard. He stooped to pet her behind the ears, and she began to purr.

"Yours?" he asked. Catherine nodded. "What are you feedin' it?"

She threw her head back and laughed, the first time in so long. "Little Miss is in the family way. Now come on, Mr. Matthews." She pulled him behind her. Inside the house, she guided him down the hallway to her bedroom. She dropped his hand and went to her dresser, opening the top drawer. Retrieving the wooden box, she handed it to Luke. He removed his hat and set it on the bed.

"You kept my stuff all this time?" When she nodded, he kissed her again. "Oh, Catherine, how I missed you..."

She threw her arms around him. "I thought you'd forgotten all about me. You didn't come back and I was so afraid you were dead..."

He pulled her to sit down on the edge of the bed with him. "Did you think about marryin' another man because you thought I was dead?"

Tears of remorse burned her eyes. She nodded. "And I thought...after the sheriff's office in Cheyenne claimed they'd never heard of you, that you had played me for a fool." She sniffled. "I'm sorry I ever doubted you, Luke."

“I had my own doubts as well. We have a lot to talk about, Catherine. But first, I have to know. Did you want to marry that man?”

She met his searching gaze. “Please understand, I thought he was my last chance at being a wife and having a family of my own, but it never felt right, Luke. You have to believe me. I never loved him.” His mouth moved over hers again, and she rejoiced at the knowledge that he accepted her word.

The kiss lasted for long delicious moments. Finally, he pulled back. “What happened here?” he asked, fingering the cut place on his family’s photograph as he combed through the box on his lap.

“Oh, I’m sorry I did that.” She touched the golden locket between her breasts. “I wanted to put your picture in here,” she said quietly, “right next to my heart and my mother’s picture. But I couldn’t bear to destroy the only picture I had of you with your family.”

“Did you look at it and think of me?”

She nodded, a mischievous smile on her face. “All the damn time.”

Luke chuckled, kissing her again. He couldn’t seem to get enough of her mouth. “Thank you, Catherine, for keepin’ things most people would place no value in.” He pulled at the false bottom of the box. “Unless they saw this.”

Catherine gasped when he lifted the pouch of money. “I had no idea.”

“That is the idea.” He grinned. “And there’s a lot more of that now.”

She didn't question him as she bent her head and opened the locket. "There's one more thing I kept." She removed a small, worn scrap of paper and handed it to him.

Luke unfolded the note and read her name there, written in his own hand. He smiled. "I remember the night I wrote it. It was the night I knew I was in love with you."

Warmth enveloped her. "When was that—the night you told me?"

"No, before that, when we lay beneath the stars, and you learned the constellations."

"And we named Catherine's Cross?"

His dimples deepened. "I often wondered if you looked for it after I left."

"I did. I thought about you every time I looked up at the sky at night."

"And I thought of you."

He leaned close and kissed her gently. She responded with all the passion she'd held within her since he'd ridden away with her father that day. If this was all a dream, she didn't ever want to wake up.

"Do you still want to marry me, little Cat?" he whispered.

"Oh, yes..." she murmured. Joy swept through her. She picked up his hand and placed it near the locket. "Listen," she said, her gaze meeting his. "My heart is beating again."

The sound of her father's voice broke through the happy fog surrounding Catherine.

"I should have known you'd go back on your word," Harlan growled.

Catherine turned to him. Luke kept one arm possessively around her. He glared at the sheriff. Both men tensed like sticks of dynamite, ready to explode at any moment.

"Get out of my house," Harlan said with menace.

"No, Father!" Catherine cried. "You won't send him away again—I won't let you."

"Nothing good's gonna come from you being here," the sheriff said.

"I can make her happy," Luke retorted.

"She was happy before she ever laid eyes on you. You'll only make her miserable again, and I won't let that happen. You won't be allowed anywhere near her."

Catherine stood. She and her father had reached an uneasy truce of sorts, but now she could see what he was trying to do—again. "Don't talk about me as though I'm not in the room, Father. I'm a grown woman and I'll see whoever I wish."

"He's a dangerous man," Harlan went on. "Someone could take a shot at him."

"He's right about that, Catherine," Luke agreed, rising to stand beside her. He placed an arm around her slim waist and pulled her close. "That's why your daddy will let everyone know I'm no longer—and never was—a wanted man." He looked at the sheriff. "And you can start right now, 'cause I'm takin' your daughter to supper."

Catherine gave Luke a broad smile. "I'll just need to freshen up a second, if you two will excuse me."

Luke walked to the door. "You're invited too," he told Harlan with a victorious smile before he stepped out of the room.

Her father's expression held a mixture of rage and concern. He looked at Catherine and opened his mouth to speak.

"Say nothing else, Father. You've done enough damage, and I will not allow you to do anything else to keep Luke away from me." She faced him with hands on her hips. "Do you understand that, Father?"

He walked out of the room. Catherine let out the breath she'd been holding.

A few minutes later she headed for the parlor. The men's voices carried through the open doorway. She paused to listen and to say a prayer for some modicum of peace between them.

"...I hold you personally responsible for all of it, Campbell. You need to know that as long as Catherine wants me, I'm stayin' right here in Rocklin." Luke paused. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with menace. "And I'll kill any man who tries to stop me."

Catherine squeezed her eyes shut. She'd never heard a man threaten her father.

"I'll be watching you, Matthews."

"And I'll be watchin' you."

Catherine stepped into the room. "Shall we go?" Her gaze darted between the two men. "I'll walk you into town," her father said.

Evening was coming down as they made their way toward the cafe. When they entered the building, everyone in attendance turned to stare.

Catherine looked at her father. "Tell them," she prompted.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "This man is not wanted by the law," he said, gesturing at Luke. "There is no reward on his head. Please spread the word." He turned and left abruptly.

Catherine didn't want the day to end. Later, after they'd eaten and returned to her house, she led Luke to the porch where they sat close together on the swing in the dark.

"Stay with me awhile?" she suggested.

Luke chuckled. "Twist my arm, little Cat." He bent to feather-brush her lips with his own. Then his mouth moved lower to sip at her neck, and she smelled the rich fragrance of his hair, felt the tickle of his mustache and beard, heard the sound he made deep in his throat. Desire raced through Catherine, leaving her as winded as a footrace.

"Luke..." she breathed. "I never stopped loving you."

"I was going to say it first this time." His mouth moved to her ear and he whispered, "I love you, Catherine." She turned her head to meet his warm, wonderful lips again. His masterful kiss left her dazzled and yearning for more.

"I still can't believe that you're here," Catherine murmured.

"And I'm never leavin' you again. I swear it."

Chapter 24

Luke took a room at a boarding house in town. He rented a buggy and horse and picked Catherine up early the next morning. He wanted to return to the Saunders' ranch so he could explain his behavior the day before.

Catherine greeted him with a warm smile and an even warmer kiss. "You shaved off your beard," she murmured, stroking his face. "You won't get rid of your mustache, will you? I love your mustache."

"Then it stays."

She was quiet as they drove out of town. The wildflowers along the rutted road looked brighter than a day earlier. The air smelled fresher, and the sky was a clear blue. He smiled with contentment. His fears had been laid to rest. Catherine wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"What's brewin' in that pretty head of yours?" he asked after a few moments of silence.

"Do you still want your own ranch, Luke?"

"Of course. I always have."

"People say now's a good time to buy land. A lot of ranchers lost more cattle than they could af-

ford last winter. Some just abandoned their spreads. Most of the cattle are too scrawny to sell for slaughter this year. A man could make a good deal right now."

He'd been thinking the same thing. "It's a shame one man can benefit from another's misfortune, but if we can find what we want, I'm ready to buy. With Linc's help, we've got enough money for a nice place of our own, Catherine." He'd told her the incredible story of meeting his twin. Although his stubborn pride had him questioning the use of his brother's money, he knew it was the only way to get the kind of place he wanted so soon.

"Then we can marry," he added.

She smiled happily and leaned closer to him on the padded seat.

"Ye gods, I don't believe it!" Claire exclaimed when Catherine and Luke pulled into the ranch yard. She held her tiny daughter against her shoulder.

Catherine could hardly contain her excitement. There was a new bounce in her step as she climbed down from the wagon before Luke could help her. "Claire!" she squealed, embracing the new mother gently. She gazed at Renae Saunders. "She's beautiful," Catherine said, "and you look well and happy."

Claire laughed. "You look good yourself, and it's obvious why." To Luke she said, "Welcome back."

Luke smiled, tipping his hat as he climbed the porch steps to stand beside Catherine. "Thank you,

ma'am. It's good to be back. Congratulations on your little one there."

"Thank you, but call me Claire. We're old friends."

"I apologize for ridin' out of here so fast yesterday, Claire," he said. "I need to tell Emmett that, too. I'm afraid I was abrupt with him. As far as I knew, Catherine was married, and I just wanted to get away from any place where memories of her lingered."

Touched by his words, Catherine reached for his hand, and he squeezed it gently in his.

In the house, Claire gestured at the sofa. "Have a seat. Here, Cath," she said, handing Renae to her. "Why don't you get acquainted while I fix us something to drink?" Claire disappeared into the kitchen.

Catherine held Renae gingerly in the crook of her arm, looking down at the baby's sweet face. "Did you see that, Luke? She smiled at me."

Luke leaned toward them and put an arm around Catherine's shoulder. "You look good holding that baby," he murmured, nuzzling her ear. Claire returned with cool tea and a plate of cookies. Catherine laughed as Renae grabbed Luke's proffered index finger.

"She's got a good ropin' grip," he said. "She'll make a fine cowgirl."

Claire laughed. "Be sure you tell Emmett that."

"She's precious, Claire," Catherine murmured. "She has such a sweet disposition."

"Most of the time. Just wait until she hollers."

Catherine smiled down at the baby in her arms. She couldn't imagine such a tiny thing making much noise. "I have a gift for her in my bag."

"I'll stable the horse and bring our things in." Luke gave Catherine's cheek a quick kiss and left the house.

Claire settled into Luke's spot next to Catherine on the sofa. "What happened, Cath? Where has Luke been all this time?"

Catherine smiled, resting her head on the comfortable cushions. "He showed up in my backyard yesterday. I nearly fainted from the shock." She paused. "He was in jail in Cheyenne. He wouldn't tell me for how long...I think he wanted to spare me the details. But he exonerated himself and was released." She added sadly, "He found out I was engaged to Ray, so he went home to Nebraska. His father died over the winter."

"The poor man," Claire said with sympathy. She was quiet a moment as they both watched Renae fall asleep in Catherine's arms. "It just goes to show you that things will work out if they're meant to," Claire said. "And I believe you two are destined to be together."

"All I care is that I'm with Luke."

"What about teaching?"

"It's not the same at the schoolhouse anymore. The new teacher from Ohio will be coming soon."

"I was so sorry to hear about the children." Gazing at her daughter nestled securely in her friend's arms, Claire added, "I couldn't imagine losing a child. How could one ever recover?"

"I don't know," Catherine said, her eyes filling at the painful memory of Eddie and the others.

"It was such an awful winter. So much death." Claire shuddered.

"Will the ranch survive?" Catherine asked.

Claire nodded. "Thank goodness Emmett had hay stored in the barn. It was a dangerous undertaking just to get it out to the cattle, but somehow the men managed it. We lost some stock, but not as many as we would have had there been no hay."

Luke entered the room then, carrying Catherine's suitcase in one hand.

"Cath can show you where to put that," Claire remarked, scooping up her daughter. "I'm going to go put Renae down for awhile."

Catherine led Luke to the guestroom where he set the suitcase down on the bed. She opened it and withdrew a small parcel wrapped in white tissue paper and adorned with a pretty pink ribbon. Luke put his arms around her waist from behind and kissed the back of her neck, sending shivers of pleasure up her spine. She leaned back and hugged his arms around her middle.

"I want all my little girls to look just like you," he murmured.

She didn't know if having babies would be possible or wise at her age, but knowing that Luke was willing to try was enough for now.

She turned her head, and their mouths came together in a gently passionate kiss. When it was over, Catherine pressed her cheek against Luke's chest. They wrapped their arms around one an-

other, remaining that way—content without words—for a long time.

* * * *

Claire served dessert after supper; then the two couples played cards. Catherine's heart began a heady pounding when Luke asked her to walk him outside. He held her hand in his as they made their way through the dark. Far from the welcoming lights of the ranch house, near the place where Luke had taught Catherine about the night sky, they stopped.

"It's too early in the season to see Catherine's Cross," he said.

She sat in the short spring grass and pulled him down beside her. "Show me what's up there now." They lay on their backs, their bodies touching from shoulder to ankle. Catherine felt Luke's presence in every pore of her being.

He pointed. "Look just above the horizon. That cluster of stars there is Corvus the Crow."

"Hmm. It looks like a baseball diamond."

Luke swiveled his head to see it from Catherine's perspective. "You're right," he said thoughtfully. "I never looked at it that way. Now, look northeast of Crovus. That's Crater the Cup. A month or so ago you would have seen it attached to Hydra the Water Snake, but Hydra's out of sight now."

"The one above Crater looks like an animal," Catherine observed.

"Smart woman. That's Leo the Lion."

"What's that large group of stars to the southwest of Leo? It resembles a hook."

Luke was quiet a moment. "That's Virgo...the Virgin." He rolled onto his side to face her. "Catherine, I have to ask you something."

Her gaze met his in the moonlight. She knew what he would ask before he spoke again. "Ray and I weren't intimate, Luke."

His breath came out in a relieved rush. "That's good," he whispered.

"Would you still want me if I was no longer...like Virgo?"

"I'll always want you."

He moved to kiss her, and the flame that had begun last summer quickly re-ignited. His hands slid over her, robbing her of breath and reason. She reached for his shirt, yanking at the snaps until her fingers met hard, warm muscle. He pressed her close, his hot kisses trailing down her chin, her throat. His mouth roamed over her blouse, and he kissed her breasts until the fabric was damp and her flesh ached. When he made no move to unfasten her buttons, she performed the task herself, quickly lowering her chemise, baring herself to him.

He stared at her a moment, then lowered his head until his mouth fastened on a hardened nipple. Catherine's senses spun out of control, rocketing into space to mingle with the stars. She grasped his head, burying her fingers deep in his hair.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured against her skin. "You taste better than Claire's cinnamon-apple strudel."

"You...had...seconds," she reminded him, and he blazed a heated path to her other breast, devouring it in the same fashion.

Catherine barely breathed as Luke's mouth moved down across her ribs to place molten kisses above her belly. The ache of longing settled in the region just below. When his fingers teased the area near her waistband, she raised enough to reach behind her and unclasp the top buttons of her skirt.

"Sweet kitten," he whispered, his hands roaming beneath her clothes. When his fingers finally encountered moist, private flesh, she cried out. He caressed her tenderly while his mouth returned to her breasts. Her bottom began to make little circles on the grass as she found the rhythm he'd taught her that summer night nearly a year ago. She knew now what her body needed.

His mouth rose to swallow her cries of ascension, and soon after she was tumbling through the starry universe, arching against his hand. She called out his name, and he gathered her close as she slowly settled back to earth.

"Please, Luke," she said after her heartbeat leveled off, "I want to do something for you."

"Catherine..."

"But you deserve it." She smiled dreamily, and he chuckled.

"All right, little hellcat. But I want you to know that I still plan on savin' the best part for our wedding night." He leaned back on his elbows, grinning mischievously.

"Tell me what to do."

“I’ll give you a few hints. The rest you can figure out for yourself.”

* * * *

Luke knew Catherine regretted leaving Claire, Emmett, and Renae after such a short visit, but they had to get back before school resumed on Monday. Claire promised she and her family would make the trip into town soon now that the road was in better condition.

“Should we stop by that abandoned ranch on the way back?” Luke asked Catherine when they were settled in the buggy.

She nodded with excitement. “I hope it’s as nice as Emmett said.”

After several miles, they came to a fork in the road. One led directly south toward Rocklin while the other went in a southwesterly direction, toward the mountains. The buggy lurched precariously on the rough two-track road as Luke followed the directions Emmett had given him. Soon they turned onto a rutted lane that headed due west.

“There it is!” Catherine shouted, pointing at some small buildings coming into view.

Luke nodded. He’d already noticed the leaning fence posts and drooping barbed wire. As they drew closer, he could see that the house was very small and the barn was in need of repair. The layout of the ranch was well planned, however, and the view of the snow-capped mountains beyond was spectacular. He’d often imagined this kind of scene when he daydreamed of his own place. Maybe this was it.

They pulled into the ranch yard and stopped. Luke watched Catherine's expression as she looked around, but he couldn't read her thoughts. Most of the out buildings needed maintenance. No one had repaired them after the ravages of the harsh winter. The house looked solid, though the stovepipe poking out of the roof was crooked.

Luke dismounted and went to lift Catherine down from the buggy. His hands lingered at her waist. "No one lives here, so it should be all right to look around."

Together they walked onto the porch of the house. Catherine gingerly pushed the front door open and it creaked like dry snow. She peered inside. "I feel like an intruder," she said.

"I'm right behind you."

Luke surveyed the interior room with a critical eye. The previous occupants had left behind only a dusty cook stove and a broken down chair. One window was broken while the other one was loosely shuttered.

"It's not so bad," Catherine said with a confident smile. "We could fix it up. A little spit and polish and—"

"A lot of spit and polish," Luke corrected.

"After I cleaned it I could put curtains on the windows, rugs on the floor, move in some decent furniture, and it would be just fine."

He didn't know if she was being brave and optimistic for his sake or if she truly liked the little house. It did have a certain appeal. He could almost picture it the way she described.

“There’s only one room, Catherine. We’d be doin’ our eatin’ and sleepin’ in the same place.”

“Sounds cozy.”

He grinned. How he loved her spirit. “We could settle in here until we build a bigger house,” he suggested, “then turn this into another bunkhouse. Come on, let’s look around outside.”

She took his arm, and they stepped out of the little house and off the porch. “We could build our house over there,” she gestured further to the south where a stream wound through the native grass. “What a splendid view of the mountains!”

He agreed. The place was almost perfect.

Under the shade of a cottonwood near the stream, they ate the lunch Claire had packed for them; then they continued the trip back to Rocklin.

“Luke and I are going to buy the Baker Ranch and fix it up,” Catherine told her father after supper that night. She’d wanted to invite Luke to stay and eat with them, but there were some things she needed to settle first.

Harlan leaned back in his favorite chair in the parlor and let out a deep sigh. He looked so old and worried tonight. “Are you sure you want to marry him, Catherine?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” She paused and let that sink in. “What do you think about that, Father?”

“I think,” he began, “that you’re very much in love with the man, and you’ll do what you want, regardless of my feelings.”

“You’re right. But we’d like your blessing.”

“I won’t stand in your way.”

Catherine was shocked into silence for a moment. "Are you feeling all right, Father?"

He regarded her with a sad smile. "I'm fine, dear." He groaned a little when he shifted in his chair. "I've been doing a lot of thinking since you broke off your engagement to Raymond. Although I may not fully approve of your choice in husbands this time, I've come to realize that I've made some mistakes where you're concerned."

She held her breath. "Go on, Father."

"To explain it all, I need to go back to the time when I first met your mother."

Catherine smiled, remembering the things her mother had told her about their courtship. "She said she fell in love and gave up her old life for a new one with you."

Her father drew in a breath, exhaling slowly. "She said that? Your mother certainly had a way of looking at things in a positive light." His eyes were distant as he immersed himself in memories. "She gave up her old life, all right. She gave up everything she had before me. When she moved to St. Louis with me, she was choosing never to see or hear from her parents again."

Catherine had rarely seen her father look so vulnerable. "Mother never said much about her family. I always wondered why I hadn't met my grandparents."

"Marie's father hated me. I was a nobody, a good-for-nothin' from nowhere. I had no family. But when I first laid eyes on your ma, I knew she was the woman for me." His eyes clouded over and he looked down at his lap, rubbing his knuckles. "I

wasn't welcome in her father's home. I wasn't from the right kind of people. I had little money, fewer possessions. I wasn't fit to court his daughter." His eyes were full of guilt when he met Catherine's. "I didn't give up. I loved her too damn much."

Catherine's throat choked with sympathy. It was sadly ironic how her mother and father's story compared with hers and Luke's. Perhaps that was the point her father now wanted to make.

"I'm listening, Father."

He nodded. "Marie's parents were wealthy and powerful. The old man wouldn't allow us to be married. He had me driven out of town and threatened me if I ever tried to come back." He made direct eye contact with Catherine across the room. "Like I threatened Luke."

Her heart pounded painfully behind her ribs. So it was true. Catherine had wanted to ask her father about Luke's arrest but had avoided confronting him. Her emotions boiled close to the surface now, but she held her tongue as her father continued.

"Of course, I returned. Guess I've always been stubborn, but then, I don't need to tell you that." He sent her a wry half-smile. "I gave your mother the choice of staying with her parents or leaving with me. She packed a suitcase, and I sneaked her out of the house in the middle of the night. She never saw her parents after that."

"She loved you so much that she was willing to leave them behind," she said quietly. "But they lived right there in Missouri, not far from us."

“They did. Your mother sent word to them when you were born, but they never contacted us or came to visit. She had defied her parents, and they no longer considered her family.”

The clock on the fireplace mantle ticked in the silent room. Catherine watched her father’s lined and weathered face for a hint of the emotions he was feeling. Was he afraid she would do the same thing—defy him and marry Luke anyway?

He was right.

“I know I’ll lose you if I force you to choose between me and Matthews,” he said almost in a whisper. “I’m not going to put you in that position, Catherine.”

“Then you’ll accept Luke as my husband?”

“Yes.”

She bridled her relief for the moment. The air wasn’t clear between them yet. “You arrested Luke just to get him away from me, didn’t you, Father.”

He closed his eyes tightly. Catherine wouldn’t forgive him if he lied to her now.

Finally, he nodded. “He matched the picture and the description on the wanted poster, and I told myself the dates of the robbery didn’t matter. He could have done it. So I arrested him and sent him away. I didn’t care if he turned himself in at the sheriff’s office in Cheyenne or not. I just wanted him out of your life. I thought you would find a better man, such as Raymond Pickering.”

“There’s no better man for me than Luke, Father.”

"I know you believe that, dear. I'm willing to accept it on the condition he treats you the way you deserve."

Catherine paused to take a long breath, and then continued to question him. "Did you know all the stolen money was returned to the bank in Cheyenne last October?"

"I did."

"And you didn't tell me."

"You were engaged to Ray. I was afraid what you might do."

"You had no right to keep such a thing from me. You knew how I felt about Luke."

"Luke was gone, and Ray was here. I wanted you to finally get the life you dreamed of."

"My dreams were of Luke."

"I know that now, Catherine. I'm deeply sorry."

She batted at the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. She didn't want to cry, not now. "All this time, Luke and I could have been together."

"I never meant to hurt you." Harlan's voice choked on a sob. Catherine hadn't seen him cry since her mother's death. "You remind me so much of Marie... I tried to hold onto that. As God as my witness, Catherine, I'm sorry."

Her tears fell on the next blink. "You owe Luke a huge apology."

"I know, and he'll get it."

"You'll be polite when you tell him?"

"I swear it on your mother's grave."

* * * *

Luke met her outside the schoolhouse the next afternoon. They walked along the path closest to the creek, and Catherine avoided looking at the place where Eddie had died. She'd cried in Luke's arms when she described the terrible incident to him. Now he seemed to sense her mood and held her hand until they were well past the spot. As they drew near a tree with a broad trunk, he pulled her off the path.

She smiled at him and leaned back against the cottonwood. "This is where I first feared I was falling for you."

"Is that right?" he said with a grin that dimpled his cheeks. "Must've been that kiss. Let's see...I put my hands on either side of you, like this." He planted his hands on the trunk near her shoulders.

"And you put my hands around your neck, like this," Catherine continued, her fingers reaching up and around to clutch his neck, pulling him to her. She felt the now familiar warmth of her body responding to him. "You're driving me absolutely crazy, do you know that?" she said breathlessly as she leaned back. "Oh, Luke, I want to be with you."

"You are with me," he teased.

"You know what I mean." She leveled her gaze at him.

"Soon, Kitten. But first we have land to buy and a wedding to plan." He kissed her neck softly and her knees went weak.

"We don't need a wedding, Luke," she said, remembering how she'd caused problems for some of her friends and local merchants when she canceled the ceremony with Ray. She was too

ashamed to tell Luke about that. "We can visit a Justice of the Peace."

"I've heard the rumors, Catherine, and I don't care what happened before. You and I deserve a real wedding with all the fixin's. My ma would be disappointed if she came all the way out here and didn't get to see me married in a church. We're doin' this right, little Cat."

She nodded, accepting his argument. Her hands slipped down across his chest.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What's what?"

"That," she said, poking the small bulge in his breast pocket.

"Oh, that," Luke said mischievously. "Just a little something for you."

She waited impatiently for him to remove the gift. Luke pulled the item out of his pocket, holding the velvet box in one hand as he opened the lid with the other. Catherine's heart tripped over a beat as she stared at the diamond ring.

"Oh, Luke! It's beautiful!"

"Would you like to try it on, make sure I got the right size?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

He removed the ring from the box and slipped it onto her finger. Her hand trembled. She spun out of his embrace and into the afternoon sunlight.

"Look how it sparkles!" she exclaimed, holding her hand up in the air. She skipped back to Luke and kissed him. "I wish we were married right now."

"Soon, I promise."

By the following week, the Baker Ranch belonged to them. Luke moved into the little house so he could work on the repairs necessary before Catherine could join him. He hired several men as ranch hands and purchased close to a thousand head of cattle that had survived the winter. Luke and Catherine christened the place the Diamond M Ranch, and the ranch hands burned their brand into the hide of each animal.

The new teacher arrived in town at the end of the spring term, soon enough for Catherine to introduce her to the children she would be teaching during the summer months. If all went well, the young woman would instruct the older students during the regular term too. She couldn't wait to get started, and the children responded well to her. Catherine found it bittersweet when the school board released her from her contract.

Martha Pickering was fixing a display in the front window of the mercantile when Catherine visited the store to order her wedding ensemble. There was no other place in town she could do it. The older woman greeted Catherine cheerfully when the bell over the front door jangled, announcing her presence.

"How are you, dear?" Martha asked. "I heard you've finished teaching."

"Yes, I have." Catherine returned the woman's warm smile. "It was difficult saying goodbye to all the children, but I'll soon have my hands full with ranching. Luke Matthews and I bought the Baker place. We're getting married soon."

“Congratulations, dear. And I mean that. I’m very happy for you.”

“Thank you. That means so much to me.” She paused. “I need to pick out some things for the wedding.”

“Of course you do. Right this way, dear.” She led Catherine to a new table displaying several mail-order catalogs. “Do you need any help, dear?”

“No, thank you.” Catherine sat down at the table and opened a catalog. She had known before coming here this morning which dress she would pick. The day she had chosen the dress she never wore for Ray, she had found a modern-looking low-necked gown of white satin draped with Brussels lace. She had thought about Luke when she saw that dress and couldn’t bring herself to order it. Now she would. She thumbed through the catalog until she found the right page. The dress was as beautiful as she’d remembered. She ordered the gown, a matching tulle veil, kid gloves, white slippers, and white silk stockings.

For Luke she ordered a pair of tailored black trousers, a matching black tailcoat with satin lapels, a white shirt and vest, and a white bow tie. Her groom would be incredibly handsome in the outfit.

Chapter 25

Luke bailed out of bed before dawn at the sound of a cannon blast announcing the annual Fourth of July celebration.

“Are you ever a sight for sore eyes,” Luke breathed when Catherine met him at the door of her father’s house. He stepped across the threshold and kissed her. “The house is nearly done,” he murmured against her lips.

She clapped happily. “When can I see it?”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. “I’ll come for you on Saturday and you can spend the day decoratin’.”

“I can’t wait! Oh, I have something to show you.” She led him through the house and onto the enclosed back porch. “Little Miss is a new mother!” she announced proudly, motioning toward a wooden crate in the corner. The five kittens, their eyes still sealed, wrestled for position at their mother’s rounded stomach. The sight made Luke laugh. He scratched Little Miss behind the ears and she leaned against his hand. “I never much liked cats.”

“I can tell.”

He grinned up at her. "I guess I'll be movin' them out to the ranch, too. We'll need good mousers out there."

They walked to the field near the schoolhouse and watched the children at their games. Catherine stubbornly resisted all attempts by her former students to get her in the women's footrace.

They met Emmett, Claire and little Renae later and joined them on their blanket during the potluck. That evening they all danced in Jessup's barn. Luke twirled Catherine around the room, and in his mind, he traveled back to the first time they had danced together, one year before. When the musicians took a break, Luke and Catherine spilled out the doors with other couples, gulping fresh air.

He led her away from the noise and the light, to a grove of willow trees near the river.

"What did you really think of me when we first met?" Catherine wanted to know.

He smiled at the memory. "I thought you were out of my reach, but I was bound and determined to take a chance anyway."

"You didn't think I was too old for you to pursue?"

"Nope. That never entered my mind."

"Not even with all the wrinkles on my face or the gray in my hair?"

"Nope."

"Liar."

He laughed out loud, and quieted as he searched her face in the moonlight. "They say

women outlive men. I reckon we'll grow old together and finish out our lives together."

She nestled against him, and he encircled her in his arms.

* * * *

Boxes and crates full of linens, rugs, dishes, and other household goods were already packed into the back of the sheriff's rig by the time Luke arrived Saturday morning. The men loaded the new furniture that had arrived by train onto Luke's larger wagon while Catherine fixed a lunch basket in the house.

"I'll be back by dark, Father," she said, waving to him as she drove away with Luke following close behind. It was slow progress as they headed out of town on the northern road. Long before the ranch house came into sight, Catherine was craning her neck for a glimpse. The barbed-wire fence bordering their property looked strong and taut and the road had been graded. She fought the temptation to give the horses free rein. Catherine's wagon finally climbed a knoll above their land.

"It's just the way I pictured it!" she shouted to Luke.

The outside of the little house was stained a deep redwood color while the trim around the windows and doors was white. It looked larger.

"What have you done, Mr. Matthews?" she asked in a mock reprimand.

Luke grinned at her. "We just added on a little bit."

There was no gate yet, so Catherine pulled her father's wagon to a stop a few feet away from the

porch steps and jumped down before Luke had halted his wagon.

"It's beautiful!" she cried. She hurried up the steps and onto the porch. "I can't wait to see inside!"

"Hold on, little Cat," Luke said, touching her arm to stop her before she could open the door. "There's a proper way of doin' this, even if we aren't married yet." He scooped her up in his arms and she laughed as he carried her over the threshold of their new home.

Catherine gazed around the front room, speechless. The wooden walls were varnished to a glossy shine, the floor polished and smooth. She'd planned on cleaning the place herself, but it was now nearly spotless. The cook stove looked almost new, and the broken window had been replaced. She clutched Luke and let out a surprised squeal. He carried her past the stove to where a new door stood. He ceremoniously pushed it open with one booted foot.

"Our bedroom. I hope you like it."

"I love it!" Catherine exclaimed. She removed her hat, tossed it onto the shiny floor, and danced around the room. A warm breeze blew through two open windows. The walls were painted a clean bright white.

"We're going to need more furniture," she declared after a moment, and Luke chuckled. "I can't believe this is our home," she whispered, happy tears filling up her eyes.

"It is until we build the new one." He set her down on her feet. "Now we'd better get the stuff off

the wagons and out of the sun. I'll holler for Ronnie and Les to help."

Catherine followed him and stood on the porch while he went to the barn. Luke and his hired hands had converted part of the loft into living quarters. Two men returned with him and he made introductions. Then they all set to work, unloading furniture, and boxes. The men unrolled the largest rug, a braided mixture of blues and browns, and placed it in the middle of the front room; then they proceeded to rearrange the furniture accordingly.

"How's that?" Luke asked Catherine, wiping a trickle of sweat from his brow.

"Absolutely perfect."

The men placed a small oak table and chairs in the tiny eating area near the cook stove. Catherine almost could picture the two of them sipping their morning coffee there, discussing plans for the day. She couldn't keep the happy smile off her face.

A double bed with a matching dresser came in last. Catherine chose a spot in the bedroom near a window for their headboard. The location would help keep them cool in the summer, and she could rearrange the furniture come winter.

"Thanks, boys." Luke dismissed Ronnie and Les. The ranch hands nodded politely at Catherine as they departed.

"Well," she said on an exhale, gazing around. "I still have a lot to do. Should we go ahead and eat now?"

"All that movin' made me hungry," Luke admitted. "Let's go down by the water."

They laid a new quilt on the grass under the shade of a tree near the stream. Catherine produced ham sandwiches and lemonade from the basket she'd packed.

"We have our ranch, little Cat."

She smiled and nodded.

"It may not always be an easy life, way out here," he said, gesturing at their land to remind her of their isolation. She had always lived in a town. "In fact, it's going to be damn hard work."

"I'm not afraid of hard work."

"If it ever gets to be too much for you—" he began.

"It won't," she assured him. "I'm a lot tougher than I look."

"Yeah. I'm discoverin' that more and more."

"I love you, Luke Matthews," she said softly, leaning close to offer him her mouth.

The next several hours flew by in a whirlwind of activity. Catherine had unpacked the last box and had everything neatly in its place when Luke reappeared at the house.

"Now it's my turn to take you on a tour," Catherine said. "Just don't expect me to carry you," she added with a laugh, grabbing his hand to lead him. At the doorway of their bedroom, he stopped and whistled. "It looks great. I guess I expected pink or something frilly."

She'd decorated the room in soft blues and browns. "It's your room, too. I want you to enjoy it."

"Oh, I will," he said with a confident grin. "You've made this house a home, Catherine," he

added quietly. "You amaze me. Now let's get out of here before we're tempted to use some of this furniture before the wedding."

* * * *

Catherine watched the passengers disembark from the southbound train. Her heart stalled an instant when a man looking just like Luke stepped down onto the platform. He turned to help a woman and a little girl off the steps.

"Sweet heaven," Catherine whispered, clutching Luke's arm. She stared at Lincoln Richards and his wife for long moments after introductions were made. Nothing had prepared her for seeing Luke's twin brother.

"Uncanny, isn't it?" Mary Kate asked.

Catherine could only nod. Jessica tugged at her hand.

"You look like my auntie," she declared.

"That's true," her mother agreed. "You look a lot like my sister Marcia."

Helen Matthews arrived the next day. Caleb and Anna and their children would be able to stay only for the wedding, and wouldn't be coming into town until Saturday morning.

Catherine loved Luke's mother immediately. She cried right along with everyone else when the woman embraced Lincoln after being parted from him for more than thirty years.

The wedding day dawned bright and beautiful. Not a single cloud marred the clear blue sky. A large crowd gathered at the Community Church to witness the ceremony. Tears of joy spilled from

Catherine's eyes as they were pronounced man and wife. Church bells signaled their union.

Wedding guests trickled out of the church and toward the town park for a traditional post-nuptial feast. There, more well-wishers greeted Luke and Catherine and showered them with gifts to open in front of everyone.

Later, Ronald Jessup stood up on a bale of hay in his barn and announced the first dance in honor of the newlyweds. Luke pulled Catherine onto the floor. When the music stopped, the crowd clapped. Catherine kept her eyes locked with Luke's, feeling breathless and giddy. Other couples joined them on the dance floor—Lincoln and Mary Kate, Emmett and Claire, Caleb and Anna, Harlan and Eva from the cafe. Helen danced by in the arms of Ronald Jessup.

"Have I told you you're the most beautiful woman I've ever known?" Luke asked quietly, bringing Catherine's gaze back to her husband.

"Yes, but feel free to repeat it as often as you like." She leaned her head against his chest and sighed happily. "I suppose we could make our excuses anytime we like." She smiled up at him. Harlan had reserved them the finest room at the hotel so they wouldn't have to travel to the ranch in the dark.

"No excuses necessary," Luke said with a wink. "Everyone in this town will know why we're leavin'."

Catherine smiled up at him. "Our wedding day will be that much more special because we waited. I'm glad now that we did."

His blue eyes twinkled. "The waitin's over, Kitten." He took her hand and led her off the dance floor. They located Luke's family and made plans to see them the following day.

The elegant hotel room, tastefully decorated in mint green and peach, beckoned them into the soft lamplight. Catherine had a quick glimpse from the hallway before Luke picked her up and carried her across the threshold. She clutched him, overcome by a sudden attack of nerves. Here was the moment she'd wanted for so long. Her heart beat wildly. Her body trembled. She buried her face in Luke's suit.

He shut the door with his left foot. "Look at me, Catherine Matthews," he commanded gently. When she lifted her face to his he said, "You know how much I love you. We'll take this as slow as you want."

He moved across the room and set her down on her feet near the edge of the bed. With hands still linked behind his neck, she rose on tiptoe to kiss him. Their lips met slowly at first. Then he parted hers with his tongue, and their passion ignited. His skillful hands removed her veil and released her chignon, sending her hair and the daisies she'd pinned into it cascading down her back. Catherine felt Luke's fingers behind her, unfastening a long row of tiny pearl buttons.

The dress whispered over her shoulders and onto the floor, followed by a fluffy bustle and layers of lacy petticoats, until Catherine stood in just her corset and drawers. Those remaining garments quickly landed in various places around the room.

Catherine peered down at her stockings and new white slippers. Luke knelt to slide the soft shoes off, then proceeded to kiss each inch of the flesh he exposed as he rolled thin stockings down each of her legs.

“One of us is naked,” he murmured.

“And one of us isn’t.” Catherine’s hands moved quickly to remedy the situation. Heat blazed everywhere Luke’s eyes, hands, and mouth touched, making it difficult for her to concentrate on riding him of his suit. Long, fiery moments later, her task completed, they stood gazing at one another.

Then his hungry mouth was upon her, devouring her lips, throat, and breasts, nibbling a damp path across her sensitive skin while his clever hands played lower.

“Luke...” she whimpered. “I don’t want to go slow. I need you now.”

Without a word, he backed her toward the bed. She reached behind her with her free hand and pulled off the covers, sending them tumbling off the end of the bed. Eagerly, she climbed onto the mattress and waited for him to join her.

“It’s going to hurt a little, just this one time, Kitten,” he warned her quietly, kneeling beside her.

She nodded, watching as he positioned his magnificent body over hers. His fingers probed her gently, and her body opened like a flower petal. Then he was nudging into her, slowly, so slowly that Catherine thought she’d go insane with wanting. She thrust against him. The shock of pain was

over quickly. For a moment, they both lay still, their erratic breathing the only sound in the room.

“Are you all right?” he whispered hoarsely.

“I think so,” she whispered back.

From a distance, Catherine could hear the faint strains of the fiddlers in Jessup’s barn. She smiled at her husband, her discomfort melting away as pleasure beckoned, and soon they were moving as one. Catherine danced beneath Luke, her body matching the rhythm of his. The bed squeaked, the headboard tapped against the wall, and throaty sounds of raw animal pleasure blended together in the still July night.

One glance at Luke’s face told Catherine that he, too, had passed beyond the borders of control. She lifted her legs to wrap them around his body, and he groaned as his thrusts went deeper. They were swept over the edge of bliss together.

The journey over, he lay spent upon her, his damp body molded to hers. Catherine was nearly asleep when Luke finally rolled onto his side, nestling her against his chest. His whispered words of love brought a weary smile to her lips before she gave in to heavenly slumber.

* * * *

Catherine awakened as fingers of early morning sunlight crossed the bed. She rose on one elbow and gazed down at the man lying next to her. Most of the bedclothes lay in a heap on the floor along with their wedding attire, all hopelessly wrinkled. She smiled to herself. Their union had been the sweetest, most wondrous way to begin their lives together.

Luke stirred. "Mornin', Mrs. Matthews," he drawled.

She curled up next to him, enclosed in the loving warmth of his arms. They dozed, waking again long after the day had begun to dress in clothes they'd packed the previous day. A quick knock on other doors in the hallway told them Luke's family had already left the hotel.

"What time is it?" Catherine wondered aloud.

Luke checked his new pocket watch, a gift from Lincoln. He whistled. "About noon."

"Oh my," Catherine said with a laugh.

They found their families at the Campbell house, sipping lemonade and visiting on the porch.

"Hey, you two missed church!" Lincoln called.

"Good morning," Catherine said as she mounted the front steps, Luke's hand held tightly in her own.

"Good afternoon," her father corrected.

"Have you all eaten?" Catherine asked. She was starving.

"We've had breakfast," Helen answered. "We were waiting for you two for lunch."

"We weren't goin' to wait much longer," Lincoln teased, a knowing sparkle in his dark eyes.

"My wife and I would like to treat you all to a meal at the cafe," Luke said.

Afterward, everyone pitched in to load the wedding gifts and the remainder of Catherine's belongings into Luke's wagon. Then the group went to the train depot to see Caleb's family off.

"The rest of us will be out to see you at the ranch tomorrow," Harlan promised. Catherine

hugged her father. "Be happy," he said gruffly. She saw that he was fighting back tears, and she embraced him tighter.

He shook hands with Luke. "I know you'll take good care of her," he said. They'd settled their differences weeks ago. "You can take that to the bank," Luke replied with a smile that proved he held no more hard feelings.

The sun was a blazing golden ball setting behind the mountains when Luke and Catherine reached the Diamond M Ranch. Catherine clapped with joy when she saw the sign boasting their brand swinging above them as they drove through the gateway.

Their cattle grazed over fertile pastures below them. The small herd of prime horses Lincoln had given them as a wedding present roamed between the stream and the foothills. Tall, healthy native grass covered the land. Hay would be harvested in another month to help feed the herd over the winter.

"I can hunt deer and elk up there in the fall," Luke said, pointing toward the rugged mountain peaks. "Plenty of pronghorn share our land, and those ponds," he pointed to the northwest, "should bring in a fair amount of ducks and geese. There's sage grouse and blue grouse, and rainbow trout in the stream..." He stopped the wagon and turned to her. "I have everything I ever wanted, Catherine."

"So do I," she replied.

A contented smile rested on his lips as he pulled her into his arms.

Nothing Less Than Love

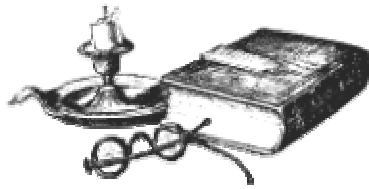
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet Mills is an avid reader who began writing stories in early childhood. As she grew up, her interests changed from mysteries and science fiction to the happy endings found within romance novels. She writes western historical romances, contemporary romances, and romantic short stories.

Janet lives in Wyoming with her handsome husband, the inspiration for her heroes. They have three children and a toy poodle. An elementary school teacher, she spends much of her summer vacation reading and writing. She enjoys spending time with her family, traveling, collecting magnets and pins, eating dark chocolate, and sleeping in on the weekend.

Please visit Janet's website at:
www.janetmills.net

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