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# Miss Fixit

L.C. Monroe and Nicolette Derens

# Dedication

#### L.C.Monroe:

For my mom, fondly known by those who love her as The Band-Aid—the original Ms. Fixit!

#### Nicolette Derens:

To Lilles, who made it all possible and to N.E. and D.A. who make me more than I ever thought I could be.

### Chapter One

Virginia Pembrook—Ginney to her friends and most acquaintances—was famous for always knowing what everyone should do. She was also famous for always telling everyone what they should do. Furthermore, she was nearly always right.

It sounded a bit ridiculous, even prideful when Ginney said it herself. But no one questioned her reputation because there were so many examples. Even at age ten, for instance, she had known that Caleb Jasper should fall in love with her. Fortunately, she knew she should fall in love with him as well.

A fact that she was eternally grateful for as she folded her cousin Phoebe's latest letter. It was only a small detail, that she had not yet informed Caleb that he should fall in love with her and vice versa.

Phoebe was also in love. Likely with the man perfect for her. But Beau Jasper was far from faultless, the best evidence of which was the fact that Phoebe's heart was currently broken. Evidently Beau was not as convinced that he couldn't live without Phoebe as Phoebe was.

Added to that was Phoebe's father, Ginney's Uncle Silas. Silas evidently found Beau lacking as a prospective husband for Phoebe, though it seemed that he wouldn't explain the reason to Phoebe, expecting her to just accept her father's choice for her without question.

Ginney happened to agree, however, that Phoebe and Beau would make a wonderful match. Much as she and Caleb would.

So, Ginney would fix this, as she did everything. Of course, some things were easier to remedy than others. This, for instance, would take two train tickets across the country, arranging for several months away from home, and convincing her mother to leave Chicago for the first time in almost a year.

She took a deep breath. She would do it. She would make it work. It was simply what was best for everyone. But it wouldn't be easy. Strangely, it was often the people closest to her, who should know her best, that most resisted her efforts and advice.

Ginney tucked Phoebe's letter into the top drawer of her writing desk and went in search of her mother. She had a plan and there wasn't a moment to waste. She ran down the staircase and remembered to start walking just as she heard her mother talking with the maid in the parlor.

"Mother?" She was pleased to see the tea service present when she entered the sitting room. Of course, she was always pleased to see something to nibble on. Not fashionably slender, she had a womanly figure she refused to bind in a corset. Her father had been an adherent of the new healthful way of dressing which required undergarments similar to Chinese pajamas and looser fitting dresses that encouraged exercise and fuller breathing.

Exercise wasn't really a problem for Ginney, though. She stood only five feet, one inch tall, but she was a whirlwind of activity. She had a very hard time sitting still, something that drove her very ladylike mother crazy, and even when her body was quiet, her mind was racing. To complete the picture of commotion, she had thick chestnut hair, which she wore in a loose knot from which her curls were incessantly escaping and brown eyes that never missed a thing.

"Yes, Virgina?" Ruth Pembrook looked up from her needlework. She was dressed in an elegantly simple gray merino day dress. Her mother was always elegantly simple.

Ginney took a seat across from her mother and smoothed her rose-colored skirt. She looked at her mother and smiled, trying to study her mother without her realizing it. Her mother had always been sweet, generous, loving and full of life. But Ginney's father's death the year before had taken some of the bounce out of her step and light out of her smile. Ginney didn't like treading softly around her mother, but she didn't always know what to say to the woman who wandered around the house picking up things that didn't need straightened, dusting things that were perfectly clean, as if she didn't know what to do with herself now that she didn't have Papa to care for. The truth was, her mother needed a project and Ginney had just the one in mind.

"How are you, Mother?" As Ginney asked the question, she realized that she hadn't asked her mother that since her father's funeral. Which seemed odd, suddenly. Ginney always asked people how they were. And what they were up to. And why. Virginia Pembrook simply could not keep her own counsel; she wanted to keep everyone else's too.

So, why didn't she know how her own mother was? Was she afraid that her mother would answer that she wasn't all right and Ginney wouldn't know what to do? But a moment later, she shook those thoughts off. She always knew what to do.

"Well, dear, actually," her mother said. "I've been thinking." She laid her needlework on her lap and leaned forward to pour tea for her oldest daughter.

Ginney watched her mother prepare her tea with exactly the right amount of milk and sugar. She remembered every detail of each of her children's lives, which was no small task with six children.

Joshua and Ruth had always wanted more children after Ginney's birth, but God had a different plan for them. Joshua, a gentle, kind and generous man, surprised no one when he and his wife took in an urchin who had been found nearly freezing in the parsonage's cellar. Ginney had only been in leading strings at the time, but Matthew was a wonderful answer to their prayers for another child. A few parishioners were taken aback when the Pembrooks took in a second child, Rachel, who was found sleeping in an empty hotel room. Many were astonished when they added Naomi to their family, amazed by their adoption of David and then stunned when John joined the Pembrook brood. But after that, nothing really surprised anyone who knew the family. Every child was treated as blood and they fought and loved like true siblings.

Though all of the children had moved out of the parsonage to make their way in the world, when Reverend Pembrook became seriously ill each of his children had made great effort to make his final days full of joy and peace.

Many a prospective suitor would be disappointed to find out that Ginney's inheritance would actually be split with her five siblings upon her mother's death. Her father had settled the same amount on Ginney to be used upon her marriage as he had for his other daughters. And this amount was by no means grand by Chicago's standards.

Once Ginney's tea was perfect, her mother continued. "I believe that it is high time you visited your cousin Phoebe again. I thought perhaps we should take a trip out there."

Ginney had just taken a sip of tea and then tried to talk at the same time. She ended up coughing and choking for a few moments. She was dumbstruck at how closely her mother's plans matched her own. Could she too know about the calamity in Pendleton?

Used to her daughter's less graceful moments, Ruth simply waited, daintily sipping her own tea, until Ginney was composed again. "It will be our first trip out there without your father." Her mother's voice softened and her gaze dropped to her lap. "It will be difficult and I remember the strangeness of going to visit Silas and Phoebe the first time after Ellen's death. But nothing could have replaced the comfort we gave one another as a family at that time."

Ginney felt her heart ache for her mother. In spite of her full house and busy life, Ruth had been lonely and sad for months after Aunt Ellen and Uncle Silas moved to Oregon. When Aunt Ellen had unexpectedly died, still a young woman for the most part, Ruth was bereaved of her sister and best friend. It truly was a cruel blow to lose her beloved husband and only sister within a few years of each other.

Ginney wondered if this explained her Uncle Silas's strange behavior regarding Phoebe's affection for Beau. Perhaps losing his wife for the final years of his daughter's upbringing had planted some strange ideas in his head. Still, she had a hard time picturing her jovial uncle ranting at Beau Jasper.

Ranch concerns had kept him and Phoebe from visiting the last two years and Ginney knew that Uncle Silas missed his brother-in-law. They had been close and enjoyed arguing points of theology, although her father had been a trained minister and Uncle Silas a rancher. Perhaps Uncle Silas had changed beyond recognition. She supposed grief could do that to a person. The good Lord knew how hard it had been for her after her father's death. There were days when it seemed that there would be little to look forward to ever again without him.

Generally Ginney wore bright colors, a warm smile and was able to see the good in any situation. Her father had called her his "sunshine" since she'd been old enough to walk. She believed he would have been disappointed in her if she had slipped into a dark depression, especially when her mother and siblings needed someone to be positive. So, in spite of the emptiness she felt, she had conceded to wear only a black armband in grieving, choosing the yellows, pinks and bright blues her father had always loved. Thinking of him whole, happy and living in Paradise with his Father made it possible to smile again even after he was gone.

And now, as she looked at her mother, she felt a great surge of hope. If the Lord could plan things so perfectly that she didn't have to convince her mother of the trip, who knew what other plans He had in store?

She couldn't keep the enthusiasm from her voice. "Oh, I would love that more than anything! Just imagine getting to see Phoebe again. She's having such a difficult time right now."

Ginney proceeded to tell her mother all about Phoebe's letter.

"Then it seems that we can't postpone this trip even a week," her mother decided. If there were someone in need, Ruth Pembrook wouldn't hesitate to go to them. Even if they were in Oregon.

Ginney was awed anew by God's provision and planning.

"I think I can handle your Uncle Silas, but I'll leave it up to you to talk sense into Beau and Phoebe. Two people more divinely meant for each other I can't imagine," her mother said.

Her mention of divine planning gave Ginney a surge of adrenaline. For the first time in a long while, she felt hope for a brighter future. She knew that one day she would see her father again. Until then it seemed that the Lord had plans for her.

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The next few days were spent in a whirlwind of activity. Ginney had been able to convince her mother to spend several months in Oregon. With no parish business to attend to, Ruth looked forward to time to get reacquainted with her niece and brother-in-law.

Packing for an extended stay and closing up the house took all of their spare time and Ginney fell to sleep each night easily, exhausted from the preparations.

Until the night before they left for Oregon. Ginney lay in bed wide-awake, thinking.

Thus far, she had been able to avoid thoughts of what this trip could mean to her beyond fixing her mother's melancholy, Uncle Silas's attitude and Phoebe's love life. But now, on the eve of departing, with nothing but the crickets to listen to and the moonlight patch on her ceiling to look at, she could no longer keep her heart from daring to hope for something else. Something for her. She was a naturally selfless person, but in the privacy of her thoughts she knew that this trip was making her heart beat faster for another reason beyond her family and their happiness.

Ginney hadn't seen Caleb Jasper in three years. The last time was the final trip her father had made to Oregon before he lost the use of his legs completely. But the tall man with the dark hair, intelligent, knowing brown eyes, deep, gentle voice and easy laugh wasn't ever very far from her heart or memories.

He was the only man who had ever come close to her reminding her of her father. On the visit three years before, he had stolen her heart all over again as he spent hours with her father, helping him physically, yet never demeaning him. Caleb took her father's physical limitations in

stride, never erroneously believing that the infirmity extended to his mind. They continued their conversations and debates on the Bible, theology and their shared assuredness of eternal life with the Father. Caleb openly admired her father and was always hungry for new insight into the Word of God from the older man.

In fact, as she looked back, Ginney remembered she and Caleb sharing very few private conversations during their visit. The few minutes they did have alone seemed to focus on Caleb comforting her about her father's failing health and him counseling her to remember God's plans were perfect. She didn't mind of course. Her father and Caleb inspired one another. They shared a connection that deserved nurturing. Ginney knew in her heart that her time with Caleb would come. In the meantime, she treasured the last moment she'd spent with him, on the train platform, as she and her family were departing to come home. He had lifted her hand to his lips, kissed it gently and looked directly into her eyes as he said, "I pray for you, Ginney. I hope you know that. Always."

No bouquets of flowers, elaborate sonnets or jewels could have made her more sure of the fact that she wanted to be Caleb's wife someday. His love for the Lord was more of an aphrodisiac than anything else on earth.

Of course, she'd known they belonged together the first time she'd ever met him.

She had been nine, he was eleven, and he'd swept her off her feet. Or more accurately, knocked her off her feet. Literally.

She and her cousin Phoebe had been trying to care for a wounded sparrow, when Caleb and his brother, Beau had come barreling around the corner of the barn. Reacting instinctively, Ginney had stepped in front of the bird and put her hands up to protect it. Caleb had run right into her, both of them ending up on their rear ends in the dirt. He'd grinned at her and stuck out his dirty hand to help her up. That grin had taken away the ache in her backside and she'd allowed him to help her to her feet. She did, however, mention that he needed to look where he was going. He'd winked at her, actually winked! Then replied, with that same grin, that would make many girls' hearts flip over the next few years, "But sometimes the best things happen when you're not looking."

Caleb helped her mend the sparrow's wing, feed the bird and take care of it. Against all odds they nursed it until it was able to fly away on its own. She cried when it left and he'd hugged her.

"You're the best person I know, Ginney Pembrook." Their friendship had been cemented then and Ginney looked at him with the same awe she felt for her father and no other.

Ginney returned to the present with a sigh. When her father had died a year ago, she had wanted to see Caleb so badly. She knew he would understand the terrible pain and emptiness, and he would have made it better. He couldn't have taken it away completely, of course, but he would have made her laugh and maybe forget the pain for a little bit.

Not that her mother had neglected her or her brothers and sisters hadn't been a comfort, but they had their own grief to deal with. Ginney's relationship with Caleb was different. Her mother, her siblings, Phoebe, Uncle Silas all thought that Ginney was wonderful. But they had to. They were her family. Caleb didn't have to think she was special. But he did. And it made her believe it.

And in her heart of hearts, where she just whispered to herself and told no other, Ginney nurtured a hope that one day Caleb would see that she was God's helpmate for him. She had never told anyone but Phoebe of the love she had for Caleb because everyone expected her to marry a man from the city. He planned to be an itinerant preacher and no one would ever have thought that she, the girl who hated to be alone, would long for the life of a traveling preacher's wife.

Of course, she did not plan on living the regular life of staying home as her husband traveled from settlement to settlement. She had every intention of going with him. This was her real reason for keeping all of her suitors in Chicago at arm's length. She sighed and drifted off to sleep, dreaming dreams of hope and promise centered on a rancher's son.

## Chapter Two

Ginney and her mother boarded the train early in the morning on Saturday.

Ruth insisted they spend some time in the Bible and reflection as they started their trip. Ginney was so excited to be traveling again that she found it very difficult to concentrate on the Scriptures until she happened upon Genesis 12 where God sent Abraham on his journey to the Promised Land. She just knew that there were promises waiting for her at the end of the rails

She looked up from her study to see her mother staring out the train window with a faraway look in her eye.

"Mother? Are you all right?"

"It just seems like we're embarking on a new life and I was wondering what the Lord had in mind. The last time I felt this way, your father proposed to me."

Ginney smiled. It looked like the Lord was being especially generous with promises today.

The trip west was uneventful for the first day. Then as they re-boarded after a long stopover, they heard a high-pitched shriek, then a loud, male roar.

"You dirty little thief!"

Ginney gasped as a young boy came running down the center aisle past their seats.

A few moments later a large, angry man in an apron appeared at the back of the car.

Never any good at minding her own business, she jumped from her seat and stepped in front of him. "Sir! Sir, please..."

"Get out of the way!" the man shouted, his eyes following the boy. "Someone stop him!"

But it was her mother who got the man's attention—by poking him in the back with her parasol. "See here, there is no call to treat your help in such a way. I am sure a few words of encouragement would have much more lasting effects."

The man whirled to face her, clearly shocked by her interference.

"He ain't no help of mine! He's a sneaky stow-away and a dirty little thief!"

Ruth narrowed her eyes and Ginney knew the man was about to be reprimanded by one of the best lecturers in God's creation. She backed down the aisle in the direction the boy had gone. She found him cowering behind the seat at the front of the car. Without a word, she took his arm in a firm, but gentle grip. She tugged him up to standing and then tucked him against her hip with her arm around his shoulders.

He looked scared.

"You're going to be all right," she told him softly. "My mother rarely loses an argument." She smiled at him and was pleased to see his look of fear fade into surprise. He stayed with her and didn't fight her hold as she took him back to where Ruth Pembrook was chastising a man three times her size.

"I don't care what he stole. He's a child. Apparently a hungry one. Jesus said, 'Whatever you do for one of these, you do for me'. Are you not in need of blessing?" she demanded of the large man. "Are you not in need of charity at times? Do you not deserve patience, forgiveness and understanding? Because if that is so then you are the first perfect man to walk this earth in a very long time."

The man's face was red, but he seemed to understand that he was never going to win this argument.

Ginney smiled at the sight of the huge man backing away from her mama.

"Look, lady, I don't want trouble. I can't afford to open no orphanage here. If you're so patient and understanding, *you* take responsibility for the boy and I'll forget all about it. Just so long as I don't see him around here again," he said, with a glare over her shoulder at the boy.

The cook turned and stomped out of the car. Ruth spun to face Ginney and the little boy she'd just rescued.

"It's a good thing your daddy isn't alive to see this, Ginney," she said, going onto her knees in front of the boy. "Imagine treating a precious child like this." She lifted her hand to the child's cheek.

The boy stood staring at Ruth as if she'd just crowned him the King of England. Amazement, hope and confusion seemed to be represented in equal measures in his eyes.

She smiled gently. "Ginney, I think I found the perfect person to help you with your gelding."

That loosened the boy's tongue. "You got a horse, ma'am? Where is it?"

Ginney smiled at him and replied, "My name is Ginney Pembrook and my gelding's name is Glory. He's a wonderful horse, but I could use some help with him."

Before the boy could reply, her mother asked for his name, age and how he came to be in such a predicament.

After Ginney explained what a predicament was the boy said, "My name's Rory, ma'am. I'm nine years old and I don't got no family. I run away from the orphanage. I ain't going back there neither. I'm goin' west to become a cowboy."

When he was finished speaking, he stood defiantly before the women, his chin raised in the air, his spine ramrod straight.

"Very good." Ruth nodded. "I think that's an excellent plan. Except that now that we've met you, I'm afraid that we're going to have to insist that you stay with us. We have the horse to think of, not to mention a number of heavy bags. A strong young man like you could be quite a help to us. Of course," she added, "the position includes a train ticket, room and board."

Rory looked like he wanted desperately to believe her, but just couldn't quite do it. Ruth frowned slightly at him. "Thank you, ma'am, would be appropriate at this point."

He swallowed, his eyes still wide. "Thank you, ma'am," he repeated obediently.

Ruth smiled again. "Get to it then, you two don't have much time. The train leaves again in twenty minutes."

They made their way to the back of the train where Glory was housed with six other horses.

When Rory saw Glory, he just stared in awe. "Boy, he sure is a beaut, ain't he?" "Isn't he and yes, he's wonderful. Would you like to brush him while I get his food?"

Rory's face lit up like a street lamp. "Boy, would I!"

He took the brush from Ginney, and after some hasty instruction on her part, began gingerly applying it to the horse. Glory took to Rory, shaking his head and whinnying in approval as the boy ran the brush over the gelding's coat. Ginney smiled and went to get the feed.

They returned to the car where Ruth was reading quietly, just as the conductor called "All aboard!"

They took their seats, Ginney feeling the renewed rush of excitement and Rory watching out the window with an expression that bordered on overwhelmed.

Ruth laid her book to one side, folded her hands in her lap and cleared her throat. "Before we go any further, I have an announcement to make."

Rory and Ginney glanced at one another, then back to Ruth.

"Mother, is everything all right?" Ginney inquired. Ruth didn't look upset. In fact, she was smiling.

"Everything is wonderful. I just wanted to tell you that I've made a decision."

Ginney raised her eyebrows and looked over at Rory. He looked suspicious. Her heart broke to think of all of the hopes this little one had likely had dashed in his short life.

"I think that Rory needs to stay with us when we get to Oregon."

Rory's mouth fell open. Ginney smiled, wondering why she hadn't expected this from her mother. It looked like God had more than one project in mind for Ruth.

"I think that's a wonderful idea." Ginney turned to Rory. "What do you think? Would you like to stay with us a bit longer?"

"How long?" he whispered.

Her mother's eyes were bright with tears when she leaned to take Rory's hand. "As long as you need us. God said we are to take care of the fatherless and the widow. You're without a father and I'm a widow. Maybe we can take care of each other."

Rory clearly didn't know what to say to that, but he nodded. "I guess that might be okay."

Ginney swallowed against the lump in her throat. "And I'm sure Uncle Silas could use another cowboy around his ranch."

That clinched it.

Rory's face lit up again and he choked, "You mean it? I could even be a cowboy?"

"Probably the best cowboy of all," Ginney said, putting her hand on top of Rory and Ruth's joined hands.

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Caleb Jasper sat on horseback on the rise behind the main house and looked out over the land that had been in his family for four generations. This was exactly where his father had sat every evening before going in to supper for the past twenty-seven years.

The view allowed him to see nearly to the borders of their land in all directions. Caleb knew that his father felt great pride and satisfaction when sitting here, like a king surveying his kingdom. William had brought Caleb to this spot for the first time when he was four. Even at that

young age, Caleb understood this was where his father's heart was, and at the time, and for a few years after, he'd assumed that his heart would belong here too.

But that was a long time ago.

If it were true now, it would make his life so much easier.

Unfortunately, it seemed that God did not intend for things to be easy for Caleb.

It wasn't that Caleb wasn't proud of the ranch. He was a Jasper, after all. He'd helped feed the horses, mend the fences, painted the buildings and had been happy doing it. But he'd known it was temporary. Since he was eleven and had given his heart completely to God, he'd felt drawn to leave the ranch. He'd been so sure that his call was outside of the ranch and the life that his great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and brother had chosen. He'd felt such peace and excitement at the same time when contemplating a life as a preacher. He knew that his father didn't understand the choice, knew that it seemed a drastic difference from how he'd grown up.

Yet, it had never felt drastic. It had felt right. In many ways, this choice went right along with how he'd grown up. He'd gone to church all his life, heard his father say grace at mealtime, prayed with his mother at bedtime. He knew the stories in the Bible by heart by the time he started school. He'd never actually *doubted* God's presence. But, as most boys of his age, he hadn't really thought about it a lot one way or the other. At that point, it was just a given because all of the adults in his life said so.

But, when he was eleven he found himself sitting in the front row in the little church, between his mother and his brother. It was there that Caleb had heard Reverend Joshua Pembrook for the first time. He was a preacher from Chicago, in Pendleton visiting his wife's sister and her family. Their preacher, Reverend Wilson, had asked Reverend Pembrook to speak one Sunday evening and he'd obliged.

That was the night that Caleb actually thought about those stories he'd heard so many times. He actually contemplated who God was and the sacrifice He'd made of His Son. And why He'd made the sacrifice.

He knew then that he had a choice to make.

In that moment, he knew that Jesus was his Savior and asked Him into his heart. Not because he was told to, not because it was expected, but because he wanted to.

His life had never been the same.

The horse under him whinnied and he snapped back to the present. The air had grown cooler and the sun had retired behind the hills. He sighed. Sunsets, cool breezes, stars, all of God's creation had always made him feel inspired, safe, awed. Crazy as it sounded, now the wide-open spaces of the ranch made him feel hemmed in and the beauty around him served only as a reminder of the things he would stare at for the rest of his life.

He didn't know everything, but he did know that he didn't want his home, the place he'd grown up, the place full of memories from his childhood, to dishearten him.

How had he misinterpreted things so badly? He had been so sure, for so long, that God wanted him to preach. He'd never questioned it. The only thing he wasn't absolutely confident about was *where* God wanted him. He had prayed for God to show the direction He wanted Caleb to take. Of course, Caleb had been referring to whether he should take the position in a local church, or if he should follow his original plan of becoming an itinerant preacher. He realized, in retrospect, that he hadn't been that specific in his request to the Almighty. He'd rather assumed that, being the Almighty and all, God would know Caleb's true request.

The next morning his father had been thrown from his horse. In an instant, William had become an invalid, incapable of handling the ranch.

The Lord's message couldn't have been clearer. In fact—Caleb turned his eyes Heavenward-- it didn't have to be quite so obvious. A gentle "no" from On High would have sufficed. He could have possibly found peace about not pursuing preaching full time. He could have possibly been content to just teach to those he met, the lost souls that God would bring across his path.

But it seemed that God wanted Caleb to be a rancher. Which was something Caleb was having trouble finding peace in. In fact, he felt like an absolute failure. His father was brooding, barely speaking. His brother resented Caleb taking the role over the ranch that Beau always assumed would be his. His mother was worried and trying too hard to make everyone happy.

Maybe the worst part was that Caleb had no idea how to run a ranch. He'd grown up here, and yet, he'd never paid attention. At least he hadn't tried to learn what he needed to in order to take over. Because he had also assumed that Beau would be the one.

Now it was obvious to him that God had chosen him, not his brother. No matter how any one of them felt about Caleb running the ranch, the timing of his father's accident right after Caleb's heartfelt prayer for direction in his life could not have been a coincidence.

Caleb knew that God used hard times to form his people, to teach them and make them grow.

Really, Caleb thought, six feet and three inches was grown enough

He turned his horse toward the barn. His mother would worry if he was late for supper and Heaven knew that he didn't want to be responsible for anything more negative if he could help it at all. Problem was, he wasn't so sure he could help any of it.

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Rory didn't like to talk about the orphanage or how he'd come to live there, so Ginney left the subject alone after the third try. She wanted him to quit looking at her and her mother as if they were teasing him every time they offered him something or talked about the family and events that were waiting for them in Oregon.

She had seen wondrous changes in the children who had become her siblings when Christ was brought into their lives, so she encouraged Rory to read the Bible and learn about Jesus.

He thought the stories in the Bible more fanciful than anything he could make up. He had a difficult time understanding why his stories made Ruth and Ginney laugh so hard and yet they took those in the Bible so seriously. But he read as much as he could and begged Ginney to pronounce the unfamiliar names of people and places until he could say them himself.

On the third day of his journey with the Pembrooks, Rory questioned her about the Bible.

"Why are the stories in the end of the Bible so different of those in the beginning?" asked Rory as he finished reading about the feeding of the five thousand.

Ginney smiled. She loved these discussions with Rory. They made her think. No one had challenged her so much since her father died. Her mother seemed to enjoy them too because she always joined in.

She now said, "Well Rory, you must understand that the Bible isn't really just one book. It's a compilation of many."

"Like Aesop's Fables?"

"Not quite, dear." Ruth continued, "The Bible was written by many different people, but they were all inspired by the same God. So you could say that there is one author with many biographers."

"What's a biographer?"

"A biographer writes a story about someone's life, sometimes with the help of the person they are writing about. The Bible is all about God in one way or another and every book carries a little of the personality of the person who God had write it."

"So the Bible isn't a bunch of fairy tales? It's really about God and He helped write it?"

"Exactly," Ginney and Ruth answered at once.

"Sure seems like fairy tales, only better, if you ask me." Rory picked up Ginney's Bible to read some more.

Ginney smiled at her mother. Rory might not be a believer yet, but he felt the irresistible draw to God's truth that so many others had felt before him.

## Chapter Three

Silas Andrews was a big, brawny rancher in every sense of the word. He was easily half a head taller than everyone else on the train platform and was easily spotted when Ginney, Ruth and Rory stepped off the train. Ginney watched her uncle search the crowd until his gaze landed on her mother. A wide grin stretched his white-bearded face, further gathering the tan, sun-wrinkled lines around his eyes, as he began pushing through the crowd. Ginney wasn't sure he noticed anything else until after he'd swept Ruth up into his arms and hugged her tight.

"Ruth, you are good for this old man's heart," he told her warmly. Then he spied Ginney over Ruth's shoulder. He set Ruth down and picked Ginney up, swinging her around.

"Virginia, Virginia." When she was back on her feet, he held her at arm's length. "You've become a beautiful young woman. Why I bet you have all the young men in Chicago at your feet."

She had been expecting a similar compliment, but she felt the heat in her cheeks anyway. "It's so good to see you, Uncle Silas."

"Hi." Rory stood next to Ruth taking the whole scene in with wide eyes and a smile.

"Well now who's this youngster? Don't know that I've seen him before."

"Silas, this is Rory, the newest addition to our family. We met on the train." Ruth put her hand on Rory's head and looked down at him with a fond smile.

Silas took a moment to digest that, then chuckled. "Well of course you did." With that, he held his hand out to Rory in greeting.

At the wagon, Ginney insisted on taking a seat in the back with Rory. Silas and her mother seemed not to think anything of her choice, engrossed in conversation as they were, and Silas loaded their bags up in the wagon. He then handed Ruth up on to the wagon seat.

Ginney hadn't thought of it until the idea to visit Silas and Phoebe had come to her, but Silas had always treated her mother very well. Not inappropriately in any way, of course. But he'd seemed to genuinely enjoy her mother's company. When the two couples had sat around the kitchen table, lingering over the after-dinner coffee, Ginney remembered that her mother and uncle seemed to be the ones that kept up the conversation. In fact, though she'd only been a

child, she had noticed that her father and aunt had listened and laughed with them, but her uncle and mother had been the ones talking, to each other, about everything.

Now they had both lost a spouse. Who better to understand what the other was going through? Who better to be with than an old friend whose company they'd always enjoyed?

Rory was tired from the trip and perhaps a bit overwhelmed by everything that had happened to him in such a short time. His head nodded forward and he was asleep only ten minutes into the ride. Ginney didn't mind. With Rory around it was sometimes hard to even hear herself think, not to mention eavesdrop on someone else's conversation. She was pathetically desperate to catch a word about Caleb.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with that girl," Silas declared of Phoebe. "She just doesn't think."

"Does she love him?" Ruth asked.

"Claims to."

"You don't believe her?"

"I don't know that she really knows."

Ruth pivoted on the seat. "Why would she not know her heart?"

"They've hardly spent time together. He's rushing everything. It's like he can barely sit still since his father got hurt."

"What happened to William?" Ruth asked. "Phoebe said in her letter than he'd been hurt, but there were no details."

That had bothered Ginney as well. Something like this affected Caleb greatly and he hadn't written to her since his letter after her father's death. He had sent her mother a letter as well, but Ginney's had been much more personal. He'd said how much he wished he could be there, to say goodbye to her father who had been a mentor to him, but also to comfort her. She was amazed by how much the letter had helped her with her grief, but also how badly she wanted Caleb to be there in person. It was actually scary how much she ached for him, to hear his voice and see his smile...to have his arms around her. That was the strangest part as she'd never actually had his arms around her before. How could she long for something she'd never experienced?

They had hugged a few times, usually when they were saying goodbye. Otherwise, physical contact between them had been limited to occasional handholding, when he was helping her up or down from a wagon or escorting her somewhere. His hand had been on her low back exactly four times. He'd brushed her hair back from her cheek twice. He had kissed her hand on her birthday once and then goodbye at the train station once. She remembered every touch.

What bothered her almost as much as needing Caleb's comfort was having him not turn to her for similar support when his father was injured. He hadn't even written to tell her about it.

"Everything's changed," Silas was saying as Ginney shifted her focus back to the conversation at hand. "William went out for a ride to check some fencing on the far side of the river. When he didn't come back, the boys went out to search. Caleb was the one who found him. William had been unconscious for some time. He broke both legs, a few ribs and his hand."

"Did the horse throw him?"

"No. The way he described it to Nellie and the doctors, I guess, is that he had an episode of some kind where he got very dizzy and weak. He fell from the horse, hit some rocks and rolled for a ways down a hill before he could stop."

Her mother gasped and Ginney suppressed the urge to do the same. Poor William. It was a miracle that he hadn't broken his neck.

Her uncle's voice got quiet. "They had to take his leg below the knee. But it seems to me that he lost something worse. He won't see anyone and leaves running the ranch up to the boys."

"Well, he could have been killed! I suppose that takes some time to recover from."

There was a moment of silence between them. Then Silas spoke again. "I'm real sorry about Joshua, you know that don't you, Ruth?"

Ruth didn't look at him, but she reached her hand out and covered one of his. "Of course, I know."

Ginney swallowed hard. Her mother had seemed so lost without her father. But Ruth was a very loving woman. Ginney hoped that perhaps some of her sadness was from simple loneliness. She had been there for her mother, but it wasn't the same as having a companion of her own age and Ginney had been dealing with her own grief as well.

"I couldn't make it out there these past years because of the ranch. That's something else—my Phoebe would have to live with as a rancher's wife. The ranch is a living thing and can't be left to run itself. When hard times come, even family has to take second place." Silas's voice had a hard edge now.

"Phoebe's grown up on your ranch, Silas. She knows what it takes. She knows what her life will be like with Beau and she is still making that choice." Ruth did pivot on her seat now to look at Silas. "I didn't have a lot of luxuries as a preacher's wife, but I wouldn't discourage my daughters from marrying a preacher who loved to help the poor. Even if it was Joshua's work among them that exposed him to polio."

Ginney heard the tears in her mother's voice, but was relieved to see the smile Ruth gave Silas. She was even more pleased to see Silas turn his hand so that he and her mother touched palm to palm. He gave her hand a little squeeze.

"Now, now, it's all right. I didn't mean to upset you. I just want my daughter to be happy. Honest."

Ruth left it at that and talk shifted to other topics for the rest of the drive home, but Ginney knew that her mother wasn't finished telling her brother-in-law what she thought. Her mother's gift was saying the right thing at the right time.

Phoebe came flying off the porch as the wagon pulled into the yard. She climbed up into the wagon and threw her arms around her aunt before Ruth had a chance to step down.

"Oh Aunt Ruth, it's so good to see you!"

Then she jumped to the ground and rushed around to where Ginney was dusting herself off and hugged her tightly. "Oh Ginney, now everything's going to be all right. I'm so glad you're here!"

Ginney laughed. "I'm glad to be here too and I'm planning to fix more than just your problem before the summer's out."

Phoebe looked ready to question Ginney further but Ginney put her finger to her lips. They couldn't talk in front of their parents.

Phoebe understood. "Let me help get your horse settled in the barn. He seems to have taken the trip well."

"Yes I was surprised that he rode the train so well, but I'm glad Mama let me bring Glory. He's such a good horse and I don't know who would have exercised him if we had to leave him in Chicago." The two girls started toward the barn.

A few moments later they heard footsteps following them. Rory came running up.

"Hey, Ginney, I'll help you with Glory if ya want," he said breathlessly.

She wasn't offended though she knew Rory liked her gelding even more than he liked her.

"Phoebe, let me introduce you to your new cousin, Rory. Rory this is Phoebe."

"New cousin? What do you mean?" Phoebe looked between Ginney and her new little brother.

She explained about how they found Rory and her mother's decision. It was Phoebe's turn to laugh.

"Well, that sounds about right." Phoebe propped her hands on her hips and looked down at the eager little boy. "Welcome to the family, Rory, and if you like horses, I'm sure we can find someone that you can call your own."

"Wow, that would be super. I mean I guess it would. I mean, well..." Rory dug the toe of his shoe into the dirt. "I don't know how to ride."

Ginney and Phoebe both looked at Rory, then at one another, in awe. Not knowing how to ride was like not knowing how to walk in their family.

"Gosh, someone will have to teach you, then," said Phoebe. "It's a good thing we live next to the best cowboys around. Isn't it, Ginney?" Phoebe elbowed her cousin in the ribs and Ginney grinned. It didn't surprise either of the girls that they had fallen for brothers. But Phoebe's suggestion was more than just a way to get to see Beau and get Ginney and Caleb together again; the Jasper boys were famous for their horse skills.

"I'm gonna tell Mrs. Pem—I mean Mama!" Rory turned and ran up to the house, completing forgetting about his promise to help with Glory.

The girls let him go, as it gave them a long awaited chance to talk.

"So, what were you talking about by the wagon when you said there were more problems to fix this summer?" Phoebe filled a bucket with feed for Glory.

"Well, besides you and Beau, it sounds as if Mr. Jasper needs some tending to. My mother is lonely. Rory needs to get adjusted." Ginney sighed, happily. This is what she did best. She took care of people. "I'll be busy."

"Don't forget about Caleb."

She turned from brushing Glory. "I haven't forgotten about Caleb." How could she?

"Good. He needs as much help as anyone." Phoebe turned with the bucket and dumped it into the feedbox.

"What do you mean he needs help?"

Phoebe straightened. "Because of..." She looked at Ginney. "You don't know about Caleb?"

She felt her stomach tighten. Something was wrong with Caleb? She tried to keep the panic out of her voice. "What don't I know, Phoebe?"

Phoebe looked worried. "Oh, Ginney, I assumed he'd told you. I figured he was one of the reasons you came." She frowned. "Though come to think of it, I couldn't figure out why it took you so long to come. Caleb has been struggling longer than I have."

Ginney stepped up next to her cousin, but resisted the urge to shake the other girl. "I didn't *know* he was struggling. What are you talking about?"

Phoebe was clearly hesitant to be the bearer of the news. "Ever since William was injured, Caleb has been running the ranch."

"He's not sick? Hurt? Engaged?"

"No, of course not."

Ginney breathed again and gave her cousin a weak smile. "Okay. I knew he was helping with the ranch until William is feeling better."

Phoebe shook her head. "No, he's taken the ranch over. He's not helping, he's doing. He's barely letting Beau help him. And he certainly isn't planning for William to return."

"But he can't plan to run the ranch for good," Ginney protested. "He has to choose between a church and traveling soon."

Phoebe looked sad. "He's already turned both down. The church is getting a new preacher within the month, and they already sent someone else out on the circuit. He's told everyone that the ranch is his responsibility now."

Ginney felt like Phoebe had slapped her. "That can't be right."

"I'm sorry." Phoebe was the only person in the world who knew Ginney's true feelings for Caleb. Phoebe knew that Ginney had never pictured herself any other way than beside Caleb in his ministry.

"Well, that can *not* be right."

"Ginney, I..."

She straightened. "It is a good thing I'm here. Caleb needs my help too. Maybe more than anyone."

Phoebe didn't look convinced. "If anyone can talk to him, it's you. But...I just don't want you to get your heart broken."

Ginney didn't want to talk about that possibility. But speaking of heartbreak...

"Have you seen Beau lately?" she asked, hoping for a subject change.

"No, and I'm not going to until he stands up to my father. If he really loves me, then he would fight for me, even against my father."

"What's going on, exactly? Your letter said that you weren't sure why your father was so set against Beau."

"Evidently, it's not so much that he's against Beau. He thinks I'm too young to marry anyone." Phoebe sighed dramatically. "I'm very mature for my age."

Ginney smiled. "Of course you are."

"And now that Beau is not going to take the ranch over for William, Daddy thinks I need someone more stable."

Ginney frowned at that. Caleb's decision was affecting others negatively. There were all of those people who needed his ministry for one thing. Then there were *her* plans, of course. Now his brother and Phoebe were impacted by his choice as well. She was eager to see Caleb and point out his misdirection to him.

"I'm sure that Uncle Silas wants you to be happy. He's just saying that he's concerned about your welfare."

"No, he's serious about me marrying someone else. Someone who owns land and livestock himself, rather than someone working for his brother," Phoebe insisted.

"He's just talking without thinking—"

"It's more than talk," Phoebe cut in, her voice rising hysterically. "He's even picked the man out. He's talked with Conrad Wildebeer about a match."

"Conrad Wildebeer?" Ginney repeated, astounded. She'd met Mr. Wildebeer on prior visits. He was originally from Boston, was mildly good-looking, and was the richest unattached man in the region. He was also pompous, greedy and elitist.

"I do *not* want to be Phoebe Wildebeer!" Then she promptly burst into tears.

Ginney sighed; she certainly had her work cut out for her.

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Ginney awoke feeling fresh and optimistic. Sleeping in a bed certainly beat sleeping on the train and it felt wonderful to be in Oregon again. When she'd been tired, all of the problems facing her in those she loved seemed almost too much. But with the sun shining and a new day

ahead, she realized that she had a purpose here and that filled her with determination and confidence.

She also couldn't help feeling excited at the prospect of seeing Caleb again.

She planned to ride over to their ranch this morning to talk some sense into the Jasper men, starting with the one that was most on her mind...and heart.

When she dressed, she chose a chocolate brown riding habit with a split skirt and suede boots. She brushed her hair until it glistened in the early morning light, then braided it in a single braid down her back. She then pulled a few tendrils out to curl softly around her face. Put together, she twirled for Phoebe who was still lying in bed, tired after her long coze with Ruth the night before.

Phoebe propped herself up on her elbows. "I can't believe you've changed so much in three years."

Ginney blushed and couldn't help wondering what Caleb would think when he saw her. "I can't wait to explore my old trails," she said, taking the attention off of her appearance before Phoebe realized how careful she'd been with her hair and in dressing. Phoebe already knew that she was in love with Caleb, but she didn't want to appear pathetic about it.

"If you weren't leaving so early, I'd come along." Phoebe broke off for a large yawn. "I'm just too tuckered out to leave right now. Your ma sure can talk. I couldn't believe we were up so late."

Ginney ducked her head to hide her smile, brushing nonexistent wrinkles from her skirt. She and her mother had planned the late night and Ginney's early ride. She wanted to go and see how things stood with Beau before she got too far in her planning.

When she entered the kitchen only Rory was there to greet her.

"Hi, Ginney! Did ya sleep good? I slept like a log. This place is great. Uncle Silas, he told me to call him that, can ya believe it? He took me down to see the horses in the corral this morning. He's down breaking in a new mare now. I'm gonna go watch. Wanna come?" He didn't stop once for breath.

She was happy to see Rory so enthusiastic.

"No thank you, Rory. I'm going to have some breakfast and then go for a ride on Glory."

Rory was already on his way out the door, not wanting to miss anything. His "Okay. See ya!" could barely be heard through the shutting door. She laughed outright. Rory sure was a breath of fresh air.

She decided to skip breakfast and go for her ride. Instead of the smart little hat she usually wore to ride in Chicago, she donned a lovely brown Stetson hat with a wide brim. She waved to Rory and Uncle Silas on her way to the barn for Glory. One of the hands had already fed him and he was pawing around in his stall.

Riding out of the barn a few minutes later, she took a circuitous route to the Jaspers' ranch, not wanting anyone but her mother to know where she planned to spend her morning.

Ginney loved the Oregon desert. It wasn't quite summer and the desert was still brisk in the morning. The sun always seemed to shine here, even when the temperature was below freezing. It wasn't as wet and windy as Chicago. She'd heard that western Oregon had more than its share of rain as well, but the skies were clear here. Phoebe had told her that even in the coldest winters most days the sun shone overhead. Ginney took in every desert bloom, every ponderosa pine. This place filled her heart whenever she was here.

She rode Glory at a gallop for a while to work out all of the gelding's kinks, but she had slowed down to a trot when she spied a rider in the distance. Her heart started to pound.

Oh Lord, give me the right words.

She didn't have to get much closer, however, to realize this was not Caleb. This man had the same dark brown hair but he wasn't as tall. He was also a bit wider through the shoulders than Caleb and he sat the horse differently. From this distance, most people likely wouldn't be able to tell one brother from the other, but there was very little about Caleb that Ginney hadn't studied. This was Beau Jasper.

Her heart returned to normal rhythm. She knew just what she wanted to say to Beau. It was Caleb she wasn't sure about.

"Howdy stranger!" she called.

Beau did a double take. "Well, if it isn't little Ginney Pembrook."

She felt comfortable immediately. She and Beau had always gotten along well.

"Not so little anymore. How are you, Beau?" she asked as she reined her horse in beside his.

"Well seeing as how you've already talked to that crazy cousin of yours. You know I'm not doing great," Beau replied with his customary frankness.

She grimaced at his reply. "Now that you mention it, I did come with the express purpose of taking the bull by the horns and talking some sense into you."

"Talking sense into me? I don't suppose Phoebe's mentioned that she wants to run away and get married has she? Against her father's wishes. And she's only seventeen! Just what am I supposed to do when her daddy demands we get it annulled? Shoot him? Even if I have been tempted, I wouldn't. After all, besides mostly liking him, I am a Christian man."

Ginney was surprised by the vehemence of Beau's reply. She hadn't expected a rant from the usually easy-going cowboy.

"Now, Beau, you know that Phoebe doesn't believe that will happen. She's sure that if Uncle Silas realizes how much she really loves you he'll give in."

This had the opposite effect on him than she had hoped.

He practically shouted, "How much she really loves me? But since I'm not willing to go sneaking off into the night with her, I don't really love her, right? I'm not man enough to fight for her, right?"

The sudden, loud male voice spooked Glory and he reared up, then spun and took off with a gallop. It took Ginney a few minutes and about two miles to get Glory under control. Beau pulled up next to her and took one of the reins, holding tight in case the horse decided to bolt again.

"I'm sorry, Ginney," he said in a calm, soothing voice. "I didn't mean to spook him. He's a beaut. What's his name?"

"Glory. He was Daddy's last gift to me."

"I'm sorry about your father, too, Ginney."

"Thank you." She looked up at the big man and was struck by how similar the color of his eyes was to Caleb's. "Phoebe didn't mean what she said. She does love you. She was just distraught. You know how impatient and headstrong she is."

"If she didn't mean it, then why hasn't she apologized?"

Ginney didn't answer, not wanting to start off another fireworks display by Beau. But in her opinion both Beau and Phoebe had more stubbornness and pride than was good for any two people. "How is your father doing?" She changed the subject.

"He's fine as far as being healed and all, but he's changed a lot. He never goes outside and he won't see visitors." Beau frowned.

"I'm so sorry, Beau. You certainly have your share of troubles on your plate right now. But why won't your daddy do anything? Mama said he just lost one leg below the knee. Are there more problems that she didn't know about? We've been praying for complete recovery."

"No. It's just his leg, but somehow he's lost zest for life. I sure don't know what to do." Beau sighed.

She felt for the entire family. Her father had been devastated by the loss of use of his legs. Although he had not retreated from the world like Mr. Jasper, he had found life challenging. If he had not been so close to his Lord, she was sure he would have succumbed to melancholy. Privately she thought it sounded like Mr. Jasper needed to be reminded of all he still had, but it wasn't her place to say anything...yet.

"Well, I'd like to come by the house and see your mother, if that's all right," she said instead.

"That'd be just great. Hardly anyone visits anymore because of Pa. I'm sure Ma would love some female company."

"Fine. Are you headed back now, or should I just ride on over alone?"

Beau thought for a minute, then glanced in the direction of Silas's place. "Well. I do have some more strays to look for, so iff'n you wouldn't mind. You could just ride on over. I know you know the way," replied Beau.

She smiled. "Fine. It was nice seeing you Beau. I'll see you again soon." She turned Glory towards the homestead, but couldn't help turning back and calling, "And when you get to Silas's place, tell my mother to come join me and Nellie for tea."

Beau looked sheepish. "How'd ya' know I was heading that way?"

"You never know how far those strays might wander."

Beau grinned and tipped his hat to her before turning and riding away.

# Chapter Four

Ginney arrived at the homestead ten minutes later. She rode up to the hitching post in front of the lovely old ranch house and pulled Glory to a stop. The ranch house was a sprawling one-story structure that had been built by Caleb's grandfather and passed down with the ranch to his father. Ginney loved the porch that surrounded the entire building. She could remember many summer days spent there playing with the Jasper boys and Phoebe while her mother, Aunt Ellen and Nellie Jasper visited and drank lemonade.

She called out a hello to the house as she slid off of Glory's back.

The screened door swung open and a gasp was followed by, "Ginney Pembrook, is that you? Oh, my! Ginney!"

Ginney laughed as she was enfolded in a hug, while Nellie continued chattering. "Where's your mother? Did she come west with you? Come on inside and have some lemonade. Just made it last night. It's still plenty cool in the house. My, don't you look lovely? Well tell me how you are now."

"Right now I'm just plain thirsty. Your lemonade sounds wonderful. I was thinking about it on the ride over here," she admitted.

Nellie smiled at the implied compliment and ushered Ginney into the parlor, told her to make herself comfortable and bustled off to the kitchen. Ginney looked around the parlor as she waited for her hostess to return. She had taken an overstuffed chair near the window. All of the chairs and the sofa in the parlor were upholstered in lovely brocades, but were overstuffed and comfortable. The room was just like Nellie Jasper, charming and comfortable.

Nellie returned to the room, in the middle of a sentence and Ginney wondered if she'd stopped talking even while out of earshot. Not that it mattered. She didn't pause long enough to give Ginney the chance to answer any of her questions. Nellie set down a tray bearing a pitcher of lemonade, glasses and a plate of shortbread cookies.

Ginney happily munched a cookie, listening with half an ear, while wondering where Caleb was and if he'd moved to one of the other houses on the land or if he was staying in the main house.

Suddenly she realized Nellie had fallen silent.

"Nellie, what..."

"I just wonder... I don't know that the Good Lord didn't send you. I guess there's no harm in asking anyway," said Nellie with an air of distraction.

This last communication leaving Ginney totally baffled, she remained silent, but gave Nellie an attentive stare.

"I'm worried about the boys."

"Caleb and Beau?"

"And William. I know he's their father, but I still think of him as one of the boys on occasion. Lately he's been acting so sullen, it's hard to think of him as anything else."

She took a deep breath and continued, "Since the accident everything has gone topsy-turvy. First Caleb stormed in and took everything over, practically pushing Beau out of the picture except for the fact that even driven as he seems, he can't do it all himself. William is acting like he died, or wished he had, in that accident. Then Beau had some kind of fight with Phoebe that's left him acting prickly as a bear."

Ginney grimaced. Nellie noticed.

"Yes, so you know all about it. I thought you might. But I think I could patiently wait out the resolution of William's sullenness and Beau's grouchiness if it weren't for Caleb." The troubled woman sighed. "Used to think he'd drive us crazy with his sermonizing, but at least he was happy. And he kept the rest of us positive and with our eyes and minds on the right things. Now he just mostly talks about beef prices, mending fences and other such things." Nellie looked so sad. "This family needs Caleb for more than pulling calves and shoeing horses."

Ginney swallowed hard. Suddenly even Nellie's shortbread didn't taste so good.

Nellie said, "It wouldn't be so bad if he enjoyed it, but he doesn't. Never has. I'd sure love it if I could keep both my boys around here, but I know God wants Caleb out there telling others about Him. I just don't know what to do. I thought maybe you'd have some insight seeing as how your daddy was a preacher and all. Guess it sounds silly, old woman like me asking a young thing like you for advice."

Ginney shook her head, not sure what to say. Finally, she admitted, "I don't believe a Christian can be happy as long as he's refusing to do what God has called him to." She knew that wouldn't be comforting to Caleb's mother, but it was the truth.

"You're right about that. I just wish I knew what is in Caleb's head all a sudden, that's all," Nellie said in exasperation.

Ginney wished the same thing. Caleb had never expressed any feelings of guilt about leaving the ranch to his father and Beau to run before. He had always been so excited about God's calling, he had never questioned how it had to be worked out. The only thing she could see that had changed was William's accident, but Beau was old enough to run the ranch and they could hire help if they needed it. There had to be something else Caleb wasn't telling anyone. She just couldn't believe that he would give up preaching without a good reason.

"So it seemed a sudden decision?" she asked.

"Seemed so to me. There was a rough patch, but he seemed okay with that."

"A rough patch? What happened?"

"A little girl in Franklin drowned in the river. Her father was distraught, feeling it was his fault since she'd been fishing with him."

Ginney nodded. "He wrote to me after that. Caleb went over to counsel the family and perform the funeral. He spoke with the father at great lengths about God's plans and keeping faith."

A week later they had found the man had hung himself in the barn. She shuddered now as she had when she'd first read those words. But Nellie was right. Caleb had been all right after that. It had shaken him and he'd felt terrible, but he hadn't blamed himself for the man's choice.

"Ginney, maybe you could talk some sense into Caleb. I certainly haven't been able to."

Ginney was worried that the Caleb they were speaking of was not the same man she knew. She was loathe to promise anything, but unwilling to disappoint Nellie.

"I'll try."

Nellie looked relieved. "Thank you. Caleb used to set such store by what your father said and he always had a soft spot for you. I'm sure good will come of it. It just has to," she said with a catch in her voice.

Ginney was ashamed of herself for hesitating in promising to help. She realized that Caleb's call and his happiness were paramount in Nellie's mind right now.

"Hello?" a voice called from the front porch.

Nellie's smile grew and she stood quickly, distracted by the arrival of Ginney's mother.

Caleb heard female voices carry from the living room as he stepped through the back door of his mother's house. He recognized his mother's voice immediately, and then he heard a laugh. This sound he knew as well. Virginia Pembrook was here.

He'd known she was visiting Phoebe, of course. In the past few months, very little had occurred concerning Phoebe Andrews that he hadn't heard about from his brother. Ginney and her mother's arrival in Oregon had been the second thing Beau told him when he'd gotten home last night.

The first had been that Phoebe still wasn't speaking to him.

But Caleb would have known the sound of Ginney's laughter whether he knew she was here or not. There had always been something indescribable that drew him to her. From the first time he'd seen her she'd made him feel good, lighter, hopeful.

He removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair then down over his face. He tossed the hat onto the table inside the door. He was dusty and dirty—just like a good rancher should be. He grimaced as he felt the grit and contemplated cleaning up before greeting their guests. But what was the point? He was a rancher. This was his reality now. This was how he was going to look and feel every day for the rest of his life. The sooner both he and Ginney realized it, the better.

He paused in the doorway to the living room, assuming he would go undetected for a moment and he could get his wits about him. But he knew that his presence was sensed immediately. And by who.

Ginney's eyes found his, even as their mothers continued their chatter, and she didn't say anything to alert the older women. She just looked at him.

He stared back. She was here in person. Somewhere in his mind he heard the word *finally*. He knew her handwriting, he knew that she was afraid of spiders; he knew that she always misspelled "accommodate" and he knew her favorite Bible verse was from Ephesians, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. But when he thought of her face, he saw the fifteen-year-old girl with the big brown eyes she'd been when he'd last seen her.

Beau had told him she'd grown up. He'd said she was pretty.

He'd lied.

She was beautiful.

Then she smiled at him, and he realized he didn't even have a word to describe her.

He continued to stare, unaware of any of the words of the conversation going on in the room. Her eyes widened as the moment stretched on and she lifted her hand to her cheek, which was stained pink with a slight blush.

He knew that she'd guessed what he'd been thinking.

Which shouldn't have surprised him. They'd shared a connection right from the first, the ability to look at one another and know the other's thoughts. They found humor in the same things, inspiration in the same things. It had seemed so natural to Caleb that it was Ginney's father who had delivered the sermon that had changed his life. In fact, she'd been the first one he'd wanted to share the news of his salvation with.

Since then, they'd been constant pen pals. Every two years there had been a summer visit as well, when she, her parents and various siblings came to Oregon for a month or two. Every time they were together, it seemed as if they'd never been apart. It amazed him the first time. The second time he just enjoyed it. The third time he'd sincerely thanked God for it. It had been three years since they'd last seen each other. Her father's illness had prevented their trip last year. He wondered what it would be like this time.

It seemed that already some things were different between them, which wasn't bad. But it was complicated.

Ginney wasn't a little girl any longer.

"Caleb, darling." His mother had noticed him. "Come join us."

Now he was going to have to act natural. Whatever that was. He couldn't let on that he was flummoxed. That would not make staying away from Ginney easier. He knew that she had feelings for him. In their letters they had spoken of what they each wanted in the future, of their hopes for ministry in each of their lives, of their affection and friendship toward each other. They'd never said love. They hadn't talked of marriage. But it had been there, between the lines. But now, he couldn't lead her on. She not only deserved to have her dreams realized, the world needed her ministry.

God had called Ginney to serve Him as the wife of a preacher.

Caleb was a rancher.

Her future didn't include him.

"Hello, Mother." Caleb moved to the side of Nellie's chair and leaned to kiss her cheek. "I'm not dressed or washed to sit with ladies. But I will take a cookie."

He reached and grabbed a piece of shortbread from the tray near Ginney's knee. He was unable to resist glancing up at her and found her watching him with an expression he didn't want to analyze. Her smile made him wish he could lean close to her for a kiss as well.

He straightened quickly. Those types of thoughts had no place here, between them.

"Mrs. Pembrook, Ginney, it's nice to see you," he said, because his mother expected it and because he really did have an affection for the two females. Too much, in fact.

"Caleb, how are you, dear?" Ruth asked.

He met the older woman's gaze. "I'm sorry about Reverend Pembrook." It was a much easier to thing to say than the answer to her question. He didn't like lying and he knew she didn't want to hear the truth.

There was a touch of sadness in Ruth's eyes, but her smile held. "Thank you."

"I wished I could have been at the funeral." He looked at Ginney. "I hope you received my condolences."

"We did, thank you," Ruth answered.

He wanted Ginney to say something. He'd heard her laugh. He'd read her words for years. But he hadn't heard her voice say his name in far too long. He wracked his brain for something to say that would get a response.

"He'll be sorely missed."

Ruth nodded. "I know."

Caleb wanted to kick himself. Of course she knew. She was the one living without her husband.

"He was such a wonderful mentor to me," he went on, wanting to express his feelings for the man without saying something stupid.

"He was so pleased with you, Caleb. He commented often on your understanding of the Scriptures and your insights and your ability to teach."

Ruth's words warmed his soul. For the twenty seconds it took for him to realize it was all irrelevant.

"Thank you for saying so," he told her. "But some things have...changed. I—"

"Caleb," Ginney said, suddenly coming to her feet. "I would love an escort around the ranch. I've missed it."

He looked at her with confusion. Well, he had wished to hear her say his name. "Of...of course," he stammered. "I would be...happy to." He looked from Ginney to his mother, who only smiled at him, to Ginney's mother, who was studying the stitching on the edge of the cloth napkin she had in her lap.

"Nellie, this is beautiful work. Did you do it?" Ruth asked.

No one seemed to think it strange that Ginney suddenly vaulted from her chair intent upon a walk around the ranch.

Of course, Ginney did tend to be bold, saying what was on her mind whenever it struck her. He'd always liked that about her. He didn't have to try to figure her out.

"Yes, years ago," Nellie replied. "I have another set that I've just started—"

"Ruth, would you care to join us?" It was rude to interrupt his mother, but Caleb suddenly wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with Ginney. She was definitely bold. She would tell him what was on her mind. And he wasn't sure he trusted himself to remember all the reasons why he couldn't tell her what was on his. He couldn't lead her on. She needed to understand that their relationship would not, could not, progress past where it was right now.

Ginney stepped forward and took his arm. "Oh, no, our mothers have much to still catch up on. And she didn't wear walking shoes."

He glanced down at Ginney's shoes. They looked much more appropriate for sitting for lemonade as well, but he didn't comment. Instead he just looked at her, one eyebrow up.

He knew that she understood his unspoken observation, but ignored it.

Fine. If they were going to have a heart-to-heart talk within minutes of seeing each other again after such an absence, there was no reason not to just explain everything up front.

"We'll be back later, Mother."

"Take your time dear," Ruth said, taking a sip of lemonade. "Nellie and I could talk for a year and not run out of things to say."

Ginney didn't let go of his arm as they walked to the door. He tried to put some space between them to avoid getting the skirt of her pale blue dress dirty from where it brushed against his breeches. She only tightened her grasp when she felt him try to move away.

They were barely outside of the door when she said, "He would be very disappointed in you ignoring your calling."

Caleb's eyes flew to Ginney. "What?" But he knew. She wasn't going to declare her feelings for him. She was going to lecture him.

"My father." She kept her eyes on the path ahead of them. "He would be so disappointed in the fact that you've decided to give up preaching."

"I see that your tea conversation didn't just include the weather and latest fashions," he said dryly.

"Phoebe told me. My mother doesn't know."

"Is that why you interrupted me in there?"

She nodded. "I didn't want my mother to hear it, and I knew the conversation would upset your mother. Phoebe said there has been a lot of bitterness within your family."

She picked up her skirt to step around a clump of grass, her hand still firmly gripping his arm, her eyes ahead as if they were simply out for a stroll.

"There are a lot of reasons."

"It sounds like you're the main one."

He felt his jaw tighten.

"Evidently, Phoebe and Beau have had a chance to talk between the arguments," he almost growled.

Ginney didn't say anything more until they reached the barn. She loved horses. This was where she always came first. He had led her here without thinking. She let go of his arm as they stepped through the door. The sunlight through the narrow windows broke up the shaded interior with wide yellow stripes. Soft whinnying greeted them and Caleb leaned a shoulder up against a post, watching Ginney move from stall to stall, murmuring and petting velvety noses.

She was graceful. And sweet. Gentle. Beautiful. So many things. Things he couldn't have. Things he shouldn't want.

"I must say I was stunned to hear about your decision as well." The last of the horses had been sweet-talked and now Ginney stood about twenty feet away, leaning against a stall door, watching him.

She sounded hurt.

He straightened. That hadn't occurred to him. But they had made a habit of telling each other everything in their letters. He hadn't, however, shared this with her. Possibly the biggest decision of his life.

"I'm sorry, Ginney, I—"

"You should be sorry! You're giving up your ministry, Caleb! And you're going to be even more sorry if you keep this up."

Taken aback by her outburst, he gaped at her. "What are you talking about?"

She looked at him like he was dim. "Don't you think there might be consequences to turning your back on God?"

He felt himself frown, for possibly the first time ever in Ginney Pembrook's presence. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it? Don't worry that one of the most gifted preachers I know isn't preaching?"

As she spoke she came toward him and he fought the urge to back up. She looked fierce.

"Don't worry about the fact that one of my dearest friends is making the biggest mistake of his life? Don't worry about the fact that a disciple of God is saying 'no' to God's calling?"

By now she was standing directly in front of him, breathing hard, her eyes flashing. "I can't not worry about it. This is a huge mistake."

Hearing Ginney, a woman he regarded as a true friend and the only one he'd truly ever regarded as potentially more than that, admonish him for the most difficult choice he'd ever made put him instantly on the defensive.

"It can't be a mistake," he said angrily. "This is how it's supposed to be."

"No, you've always..."

"I know what I've always said and believed, Ginney. I *know*. I think about it every day. But I have to accept that my plans are not always God's plans. And I have to believe that His plans are perfect."

She met his gaze directly, only inches from her own. "Why do you think this is His plan, Caleb?" she asked. "How can you think that? Your gift is preaching and teaching. Not ranching."

He flinched at her blunt observation. "Every day I think about that too," he admitted. "Every time I have to make a decision about the ranch, every time someone asks me a question about the ranch, every time I have to sign my name to something regarding the ranch..." He paused and took a deep breath. "I know that ranching is not my gift. But God often requires us to step out of our comfort zone."

Ginney shook her head. "That's ridiculous."

Caleb's eyebrows rose at that. "God's plan is ridiculous?"

"Of course not. What's ridiculous is that you think that ranching is His plan for you.

If He wanted you to be a rancher, wouldn't He have given you those gifts? Why would He have given you such a heart for His Word, such an understanding, such an ability to give that understanding to others? It's like giving someone a taste of chocolate cake and then taking it away, setting it just out of reach, telling them they can never have it."

Caleb felt a lump in his throat. She was right. That was exactly how this felt. God knew how much he loved chocolate cake.

"Maybe He's testing my faith and obedience," he said, hearing the hoarseness in his voice. He didn't really have the answers to her questions. He had to trust. He had to. He didn't have anything if he lost that.

"Exactly." Her eyes brightened. "Don't you see?" She reached out and grabbed his forearm.

For a moment, Caleb realized how nice it was that she was so comfortable touching him.

"See what?"

"Maybe He's testing you, to see what you would do with the choice."

"What choice?"

"The choice between ranching and preaching." She curled her fingers into his arm. "Yes, that must be it. He knew you would feel responsible for the ranch as the oldest son. But maybe God wanted to see that you would trust in your calling no matter what."

He wanted to tell her about his prayer. He'd *asked* God to show him. He wasn't guessing about this. It wasn't about responsibility as his father's oldest son. It wasn't about the ranch. It was about his Heavenly Father and what He wanted from Caleb.

He had not made this decision lightly. But he couldn't deny his God. For Caleb to make this decision, any decision really, God had to be a part of it.

But if she didn't already know that, then maybe they weren't as close as he'd assumed.

He pulled his arm back. "I have reasons, Ginney. That's all I should have to say on this subject."

She folded her arms, unfazed by the hardness in his voice. "What if David had gone to the battlefield, seen Goliath and then said, 'I'd like to help, but I have to get back to the sheep'? He was the only one left at home. He could have used that reason to get out of the battle. He could have insisted that God would have made him the first or second born if He wanted him to fight. He could have said the wind was blowing too hard for the stones to fly right. Instead, he fought the fight and he became King, Caleb. God had great things in store for him, but David had to choose to follow that path. David didn't make excuses or find 'reasons' to go the other way."

Caleb stared at her, amazed. And hurt. "You think I'm taking the easy way out?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it again. He waited for her to deny it for another minute. She shifted from one foot to the other, then back; she stared at the floor, clearly uncomfortable.

He stepped closer until he was looking down on the top of her head. The sunbeams caught the gold highlights in the auburn depths of her hair. For one more moment, while he could still hope that she thought the best of him, he wished that he had the right to lift his hand and run it through the silky fullness.

Quietly he said, "Ginney."

He waited for her to look up.

When she finally did, he said, "Do you think I'm doing this because it's easier than preaching?"

She wet her lips before answering, haltingly, "I don't want to think that, Caleb. But I know that preaching requires all of you—your mind, heart and spirit. I watched my father for all those years. I know that he was, in many ways, more fatigued and spent at the end of many days than the manual laborers. And the man who hung himself after his daughter's death...that would have been hard for anyone."

Caleb felt his heart clench. He couldn't be with this woman. He couldn't make a life with her. Her opinion, her respect, shouldn't matter so much. He wouldn't be a preacher, anyway. But it felt like a knife to hear her say that she thought he couldn't handle the life he'd planned for so long.

"Well, now that you've figured it all out, there's nothing keeping you here with me." He wanted to be alone.

"That's not entirely true."

He looked at her. She looked determined. Even a little angry.

"What you're not realizing is that when you deny your call, you deny someone else their call."

He crossed his arms over his chest to keep from reaching for her. She was even more beautiful when riled up and he had a very primitive urge to claim that passion for himself. But she wasn't his to claim. She never would be.

"What are you talking about?"

"The ranch. Your brother. If God's plan is for Beau to run this ranch, you are denying Beau his place."

Caleb took a deep breath. That was just what he needed, more guilt. He started to reply.

But then he looked more closely at Ginney.

There was something there. Something that made his heart beat faster, even as he felt undeniable hesitation, like his subconscious mind was warning him to not take this step, while his heart told him he'd never rest until he asked the next question.

"Who else?" he asked softly, before he could talk himself out of it.

She pressed her lips together and her eyes were on the collar of his shirt. But then, she straightened her spine, lifted her chin, met his eyes and said, "Me."

"What do you mean?" But he thought that he knew. Part of him hoped that he knew.

"We're supposed to be together."

He stepped closer to her, until the tip of his boot touched the toe of her shoe. She had to tilt her head back to keep eye contact.

"We are together."

"I mean always. In all ways. I've always known it and I think you do too. I'm supposed to be a preacher's wife. I'm supposed to be *your* wife. Which, logically, means you have to be a preacher."

He stared at her. Thoughts jumbled in his head. He couldn't believe she'd said it. This was bold, even for Ginney. The unspoken feelings in each letter, the connection between them that

lasted even across time and miles, the dreams, had now been put to words. There was no ignoring them now. There was no denying them.

Drawn by a force he didn't fully understand, but was disinclined to analyze at the moment, he leaned in.

"I love you, Caleb," she whispered just before his lips could meet hers.

It was the only thing that could have stopped the kiss.

He pulled back and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, her face turned up to his, beautiful, expectant, waiting for him to seal the promise that she had just spoken. If he kissed her now, she would expect that their future was decided. She would assume that she would indeed be his wife.; A preacher's wife.

That couldn't happen.

He put his hands on her shoulders and gently set her back, out of kissing range.

"Ginney, I...can't."

Her eyes opened and her confusion faded quickly to disappointment, then embarrassment.

"Well, it's true," she said, her chin up in spite of her discomfiture. "I do love you. We belong together."

He wasn't sure why God was torturing him like this, but he had an exquisite insight into how Eve had felt staring up at the apple tree.

Temptation. Testing. Resisting.

He dropped his hands to his side and stepped back. If that was what this was he hoped that he was getting a lot of credit at the moment.

"Ginney, I believe that your call is to be a preacher's wife as well. The thought of what you can add to someone's ministry is amazing."

"But that someone isn't you?"

"You will marry someone who loves the Lord and is called as strongly to that life."

She stepped forward and laid her hand over his heart. "And you're sure that isn't you?"

He covered her hand with his. "I'm jealous of the man, whoever he is, in spite of my better intentions. But God's plans are perfect."

"The ranch isn't where you belong."

"God feels differently."

"No. He can't."

Caleb smiled. "Ginney, you can not be prideful enough to believe that you know better than the Creator of the Universe."

"It isn't the Creator that I'm questioning."

He smiled again and pressed her hand more firmly against his heart. "God bless, and help, the man who becomes your husband, Virginia Pembrook."

She rose up on tiptoe, pressed her lips against the side of Caleb's jaw. "He already has, Caleb Jasper. More than you apparently know."

She stepped back, patted Caleb's chest, and then left the barn with a swish of her skirts.

## Chapter Five

Caleb knew that just letting Ginney go was the best thing. The less time he spent with her, the stronger his conviction would stay. Why was she here now?

He quickly saddled his horse and swung up on the mount, determined to follow her home, from a distance, to ensure she arrived safely.

As he rode out of the yard, he reflected on the timing of Ginney's visit. It made sense only in the context of his assumption that God was testing him. God wanted to guarantee that he was going to do what He'd asked. If anything could tempt him away from the ranch, it was Ginney Pembrook. If he could resist her, and the thought of making her his wife, then nothing would get in the way of him taking his place on the ranch.

He saw her just as she descended behind the hill and he spurred his horse into a trot. He wouldn't ride with her, just behind her, just close enough to watch over her.

About a mile later, she turned her horse west toward where the sun was beginning to sink. He frowned. Riding straight south would have taken her to Silas's place.

Caleb nudged his horse forward and was soon galloping. Glory was merely trotting and he soon overtook her.

He slowed his horse beside her. "What are you doing?"

She looked at him, not seeming surprised to see him. Then she glanced down at her horse. "It seems rather obvious. I'm riding my horse."

"Of course, I know that. Where are you going?"

"This way."

"I figured you were heading back to Silas's."

She looked to the south. "Eventually, I suppose."

They rode along in silence for a moment. "It's getting dark," he finally said.

Ginney looked at the sunset that was becoming a warmer orange along the horizon. "Yes, it is."

"Don't you think you should head home?"

She tipped her head back and breathed deeply. "No. Not yet."

"But you shouldn't be out here alone. Especially in the dark."

She looked over at him and gave him a smile that made him catch his breath. "I'm not alone. You're here."

"You didn't know I would be, though."

"Yes, I did." Before he could reply, she clicked her tongue and galloped ahead.

He had little choice but to follow. It wasn't safe out here for her alone. Though he wasn't sure it was completely safe for him to be out here with her.

She finally came to the rise that overlooked the ranch. It was the same spot where he'd been coming in his father's absence. He pulled his horse up next to her and looked at her. Did she know about this place? He didn't think he'd ever brought her here. Why would he? Until four months ago, this place wasn't all that significant to him. This was his father's place.

"It is so beautiful here," she breathed as she looked out over the land bathed in golden tones and shadow as the sun continued to drop. "The air smells so good. The colors are so vivid. It's so wide-open and free."

The moment gave him the chance to study her. He didn't need to look at the scenery. He'd seen more than enough of this land. He hadn't known that she was so enamored with it though. She looked good here. Not that she ever really looked bad. But as he thought about it, he realized that she seemed to fit here. He'd never visited Chicago, but he and his family had been in Boston once, visiting his mother's aunt when she was ill. The city had not appealed to him. It was too busy, too crowded, too noisy. It was much too difficult to find a quiet place and to see God. Everything was man-made in the city. He knew that Ginney had spent most of her life in Chicago, but yet, he couldn't picture that. She was too elemental to be a city girl.

He had an overwhelming urge to kiss her. Another overwhelming urge to kiss her.

Was it simply a matter of wanting what he couldn't have? Of being drawn to the forbidden?

That would have actually made things easier. Caleb didn't think there was going to be anything easy about his feelings for Ginney.

"I think it's time to go," he said gruffly. It was nearly dark.

"Not yet," she said. "Just a little while longer."

He followed her gaze to where she was watching the sky. He didn't see anything in the purplish hue that was left behind the sunset.

Then he heard her whisper, "There."

He looked back at her and was captivated by the expression on her face far beyond anything that could be seen in the skies.

"The first star." She turned to him with a smile. "I can barely see the stars in Chicago. I've been looking forward to this since we got on the train. This is the first chance I've had."

There was that urge to kiss her again.

"Time to go." He turned his horse and started down the hill. It took him a few steps to realize she wasn't behind him.

"Ginney."

"Not yet. I might not get another chance to just sit and look at the stars for awhile."

He returned to her side with a sigh. "Why not? They come out every night."

"But there's so much to do. Besides." She turned slightly in the saddle. "Everyone seems to think I shouldn't come out by myself."

He rolled his eyes. "You shouldn't. There are coyotes and snakes; there could be vagabonds passing through."

"But who will come with me? Mama and Phoebe don't appreciate the outdoors like I do and Uncle Silas is too busy with the ranch. She sounded forlorn and Caleb's first instinct was to promise that anytime, anywhere he'd be there for her. He just barely held back, in fact. But he glanced at her just before he spoke and saw that she was pressing her lips together. Almost like she was fighting a smile.

"Poor baby," he said deprecatingly.

She let her smile loose then. "It's true."

"But you were trying to get me to commit to nightly rides to watch the sunset."

"Absolutely."

He couldn't help his smile. She was unashamed about wanting to spend time with him. Romantic time.

"And it isn't just about having company so your mother doesn't worry, is it?"

She drew herself up taller in the saddle. "I am not lying about wanting to see the stars."

Of course not. Ginney didn't lie. In fact, she barely softened the truth when needed.

"But you're right," she continued softly. "I would always pick you over anyone else's company, given the choice."

He knew he needed to fight this attraction. He couldn't commit to sunset horseback rides, because he couldn't commit to all the other things that she would want. And that he would want.

"I'm flattered," he finally said honestly.

"You should be. I'm a very good judge of character."

Caleb laughed, and loved hearing her laugh along with him. When Ginney laughed, she didn't giggle like some girls. She laughed from the heart, without concern for appearing subdued or correct.

"We really should be getting back."

"Caleb, wait. There's something I wanted to say."

"We need to go." He already wanted to kiss her. He already wanted to promise things he had no business promising.

"Really, I have something to say."

"It's past dark. Your mother is going to worry."

"She won't worry. I'm with you."

He groaned. "She doesn't know that."

"She trusts me."

"It isn't about trust. If a mountain lion decides to attack you, it has nothing to do with if your mother trusts you or not."

He could see her frown even in the increasing darkness. "That's not very pleasant."

"No, I don't suppose a mountain lion attack is pleasant at all."

"Caleb."

"Ginney."

There was a moment of silence. Then she asked, "What?"

He was confused. "What?"

"You said, 'Ginney'. I assumed that meant you had more to add."

"You said 'Caleb'."

"I did have more to add."

He sighed. "If I let you say whatever it is, can we go then?"

"The chances are better than if you don't let me say it."

He smiled. He couldn't help it. Ginney Pembrook was difficult. It would serve him well to remember that. Even though he liked it. "Okay, please continue."

"I wanted to say that I am sorry for assuming that you stopped preaching because it was too hard."

Caleb moved his horse closer to hers. He wanted to see her face and it was now dark. The moon was climbing, but not quickly enough for his taste. "You did assume that then."

"I couldn't think of any other reason for you to stop."

"But you couldn't just trust that I have a reason?"

She didn't answer right away. She took a deep breath. "I should have."

"Yes, you should have."

They sat, looking at one another as the moon rose and its glow illuminated the landscape around them as well as her face.

He wanted to kiss her so badly. It would certainly make this spot, on his father's hill, more appealing to him. Worse, he knew that she wanted him to kiss her. She loved him. She'd said it. She wanted to be with him.

Strangely, those reasons were the ones that made it nearly impossible to *not* kiss her, while also being the very reasons he couldn't.

"Will you tell me the reason?"

That broke the spell.

He sighed. "Honestly is there *any* reason that would be acceptable to you?"

She actually took a moment to consider the question. "No. You are meant to be a preacher. God wants you to bring others to Him. Nothing will convince me otherwise."

"Now it is time to go." He did not want to have this conversation again.

"No... I'm...not ready."

"Get ready."

"Caleb, I just want..."

"We're going."

"I need...to pray." She said it like she'd just had a revelation and had the nerve to look triumphant.

It was the one thing that a man like Caleb would not say no to. It was the one thing that she knew would force him to let her stay.

It wasn't going to work.

"You can pray while we ride." He turned his horse around.

"But it won't be..."

He was a patient man. It came with the territory. The old territory. As a rancher he could get away with being a lot less tolerant than he had been as a preacher.

He reached out, slipped his arm around Ginney's waist and pulled her from her saddle into his lap.

"Caleb!"

He ignored her. He looped her horse's reins around one hand, made sure that Ginney was secure with his other and started for Silas's ranch.

It only took her twenty seconds to relax and settle into him. They rode in silence for two minutes.

"Caleb?"

"I thought you were praying."

"I...I'm done."

"Okay." He pulled her a little tighter against him. The terrain was rough out here. He'd hate to have her slip.

"Caleb?"

"Don't talk, Ginney. Let's just...not talk."

That lasted for another minute.

"I just wanted to say that..."

"Ginney," he said warningly.

"...being in your arms feels just as good as I imagined it would."

The air in his lungs left all in one breath. She'd imagined it.

So had he.

And she was right.

"So this is how it's going to be between us while you're here?" he asked. His chin rested against her temple, keeping her from turning her head.

"How what is going to be?"

"You are going to constantly try to convince me that we belong together and that I need to go back to the ministry so that can happen."

"Oh. Well." She tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "Yes."

"I appreciate the warning."

He felt her spine go rigid and he couldn't help his smile.

"Except..."

"Except what?"

"I am going to constantly try to convince you that we belong together and that you need to go back to the ministry while I'm here. And after we go back to Chicago. And for as long as it takes."

Caleb sighed. He believed her. Virginia Pembrook was honest, confident and tireless when she had a cause.

She was wonderful for God's ministry to the world.

She was big trouble for him.

Ginney was torn between feeling wonderful with Caleb's big strong arms around her, and worried that she'd never feel them again. He was determined they were not meant to be together. He would likely try to stay away from her from here on out. She was going to have to do something about that.

Silas saw the two from the barn as they rode into the yard. "Howdy, Caleb! Ginney, it's about time you wandered on back here. Phoebe's been waiting none-too patiently for you to return."

If her uncle thought it strange that she was riding on Caleb's horse with him while hers walked beside, he said nothing.

"Why don't you stay for dinner, Caleb?" Silas asked. "Ruth put on a spread fit for a king, if the updates Rory's been bringing from the kitchen can be believed."

Ginney couldn't help her grin. Her family was conspiring without even knowing it.

Caleb shifted behind Ginney and said for her ears only, "My brother's not good enough for him, but I'm supposed to stay for dinner?"

She pinched the back of his hand. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink'," she quoted from Romans.

His deep laugh rumbled behind her. "My enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall'," he returned.

She recognized the words from the Psalms, though couldn't remember which one. She was, however, thrilled to recall an applicable Psalm herself. "You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place'."

He laughed again. He drew the horse up near the porch and swung out of the saddle from behind her. "You are a worthy opponent, Ginney Pembrook."

When he reached up to help her down, Ginney decided to not remind them both that she had been riding almost as long as she'd been walking. She didn't need his help down. But she wanted it.

"You should probably keep that in mind." She put her hands on his shoulders as his hands settled at her waist and she slid forward, feeling him lift her gently and set her on the ground.

He didn't step back immediately.

"You don't have to remind me that when you set your mind to something, you generally get it," he said. "But I don't want to hurt you."

She looked up into his eyes, her hands still on his shoulders, him still standing closer than was proper. "Then don't," she said softly.

"Hi!"

They jumped apart as Rory came barreling out of the house and down the steps.

"I'm Rory," he said to Caleb with wide eyes and a wider grin.

"Silas sure has started hiring young cowboys."

Rory's grin grew. "I'm not a cowboy, mister, but I'm gonna be one someday."

Ginney put her arm around Rory. "Caleb, I would like you to meet my newest brother, Rory."

He didn't seem surprised. Anyone who knew the Pembrooks knew that this was par for the course. Caleb smiled at the boy. "Tell me, pardner, can I get you to give me a hand with Starlight?"

Rory's eyes shown as he exclaimed, "Can I really help you with Starlight? She sure is a pretty horse. Gosh Ginney, do ya see the star on her forehead? Hey, is that why ya named her Starlight, Mister?"

The boy's enthusiasm was contagious.

"Yes that's why I named her Starlight. She's a mighty fine horse, but I figure if Miss Ginney'll let you help her with Glory then you're a safe bet, even if you're not a cowboy."

Ginney looked up at Caleb and smiled. "You're staying. That's brave."

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

She laughed. "I don't think it will be that bad."

"I don't think so either."

The words and the look in Caleb's eyes in that moment made Ginney catch her breath. And hope.

She turned her head away before she launched herself into his arms, and smiled at Rory. "Well, if you two think you can finish things up here, I'll go and wash up for dinner."

As she approached the house she could hear her mother's laughter coming from the kitchen. It was such a welcome sound that she stopped and leaned against the porch railing just to listen for a few minutes. If their trip to Oregon did nothing but restore her mother's laughter, it would have been worth it. She didn't realize how long she'd been outside listening to Ruth and Silas talk and laugh about everything from the weather to how bad a cook Silas was, until Rory and Caleb walked up from the barn. Rory ran past her into the house, but Caleb stopped beside Ginney.

"What were you doing still out here?"

She looked up at him and smiled. She blinked a couple of times. "I was listening to my mother laugh. I didn't realize how much I missed that sound since Papa died."

Caleb laid his hand on her arm and said in a quiet voice, "I'm real sorry about your father. He was a very special man. His passing on affected us all."

"Of all people, I knew you would understand. How sad we were, but how much relief that he was whole again. I just miss him so much." She sighed.

"I know you do. But life goes on. Circumstances change. People change. You have to let go."

Ginney knew that he was talking about the friendship and the potential for more they had shared. Well, she wasn't going to let go.

"The important things about people don't change. They just get buried for a while. Sometimes they need other people to come along with a shovel and dig them out." She pulled open the screen door and walked into the farmhouse ahead of him.

"Better watch out, Miss Virginia. Instead of digging me out, you're liable to dig yourself into a mighty deep hole," he replied just loud enough for her to hear.

The scene inside reminded Caleb of dinners at home before his father's accident. Rory was trying to sneak food from the serving dishes as Ruth and Phoebe carried them to the dining room table. Everyone was talking in excited tones and Silas was belly laughing at something Ginney had said as she walked in.

Everyone called greetings to him as he joined the group, acting as though it was completely natural that he was there to share a meal with them. He simply wouldn't be human if he didn't wish this could be a regular thing.

"Come now, children, it's dinner time. Make sure your hands are clean before taking your seats at the table!" Ruth looked pointedly at Rory's less than pristine hands.

Silas winked at Rory as he took Ruth's arm and steered her into the dining room. Phoebe caught Rory as he finished drying his hands and followed them in, arm in arm. Ginney smiled up at Caleb with a challenge in her eyes. He lifted his eyebrows and offered her his arm. He escorted her into the dining room, and even held her chair for her.

When everyone was settled, Ruth asked, "Caleb would you please bless the food?"

He looked at her, startled. He hadn't prayed publicly since he took over the ranch. Ruth looked at him with her "don't you dare disappoint me, young man" look. Many a wayward youth had been brought to heel in the Pembrook household by that look and Caleb was no exception.

He lowered his head and began to pray, "Dear Lord, please bless this food that we are about to receive. We thank You, Lord, for the bountiful supply that has made this dinner possible. We also thank You for bringing Ruth and Ginney here to be a comfort and be comforted by their family. In the name of Your Precious Son. Amen."

He felt his throat go thick and stared down at his plate as he tried to get his emotions under control. He would never have guessed that something as simple as blessing the food would have evinced this reaction from him.

No one else seemed to notice, but he felt Ginney's hand on his under the table and she gave him a little squeeze. He was able to regain his composure and gave her a small smile as they began eating.

The conversation for the rest of the meal flowed smoothly, as it was supposed to amongst friends and family that enjoyed each other's company. In fact, the time went quickly and Caleb

was surprised to find he was disappointed when he no longer had a reason to stay. But, he had to get up early in the morning. As all good ranchers did.

## Chapter Six

Ginney rose early three mornings later with another plan needing implementing before Phoebe awoke.

In record time she was dressed in a camel brown riding skirt, vest and hat with her hair pulled back at the base of her neck with a purple ribbon. She loved bright colors but it was difficult to find functional clothing for ranch life in yellows and pinks. Ribbons and accessories were the only way she could find to add a splash of color. She did wish she could find a hat with a wide brim to protect from the sun, but in a bright red to help break up the browns, blacks and tans.

Glory was headed across the fields with Ginney and a basket of biscuits, bacon and coffee before anyone else had risen. Ranchers got up early though. It took her only half an hour to find the rancher she was particularly searching for this morning. She thanked God for that favor.

"Good morning!" she called as she drew close enough for him to hear over the steady whack, whack, whack of his hammer against the wooden fence railing.

Beau Jasper looked up in surprise and just a touch of hope on his face, before he realized it was Ginney and the hope faded. She didn't take offense. She knew, and was pleased, that he was hoping to see Phoebe.

"I brought breakfast." It was important to mention the bribery upfront.

She ignored his frown as she slid to the ground. She opened the basket, handed Beau a cloth napkin wrapped around a biscuit and bacon, and poured coffee into a cup borrowed from Silas's cupboard.

Beau accepted it all with a murmured thank you and a suspicious look.

Ginney took note of the tools and wooden fence rails lying in the grass behind him.

"Repairs?"

He nodded as he chewed, then washed it down with a swig of coffee. "More to do up north too. Will take me most of the morning."

"That's a lot of work. Where's Caleb?"

Beau raised an eyebrow. "You're here about Caleb, not Phoebe?"

Ginney smiled. She liked things up front and out in the open too. "No. I'm here about Phoebe. I was just wondering why you're doing all this work alone."

"Caleb's at the house working on the books." Beau chewed with a frown, finishing off the biscuit. "Which is stupid," he finally said. "I can do those books with one hand tied behind my back and still be done in half the time. But he thinks it's his job now."

She frowned too. "He's so stubborn."

Beau actually smiled at that. "You know, I'll be honest when I say that I've been feeling better about the whole thing since you showed up though."

"Why is that?"

"If anyone can stand up to him when he's being hard headed, it's you."

Ginney sighed. She hoped so. "Let's talk about something else."

"Gee, what would that be?" Beau asked, tossing back the rest of his coffee.

He seemed to be a bit happier since his stomach was full. Exactly Ginney's intention.

"You need to know that Phoebe loves you and wants to be with you more than anything. But she's realized that running off without her father's blessing isn't what she wants either."

For the past three nights, the girls had stayed up late talking in the dark about their hopes, plans and loves. Phoebe had done more talking than Ginney. Though Ginney believed in her heart that she and Caleb were meant to be together and that he would eventually come around, she didn't like admitting that Caleb wasn't as head over heels as she'd hoped.

"Why isn't she here tellin' me this herself?"

"Because I get the feeling there's more to it on your part," Ginney said honestly. "I want to know that you love her and want to spend the rest of your life together. You're not using her age as an excuse are you?"

Beau looked downright irate at the suggestion. "Of course I love her! What's not to love? She's sweet and smart and funny and beautiful and generous and..."

"Okay." Ginney held up her hand with a laugh. "You've convinced me." The look in his eyes had done as much to that end as his words. "So, if she agrees that eloping is not the answer, what are your plans?"

He looked out across the land as if searching for the right words. Finally he said, "I think she needs to grow up some." He looked back at her. "I love her. I'll wait for her. But I don't think we

should get married right now. What's the rush anyway? I live just a few miles away, I'm not going anywhere and we could court for awhile, just enjoy being together."

"You think she needs to grow up?" Ginney repeated. "What does that mean?"

"I think she loves me," he said carefully. "But I think she also loves the idea of love and of havin' a wedding and having a house to take care of and all. I'm just not sure she's really ready for the work. I think Phoebe wants flowers and sweet talk and a diamond ring and isn't thinking about cleaning the house and that I'll sometimes be out in the barn all night helping birth a foal, or that there will be lean times when the market isn't as good."

"You think she's too selfish to appreciate the work that goes into being married?" Ginney wasn't angry, just trying to be clear. She was beginning to think that Beau Jasper had more common sense than anyone had given him credit for.

"Not selfish," he said quickly and firmly, defending his love. "Just not thinking it all through."

"And how does staying away from her and not talking make any of that better?" Ginney asked, smiling to let him know that she was really on his side. On both of their sides.

"It doesn't." He shook his head. "But until she'll listen and not just cry every time I say I don't think it's time to get married, what's the point in going over there?"

Ginney had to admit he had a point. "I appreciate your honesty." She gathered up the empty coffee cup and put the items she'd brought back in the basket.

"Are you going to tell her what I said?" he seemed earnest.

"Do you want me to?"

"Do you think it will help?"

Ginney smiled. "I think the crying will hold off a little longer if I talk to her than if you do."

"So...will you?"

"Yes." She patted his arm. "I'll talk to her. But I think you should plan to come around tonight or tomorrow evening."

He didn't look confident in that at all. "Silas still won't like it."

"I think Silas will come around if he sees you courting his daughter, treating her right, and not rushing things," Ginney said. "He has to have time to get used to the idea of his daughter growing up and moving out. But it will happen."

Ginney rode back to the Andrews ranch feeling much more optimistic about things. This was going to work out. She was going to fix this.

She met Phoebe in the kitchen. Phoebe looked from the basket on Ginney's arm to her cousin's face. "Where have you been?"

"Out." Ginney set the basket on the table and took Phoebe's arm. "Come on. I have a plan."

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Caleb had to get out of the house. Sitting and doing books all morning had driven him crazy. He wasn't the type to sit still and when he sought quiet and solitude in the past it had been to meditate and pray, not to try to make columns of numbers add up.

The book work was one of the worst parts of his new "job". It was necessary, though, and he needed to get used to it.

Getting out from behind the desk and onto his horse and breathing deep of the outside air made him feel better. Now all he needed was some conversation.

He went north to find Beau, figuring that his brother would have completed the east fence by now and would have moved to the second section that needed repair. He hoped Beau wasn't finished; pounding on something seemed like a good idea. He rode for about ten minutes before seeing the edge of the fence line and locating the figure of a horse on the horizon. But as he drew closer he saw that there were two horses, and neither of them belonged to his brother. Frowning, Caleb nudged his horse forward.

Two figures dressed in brown had with their backs to him. They were working together to fit a piece of railing against the fence while pounding the heavy nails through the wood. They weren't doing well.

"What's this?" he demanded when he got close enough.

Both of them swung to face him. Caleb groaned. He should have known. Somehow, he should have sensed this. But something like this hadn't even entered his mind.

Ginney and Phoebe stood staring up at him with wide eyes. Their hats were too big, the gloves they wore would have come off with a strong wind and Ginney could have fit both feet in one of the boots she wore.

She waved the hammer she held at him, trying for a convincing smile. "Hi, Caleb."

"Virginia," he said tightly. "What do you think you are doing?"

She glanced at the end of the wooden railing she held with one hand and the hammer she held in the other, then back up at him. She opened her mouth, but he said, "If you say, 'mending this fence' or anything even remotely like that, I'll tell your mother what you're doing."

She snapped her mouth shut. He would have grinned if he hadn't been so frustrated. Ruth would never approve of her daughter out doing manual labor like this, dressed in men's pants, old work shirt, boots and gloves.

"Now that you've thought about it," he continued, "you can tell me what you're really doing out here."

"We are showing Beau that Phoebe is ready to work hard at making a life with him."

Caleb looked to the other girl, who was about an inch shorter and ten pounds lighter than Ginney. The men's work clothes she wore were four sizes too big for her rather than the three sizes too big Ginney's were. He looked closer. The work clothes looked familiar.

"Are those *my* clothes?" he asked.

Phoebe glanced down. "I really don't know. They were the only ones there."

He looked back at Ginney sharply. "Where?"

"In your back porch," she said as if it should have been obvious.

"You were at the house?"

"Yes. Of course. Uncle Silas's clothes would never have fit and we don't have any other work clothes."

"These work clothes don't fit," he felt compelled to point out.

Ginney shrugged. "They're keeping us covered."

Caleb closed his eyes and prayed for patience. "Virginia," he said calmly, opening his eyes. "Did it even occur to you to come and tell me what you were planning to do, since you were at the house anyway?"

"No." She glanced at Phoebe, then back at him. "What good would that have done? You would have said no."

"Of course I would have said no!" he exploded. "You shouldn't be out here. You don't know what you're doing." He swung himself out of the saddle. "It's dangerous. You could have gotten hurt!"

"Beau is a rancher. Phoebe wants to be a rancher's wife. She's here proving that she can be," Ginney said. "And look what we've done so far." She gestured with her hammer to the top railing on the section of fence just to the left.

As she called his attention to it, suddenly the end closest to them tilted, then detached and fell onto the next lower railing with a loud thump.

She frowned at it as he fought the urge to laugh.

"Yes, I see. I don't know what we ever did before you got here."

She sighed. "Well, it's the thought that counts."

"No." He stepped forward and took the railing from the women's hands. "It's not. It's doing a job right that counts out here. A fence that was put together with good intentions, but that doesn't stay up, doesn't keep the livestock in or the trespassers out."

Ginney frowned at him. "But her heart is in the right place."

Caleb tossed the railing to the side and then turned to face Phoebe, hands on his hips. "Phoebe, was this whole thing your idea?"

Phoebe bit her bottom lip and glanced at Ginney uncertainly.

"Oh, you can tell him," Ginney said, obviously exasperated. "He knows it was my idea anyway."

His attention went to the woman who was never far from his mind even when they were apart. "Why?"

"Phoebe needs to show Beau that she wants to be with him no matter what," Ginney explained. "She loves him. He loves her. But he has some crazy ideas about why they can't be together. She has to show him those ideas can be overcome."

Caleb had the distinct feeling they were no longer talking about Phoebe and Beau. His heart quickened even as his mind realized that these were the kinds of conversations and situations he needed to avoid with Ginney. "You can't just leave it alone? Let it go? Let everyone have some peace?"

"If their hearts are not whole, how can they have peace?"

She hadn't physically moved closer to him, but he felt everything around him start to fade, except for Ginney's face and voice. "You don't think that people get over that, with time? You don't think there's a way to accept things as they are and not keep wishing and hoping forever for something that can't be?"

She shook her head. "I think that God puts longing into us for a reason. I think He wants us to seek the things that we need, yearn for the things He wants to give to us."

Caleb felt like he was spinning. "'Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life'," he said quietly.

Ginney moved closer to him. "What did you say?"

"It's from Proverbs," he said, his throat tight. "It just came to me."

She looked startled for a moment, then smiled. "Understanding is like that sometimes."

"Ginney, I—"

"What is going on here?" a voice called.

Beau.

Ginney and Caleb both looked at Phoebe. She was glowing, even as she looked nervous.

"Go talk to him," Ginney urged. "Tell him why you're here."

Phoebe nodded mutely, and moved toward Beau as he rode up.

"Why are you here?" Caleb asked Ginney after Beau had dismounted.

"I'm supporting my cousin."

"And?"

"And hoping to see you."

He didn't know why he had pressed the issue. He supposed that he liked knowing she cared about him, even if nothing should come of it. It was selfish on his part, but he liked hearing the words.

"But you don't want to prove to me you can be a *rancher's* wife," he pointed out, motioning toward the fence.

"You already know I'll be an excellent preacher's wife."

Her eyes sparkled and her lips tipped up just slightly as she said it and Caleb couldn't help his smile. Or the desire to kiss her. He resisted. But he was beginning to wonder how long he would be able to.

"Now I just have to find an excellent preacher," she added impertinently. "Do you know anyone?"

He did. His heart squeezed as the thought filled his mind. He couldn't take a deep breath.

He knew someone who was an excellent preacher, who would have rejoiced to have Ginney by his side.

Why does it have to be this way? he asked silently. Why am I sitting behind a desk, when I want to be standing behind a pulpit?

"I need to go," he said raggedly, turning toward his horse without really registering what he was doing or where he was going.

"Caleb?"

Ginney sounded worried. He knew she'd just been teasing him and it seemed strange even to him that he was taking her comment so hard. But it felt like his heart was being torn in two.

"I'm sorry. I have to go," he repeated, fumbling for the reins and mounting awkwardly. "I have to go."

"Caleb!" Ginney called after him.

But he was already galloping away.

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Ginney didn't know what to expect over the next week.

Would Caleb come to her? Should she go to him? Should she leave it alone? Should she fight for what she wanted? If she only knew what had gone through his head before he fled the other day.

She prayed, she rode Glory, she even visited Caleb's parents.

She didn't see even the hem of a sleeve of one of Caleb's shirts. With or without him in it.

For the second time since Caleb found her mending fences, Ginney sat in William and Nellie's living room sipping iced tea. She'd come with Phoebe, again, so that Phoebe could talk with Beau, again, without upsetting Silas. It wasn't sneaking. Ginney wouldn't have condoned that. Silas knew they were here and knew Phoebe was spending time with Beau. He also knew that they were well chaperoned.

Ginney certainly didn't mind the time spent with Nellie. Nellie was a wonderful woman. She didn't see much of William. He spent his time on the back porch, in a chair, not talking to anyone. He ate when Nellie took him food. He slept when the sun went down. Beau, not knowing what else to do for his father, assisted him to and from the bedroom and to relieve himself.

Nellie was sad and the more time Ginney spent with Caleb's mother, the more she saw it. And the more it bothered her. William was hurting, emotionally, if not physically anymore. But his wife, who loved him more than anything, was suffering just as much. She felt powerless to help him, depressed that she was no longer married to the man who had made her laugh for thirty years, sorry that she couldn't make him happy enough to get past what had happened.

Ginney sipped her tea and looked over the corner of the room where Phoebe and Beau were huddled close together, talking in tones too low to make out specific words. She smiled. That issue seemed to be clearing up.

Then she glanced at her mother and Nellie.

"...since William's accident." Nellie was saying. "I wish... Oh what's the use wishing? Won't change anything." The woman sighed.

Ruth leaned forward, concern on her face. "Nellie, don't give up hoping. The Bible says that hope is the result of our perseverance in suffering. Dear, suffering is wasted if we allow it to diminish our hope rather than increase it. Remember, our Lord is the God of Hope."

Nellie looked at Ruth and replied, "You know Ruth, if someone else had said that to me I don't reckon I would have listened. But if you can think that way after what you went through with Joshua, then there's got to be something to it."

Ruth smiled at her. "You know it's something that Joshua told me in the final days of his life. I was terribly sad, knowing that his time here was getting shorter and shorter. It was so difficult to watch him waste away and suffer physically the way he did. Yet, he maintained such a wonderful attitude. He reminded me that I had to keep hoping. That faith means more than believing that Jesus died for me, but it also means believing that He's living for me too."

The discussion spoke to Ginney's heart as much as it, hopefully, spoke to Nellie's. Something had to be done about William. Why couldn't Ginney help there as well? It wasn't just Nellie's faith that needed boosting.

No one seemed to notice when she stood and crossed the room. Phoebe and Beau were much too engrossed in each other, and Ruth and Nellie were holding hands, their eyes closed as Ruth prayed. Ginney didn't think God would mind her using the prayer time as a chance to find William. He loved William and wanted him to heal. He also knew that Nellie would have tried to dissuade Ginney for her determination to talk to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jasper," Ginney greeted as she stepped out onto the back porch.

He didn't look at her and did nothing more than grunt in greeting.

Undaunted, she took the rocking chair next to the older man. "What a beautiful day," she commented. She planned to lead into what she really wanted to talk to him about. Though she had a fairly good idea that William knew she was out here for more than casual conversation.

He grunted again. He was smoking a pipe and it was so quiet between them that she could hear the soft crackle of the tobacco as he drew on the mouthpiece.

"God truly has blessed this place with beauty." She took a deep breath of the fresh, clean air. "I love it here."

Another grunt. But the rocking chair tipped back and forth a bit faster and she hoped that meant she was getting some emotion stirred up.

"I can't believe how Beau and Caleb have changed in the last three years, Mr. Jasper. Why when I left, Beau was just a gangly youth and now he's a man full grown."

At that William turned a scowl on her.

She smiled in return. "Isn't it wonderful that you've taken the time to teach Beau so much so that he can help now that you need him?"

"Yes, yes, my sons are grown men, and it's a durn good thing too. Where would we be if not? Who'd run the ranch otherwise? Surely not a useless old cripple like me!"

She frowned right back at him. "You are not useless, Mr. Jasper," she said firmly. "There is still so much that you can do and when you're fully recovered I'm sure that you will return to running the ranch."

He turned red and responded in a voice near a shout, "When I'm fully recovered? What do you think is going to happen? The Lord is going to give me a new leg maybe? I'm sure I've used up whatever blessings I had coming my way long ago."

Ginney wasn't surprised by William's assumption. Her father had told her that many people felt this way when faced with real tragedy in their lives.

She gently touched the older man's shoulder. "That is not what I meant at all. The Lord doesn't have to give you a new leg for you to be useful. He's got plans and blessings for you as you are right now."

"And what would you know about it, missy? As far as I can see you've got two perfectly good legs and your whole life ahead of you."

"None of us know how long we have on this earth, Mr. Jasper. Perhaps I will meet God tomorrow. That doesn't have anything to do with it. We are to make the most of the time we have, however long it is. You're wasting your time, your life and your family's patience. You're taking their love for you for granted."

"My family is just fine," he said angrily. "You mind your business, young lady."

"No."

William looked genuinely surprised.

"All right, so you lost part of your leg. You aren't dead! You're not confined to a bed! You could probably even still ride a horse. Above all, your family loves you. They want to help you but you're pushing them away. Caleb is even out there ranching for you, when his heart is really in preaching. Nellie is worried and sad all the time. Beau doesn't know what to do between you and Caleb."

"The boys are fine," William said gruffly.

She surged to her feet and faced Caleb's father. "They're *not* fine! They're worried about you. They want to be with you, help you, help make things better. But you're pushing everyone away. You might as well be dead, if this is how you're going to treat them!"

She almost couldn't believe she'd said that and she rushed ahead to cushion her statement. "My father and I would have each given anything to have just a few more days together." She blinked against the tears that had welled up. It was so true. Her father was gone and she would have to miss him for the rest of his life. "You're *here*, your mind is good, your health isn't poor, you just have one leg that's shorter than the other. Yet, you sit on this porch as if your life is over! You have two wonderful sons and a delightful wife who all love you immensely. You should sit out here and count your blessings, William Jasper, not bemoan your circumstances."

Caleb had stopped on the bottom step to the porch.

He hadn't known Ginney was there as he'd approached the house, until she stood up to lecture his father.

Caleb felt like he was choking. He could hear the hurt in Ginney's voice as she talked about missing her father and wanting a few more days with him. It hurt him, that she hurt. She was also saying all of the things to his father that he, or someone, should have said to him. They all walked around William as if he was a child or on his deathbed. Neither was true, but they didn't know how to confront William's poor attitude.

Thank You, God, for Ginney.

It was so natural to pray the prayer. He meant it with every fiber of his heart. God had sent Ginney. Caleb knew it.

"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Ginney asked William, quoting from the book of Job. "Job was attacked by Satan, he lost everything, and still he praised God. He lost his land, his livestock, his *children* and he still knelt down and said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised'."

Caleb felt a familiar yearning within him at Ginney's words. The Word of God was so much a part of her and the things she said and did. He loved that about her.

Even as a child, Ginney had a faith that had helped inspire Caleb. It had been innocent then. The faith of a child. Especially the type of faith the child of a preacher would have. As far as young Ginney knew, everyone had a deep, abiding love of the Word.

As she'd grown, her faith had matured. She realized that there were many who hadn't heard the Word of God and those who had but did not believe. Her faith was more confident as she'd shared her belief with those who asked questions and as they learned more, wanted to know more. She had also found herself defending her faith to those who did not share it and who engaged her in debate.

Now, as a woman, she didn't just wait until someone else brought it up. She made people face the question of faith and Creation and God, whether they asked for it or not, when she determined that was what they needed. She was confident not only in what she talked about, but also in the fact that this was what God wanted from her.

Suddenly in that moment, Caleb knew then that he and Ginney could not be friends.

She would not let them be friends and nothing more. She had no doubts that God wanted them to be life partners and hearing her say that, along with her being the first woman in a very long time that he even had the slightest urge to kiss, made him want for things he could not have and it was torturous.

And he wanted even more. Witnessing her fervor when she talked of God and His plans made Caleb want to once again proclaim God's Word to the masses. It was like he was a bird who was asked not to sing or a deer asked to not run. Preaching for God seemed such a part of him, and Ginney drew it out, until he was nearly bursting with it.

It was just too hard.

He climbed the rest of the steps, noticed by the pair on the porch right away.

"Caleb!"

Ginney seemed surprised but happy to see him. Her smile made his heart squeeze. What this woman was doing to him was crazy.

"Ginney," he greeted with a nod. "Pop." He looked at his father, trying to read how William was taking the conversation with Ginney. "How are you doing?"

His father seemed to stop to consider the question for a moment. "Better, I believe, son," he said. "Better."

Caleb was surprised by his father's answer. Not just the words, indicating a change of heart, but also that there had *been* words in response to his question. William had barely spoken to anyone in weeks.

"Caleb," Ginney said. "I think your father could use some company. I need to get back to the other room before the women notice I've been gone."

He looked at her, then at his father, then the rocking chair next to his. "I have some time. Do you mind if I join you, Pop?"

His father was filling another pipe with tobacco, so he just gestured with one arm toward the empty rocking chair.

Caleb sat down, feeling dazed. He and his father were going to have a conversation. It would likely end up on the topic of cattle prices. But it was talking. That was a start. Ginney moved toward the door back into the house and he opened his mouth, wanting to say so many things. But he couldn't. He couldn't tell her thank you, or that she was a gift from God or, most especially, that he loved her. That would all certainly be leading her on if he had no intention of pursuing her as a wife.

Instead, she went back inside with just a smile.

## Chapter Seven

In the parlor, Ginney found a radiant Phoebe discussing the upcoming picnic social with her mother and Nellie. Ginney noted that her uncle had joined them and Beau had departed, presumably for work. Uncle Silas didn't seem happy to be just in time for the picnic planning.

Phoebe was saying, "Well, I plan to pack every single one of Beau's favorite foods. Does he like fried chicken or ham? Should I make pie or cake for dessert? Or do you think he'd prefer a pudding?"

Nellie laughed. "My, my. You certainly do aim to please." Turning to Ruth she remarked, "I have to admit that I'm glad those courting days are over. If I had to bake a cake every day, I'd never get anything done."

Ruth smiled at Nellie and nodded her agreement. "Yes, it's certainly a blessing that you're only young once. I'm much more comfortable settled and stable."

Ginney saw her mother glance over at Silas as she said the words and his face got red. What was that all about?

Suddenly, Nellie gasped and Ruth came to her feet. Startled, Ginney turned, just in time to see William come limping into the parlor, leaning heavily on wooden crutches. Nellie jumped up and rushed forward to help her husband find a chair, while the other ladies looked on smiling.

"Been a while since I sat in the parlor, Nellie. Looks right nice," William said between short breaths brought on by the exertion of leaving the back porch.

Nellie smiled beatifically at William and replied, "Thank you, dear. You look wonderful in the parlor."

This made everyone laugh. Nellie blushed as she plumped a pillow behind William's back.

Silas smiled at the ladies and said, "Well, girls, it's time we were heading back to the ranch. Ginney do you think you can round Rory up? I saw him head for the barn just as soon as we arrived. I don't believe he even said hello to Nellie."

Ginney hurried down to find Rory, not wanting to keep the others waiting. She was fairly certain Rory would be found near the horse stalls. As Ginney's eyes adjusted to the dimness of the barn she called out Rory's name.

"I'm over here, Ginney. Caleb's teaching me how to saddle a horse." Rory's voice came from the opening into the horse corral.

She stopped short. The last thing she wanted was another attempt at reading Caleb. He'd had such a strange expression on his face out on the porch. She'd feared he would be angry with her for haranguing his father. But he'd seemed thoughtful, more than anything. However, he certainly hadn't seemed overjoyed to see her. She didn't know if she could face that just now. She wanted Caleb to feel all the things she did. He'd made it clear that he did not think they should progress beyond friendship, and he was sticking with it.

"It's time to go, Rory. Come along now. We don't want to keep Uncle Silas and the horses waiting."

"Aw Ginney, we're almost done. Just give me five more minutes."

Her nerves were on edge from the already emotional visit and she didn't want to spend any further time with the man that made her feel more emotionally than all of the people in that house that she loved put together.

"Rory, you can learn how to do that later. Caleb is perfectly capable of finishing. Come now." Ginney spoke more sharply than she intended.

Caleb came out of the fourth stall down and walked toward her, wiping his hands on a white cloth. "It's all right, Rory. Ginney'll wait a few more minutes. You know, I taught her how to saddle a horse too."

He stopped right in front of her and spoke to her in a low voice not intended to be overheard by the boy or even the horses. "I'm grateful to you for what you did today with Pop."

Ginney's entire countenance softened. "Oh." Her lips parted as she stared up into Caleb's face.

"He needed that and I wasn't brave enough to make him listen."

"It wasn't bravery." She gave a small smile. "It was a desperate act. I couldn't stand how unhappy everyone was."

"You can't help the urge to fix everyone, can you?"

"If there's something that needs fixed, don't you think God wants us to at least try?"

Caleb's eyebrows drew together. "Have you asked Him?"

"Asked Him what exactly?"

"If what you're doing is what He wants you to do?"

Caleb's words made her stomach tighten. Of course this was what God wanted her to do. Wasn't it? She couldn't help the question that flickered through her mind. She figured she would know if He *didn't* want her doing these things. Wouldn't she? There was another question that came uninvited.

She frowned. She was the one that asked questions that made others think. Darn it.

"Ginney?"

"What?" She sounded a bit cross if she were honest.

"Have you asked God what He wants from you?"

"You shouldn't make me question myself just because you are having trouble being confident in *your* call."

He looked taken aback. "I'm not questioning you because of my own questions. Just like with that fence the other day. Good intentions aren't the only important thing behind our words and actions."

"We have to have confidence. Those of us called to minister to others have to have unwavering confidence. How can we minister to others with the certainty they need if we have questions?"

"How can we minister to others *without* having questions?" he shot back. "We have to question what we're saying, what we're doing, when we're saying things, how we're saying things and, of course, our own faith. How do we know that we are saying the right thing at the right time if we don't *ask* if that's the case? As we question and receive answers, we gain confidence. Not only in our faith, but also in God using us for His purpose."

She folded her arms across her mid-section. "You don't think that God wants your father to be happy? It seemed that what I said to him worked. How can you think that was wrong?"

He mimicked her posture, crossing his arms. "God loves my father. But how do you know God didn't have another plan? I'm not saying that this wasn't the plan. I'm just asking if you are *sure* that it was."

She dropped her gaze to the floor of the barn. He was right. She didn't always ask God what He wanted. She just assumed. She also feared that sometimes the answer would be "No, not now" or "No, not you" if she asked. She wanted to help the people around her. She loved the feeling of touching their lives, influencing them...being important to them. Her face heated as she admitted the truth.

Caleb tipped her chin up with his finger. His eyes were understanding. "You do good things, Ginney. God is going to use you in people's lives. You don't have to worry about that."

She was startled by the fact that Caleb knew what she had been thinking. "I shouldn't assume I know best."

"No, you shouldn't," he agreed. But his voice was gentle. "Some of the rest of us would like a chance to do good, too. You barely give God a chance to step in. You have it already taken care of."

She smiled, in spite of how ashamed she felt. But she also felt sad. "You're leading up to telling me that I need to leave you alone because God hasn't told me to talk you out of ranching."

"He hasn't?"

She shrugged. "Well, I haven't asked one way or the other."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe you should."

He sighed. "Ginney, I did." He stepped back and she could feel him step back emotionally as well.

"What do you mean?"

He sighed again. "I did ask Him." He ran a hand through his hair. "I prayed for Him to show me which way to go. I was trying to decide between the church or traveling. But all I asked was for a directive, what He wanted me to do."

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"My father fell off his horse." Caleb laughed, but it wasn't a humor-filled laugh. "Can you believe that? The man who has ridden horses more than he's walked, fell off his horse. He hasn't done that since he was a kid."

"Silas said that he had some kind of episode."

Caleb waved that away as if unimportant. "It doesn't matter. The point is, I prayed one night for God to show me what He wanted from me and less than twelve hours later, my father was injured badly enough that he couldn't return to ranching. The message was clear."

"Oh, Caleb..." But she didn't know what to say. She heard the pain in his voice. His assumption didn't ring true to her, but she also could understand where he came up with the explanation.

"Do you know for certain that I'm not supposed to ranch?" He was suddenly completely focused on her.

She had to be honest. She shook her head. "I told you I haven't asked."

"I have. I have asked Him to show me if this is right, if this is what He wants every day."

Ginney took a deep breath and hugged her arms tightly around herself. "You have to follow what God tells you."

"I know."

"Caleb, I—"

"So, I have to ask you to leave me alone."

She was startled by his words, but she understood. "I won't harass you about the ranching anymore, I—"

"Don't tempt me anymore either, Ginney," he interrupted again.

"T-tempt you?" she stammered in surprise.

"Yes, tempt me. Don't talk about us being together, don't talk about us getting married, don't tempt me with things I can't have."

She was quiet for a moment, then something interesting occurred to her. "The word 'tempt' implies that it's something you want...just can't have."

He stepped quickly forward, staring down at her intently. "Of course I want it. You. Of course I want to be with you." He lifted his hand to cup her face, brushing over her cheek with his thumb. "How could I not? But I shouldn't tempt you either. You have a calling. So do I. We have to follow the Lord's lead, not our own."

"What if the Lord leads us together anyway?"

He shook his head, clearly not believing that would happen, but he said, "Then that would be reason to rejoice."

She took the words to heart. "Yes, it would."

"Are you gonna kiss her?" Rory asked from behind Caleb. His tone indicated clearly what he thought of that idea.

Caleb smiled down at her. "No, I'm not, Rory."

"That's good." The boy sounded relieved.

"I don't know about that," Caleb said softly.

Ginney smiled. "Me, either."

"We gonna go?"

"Yes." Though she made no move to change her position. Right here with Caleb was just fine with her.

"When?" the boy asked.

"Soon." Still she stood staring up at Caleb.

It was quiet for a few seconds. Then Rory said, "How about now?"

Ginney and Caleb smiled at each other, but it was tinged with sadness. They each knew this might be the last time they would stand this close, the last time he would touch her like this, the last time they would hover on the verge of kissing. Unless God changed their minds.

Finally, Ginney sighed and stepped back. "Yes, now." She broke eye contact.

Rory brought Glory from his stall and Ginney let Caleb help her up into the saddle, then settle Rory behind her, all without looking into his eyes again.

She didn't look back as she rode out of the barn and headed home.

She wanted to remember that last look in Caleb's eyes. That look that said he loved her and always would.

## Chapter Eight

The next day dawned bright, warm and sunny, in contrast to Ginney's mood.

She prided herself on being known for having a sunny disposition. Not that she never felt blue. But she looked on the bright side and trusted God to "prosper" her and not harm her, as it said in Jeremiah. Somewhere deep down she knew she still was sunny. She knew that God still loved her and would ultimately protect her. But at the moment, she just wanted to be glum.

It was hard with Rory around, though.

"Do you think there are going to be other kids there?" he asked as they bumped along the road to town in the back of Silas's wagon.

"Oh, there will be lots of kids," she assured him. "Everyone comes to the box social."

"Will there be games to play? Because I'm really good at playing ball. And it's been a long time since I got to play with anyone. I'm especially good at hitting."

She looked at the boy, affection filling her. "Rory, I'm so glad you're here." She put her arm around his shoulders and pulled him close for a hug.

"Here in the wagon?" He settled against her, finally comfortable with hugs and such from his new family.

"Here in our family."

"Do you think Mr. Caleb will be at this social-thing?"

Ginney had known that Caleb's name would come up eventually during the day. She hadn't known how she would respond. Now she didn't have to wonder.

Her heart squeezed and she had a hard time taking a deep breath.

"Ginney?"

She smiled down at Rory. "Probably," she said hoarsely.

"Oh, good. He probably plays ball real good."

She just patted his shoulder and let him prattle on, grateful that he didn't need responses from her.

"Why do the men have to buy the picnic baskets?" he asked after a few minutes. "Why don't the women just give them the food?"

Her eyes landed on her picnic box.

"We ladies make picnic baskets and decorate them. When it comes time to eat at the social, Mr. Johnson will stand up and auction off each basket. Gentlemen buy the baskets in hopes of eating dinner with the girl of their choice."

"Wow! What happens to the money? Do you get paid for your basket? Like at a restaurant?" Phoebe and Ginney laughed.

"No. Rory, the money goes to the school for supplies and improvements," said Phoebe, still chuckling.

"Well I hope Uncle Silas gets Mama's basket, 'cause I want some more of those strawberry tarts." The boy no longer had to steal to eat and ate with zeal and an appetite that rivaled men three times his size.

Ginney had strawberry tarts in her basket as well. Caleb loved anything with strawberries. She was certain Caleb would know which basket was hers. And he'd stay far away from it.

She had used the same color scheme for decorating her baskets since making the first one. Everyone else, including her family had decorated their baskets in some combination of red, white and blue. Ginney, always full of fun, had decorated hers purple and yellow as a joke.

She had received so much teasing for it that she had continued to use the color scheme every summer they had attended just to show that she was a good sport.

If only he hadn't asked her to stop tempting him. When she'd believed he was just being stubborn, she could handle it, but now this was serious. When Caleb spoke of being tempted, it sounded like being with her potentially jeopardized his relationship with God. That was something that had never occurred to her. But, as he so graciously reminded her, she'd never asked God.

Until last night. She'd prayed much of the night for guidance and wisdom. When she'd finally fallen asleep it was with trepidation. She knew that God didn't always give what His people asked for, or thought they wanted. But it was also with faith, that whatever God's plan for her and Caleb's lives, it was greater than anything they could imagine.

She looked away from her basket, to the rolling fields and hills around her. God's hand was evident everywhere she looked. From the land around her to the little boy beside her. He would not forsake her.

"We're here!" Phoebe's squeal cut through Ginney's reflections.

Rory immediately matched his cousin's excitement and Ginney had to hold him back from jumping out of the wagon before it had come to a halt.

She was smiling again before she knew it.

It was a beautiful day. It was a picnic. How could she be down?

"Well, I'll be..." Silas stopped the team and handed Ruth the reins.

"Silas, what—"

But he had already jumped out of the wagon and was striding across the field where the picnic goers were gathering their wagons. Ginney lifted herself up off her seat to get a better look while Phoebe leaned around and Rory climbed into the seat beside Ruth.

"Where's Uncle Silas goin'?" the boy asked,

"That's the Jaspers' wagon," Phoebe said.

The annoying flip happened in Ginney's heart again at the mention of Caleb's family.

"What are they doin'?" Rory asked, craning his neck.

"They're unloading something from the back," Phoebe said.

Silas was around the back of the wagon with Beau, apparently pulling something from the bed. Ginney was gratified to see William sitting beside Nellie in the front. He was even smiling and talking with the men behind the wagon. She was also relieved to see that Caleb was not with them.

She knew she couldn't avoid him forever, but she felt raw from all of the emotions that had been coursing through her over the past few days and the monumental realization of the night before: she and Caleb may not be meant to be together.

"Look at that."

"What is it?"

"Oh, my."

Phoebe, Rory and Ruth reacted to what the men had taken from the back of the Jaspers' wagon as they brought it around to the side. It looked much like the carts that Ginney had seen in pictures from the old days of chariot races. It was large enough for only one man, and had a seat, but it hooked up to a single horse, which Beau unhooked from the team in front of the family wagon.

They all watched as William got out of the wagon, a hand on his younger son's shoulder, and into the cart. He took the seat, then handled the reins of the one horse, driving the cart in a large circle around the wagon as everyone smiled and exclaimed.

Rory, Ruth and Phoebe scrambled out of their wagon and headed across the field toward the delighted group, leaving Ginney behind to tend the team and their own wagon. She didn't mind. It looked like William was getting out and about and that was all that mattered.

A few minutes later she was proud of the way she got the horses unhooked, watered and tied securely. She might be a city girl, but she was learning the ways of the ranch. The Jaspers and her family had moved off toward the larger crowd and she could see them greeting old friends and everyone chattering about the inventive cart William was using. She smiled. Things were good. Mostly.

"Well if it isn't Virginia Pembrook," said a voice close to Ginney's left shoulder.

Ginney turned to identify the speaker and felt an inward groan. It was Conrad Wildebeer, the man Uncle Silas had chosen for Phoebe. He was not a tall man and he dressed as if he owned a haberdashery in Chicago rather than a general mercantile in Pendleton, Oregon. Although the day was warm, he wore a suit with waistcoat and a modern necktie. His shoes were shiny patent leather. Everything about his dress and demeanor seemed to say that he didn't belong among the ranchers, cowboys and farmers that made up the majority of today's revelers. Nevertheless, he was here and Ginney had to acknowledge him. She summoned a smile and greeted him.

"Hello, Mr. Wildebeer. It's a nice day for the festivities isn't it?"

"Really, Virginia, you must call me Conrad. We are practically family."

Not if Phoebe has anything to say about it, Ginney thought. "I always take some time to recall the informality here as compared to Chicago."

Conrad's smile diminished as the import of Ginney's words sank in. He did not like his behavior being described as informal by Chicago's standards. In his own eyes at least, he was top of the trees in Pendleton's society.

"I assure you, Virginia, that I would not be so impertinent if our familial relationship were not so certain," Conrad replied repressively.

Ginney's eyes narrowed at the pompous man's assumption.

"Really, Conrad? I was unaware we were related. Are you my second cousin twice removed on my father's side? Or perhaps my third cousin thrice removed on my mother's side? I must say that Uncle Silas had not told me that you have been tracing your family roots," she said in a falsely sweet voice.

Conrad looked at her askance and blushed a little.

"Ahem. That is not what I meant. Surely your cousin has informed you of my suit. Really, it's quite a coup for her. I would not consider it, but for the connections on her mother's side of course."

"Of course." Ginney tipped her head and frowned slightly. "However Phoebe must not be aware of the *coup* she has accomplished, because she has said nothing to me of her intention to accept your suit."

"Perhaps at her young age she is not aware of the advantages of marriage to someone in my social position. I can assure you however, that her father has made his position quite clear."

"Ginney, is everything all right?"

She turned toward the familiar deep voice of Beau Jasper. She knew that Beau was aware of Conrad's intentions toward Phoebe—Silas had made that painfully clear previously—but she wasn't sure if Conrad knew of Beau's feelings.

"Beau, how nice to see you," she said sincerely. Then turned back to indicate Conrad. "Mr. Wildebeer here was just telling me of his acquaintance with Phoebe and Uncle Silas."

"Indeed." Beau looked coldly at the other man who narrowed his eyes as well.

Conrad stepped forward to face Beau directly, though he came just up to the other man's nose. "Actually, Jasper, I meant to have a word with you prior to the auction."

Beau raised an eyebrow. "Is that right?"

"Yes. I'm aware that you have some misconceived intention to bid on Miss Andrews' basket today."

"The thought had crossed my mind," Beau returned, his voice flat.

"I would advise against that."

Beau grew nearly an inch taller as he drew himself up straight. "Why is that?"

"It won't matter how many pies you eat with her, Jasper." Conrad smirked. "Her father prefers me. You might as well give up your courting now."

"Well, I wish you and her father the very best," Beau told him. "I, however, do not intend to court her father."

It took Conrad a moment to process Beau's insult. Rather than get angry, however, Conrad sighed, as if putting up with people beneath him was exhausting. "I thought it may come to this. Fine. I will pay you one hundred dollars *not* to bid on Phoebe's basket," he said. "I will outbid you regardless of what you attempt to pay and you will walk away empty-handed and humiliated. Why not save the embarrassment and gain a few dollars in your pocket? In fact, I'll pay you another hundred to make it clear to her that you are no longer interested in her and to give up your suit."

Ginney gasped at his offer. Not just at the amount, but at the audacity that accompanied it.

She thought for a moment that Beau was going to lunge for the other man's throat. Though a woman of God, she might not stop him. At least not at first.

"So that is the price you would put on Phoebe's company?" Beau finally said tightly.

Conrad looked at him derisively. "Don't be stupid, Jasper."

Beau crossed his arms. Ginney opened her mouth to reply to Conrad's insolence. He spoke again before she could.

"That's the value I put on your courtship of Phoebe. It's hardly a significant amount."

The muscle in Beau's jaw tightened. "I see."

Conrad smiled a smarmy smile. "I thought you would."

"I think the best thing for my courtship with Phoebe might be for her to spend some time with you."

Conrad didn't take as long this time to catch the affront. He straightened his jacket, mopped his brow with the handkerchief in his breast pocket and cleared his throat. "You should have taken the money." He turned to leave, then paused. "I am certain that her other *potential* suitors will be more agreeable. As will her young cousin, who I will use to ascertain which basket to bid upon."

Ginney could feel the tension and anger radiating from Beau. He spoke before Conrad got more than a few paces away. "You could pay suitors off for any woman here. Why Phoebe?"

Ginney knew he meant, why a woman who doesn't want you and who has a serious prospect?

Conrad turned. "Why, isn't it obvious? Phoebe is the most sought-after woman in three counties. She's the best. And like cigars, whiskey and land...I am the only one who can afford the best."

Ginney held her breath as she waited for Beau's reaction. He said nothing. He didn't move. But his entire body was tensed. Conrad seemed satisfied that Beau was not going to do or say anything more and again turned and strode away from them.

She turned to Beau with wide eyes. "You're not going to let him outbid you are you?"

"I can't compete with his money, Ginney," Beau said, his eyes still on the retreating back of his adversary.

"But..."

"I have some things I need to do," Beau cut in. He turned on his heel and stalked off in the opposite direction from where Conrad had gone, which was also the opposite direction from where the picnic crowd, and Phoebe, were gathering.

Ginney was bewildered. As long as she'd been visiting at the ranch, she had seen no signs from Conrad Wildebeer that he was interested in her cousin. Ginney wouldn't even know his name if Phoebe hadn't told her. There had been no flowers, notes or visits. It was as if Conrad had picked her out like a hat and was simply waiting until it was necessary to "wear" her.

Ginney looked nervously in the direction Beau had gone. Conrad simply couldn't win the auction. It was just a picnic basket, just a lunch, but the townspeople took it much more seriously than that. This was the place where many young men made their intentions toward young ladies known publicly for the first time.

She had to do something. Ginney picked up her skirts and ran in the direction she'd last seen her uncle.

## Chapter Nine

"Uncle Silas!" she called when she spotted him near the trees, her mother on one side and Nellie Jasper on the other.

All turned as she ran up to them.

"Virginia!" her mother admonished. "Ladies don't—"

"Uncle Silas, I need to speak with you," Ginney puffed, cutting her mother off. She would hear a lecture about ladies and running later, but this was too important to give her mother even half a minute to scold her.

"What is it?" Silas looked concerned.

"It's about Phoebe."

Silas glanced around, quickly locating his daughter near the lemonade table. "What's the matter?"

Phoebe was talking with a group of girlfriends and laughing, obviously with no concerns.

"It's Mr. Wildebeer," Ginney said. "He's going to bid on her basket."

Silas nodded. "I expected as much."

"Beau wants to bid on it."

Again, Silas nodded. "I figured. Auctions generally work better with more than one bidder."

Ginney shook her head and grabbed her uncle's arm. "I just witnessed Mr. Wildebeer offer to pay Beau *not* to bid on the basket. He intends to pay everyone not to bid, so that he will win."

"Can't he just outbid them?" Silas said with a frown.

"He claims that he wants to save Beau the humiliation of declaring himself interested in Phoebe and not winning, but I think it's that he wants everyone to believe she is betrothed to him, because if that were true no other man would dare bid against him."

Silas's frown grew. "We did speak of an arrangement," he admitted.

"I know," Ginney said, clearly surprising her uncle. "But you don't want your daughter promised to a man who would essentially attempt to *buy* her from another man, do you?" She watched her uncle's face. Then added, "He compared this to buying cigars, whiskey and land."

Silas didn't like that. "Did he now? So my girl will just be a possession, is that it?"

Ginney nodded fervently. "That's how it seemed."

"What did Beau say?"

"He was furious, refused the money of course, and got in a couple of great insults in the process."

Silas didn't smile, but he nodded. "Beau better be planning to bid anyway."

"He can't afford it. He can't compete with Wildebeer."

"Well, I can." Silas reached into his back pocket and withdrew a roll of bills. "You tell Beau that I want him to win this auction." He handed her several large paper bills.

Ginney was delighted. "I'll tell him. Thank you!" She gave her uncle a hug. "Beau is the right man for Phoebe."

"I'm beginning to see that," Silas said.

"Oh! Where's Rory? I have to warn him..." Ginney was cut off as she felt a hand on her arm.

"Ginney, dear, I'd like to introduce you to someone," Nellie was saying as Ginney turned.

"I don't really..."

But the man was already standing next to Nellie.

Good upbringing demanded she be cordial. "Hello." She smiled.

He was very handsome, actually, with light brown hair, brown eyes and a conspiratorial smile that said he was placating the sweet woman insisting that he meet the entire town.

"Hello." He offered his hand. "You must be Ginney."

"I must?" she asked, taking his hand.

"Mrs. Jasper said I had to meet you. That we would have a lot to talk about."

"Oh?" Ginney turned to look at Nellie.

"This is Brian Macintosh," Nellie said, looking at him with obvious admiration. "Pastor Brian Macintosh."

Ginney took her hand back. *Pastor*. This was the new preacher.

"It's nice to meet you, Pastor," Ginney said.

Another friend came up to greet Nellie and she turned her attention away. Pastor Macintosh took the chance to draw Ginney away a few feet and ask softly. "Are you having some sort of trouble, Miss Pembrook? Are you in need of counsel?"

What was she supposed to say? I'm supposed to marry a preacher and you're the best option now that the love of my life has become a rancher?

Her breath caught in her throat.

Caleb was the love of her life.

She felt like she was going to cry.

She pasted on a bright smile instead. "No, I'm not. I think Nellie was thinking that I would enjoy conversation with someone as acquainted with the Scriptures as I am."

"You read the Word regularly?" he asked. There had been an unmistakable spark of interest in his eyes before, but now it grew.

She nodded. "For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding'."

"Ah, the Proverbs," Pastor Macintosh said approvingly with a smile. "Then Mrs. Jasper was very correct in stating that I would enjoy your company."

"I would as well," Ginney said, a bit distractedly. She had to find Rory and ensure he didn't tell Conrad which basket was Phoebe's. Then she had to find Beau and be sure he did intend to bid and give him Silas's assistance. "I'm afraid at the moment I have some pressing business."

"Then I shall look forward to another time," Pastor Macintosh said with a gentlemanly tip of his head. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

She smiled and turned to leave, but found herself facing William Jasper.

"Hello, my girl." William smiled up at her.

"Hello, sir. It's a beautiful day isn't it?"

"Yes it is and I intend to enjoy it!" he said in a quietly serious voice.

Nellie came to stand with her hand on her husband's shoulder. Her thanks was shining out of her eyes.

"This cart is wonderful," Ginney said. "How ever did you find it?"

"Beau and Caleb made it for me," William said proudly. "It was my idea, though, after someone made me see that if I was just going to be sittin' around anyway, might as well do it while checking out the ranch."

She smiled, accepting the thanks that was inferred. "I'm thrilled to see you here." She leaned in, gave the man a quick peck on the cheek, then hurried off to find Rory.

Predictably, he was playing ball behind the new schoolhouse with some other boys. She pulled him aside with a brief apology to his friends. "Rory, have you spoken to a gentleman named Conrad Wildebeer?" Ginney asked without preamble.

He nodded. "Yeah, he asked which basket was Phoebe's."

Ginney fought the urge to groan in frustration. "Did you tell him?"

"Isn't it against the rules to know whose basket it is?" Rory asked. "I thought people bid on the basket that looked the best to them."

"That's the general rule." She prayed for patience. "But lots of people try to find out which basket belongs to a special person they really want to eat lunch with."

"Oh. Okay. That's what he said too."

"Did you tell him?" she asked, kneeling in front of the boy.

"I tried to. But I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't find it." Rory's attention was drawn by the other boys calling his name to come back to the game.

She put her hands on his shoulders to keep his eyes on her. "What do you mean, sweetie?"

"It wasn't there."

"The basket?"

He nodded. "I saw Mama's and yours, and I know Phoebe's was right there with them, but when that man asked me to show him, it wasn't there."

Ginney frowned, but she patted Rory's head. "Okay, sweetie, go play."

He ran off without a look back.

She took just one moment to watch the boys play, rejoicing in the fact that Rory was able to run, play, and laugh and that he'd found some friends. She wondered if he'd had friends before. If not, that was exceedingly sad. If so, then he must miss them.

Thank You for bringing him to us, Father.

Then she went to find out what was going on with Phoebe's basket.

After searching the table where the other baskets were displayed, the entire wagon they'd brought to town and the immediate vicinity, Ginney determined the mystery was not going to be

easily solved. As the crowd was already gathered for the auction, she realized she needed to find Beau.

He was standing toward the back of the mass, leaning casually against a tree, a milkweed in the corner of his mouth. He looked every bit the rancher, with no worries, no concerns. She marched up to him with a frown. "What are you doing?"

He smiled down at her. "Enjoying a beautiful day."

"You have to bid on Phoebe's basket," she said, ignoring the fact that this was *not* the man she'd seen with Conrad Wildebeer a bit ago.

"No need." He moved the milkweed to the other side of his mouth and seemed to get more comfortable against the tree.

"Silas wants to give you money to help so Conrad can't outbid you." She thrust the bills toward him.

That straightened him. "Silas wants me to win Phoebe's basket?"

She nodded, still holding the money out. "I told him what happened. He is much less impressed with Mr. Wildebeer than he used to be."

Beau stared at the money. "I'll be..."

"Just take the money and win her basket." She knew Beau was touched by Silas's sign of acceptance, but they didn't have time. The auction was in full swing.

"I don't—"

Beau's comment was interrupted as Ginney overhead Caleb's name being called by the auctioneer. She turned toward the makeshift stage from where the auction was being conducted and stretched on to her tiptoes. Sure enough, Caleb had just arrived in front of the podium and was accepting a large picnic basket tied with three bright red bows. He offered his arm to a pretty young blond woman who was blushing madly, and they made their way toward the grassy area where blankets were being spread and baskets opened by those who had already bid and been matched up.

Ginney felt sick. Caleb had shown up. He'd also just bid on another woman's basket.

Beau looked at her with concern. "You okay, Ginney?" he asked gently.

She shook her head and pressed a hand against her stomach. "I didn't know he was here."

Beau glanced in the direction his brother had gone. "He didn't want to come with the rest of us, but he intended to be here."

"Who is that girl?" she asked miserably.

"Victoria Edwards," Beau answered reluctantly. "He barely knows her. Her daddy owns a ranch on the other side of town."

Ginney closed her eyes. This was so stupid. Caleb felt that he couldn't be with *her*, but he'd never given her any reason to believe that he would remain unattached completely. She knew what he was thinking—as usual. What better way to move on, in his mind, her mind and in actuality, than to have lunch with another woman?

If everyone around him believed that he had romantic interest other than Ginney, then perhaps, over time, he would also believe it.

She opened her eyes. There wasn't anything to be done about it. She couldn't very well march up to the front and announce to everyone that Caleb didn't mean to bid on that basket and that he belonged to her. Not only would her mother likely expire from mortification, but that would not be keeping her promise to Caleb to not tempt him. It also wouldn't be letting God direct things His way.

Lord, help me be patient. Help me to trust You. Help me to know what You want for me and Caleb. She took a deep breath. Then added, just for good measure, and if I am not meant to be with Caleb as his wife, please help it not hurt so much.

She looked at Beau. "What were you saying about Phoebe's basket?"

"Ginney, are you sure..."

"Mr. Silas Andrews!" the auctioneer announced, again interrupting.

Ginney turned again in time to see her uncle accepting a basket and taking a woman's hand. She gasped as she realized that the woman was her mother.

"Uncle Silas bid on Mama's basket?" she wondered aloud.

"If you're surprised, you're the only one." Beau was grinning when she turned back to him. "It's obvious to everyone how he feels about her."

"Is it?" She had hoped that there were some feelings there that went beyond an old friendship.

Beau nodded. "If I looked at Phoebe like that in front of him, Silas wouldn't let me within five miles of her."

Ginney's eyes widened. But then she smiled. Uncle Silas and her mother. It was a great match.

"Now what were you saying about Phoebe's basket?"

"Phoebe's basket won't be auctioned off to anyone," Beau said confidently. "I'm not worried about her having lunch, or anything else, with *Conrad*." Beau said his name with some disdain.

Ginney propped a hand on her hip. "And why is that?"

"I stole her basket." He tried to keep a straight face, but it didn't work for long. After just a few seconds he was grinning.

"You stole her basket?" Ginney repeated. "How did you know it was hers?"

"I went up to the table, looked at every basket until I found the one full of my favorite foods, took it and hid it in the apple orchard." He looked very proud of himself.

Ginney couldn't help her smile. "So you are planning to have lunch with her?"

"A private lunch now," Beau added. "Since there's no basket up there to bid on, I can't put a bid out in front of everyone, no one will know that she and I are having lunch together, so we can go over to the orchard instead of staying in the meadow with everyone else."

"Silas knows there was a basket, Beau. He'll want to know what happened to it and then he'll want to know where you are."

Beau's smile faded. "You're right," he admitted. "Darn. Phoebe and I could really use some time alone."

"You need a chaperone," Ginney reminded him. "You can't be completely alone."

"Well, no," Beau conceded. "But I haven't even had a *chance* at sneaking a quick kiss."

"Not in Nellie's parlor, that's certain."

Beau nodded and sighed. "We used to go for short walks after church while our folks chatted, or we'd go out for fresh air during a town dance."

Ginney blushed. "I don't need the details, Beau."

He looked abashed as he realized what he'd said. "No! We didn't...that is...we held hands. We hugged when we talked about wanting to be together. I've kissed her cheek four times. Only one time did I get brave enough to kiss her on the lips and it was just a peck."

Ginney nodded, willing her cheeks to cool. "I wasn't questioning your honor, Beau. I know you care about Phoebe and it's more than just...attraction."

"I would never do anything to hurt Phoebe, and that includes her reputation," Beau declared. "But everyone hangs around the one side of the town hall during dances. Just to have some time away from their parents."

"I understand." And she did. The time alone with Caleb on the hill a few nights ago had been magical. Not because they'd done anything risqué, but simply because they could speak without watching their words or worrying about interruption. And yes, to allow themselves to feel the chemistry that hummed between them. Sometimes she thought that anticipating a kiss might be even better than the kiss itself. She hoped not, deep down, but did wonder.

"Oh, well," Beau said, brightening again. "We'll still be havin' lunch together. I love talkin' to her. She makes me laugh."

Before she could reply, she heard, "Virginia Pembrook!" announced behind her.

She turned, having thought nothing more about her own basket. Apparently someone had bid on it, she realized with a start. When she'd made the basket, she supposed that she'd pictured Caleb buying it in the back of her mind. The idea of someone else bidding on it and sitting next to her during lunch just hadn't occurred to her. Even though Caleb had made it clear he did not intend to pursue anything other than friendship with her, she supposed her heart hadn't believed it.

"I guess I have to go," she said to Beau. She didn't remember what Beau said in response. She felt a little dazed as she made her way through the crowd toward the stage.

Brian Macintosh waited for her, holding her basket.

"Pastor Macintosh," she said with surprise, taking his arm.

"I thought now might be a good time to start our conversation."

Ginney noted absently that his smile was very nice.

He escorted her to an open area and spread a blanket, before gesturing for her to take a seat. She tried not to glance around for Caleb but failed. She noticed him right away, along with the fact that he was watching her and Pastor Macintosh with a slight frown.

She sat on the blanket with her back to Caleb and Victoria and folded her legs under her with her skirt spread out.

She and Pastor Macintosh worked together, making small talk—during which he insisted she call him Brian—as they unpacked the lunch basket. He was very complimentary toward the

food she had prepared and soon they were each holding a plate of fried chicken, biscuits, and fresh peaches, with glasses of iced tea beside their knees.

Ginney was very self-conscious of everyone's glances at first, knowing full well that they were all very interested in the new single pastor eating with single Ginney Pembrook. But soon, their conversation had her so engrossed that she paid very little attention to anything else. She served Brian a second helping of chicken as they discussed drawing young people to church, then served them each chocolate cake while they discussed teaching about the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

They were so absorbed in their topic that they didn't notice that they were the last ones to pack up their basket and blanket.

"It looks as if we're missing a lot of the social activities," he finally commented, looking around.

She also glanced at the nearly empty meadow. She smiled. "Our talk was much more fun for me than a game of horseshoes or croquet." She gestured toward the area where the games had been set up and people were beginning to play.

Groups of people were still gathered here and there chatting and kids ran around, laughing and playing tag and hide-and-seek. Ginney knew from experience that occasions such as this often drug well into the evening, as many ranchers had few chances for coming to town all day just to socialize with friends. The life of a rancher demanded long days with very few, if any, vacations or time off. Livestock required care seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Trips to town were generally for getting supplies, banking, going to church and the occasional need for medical care.

Ginney took Brian's offered hand and he helped her to her feet. She bent to retrieve their blanket and happened to notice that one other couple still occupied their spot in the meadow.

Caleb and Victoria.

Victoria was talking and Caleb was nodding, but his eyes were on Ginney.

The corner of the blanket slipped from her fingers and she had to bend again, looking away from Caleb. She folded it quickly and handed it to Brian who put it on top of the basket and turned to head toward the wagons to store Ginney's things. She couldn't help looking back over her shoulder toward Caleb. He was still watching her. This time he smiled. Though "resigned" seemed more of the proper term for his expression than happy or friendly.

Ginney looked forward again, emotions swirling through her as she started after Brian. She looked at Brian's back. "Resigned" repeated in her mind again. That was what she thought of Caleb's smile. Resigned to what? Why would... Suddenly she stopped walking. Resigned to her being with Brian? She knew that much of the town who had seen them eating together was wondering if they would see her with Brian again socially. More than a few romantic relationships had begun at the box social. Or was he resigned to being with Victoria?

Ginney couldn't explain it, but suddenly a new emotion rushed through her.

Anger.

She was angry with Caleb. In that moment, as she walked away from him, sitting with another woman, toward another man, she could be honest and admit that she was angry.

Lord, I need to know what to do. I need to know what You want. I'm angry. Why am I angry? I need to know what to do with these feelings.

Brian turned back when he noticed that she wasn't beside him. "Ginney?" His eyes settled on something over her shoulder and she felt what he was looking at before she looked.

Caleb had come up behind her.

"You're Caleb Jasper," Brian said as he stepped forward. He extended his hand. "Brian Macintosh."

"Pastor." Caleb took Brian's hand. "It's nice to meet you."

It became clear to Ginney, for some reason, in that moment. *This* was why she was angry with Caleb. She knew again what he was thinking. Ginney narrowed her eyes as she watched the men converse.

Simply because Brian was a preacher and they had just enjoyed a very nice lunch together, Caleb believed that Ginney had found her match. He thought this was God's answer to them about *their* future together. She was angry because Caleb looked sad and *resigned* under the smile he gave the other man. She was angry because Caleb believed that this was what God would want them to feel. She was angry that Caleb was willing to be *resigned* about being with another woman...or more specifically, *without* Ginney. Didn't he believe that he deserved to be happy? That God would want that for him? If he was meant to be with Victoria, shouldn't that fill him with joy?

If Brian was the man for her wouldn't she be ecstatic? Surely there would be butterflies in her stomach, or *some* reaction, when she looked at him.

Ginney looked at Brian now, considering that. During their lunch she had certainly enjoyed herself, but it was purely intellectual. There had been nothing beyond a mild recognition that he was handsome and had a nice smile. There had been no sparks when he'd taken her hand. She hadn't thought once if her head would rest on his shoulder if they were standing together, or what his hair would feel like if she ran her fingers through it.

Brian was a very nice man. In fact, he was perfect for her in any number of ways. He was kind, intelligent, dedicated to God, destined for ministry. But wasn't that the point of *feelings*? Hadn't God designed the human heart with the capacity to understand things that the brain couldn't recognize? What else would explain the way a mother could love a child before it was even born? Or that people would give money to people they had never met and would never see again? Or that people would pray for strangers?

Or that a man would willingly go to a cross for the very people who wanted him dead?

Suddenly, she *felt* it...and more importantly, she believed it. *Caleb is the one*. She knew. She was positive. She wasn't meant to be with Brian, or anyone else for that matter. It was Caleb. It had always been Caleb.

Please God, I need a sign. I believe it. I know I shouldn't test You. But I'm going to have to give Caleb a certain sign when I convince him that this is Your answer.

"You would be the best one to show Ginney the new schoolhouse, Caleb," Brian was saying as Ginney mentally rejoined the conversation. "I wasn't here to see or appreciate the old one."

Victoria nodded. "I've already toured the new building and I really need to go find my grandmother."

Ginney looked at Caleb, trying to arrange her features into a casual expression. It would only confuse him if she looked triumphant at this point. *Thank You*. God wasn't just ingenious. He was quick.

"Ginney, you should go see the new school building," Brian said. "I'll take your things to your uncle's wagon for you."

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "That's very nice."

Brian smiled. "I enjoyed our lunch. Perhaps we could repeat the occasion at some point?"

She glanced at Caleb who was watching her carefully for some reason. Clearly Brian suspected nothing between her and Caleb to be so blatant in asking her for another outing right in front of him.

"I enjoyed it as well," she replied.

Brian either didn't notice that that she'd failed to answer his invitation, or he was too polite to point it out in front of others.

"Ginney?"

Caleb's voice alone made her heart flip and when he held out his hand her nerve endings danced, anticipating his touch. *This* is the kind of reaction I'm talking about, she thought. This is the kind of delight God intended for His children, she was certain to the very marrow of her bones.

"Of course. I'd love to see the new schoolhouse." She gave him a bright smile and put her hand in his, unconcerned that it would be more proper to link arm and arm. He didn't seem inclined to change the contact either.

Brian offered his arm to Victoria and they headed in the opposite direction, chatting in a friendly manner. Neither Ginney nor Caleb looked back at them even once.

## Chapter Ten

They walked nearly to the front steps of the school before Caleb said anything.

"Pastor Macintosh seems very nice."

"He is," Ginney agreed. "And very knowledgeable about the Scriptures."

"Well, I would hope so," Caleb muttered, pulling the schoolhouse door open with more force than was strictly necessary.

She glanced at him. If she wasn't mistaken, he was gritting his teeth.

He led her into the schoolhouse and began pointing out the improvements. She was impressed with the new bookshelves covered with books and the neat little desks that had replaced the long tables and benches. She turned to ask Caleb about the blackboards, but she lost all train of thought as she found him staring at her.

"What?" she asked softly.

"You're so beautiful."

She couldn't breathe for a moment. "Thank you."

"He's perfect for you, isn't he?" His voice was rough.

She didn't even pretend to not know who he was talking about. "Pastor Macintosh and I will likely be good friends." They did have a lot in common and their conversation over lunch had been invigorating to them both.

Caleb moved in closer and she noticed that his gaze flickered to her lips before returning to her eyes.

"I can assure you that he is not thinking of you as a friend, Ginney."

"He is," she said confidently. "We got along very well over lunch."

Caleb looked pained as he shook his head. "Not just a friend, then."

She swallowed. God had arranged this moment. She couldn't shrink away from it. "Caleb, it doesn't matter."

"Unfortunately, it does to me." He stepped even closer. "Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized that if we weren't together, you would be with someone else. Which would mean that he would hold your hand, hold you...kiss you. But it wasn't until I saw you with

Brian, and saw how he looked at you, that I realized that if I'm not going to be the last man you kiss in your lifetime, I want to at least be one of the men you kiss in your lifetime."

Her eyes widened. "Are you saying that you want to kiss me?"

He smiled. "I've wanted to kiss you since you turned sixteen."

She had thought this would be more difficult. She smiled. Then stopped and frowned, remembering his words from just moments before. "Why won't you be the last man I kiss in my lifetime?"

He lifted his hand to her cheek in the gesture that always made her heart melt. "Because your husband will be the last man to kiss you."

"But, I thought..."

"I'm a man, Ginney. Just a mortal man. And as hard as I try to be true and do the right thing, I'm weak. When it comes to you, it seems, especially." His voice was thick and his thumb stroked over the skin along her jaw. "Just one kiss. Just one to remember."

She felt lost in his eyes. He seemed so intent, yet distressed, yet amazed at the same time.

"I've always wanted you to be my first," she whispered before she even thought the words.

Caleb's hand stilled on her face and he stared at her for a moment. Then he asked huskily, "What do you mean?"

She blinked up at him. "I want you to be my first kiss, Caleb."

He breathed in deeply, then out all at once. "You've never been kissed?" She shook her head.

"Not ever? By any of the men who courted you in Chicago?"

She shook her head again and wrapped her hand around his wrist where he still cradled her cheek. "I never let them get that close. I never wanted to kiss anyone but you."

Several seconds ticked between them. Then he said, almost to himself, "This is so selfish. But I'll just have to live with that."

She thought to reassure him that this was part of God's plan, but his lips touched hers before she could and she gave up everything but breathing and staying on her feet.

At one time she'd thought anticipating a kiss had to be sweeter than the actual thing. She had been so, so wrong.

Caleb had thought that he'd experienced craving and satisfaction in his life. But nothing had ever come close to this. Surprised by his reaction to Ginney's kiss, he pulled her closer, marveling at how good she felt in his arms, how sweet she tasted.

He drank in every detail, wanting to remember the sound of her sigh, the feel of her skin under his fingertips, the smell of her hair. He could have gone on kissing her, gladly, gratefully, for the rest of his life.

But it was that thought that brought him back to reality.

This was one stolen moment. This wasn't just a first kiss; it was also a kiss goodbye.

He let himself linger for a few seconds more, but finally lifted his head, setting Ginney back from him. Her eyes were slightly glazed and she pressed her lips together as she stared at him. He drew in a long, ragged breath.

This wasn't going to help anything.

Giving a starving man a single taste of sustenance did nothing but make his hunger more ravenous.

"I'm sorry. That got...carried away."

She touched her lips with her fingertips, then gave him a beautiful smile. "I didn't mind."

His eyes widened. She was so honest and open. It just might be the death of him.

"I shouldn't have...I shouldn't have even started this."

She reached out and touched his arm before he could move away. "Caleb, it's all right. I asked this time."

He had no idea what she was talking about and didn't know if it was because his emotions were still coursing and tumbling rapidly, or if it was because she wasn't making sense.

"Asked what?"

"God. I asked what He wanted. And this is it. Us. Together."

She looked so happy that he just wanted to smile and hug her. But he had to maintain some sense. If he got close enough to hug her, he would most certainly kiss her again. He pushed his hand through his hair. Why did she have to wait for his kiss? And why did she have to tell him that? It was more than God should expect any man, even one with the best intentions, to resist.

"What did you ask?"

"I asked Him to show me what He wanted for us. And here we are."

Caleb began to shake his head, but she plunged on. "What are the chances that we would end up here, or anywhere for that matter, alone today? The entire town is here. The schoolhouse is brand new. Everyone wants to see it. But here we are, alone. And you can't tell me," she said, moving closer, "that you didn't feel how *right* that kiss was. I've asked God to take these feelings I have for you away if they're wrong. I've asked Him to help me get over you. Instead of alleviating the feelings between us, they keep getting stronger. Why would He do that? He loves us. Why would He torture us when we're trying to do the right thing? And if Brian was God's partner for me, why did I feel nothing but interest in his conversation? I don't want to kiss Brian. Or anyone else. Except you."

Caleb tried to step back, but he couldn't move. What she said made sense. Or did he just so desperately want to believe he could have Ginney? He didn't know.

But she wasn't done.

"Caleb." She took his hand and squeezed it. "It's more than kissing you, too, and you know it. I want to talk with you, laugh with you, watch you succeed, see you interact with your family, know about your plans. I want to just sit with you in front of the fire, not needing to talk. I want to sit alone in front of the fire and know that wherever you are, you love me and you'll come home to me."

"I'm a rancher." He grabbed on to the one thing he knew mattered to her more than anything. "I won't be preaching. That's not the life you want."

"God has shown me that as well," she said. "I can talk about God to His people who need the truth on a back porch, or by a broken fence, or anywhere. I can still minister to people as a rancher's wife."

"So you don't still think God wants me preaching?" he asked, surprised at how disappointed that made him. As long as Ginney had believed, he'd let himself believe that maybe his calling would...change.

"That's between you and God. I don't know His plans. But I think you should ask."

"I did ask. I..."

She lifted her hand and pressed it against his lips, silencing him. "I know. But as much as you want to preach, it makes me again wonder why would He do that? Why would He not help you find satisfaction and reward in the ranch? He doesn't want you to be miserable. God loves

you. But," she smiled, "if he wants you to be a rancher, you will do it for His glory. And I'll be there to help."

He couldn't help it. He leaned in and kissed her again. It was brief, and sweet.

"I can't make any promises right now," he warned.

"He won't give us two different answers, Caleb."

She had a point. And this felt right. He couldn't deny it. How often had he counseled people to listen to their hearts because that's where God spoke? Minds could get too cluttered with worries and opinions and regrets. The conscience, the heart, the gut feelings were where people more often needed to put their trust.

Had he done that? Caleb wondered. And he did believe in a benevolent God. God would answer their questions, their pleas, to be delivered from the feelings they had for one another if that wasn't His plan. He loved them.

"I can't make any promises right now," Caleb repeated. He needed some time with God. "I need to pray."

"Of course." Ginney stretched onto her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I'll be anxious to hear how He convinces you."

Then she stepped around him and left him in the schoolhouse with jumbled thoughts, the most intense emotions he'd ever experienced, and his God.

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At sunrise, Caleb found himself back on the hill where his father surveyed his land. The last time he'd been there he'd felt resentment, now he felt hope. But he couldn't deny his frustration. He wanted some answers. He knew he could not demand answers to his prayers, but being away from Ginney, not knowing if she would be his or not, was driving him slowly mad.

Lord, I want to know Your will for me. I want to serve You, how You can best use me. I want to celebrate the feelings You've given me and Ginney. I want to look to the future with hope and thanksgiving. Help me to do that. I want to preach.

He stopped and took a deep breath. Then bowed his head. But I will accept wherever You want me to be, with Your help.

He remembered Ginney's words about sharing God with others on a back porch or by a broken down fence. He could to that too. The Lord might still have a plan for Caleb to teach. It just may not be in the way he'd imagined.

He could live with that.

Lord, use me for Your purpose. Just help me to know, somehow, if I should be ranching. Show me somehow. But especially show me about Ginney. Is Ginney supposed to be my wife?

The thought was barely complete when his chest suddenly tightened, and he was unable to breathe deeply.

Ginney. He absolutely could not imagine his future without her. He could not imagine ever feeling this way for another woman. He knew every expression, every tone of voice, every tilt of her head and move of her hand. She was amazing. She was wonderful. She was real. He never had to guess how she felt or what she thought. She told it straight from the heart. If God wanted someone on this earth to know something, He could have no better messenger than Ginney Pembrook.

Caleb straightened in his saddle.

Of course.

Ginney had suddenly arrived back in his life, just when he was most at odds over the direction of his life.

Could she be God's messenger to Caleb? God used many means to communicate with His people. Maybe all this time Caleb had been missing God's insistence that he was on the wrong path. Using someone he loved and respected should have been a sure way of getting the message across.

But he was stubborn.

He smiled even as the thought went through his head. God had created him. He knew him as no one else. God was probably shaking His head thinking "Virginia Pembrook isn't convincing enough?" Between Ginney's own stubbornness, her confidence in what she knew to be true and the powerful feelings Caleb had for her, that should have been enough.

Okay, I've got it this time. Ginney. I've got Ginney.

He was able to breathe again and it felt good. In fact, it felt as if it was the first life-giving breath he'd taken in some time.

## Chapter Eleven

The next morning dawned just as beautiful as the day before, but the girls didn't witness its beginning. They did not stir until the sun was high in the sky. Phoebe was the first to awaken and she nudged her cousin.

"Ginney, did I dream it all? Or was yesterday the most perfect day imaginable?" The younger girl sighed.

Ginney stretched and smiled indulgently at her cousin. It was her personal opinion that if yesterday had been rainy, cold and dark, Phoebe would have felt the same way. "Yes, sweetie. It was a lovely day. I'm so glad that you and Beau are finished with your quarrel."

Phoebe rolled onto her side and propped her chin on her hand. "So tell me all about Pastor Brian."

"Pastor Macintosh," Ginney corrected, looking up at the ceiling. "And there's nothing to tell."

"The minute he raised his hand for your basket, three other hands went down," Phoebe said. "Everyone was talking about how the two of you sat and talked without even noticing anything around you."

Ginney pushed herself up to sit on the edge of the bed. "Phoebe, Brian Macintosh is a wonderful man. We are friends. But I am madly in love with Caleb and I plan to stay that way."

Phoebe looked at her for a long moment. "But Pastor Macintosh is perfect for you."

"On the surface." Ginney agreed. "And maybe even a little deeper," she admitted when Phoebe raised her eyebrows. "But not down where Caleb is."

Phoebe's expression softened. "Oh, Ginney, that's so wonderful."

Just then, Ruth swept in through the door, humming as she crossed the room to pull back the curtains and let the sun in. "Goodness, I can't believe you're sleeping this day away," she said, turning to regard the two. "I think it would be best if you rose and dressed. Phoebe, I don't know if it has occurred to you, but I would be expecting a certain caller today."

Phoebe squealed and bounced out of bed. "Oh do you think Beau will come today? I suppose he will, if he's half as eager to settle our future as I am. Oh, Aunt Ruth are you certain Daddy will accept him? I'm afraid he won't ask again if he doesn't."

Ruth laughed and placed her hand on her niece's head, affectionately. "I think that you can safely assume that your father is no longer adverse to Beau's suit, Phoebe. I'm certain that if I were you, I would be more concerned about being caught in my nightgown."

This galvanized both girls into action. They both jumped up and began straightening bedclothes.

Ruth turned to leave and said over her shoulder, "I'll have some tea and leftovers from yesterday set out in the kitchen. When you are finished getting ready, come downstairs and eat."

They had barely finished their meal when Beau rode up to the ranch. Silas rose from the table with a serious expression, but just as he pushed the door open he looked over his shoulder and gave his daughter a wink before going out to meet him in the ranch house yard.

Of course, Phoebe and Ginney rushed across the room as soon as the door swung shut behind him to watch and listen through the open window.

"Howdy, Beau, I thought we might be seeing you today."

"Sir," Beau replied with a nod.

"Ah, maintaining the formalities are we?" inquired the older rancher. "So, I'll take that to mean you are not here just to jaw about horse prices."

Beau swung down from his mount. "No, sir. Horse prices don't much interest me today. I've come to ask you a question that I have asked before, but this time I am hoping for a happier outcome."

Silas invited Beau into the house for some refreshments and a cooler place to talk. The ranch house generally remained cooler because it was surrounded by trees, but the day was sunny and hot.

Beau accepted with alacrity. He followed the older man into the house and the girls scattered quickly to the living room, leaving Ruth to meet the men in the kitchen with refreshments.

Ginney and Phoebe ducked just around the corner so they could continue listening and sneak an occasional peek.

Silas commented, "It certainly is nice to have such a fine cook visiting. I don't mind rustling up my own grub, if only it would turn out edible more often."

Ruth and Beau laughed. Silas's poor cooking was legendary.

Ruth replied, "I don't know if you could ruin this, Silas. I'm just going to pull out leftover cake and pour you some coffee."

Chairs scraped on the wooden floor and the sounds of dishes and utensils filled the air for a few moments. Then Ruth commented, "I told the girls to wait in the parlor and finish their work on Rory's new clothes, Beau. I thought perhaps you and Silas had some things to discuss before seeing them."

Beau mumbled a "thank you" presumably after being served cake and coffee and Ruth excused herself to hang some laundry out in the yard.

Just after the door banged shut, Beau said, "Silas, three months, one week, three days and a few odd hours ago, I asked you for permission to make my address to your daughter. You thought at that time that she perhaps had better prospects. Maybe she did. Heck, maybe she does. But no one could love your daughter more than I do or cherish her as I intend to if you'll give me the opportunity."

Ginney nudged Phoebe with her elbow when her cousin gasped. Phoebe covered her mouth with her hand but Ginney could see her huge smile and the tears in her eyes.

Silas cleared his throat. "Beau, you're a fine young man and that's the truth. When you came around here before, I was confused in my own mind about what makes a happy life. Ruth Pembrook has done a good job of reminding me these last weeks. I have no reservations about your proposing to Phoebe, but..."

Beau cut in excitedly, "Oh, sir. Thank you, sir. You just watch and see if I don't make her the happiest woman in these parts."

"Woah, boy. Now just a minute. I was about to say but..." continued Silas.

"Yes, sir?"

"I don't mind your asking Phoebe for her hand, but I believe she's too young to marry. I'll agree to your engagement, if you'll agree to wait a year to marry. I'm sure your and Phoebe's love will stand this short test of time and you both could use a might more growing up."

Beau was clearly choked up when he said, "My love for Phoebe will never dim. A year is a short period of time compared to how long I intend to spend with your daughter."

Phoebe sniffed and Ginney even felt that she had to blink back tears.

The sound of chairs scraping again reached them.

"Okay, boy, you go on out to the porch. I'd like a word with my daughter before you speak with her."

The girls ran for chairs, but didn't quite succeed in looking settled when Silas strode into the room.

Silas smiled at his daughter. "Phoebe, Beau is on the front porch. He has some things he would like to say to you privately."

The young woman flew from her chair to throw her arms around her father's neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Daddy!" she cried.

Tears were running down her cheeks when she pulled back to smile up at him.

"Enough of that now, you go right ahead and see your young man. I've set a condition that you'll have to agree to if we're to have peace in this house," said Silas gruffly, not quite able to cover the emotion clear on his face.

Phoebe gave a last squeeze to her father and rushed outside to meet her caller. She passed Ruth coming back into the house.

Silas's face lit up when he saw Ginney's mother. He let out a long sigh. "I did it, Ruth."

Ginney watched her mother take his hand and pat it. "You did good, Silas."

"I think that a year-long engagement is both necessary and beneficial for the young couple. Besides, I'm a selfish man. I need some time to prepare myself for my daughter's leaving."

"You're going to be all right."

Ginney was gratified to see Silas smile into Ruth's eyes and lift her hand to his lips for a quick kiss. "I know."

Ginney quietly left the room, wanting to give them some privacy as well. It seemed everyone was finding their happiness.

She wondered when God would be done convincing Caleb that his happiness was important too.

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Silas officially proposed to Ruth five days later.

Ginney was thrilled but decided that she needed to take a ride. She took Rory with her, because the boy needed the attention with the double engagement taking up so much of everyone's thoughts and energy.

She just happened to end up at the Jaspers' ranch.

Then she decided to not lie to herself. Caleb had had six days to think. The Lord had taken seven days to create the earth and everything on it. Surely six days was enough for a man to make a decision.

Mr. Jasper was on the porch when they rode up. She decided not to lie to anyone else, either.

"Is Caleb here?" she asked, not even dismounting.

William didn't seem surprised at her question. "He's down at the corral irritating his brother. I'm sure Beau would be much obliged if you could get that ornery brother of his out of his hair. Pardon my plain speaking, but my boy has been a real pain in the backside since he stopped preaching my ears off."

When they reached the corral, she could see right away why Beau was so irritated. It looked like Caleb was insisting on doing everything, including breaking in a mare. She knew that traditionally that was something Beau and some of the other hands liked doing. She wondered if Caleb's protective feelings toward his family had gone too far.

Ginney didn't call a greeting because she didn't want to startle Caleb or the horse he was busy trying to sweet-talk. She and Rory dismounted and tethered their horses near the barn, away from the current activity in the corral. She walked up to Beau and tapped his shoulder before saying hello.

Beau turned startled eyes to Ginney and smiled when he recognized her and Rory. Rory was already against the corral fence watching with avid interest the spectacle within. He asked the hands around him questions, wondering about the different style to breaking a horse Caleb was exhibiting to that he had seen with Uncle Silas.

"Hi, Ginney. Phoebe with you?" Beau asked.

"No, sorry, she's baking with Mama today. Mama is doing her best to train her in all the wifely arts."

Beau looked pleased with that answer.

"We're here because Rory was hoping for another riding lesson from Caleb," Ginney explained, not completely fibbing. "Evidently, Caleb is the only one who can do the honors."

Rory looked over. "That's because Caleb talks about God while we ride and I like learnin' that stuff."

Ginney looked at him with surprise. "He does?"

"Sure. He's told me about all the guys."

Beau chuckled. "The guys?"

Rory shrugged. "Yeah. Like Abraham, David, Jonah, Matthew, Paul."

Ginney didn't know what to say. Caleb had been preaching. Did he realize that? Did he know how wonderful that was?

She glanced out into the corral. He looked so tense right now.

"Did he tell you about the big guy?" Beau asked. "The star of the whole show?"

Rory grinned at him. "Of course he told me about Jesus."

She felt her heart swell. Everything was going to be perfect. Everything was going to be right.

"Well, I'm glad Caleb's found someone to be friendly to," Beau said. "He's acted too much like a bear with a sore paw lately for my liking. He's got some crazy notion that I can't do anything risky here on the ranch anymore either. He has never liked breaking horses. Just look at him now, trying to talk the horse into letting him ride. Shoot, Ginney, I've been busting broncs for years. If you ask me, Caleb's gone plumb crazy."

Ginney was surprised at this speech. She had never known Beau to be impatient with his brother. It was true that he was head-strong and somewhat short-tempered, but he had always looked up to his older brother. Now that she thought about it, the irritable attitude of Caleb's was the unusual one.

"How come he's not just prayin' about it?" Rory asked.

She put her arm around the boy. "That's a good question."

"I just hope he remembers how," Beau grumbled.

"Oh, he does!" Rory said. "He taught me how. I felt silly at first, but he didn't act like there was nuthin' wrong with it so I got used to it and pretty soon I was talking to Jesus jes' like He was right there with me. It's been the same ever since. I wake up in the middle of the night and where I used ta' be scared, now I jes' talk to my new friend."

Ginney hugged him close. "That's so wonderful, Rory. Thank you for telling me."

She knew Caleb had been praying about them. She knew it.

Beau shook his head. "How he can be so great on one hand and so bull-headed on the other?"

"I'm sure he'll get over it, Beau," Ginney said. She wasn't sure what he was doing out here if he'd been praying about *not* being a rancher, but she had to trust God. "He is surely feeling a little protective of you all since your father's accident."

Beau grunted. "Maybe, but what makes that stiff-necked brother of mine think that he can ranch better than me? I've always been a rancher. I didn't take time off to attend Bible School."

She understood Beau's frustration, but she couldn't help but smile at his words. He made it sound as if he was a fifty-year-old rancher being usurped by a young city boy. When in reality, he was only a little older than twenty and Caleb was a rancher before and after going away to school for two short years.

She was saved from answering this by commotion going on around the corral. Caleb had eventually succeeded in mounting his horse, but no amount of talk could sweeten the mare and she was bucking, trying to dislodge the uncustomary weight. Everyone laughed and whooped and when Caleb was sent crashing into the earth for the third time, the hands positively let loose. She didn't want to laugh so much as cry, knowing how Caleb had always disliked this part of ranching.

Beau wasn't laughing either. He was angrily lamenting the fact that he would have had the mare broken by now. Caleb heard him and stomped over, tearing his hat from his head and throwing it to the ground. His frustration was palpable.

"Fine, little brother, if you think you can saddle-break this horse, have at it," he said between gritted teeth.

Beau gave a stiff nod and climbed the fence, vaulting into the coral. He made short work of breaking the mare in. He had her calmed down in less than twenty minutes. Some cowboys called out encouragement and congratulations and others declared that Caleb had already done the hard part.

Caleb turned disgustedly away from the coral and looked at Ginney, seeming to become aware of her for the first time.

"What are you doing here?"

"Don't take that surly tone of voice with me, Caleb Jasper. I'm not the mare who dumped you on your backside so many times."

He continued on past her. "Nothing's changed since the last time I saw you."

"Stay here with Beau," she said quickly to Rory, then started after him. "Caleb!"

He didn't slow down.

"Caleb! Talk to me. I know that He's going to answer. I know..."

He stopped suddenly and spun on her. "When? I've been going crazy. It's been six days. I'm dying here."

She could see the pain and frustration in his eyes and her heart swelled. "God's time is not our own."

"But, I..." He came a few steps closer. "Ginney, I love you. That I'm sure of. But I've asked for guidance, clarity about the ranch, about my preaching. And I'm still here. Ranching."

Her heart was rejoicing at his words of love. But she knew he needed it all. He needed to have it all decided.

"So what? If this is where you're supposed to be, then you'll be here. I know about you teaching Rory. You can do that every day and still ranch, Caleb. You can..."

"Then why doesn't that feel like enough?" he asked, throwing his hands up. "Why can't I be satisfied? Why do I feel this yearning for more? I want to know for sure that God has another plan."

She gestured toward the corral where Beau was now riding the horse that Caleb had previously failed with. "Maybe getting thrown off that horse was your sign. Maybe the fact that you're unsatisfied is your sign. There are two parties involved in communicating. How can God get you the message if you refuse to receive the message?"

"I think I would know!" he exclaimed. "I *knew* that God wanted us to be together. The feeling came over me and I was sure. Why can't I be sure about this?"

She didn't mind that his declaration of love and desire to be with her was less than romantic. He knew it. That was all that mattered.

"Caleb!"

They both turned toward William's shout. Caleb's father was coming toward them, his crutches hitting the ground angrily. He was moving surprisingly fast for a man with one leg and two crutches.

"Pop? What's wrong?" Caleb met his father partway down the path from the house.

"I just heard from the bank," William said, waving a letter as he stopped and balanced on his crutches.

"Bad news, I assume," Caleb said, with a frown. He reached out to steady William.

His father was stubborn and opinionated, but rarely raised his voice. Something was wrong.

William brushed off Caleb's attempts to help prop him up on his crutches. "You messed up the books, Caleb," William said, his frustration evident. "Boy, this is the second time. Now we're behind again."

Caleb ran a hand over his face. How could this have happened again? He'd been meticulous with those books. He'd redone them twice just to be sure. There had to be a mistake.

"That isn't possible, Pop." Caleb reached for the letter. "What did they say?"

"They said you messed up," William muttered, surrendering the paper he held.

Caleb scanned the letter from the bank. It was short and to the point. Their books hadn't balanced and therefore the check they'd sent had been short. This was the second time. The bank expected they would send the difference as soon as possible.

Because the Jaspers had been a part of the community and had banked with this bank for years, they were willing to be somewhat lenient. But Caleb understood that this was a problem. One that the bank would not be quite so forgiving of if it happened again.

"We've never been off," William said. His voice was a bit calmer now. "We've never had to correct mistakes like this. There have never been mistakes to correct."

Caleb saw in his father's face that the older man wasn't concerned about the money. They would be able to set the books straight. But William was embarrassed. He didn't like owing people. He didn't like having to go into the bank and fix things. He was proud of his reputation as a successful businessman and community member.

"I'm sorry, Pop," Caleb said quietly. "This isn't my thing. I'm a lot better with words than numbers. But," he added as William started to respond, "that's no excuse. I'll pay more attention next time."

How, he wasn't sure. He'd paid as much attention as he could. He was an intelligent man. It was simple addition and subtraction. He wasn't sure how it could have gotten so off.

"No, son, you won't," William said. He put his hand on Caleb's shoulder. "You're fired, Caleb."

Caleb glanced at Ginney who was staring at William with wide eyes. He looked back to his father, waiting for the smile that showed he was joking.

"What are you talking about?" he finally asked.

"You're fired, Caleb. You are no longer in charge of this ranch," William said. He didn't look angry, just matter-of-fact. "Your brother is much more suited to running the ranch anyway. He's done the books for years. Without any errors, I might add."

Caleb frowned at the blatant reminder.

"You're a great son, Caleb," William continued. "I love you. I'm proud of you. But this isn't where you belong."

"So this is just a big conspiracy to get me back to preaching, is that it?" Caleb asked, not nearly as upset about the idea as he supposed he should be.

"This is nothin' but me doing what's best for my ranch."

His eyes and voice were sincere and Caleb knew this wasn't premeditated. William loved his sons and would hate to see one of them hurt. But he wouldn't lie. Not about something this significant. His children were more important to William than the ranch, of course, but the ranch was vital to the whole family's well being. It was their livelihood and their heritage. The ranch employed a number of hands that needed the jobs. They supplied calves to a number of area ranches, and meat and hides to local merchants. William's good name was also at stake here. The Jaspers' ranch had been productive since William's grandfather. Now William wanted the best man running the ranch if he couldn't. Caleb knew his father loved him as much as he loved Beau. But Beau was the better man for this job.

"What you do is between you and God, Caleb," his father continued. "All I'm doin' is tellin' you what you *aren't* going to be doing. Running this ranch. Besides, your brother is settling down now and he needs this ranch more than you do."

Caleb frowned. "What if I'm settling down? I don't need the ranch?"

"Nope. You never did. But you did need to find that out for yourself." William patted his oldest son's shoulder and smiled. "I guess there were a few things we all needed to find out."

Caleb looked at Ginney again, wondering briefly if she had anything to do with his father firing him. He wouldn't put it past her to have gone to the bank, opened up his account book, and rearranged some numbers so they wouldn't add up...so that he would get fired.

But that didn't fit. Ginney's trust was in the Lord. She was waiting for Him to show Caleb His direction and she trusted that He would. Ginney could have gotten Caleb fired, but she wouldn't have been satisfied with that. Caleb's final answer had to come from God—for both their sakes.

Besides, she looked just as amazed as he felt. One more look into his father's eyes confirmed what Caleb had suspected anyway. This really wasn't about him preaching again.

At least not to his earthly father.

Caleb turned his eyes up to the bright azure sky overhead. A sense of peace and wonder filled him. *Fired from the ranch? Now that's a sign I can read*.

Suddenly, he felt light and free. He felt like yelling, dancing, singing and...

He grabbed Ginney's hand, pulled her toward him, tipped her back and kissed her soundly, right in front of his father, Rory, God and everyone.

When he lifted his head, it was to the applause of the ranch hands and his family. Ginney gazed up at him with the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen.

"That's how I feel about it too," she said.

"Marry me."

She nodded. "Of course."

"Travel with me as I preach."

"I wouldn't have it any other way.

He kissed her again, then pulled her upright and held both her hands. "Help me read the signs that I miss," he added.

"If you help me remember that I can't fix anything without God and that sometimes He wants to do it Himself."

Caleb laughed and pulled her up close, tucking her head against his shoulder. "God's given us both big jobs, hasn't He?"

Ginney snuggled against her future husband, knowing that her place was right here beside this man, wherever the Lord led him. "Everything is possible for him who believes'," she reminded them both.

### Epilogue

#### Two Years Later

Ginney sat next to the fireplace, rocking a newborn baby. On her lips was a smile of utter contentment. Caleb walked into the room and stopped to soak in the sight. It wouldn't be long before she'd be holding their child like that. He was very grateful to the Lord that they had been able to return to Pendleton for the birth of Phoebe and Beau's first child and the imminent birth of his and Ginney's.

The two years since their "barnyard engagement" as Ginney always laughingly referred to it, had been full of ministry and family change. Her mother and Silas had married and were raising Rory to be a fine young man. He sat a horse like he was born in the saddle, but more importantly he had led numerous cowhands to the Lord. His winning ways and honest love of God were undeniable and obviously irresistible.

Phoebe and Beau had been married over a year and although they still argued like scrapping puppies sometimes, their life was full of love and laughter.

The Jaspers were doing well and Beau had taken over much of the managing of the ranch, but Mr. Jasper was by no means idle. He and Rory often competed at chess and checkers and he had taken to carving and mending tack to fill his days.

As for Ginney, Caleb was convinced that she was the most beautiful pregnant woman he'd ever seen and constantly told her so. She was still trying to help people "fix" things, but she spent a lot more time in prayer now, asking for God's guidance first. Slowly she was getting better at truly turning things over to God and letting Him use her as He saw fit.

Ginney met his eyes across the room, their special connection only strengthened by their two years as man and wife. She smiled. "What are you thinking about?"

"Just about everything and everyone," he replied vaguely, ambling across the room to stand beside her and gaze down at his nephew sleeping peacefully in Ginney's arms.

Ginney laughed softly. "Watch out, dear, or people are going to think that you're getting to be more like me."

Phoebe piped up. "That wouldn't be a bad thing at all. I know that Beau and I are grateful to have our own personal 'Miss Fixit'," she said, looking at her cousin affectionately.

Caleb agreed. He leaned over and kissed the top of Ginney's head. "We should all be so blessed."

### About the Authors

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## Look for these titles by L. C. Monroe

### Now Available:

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Can a free-spirited woman teach an uptight professor what he needs to know about love and faith—outside the classroom?

# Meagan's Chance © 2007 L.C. Monroe

Shattered by her ex-husband's infidelity and her own infertility, Meagan O'Hare is starting over. Tossed in the midst of a family crisis by a flat tire, she meets Adam McCallister. The last thing Meagan wants is to get involved with Adam and his children. It's just a painful reminder of what she can never have—her own family.

Adam couldn't agree more. The son of an alcoholic, Adam desires stability and security for his children. An undisciplined, too attractive woman who wears tie-dye T-shirts is not his idea of the model nanny. His children disagree. They have prayed for someone exactly like Meagan and aren't above giving God a helping hand in getting her.

In less than twenty-four hours, Meagan turns Adam's neatly ordered world upside down. While the children love it, Adam questions the wisdom of his decision to hire Meagan, even temporarily. So—why is the knowledge that she'll be there when he comes home so enticing?

Living in the same house isn't easy for Meagan and Adam as they grapple with a growing attraction and a different way of looking at life. Yet their very differences are the things that draw them together. Can the free-spirited Meagan teach the uptight professor something new about his faith while he leads her to discover something new about unconditional love?

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Meagan's Chance:

Adam stared at Meagan. "A mistake?"

"Apparently your housekeeper mistook me for the new nanny and left before I could explain that I wasn't."

"How could this happen?"

"Well, Dad, you know how Estelle only speaks Spanish when she's upset?"

Adam nodded at his son's words. The entire family knew when Estelle was upset or excited because she walked around the house muttering to herself in Spanish.

"When Meagan got here—"

Adam interrupted his son to correct him. "Miss Meagan."

"Miss Meagan. When she got here, Estelle just left, telling her in Spanish that she was going."

Meagan's smile touched something inside him. "By the time I knew what she intended she was already in her car and halfway down the driveway." Her voice was laced with laughter.

Adam groaned. The sunshine could not dispel his feeling of impending doom. Taking a glass from the cupboard, Adam poured himself some ice-tea. He took a sip and then turned back toward Meagan and the children.

"I take it that Estelle's daughter called."

"Yes. Jason said she called long before I arrived and by the time I got here, Estelle was frantic to leave so she could be with her."

Adam couldn't summon up any anger at his housekeeper. He knew she had been emotionally charged over her daughter's impending labor. He should have stayed home until the new nanny arrived. He could have corrected the papers at home and driven them back to his office later. Adam shook off the regret. It was done. The problem now was: if Meagan wasn't the nanny, then where was she? The agency had promised to send someone over today. He was counting on them.

"It looks like I owe you an apology. I'm sure it isn't every day you knock on someone's door and get left in charge of two children you've never met."

Meagan laughed. "You're right about that. It doesn't happen more than once a week, on the outside."

Her teasing humor dispelled some of his gloom. She was taking the situation in stride; maybe he should follow her lead.

"I assume that you came to my door for some reason other than to take charge of my children." Comprehension dawned. Meagan owned the little red car parked too close his mailbox. "Your car broke down."

She shook her head. "It was a flat actually."

Oh. A flat. "Need help changing it?"

She smiled at his offer and Adam found himself wishing the impossible, that this woman with the beautiful face and infectious laughter was his new nanny.

"No thank you. I've already called some friends. They're on their way over. I would have changed it already, but my tire iron is the wrong size."

"Your tire iron is the wrong size."

Her eyes opened wide at his tone. "Don't blame me. It came with the car."

"Naturally."

She laughed again. "After the day I've had, I guess you could say that. It does seem perfectly natural that my tire iron didn't fit the bolts."

He liked her laugh. It reminded him of a cheerful brook in a quiet dell, bubbly and refreshing. Adam smiled in response. He took a sip of his ice tea.

Mandy scooted her chair closer to Meagan and leaned against her arm. "Miss Meagan is fun. I like her."

Meagan smoothed her hand across Mandy's hair. "I like you too, sweetie."

Something twisted inside of Adam at the exchange. His daughter seemed entranced by Meagan. Had any of Mandy's nannies ever touched her with such tender affection? Meagan O'Hare was a special woman.

"Dad, can we keep Miss Meagan?"

Adam choked on his ice tea. Meagan's eyes twinkled as she handed him a napkin from the basket on the table. Taking it from her grasp, he muttered a quick thank you and wiped at his face. He felt heat in his cheeks. Great. He was blushing. Men did not blush, especially professional men, professors who were used to lecturing in front of large groups. Then again, most men did not have to deal with coming home to find their children in the care of a beautiful stranger and their sons asking to keep her.

"No, Jason, we cannot keep her. Meagan is not a puppy."

"But, Dad, we need a new nanny. The agency one didn't show up. How are you going to go to Illinois if there's no one to watch us?"

Adam sighed. His son was certainly right about one thing: without a new nanny he wasn't going to make his interview.

"I'm sorry about your nanny."

Lured by the sympathy he heard in Meagan's voice, Adam sat across from her at the table. "Thanks. I am, too. I don't know how I'm going to make my plane without someone to watch Jason and Mandy."

She didn't say anything, but gave him a questioning glance, encouraging him to continue. He gave her a brief rundown of the situation, finally starting to relax under her compassionate gaze. It felt good to talk to someone, to vent about his frustration. He rarely allowed himself the privilege.

"That's terrible." She sounded incensed.

Her instantaneous loyalty was balm to his frazzled spirit. "Thanks. I think so, too. What's worse is that the agency that screens my nannies for me was supposed to be sending someone over today."

Meagan's eyes never left his and Adam wondered briefly who this woman really was. Where did she live? Was she married? She wasn't wearing a ring. Unsure why, he was glad.

"Something must have come up." Her voice pulled him from his wondering thoughts.

His hands clenched where they rested on the table. "Unless she's in the hospital, I don't want to hear about it."

His son made a choking noise. Jason's face turned red and ice tea sprayed out of his mouth all over the table. Adam jumped up to pat his son's back. "Jason. Are you okay? What happened?"

Cheeks scarlet, Jason said, "I'm fine. I just swallowed wrong."

Adam rubbed Jason's back. "All right now?"

Jason nodded.

"Good."

Adam sat back down. Catching Meagan's eye, they shared a smile. He could see her thinking, like father, like son. She wiped at the mess with more napkins from the basket.

"What about your housekeeper? Will she be back tonight after the baby is born?"

"That would certainly make things easier, but no. I gave her time off to help her daughter with the baby." Things could not have been more perfectly timed to put him in a quandary.

"What about their mother?"

"She died two years ago."

Meagan's eyes filled with compassion. "I'm sorry." He felt like she had touched his heart with those two simple words. After Caroline's death he had received many platitudes, but few had been as earnestly spoken as her simple declaration.

"Why don't you see if you can get seats for Jason and Mandy? I'm sure that someone at the university could find you competent childcare for the hours of the interview."

Of course. That made perfect sense. "I'll have to call the travel agent right away."

She nodded. "How about if I visit with Jason and Mandy until my friends show up? That way you can make your calls without worrying about them interrupting you."

"That's very kind of you, but I hate to impose."

Her green eyes flashed at him. "It's not an imposition and I wouldn't offer if I didn't want to."

Her quick temper amused him. From the stubborn tilt to her chin, he concluded that she liked to get her way. "Yes ma'am. Thank you." Standing up, he turned to leave the kitchen. "I'll be in my study if you need anything."

"Don't worry about me. Just go take care of your problem."

Right. She made it sound so easy. Maybe it would be. He had the feeling that with this amazing woman, anything was possible. Adam walked down the hall toward his study, vaguely aware that Jason had asked Meagan if he and Mandy could go outside. He didn't hear her answer. His mind was focused on the task at hand: finding two seats on his flight to Chicago.

Adam rapidly punched the buttons to dial the travel agency. Lord, just two more seats on the plane. That's not a lot to ask is it?

He waited on hold for a reservation agent. Letting his thoughts slide to his arrival, Adam smiled. Meagan was quite a woman. Cold chills ran up his spine when he thought of what could have happened when Estelle mistook a stranger for the new nanny. God had definitely been watching out for his family.

Meagan had taken the situation in stride. She didn't seem at all upset to have been left in charge of two strange children while his housekeeper tore off to see the birth of her daughter's baby.

Too bad Meagan wasn't a nanny. He could use someone practical like her caring for his children. Oh well, she was too young anyway. Meagan looked in her early twenties, only the laugh lines around her mouth attesting that she was probably near thirty. That wasn't old enough. After one disastrous encounter with a younger nanny, he had learned his lesson: no live-ins under the age of fifty. Not that it had helped with Mrs. Prout. Who would have thought buying light popcorn instead of regular could be construed as a token of his undying affection?

The reservation agent came on the line. Forcing himself to focus on the task at hand, Adam explained his problem. Moments later he was hanging up the phone in disgust. There were no flights available with three seats tonight or tomorrow morning. It looked like he was going to

have to postpone the interview. Sitting in his desk chair, Adam closed his eyes and rubbed his hand across his face in frustration.

Out of control. That's how he felt. He didn't like it. He'd worked too hard to order his life. What right did Mrs. Peer have to up and leave him in the lurch? Was there no one he could trust or rely on?

Trust in me.

Lord, it's not that I don't trust You. It's just that right now I need a flesh and blood person to watch my children. Father, show me what to do.

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