

CHANGE OF HEART

By Fran Shaff

A Fran Shaff Family Novel

Historical Romance for Everyone Who Loves a Love Story.

Change of Heart By Fran Shaff

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When you've finished reading "Change of Heart," be sure to read the "Previews Section" following the story where you'll find the first chapters to six more Fran Shaff books you may enjoy.

REVIEWS and Acclaim For Change of Heart

5 STARS from Simegen.com The author, Fran Shaff, has sewn together a gripping, warmhearted romance filled with suspense that will have you, the reader,

weeping tears of sadness and of joy for the sweetest couple that has hit the pages of books for a long time.

5 HEARTS from The Romance Studio. Ms. Shaff has written a magnificent heart-stirring book. Many times I found myself crying out loud, then releasing a wonderful sigh. Ms Shaff is a gifted writer that always delivers in her stories.

5 STARS from CataRomance. This book is not to be missed.

5 CUPS from Coffee Time Romance. I didn't want the story to end.

4 BLUE RIBBONS from Romance Junkies: Fran Shaff does an amazing job pulling the reader into the story so that you feel like you're really part of it. I became so involved, I'd read all the way through the story before I even realized it, and was extremely impressed to find myself so emotionally involved that I cried at several points.

4 ANGELS from Fallen Angel Reviews. Fran Shaff did a great job in bringing together the heartache of losing a loved one and the joy of finding new love. Great Job.

MyShelf.com. I highly recommend this endearing novel to anyone who enjoys old-fashioned romance.

DEDICATION

For all of the good people of Nebraska, one of my home states

Chapter One

Marietta Randolph pulled her aching body from the stagecoach which had shaken her insides for the last two hundred miles. Her tired gaze drifted over the vast Nebraska wilderness. She didn't like it. She could scarcely believe *anyone* would willingly live in the Nebraska territory, let alone her beloved sister Kathy.

The journey to Fort Kearney from Chicago had been a miserable one, especially since leaving the steamboat on the Missouri River south of Omaha. Stagecoach treks were not for city ladies; they were for mules and men and other wild creatures. Marietta found it amazing that in the modern age of the late 1850s, travel to the west was still so primitive.

She massaged the aching muscles in her back as best she could without drawing too much attention to herself. She doubted her body would ever forgive her for leaving civilization.

"Do you see your young man, Miss Randolph?" Mr. Henshaw, a fellow passenger, asked.

“My young man? Oh, you mean my nephew Zack.”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t see any children.”

“Likely he’s inside the fort. However,” Marietta said, looking around, “I am expecting someone to meet me. I don’t see him yet.”

Mr. Henshaw tipped the hat hiding his gray hair, smoothed a hand over his dark suit, and lit his deep-blue eyes the way he’d done numerous times on the ride from the river. “I need to board the stage once again, Miss Randolph. The driver has taken down your bags. He’s ready to leave.”

Marietta eyed the driver who’d refused to give a body two extra minutes to rest anywhere along his route. “It’s been a pleasure to know you, Mr. Henshaw,” she said, looking at him again. What she told him was a lie, of course. He’d been a bother since they’d boarded the coach. His annoying parlance had blown through the conveyance as constantly as the prairie wind. In an apparent attempt to impress her with his intelligence, he unceasingly misquoted the Bible, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Dickens.

Mr. Henshaw took Marietta’s hand. “Again, Miss Randolph, I offer my sympathies over the loss of your esteemed sister. God be with you in your time of sorrow and always. He’ll be with you in your new life with your nephew as well.”

“Thank you, Mr. Henshaw,” Marietta said, forcing a smile in the direction of the annoying man who was finally behaving in a gracious manner.

He released her hand and returned to the stagecoach. He waved from the window as the coach pulled away.

Marietta nodded and watched the violent vehicle shake and roll over the colorless prairie.

A sudden gust of late-November wind chilled her.

“God’s Cathedral,” she mumbled, repeating what Mr. Henshaw had called this barren wilderness. Marietta would never understand how he saw Heaven in the countryside which, to her, surely had to be a reflection of Hell itself.

“I beg your pardon?” A deep voice startled her.

Marietta turned and found a man staring down at her. He was covered in black from hat to boots, except for the red bandana around his neck.

“Did you say something?” he asked, fastening his dark wool coat shut over his black shirt and waistcoat. “I heard you speaking and thought you’d seen or heard me approaching. Were you talking to me?”

“No, of course not. Just thinking aloud I guess,” she replied, slightly unnerved at being met by such an attractive man. She’d been afraid all men who inhabited the prairie were as old and annoying as Mr. Henshaw.

He nodded toward her. “Nothing wrong with that.” He took off his wide-brimmed felt hat, revealing a mass of dark molasses hair. “I’m Jason Kent, ma’am. Zack’s been staying with me on my ranch,” he said, fingering the brim of his hat.

Another chilling breeze washed over her. Marietta shivered and pulled her wool cape tight around her. “Thank you for looking after my nephew, Mr. Kent.”

“It’s been my pleasure.”

“How is Zack?”

“He’s doing quite well, considering what he’s been through. He wanted to come with me, but I thought it best for him to wait at the fort.”

Marietta nodded and shivered again.

He reached toward her and tugged her cape tighter around her. "You're freezing," he said. "We'd best get you inside." He looked at Marietta's luggage and returned his hat to his head. "I'll have to make a couple of trips to take your things to the Carsons."

"I'm sorry to be such a bother," Marietta said as she watched the accommodating man easily hoist her heavy trunk on one shoulder while he picked up another of her bags.

"No trouble, Miss Randolph. You've had a long trip. It's cold this time of year, and you had to be prepared." He inclined his head toward the stand of buildings inside Fort Kearney. "Go straight ahead, ma'am. I'm taking you to Lieutenant Will Carson's quarters. His wife Amy has a place for you and Zack to stay tonight."

"How wonderful, and how kind of Mrs. Carson to take us in." The thought of being inside a real home again offered Marietta a great deal of relief.

"She's a fine woman, Miss Randolph. God-fearing and kind." He took a few steps in silence then asked, "Was your trip to your satisfaction?"

"Certainly not."

"Problems, ma'am?"

"I'm afraid a stagecoach rides nothing like the surreys we have in Chicago. But then, our streets are more navigable than these rutted prairies."

"Yes, they are."

She stopped and looked up at him. "You've been to Chicago?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was there when Clint met and married Kathy."

Marietta shunned the heartbreak which plagued her at the mention of Kathy's marriage. "You were there? At the wedding?"

"No, ma'am, I knew about the wedding, but I didn't attend. They eloped you know."

"You knew they were getting married? Why didn't you stop them?"

"Stop them?"

"Yes, you should have stopped them, *someone* should have stopped them." If Kathy hadn't married Clint, she'd still be alive.

"I don't think anyone could have stopped them, Miss Randolph. They were quite determined and both of age." He stared down at her, shifting the heavy burden he carried on his shoulder. "Did you try to stop them, ma'am?"

"Yes, of course," she said on a sigh, "but, if I couldn't make it snow in July, I couldn't stop Kathy from leaving with Clint." Kathy had possessed a mind of her own. She'd often ignored even the teachings they'd been raised on and done as she'd darn well pleased.

"Exactly, Miss Randolph. I'm not sure if even God Himself could have kept Clint and Kathy apart. They belonged together more than any two people I've ever seen in my life."

"Mr. Kent, I'd rather not talk about Kathy right now, if you don't mind." Losing Kathy to Clint had been bad enough. Now that she'd lost her to death, Marietta could barely stand to think of the pain of the loss of her sister. It ate at her like a disease.

"I'm sorry, Miss Randolph. I didn't mean to upset you."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let's find my quarters for the night, please, Mr. Kent. I'm very tired."

"Yes, ma'am. That way." He inclined his head toward the fort.

Upon entering the compound, Marietta took in the layout of Fort Kearney. Five unpainted wooden houses stood next to an open square. A large number of mud and sod buildings ran from the square out along the roads into the fort. Young cottonwood trees lined the borders, the only shrubbery visible for miles. A flagstaff rose in the middle of the square. Various guns and weapons stood within the fort. Marietta was unfamiliar with their capabilities, but they looked sturdy and reliable enough to protect the fort from hostile attack.

On the west side of the open area stood a large house, unpainted and rather unusually shaped. Opposite the large house was a long building which rather reminded Marietta of an eastern barn. The two-story dwelling was, no doubt, a barracks for the soldiers. All in all, the buildings of the fort seemed run down and in need of repair.

“The Carsons live in the wooden structure over there,” Mr. Kent said, setting down Marietta’s bag and pointing.

“Would you like to rest a minute, Mr. Kent? The trunk must be getting heavier with each step we’ve taken.”

He smiled and shook his head. “No, ma’am. My burden is light compared to what I have to carry around at my ranch sometimes.” He picked up her bag again. “Go ahead, Miss Randolph. I’ll follow you to the Carsons’ now that you know where they live.”

When they arrived at the Carsons’ tiny home, the door flung open, and a little boy darted from the doorway to Mr. Kent, grabbing his leg. Marietta thought surely the boy, whom she assumed was five-year-old Zack, would knock the man over, but Mr. Kent stood as firmly as a cedar in a storm.

“Jase! Why did you leave me, Jase?”

“I went to meet the stage, Zack. You knew your aunt was arriving today.”

“But you shoulda taken me with you.”

“You were sleeping, son. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“It was only a nap.” The boy scratched through his blonde curls. “You could’ve waked me.”

Jase set Marietta’s belongings on the porch and scooped the boy into his arms. “This is your aunt, Zack. Marietta Randolph, your mother’s sister.”

Marietta smiled at Zack and moved closer to him. “Hello, sweetheart. Your mama wrote me many letters telling me about you.”

Zack pulled away from her and hid his face in Mr. Kent’s shoulder. “I want to go home, Jase.”

“We’ve come to the fort to meet Aunt Marietta,” he said, pulling the boy’s face from his shoulder and forcing Zack to look at him. “I told you she was coming to take care of you. You and I talked about that.”

Zack shook his head. “You told me, but I didn’t want to hear.”

“Don’t worry, Zack, it will be all right. You’ll like Chicago,” Marietta said, reaching toward the boy and touching his cheek. “You’ll go to fine schools and have all sorts of children to play with. There’s so much to do in the city, you can’t even imagine.”

He pulled away from her. “I got plenty to do and a fine home here with Jase. I don’t need no children to play with or no fine schools. I got Jase. He plays with me and teaches me all I need to know. I don’t need anyone else.”

Jase held the boy away from him. "I'm not your family, Zack. Miss Randolph is. She's your ma's sister. She'll give you a wonderful home and be a good mother to you." He set the boy down.

Zack stared at his feet. "My ma's gone. I don't need a ma anymore." He looked up at Jase. "All I need is you."

Jase hunched down next to him and took off his hat. "Son," he said, fingering the wide brim, "we talked about this. A boy needs to be with his family. It's God's way. Your ma wants you well cared for and loved. She wants you with your aunt."

The talk of Kathy's demise and her wishes for Zack grieved Marietta to the point of collapse. She moved next to the porch, steadied herself, and listened as Zack and Jase went on.

"I don't want to leave you, Jase."

He rubbed his hand over his face and focused on Zack. "I know, son, but you've got to be a man about this. Miss Randolph has traveled a long way to come for you. You belong with her. Believe me," Jase said encouragingly, "you're going to love Chicago. It's an elegant, wonderful city. I know. I've seen it."

Tears trickled from Zack's blue eyes across his rosy cheeks. "Jase," he said thoughtfully, "I don't understand why I can't stay here with you." He wiped his nose on his blue-calico shirtsleeve. "But I'll leave if you say I have to. I'll do anything you say."

He embraced the child. "You're a good soldier, son. You'll see. You'll like living in the city."

The boy pulled away from him and looked up. "If you say so, Jase."

He touched Zack's cheek and stood, glancing at Marietta. "Go inside now," he said, looking at Zack. "See if you can help Miss Amy."

"Okay, Jase." He shuffled up the steps and turned back to look at him. "I always do what you say, but I don't want to leave you." He quickly turned and went inside.

The second the door closed, Marietta allowed a few determined tears to trickle down her cheeks as she sat on the porch and dangled her legs over the edge. She pulled a hanky from the pocket of the coat she wore under her cape and wiped her face and nose.

Jase sat next to her, fingering the hat in his hands. "I'm sorry about Zack. He's been through a lot, but he'll be all right."

Marietta looked up at him.

"Zack will be all right," Jase repeated, "and so will you."

"Of course he will," she said, looking away. *Would either of them ever really be all right again?* she wondered.

"Miss Randolph?" He paused. "Ma'am, if you're up to it, there's a bit of business we need to discuss."

"Business? What do you mean?"

"About your return trip to Chicago. I know the events of these last few weeks have probably made you feel like you're stuck in a whirlwind, and I'm sorry I'm about to make matters even more chaotic."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

He twisted the brim of the hat in his hands. "You see, I've arranged for your immediate return, just as you requested in your letter. You'll leave in the morning with a caravan of three other wagons heading for the Missouri River. You'll board a boat at the river and take passage back to the city."

Marietta started to weave when darkness began settle over her. She nearly passed out at the thought of traveling again so soon.

Jase steadied her with a strong hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Miss Randolph?"

She rubbed a gloved hand over her face, hoping to wipe away weeks of fatigue. "I'm fine, Mr. Kent, but I'm afraid I won't be able to leave tomorrow. I won't leave until I've paid my respects to Kathy and Clint."

He let go of her shoulder. "But, it's all been arranged."

"Surely one day won't make any difference."

A peculiar look filled his eyes. "One day?" he said thoughtfully. Was that empathy she saw in his eyes? Understanding? Compassion?

"Yes, one day. Do you suppose you could talk the leader of the caravan into waiting a single day so I can visit the grave of my sweet Kathy?"

He raised his hand, and, for a moment, she thought he was going to touch her cheek. "Ma'am, refusing your modest request would be impossible," he said softly. "I'll arrange for your journey to be delayed a day or two."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent," she said, giving him a trace of a smile. "Could I prevail upon you with one more request?"

"Yes, of course."

She swallowed hard. He'd done so much for her already, but she needed his help. "Could you take me to Kathy?"

He issued her a comforting smile. "We'll go first thing in the morning, if you'd like. The Morgans were the closest friends I've ever had, and it would be my sincere pleasure to help Kathy's sister in any way I can."

She covered his hand with hers. "Thank you, Mr. Kent. You can take me any time you're ready."

Chapter Two

"Welcome to our home, Miss Randolph."

Marietta stepped inside the modest quarters of Lieutenant and Mrs. Will Carson. "I hope I'm not imposing too much."

"You're not imposing at all. It's a delight to have your company." Amy looked at Jase who was standing on the porch behind Marietta. "Come in here."

He entered and smiled at her.

Zack ran to him, but Amy caught the boy in her arms before he reached Jase. He struggled against her hold on him. "Jase, save me," Zack said, giggling as he reached for Jase.

The big man took the small boy from Amy who looked like she wouldn't have been able to hold the squirming child much longer. "You cry now to be rescued from the arms of a pretty girl, but it won't be long before all you'll want is to be held by a lovely woman, partner."

Marietta could feel her face turn a crimson color.

Jase fidgeted. "Sorry, ladies. I shouldn't have spoken so audaciously."

“Nothing in the world to apologize for, Jase. No truer words ever spoken,” Amy said.

Though Marietta was surprised by Amy’s casual, undaunted response to Mr. Kent’s boldness, she admired her for being so uninhibited.

Amy looked at Zack. “Say, young man, those gingerbread men we were working on should be ready now. I’d bet they’re just waiting for a little boy to eat them up!”

“Yum!” He pushed out of Jase’s embrace and bolted to the tiny kitchen off the parlor.

“I guess he likes gingerbread. I’ll have to remember that.” Marietta sighed. “That and about a thousand other things.”

Amy put her arm around Marietta. “You’ll do fine, honey. Zack’s a great boy. He’ll help you along the way.”

Marietta was astonished at how comforting the words of this young woman were to her. Amy certainly was at least four or five years shy of her own twenty-nine years, yet she spoke with the wisdom and reassurance of a woman twice her age.

“Thank you, Mrs. Carson. Your words of encouragement mean a great deal to me.”

Amy stepped back and pushed at a stray blonde strand which had escaped the hair arranged on top of her head. Her blue eyes softened, and she stretched to reach a five-foot, two-inch stance. “You seem a very strong woman to me, Miss Randolph, don’t you think so, Jase?”

“Anyone who can make the trip from Chicago to Fort Kearney can handle one little boy,” Jase replied.

“I hope you’re both right.” Marietta looked around. “Where would you like me to put my things?”

“You’re going to bunk with me, sweetie,” Amy said. “My husband will sleep on the sofa, and Zack can sleep on the floor next to him.”

“And, if the colonel doesn’t mind,” Jase added, “I’m going to see if I can pull up a piece of wood in his quarters for the night.”

“You’re staying at the fort tonight?” Amy asked, surprised.

“I promised Miss Randolph I’d take her to Kathy and Clint’s graves tomorrow.”

“But, I thought you wanted to leave for Chicago immediately,” Amy said to Marietta.

“I can’t leave until I’ve told my sister goodbye, no matter how eager I am to return home.”

Amy placed a hand on Marietta’s shoulder. “Of course you can’t.” She looked up at Jase. “We should have considered that. How heartless of us.”

“I’ll change the arrangements as soon as I bring Miss Randolph’s things in from outside,” Jase said, straightening his stance. “I’ll find Jackson and tell him the trip to the Missouri River is going to be delayed.”

“That sounds good,” Amy said. “Why don’t you get Miss Randolph’s belongings and take care of your errands while I tend to her needs.”

Jase nodded toward her and did as she suggested.

When the ladies were alone in the parlor, Amy took Marietta’s cape and coat and led her to the sofa.

“Sit, honey,” she said. “If you don’t, I’ll fall over myself. I can feel your exhaustion clear down to my toes.”

Marietta lowered her body to the softest couch she’d ever sunk into. “I think I’m sitting on a cloud.”

Amy released a girlish giggle. “I understand completely. I remember the unbearable trip out here. We came overland from the Missouri River on a rig like you’re going to take back. I think I turned the trail into mud with my tears. I had no idea how grueling the trip to Fort Kearney would be.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Independence.”

“It’s civilized there. Not like St. Louis or Chicago, but civilized.”

Amy smiled and shrugged. “More or less.”

Oh, my, she’d spoken thoughtlessly, she realized. “I don’t mean to insult your home city. What I meant was how could you leave Missouri to live here? The idea of any woman wanting to live in this wilderness is unfathomable to me.”

Amy’s blue eyes sparkled in the gray light of late afternoon. “Have you ever been in love?”

Marietta shook her head. “I haven’t had time for such things.” Nor did she have the inclination to let any man influence her life. She’d considering falling in love a risky, even foolish thing for a woman to do. Her mother had preached against letting infatuation with a man cloud good judgment. A woman should lead her life conservatively and carefully, her mother always said. For Marietta, that precluded falling in love.

“When you’re in love,” Amy said, letting her voice drift to a heavenly softness, “you’ll willingly live anywhere to be near your man.”

Marietta looked around the tiny quarters, through the window at the desolate landscape and decided falling in love had to be the worst of all afflictions if what Amy said was true.

“When you fall in love, you’ll understand what I mean.” Amy looked at her carefully.

“Perhaps,” she said, hoping to appease Amy with a noncommittal comment.

“Love is a very powerful emotion, but then I believe you already recognize that, don’t you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Wasn’t your traveling here an act of love? Hasn’t love enticed you to do something you might not have done otherwise?”

“I’m not sure I comprehend what you mean.”

“You traveled here because you loved your sister, and, because of that love, you want to care for her son, give him a good home.”

“That’s true enough.”

“The power of love enables us to do many things we never thought we would or could do.”

Marietta was letting Amy’s words sink in when Zack burst into the room.

“Where’s Jase?”

“He had some business to take care of, Zack,” Amy explained. “Are there any gingerbread men left in the kitchen?”

“Some.”

“Do you think you’ll have room for beef stew and pumpkin cake come suppertime?”

Zack rubbed his tummy. “I better do something to work up my appetite again. Ma always told me work makes a boy hungry. You got work for me to do, Miss Amy? I want to get hungry for that pumpkin cake.”

Marietta hid the tears Zack’s reference to Kathy caused inside her.

“The wood’s out back,” Amy replied. “Bring some in for the stove, then get the bucket by the back door and fetch water from the well--lots of it. Fill the cistern full. You know where the well is.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Zack said, saluting Amy.

Amy returned his salute. “Hop to, soldier.”

He dashed out of the room.

“We’ll wear the boy out carrying water for us, Miss Randolph. I’m assuming you do want to take a bath before you do anything else. Am I right?”

Marietta was amazed by Amy’s thoughtfulness. “How kind of you, and what a mind reader you are.”

Amy sat next to her. “I’m no mind reader. I’ve been where you are now. The first thing I wanted when we reached the fort after the long journey was a hot bath. I’d expect you to want no less.”

“Bless you, Mrs. Carson,” Marietta said, hugging her.

“Not Mrs. Carson, Marietta. I’m Amy.”

Marietta released Amy from her embrace. “Thank you for your kind friendship.”

“Just so you know, Kathy was my friend too, and I miss her terribly. She was a wonderful girl.” Amy wiped away a tear. “Not nearly as pretty as you, but sweeter than sugar.”

“I’m glad to know Kathy had friends as kind as you in Nebraska.”

“Everyone at the fort loved her, Marietta.”

Tears slid down her cheeks.

Amy went to a rustic wooden stand near the door, opened the top drawer, and withdrew several hankies. She walked back to Marietta and handed them to her.

“I’ve got a feeling you might just need a good cry. You’ve been through more than a body should have to stand.”

“I believe you’re right,” she said, wiping her cheeks. “I think I do need to cry, but I wouldn’t want Zack to see me like this.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’ll be busy hauling water into the house, and I’ll try to heat it as fast as I can so you can have your bath. I’ve already set up the bathtub in the bedroom so you’ll have all the privacy you’ll need.”

“Thanks, Amy, but I really shouldn’t let you bother and fuss over me like this.” She began to get up.

“It’s all settled. You cry or rest or do whatever you want, and I’ll call you in a little while.”

Marietta could see Amy was determined. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” She left the room, and Marietta lay back on the sofa. It wasn’t long before she dozed and began to dream.

When Amy roused her from her nap, Marietta went straight to Amy’s bedroom. There she found the luggage Jase had hauled to the house and a tub full of warm, inviting

water. She bathed quickly because Amy had told her supper would be ready in less than an hour.

Seeing the alabaster color of her skin reappear once the trail grime had been scrubbed from her delicate, soft flesh helped Marietta to feel like a woman again. She was suddenly excited about wearing the best dress she'd brought from Chicago to supper.

It was unfortunate her black woolen dress with the full skirt and long, slightly puffy sleeves hung loosely on her, but it was impossible for a woman to keep a nice, full figure while living the rough life Marietta had experienced the past weeks. No woman could go through what she'd been through without losing weight, thanks to the meager, distasteful meals she'd eaten on her journey.

But, tonight she would eat well. She loved beef stew, and pumpkin cake was her favorite dessert. What a feast!

Marietta looked at herself in the large mirror in the corner of Amy's bedroom. Her dress didn't hang right, but her dark cinnamon hair was stunning against the black frock. A bath with Aunt Mamie's lilac soap and freshly washed and combed hair brought her femininity to the surface. She hadn't felt this good in a long time. She took a deep breath, full of womanly confidence, and smiled at her reflection before going to meet the Carsons and Zack in the kitchen.

"Look who's come to join us for supper," Amy said, delight in her voice.

Marietta's gaze lifted to meet Jase's. He seemed to freeze the second he laid eyes on her.

"Mr. Kent," Marietta said, "I thought you were joining the colonel."

"I... I was, but, when I brought the rest of your things from the stage, Amy asked me to stay to supper." He cleared his throat, but his eyes never left her. "I never turn down beef stew."

"I see."

"Miss Randolph..." Jase cleared his throat again.

"Don't be shy, Jase," Amy said. "Take the lady's arm and escort her to the table."

He hesitated a moment then moved toward Marietta, offering her his arm. She took it and walked the few feet to the table in the center of the kitchen.

He continued to stare at her. "You look absolutely lovely, Marietta."

Thick silence hung in the kitchen as they locked gazes. She felt the warmth of his eyes pierce her heart. Had he just called her by her given name? How very bold of him!

He held her chair for her. "Please sit down."

She complied, and he took his place next to her.

Will Carson had been standing since Marietta entered the room. "I'd like to second Jase's observation," he said. "You do indeed look lovely, Miss Randolph."

Marietta turned her attention to the soldier across the table from her. "Thank you."

"As I'm sure you've guessed I'm Amy's husband, Will Carson." The tall, uniformed man with wavy blonde hair, green eyes, and a bushy wheat-colored mustache turned to Amy. "Did I tell you, my dear, how lovely you look this evening?"

She touched her fingers to her disheveled hair. "Oh, my. You must fancy an un-coifed look," she said, laughing.

Will leaned over and touched her cheek. "You're beautiful."

In that simple exchange, Marietta understood what Amy had tried to tell her in the parlor. Will and Amy had found true love, and, for them, it seemed to have conquered even a desire for the comforts of a more civilized land.

The evening passed quickly. The conversation exchanged, the after-supper cleanup and almost everything else that happened seemed a blur to exhausted Marietta. As she lay in the first real bed she'd laid in since she'd left the boat on the Missouri, she thought it strange the only distinct memory she had of the evening was the comfort she'd felt in the presence of Jason Kent.

Wasn't it odd a total stranger would have such an affect on her? And wasn't it even more peculiar that his absence had left her feeling more lonesome than she'd felt on the trail between the Missouri and Fort Kearney?

Perhaps as she slept and dreamt on a real goose down pillow, she'd be able to figure out how Mr. Kent had seduced her into experiencing feelings entirely unfamiliar to her. Or perhaps not.

~ * ~

Jase arrived before daylight the next morning to take Marietta and Zack to Kathy and Clint's burial site. He wasn't pleased the outing forced him to change his plans for attending a business meeting, but he'd never shirk his duty to Zack or to Kathy's sister.

He loaded their belongings onto the buckboard he'd borrowed. When they finished paying their respects to the dearly departed, Jase would take them straight to the cabin where they'd stay until Sledge Jackson and his party were ready to leave for the Missouri River.

Zack did most of the talking on the twelve-mile ride to the Morgan ranch. He asked Jase over and over to tell him about all the adventures he'd had on the cattle drive from Texas in 1852. Zack knew his dad and Jase had been among the first men to make such a drive and bring cattle so far north. He loved to hear the stories of dirt, rivers, horses, and snakes.

Marietta seemed fascinated by the tales herself.

Jase's stories made it clear he had led a hard life, but a life he'd specifically chosen for himself. His life pleased him in a most fulfilling way, and he made no secret of that.

They reached the graves about noon. The bright sun of the morning had given way to clouds about half way through their journey. After Jase helped Marietta down from the buckboard, she took her cloak and walked to Kathy's grave. She laid the cloak on the ground and sat down.

"Kathy," she said, rubbing her hand over the brown sedge as tears began to pour from her eyes. "Oh, sweet Kathy."

Marietta lay prone on her sister's grave and cried harder than Jase had ever seen any woman cry. Nothing seemed to exist but her grief, her throbbing heart, the coldness of the earth.

"How could anyone hurt you and rob you of your life?" she said between sobs. "You were a flower among rocks in this harsh land. You should never have left me--blast your rebel ways! You should have stayed with me where you belonged. Chicago died when you left. We all died the day you left us behind, most especially me." Jase could

hear her struggle to draw air into her lungs. “And now there will be no more letters, no more slips of paper allowing me to touch what you have touched. Oh, Kathy, take me with you! I can’t bear to live without you.”

Jase couldn’t stand her pain any longer. He’d held Zack back, giving Marietta time alone to be with her sister, but she was only making matters worse for herself carrying on as she was. Her behavior prodded Zack to break free of his restraint and run howling to Kathy’s grave, throwing himself on the brown sod.

“Mama, take me too! I want to go with you like Aunt Marietta.”

Jase had set broken bones on men who weren’t hurting as much as Marietta and Zack were. He knew how to ease the pain of a man with a cracked femur, but how did he stop the pain of death?

He rubbed his face with his hands as Marietta and Zack continued to beg Kathy to take them with her. When their agony overcame him, he closed his eyes and tried to think of something else. Minutes passed, but he couldn’t fill his mind with anything but Zack and Marietta’s cries. He raised his face to the sky, opened his eyes, and noticed snow was beginning to fall.

He looked toward Kathy’s grave and found Marietta still prostrate with Zack pushed up against her. They held each other tightly and wept together. Jase walked to the buckboard and leaned against it. The snow began to come down a little more heavily. He didn’t like the look of the snow or the sky or the open prairie prone to sudden, fierce storms. They needed to head back to Sledge Jackson’s before the drive became dangerous, but how could he tear Marietta or Zack from Kathy and Clint?

He couldn’t.

He could only hope the sky would hold tightly onto the wind long enough for him to be able to ensure the safety of his two charges.

He tried once more to put his mind on another subject. As Marietta and Zack’s grief turned silent, he was able to think about his land project. Thinking about the development he intended to pursue would take his mind off the pain feeding on his two companions.

It had been just over two months since he and Zack’s pa, Clint Morgan, had talked with a group of men interested in founding a new town along the Oregon Trail. The men had speculated the railroad might come through somewhere near the Trail one day. If it did, lots of money and plenty of glory would be available in towns which sprung up along the Trail. Speculators could garner both fame and fortune.

Not that Jase wasn’t happy being a rancher. He was, but he wanted more. He wanted to leave his mark on the world. What better way than founding a new town? An entity he would establish along with his partners would live on long after he was gone.

He glanced at Marietta and Zack and found they were still huddled together on top of Kathy’s grave. Jase felt his jaw clench. He’d already missed the first meeting of the land consortium due to his responsibilities since Clint and Kathy’s barbarous murders. The next meeting was in two days at Red Rock Junction. He needed to get Marietta and Zack to Jackson’s as soon as possible. He couldn’t afford to miss another meeting. His chance at immortality was just too important. If he’d learned anything from Clint’s death, it was that a man had to reach for opportunities when they came and not put them off.

The snow was getting heavier; they had to get moving. Jase took a few steps toward Marietta and Zack intending to attempt to hurry them along, but when he saw them cuddling and comforting each other, he knew he couldn't rob them of the time they needed, no matter how important it was for him to get to his meeting.

Another hour passed before Marietta and Zack were ready to leave. Their grief had consumed them so completely they hadn't noticed it had been snowing.

"Are you sure you're ready to go?" Jase asked as he helped Marietta into the buckboard.

She looked longingly at her sister's grave. "I'll never be ready to leave, and I can't stand to stay another minute." She gave him a painful look. "Does that make any sense?"

He lifted one corner of his mouth and touched her snow-speckled auburn hair as he stared into the most beautiful emerald eyes he'd ever seen. "It makes perfect sense."

He helped Zack into the rig, mounted the carriage and put the horse in motion. Three miles into their return trip, the wind began to whip the snow into a storm as thick as pudding.

"We're going to have to find a place to wait out the storm," he told Marietta.

Her face turned as white as the snowflakes on her cheeks. "Where?"

"If I haven't gotten us steered off course, I believe there's a shack about a hundred feet that way," he said, pointing.

"A shack? For the three of us? Alone?"

Her shocked reaction at the impropriety of their being alone would have made him smile if the circumstances hadn't been so grave. "I'm afraid we either take shelter in the shack, or we risk our lives heading to Jackson's or the fort."

Marietta looked down at her nephew who'd huddled between them when the wind began to blow harder. "We can't risk Zack's life. We have no choice."

"No, we don't." Jase couldn't help but notice the fear in her eyes. As he looked away, he decided the last thing she needed was more suffering, and the last thing he needed was another delay in reaching his meeting at Red Rock Junction.

He glanced again at Marietta's frightened face and found himself wanting to hold and comfort her. He wanted to ease the pain in her heart and erase the fear in her eyes.

Yet he couldn't help being angry with her for stealing his time. She'd asked him to take her west to Clint and Kathy's graves when he should have been riding east to Red Rock Junction to meet with the group of land speculators.

He closed his eyes and cursed his unfortunate circumstances. When he opened them again, he headed into the thickness of the storm hoping he could find his way to the safety of the secluded shack. The lives of two other people depended on him completely.

Chapter Three

Snow stung Marietta's eyes. Wind-driven, individually innocent flakes felt like pin pricks in her cheeks.

Zack snuggled close and covered his face with his hands.

Marietta saw no sign of a cabin.

Jase guided the horse through the storm as though he knew exactly where he was going, but did he? Marietta couldn't imagine any man could be ingrained enough in his surroundings to find his way in white blindness to a specific destination. All she could do was hope he did indeed have them heading in the right direction.

A few minutes later the cabin came into view. Jase pulled up in front of it, got down from his seat, and secured the rig. He went immediately to Zack and Marietta and helped them out of the carriage. The three of them rushed into the cabin.

Jase lifted Zack into his arms. "Are you all right, partner?"

"I'm cold, Jase, and I'm hungry." He rubbed a hand over his eye which was still puffy from all the crying he'd done earlier.

"I'm hungry too, and so is your aunt. Aren't you, Miss Randolph?" He looked down at Marietta, his eyes filled with worry.

"I'm frozen and famished." She looked from Jase to Zack. "But we can take care of both of those problems."

Jase set Zack down. "In due time. I'll light a fire which will quickly warm the shack, but it may take me a while to find game in this storm."

"No need to wait until you fetch us game to eat, Mr. Kent. I have supplies in my bags," Marietta said. "Not a lot, but I do have fixings for biscuits and some jerky as well."

Jase's brows lifted. "You do?"

"Yes. I bought supplies before we left the Missouri. I wanted to be prepared on the trail to Fort Kearney in case we had unexpected trouble. Fortunately, nothing went wrong, and we had plenty to eat along the way."

"I'm impressed to find a city woman well prepared for wilderness travel." Was that true admiration she saw in his eyes?

She waved away his compliment and pretended she didn't enjoy his flattery a bit more than she should have. "If you'll bring in the bags, Mr. Kent, we'll have more clothing for warmth, food and perhaps Zack even has a toy or two among his belongings."

"I do," Zack said, "but I'm too cold to play."

"There are blankets on the bunks over there," Jase said, pointing toward the north wall as he looked at Marietta. "You'll find a few extra in the closet next to the fireplace. Wrap the boy so he doesn't get any colder, and wrap yourself as well. I'll bring in the bags and put the horse in the lean-to. When I finish, I'll lay a fire."

"All right, Mr. Kent."

Marietta took Zack's hand and led him to the bunks. She pulled off his boots and helped him get under the blanket. While Jase went about his chores, she found extra blankets and put them over Zack.

She knelt next to his bed and rubbed her hand over his curly blonde hair. "Is that better, honey?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Are we going to be all right?"

"I think so."

"When I got icy cold, I thought maybe Ma was coming to take me with her like I asked. When people die, they get very cold, don't they?"

“Yes, they do, but your ma can’t come to take you away, Zack.”

“Are you sure? You asked Ma to take you. If she could take a grown person with her, couldn’t she take a little boy?”

Marietta bit back a tear and caressed Zack’s hair again. “When people grieve, they sometimes say silly, impossible things. I asked Kathy to take me with her because it’s difficult for me to be without her, but she can’t really take me to where she is.”

“I love Ma,” Zack said slowly, “but I don’t want to die, Aunt Marietta.”

She took him into her arms and squeezed him tightly. “Neither do I, darling. We’re going to be fine.” She let him go and pulled the blankets up to his chin. “You rest now. I’m going to start laying the fire. Soon it will be warm as July in here.” She kissed his cheek and touched his hair. “You’ll see, Zack. We’ll be fine.”

He nodded and closed his eyes.

She went to the hearth and took kindling from the box near the fireplace. She put it in the firebox and lit it with matches she found on the mantel. The dry wood burst into flames, and Marietta added larger pieces of kindling. When she felt the door open behind her, she turned and looked at Jase. He’d brought in the bags while she took care of Zack, and now he was returning from stabling for the horse.

“You’ve started the fire,” he said, coming to her. He crouched down beside her and took a small log from the wood box to lie in the flames. “Very nice, Miss Randolph.”

His compliment and the warm look in his gaze toasted her insides, and all remnants of the chill within her were gone.

She looked into the flames. “I love the glow of a fire.”

“It beautifies everything around it.”

She glanced at her surroundings and smiled at Jase. “You’re right. It even makes this humble home attractive.”

He took her hand and stood, helping her to her feet. “I brought a bucket of fresh water in from the well. If you’d like to see to those biscuits you promised, I’ll check on Zack.”

“Sounds good, Mr. Kent. I’m surprised to learn this place has a well. I thought we might have to melt snow for our water.”

“We needed a well to water the livestock we run in this pasture. Sometimes in July or August the streams dry up.”

“This is your cabin?”

“Yes. It’s at the far end of my property, near the Morgan holdings. I put the shack up for protection from sudden storms we might experience when we’re working the cattle here. It’s come in handy many times.” He stopped talking and grinned at her. “Now, how about those biscuits? I’m hungry.”

She returned his smile. “I’ll have them ready before you know it.”

He nodded and went to see to Zack.

Marietta worked quickly to prepare their modest meal. She was grateful to find all the utensils she needed to make a proper batch of biscuits. Soon the aroma of fresh bread filled the tiny home, and the three of them enjoyed a pleasant meal.

After they’d eaten, Jase took his gun and went to find fresh game. He tied a rope to a post on the lean-to outside the shack and held on to it as he went into the storm. It would be his lifeline to the cabin. He’d told Marietta, men got lost in blinding snowstorms and died if they weren’t careful.

With Jase gone and Zack content to play with the few toys he had in his bag, Marietta took a book from her belongings and began to read. When an hour had passed, she went to the one window of the cabin and peered out. Jase was nowhere in sight, but neither was anything else. The storm was thick and blinding, and Marietta began to worry. What if Jase got lost? What if he never came back? Another hour passed, and her worries turned into extreme fear.

Thirty minutes later Jase finally returned with two rabbits.

“It looks like we’ll have something real tasty to go with the rest of those biscuits,” he told her pleasantly.

Thank God he was safe, but did he have to bring rabbits for their supper? Marietta knew she should be grateful for the food--rabbit was definitely better than jerky--but she’d eaten rabbit nearly everyday on the trail from the Missouri River, and she was tired of it.

“That’s wonderful, Jase,” she said, rising from the floor where she’d been reading. “I’ll help you clean them.”

~ * ~

Over the next two days, Jase and Marietta spent time reading and discussing the books she’d brought with her from Chicago. Such activities helped the time to pass bearably. She was amazed by his interest in literature. She’d never dreamed a rancher would enjoy books as much as Jase did.

On the afternoon of the third day, the storm had calmed, but it was still not safe to travel. Marietta stood by the window and gazed into the whiteness with Jase standing close behind her.

“Do you think we’ll ever get out of here?” she asked drearily.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. “It won’t be long now, Miss Randolph. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know,” she said hopelessly. “Things have been pretty bleak lately. Two months ago, except for missing Kathy, I was one of the happiest women in Chicago. I had a good job at the library, and I had access to all the social activities a woman could want.” She glanced up at Jase. “Mother always told us social activities defined a woman’s purpose in life.” She looked outside once more. “Good advice is the one thing Mother left us before she died. I’ve always acted on what she raised us to believe, and I was happy to live as she’d said I should. But now...”

He squeezed her shoulder.

She found the gesture comforting. He’d comforted her often in the last two days.

She turned and looked up at him. “Everything in my life has changed. Sometimes, I don’t know what I’m going to do. Will I ever know the happiness and contentment I knew before I lost my Kathy, my love and my life?”

He touched her cheek with his fingers. “It may take a while, but I have no doubt you’ll be happy again, Miss Randolph,” he said gently. “In a few weeks you’ll be back in Chicago and everything will begin to return to normal. You’ve just got to hold on a while longer and set aside these hopeless feelings as best you can.”

“No you don’t understand.” She stepped away and wrung her hands. “It isn’t only the difficulties I’m facing here and now which have me upset. My life in Chicago is as

dead as my sister. A week before I got word of Kathy's death, I was fired from my job at the library. My employer has a sister who was recently widowed and needed a job, and since she has three children and I had none, she got my job." She glanced at Zack. "Now I have a boy to raise myself and no job to support him or me," she said, looking up at him.

He rubbed his hand over his dark, unshaven cheek. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm counting on my aunt to take us in while I look for another job."

"Do you have sufficient money to tide you over until you find work?"

Marietta shook her head. "I used every cent I had left to make this trip, but a lack of money isn't the worst of my worries. I'm confident I'll acquire another job. I'm a skilled woman, and Chicago has much to offer. What frightens me most is my total unfamiliarity with being a mother. Mr. Kent, how will I ever be able to give Zack the motherly care he needs? I don't even know how to be his aunt. Though I'm quite fond of him because he is a part of Kathy, I barely know the boy."

Jase touched her chin and smiled softly at her. "You're already mothering him, Miss Randolph. I've watched the two of you the last few days. You knew how to calm him when he fretted, you fed him when he was hungry, cuddled him while he slept and kissed him and tucked him in. I heard you pray with him too." He touched her hair and drew back his hand. "Don't say you don't know how to be a mother. Whether you realize it or not, you're a gentle mother and a loving woman. Zack is very lucky to have you."

She gazed into the softness of his eyes and wondered how a man who had led such a hard life had managed to have a gentle soul.

"You're kind, Mr. Kent. Sweet...gentle...kind."

He reached toward her, almost touched her cheek with his palm.

Suddenly, she realized they were much too close.

"I'd... I'd better make fresh biscuits. I'm sure Zack is hungry again."

~ * ~

The sun shone brightly the next day, but the ride in the buckboard back to the fort was a rough one. Snow drifts fought the carriage every foot of the way. Dusk set in as Fort Kearney came into view.

Will Carson rode out to meet them outside the fort. "Thank the sweet Lord you've returned safely," he exclaimed. "Amy has been beside herself worrying you'd all perished in the storm."

"We took shelter in the shack near the edge of my property line." Jase gave Marietta a quick look before he turned his attention back to Will. "It was a rough few days, but we made out all right."

"That's good news, Jase," Will said. "You'd best take Miss Randolph and Zack straight to Amy. She'll want to feed them and clean them up and fuss over them. You know how she is."

Jase smiled. "It's been my pleasure to be fussed over by your lovely wife myself a few times."

"And don't think I've forgotten it, Jase."

The two men laughed at their secret joke, then Will's expression sobered, and he focused on Marietta. "Miss Randolph, I'm afraid we've got some bad news for you."

Her heart nearly stopped, and she swallowed hard. Bad news? Was there any other kind? “What is it, Lt. Carson?”

“When the sky turned gray and it looked to start snowing, Jackson and his party decided to leave for the Missouri River at once. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until the next stage comes through before you can return home. That’ll be near the end of December.”

Marietta’s head began to spin, and she felt herself slump into Jase. An arm circled her just before everything went black.

Chapter Four

Jase pressed Marietta close to him.

“Maybe I was too rough with the news,” Will said.

“Is she dead?” Zack asked from his place in the back of the buckboard.

Jase turned around. “No, son, she’s not dead. She just fainted.”

“Why?” Zack craned his body to get a better look at his aunt.

“Because Lt. Carson gave her some bad news. He told her you’ve lost your ride to the Missouri River, and you’ll have to wait several weeks for the next stage.”

Zack stroked Marietta’s cheek with his tiny hand and gazed down at her. “I hope she’s all right.” He lifted his eyes to look at Jase and added, “But it isn’t bad news to me. It means we can stay longer with you.”

He gazed at the beautiful woman wrapped in his arm and remembered the dozens of times her loveliness had stolen his breath during their confinement. “We’d better get Miss Randolph inside so Amy can take care of her,” Jase said, ignoring Zack’s conclusion. As he put the horse in motion, he tried to determine just what his own reaction was to Marietta’s news.

Zack was happy to stay on in Nebraska, but the news of her delayed return had snuffed the breath out of Marietta. What did Will’s proclamation do to him?

With Marietta pressed close to his heart, Jase was torn between hope that he’d have a chance to spend more time with the lovely lady and the resentment he felt toward her because her lingering at the Morgan burial site had caused him to miss his meeting.

It occurred to him then that perhaps the meeting hadn’t taken place. If the storm had been as bad at Red Rock Junction as it was in the Fort Kearney area, no one would have been able to attend the meeting. The thought comforted Jase. Maybe his opportunity hadn’t been lost after all.

Marietta stirred and moaned.

“Is she all right?” Zack asked as he continued to watch his aunt attentively.

“She’s all right, Zack,” Jase replied. “I told you she just fainted. She’s probably exhausted. She’s been through more than most women could take these last weeks.”

“We should have sent a detachment to meet her at the Missouri River,” Will said as he rode beside Jase’s buckboard. “This wilderness is too harsh for city women. We might have been able to offer her more comfort than a stage could. I should have done more for her because of the Morgans. My Amy had a terrible time adjusting when she came to the fort. Kathy Morgan saved her life more than once, I can tell you.”

“Thinking about what we might have done to make things easier for Miss Randolph is useless, Will. Let’s concentrate on what we can do to make her life more comfortable now.”

“You’re right. We’ll have to do whatever we can for her.” He looked ahead at the fort. “Jase, I’m going on to tell Amy you’re coming.”

“That’s a good idea. Miss Randolph will need prompt treatment to bring her around. We’ll catch up as quickly as we can. We should be at your place soon.”

He inclined his head toward Jase and urged his mount into a much quicker pace.

It took Jase longer than he’d expected to cover the last mile to the fort. He was pleased to see Amy standing on the porch waiting for them when he drove up to her home. She shivered in the cold despite the fact she had a heavy knitted shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

Jase got down from the buckboard, took hold of Marietta and marched up the steps carrying her in his arms.

“She fainted, Amy.”

“I know, Will told me.” Amy looked as though she hadn’t slept in days. “Bring her in and lay her on the sofa. Will is fetching the smelling salts and a glass of water.”

With Zack on his heels, Jase strode into the small living quarters and laid Marietta on the sofa. He stood back and gazed down at her, hoping she was all right.

Amy knelt beside the sofa and rubbed her palm over Marietta’s forehead. “You poor dear,” she cooed. “You’ve been through so much.”

Will handed her the smelling salts and water. Amy set the water on the table next to the sofa and waved the bottle of pungent odors beneath Marietta’s nose.

“What’s that stuff?” Zack asked, sidling up to Amy.

“Smelling salts. They’ll help her to come to.”

“Do they smell good?” He removed his hat and coat and dropped them on the floor.

“No,” Amy replied.

Zack grabbed the smelling salts away from her. “Then don’t make her smell them. When I wake up, I like to smell stuff that smells good. When my ma fried bacon, that always waked me up. Why don’t you fry some bacon, Miss Amy? Bacon will wake up my aunt.”

The men chuckled, and Amy smiled at Zack.

Jase had to admit the boy made a good point.

Marietta stirred, lifting her hand and placing the back of it on her forehead.

“Easy, Marietta,” Amy said soothingly.

She rolled her head from side to side and wiped her fingers over her eyes. “What happened?”

“Honey, take it easy,” Amy said. “Don’t get up just yet. You fainted.”

“And Miss Amy tried to wake you up with some stinky stuff,” Zack added. “I told her to fry some bacon ‘cause that’s good at waking a person up.”

Jase crouched next to the sofa when Amy moved aside. “Are you all right?”

Marietta glanced to her side. “I’ll be fine in a minute. I’m sorry to have worried you.”

When he noticed her gaze had fallen to his hand, Jase saw he’d grasped her hand with his. He hadn’t realized he’d taken this intimate liberty with her. He quickly released

his grasp and stood. "She'll be okay now." What had just happened? Why had he taken her hand, and why had touching her set his heart pounding against his ribs?

Will nodded and gave him a peculiar look. Had he noticed what Jase had just learned himself? Were his suddenly-discovered feelings for Marietta written all over his face?

"You men go to the kitchen and have some coffee," Amy suggested. "Take Zack with you and give him a glass of milk." She turned toward Marietta. "We need a few moments alone."

Jase scooped Zack into his arms. "Come on, big fella. Let's see if Amy has any of her famous gingerbread men in the kitchen."

When they were alone, Amy bent next to Marietta. "Let me help you out of that cape and coat, honey. The men will be occupied for a few minutes, and you and I can have a little talk."

Marietta sat up and squirmed out of her coat. "I'm sorry to be such a bother. I remember now what happened. Lt. Carson told me Sledge Jackson has already left for the Missouri River."

Amy bit her lip and nodded. "I'm afraid they left when the skies turned gray. Mr. Jackson has a sixth sense about the weather and said they could be delayed another week or so if they didn't get started right away. He wanted to get as many miles behind him as he could before the storm caught up to him."

"But that leaves me stranded here until the stage returns weeks from now." Marietta rubbed her hands over her face. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to stay with us."

"I can't. You barely have enough room for yourselves. Zack and I would be terribly underfoot."

"Nonsense," Amy said. "Will and I talked it over and agreed that if God spared you from the storm as we prayed with all our might He would, we would put you and Zack up here in our home until you can catch the stage back to meet the boat at the Missouri River."

"No. It will never work," Marietta insisted. "And what if the stage can't travel? Who knows what kind of winter this will be?"

Amy smiled broadly. "It's going to be a good winter, I can feel it. The snow is already half-melted, and it will melt some more tomorrow. We'll have a mild winter--a happy winter. I can feel it deep inside me." She paused and sighed. "I know your plans have been terribly upset, Marietta, but I feel blessed to have a new friend who is going to be able to spend more time with me. Our invitation to you is heartfelt and lovingly extended. I hope you'll accept it in that manner."

Marietta could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Amy barely knew her, yet she spoke to her as lovingly and sincerely as only Kathy had spoken to her before.

"I don't know what to say, Amy, except thank you. But how are we going to work this out? I won't consider staying in your room. That's yours and Will's domain."

"Will and I thought of that too," Amy said. "We'll section off the end of the parlor with the bookshelves next to the east wall. Will can get an extra bed for you, and you'll have some privacy in the space between the shelves and the wall. Zack can sleep on the sofa." She clutched Marietta's arm. "It will work, honey. We'll all be just fine."

The men and Zack returned to the parlor.

“Did you explain everything to her, Amy?” Will asked.

She stood and turned toward her husband. “I did and she accepted. She and Zack will stay with us until the stage comes.”

“Not me!” Zack shouted. “I’m staying with Jase.” He grabbed the cowboy’s hand. “Jase told me I had a home with him. Didn’t you, Jase?”

He squatted next to Zack and touched the boy’s cheek. “I did, but that was right after your ma and pa died, son.” He drew back his hand. “It was before I knew your aunt was coming to take you home with her. You belong with Miss Randolph now.”

“Not yet,” Zack said. “In Nebraska I belong with you.” His lower lip quivered as he tried to convince Jase of his logic.

Will stepped next to them. “Zack, I’ve got a job for you to do while you stay here with us.”

Jase stood and took a few steps back to give Will some space as he spoke with the child.

“A mare wandered into the fort during the storm,” Will said, “and I’ll be blasted clean to Pennsylvania if she didn’t drop a foal. A filly it is. In cold weather like this, we have to take extra care in keeping a tiny bit of a horse like her warm, and we could use your help. Would you like to see the filly?”

Marietta could tell Zack was torn between wanting to see the horse and not wanting to leave Jase even for a few minutes. Her heart ached at the thought of taking Zack away from him. She could see how hard the separation would be for both of them. As much as she hated the delay in her return to Chicago, the postponement of their trip might possibly be better for Zack. He could ease his way into leaving Jase a little at a time.

Zack took his time making up his mind, but when he made his decision, he went with Will.

“I have a million things to do in the kitchen,” Amy said when Will and Zack were gone. “I’ll leave you two alone to work things out regarding Zack.”

Jase walked toward Marietta who made room for him to sit on the sofa.

“I’m sorry about Zack’s reaction to staying here with you, Miss Randolph. It isn’t that he doesn’t want to be with you.”

“He’s confused, Mr. Kent, but the boy obviously loves you. He’s lost too many people he loves already. He doesn’t want to lose you too.”

Jase wiped his hand over his face and looked at the hearth on the opposite side of the room. “I’ve known him since he was born. Fact is I helped Clint bring him when Kathy’s time came.”

Marietta sucked in a frightened breath. “Kathy had no doctor?” Her sister hadn’t told her about giving birth under such primitive conditions.

“There are no doctors out here, ma’am,” Jase replied. “There are medics at the fort, but they don’t know any more about delivering babies than the rest of us.”

“Oh, my dear heaven,” she said on a worrisome sigh. “Poor Kathy.”

“No need to be upset, ma’am. Kathy came through everything with the strength of ten men.”

“You and Clint took good care of her and Zack?”

“Yes, indeed. We did the best we could which I believe was real fine. My housekeeper, Mrs. Whipple, was supposed to help Kathy when her time came, but she

was away visiting her son. Zack had a mind of his own even back then, and he came early. When Mrs. Whipple returned she told us we'd done an uncommonly good job handling everything."

Marietta gave Jase a smile of appreciation, but the thought of her sister's dismal life wiped the smile away as quickly as it had come. "Kathy had to give up so much to come here. She had a good life in the city." Marietta looked away. "I'll never understand why she left."

"Folks give up what they have for all sorts of reasons," Jase said. "You take me for example. I had a fine ranch in Texas, had everything a man could ever want, then Clint and me got curious about the Nebraska and Wyoming territories. We made a trip up here to look around, and once I laid my eyes on this part of God's creation, I knew I had to come here to live. Clint felt the same way."

"Did Kathy know you'd be settling in the Nebraska territory when she and Clint got married? She'd told me back then she'd be living in Texas."

"Kathy knew of our plans, and she was excited to come to virgin land."

Marietta shook her head. "I suppose she kept her secret because she knew I'd worry myself into a grave if I'd known about your eventual settlement in this God-forsaken land." She wrung her hands. "I don't understand why that girl was such a rebel. How could she allow herself to take such dangerous risks?"

"Kathy a rebel?" he said, grinning. "I never thought of her that way. She seemed like a real reasonable woman to me." The grin on his face turned into a look of affection. "I don't think Kathy ever saw going to Texas or coming to Nebraska as a risk. As long as she had Clint at her side, she had everything she'd ever wanted. She loved him in a most profound way, in an indefinable almost mystical way."

"And what did such foolishness and romanticism get her, Mr. Kent? Death at the hands of wild savages!"

"Love brought her immeasurable happiness, Miss Randolph. I wish you could have seen how happy Kathy was with Clint." He looked away. "As for the savages who killed her-- Savages are among us everywhere," he said, looking at her. "Would Kathy be any less dead if she'd fallen in with riffraff from a riverboat in Chicago or St. Louis or Omaha?" He squeezed her shoulder with his powerful hand. "There isn't anything foolish about the kind of love your sister had for Clint."

His words stung her to her core.

"We all miss Kathy terribly," he said sympathetically. "She was a shining light among us. It was a blessing to have her in my life and an even bigger blessing for Clint to have her in his. She changed him in an overpowering way. Kathy was a beacon of hope in the life of a man who'd lived alone since he was only a little older than Zack is now."

Marietta placed her hands over her ears. "Don't tell me any more," she said, lowering her hands. "Love destroyed Kathy. If she hadn't loved Clint, she'd be alive today."

"Maybe she would, but Zack wouldn't."

Marietta bolted from the sofa. She'd barely taken two steps away from it when her knees began to buckle.

Jase sprang to her side and held her arm to steady her. "Easy, Miss Randolph. You don't want to faint again."

She looked up into his coffee-brown eyes and was surprised at the concern she saw in them. “No, I don’t want to faint again,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“Please sit down.” He helped her back to the sofa and took his place next to her. “Do you think you’re all right now?”

She leaned back and nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

“I’m glad to hear it because I need to get back to my ranch,” he said hesitantly.

“But it’s nearly nightfall. It wouldn’t be safe for you to travel in the dark.” The realization that she didn’t want him to go struck her like a bolt of lightning.

“I’ll stay with the colonel tonight, and I’ll head back at first light in the morning.”

“Are you going to tell Zack your plans? You should let him know what you intend to do.”

He glanced toward the kitchen. “Don’t worry. I know how to handle Zack,” he said, focusing his engaging brown eyes on her. “I’ll invite myself to supper with all of you before I see the colonel to make arrangements for the night. I figure if I can ease Zack into the idea of staying here while we’re having supper together, he might raise less of a fuss about being away from me. After supper, I’ll tell him goodbye and promise him I’ll be back in a week.”

“You’ll be back in a week? No sooner than that?” Why did a week seem like too long a time for her to have to wait to see him again?

“Zack will need at least a week to get used to the idea that he won’t be seeing much of me anymore. If my visits come too frequently, it’ll only be harder for him to adjust to being away from me. He needs to begin to feel more a part of your family and less a part of mine.”

“I guess you know the boy best. I’ll rely on your good judgment where handling Zack is concerned.”

“I appreciate that.” He looked away. “I suppose I should leave,” he said, gazing at her again.

“Already?” She didn’t want him to leave.

“Would you like me to stay a little longer?” he asked tentatively.

She nearly cried a resounding yes before she looked away and refused to respond.

She felt him shift closer to her. His sudden movement caused her to inhale sharply as she looked at him again. “Mr. Kent...”

He reached toward her and cupped her cheek. “Miss Randolph...” He blinked, pulled his hand from her cheek, and wiped his knuckle over his lips.

Marietta took hold of his wrist. “Mr. Kent, thank you for taking care of us in the cabin,” she said, taking his hand into both of hers. “I’ll never forget our time together there.”

“Nor will I,” he said huskily.

She reluctantly released his hand.

“Miss Randolph...” He was so handsome, and the provocative look in his eyes stirred her heart.

“Mr. Kent, perhaps--”

An object crashed in the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry,” Amy said upon entering the parlor. “Clumsy me, I dropped a cast iron skillet to the floor. You two just go on with what you were doing.” She rushed back into the kitchen.

Marietta looked at Jase. "I'd better help Amy with supper. I'll tell her we'll need to set an extra place for you."

"I'd appreciate that." He stood, took her hand and helped her to her feet. "I'll go make arrangements for the night with the colonel."

"Of course," she said, clasping her hands in front of her.

"I'll see you in a short while."

"She nodded toward him.

He donned his heavy coat, put on his hat and went outside.

The instant he was gone a heaviness filled her heart, and she felt more alone than she'd ever remembered feeling. Strange Mr. Kent's absence should affect her in such an odd way.

But then she had no time to analyze another of the unusual emotions the handsome Jason Kent had evoked in her. She needed to be a proper guest and help her hostess prepare their supper.

As she headed to the kitchen Marietta realized her delayed return to Chicago may not be as bad as she'd initially thought. She didn't think she was going to hate having the opportunity to get to know Mr. Kent better.

Having finally found a bright spot in the middle of her bad news, she began to feel better.

Chapter Five

Jase thought the week would never come to an end. Between waiting for word from the consortium, the anticipation of seeing Marietta again, and the emptiness in his house brought on by Zack's absence, the week since he'd left Fort Kearney moved as slowly as a steer stuck in a snow drift.

As he rode toward the fort, his heart began to beat a little faster. He nudged his stallion, urging it to pick up its pace. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to see Marietta. He knew he was behaving foolishly by allowing feelings for her to dwell in his heart. She'd be leaving in a few weeks as eager as ever to return to her city life. She hated the territory holding her captive. Yet, he couldn't help aching for another glance into her emerald eyes. He wanted to inhale the lilac scent of her. He needed to touch her.

The last time he'd seen her, he'd longed to lace his fingers through her cinnamon hair. When they sat closely together on the Carson sofa, when Marietta took his hand... If Amy's kitchen accident hadn't diverted their attention, he might have taken Marietta into his arms and held her as he'd wanted to hold her in the cabin.

"Blast it!" He desperately needed to put his mind on something else.

The land deal. He had business he needed to ponder, decisions to make. He hoped someone from the fort had word for him from the consortium. Had they met as scheduled, or was there another meeting date set? He could hardly stand not knowing what was going on.

He wished he could go on to Red Rock Junction from the fort and find out if anyone knew anything about the meeting, but he couldn't. He'd lost a number of cattle during the blizzard, and he and his ranch hands had had a huge job disposing of all the

carcasses. Routine work on the ranch was lagging, and he needed to catch up on chores and duties at home.

As soon as he arrived at the fort he went to see the colonel. He was dying to know if Colonel Harrison had news from the consortium, but he didn't rudely rush into a litany of questions. He made time instead to accept the colonel's invitation to coffee and apple pie on the porch where they enjoyed the unseasonably warm early-December day. Once they'd covered the topics of the melted snow and the warm days over the past week and talked over the news from the fort, Jase moved straight on to the question burning in his gut. Had Colonel Harrison heard from anyone in the consortium?

He hadn't.

Jase politely stayed another few minutes before he moved on to the other urgent need burning inside him.

He was starved for the sight of Marietta, and he couldn't wait another minute to see her. He moved quickly to the Carson home. A thrill coursed through him when Marietta answered his knock on the door.

She wore the black woolen dress she'd worn the first night they were together at the Carsons'. It fit her better this time than it had the last. It had seemed a little large on her small frame before, but now it hugged her curves in a most provocative way. Her auburn hair flowed over her shoulders. The emerald-green eyes she cast up at him set his heart to beating wildly.

"Hello, Miss Randolph."

"Mr. Kent, won't you come in?" She opened the door wider, and he stepped inside.

"I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all. We were expecting you today." She waved her hand toward the sofa. "Won't you sit down?"

He took off his hat and coat and hung them on a hook near the door. He turned to her and slipped his hand to the small of her back. Perhaps he shouldn't have touched her as audaciously as he did, but he couldn't help himself. And she hadn't stepped away from him.

Now that he was with her again, he felt alive and satisfied. Once she sat down he made himself comfortable beside her.

"Any more fainting spells?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, indeed. I'm fit and healthy. Amy has made sure I've had plenty of rest."

"I'm glad to hear that." He smiled at her. "Where is everyone?" he asked, looking around the room.

"Amy took Zack with her to pick up some supplies from the commissary. He didn't want to go because he knew you were coming, but when she bribed him with the promise of a candy stick he couldn't resist."

"She had to bribe him to go to the commissary? But Zack loves to go there. Gus always gives him a cookie or a pickle."

"Really?" Marietta raised her lovely brows. "Amy had to practically drag him out of the house until she promised him the candy stick."

Jase frowned. "I don't like the sound of this."

A look of concern filled her verdant eyes. "Zack isn't doing well at all, Mr. Kent," she said in a most disheartened manner. "His reluctance to accompany Amy to the commissary is only one example of the dreadful behavior he displayed this week." She wrung her hands. "The boy is nothing like he was when we were in the shack. Despite our difficult circumstances, he was happy there. Now, when his comfort far exceeds anything we had in our primitive cabin, all the life has gone out of him. I think it's because of you, Mr. Kent."

"But I've done nothing to harm the boy, Miss Randolph."

"No, of course you haven't. I think Zack is misbehaving because he's heartsick over not being with you. He's terribly fond of you, and he misses you something awful."

Jase looked away. "I know how he feels. I've missed him fiercely this week."

"This separation must be difficult for you too."

"My house has never been so empty," he said, looking at her again.

Marietta left the sofa and went to the window which looked out on the compound. He followed and stood behind her, inhaling her sweet scent, staring at the silky hair lying softly around her shoulders.

"Everything keeps getting worse," she whispered. "How bad must it get before things start to get better?"

He touched her shoulder and gently turned her to face him. "I don't know."

"I can't bear to see Zack suffering. I feel horrible for the poor boy."

"I know what you mean. You should have seen him when he walked in on his parents after they were--" He cut himself off.

"Zack saw Kathy and Clint after those savages..." She started to weave, and he quickly took hold of her shoulders to steady her.

"No, Miss Randolph. He didn't see them. He was with me when the attack happened. When I took him home, he ran into the house ahead of me, but he stopped in the doorway when he saw blood on the floor. I made him stay outside while I checked on Kathy and Clint. Once I knew it was too late for me to help them, I took him back to my ranch and left him with Mrs. Whipple while I went to report the crime and tend to the bodies."

He took her back to the sofa. "Let's sit down. We don't need to talk about tragic things anymore."

"My God in heaven, dear sweet Lord, how could anyone hurt them that way?"

"Please, Miss Randolph. Don't think about Kathy and Clint. You'll make yourself sick, and you need your strength to care for Zack."

She nodded as she took a hanky from her pocket and wiped her eyes.

How he wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her!

"Mr. Kent, what am I going to do? Zack is so upset."

Jase couldn't say what he had to say and look her in the eyes at the same time. He needed some distance between them so he could speak as dispassionately as necessary to her. He stood and took four steps to the sideboard next to the wall. He leaned against it and folded his arms.

"The boy will adjust. He had a terrible time the first two weeks after his parents' death, but he came around. Not that he's completely gotten over what happened--he'll never get over that--but he did come around enough to get on with his life. He'll face this next challenge in his life just as bravely because he has to." He hoped his words didn't

make him sound heartless, but life was hard, and even children had to learn to live with cruel blows.

“Do you really think he’ll be able to adjust to being with me instead of you?” She didn’t look anymore convinced than he felt.

“I do. Give him time.”

He unfolded his arms and pressed his hands into the sideboard behind him.

With her gaze firmly attached to his, she walked toward him.

He swallowed hard as she crossed the room to be near him. “He’ll be all right, Miss Randolph.”

She stood two feet in front of him, looking up at him with eyes as verdant as a spring meadow. More than anything in the world, he wanted to gather her into his arms. Instead, he blinked and looked away. “I’ll have another talk with him if you think it will help.”

The front door swung open, and Zack flew inside like a bird lighting away from a cat. “Jase!”

The cowboy bent and scooped him into his arms. Deep, abiding affection poured from his heart. He loved Zack as though he were his own son. He hugged him with as much might as he could use without breaking the boy into pieces.

“How are you, Zack?”

“I’m happy now, Jase. I missed you powerful much. Can you stay here for a week this time?”

Jase set him on the sideboard. “I’m afraid not, son. I have a great deal of work to do on my ranch.”

“Can I help? I’m good at ropin’--you said so yourself. And I can pitch hay or milk the cows or muck out the barn. I’ll do anything, Jase. You need me.”

Jase glanced at Marietta, certain Zack’s words were breaking her heart. She couldn’t help but feel rejected even though she’d not mentioned it. “I’ve got all the help I need, son.”

“But Spike and Lone Wolf and Miguel might need me to make up fresh bunks for them. That was my job, you know.”

“It was, but the boys are doing their own chores now.”

Jase had never seen dejection hit someone as hard as it hit Zack. The boy’s lower lip began to quiver. He looked down at his hands. “You truly don’t need me anymore? No one needs me anymore.” He slid off the sideboard and ran outside.

Jase looked at Marietta. “I’m sorry, Miss Randolph. It seems I’ve made matters worse.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “Go to him, Mr. Kent. Find the right words and set the boy straight.”

Jase took her hand from his shoulder and wrapped it inside his fingers. He stared down at her intently, doubting he could do anything but hurt Zack even further. “I’m not sure I know the right words.”

“You love the boy. You’ll find the right words. I know you will.”

He touched her hair with one hand as he squeezed her gentle fingers with his other. He gazed into two lovely emeralds set in perfect symmetry above her exquisitely shaped nose. “I hope your confidence in me is well placed.” He withdrew his fingers from her hair.

"I'm sure it is," she replied, gifting him with a warm smile.

He let go of her hand and turned toward the door. Before he reached it, Amy came inside.

"Jase, what's going on?" she asked. "Zack ran toward the house like a bee was chasing him when he caught sight of your horse, and now he just took off lickety split toward the barn."

"We had some rough words, Amy. I'd better go after him. Miss Randolph can tell you what happened." He grabbed his hat and coat from the hook by the front door and turned to Marietta. "I'll see you later, Miss Randolph."

"Of course, Mr. Kent."

"You're staying for dinner, aren't you, Jase?" Amy asked.

"I am now." He grinned at her and tipped his hat as he went out the door.

A few minutes into his search he found Zack in the barn petting the filly born during the blizzard.

"She's going away," Zack said sadly.

"Who?"

"The filly. I finally thought up a name for her, and now she's going away. We learned at the commissary the man who owns the mare came to the fort today. He's taking the mare and filly home with him. The mare ran away during the storm."

"Oh." Jase acknowledged another of Zack's losses. "Well, it's a good thing the little foal has a home to go to with her mother. They must have felt lost being away from home."

Zack looked up at him. "I know how that feels."

Jase squatted next to him. "Suppose I talk to the man who owns the horses and ask if the filly can stay here. He could take the mare home, and you could keep the filly with you. How would that be?"

Zack furrowed his brows. "You mean take the baby away from her mother? But they're a family."

Jase shrugged. "So? The filly likes you too, doesn't she? Maybe she'd rather be with you. You want her to stay with you, don't you?"

"Yes, but she needs her mother."

"More than she needs you?"

"Well, sure."

"But why? You both love the filly, don't you?"

"I guess, but the mare is the filly's family."

Jase nodded his head slowly. "Oh, I see. So, even though you love the little horse and you need her, you're willing to let her go so she can be with her family?"

"I have to. I wouldn't want the filly to be away from her family."

Jase picked up Zack and walked over to the mare. The two of them stroked the horse's hide for a minute or two before they moved on to the baby. They gave her the same attention they'd given the mother. When they left the barn, Jase set the boy on the post of a hitching rail.

"I'm sorry I made you feel bad a little while ago, Zack. I do need you, son, and I love you very much. You know that. Ever since you were a baby, we've been real close friends, haven't we?"

Zack nodded. "But, if you need me and love me, Jase, why can't I stay with you?"

“For the same reasons you wouldn’t let that filly in there stay here without her mother. Just as the baby horse needs to be with her family, you need to be with your aunt. It’s what your mother and father wanted, Zack. They wrote it down on a piece of paper I found when I cleaned out their house. Your folks left word that if anything ever happened to them they wanted your Aunt Marietta to take care of you. She’s your family.”

Zack rubbed his eye and looked up at Jase. “Is it hard for you to let me go with Aunt Marietta like it’s hard for me to let go of the filly?”

He cupped the boy’s cheek with his palm. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in all my life, but it’s the right thing, Zack. You belong with your aunt.”

Zack threw his arms around him. “I love you, Jase. No matter how far away I am from you, I’ll always love you. I’ll try to be happy staying with Aunt Marietta. I do like her, but I don’t want to leave you.”

The boy might as well have gone into the barn, picked up a pitch fork, and run it through Jase’s heart. He’d found the right words to say to Zack, but Zack had some pretty powerful words of his own, words which could be as lethal as any deadly weapon.

“We’ve each got our own lives, Zack. Yours is with Miss Randolph, and mine is here.”

Jase lifted him from the hitching post and carried him out into an open area of the compound where he set him on his feet. “How about a foot race?”

Zack looked up at him. “You can stay and play for a while?”

“We have the whole afternoon,” Jase said, smiling.

He let out a cheer. “Then let’s go riding. I miss Beaumont almost as much as I miss you, Jase.”

“All right.” He inclined his head toward Zack. “I’ll race you to Beaumont. The first one there gets to sit up front.”

~ * ~

Two days after Jase visited the fort, a stranger stopped by the Carson home. The man introduced himself as James Richards. Marietta was in the middle of baking a large batch of sweet rolls when he came to their door. She had little time to talk to him, but when he said he was looking for Jase and needed to speak to him on a business matter, she invited him inside.

She gave him a cup of coffee and explained he needed to see Lt. Carson or Col. Harrison to get directions to Jase’s ranch.

When she returned to the kitchen after Mr. Richards left, Marietta found Zack stuffing his fingers into the sweet roll dough and pulling out handfuls of the mixture which he promptly placed into his mouth.

“Zack! Don’t eat the dough like that. It’s much better after it’s baked.”

“I like it this way,” he said, wiping his wrist over his mouth.

Marietta smiled and leaned over to kiss his cheek. The boy had spent most of his time moping since Jase had left, but he seemed to enjoy being in the kitchen while she baked rolls. Understandable, considering how he loved eating them before and after they were baked.

“What did the man who came to the door want?” Zack asked.

“Mr. Richards needs to see Mr. Kent on business.”

“He’s going to see Jase?”

“Yes. He went to find Lt. Carson or Col. Harrison in order to get directions to Mr. Kent’s ranch.”

“I could’ve given him directions. It’s easy. You just ride a ways that way,” he said, pointing west, “until you come to this big tree which fell over long before I was born. Then you turn toward the butte and go until you see a patch of wild roses. After that, you turn toward the Indian burial mound. Once you get to the burial mound, you can see Jase’s place. See? Easy.” He took another piece of raw dough, put it in his mouth and wiped his hands on his pants. “I’m going to find Gus to see if he wants to arm wrestle.”

“Okay.” Marietta’s heart felt ten pounds lighter now that Zack’s mood seemed happier. She was glad she’d let him help her with the rolls. “Button up your coat, and don’t forget your hat.”

“I will, Aunt Marietta.”

Zack slammed the door on his way out, and Marietta hoped his noisy exit hadn’t disturbed Amy. She’d lain down because she had a sick headache.

Roll baking was a time-consuming task, and, before Marietta knew it, twilight had descended on the fragrant kitchen. Hours had passed, and Zack hadn’t returned.

Where could the child be?

Marietta went to Amy’s room and asked her to watch the last pan of rolls baking in the oven while she went to find Zack. Once Amy agreed, she put on her coat and hat and went out to search the compound. She began to panic when she couldn’t find her little boy anywhere. She located Col. Harrison and asked him if some of his men could assist with her search for Zack. He promptly granted her request.

Three hours later, Zack was still missing. The boy had simply vanished.

Chapter Six

Jase hadn’t had a visit from a stranger for quite some time. He finished brushing down his horse while the approaching buckboard covered the last mile to his ranch. The open countryside in the Nebraska territory made it easy to see approaching visitors from a long distance away.

Jase was inside washing up when his guest arrived. Mrs. Whipple greeted the caller and asked him to wait on the porch while she went to get Jase.

“He says he has business with you,” Mrs. Whipple said in her warm, grandmotherly voice. “His name is James Richards, and he has news from the Red Rock Junction meeting.”

Jase could have picked up the white-haired, sixty-something-year-old woman and spun her around the room.

“Invite him in, Mabel! Seat him in the library and give him coffee or pie or whatever he wants. I’ll be with him shortly.”

Her silver eyes twinkled. “It’s good to see some life in your smile again, Jase. Things have been too sad around here since Zack left.”

He couldn’t argue with that. While this good news couldn’t relieve him of his heartache over losing Zack, starting a new project would help his healing. He’d already spent too much time hurting over the loss of Kathy, Clint, and Zack. And, even though

she was never his to lose, he felt in a way that he'd lost Marietta too. He had strong feelings for her which he knew he'd never be able to take any farther than they were right now. Having a diversion which could steer his mind away from his losses and on to future gains was just what Jase needed.

"Things have been sad here for a long time," he said, drying his hands.

"Indeed they have," Mabel said, unable to keep a disheartened tone out of her voice. "I'll make Mr. Richards comfortable at once."

Jase went to his bedroom and put on a clean shirt and fresh trousers. Once he was properly groomed he headed for the library. There he found Mr. Richards sitting in one of his high-backed red chairs. The tall, lean man dressed in dark clothes stood when Jase stepped into the room.

"Mr. Kent?"

"Yes, I'm Jason Kent, Mr. Richards. It's a pleasure to know you."

"Likewise." Richards looked around the library. "Impressive room, Mr. Kent. You have quite a collection of books."

"I like to have as much knowledge as possible at hand."

"A rancher and businessman needs all sorts of informative tomes, but you seem to enjoy fiction, plays, and poetry--Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Dickens, Greek classics and myths, even the bewitching Washington Irving and James Fennimore Cooper."

"You're familiar with American authors, Mr. Richards?"

"I prefer English writers, but then, there are far more of them. We're too young a country to have spawned many great writers."

"A man could disagree with that," Jase said, "but you aren't here to discuss literature."

"No, indeed. We have something great of our own to talk about, an opportunity to be a part of the expansion of this growing country, to make our own place in history."

"What news do you have from Red Rock Junction?"

The gangly man returned to his seat in the high-backed chair, and Jase sat in the matching chair next to him in front of the fireplace.

"You're still interested in being a part of our consortium, Mr. Kent?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Then you and I shall be partners." Richards leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee.

"Partners? Just the two of us? Aren't there any other investors interested?"

Richards waved a hand. "Of course, of course, Mr. Kent. Ten of us altogether. We're breaking into groups of two. We each have specific areas of the Oregon Trail to explore. We'll gather as much information as we can, then we'll meet to choose the location we believe will most likely best serve our immediate purposes as well as our future plans when and if the railroad is extended through the Nebraska territory."

Jase's eager heart thrummed at the news. "When do you want to get started?"

"The consortium agreed to begin our search in the spring." Richards sipped more coffee. "This unseasonably warm weather makes it tempting to start our search immediately, but a man wouldn't want to be caught in the wild with the nasty elements of winter."

"He certainly wouldn't." *Though I wouldn't mind being alone in a cabin with Miss Randolph during a blizzard once again,* Jase mused.

“We hope to choose the location of our town by late May or early June next year, and we’ll start constructing buildings in June or July. Our businesses should have their first patrons by August if all goes as hoped.”

Jase slapped the arm of his chair. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your coming here, Mr. Richards.”

Richards stood as Jase got up from his chair. “Please call me James. If we’re going to be partners, Jase, we need not be formal.”

“Agreed. Can you stay for supper, James? My housekeeper is an excellent cook.”

“Having eaten a piece of her apple pie I don’t doubt her kitchen skills a bit. You’re a lucky man to have such a capable cook. However, I want to head back to the fort immediately.”

“But it’ll be dark soon, and it’s not easy to find your way around in the dark on the prairie.”

James reached for his coat and slipped it on. “I don’t plan to make it all the way back to the fort tonight. Col. Harrison told me he and his men were going out on maneuvers this evening since the weather is reasonably warm. He likes to keep his troops in shape and ready for action. I’m going to join them.”

“Whatever you say.” Jase led James to the door and shook his hand. “Thanks for bringing me the good news. I’ll look forward to working with you in the spring.”

“I’ll contact you through the fort or the post with further information.”

“That will be fine.”

They exchanged a few more details and said their goodbyes.

Jase was happy enough to dance a jig. This new start would balance out a small bit of the losses in his life, and, if the speculation was as successful as he hoped, Jase would have the ability to set up a nice trust fund for Zack. After all, Clint had wanted to be a part of the consortium, so Zack was entitled to share in its success.

He went into the kitchen and found Mabel setting dinner on the table. When he smelled the fragrance of fried chicken filling the air, he wondered how James had torn himself away from such a heavenly scent to face soldier stew around a campfire.

“Sit, Jase,” she said. “Everything is ready.”

“This looks great, Mabel,” he said as he sat down. “You know how much I love potatoes with cheese next to my fried chicken.”

“Me too.”

The little voice Jase heard certainly wasn’t Mabel’s. He left the table and went to the back porch to confirm his suspicions.

Zack stood next to the wash stand. “I like cheese on my potatoes and fried chicken too.”

“What are you doing here? How did you get here?”

“I had to come, Jase. I belong here until it’s time for me to leave with Aunt Marietta.” He stated his opinion as firmly and decisively as any man had ever done.

“Zack,” Jase said in his most demanding voice, “how did you get here?”

“I hid under a canvas in Mr. Richards’ buckboard.”

Jase swept the boy into his arms and stalked back to the kitchen. “I’m taking you straight to Fort Kearney.”

“But, Jase,” Mabel said gently, “it’s getting dark. As much as the boy needs to be returned to his aunt, it really isn’t worth risking his life by taking him home in the dark, is it?”

“She’s right, Jase.” Zack latched onto Mabel’s words quicker than a mosquito bites a man walking through a slough.

Jase’s stomach churned. He knew Marietta must be sick with worry. He wanted to throttle the boy for what he’d done, but that wouldn’t make Marietta feel any better.

“Zack, sit down,” he said. “We’re going to eat then we’re going to bed. We’ll be on the road to Fort Kearney when day breaks.”

It was obvious the boy wanted to protest, but he kept his lips silent. The only things which passed through his mouth the rest of the evening were two drumsticks, a chicken thigh, half a plate of potatoes, and a big piece of apple pie.

After supper, Zack went straight to his room while Mabel and Jase cleaned up the kitchen. Jase went to Zack’s room to tuck the boy in once he finished helping Mabel.

“Did you wash up good, son?” Jase sat on the edge of the bed and brushed his hand over the boy’s head. He’d missed being close to him. How was he going to stand taking him back to the fort in the morning?

“I cleaned both ears, inside and out.” Zack twisted his head so Jase could see. “I washed all the way up to my elbows, and I got my feet clear up to my knees.” He took Jase’s face in his hands. “I can be a good boy, Jase. If you’ll let me stay here until I go on the stage with Aunt Marietta, I’ll be the best boy you ever saw in your life. I’ll do anything you ask.” He threw his arms around Jase’s neck. “Please, please let me stay. I love you so much. I just want to be with you a little while longer before I have to go.”

Jase wrapped his arms around him. He wanted Zack with him as much as the boy wanted to stay, but what could he do? Zack belonged with Marietta. The boy needed to form an attachment to her, and he couldn’t do that if he stayed with Jase.

“Zack,” he whispered into the child’s ear, “I have to take you back to Fort Kearney in the morning. There’s nothing else I can do.”

He let go and pushed himself out of Jase’s arms. He snuggled on his side under his quilt with his knees curled up. “I’m sorry, Jase. I want to go to sleep now.”

He stood and stared down at the child he loved more than his own life. Why did doing the right thing have to be so blasted hard? “Good night, Zack,” he said, kissing his cheek.

He left the boy’s room and went down the hall to his own bedroom. He began to consider Zack’s proposal. His request really wasn’t unreasonable. The Carson house was crowded with two extra people. Maybe Zack *could* stay with him until the stage came.

But, if Zack *did* stay with him for another few weeks, would he be any more ready to leave when the stage came? As much as he wished he could give Zack what he wanted--what Jase wanted himself--he knew the boy needed to be with Marietta. He needed to gain the sense of family with her which would give him some security.

The next morning, as soon as Mabel had fed them a hearty breakfast, Jase and Zack left for the fort in predawn obscurity. Jase held Zack close in front of him as they cantered over the prairie, savoring what would probably be the last moments of closeness they’d ever have.

Zack was so innocent, a victim of injustice. Evil men with hearts dedicated to greed, selfishness, and violence, with hands doing the Devil’s work, had murdered the

boy's parents and caused him unbearable pain. Now, a woman as beautiful as a summer sky, with a heart warmed by love, would hurt Zack again by taking him away from the only land he'd ever called home--and Jase was helping her do it.

Whatever the intentions of those concerned, Zack was suffering injustice from everyone around him.

A few miles from the fort, they were met by several soldiers who were looking for the missing boy. Once they discovered Zack was well, the group of military men rode back to the fort in haste to report to Marietta that her nephew was in good hands and would be in her arms shortly.

Jase decided as long as Marietta knew Zack was safe, there was no need to jostle the boy with a hard gallop like the soldiers had been willing to make to give her the happy report.

He thought of Marietta the rest of the way to the fort. The idea of seeing her again quickened his pulse. He wished he had an opportunity to pursue a relationship with her, but he knew it was pointless. Her life was in Chicago; his was on his ranch. She'd never fit in with his way of living, and he'd choke in a city.

He'd have done anything to win Marietta's love if he'd thought he had a chance at enticing her to stay, but he knew such efforts would be wasted. He'd have to be content for the rest of his days with the memories of the gazes she'd given him, the words they'd exchanged, and the quiet magic of their moments together.

He guided Beaumont into the fort and urged him toward the Carson home. Marietta was on the porch sitting next to a soldier, smiling at him. The image ripped Jase through the gut like a knife through a vital organ.

His reaction to seeing her with another man surprised him. He tried to toss the nasty feeling aside, but it wouldn't leave. His head told him he had no right to feel the way he did, but his heart made it clear Marietta was special to him, and there wasn't a thing he could do about that.

The instant she caught sight of the approaching riders, she hastened to her feet and lit the entire fort with her smile.

Jase's heart beat even faster when his eyes locked on the most beautiful sight in five hundred miles. She was absolutely breathtaking.

The soldier next to Marietta stuck something in his pocket and came toward Jase when Beaumont reached the hitching post. "Let me take the boy," he said, reaching for Zack.

Jase handed Zack to the soldier, who promptly placed the child in Marietta's arms.

"There you go, right back where you belong," the soldier said to Zack. "Thank you, Miss Randolph. I'll be leaving now." He tipped his hat and strode off.

Jase dismounted and climbed the steps to the porch. "Hello, Miss Randolph."

"Hello, Mr. Kent."

Jase couldn't help but wonder if the delight in her eyes was solely a reaction to having her nephew back, or if some of her happiness was the result of seeing him again. He removed his hat and held it by the brim.

"The boy stowed away on James Richards' buckboard."

"So that's what happened. I was terribly worried." Marietta continued to hold Zack closely as she lifted her emerald gaze to meet Jase's. "I didn't know what had

become of him. I thought maybe someone had..." She pulled Zack away from her and looked at him. "Don't ever do anything like that again, darling. I couldn't stand it if anything bad happened to you."

He looked down. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I missed Jase so much I couldn't stand it." He lifted his eyes and stared into Marietta's loving gaze. "Can't I please stay at Jase's until we leave for the city? I'll be good, I promise." Tears slid from the child's gloomy blue eyes. "I just want to be on the ranch. *Please.*"

She kissed Zack and squeezed him hard. "I'll talk to Mr. Kent about it."

The breeze from the wing of a gnat could have knocked Jase over when he heard her response to Zack's request. He'd have been less surprised to see his bull grow an udder than to hear her say she'd consider letting the boy stay on the ranch. In just a few words, she'd undone all the convincing Jase had done to make Zack understand he had to stay with her.

Zack pushed away from her and jumped down to the porch. "Talk to Jase now. I'll go inside and see if Miss Amy has any gingerbread men." He looked up at Jase. "You listen to her when she tells you how much I need to be at the ranch, Jase. She's my aunt, and I got to do what she says, so listen to her." He sped into the house before either Marietta or Jase could say another word.

Jase stretched to his full six-foot-two-inch height and folded his arms. "You'll talk to me about it?" he asked, lifting a brow. "What does that mean? The boy belongs with you, and we all know it. The two of you need to build family ties."

"I know."

"Then why did you speak as though you'd consider letting him come back to the ranch with me?"

"Because I can't turn down such a reasonable request. Zack has lost so much, and he doesn't want to lose you. He loves you, Mr. Kent, why shouldn't he spend time with you? He's happy when you're around, and he's glum as a beggar when you're not with him." She wiped her hands over her face. "Why can't we give the boy a little happiness?"

Jase stared down at her in disbelief. Refusing Zack's request had been difficult enough. He'd never have the strength to turn down Marietta if she flat-out insisted on his taking Zack home to the ranch.

"He belongs with you, Miss Randolph." His words were firm but gentle.

"He'll have his whole life with me."

"He needs you now. Even he understands that."

"Mr. Kent, the boy deserves some happiness. I know it's impossible to give him both what he needs and what he wants, so we have to choose. He needs to be with me, but he wants to be with you. I say let him be with you now and me later."

"You're only delaying the inevitable," Jase said, shaking his head. "The boy has to be with you." He looked out on the compound as he searched his mind for a solution to this latest dilemma.

"Surely we can come to an understanding, can't we?"

Jase fingered the brim of the hat he was holding. "There's a way, I suppose, to do what you're asking." He gazed at Marietta and wondered if what he was about to suggest was in Zack's best interest or his. "I'd consider having Zack come to the ranch with me if you came too."

"What?"

The shock on her face mirrored Jase's own astonishment at what he'd been foolhardy enough to say.

"I'll move into the bunkhouse with my ranch hands," he explained as one idea after another flooded his mind. "You can live in my house with Zack and my housekeeper, Mrs. Whipple."

"You want me to live in your house?"

"Yes. It's the only way. You and Zack can be together, and I can be with him as much as possible."

"But, to put you out of your own house... Mr. Kent, that wouldn't be fair."

"Do you think I wouldn't give up more than my house to make Zack happy? I'd give the boy my life if it were necessary."

She looked away. "You dearly love him, don't you?"

"You know I do."

She gazed at him once more. "Are you sure you want to do this? I know I was out of line giving Zack hope, but maybe you were right. Maybe he should just stay with me here at the fort."

"Naturally, I want to do whatever you think is best for Zack, but, if you decide it would be okay for him to come to the ranch, you now have a choice."

"Hmm, I wonder..."

"I swear I don't know whatever put such an idea into my head, Miss Randolph, but I'm glad I came up with it. If you think it would be good for Zack to spend more time with me, I truly believe the plan I outlined is the best solution for this situation."

She smiled up at him. "I'd love more than anything to see the life in Zack's eyes which I saw when we shared the cabin in the snow storm."

"Are you saying you want to come to my ranch?"

Her eyes turned softer than Jase had ever seen them. "Let's go tell Zack the good news. I can't wait another minute to see him happy again."

Chapter Seven

It took only a couple of hours for Jase, Marietta, and Zack to load the things they needed onto the borrowed buckboard they took to Jase's ranch. As he sat next to Marietta driving over the beautiful open prairie on a warm December day, Jase's heart filled with gratitude. He was thrilled he'd found the right solution to his problems.

While it was true he could end up with a broken heart when Marietta ultimately left him, if he let himself grow even fonder of her, he'd gladly take the pain in order to give Zack a few weeks of happiness. The happiness he'd receive himself with Zack and Marietta nearby would be enough to sustain him the rest of his life. It had to be.

Matters of the heart always surprised Jase. He'd actually been jealous when he'd seen the young soldier with Marietta on the Carson porch. He had no right to jealousy. He and Marietta weren't even close enough to speak to each other on a first-name basis, yet he couldn't help how he felt.

He'd grinned at his foolish feelings when he'd learned the reason Marietta had been sitting with the soldier: she'd been helping the private write a letter to his sweetheart back home. And Jase had been jealous.

No need to ponder that now. Marietta and Zack were next to him for the moment, and he couldn't have been happier.

~ * ~

Marietta remembered Zack's directions to Jase's ranch home as they passed each of the landmarks the boy had described. The house was visible from a great distance away, and when they pulled up to the white clapboard building at sunset, she knew for sure it was indeed as large as it had appeared from miles away. She'd had no idea a rancher would live in such a fine home.

Jase helped her down from the buggy. "Let's go inside. I'm sure Mabel has our supper ready. I'll bring your things in later."

"And I'll help," Zack said, jumping down from the buggy.

"Yes, you'll help." Jase pulled the boy's knitted hat from his head and fluffed the blonde curls.

"Do you mind if we look around before we eat?" Marietta asked, looking up at Jase. "Your house is far more intriguing than anything I'd imagined. I'd expected to see something much more humble."

A light of pride shone in Jase's coffee-brown eyes. "We'll look around while Zack washes up. Right, Zack?"

"Yup, Jase. I'll wash up while you two look around, and I'll help Mrs. Whipple set the table or wash dishes or take out ashes or fill the cistern or anything else she wants." Zack was clearly intent on living up to his promise to be helpful.

Jase grasped Marietta's arm and urged her up the front steps. "I'm glad to see you being cooperative, Zack. Thank you."

"You're welcome." The boy rushed past them and ran inside, leaving the door open. "I'm back, Mrs. Whipple. And I brought my aunt!"

Jase chuckled. "I guess the news is broken."

He led Marietta inside, took her coat, and hung it in the front closet next to his own. They stepped into the kitchen where he introduced the two ladies.

Marietta was aghast at the modern kitchen Mrs. Whipple had to work in. A bright yellow warmed the walls, the latest in cook stoves heated the room as well as their supper, and the whitewashed cabinets looked more like they belonged in a Chicago mansion than in a home in the middle of a prairie. What a luxury it must be on baking day to have so much workspace on top of the lower cabinets.

After the introductions, Jase led Marietta to a smaller room across from the kitchen. "This is my library."

"A library! Mr. Kent, look at all the books!" Marietta scanned the wooden shelves filled with books. "You have a little piece of heaven right here in this house." She stepped close to Jase and turned her beaming face up to meet his gaze. "We'll have to read to each other as we did in the cabin."

The instant the suggestion crossed her lips she knew she'd gone beyond proper bounds by suggesting such an intimate activity. It was one thing to pass the time reading

to each other in the cabin when they'd been held captive by the storm, but here in Jase's home... She'd been much too aggressive to suggest it.

Jase touched her shoulder lightly. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do, Miss Randolph."

Marietta felt her cheeks burning. His quick acceptance of her daring suggestion and the provocative gleam in his eyes led her to suspect Mr. Kent might be flirting with her.

"Would you like to see the parlor?" he asked, waving his hand toward the door.

"Of course."

He showed her his entire house, upstairs and down, and he promised he'd give her a tour of his outbuildings in the morning. Marietta was amazed at the beauty of his home. Its décor was simple, but the rooms were as homey and as comfortable as any she'd seen in Chicago. Staying in Jase's house would be as comforting as being in her own home. She knew it the minute she'd stepped into the radiant kitchen.

The first week on the ranch went by quickly. Jase spent most of his time working, and he took Zack with him everywhere he went. During the day, Marietta busied herself with sewing. Zack had nearly outgrown all his shirts and pants. She was pleased to have the opportunity to hone the seamstress skills she'd allowed to atrophy when she'd increased her hours of work at the library.

Jase gave her some of his old things to refashion into new things for Zack. Mabel gave her a bolt of goods too. In the evenings, Marietta would join Jase and Zack for a stroll or a child's story or game by the fire.

One afternoon during the second week of her stay, Jase came into the parlor where she was sewing. He held a sleeping little boy against his shoulder. "He finally wore out. He fell sound asleep ahead of me in the saddle. I was going to take him to see my favorite place on the ranch, but he just drifted off to sleep."

"We'd better lay him down in his bed." Marietta put her sewing aside and went with Jase to Zack's room.

Jase laid him on the bed and gently covered him with his quilt.

"He looks like an angel," Marietta whispered as she gazed upon the sleeping child.

"He's a great boy, Marietta. You're lucky to have him in your life."

She looked up at him and found a fatherly love radiating from his gaze as he stared at her nephew. "We'd better go before we wake him."

Jase pressed his hand to her back as he urged her out of the room. His warmth seeped inside her. She loved the touch of him, the sheer awesome masculine magic of him. She'd never known a more wonderful man.

When they were back in the parlor, he took hold of her arm before she could sit and return to her sewing. "Would you like to come with me since Zack can't? I'd love to show you the special place I intended to show him." Before she could reply, he added, "I know you don't think much of the prairie, but what I want to show you is an enigma in the vast openness. I think you'll enjoy it. We'll ride out on Beaumont and Fancy."

As Marietta stared into Jase's compelling gaze she realized he could have asked her to go just about anywhere and she'd have said yes. It seemed he had cast a spell over her, and she didn't mind one bit.

She cleared her throat and gave him a tentative look. "I'm afraid I don't know how to ride a horse."

He stroked his fingers along his jaw. "That could be a problem. We can take a buckboard part of the way, but the land gets too rough for anything but a horse, mule, or foot traffic before we reach our destination."

"Maybe I could ride with you?" The words were out of her mouth before she could censor the thought. Her suggestion hung in the air as thick as fog, and her cheeks began to warm with embarrassment over her shocking suggestion.

A grin played at the corner of Jase's mouth. "I don't see why not. Beaumont is a strong mount. He can easily carry us both."

As soon as her embarrassment over her outrageous behavior subsided she left the room and went to get ready for their outing. She met him in the barn momentarily. Within minutes, they were mounted on Jase's stallion, moving west toward a rise in the plain.

She sat ahead of Jase, his arms surrounding her as he effortlessly guided his stallion over the rough terrain. She could feel the heat of his body penetrate through her clothing into her back. She decided she could live the rest of her life inside Jason Kent's strong arms.

The thought had barely crossed her mind when her mother's oft-repeated warning intruded on the very pleasant notion: *Don't ever let infatuation with a man cloud your judgment.*

It took twenty minutes to reach their destination--twenty minutes which passed far too quickly. When they reached the rim of the landform he wanted to show her Marietta's breath caught in her throat. She could hardly believe what she saw. She'd certainly never expected to find anything so beautiful in land she'd believed to be part of the underworld.

Where had such an oddity come from? Huge rocks lay everywhere. Pine trees, invisible during their ride, rose from the floor of the low-lying gully--but it wasn't really a gully. It was more like a big semi-circle of a hodgepodge of trees, rocks, and rises coming from the ground. A stream ran through the odd space as far as Marietta could see.

Jase carefully guided Beaumont downward into the midst of the unusual land formation.

"This truly is an enigma, Mr. Kent. I've never seen such contradiction in nature nor a sight more lovely."

"It's called Pine Rock Hollow." Jase dismounted near one of the large boulders and lifted her from the horse. When her feet reached the ground, he kept a tight hold on her hand. "Watch your step. The land is very uneven."

She stared at the sight around her. "You watch my step for me. I can't take my eyes off the rocks and trees." She took two steps forward. "And the brook, Mr. Kent. I want to go drink from it." She felt his grip on her hand tighten as she moved toward the stream.

He had to lift her a time or two as she tried to manage her long skirts over the rugged ground. When they reached the brook, she let go of his hand and dropped to her knees. She pulled off her gloves and dipped her cupped hands into the water. The second she touched the crystal liquid, she inhaled sharply and turned to look at Jase. "It's warm. Is this a hot spring?"

"Not exactly. It isn't as warm as you think; your hands are cold from the crisp air. It's warm for a spring which isn't a true hot spring, but it's still just a spring."

She dipped her hands into the water once more and raised them to her lips to drink. She stood and smiled at Jase. "It's sweet."

He nodded crookedly. "Like I said, it's a mystery place. Everything about it is strange and beautiful."

"Have you ever seen anything as beautiful as this?" she asked, looking around.

Jase stepped closer to her. He pulled off his gloves, shoved them into his pocket, and took her into his arms. "I've seen much greater beauty than this strange landform, Miss Randolph." He stared at her in silence. "I'm looking at that great beauty right now." He bent closer and pressed his lips to hers.

She wasn't expecting him to kiss her.

She had no idea he would kiss her.

She was glad he was kissing her.

She slid her arms around him to let him know it was all right to hold her and kiss her the way he was doing.

He held her closer, his kiss lingering on her lips until she was sure she'd faint from the sheer pleasure of their union. When he broke their bond and pulled away from her, he stared down at her and held her face in one of his hands. "Marietta, you are so lovely."

Her own words became lost somewhere between her mind and her throat.

It seemed an eternity passed before he pressed his lips to hers once more.

As he kissed her, touched her, held her as though she were the most valuable treasure on earth Marietta realized that, for the first time in her life, her world made sense.

Her rapturous discovery filled her heart with joy, and the burden of pain she'd been carrying disappeared.

She kissed him most fervently, clung to him and touched him. She'd never kissed any man before the way she was kissing Jase, not that she'd kissed more than one or two.

Was this what it felt like to be in love? Her head swam and her heart roared. She wanted more, and she let Jase know it.

When he abruptly pulled away, she felt her heart stop. He took two steps back; she took two steps toward him. She wanted him back in her arms. Now!

"Jase..." She searched his eyes hoping to find an explanation for the magic and mysticism which seemed to exist between them.

He looked away. "I'm sorry, Marietta. I've wanted to kiss you for a long time, but I'm afraid I've behaved inappropriately. You've got to know I didn't bring you here just to kiss you."

He gazed at her, his brown eyes wild with an emotion she'd never seen in a man's eyes before. Yet, somehow, she understood the strange emotion completely, because it coursed through her own body as well: the strange, wonderful emotion had to be the holy desire shared by people in love. Committed love.

But there was no commitment between them, and there never would be. That was why Jase had expressed regret over what he'd done.

She reached toward him and touched his cheek.

"You're a wonderful man, Mr. Kent. I'm glad for the time we've had together, but you're right. We mustn't indulge in this kind of behavior. It's not for people like us,

strangers who meet then never see each other again.” She glanced around the living mystery engulfing them. “Perhaps we should return to the ranch house.”

He took her hand. “Not just yet, Miss Randolph... Marietta.” He stared down at her. “Marietta,” he said on a whisper as he trailed his fingers through her hair. “Let me call you by your given name. Let’s have at least that much between us.”

Her heart beat wildly. “Jase, I wish we could have more than that.”

“Could we, Marietta?” he asked eagerly. He cupped her cheek with his palm. “Are you saying--”

She quickly placed her fingers over his mouth. “I’m saying we both know we can have nothing more than a stolen moment. But Jase...” She had to look away before she went on. “Jase, I’m glad you kissed me.”

He touched her chin and turned her face toward him.

She looked up at him and smiled.

“One more kiss, Marietta, a kiss we can live on for the rest of our lives.” His voice was low and husky. He gazed intently into her eyes and sweetly took possession of her lips once more. Her heart thundered in her ears as happiness coursed through her veins. She knew she would remember this precious moment for the rest of her life.

When he’d kissed her breathless, he pulled back and smiled down at her. He gave her another kiss before taking her hand and tugging her forward. “I have something I want to show you.”

They walked twenty yards or so over more rough terrain. Jase held her hand the entire way.

Marietta loved the feel of her hand in his. She loved it so much she never wanted him to let her go.

Jase urged her toward an indentation in one of the large rocks they came upon and lifted her down to a hollow. He let go of her hand and knelt beside a piece of stone about three-feet high and two-feet wide. “I’m making this marker for Kathy and Clint.”

Marietta knelt next to him and read the words etched into the stone slab. “*Kathy and Clint Morgan. Beloved mother and father of Zack Morgan.*”

She’d never been so deeply touched by anything in her life. “Mr. Kent... Jase, it’s beautiful.”

“I intend to carve the Lord’s Prayer on this stone too. Kathy prayed it often. She had a deep, abiding faith. I think that would be a fine tribute to a woman who gave us so much. I wanted you to know how deeply we all loved your sister.”

Just when she thought she couldn’t care for this man any more than she had as he’d kissed her and filled her with joy, he’d brought more happiness to her heart by showing tremendous kindness to the memory of her sister.

She stood and turned away from him before he caught her shedding the tears she was struggling to hold back. “Jase, your generosity overwhelms me.”

He stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “I’m not generous, Marietta, but I’ve learned to be grateful for the comforts we receive in life. Kathy was a great comfort to Clint, Zack, and to all those who knew her. This marker is a token of my gratitude to her.”

She turned and looked up at him. “Thank you, Jase, for loving and caring for Kathy and Zack.” She kissed his cheek and pulled back.

He grazed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “It’s been my great pleasure.”

She gazed into his eyes, unable to look away for fear she'd break the perfect bond between them. Beaumont whinnied, spoiling the mystical spell which had engulfed her. She turned toward the horse. "We'd better get back," she said, glancing at Jase.

"Are you sure you want to leave?" He touched her cheek and gave her another of his intense, irresistible gazes.

The last thing she wanted to do was leave. She'd suggested they return to the ranch because, if they didn't, she was afraid she'd throw herself into his arms and never leave. "I think we should go, Jase."

"I suppose all good things must end." He cupped her cheek with his hand. "And today, Marietta, has been good beyond anything I could have imagined. I'm glad you came here with me."

If they didn't leave immediately, she doubted she'd ever be able to leave at all. The magic of both the place and the man could easily steal all of her common sense if she allowed it. She'd never felt so vulnerable. "Zack is probably waiting for us."

"He probably is."

As Marietta stared up at him, she wondered if he'd take her into her arms again. She was terribly disappointed when he didn't.

Jase took her hand and led her over the rocky ground to Beaumont.

He clasped his hands around her waist, and she hoped again he would draw her against him.

But he didn't.

Instead he hoisted her onto his horse. "Zack probably won't be too happy with me when we get back," he said as he got on behind her. "He'll be disappointed he didn't come along with us, but I can bring him here another time." He circled her with his arms as he took control of his mount. "I'm glad we came here alone, Marietta. I'll never forget this day."

"Neither will I, Jase." She closed her eyes and sank her back into Jase's chest. She knew she shouldn't let herself feel what she felt for him. She'd be leaving soon, and, if she let herself care too much, it would only hurt all the more when she had to go. But right now she didn't care about later.

No matter what the future might bring, she was going to let herself love being in Jase's arms, and she would allow herself to love him just a little too.

Chapter Eight

The days following their trip to Pine Rock Hollow kept Jase on edge. How could he have taken advantage of Marietta the way he'd done? His behavior was despicable, yet she'd been kind enough to smooth things over for him.

He truly hadn't taken her to the isolated area to take her in his arms, no matter how much the thought of doing just that had taunted and tempted him for weeks. He'd taken her there to show her a beautiful spot on a vast prairie and to show her the stone marker he was making for the Morgans.

He shouldn't have held her; he shouldn't have kissed her. Staring at his land from the top of Beaumont, Jase pulled his glove from his hand and touched his lips. He'd never

experienced anything so gut-wrenchingly wonderful as the feel of Marietta's silky cheek. He'd never tasted anything half as sweet as her rosy lips. The moment he'd held her close to his heart, he'd known he could never live without her again.

He kicked his mount and sent him into a frenzied run. Dust flew from hooves raising clouds of anger. Why did he have to care for her so much? If she'd stayed in Chicago, he'd have been so much better off. Zack would have become his son, and he'd never have known a love with Marietta he could never have.

Beaumont drove over the earth, grinding his shod hooves over rocks and dirt, throwing earthen powder into the air. Jase clung tightly to his mount, becoming one with the racing animal, moving gracefully with him, running with the steed--running away from the love in his heart. But he knew he couldn't get away from his feelings for Marietta by driving his horse to its death. He reined in the stallion until it cantered methodically over the earth.

Maybe he should ask Marietta to stay.

He dismissed the thought as quickly as it had come. She was a refined lady, a city woman. She hadn't made her distaste for the wilderness a secret. Few women could tolerate living in isolation. Kathy and Amy Carson had been extraordinary exceptions. Marietta would never in a hundred years consent to stay, even if she felt the same way about him as he felt about her.

Besides, he had his land speculation to tend to. He'd be gone a good deal of time with that project. It wouldn't be fair to Marietta for him to be away so much if she did agree to stay. He rode to the barn, checked in with the ranch hands, and decided to have supper with them.

He finished his chores early; he needed a good night's sleep. The next day he was taking Mrs. Whipple to her son's home for Christmas, and, on his way back, he was to meet James Richards at Fort Kearney to discuss their schedule for next spring's exploration.

When he returned, he hoped to spend some time alone with Marietta and Zack.

~ * ~

Marietta watched from the parlor window as Jase and Mabel rode away. The farther they went, the more alone she felt. Zack stood beside her, clinging to her skirt.

"I wish Jase and Mrs. Whipple didn't have to go, Aunt Marietta."

"Me too, but Mrs. Whipple wants to be with her son for Christmas." She crouched next to Zack and kissed his cheek. "Just like I want to be with you. You can't blame her for leaving, can you?"

He shook his head. "I know she had to go. Her son doesn't have anyone to make him Christmas cookies."

"That's right. And Mrs. Whipple couldn't go alone, so Jase is taking her. Her son will bring her back here next month sometime."

Zack scratched through his blonde curls. "Next month? We'll be gone before that." He twisted his face as he thought. "While we're here, you can cook for Jase and take care of him, but who will take care of him after we go and before Mrs. Whipple comes back?"

Marietta hadn't thought about taking care of Jase the way Zack had suggested since Jase had been spending most of his time working or in the bunkhouse with the ranch hands. The thought of doing things for him--cooking for him and caring for him--appealed to her much more than it should have. "Jase doesn't need someone to take care of him every minute. He will always be fine. He's a very strong and capable man."

Calling Jase by his first name sent pleasure coursing through her. What a wondrous time it had been in Pine Rock Hollow the day they became intimate enough to speak to each other on a first-name basis.

Marietta tucked the pleasure of her love for Jase deeply into her heart. She'd store it there and treasure it all the days of her life. Perhaps on cold winter days in the future--days filled with loneliness and loss--she'd be able to take out the day she'd spent with Jase in the wondrous, mysterious hollow and chase away the emptiness inside her. She'd be able to remember the heavenly touch of Jase's lips against hers and the beat of her own heart as he'd pressed her close to him.

She would always cherish the day she'd fallen in love.

Two days after Jase left with Mrs. Whipple, a snowstorm pummeled the ranch. Though the storm was nowhere near as bad as the one which had delayed Marietta's return to Chicago, it was serious enough to frighten her deeply. If it weren't for the concern and comfort of Jase's kind ranch hands, she would have spent every waking moment worrying about his safe return home and fretting about whether or not she'd be able to safely take her trip back to Chicago with Zack.

Spike Farley assured her Jase was one of the few men who could find his way around a prairie at night without moonlight. He promised her Jase would get home safely, and he'd get Zack and her to their stage in plenty of time.

While Spike's words did give her great comfort, his reassurance began to wear thin six days after Jase left since he'd said he'd be gone only three or four days. If the snow had delayed him a day, he still should have been home.

By late evening on the sixth day, Marietta was in a panic

It was difficult to reassure Zack everything would be all right when she was deeply frightened for Jase's safety herself, but she managed to do it anyway. She told him she was sure Jase would be home the next day.

In the evening she stayed with Zack until he fell asleep, then she went down to the parlor to worry all alone.

She stared out the window for hours, but she could see nothing moving, despite the fact that the moonlight reflecting off the snow made it seem almost as bright as twilight.

Jase could travel at night if he wanted to, she remembered Spike saying. There was enough moonlight to make it easy to see. Mrs. Whipple's son lived only eight or nine miles northeast of the fort. Jase had told her he had a few other errands to attend to, but he still should have been back by now. Why wasn't he home yet!

Marietta moved away from the window and sat on the rich-green sofa. The flowered lamp on the stand next to the couch shone brightly, but its luminance did little to comfort her aching heart. She glanced at the timepiece hanging around her neck: it was past two in the morning. She laid her head back on the sofa, closed her eyes, and prayed for Jase's safe return.

In a little while, she fell into a deep sleep.

~ * ~

Jase saw a light burning in the window as he neared his ranch yard. He decided Marietta must be up early tending to his household. The thought of her taking care of his home warmed his half-frozen body. He'd forced himself to put thoughts of her out of his mind while making his trip. She'd be leaving soon. It wasn't safe to love her as much as he did.

The business complications of his meeting with James Richards and the other members of the consortium who'd traveled to Fort Kearney had helped him push daydreams about Marietta and Zack out of his mind.

He'd learned in the discussions with the consortium members the hunt for land where they could locate their new town was going to take much more time than Jase had thought.

He'd hardly be able to spend any time at his ranch during the upcoming spring, summer, and fall. He'd have to trust one of his men to manage his operation at home. Maybe he'd divide up the responsibilities according to each man's strongest suit: Lone Wolf could be in charge of the horses, Miguel excelled in money management. Stub was an expert in handling cattle, and Spike had a knack for the upkeep and care of the buildings.

The more Jase thought about his new venture the more excited he became. Every man at the meeting had been certain that building the right town at the right location along the Oregon Trail would bring them immediate returns on their investments. And, if the railroad eventually built along or near that route, the speculators would make a fortune. Jase would have a legacy to pass on to Zack, and his name would be remembered for all time as a founder of one of the first towns along a well-traveled western route.

Jase finally reached his house. He dismounted and tied his horse to the hitching post near his front door. He hurried up the steps to his house. He couldn't wait to see Marietta.

Once he'd hung his winter wear in the front closet, he went straight to the parlor. He stopped short when he saw Marietta sleeping on his sofa. His heart warmed at the sight of her. Dear heaven, she belonged in his house and in his heart!

She was a vision of exquisiteness. Her cinnamon hair lay over her shoulders, and she wore the flattering blue shirtwaist she'd made from goods Mrs. Whipple had given her. She lay as still as a slumbering kitten, and Jase could think of only one thing he wanted to do--he wanted to take her into his arms and tell her how much he loved her.

It didn't matter he'd slept little more than four hours each of the last few nights, or that the cold had wormed itself so deep inside his bones he felt as though he'd never be warm again.

To his utter amazement he realized even the land speculation meant nothing to him. Fame held no lure. Fortune was useless. Nothing in the world mattered but holding Marietta and telling her he loved her. All he needed or wanted in the world was her.

Slowly, ever so slowly and gently, he moved toward her, admiring her beauty as he made his approach. When he stood next to the sofa, he reached toward her. He wanted to touch her. He *needed* to touch her.

He drew his hand away from her and reached for the quilt lying on the back of the couch. He covered her with it and turned to blow out the light in the lamp.

He fought the urge to kiss her sweet cheek until the craving to touch her again overpowered his ability to forbear his desire. Jase moved closer to her, bent toward her, anticipated tasting the sweetness of her cheek. Just one kiss...

“Jase!” Zack’s excited whisper startled him.

He turned and signaled the boy to be quiet.

Zack ran to him, and he scooped him up. “Speak softly. Aunt Marietta is sleeping,” he said as he hugged him soundly.

“She was worried about you, Jase,” he whispered.

“She was?”

He pulled back and looked up at Jase as he nodded. “Yup. I saw her looking out the window all day yesterday. She kept saying, ‘I hope Jase comes home soon.’”

“She did?” Jase hadn’t wanted Marietta to worry about him, but he appreciated knowing she cared enough to be concerned for his safety.

He carried Zack to the kitchen. “Are you hungry, son?”

He rubbed his tummy when Jase set him down. “I could eat a whole steer.”

Jase chuckled lightly. “That’s pretty hungry. How about some side meat and fried potatoes?”

“And flapjacks with apple jelly?”

Jase fluffed the boy’s disheveled, slept-on hair with his fingers. “I’m not sure I can make flapjacks anywhere near as good as Mrs. Whipple’s, but I’m sure I can handle the side meat and potatoes. Maybe we could make some beans too.”

“Whatever you say, Jase. I’m just glad you’re home. Aunt Marietta said you’d be all right, and you are.”

“Did I hear my name?” Marietta leaned against the arch between the parlor and the kitchen.

Jase nearly dropped the cast iron pan he was holding when he looked at her. She’d been beautiful enough to knock a man over when she was lying on the sofa sound asleep, but awake and smiling at him, she was too lovely for words.

As he locked gazes with her, the grin left her face. She started moving toward him, and he handed the skillet to Zack. As though it were exactly what they were supposed to do, the man and woman wrapped their arms around each other and pressed their hearts together.

“I was worried about you, Jase.” The whimper of concern in her voice set his heart on fire.

“I told you she was worried,” Zack said smugly. He put the skillet on the table and threw his arms around the legs of the embracing couple.

“I’m sorry I was late,” Jase said. “I didn’t mean to worry anyone, especially not the two of you.”

“Lift me up, Jase. I want to hug with you.”

Jase reluctantly stepped out of Marietta’s arms and happily lifted Zack to his hip. The boy wrapped one arm around Jase and the other around his aunt.

“Give us a hug, Aunt Marietta.”

She did as he requested, linking herself with Jase and the boy on his hip.

“We’re all together now,” Zack said triumphantly. “It’s just like we’re a family.”

Chapter Nine

Jase was bone tired after traveling throughout the night to get home, but he couldn't fall asleep when he went to bed. Zack's words rolled around in his head. *It's like we're a family*. The boy was right. Jase felt it himself, and he wouldn't be surprised if Marietta felt it too.

But what was he to do? He'd never wanted a family. He'd always had everything he felt a man could want. He loved adventure and new undertakings like starting a ranch in Texas and another one in the Nebraska territory, and building a new town along the Oregon Trail.

He stood on the threshold of opportunity few men had ever known. He was becoming an integral part of a growing nation's advancement. It was only a matter of time before the railroad came through Nebraska and the territory became a state. His plans for the future had been made.

He left his bunk and went to the window. A light burned in Marietta's bedroom across the yard from the bunkhouse. He swallowed hard.

He'd never truly, deeply loved anyone before, not anyone. He'd been on his own as long as he could remember. When he became a man, he made good friends with people like Clint, Stub, Lone Wolf, Miguel, Spike, and, of course, Kathy, Amy, and Will. He'd grown terribly fond of them all, but he'd never lost his heart completely to another person until Marietta came into his life.

Not that Zack hadn't wormed his way under Jase's skin, but his feelings for Zack were entirely different from his feelings for Marietta. The light in her room went out, and he stared at her window a moment longer. When he turned away, he made his hand into a fist and slammed it against the wall.

He couldn't have it both ways. If he wanted to be a part of the land consortium, he'd have to forget about Marietta. He knew that was the right thing to do, or at least part of him knew it. If only he could squelch the part of him telling him he was a blasted fool to let a chance at love pass him by.

If he asked Marietta to stay--and in the unlikely event she took him up on his offer--he'd lose his one shot at immortality and financial success beyond his wildest dreams because he'd have to give up the land speculation.

How could a man choose between two perfect dreams?

~ * ~

Two days before Christmas, Marietta woke to one of the happiest days of her life. She'd promised Zack they'd make cookies together all day long. Zack had coaxed and cajoled Jase into promising he'd help with the tasty Christmas preparations. It would be a wonderful day.

The next two days with Jase would be bliss, and she'd have more sweet memories to tuck inside her heart for the lonely, hungry times in Chicago.

A knock sounded at her door.

“Aunt Marietta, I’m ready to bake cookies.”

She smiled, went to the door and opened it. “Already, Zack? Don’t you want to eat breakfast first?”

“I’ll have cookies for breakfast, the kind with cinnamon on them.”

She hunched down next to him. “Cookies for breakfast? I don’t know. Don’t you want some meat and potatoes?”

He shook his head until his brains must have started rattling. “Cookies--cookies with cinnamon on them.”

She stood up and folded her arms. “Why not? It’s Christmas. Little boys’ wishes should come true at Christmastime. If you want cookies for breakfast, that’s what we’ll have.” She unfolded her arms and pinched his cheek. “I need to get dressed and wash up, and so do you. I’ll meet you in the kitchen, and we’ll get started on the cookies.”

~ * ~

Jase had tried all day to get his work finished so he could join Marietta and Zack in the kitchen, but there was just too much to do. Zack had begged him to help make Christmas cookies. Jase knew he’d be all thumbs trying to bake pastries--he could fry side meat, steak and potatoes just fine, but cookies were a little too delicate for his big fingers--but he’d do anything to spend time with the two most important people in his life.

When he’d finally finished the necessary work, he went to the bunkhouse to wash up and put on clean clothes, then he went to face what he expected to be one disappointed little boy in his kitchen. He was sure Zack would be upset he hadn’t come earlier to help.

Jase went in the front door and wiped snow from his boots. As he hung his winter wear in the front closet, he heard laughter sing through his house from the kitchen. The warmth of it touched his heart and made him instantly regret not coming inside sooner.

Quietly, he made his way to the kitchen. Marietta and Zack hadn’t heard him come in. He stood in obscurity watching a sight more heart-stoppingly beautiful than any he’d ever imagined. The woman and boy in his kitchen brought the entire house to life with a warmth that rivaled any known by any hearth.

“You’re putting too much butter in the icing,” Marietta warned Zack.

“You have to have a lot of butter, Aunt Marietta. I saw you sneak some carrot juice in there to make it yellow in color. If there’s not enough butter, it might taste like carrots.”

Marietta placed a hand on her hip. “It won’t taste like carrots, but it *will* taste like butter if you put too much in the icing.”

“I like butter.” He put another dollop of fat in the frosting bowl.

Marietta drew in an exasperated breath and smiled at Zack as she walked over to him. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. “Well, it’s Christmas, Zack. A time when wishes should come true. You make the icing any way you like it.”

He dropped his spoon into the frosting and threw his arms around his aunt. “I love you, Aunt Marietta.”

Jase turned away and leaned against the wall. He thanked God for the love Marietta shared with Zack. This could have been a miserable Christmas for Zack without a woman in his life. Little boys needed loving women in their lives.

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. So did grown men.

The choice he'd been agonizing over was easy now. If Marietta would have him, he was going to marry her. He straightened up and walked into the kitchen.

Marietta caught sight of him the minute he entered the bright-yellow room. Her heart quickened when she saw his handsome face. "I'm glad to see you finally made it, Jase. Zack and I are icing the last of the Christmas cookies."

Zack put down his spoon and licked icing off his hands before running to Jase. "You got here at last. I shoulda helped you with the chores then you coulda come inside to help us sooner."

Marietta had been watching for Jase throughout the day. She wanted him with her every moment possible until she had to leave for Chicago. He was with her now, and that was all that mattered.

When the cookie baking was finished, she served the pot of stew she'd been simmering all day for supper. Jase ate heartily, but Zack only picked at his food.

"Too many cookies?" Marietta asked, teasing Zack.

The boy stirred his spoon around his plate. "I think I'm just too tired." He looked at Jase. "I think cookie baking is as tiring as rounding up cattle. What do you think, Jase?"

Marietta noticed Jase was holding back a smile. "Judging by how tired you look, son, I think you may be right."

"Aunt Marietta, would you mind if I went to bed?"

She reached toward Zack and caressed his cheek. "I think that might be a good idea."

He pushed out of his chair and walked slowly out of the room.

"When we've finished eating, Jase," Marietta said, "I sure would appreciate it if you'd take the rest of the stew and a basket of cookies to the men in the bunkhouse while I clean up the kitchen."

"They'll be grateful for your thoughtfulness. After eating with them these past weeks, I can tell you the cuisine they cook themselves leaves a lot to be desired. Although I will admit Miguel makes some excellent chili, and Stub is great with bacon and eggs."

She pushed herself away from the table and shook her head. "It's a good thing I'm leaving soon so you can have your house back. I don't know why you didn't eat with us. I told you it would have been fine."

"I didn't mind bunking and eating with the hands. They're more than employees to me; they're friends." Jase stood and wiped his mouth with his linen napkin. "Besides, we eat at such odd hours, and I didn't want to upset yours and Zack's timetables." He straightened to his full height before continuing. "Now, I've got something I'd like to ask you to do for me."

She tilted her head and sent him a grin. "What's that?"

He stepped closer to her. "Before I go to the bunkhouse, I'll lay a fire in the library hearth. When I come back inside, I want you to join me for some reading. You suggested we read together the day you arrived here, but we've yet to open a book besides the children's stories we've read to Zack."

Marietta was thrilled at the idea of having an intimate evening alone with the man she loved. "That sounds wonderful, Jase."

“Good,” he said warmly, staring at her with gentle eyes. “I’ll go tend to the fire.”

While Jase built the fire in the library she quickly filled a basket with cookies and put the remaining stew in a bowl.

A few minutes later he came to pick up the provisions for the men in the bunkhouse.

While Jase was out, she raced to her room. She loosened her hair and let it cascade over her shoulders. After washing herself and putting on a clean shirtwaist, she hastened to the kitchen to finish her chores.

By the time Jase had returned from his deliveries, the kitchen stood in enough order for Marietta to leave the unfinished work for later. He offered her his arm and escorted her to the library. They took their seats next to each other on one of the small sofas next to the wall.

“You look beautiful tonight, Marietta.”

She felt her cheeks warming due to the compliment he’d paid her. “And you look very handsome, Jase.” His fresh, dark clothes emphasized his attractive masculine features.

“What would you like to read?” he asked softly.

The nearness of him tightened her throat. She wasn’t sure if she would be able to speak clearly. “Something warm and lovely,” she said softly. “Perhaps the book there on the bottom shelf.” She pointed at one whose title she couldn’t remember at the moment. “I tried to read it the night I waited up for you, but I couldn’t concentrate.”

He reached toward her and almost touched her cheek before he drew back his hand. “I love that you waited for me, Marietta, but I am sorry I worried you.”

She smiled at him. “That’s over now, Jase.”

He moved closer to her on the little sofa and took her hand. “Marietta, I’ve loved having you here in my house. You’re a wonderful woman and an exceptional mother to Zack.”

“Thank you, Jase. You’re very kind.”

He took her other hand. “I’m not trying to be kind.”

“You’re not?”

He raised her hands to his lips one at a time and kissed her fingers. “No, I’m not. I’m trying to tell you that I’ve fallen in love with you. I’m trying to ask you to be my wife.”

Nothing had ever shocked her so absolutely. “What did you say?”

He kissed her hands again. “I want you to be my wife, Marietta.”

Even after he’d repeated his proposal, she could scarcely believe she’d heard him right. “You want me to marry you?” She closed her eyes to think. What should she say? How should she reply? Before her thoughts could clear, he pressed his lips to hers and stole what remained of her senses.

She basked in the bliss of his loving kiss. She’d never known anything so wonderful in her whole life.

After letting the kiss linger as long as she dared, she placed her palms over his smooth-shaven cheeks, pulled back and stared into the depths of his dark brown eyes. “Dear, Jase, I won’t deny I have strong feelings for you. You know I do. I couldn’t hide my feelings if I tried.”

“Then you accept?”

The eager sound of anticipation in his words and the sight of it in his eyes was more than she could bear. She left the sofa. She needed to put some space between them if she were going to have the courage to give him her reply.

“No, I can’t marry you,” she said, turning away from him and staring into the hearth. “It’s impossible.”

A moment later he stood behind her. He touched her shoulder and turned her round to face him. “But why, if you care for me?”

“Because I don’t belong here. My life is in Chicago. You know that, Jase.”

He stroked his fingers over her jaw. “Your life was in Chicago, Marietta. You and Zack belong here with me now. We--you and I--belong together. I feel it with every fiber of my body. I love you with all my heart.”

Marietta moved away from him, turning her head from side to side. “Jase, don’t say that. You know I belong in Chicago.”

He stepped behind her and took hold of her shoulders, pressing his lips close to her ear. “You need time to think.”

The warmth of him penetrated through her. She knew if she didn’t draw on every ounce of strength she had, she’d whirl around and press her heart next to his. If she let him hold her as she ached for him to do, she’d never leave him.

But she didn’t belong in the wilderness. She had to return to Chicago. She couldn’t let her feelings for this man cloud her good judgment. Hadn’t her mother drummed that into her head until the gospel idea was firmly planted there?

She turned around slowly and looked up at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but words wouldn’t come.

She shouldn’t have looked into his eyes. Too much hope lay in the brown circles staring down at her. Too much anticipation, and far too much love.

“I’m very tired, Jase.” She looked down briefly before lifting her gaze to meet his. She stiffened her spine and firmed her jaw. “I’m sorry, Jase. My answer is no. I can’t be your wife.”

“I’m sorry too, Marietta, because I won’t take no for an answer.”

His response to her refusal was nearly as shocking as his proposal had been.

“What?”

“We belong together,” he said, pulling her into his arms and placing a sweet kiss on her lips. “You have no reason to return to Chicago. You told me you’ve lost your job; you said you’ll have to move into your aunt’s house and depend on her for your care as well as Zack’s.”

She pushed out of his embrace. “My life, such as it is, *is* in Chicago. I’ll find another job, and I’ll support Zack and myself quite adequately, I assure you.”

He smiled and touched her cheek. “I have no doubt of that. I didn’t mean to imply you needed me for financial reasons. I meant to say you had a better reason to accept my proposal than to return to your life in Chicago. With me, you’ll have something you’ve yet to find in the city, something far more important than anything else in all the world. Love, Marietta. Deep, abiding, everlasting love.”

She moved away from him and wrung her hands. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me. What would I do without my social life? Mother always said a woman is defined by her place in society and her social activities.” She turned back to face him. “You don’t know the sacrifice you’re asking me to make.”

He moved toward her quickly and took her into his arms. “And you don’t know what you’re throwing away.”

“Please,” she said, fighting the desire to stay firmly planted inside his arms, “don’t hold me so tightly, Jase. I can’t think when you’re arms are around me.”

He let her go and took a step back. “Think, Marietta. Think about what you’re throwing away.”

She grasped her head with her palms and closed her eyes. “It isn’t fair. You want me to leave my life. You want me to do all the sacrificing for us to be together. Jase, you don’t know what you’re asking.” She looked at him and slowly turned her head from side to side. “I don’t think I can do it, no matter how much I care for you.”

“You think I’m not making changes in my life by asking you to be my wife?” His jaw hardened. “Consider this, Marietta. I’m in league with a consortium of nearly a dozen men to buy land near the Oregon Trail where we’ll build a new town. We investors stand to gain a fortune in funds and everlasting fame should the railroad eventually decide to come through on land near our town. It’s a dream for me, Marietta, something I’ve longed for.”

“Then why would you ask me to marry you?” she interjected. “You’d have no time for Zack and me if you were taking on such a project. Between your ranch and your land project, you’d barely have time to eat and sleep.”

He nodded and stared at her as his deep love for her returned to his eyes. “That’s right. If we were to marry, I’d have to give up a dream.” He moved closer to her and took her into his arms. “But I’ll gladly exchange a lesser dream for a greater one, Marietta. I want you to be my wife.”

She felt herself weaken. She closed her eyes and sank her cheek into his shoulder. She had to find the courage she needed to refuse him again.

“I’m sorry, Jase. My answer is no.”

He kissed the top of her head, released her, and left the room.

Chapter Ten

Marietta’s sleep was fitful after turning down Jase’s proposal.

Why did he have to ask her to stay? Surely he knew she’d turn him down. He knew she didn’t belong in the wilderness any more than a mountain lion belonged in the city.

Why had he forced her to hurt him when it was the last thing she’d ever want to do?

Yet, his proposal required sacrifice from both of them if they were to be married. Was she being selfish by refusing to give up her established life the way Jase was willing to give up his land speculation for her?

Perhaps she was.

She turned from side to side in her bed, trying to clear confusion from her mind. She needed to think, to think clearly. She mustn’t let her feelings for Jase cloud her judgment or interfere with making sound choices.

Sometimes, she wished she could be the rebel Kathy had been. No matter what Mother had taught them Kathy had always done as she'd pleased.

How she wished she had Kathy to speak with now. She needed her sister's advice so much. Even when she'd been hundreds of miles away, Kathy had continued to comfort and advise her through her correspondence. Now she didn't even have letters coming from her dear, sweet sister.

Marietta tossed inside her sheets and stewed in her troubles and in the teachings of childhood. In a moment of clarity she realized the only way she could have peace was by putting aside her feelings for Jase. Perhaps if she tucked emotion away and let logic and common sense dominate her thoughts she'd be able to make sound decisions.

She'd barely acknowledged the importance of eliminating emotion while making sound decisions when it occurred to her Jase had let his feelings rule the choices he made for his life. He'd let his love for her trump his plans for building a new town.

She demanded logical, emotionally-detached thinking to guide her in making decisions. Jase had let his heart steer him to the road he believed he wanted to follow. How differently two people in love could behave.

He was willing to give up a *dream* for her. And she was willing to give up *him* to return to her conventional life.

Damnation!

It was the first time such a word had ever crossed Marietta's thoughts. Life was suddenly far too complicated, and she was going to have to find a way to uncomplicate things very soon.

~ * ~

The next morning was Christmas Eve. By the time Marietta had washed and dressed for the day, Jase and Zack were dragging the Christmas tree inside.

"Aunt Marietta!" Zack squealed as she met him in the parlor. "Look at the tree Jase and I cut down! I got up very, very early today because it's Christmas Eve and time to get the tree. I woke Jase, and him and me went all the way out to Pine Rock Hollow to get it. Jase said that was the most special place in the whole world to him because he had a real special day there one time a couple of weeks ago." Zack looked up at Jase, whose face was turning an odd shade of red. "Didn't you say that, Jase?"

The cowboy cleared his throat. "I did, but, Zack, that was between you and me."

Marietta could barely look at Jase. She loved him so much. She'd loved him the day he'd first kissed her in Pine Rock Hollow, she loved him this minute as she stared across the room at him, and she would love him every day for the rest of her life.

"It's a beautiful tree, Zack." She folded her arms across her lavender shirtwaist. "Did you help cut it down?"

"Yup, and I cut my finger too, but Jase took care of it."

"You cut your finger? You must be very careful using tools, Zack."

"I know, Jase told me. Right, Jase?" He looked up at the man on the other side of the Christmas tree.

"You did fine, Zack. There isn't a man alive who hasn't cut himself on a tool at least once in his life, but your aunt is right. We all need to be careful using tools."

Marietta unfolded her arms and tucked away a stray hair which had escaped from the knot at her nape. "Did you two have breakfast yet?"

"I took some cookies to the bunkhouse for Jase and me, but I'm hungry again," Zack replied. "Are you, Jase?"

"I wouldn't mind some potatoes and side meat, or steak," Jase said, fixing his gaze on Marietta.

"And flapjacks," Zack added.

She smiled at her nephew, but when she looked at Jase, the smile slowly slipped away. With fifteen feet between him and his face half-hidden by the enormous fir tree he held on to, Marietta could see the love in Jase's eyes as well as the pain her refusal had put there.

She looked at Zack again and forced another smile. "One man-sized breakfast coming up." She quickly turned and walked out of the room.

She'd spent a lot of time in Jase's kitchen over the past few weeks, but this time the kitchen felt different to her. He'd offered to make his kitchen her kitchen. He'd asked her to make his parlor her parlor, his ranch her ranch, his library her library, and his bedroom their bedroom. He'd plainly told her he wanted her to share his life in every way, and she'd turned him down.

Had she done the right thing? She clenched her fists and whispered, "I don't know."

Marietta looked out the window at the vast emptiness of the Nebraska Territory prairie. She loved Jase's home. It was much lovelier than anyplace she'd ever lived, but there were no neighbors outside the front door except the ranch hands. Amy Carson and Mrs. Harrison, the colonel's wife, were the only women close to her age who lived nearby, yet they were a half-day's ride from the ranch, and Marietta couldn't even ride a horse.

Accepting Jase's proposal would be a huge risk, and she'd been raised to avoid taking chances. Her mother had told her to stay with the familiar, to keep close associations with ladies in the community, and to never, *never* let infatuation with a man interfere with good judgment. Mother had insisted a woman without a full social life served no purpose. If Marietta married Jase, she'd have no social life at all. Jase, Zack, the ranch hands, and possibly Mrs. Whipple if she stayed on would be the only people in her life on a daily or even weekly basis.

She began to peel the potatoes and heat the skillet in which she'd fry them.

Kathy had found immeasurable happiness in Nebraska--her letters had made her feelings crystal clear--and Amy was as happy as any woman Marietta had ever met. Was love really enough for some women? It had been for Amy and Kathy, but could it be for her?

She shook the confusing thoughts from her head. She'd made the only decision she could have made. She belonged in Chicago, and she just had to accept that and forget about Jase.

When the potatoes, side meat, and flapjacks were ready to be served, Marietta called Jase and Zack to the kitchen. The three of them feasted on fine food and loving companionship the way they would if they were a real family.

As Marietta became a momentary part of domestic bliss, she began to wonder which would be the bigger mistake, leaving Jase or staying with him.

She had to stop thinking about staying with Jase. She'd made up her mind. She was returning to Chicago where she belonged.

The rest of the day passed quickly. By the time supper was over, Zack was falling asleep in his dessert. Marietta insisted he go to bed, and she promised she'd come to his room to tell him goodnight in a short while.

When Zack left the room, Jase helped her clean up the kitchen. As he handed her a stack of dishes, their hands met, and she nearly dropped the china. He stepped next to her as she set the plates in a basin of warm soapy water.

"Marietta, I want to apologize for being so abrupt with you yesterday with my proposal, and I'm sorry I tried to bully you into accepting me. I knew before I asked you'd most likely refuse me, but I had to ask. I love you too much not to have asked."

She turned and looked up at him. "Jase, I didn't want to hurt you."

He placed two fingers over her lips. "Don't say anything. I do understand. I can't give you the social life you need, and I don't have anything more to offer you than my love." He drew his fingers back. "I wish I did, but just as your life is in the city, mine is here on the ranch." He cupped her chin. "So, you see, I do understand."

He spoke as though he had a crystal clear comprehension of why she'd chosen to return to Chicago. As much as she'd strived to believe she'd made the only logical choice she could make, her heart had continued to confuse and contradict her. Why did life, choices and decisions have to be such a mystery to her sometimes?

"I'm going upstairs to see Zack," he said, stepping away from her. "He's pretty excited about tomorrow morning. I promised him we'd have Bible readings with the ranch hands when he's finished opening his presents, but I think he's anticipating the feast we'll have more than anything else. That child loves to eat."

His fondness for her nephew filled her heart. "He does for a fact. Tell him I'll be up in a few minutes to tell him goodnight."

Jase inclined his head toward her and left the room.

When she'd finished cleaning up, she went to Zack's room, half expecting to find the boy sound asleep. Zack was sitting on Jase's lap while they sat on Zack's bed. The two of them cuddled together was the most beautiful portrait Marietta had ever seen.

"Did you get a present for Beaumont, Jase?"

He kissed the top of the boy's head. "Beaumont's a horse, son. He doesn't get presents."

A giant grin spread over Zack's face. "But little boys do, don't they, Jase?"

"They sure do."

"And so do big men," Zack said slyly.

"They do?" Jase pretended to be surprised by the boy's statement.

Zack gave an exaggerated nod. "Yup. I saw Aunt Marietta making you a--" He slapped his hands over his mouth. "It's a secret," he whispered as he drew his fingers away from his lips.

Jase chuckled, and Zack threw his arms around his neck.

"I love you, Jase. I wish we could stay forever. I never want to leave you."

Jase let the embrace linger before he pulled the boy away from him. "You know that isn't possible. You and your aunt will be leaving in a week. You'll have a wonderful life in Chicago."

“If you say so. I promised I’d be good when it came time to leave if you let me stay here, and you did, so I will.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“But I still wish I could stay, and Aunt Marietta said wishes could come true at Christmastime.”

“Little wishes can come true, Zack. I’m afraid this wish is just too big.”

Marietta hastened down the hall to her room. She couldn’t stand to listen to Zack’s shattered hopes and dreams another moment.

Was she being completely selfish? Why couldn’t she be sure of her decision? Why did so much doubt linger? She raised her eyes high above. If only she could find the answers to her questions. She had to be sure she was making the right decision.

She waited until she thought Jase was probably gone and went to tell Zack goodnight. She found him snuggled under the covers. He didn’t see her until she was next to him. “Are you ready to go to sleep?”

“Yup. I’m ready to sleep ‘cause I need to get up early in the morning. I want a long day to celebrate Christmas.”

She smiled as she leaned over and kissed him. “Goodnight, honey.”

He kissed her cheek in return. “Goodnight, Aunt Marietta.”

She tucked in his quilt and left his room.

As she lay on her bed, she closed her eyes and prayed for the strength she’d need to live with her decision to return to Chicago. It was the only realistic, sensible choice she could make for her future as well as Zack’s. And it was a decision she had to live with.

~ * ~

Jase stared at his home from his bunkhouse room. Marietta’s light had gone out an hour earlier. She was asleep by now, dreaming, resting, looking beautiful with her auburn hair strewn on her pillow around her lovely face. He was going to miss her so much he didn’t know if he’d be able to stand it. Living without her would mean terrible suffering.

Maybe he deserved the pain. He’d been a greedy man in his life, always chasing a new dream of wealth and success. He’d been blessed with a wondrous ranch in Texas, but it hadn’t been enough. He’d wanted to be a new settler in a new land making his mark. That dream had prompted him to come to Nebraska to start one of the first cattle ranches. And now that his ranch was moderately successful, he still wasn’t satisfied. He wanted to be remembered long after he was gone for both his wealth and his contributions to western growth, in the form of a new town.

He’d been greedy. He’d chosen to satisfy his thirst for new ventures when he’d left Texas, instead of marrying a woman who’d loved him deeply. He hadn’t loved Louise, but he’d liked her very much. She would have been a good wife to him, and she’d have given him wonderful children. But he’d chosen a new challenge in Nebraska over a family and the love of a good woman.

It was only fitting that now, when he’d made the decision to choose Marietta over another new venture, she would reject him. He didn’t deserve her love or the love of any other woman. He was being paid back for his selfish choices.

Now that he'd finally learned there was nothing greater in life than loving a woman, it was too late.

He stared at Marietta's window a little longer.

"Goodbye, my love. I'll never forget you."

~ * ~

Christmas came and went, and nothing of its magic helped Marietta gain any peace as she tried to squelch her nagging doubts about returning to Chicago. She was just as confused on December twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh, and twenty-eighth as she had been on Christmas Eve.

Two days before the stage which would take Marietta and Zack on their way to Chicago was due, Jase came into the kitchen just after Marietta finished washing up the breakfast dishes.

"Good morning, Jase. Can I fix you something else to eat?"

"No thanks." He took off his wide-brimmed hat and stepped closer until he stood next to her. He turned his hat in his hands. "I'm leaving tomorrow," he said on half-choked words.

"You're leaving? What do you mean? Where are you going?"

He glanced away briefly before he looked at her again. "I've got business to attend to. If I can't have you, I might as well go ahead with my plans for the land development. The consortium wants to have the town open for business by the end of next summer."

"So soon?" She was amazed at how quickly things could change in the West--from the weather to the landscape to the growth of new communities.

"Of course. Lots of folks use the Oregon Trail. People come through by the dozens needing supplies of all kinds. The sooner we can provide for their needs, the better it will be for all of us."

She hadn't thought about just how exciting this venture would be for a man like Jase. He had indeed been willing to make a huge sacrifice for their love.

Blast her for being so selfish and unwilling to compromise! Guilt stirred her insides.

"Miguel will take you and Zack to the fort. I'll meet you there before the stage leaves."

"Zack will be terribly disappointed about your departure." Marietta could feel her heart breaking. She'd thought she would have more time with him before she had to leave.

His gaze drifted toward the parlor where Zack was making noises as he played with his new handmade toys. "And what about you, Marietta?" he said when he looked at her again. "Are you disappointed I'm leaving?"

She felt her throat tighten. She rubbed her fingers over her neck as though the motion would loosen her constricting muscles. Caught in the grip of his penetrating eyes, she found she couldn't lie to him. "Yes, Jase. God help me, yes. I didn't want us to part yet."

His Adam's apple quivered as he took a step closer to her and stroked her cheek with his fingers. "I'll never be ready for us to part, but I can't stand for us to be so near to each other when I can't take you in my arms."

"Jase, please don't say that." She closed her eyes and turned around, leaning against the cupboards to steady her weakening body. She wouldn't be able to think straight if he did take her into his arms, yet she couldn't help but wish he'd do exactly that. Her heart wanted him to hold her and never let her go.

"I'm sorry," he said, fingering the hair she'd allowed to lay around her shoulders. "I didn't mean to upset you. What I'm trying to say is goodbye."

Her heart stopped beating, and she couldn't breathe. He placed his hand on her shoulder and pressed his lips close to her ear.

"I'll always love you, Marietta." He kissed her cheek, stood back from her, and left the room.

Marietta couldn't move. Cold air blew through the room when Jase opened the outside door. But it was the sound of the door closing that roused her from her unresponsive state of shock.

Jase was gone.

He'd never hold her again, never kiss her again, never share her life.

Could she live without him?

Heaven help her, she wanted him, but was it too late to have him? Now that she knew more about his land developing project and understood the dream he was willing to sacrifice to become her husband, could she change her mind and accept his proposal? If she did, she'd be asking him to make a monumental sacrifice in giving up something so important to him. If she truly loved him, how could she ask him to give up his dream?

Marietta watched Jase mount Beaumont and ride away from the house. As he moved toward the pasture, she envisioned him riding out of her life. She knew only too well the pain of losing the people she'd loved in her life; could she stand to lose love again?

Chapter Eleven

As the first light of dawn filtered into the barn, Jase saddled his steed and loaded the last of the supplies he'd need to make his trip. He'd decided to ride to James Richards' ranch east of the fort to discuss their plans for the spring trip. It seemed like a good excuse to get away from his ranch.

No matter how much he wanted to spend more time with Zack, it was too painful to be with Marietta, knowing she'd never belong to him. He loved her more than he could have ever imagined loving anyone. If only his whole life could be as wonderful as the times they'd spent together since she'd come to his home. But it couldn't.

He was a coward for running out on Marietta and Zack, but he couldn't help it. The two of them would be fine without him. Miguel would take care of them until it was time for them to leave, and Jase would meet them at the fort to give them their final farewell. Their separation would then last forever, and Jase's heart would truly be dead.

When his horse was ready, he left the barn and walked ahead of Beaumont, reluctantly tugging the loyal companion away from the house. As he prepared to mount his steed, he heard his name screeched across the yard.

“Jase, wait!”

He turned to see Marietta standing on his porch with a shawl wrapped around her nightgown.

“Jase, don’t go! Please!”

Something had to be terribly wrong. Was Zack sick? Had he been hurt? Jase jumped on Beaumont and hastened toward the house. As soon as he reached his porch, he dismounted and hurried up the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” he said, grasping Marietta’s shoulders. “Is Zack all right?”

“Zack’s fine.” She was out of breath, as though she’d just run the distance he’d covered across his yard.

“Then what’s brought you out here in your nightclothes screaming at me so early in the morning?”

She stared up at him, her eyes glistening. “I’ve made some big mistakes in my life, Jase. The worst ones have been those where I’ve thrown away opportunities at happiness because I was afraid to take chances and venture into unknown territories. I’ve never been like Kathy.”

“But what has that to do with anything? Why have you come out into the cold so sparsely dressed?” He took her arm. “Let’s go inside.”

“I’m fine, Jase. I’m not cold in the least. Please, let me explain. I have so much to tell you.”

“You can tell me inside.” He squeezed her arm and ushered her into the house.

She shivered when he closed the door. He guided her into the parlor where the embers of a fire remained aglow. “Now what is it you have to tell me? You were saying something about being afraid to take chances.”

“Yes, I’ve never had the feisty spirit Kathy had, even though we were raised the same.” She stopped and drew in a breath in an apparent attempt to calm down. “As I told you before, when Kathy left Chicago, I was devastated. She missed me as desperately as I missed her. She’d sent me dozens of letters begging me to come to Nebraska to stay with her and Clint. I didn’t come, Jase, because I was afraid. For so many years, I was afraid to risk whatever lay on the path between Chicago and Kathy, so I lived without experiencing her love or the love of Zack or Clint.”

Marietta tilted her head as she stared up at him, her eyes warmer than he’d ever seen them. “Jase, these last weeks have been the happiest of my life.”

He wasn’t sure what she was going to say next, but hope began to rise within him when he learned she’d been happy in his home. “Go on, Marietta.”

A tear slid down her cheek. Jase pulled his gloves from his hands, wiped it away, and threw his gloves on the sofa.

“I don’t want to be afraid anymore. I don’t want to lose any more love because I’m afraid.” She turned away. “I couldn’t sleep last night, because all I could see was you riding away from me--leaving me. All I could feel was emptiness over another lost love, a chasm even deeper than the one which had grown in my heart when Kathy left me. I needed comfort desperately, so I went to my trunk, the one which held my letters from

Kathy. I took them with me as I snuggled under my covers, hoping to find the answers to my great confusion.”

She turned back to him and looked at him with tears shimmering in her eyes. “I didn’t think I could stand to leave you, Jase, but neither did I have the strength to stay.”

He’d never felt so helpless in his life. She was playing with his heart, his mind, even his life. If she didn’t make herself clear in the next two seconds, he was going to explode.

“As I read Kathy’s sisterly words, I realized how vital it is for a woman to follow her heart. Right or wrong, a woman will never have happiness if she isn’t true to herself and her heart.” She pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. “As I read Kathy’s letters over and over, I realized I had been wrong to refuse your proposal.”

“Marietta--”

“Wait, there’s more.” She pressed her fingers to his lips. “I know I want to marry you, Jase. I know being together is the best thing that could happen to us and to Zack as well.”

He pushed her hand away from his lips and let the joy in his heart light his face with a smile. “You’ll marry me then?”

She took a step back and said, “On one condition.”

Her regression and reluctance confused him once more. “I don’t like ultimatums, Marietta, and I won’t take them from anyone, not even you.”

Despite his firm words, she grinned like a man ready to show a full house to an opponent who’d just laid down a King-high straight. “You’ll like this ultimatum, Jase. I guarantee it.”

He quirked a brow and folded his arms. “Anything’s possible, I suppose.”

“Yes! That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Until last night I never realized it, but anything *is* possible. It’s possible for me to live here with you, it’s possible for me to leave Chicago for good, it’s possible for the two of us to find happiness and still live out our dreams.”

He couldn’t wait another minute. He scooped her into his arms and whirled her around. “And it’s possible for a stubborn woman to finally come to her senses.”

She giggled and pushed herself out of his arms. “Wait, I haven’t finished saying what I have to say.”

He set her down but didn’t let her go. “There’s more? What more can you give a man than the fulfillment of his most desired dream?”

She gazed up at him with eyes and cheeks and lips full of sheer delight. She was so beautiful he could hardly stand it.

“How about the fulfillment of his second-most desired dream?” Her gaze turned coy, then confident. “Jason Kent, you’re going to go ahead with your land speculation, and I’m going to help you every step of the way. We’re going to found and build that town, and I’m going to turn our new community into a civilized place fit for the best of society.”

“What?” He could feel his eyes growing as he took in what she’d offered.

“It’s the perfect answer for both of us. We both get what we want most--besides each other, of course.”

“You’re sure this is what you want?”

She stretched up and kissed him on the lips. "I've never been surer of anything in my life."

He crushed her against his chest and devoured her with a kiss he hoped expressed the love overflowing from his heart. He kissed her some more and more, until he wondered if he could separate from her long enough to take a breath. When she went limp in his arms, he pulled away to gaze down at her lovely face.

She smiled at him. "We'll never build a new town if you're going to kiss me like that, Jason Kent. I'll be too weak to work."

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the sofa. "Then I'll carry you everywhere you need to go."

"Let's wake Zack and tell him the good news," she said excitedly.

"Zack will be awake on his own soon enough," he said, sitting next to her. Jase pulled her into his arms again. "I want you all to myself for a few minutes."

The sight of the shade of red filling her cheeks, the same vermilion color the dawn had painted outside the window, warmed him clear through. He thought of all the nights and dawns they would share together in the coming years, and he got warmer still. As he held her closer intending to kiss her again, he heard a crunching sound which caused him to stop his advances. "What's that?"

Marietta grinned, pulled away and reached into the pocket of her nightgown. "It's the last letter I received from Kathy, the one which opened my eyes completely and set me on the right path."

Jase tilted his head and quirked a brow as he reached for the letter. "Just what sort of magic does this paper hold?"

She blushed again and reached for the paper he'd taken from her hand. "Never mind," she said coyly. "You should never pry into sisterly secrets."

Her demure behavior roused his curiosity. He held the paper away from her and began to read it, but she grabbed it from him before he could read very far. All he had time to discern was one insignificant little phrase which had been underlined several times: *Mother was wrong.*

Marietta stuffed the letter into her pocket and grinned at him seductively. "Wasn't there something you wanted before we were distracted by the letter, Jase?"

Pleasantly surprised to see she knew a bit about teasing a man, he grinned at her and took her into his arms. "What letter?"

He moved closer to her until his lips touched hers softly. He kissed her slowly, carefully, until he was sure she knew she'd be treasured for the rest of her life. Then he thanked God and Kathy for Marietta's blessed change of heart.

The End

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~ * ~

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Chapter One

Laura had waited an eternity for this day, and now everything was happening quickly. The train was due any minute.

Her tummy rumbled. She placed a hand over her abdomen as if that would help to settle an empty stomach. She'd been too excited to eat. This was the biggest day of her life.

Her daughter, yes, her daughter, a little girl she'd never even seen, would be stepping down from the train in the next few minutes. She was rushing things by thinking of Angelina as her daughter already, but she couldn't help it. In her heart, Angelina Sanchez was already Laura's very own little girl.

She stretched to look down the tracks. No sign of any movement, no sounds from the distance. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. She needed to calm down.

She opened her eyes and looked around at the other people waiting for the train. Farmers, mostly, a few people she'd seen around town during the last week since she'd arrived in Heart Junction, South Dakota.

She set her focus on the landscape around the tiny town. She'd never seen land so flat in all her life. Iowa had been flat, in her estimation, but no where near as flat as northeastern South Dakota. Both states were located on the Great Plains, but Heart Junction and land for miles around could easily be referred to as the Great Plane.

Laura smiled and admitted to herself her pun was not amusing, but she had to occupy her mind with something besides her impatience at meeting her new daughter.

She scanned the crowd again. This time a man in a dark suit caught her attention. His attire set him apart from the other men near him. He stood at least six feet tall. His caramel-colored, thick hair was neatly groomed around his ears. His shoulders looked as though they could carry the weight of one of the boulders which hindered the plows on the prairie.

He glanced at Laura and pinned his gaze to her when he caught her staring at him.

Laura froze for several moments until the movement of a farmer a few feet in front of her sliced the line holding her fast to the handsome man's gaze.

The whistle of a locomotive chipped at the frozen air of mid November, and Laura's heart began to melt. Angelina, her very own little angel, would be with her momentarily.

Laura wrapped her arms around her sapphire wool coat. She wondered if Angelina was dressed warm enough, if she'd had enough to eat on the train, if the little girl was worn out from her long journey. New York was such a great distance from South Dakota. Angelina's adjustment wouldn't be easy. No one knew that better than Laura.

"Good day."

Laura looked to her right and found the handsome man whom she'd noticed earlier. "Hello."

"You're waiting for the Orphan Train to arrive?"

Laura smiled and nodded. "My daughter is on the train. I can't wait to meet her."

He returned her smile, his medium-brown eyes twinkling. "You're going to take in one of the needy orphans, a little girl to foster? How wonderful," he said, staring at her deeply.

Laura thought his gaze would melt her right where she stood. "Yes," she said her expression sporting uncharacteristic demureness.

The sound of the train whistle broke their interlocking gaze.

Laura turned toward the tracks. "She's here!" She looked at the man next to her. He put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm Gavin Maitland."

“Laura Windsor.”

He drew back his hand and bowed slightly toward her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He slipped on the black wool coat he had been holding on his arm. “Until we meet again.”

“Yes, Mr. Maitland. So nice to meet you.”

He bowed once more. “Best to you and Mr. Windsor.”

The locomotive’s whistle screamed through the air. Mr. Maitland didn’t hear Laura clarify that there was no Mr. Windsor. By the time the whistle quieted, Mr. Maitland was twenty feet away.

Laura turned her attention to the arriving train. She watched as smoke and steam billowed around the trail of cars. When the mass of iron stopped, the conductor jumped down from one of the cars and lowered the steps.

The first person off the train was a severe-looking woman, well past fifty. The rotund maid or matriarch wrapped her charcoal woolen cape tightly around her shoulders. Her white hair blew in the chilling breeze. She stood at the bottom of the steps calling for the children to disembark.

Frightened faces from five to fifteen exposed themselves to the prairie air, one child at a time. The dowager below them called each by name and ordered them to form a line next to the train. Within a few minutes, a line of seven children fidgeted close to the tracks.

Bitter memories tugged at Laura’s heart. She remembered exactly what it felt like to be one of those lost, little souls. Deep within her heart she wished each of the children who’d come so far would find new families who would love them. She knew only too well how bitter life could be without love.

A little girl, her eyes cast downward, stepped onto the outer deck of the rail car. Long dark curls hung around her face.

“Chin up, child,” the older woman ordered.

The little girl lifted her face and surveyed the crowd.

“Angelina!” Laura cried.

The girl looked at her.

All the breath left Laura’s body. She believed she’d pass out.

“Down the stairs with you,” the dowager scolded.

Laura’s senses returned. “She’s not going to talk to my little girl like that,” Laura mumbled. She darted through the crowd to the dark-haired waif. “Angelina,” she said softly, smiling at her precious daughter.

“*Si*,” the child said.

Turning to the severe woman, Laura said, “She is Angelina Sanchez, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” the woman said, looking down her nose at Laura’s diminutive five-foot, three-inch stature.

The woman’s five extra inches and stocky build did nothing to intimidate Laura. “I am her mother, Laura Windsor. I’ve made all the arrangements with the agency in New York.” She turned to Angelina and pointed to herself. “*Tu mama*.”

Angelina’s eyes grew as she stared at Laura’s smile.

“You needn’t speak Spanish to the child. We made sure she could speak English before we brought her here.”

Laura lifted her eyes to the elderly woman. "I want to make her feel at home, Mrs.--"

"It's Miss," the woman said, raising her hand. "I've dedicated my life to caring for urchins such as these. By my hand and God's these children have received better care than any of them have earned."

Laura's jaw turned hard. "Earned? No child needs to earn good care. A good home is the birth right of every child in this free country."

"Orphans are different, my good woman."

"Yes, they are," Laura agreed. "Orphans have suffered unbearable loss. They deserve more love and kindness and understanding than is ever issued to them." She turned to Angelina. "And I have an ocean of love to give this sweet child." She took Angelina's hand. "Come with me, *preciosa*."

The spinster grabbed Laura's arm. "She's a sickly one, you know."

Laura squeezed Angelina's hand. "I know all about her health problems." She glanced down at Angelina. "I will take very good care of her," she said, looking at the woman again.

"Of course."

Laura glanced at the line of children standing next to the train. She'd been one of them seven years before. She prayed these children would find good homes instead of the life of servitude to which she had been relegated in the home where she'd been placed.

A tear trickled from her eye. How she wished she could take all of them home with her to fill her house with love.

She stooped next to Angelina. "You're very pretty. *Bella*," she said, touching the child's cheek.

Angelina smiled sheepishly. She touched Laura's face. "*Bella*," she said.

Laura bit back tears. Her father was the last person to tell her she was beautiful, ten years ago, right before he and her mother became fatally ill.

She reached into her pocket and took out a peppermint stick. "For you, Angelina."
"*Gracias, Madrina*."

Laura stroked the child's hair. "I'm not your godmother, darling. I'm your foster mother for now. In a year or so, once we've met the guidelines of the agency from New York, I'm going to adopt you. Then I'll be your true mother. Now and always you are going to live with me, and you can call me Mama. Will that be all right with you?"

Angelina lifted her eyes to meet Laura's. "I live with you?"

"Yes. Would you like that?"

Angelina looked away. She savored her peppermint stick as she seemed to be thinking over Laura's proposal. When she turned back to her new mother, she shrugged her shoulders. "You have a Children's Home like in New York?"

"No, darling. There will be only you and I, no one else."

Angelina lifted Laura's hand to her face. The girl warmed Laura's fingers with her rosy cheek and smiled.

A wordless, perfect response, easily understood in any language. Angelina had made it clear Laura had found her daughter.

Though their hearts had sealed their pact, there was still the law to satisfy. Once Laura had retrieved Angelina's one modest bag of belongings, she went to find the city

official for Heart Junction in charge of orphan placement. She needed to sign the legal papers which would place Angelina in her care.

She hadn't noticed anyone else taking children from the train, yet, when she arrived at the table outside the train station where the city official was taking signatures for promises to give the orphan train children proper homes, she found a line containing several people waiting to sign contracts.

It seemed everyone ahead of her was tall. She couldn't see who was issuing the contracts, but, then, what difference would that make? Whoever it was, in a few minutes the law would be just as satisfied as she and Angelina were with their new alliance.

Laura bent toward her little girl. "Is the candy good?"

Angelina giggled and shared the scent of peppermint which lingered in her mouth. "Candy good. *Tengo hambre, Madrina.*"

Laura stroked Angelina's soft, long coffee curls. "I know, sweetheart. As soon as we've finished here, I'll take you home and fix you something warm to eat. I know how hungry a child can get riding for days on the train."

A horseless vehicle passed through the street, a mere two dozen feet from the boardwalk. Angelina watched the strange machine travel up the street.

Laura watched with her daughter. "It's a sign of the future, darling, machines doing the job God gave animals to do." She stood up straight. "I don't like it much, but then," she said, glancing at the locomotive before looking back at Angelina, "sometimes change is good. Trains travel much faster than the stages which used to come through this part of the country before either of us was born." She squeezed Angelina's hand. "And look at the two of us." She bent and kissed her cheek. "We're in for some wonderful changes in our lives, aren't we?"

Angelina threw her arms around Laura's neck. "Change, different. Here is different from the city."

Laura laughed. "Like cheese and peppermint. Very different."

"Excuse me," a deep voice called. "I'm waiting, Mrs. Windsor."

Laura's gaze darted away from Angelina when she heard a husky, male voice. "Mr. Maitland. You are the city official handling the placements?" Laura stepped forward on the boardwalk to the table outside the railway station.

"Yes." A smile lit his striking, masculine features.

"Wonderful. Where do I sign? I can't wait to take Angelina home with me."

Mr. Maitland looked around her as though he were searching for something.

"Is anything wrong?" Laura asked, confused.

"I don't see Mr. Windsor. He must sign the placement papers too."

Relief washed over her. For a moment she thought there might be a real problem. "You needn't bother looking for a Mr. Windsor. There isn't one."

"You're a widow?"

"No, I've never been married. But this has nothing to do with my caring for Angelina. I telegraphed the Children's Home in New York. Everything has been worked out. Angelina is to be placed with me. When the one-year waiting period is over, I fully intend to adopt her."

He leaned back in his chair. "Please, Miss Windsor, sit down," he said, motioning to the chair across from his table.

Laura sat. She lifted Angelina onto her lap.

“You’ve seen this handbill, haven’t you?” he asked, holding up the paper announcing the arrival of the orphans from the Children’s Aid Society of New York.

“I saw the announcement at the post office.”

“Then you are aware there are restrictions as to whom these New York orphans can be placed with. I’m afraid Angelina Sanchez cannot be placed with you.”

Laura gave him a disbelieving look. “You’re mistaken. If you have restrictions, they don’t apply to Angelina and me. They would apply only to those orphans who come here without having made arrangements ahead of time with the Children’s Aid Society.”

He shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. “I’m afraid what’s contained in this bill,” he said, waving the paper in his hand, “applies to *all* orphans arriving on the train. It states very clearly in black and white, ‘Persons taking these children must be recommended by the local committee.’ You, Miss Windsor, would never be recommended by our committee.”

“I beg your pardon?” Had he just insulted her? She resisted the urge to spring to her feet and let her clenched fist meet Gavin Maitland’s jaw.

“Communities have the discretion to qualify and disqualify people from taking orphaned children into their homes. In Heart Junction, we, the city council and the mayor, have decided the children we take into the community should be placed only with married couples. Therefore, since you have no husband, the committee could never recommend Angelina be placed with you.”

A sick feeling stirred inside her stomach. “But that is ridiculous. In Iowa several single women and even a few single men took in orphans from the Children’s Aid Society while I lived there.”

“As I said, each community can make its own rules of acceptance regarding these displaced children. What is all right in Iowa is not acceptable to the people of this community. Here we can recommend no one but married couples for the placement of these children.”

Laura set her seven-year-old daughter down and bolted to her feet. “This is outrageous! I have worked for five years to save enough money to rescue a forsaken child. Angelina needs me, and I need her. You can’t take her away from me.”

Mr. Maitland looked past Laura. “Folks,” he said to the line of people behind her as he stood, “if you’ll excuse me for a minute, I will return shortly to sign your contracts.” He came around the table to her and took her arm.

He ushered her inside the train depot and into an empty office. “Let me take Angelina to Betty, Mr. Farrah’s secretary. She’ll take good care of the girl while you and I talk.”

Laura clung to Angelina. “I won’t let her go.”

“Please, Miss Windsor, she’ll be right outside this office. I’ll bring her back to you as soon as we’ve finished speaking.”

Laura refused to cooperate.

Mr. Maitland gently touched her arm. “You don’t want the child to hear our discussion, do you? She can see you’re very upset. Is that how you want her to remember you on her first day in Heart Junction?”

Laura softened her grip on her daughter. “Can I trust you to bring her back to me when we’ve finished speaking, Mr. Maitland? You aren’t lying to me, are you?”

Golden flecks softened his brown eyes. "I wouldn't lie to you, Miss Windsor," he said gently.

She stared at him long enough to decide his eyes were as trustworthy as any she'd ever seen. She hunched down next to Angelina. "Darling, Mr. Maitland and I need to talk. Everything is all right. We have a few grown up things we need to discuss. Will you wait outside with a nice lady while we talk?"

Angelina threw her arms around Laura's neck. "*Madrina.*"

Laura kissed her cheek. She let the tiny hug linger. "I won't be long. I promise," she said, gently pulling back.

Angelina's eyes had shown fright the first time Laura saw her; they manifested signs of fear once more. "I wait for you, *Madrina.*"

Laura squeezed her hands. "Not *Madrina*, Mama. I'm your mother, not your godmother. You'll see, Angelina."

Mr. Maitland reached for the child's hand. "Come, Angelina. Betty will show you her new typewriter. When she presses buttons, it writes words."

Angelina took his hand.

Mr. Maitland opened the door and led her through to the lobby of the depot. "Can you read yet, Angelina?"

Laura knew the answer even though she didn't hear what Angelina told Mr. Maitland. She'd learned from the Children's Home in New York Angelina could read English as well as Spanish.

Laura let her gaze drift around the office. She appreciated the fine look of the large hardwood desk, but she could have done without the stale stench of cigar ashes emanating from the ash tray on Mr. Farrah's desk.

Mr. Maitland's melodious, deep voice drifted through the open door.

Angelina's sweet laughter followed the sounds of keys striking paper on a modern typewriter.

Laura relaxed a little knowing Angelina seemed to be content. She peeked around the frame of the door into the lobby. Mr. Maitland touched Angelina's cheek and smiled at her. The man who was trying to ruin Laura's life appeared to be charming the daughter he was ready to destroy. Gavin Maitland was most assuredly two men in one. Charming, handsome, some women might say irresistible with his mass of caramel hair and his hazel-brown eyes. Yet heartless, cruel, uncaring had to be accurate words to describe him if he intended to stop Laura from making Angelina her daughter.

She withdrew her gaze from the lobby and leaned against the door jamb. She closed her eyes. *He just can't take my daughter from my arms. We need each other.*

Mr. Maitland came through the door, nearly brushing his broad chest against her shoulder. He shut the door and stood inches from Laura, looking down at her.

She stared up at him, studying his eyes, wondering what she had to say or do to convince this sober, unrelenting stickler for the law to bend the rules this one time so she might keep Angelina with her in Heart Junction.

"Shall we sit down?" he asked in a coarse, husky voice.

Laura blinked and gazed up at him thoughtfully. Would charm work? Scolding? Intimidation?

Seduction?

Her cheeks burned. She looked away. “Yes, let’s sit.” Just the thought of how far she may or may not go to keep Angelina warmed her whole body.

Mr. Maitland grasped Laura’s elbow and led her to one of the chairs opposite the large wooden desk. He sat in the chair next to her.

“I’m sorry, about our rules, but my hands are tied.”

She shook her head. “No, I won’t accept your assessment. There is something we can do. We just haven’t thought of it yet.”

“I’m afraid there is nothing we can do. Our city council very clearly states Orphan Train children may be placed only with married couples.”

Laura bolted to her feet. “This is 1912, Mr. Maitland. We’re more than a decade into the Twentieth Century. Things are changing. While we waited to speak to you this morning, a horseless carriage trudged through the street where only horses, men and stubborn mules have tread. Back in Iowa people are putting up telephone lines like telegraph lines. Even Aberdeen your neighbor has had a switchboard for more than a decade, as I understand it. I dare say the telephone will soon arrive in Heart Junction as well. One person can talk on a phone in Iowa or South Dakota while another listens in an eastern city. If the way we talk to each other can change with the telegraph and the telephone when barely fifty years ago our fastest communication came from the Pony Express, then surely you and I, one man and one woman in a quiet office in the middle of a vast prairie can effectively solve a problem full of old fashioned ideas.”

Mr. Maitland stood and looked down at Laura. “Are you a barrister, Miss Windsor?”

“Certainly not.”

“You’re an impassioned person, eloquent, effective.”

“I’m a mother, and I’m fighting for my daughter.”

“And I represent Heart Junction and its laws. I’m afraid I have no choice but to enforce them. I can’t place Angelina with you.”

Laura pushed her hand into a pocket of her sapphire wool coat. She pulled out a pocketbook and opened it. “What will it take, Mr. Maitland?”

He grabbed the pocketbook from her hand and shut it soundly. He pushed the small clutch back into her pocket. “I’m going to forget your attempt to bribe me because I know you are in a desperate way.”

Laura reached for the lapels of his coat. She gripped them hard and stared up at him. “I’ll do anything, Mr. Maitland. I can’t send Angelina back to the orphanage. I lived in one of those orphanages for three years myself. The day I left New York was the happiest day of my life. My head was filled with dreams. I was sure I’d come west and find love, with a family or with a man, someone to take care of me. I’d lost everyone I loved when I was only thirteen years old. At sixteen I felt like my life was beginning again. I did find a new home in Iowa, but the people I was placed with didn’t want a daughter. They wanted a servant. I obliged them until I turned eighteen, then I left to take care of myself as I’d done after my parents died.

“I worked as a servant girl and a seamstress, and I became very good with a needle and thread. I can do wondrous things. My life prospered, but I could never forget my life at the orphanage in the city or the friends I left behind or all the lost love. I vowed to make things better for at least one of the little ones who’d lost love the way I had. I promised I’d find a little girl to love the way I myself wanted to be loved. It is my destiny

to be Angelina's mother." She let go of his lapels and stepped back. "You can't fight a force as strong as destiny."

Mr. Maitland stared down at her. If she knew him better, perhaps she could interpret the odd look filling his eyes. "You speak as though you believe God himself has commanded you to take in this little girl."

"I make no such claim. I say only I am destined to be Angelina's mother. It is written upon my heart."

He cleared his throat. "Have you lived in Heart Junction long? I don't remember seeing you before."

"Only a week. I bought the Sudemeyer building for Angelina's and my home and my garment business."

"Do you expect your business to gain momentum quickly? It often takes new businesses time to make a profit."

"I opened my doors three days ago, and I have already received enough work to keep me busy for a month."

His brows rose slightly, and his lips edged upwards. "Impressive! You must have impeccable references."

"My work speaks for itself, Mr. Maitland. Women like fine quality in their clothing."

"And you intend to make Heart Junction your home?"

"I do. This is a growing town, the fastest growing in the area, besides Aberdeen. I did my research before I moved to Heart Junction. I'm quite thorough, except..."

"You didn't check our local laws about orphan placement?"

Laura shrugged and plopped back into her chair. "It never occurred to me things wouldn't be the same here concerning placements as they had been in Iowa."

Mr. Maitland sat next to her. "Laws are different in different areas, and we have to live with them." He paused thoughtfully. "It's good to know you're gainfully employed. I appreciate your industriousness. I do have another question which is rather personal. Perhaps the answer to it will weigh in your favor as I consider your case."

"What is it?"

He paused and swallowed hard enough to make his Adam's apple quiver. "Do you have any prospects for a groom in your near future?"

Laura blinked at him and gave him a blank stare.

"What I mean," he said, clearing his throat, "you are an attractive woman, Miss Windsor. Surely, there must be someone... I think I could convince the mayor and councilmen to bend the rules if you had plans to take a husband."

Laura lifted her chin and narrowed her gaze. "Are you making me an offer, Mr. Maitland?"

He tugged at his starched, white collar. "That isn't what I meant."

Laura enjoyed his discomfort, and she let him stew in it a few moments before she replied. "I am not engaged to be married, and I have no plans to become betrothed to anyone. I've concentrated all of my energy on building a nest egg and a future I can offer to my little girl. More importantly, I have focused on sharing love with a daughter who needs to be loved."

"And on finding love yourself as a mother?"

"Yes."

“Perhaps you should look for love with a man before you seek it in a child.”

The thought of receiving love from a man was as foreign to her as the Chinese language. The men who had crossed her path since she became of age had never been men capable of giving or receiving love. They’d only wanted to take advantage of the poor orphan girl, the second class girl from the city who they assumed too often would take clandestine walks and dole out kisses freely to any man who might show an interest in her.

Logically, she believed there must be good men capable of showing genuine affection somewhere in the world, but she’d never met one. Consequently, she’d been focused on her business, her bank account and becoming a mother in order to find love. She’d really never thought of finding love with a man.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked when it occurred to her he was delving a bit too deeply into her private business.

“Don’t you believe a woman should be married before she becomes a mother?”

“I believe it is usually a good idea to be first a wife, then a mother, but life doesn’t always follow a rigid plan. Certainly there is more than one way for a woman to live her life.”

Mr. Maitland stood. He took Laura’s hand and tugged her to her feet. “Miss Windsor, I am convinced you are sincere in your desire to take this sweet child into your home and give her a fulfilling life, but my hands are tied.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t take her away from me. We’ve only just found each other.” She splayed her hands just below her collar bone. “Angelina belongs with me.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Mr. Maitland stretched to his full height. “But that doesn’t mean you are totally without hope.”

“What?” Had she heard him right? Was he offering a solution to the problem?

“Since the Orphan Train has already left town, it will be at least two weeks before we can return Angelina to New York. During that time, if it is agreeable to you, Angelina may stay in your home.”

Laura grabbed Mr. Maitland’s lapels again and began to draw him to her for a kiss on the cheek. When she realized what she was about to do with Mr. Maitland, she let go of him and stepped back. “I’m sorry. You surprised me with your change of heart. I’m afraid I was about to--” She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Never mind what I was about to do.”

If she had two weeks, perhaps she could get this narrow-minded town to change its mind, she realized.

“I have more to say,” he stated flatly, completely ignoring what had nearly happened between them.

Laura prepared to hear bad news. “Go ahead.”

He stretched tall again. “For the two weeks’ time Angelina is with you, I will try to find her a home with a married couple in the area.”

Laura’s heart sank. She didn’t want Angelina to be with anyone else. She wanted the little girl herself.

She paused and thought. She decided she needed to put aside selfish desires and focus on Angelina. “Finding Angelina a loving home is more important than anything

else. If it isn't with me..." A tear trickled from her eye, and she quickly wiped it away. Being magnanimous wasn't easy.

He let go of her arm. "Perhaps," he said, tugging at his collar. "Perhaps you could take some time during those two weeks to look over the young men of the town. I'd recommend Angelina be placed with you if you were promised in marriage."

She sighed gently. The look in his eyes implied to her he had offered his suggestion only to help her.

Perhaps he was a caring man. If he weren't, he wouldn't have let Angelina stay with her at all, not even for two weeks. "I appreciate your help, Mr. Maitland."

"I wish you'd have come to me when you arrived in town. I could have explained things about placement to you. While I am glad you chose Heart Junction for your home, if you'd have known about our local laws, you may have wanted to choose a home more conducive to your plans."

Laura sighed. "I should have been more thorough in my investigation. But when I saw Heart Junction for the first time last summer, I knew this was where I wanted to settle. Something about the town drew me as though this is where my next step in life was to begin."

"You're speaking of destiny again?"

"Not this time. When I saw Heart Junction my stomach told me this was where I was to find my home. Destiny I find from within my heart. Gut feelings are just gut feelings, hunches which may or may not be right." Laura stiffened her spine and lifted her chin. "It looks like my gut could be wrong in thinking Heart Junction is where I am to find my home, considering the roadblock this city's council has placed before me. But I'm not wrong about my destiny with Angelina. I will find a way to overcome any and all obstacles keeping my daughter from me." She glanced toward the door. "I have to," she said, looking at him. "There are no higher stakes than finding and keeping love."

Mr. Maitland took her arm and led her to the door. "I appreciate your commitment to Angelina, but I'm afraid there is only one way you won't lose the girl. You'll have to get married."

~ * ~

STEPHANIE'S SURPRISE, Book Two of the Heart Junction Series

BLURB: 1913, Heart Junction, South Dakota: Dr. Aaron Wesley has been trying to court school teacher Stephanie Porter, but she keeps refusing his invitations. When Aaron is appointed to the school board they must work together. Personal mysteries are unraveled and an attraction between them builds. Stephanie begins to realize Aaron may not be the ogre she thought him to be. Or is he?

Excerpts, reviews at: <https://sites.google.com/site/stephaniessurprise>

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Chapter One

Stephanie could not possibly have heard what she just heard.

“What do you say, Dr. Wesley?” Antigone Verseth said, smiling at Heart Junction’s young physician. “Will you honor us by taking the position on the school board left vacant by Mr. Maitland?”

She said it again! Aaron Wesley absolutely had to refuse the offer the mayor’s wife had just extended to him. Stephanie could never in a million years stand to work with Dr. Wesley. He was the most frustrating, arrogant man she’d ever met.

Dr. Wesley rose and nodded toward the dozen people gathered around the table in the meeting room of City Hall. “I’m flattered the other members of the school board, Mayor Verseth and you, Mrs. Verseth, have invited me to join this illustrious group, but--”

“Ah, but we don’t want to hear any buts, Dr. Wesley,” Mrs. Verseth said, giving the doctor another of her clumsy smiles. “We want only to hear your acceptance.”

Stephanie bolted to her feet. “Maybe he doesn’t want the job, Antigone.” Her face began to burn, and Stephanie knew everyone in the room was watching her turn ten shades of red. She brushed her hands over her dark blue skirt and straightened her short matching jacket. “Uh, I mean, Dr. Wesley is a very busy man. Perhaps you should listen to him before interrupting. We must be fair to him, after all.”

“Quite right,” Herbert Verseth said, wagging his shaggy brows. “Dr. Wesley is somewhat new to our town, having been here less than a year. Perhaps he feels he needs more time to settle into his home and organize his practice before he takes on more responsibility.”

Stephanie forced a smile when she looked at the mayor and silently thanked him for giving Dr. Wesley an out if he didn’t want to accept the position. As she seated herself again, she prayed a silent prayer, hoping the doctor would mind his own business and stick to the practice of medicine. She neither needed nor wanted him interfering in her teaching affairs, which is exactly what he’d be doing if he were appointed to the school board.

“Well,” Jim Schaeffer said, “what do you say, Dr. Wesley? We’re busy men. Some of us have to get back to our farms and finish our chores. Do you wish to join the school board or should we find someone else for the job?” Jim was about as patient as a starving dog hunting down its next meal.

Dr. Wesley, who’d remained on his feet, let his gaze drift from one person to the next as his focus moved about the table. When he looked at Stephanie, his gaze lingered, making her quite uncomfortable. “I am indeed a busy man,” he said, staring directly at Stephanie.

Her hopes began to soar, and her fervent prayers increased. *Please let him refuse the job*, she prayed as she forced herself to look away from his captivating gaze.

“Seeing my patients often takes me out of town for more than a day or two as I make my rounds in the country. My time, therefore, is quite limited.”

Stephanie prayed harder for his refusal.

“I love my job, and I like the people of Heart Junction very much. You’ve made me feel quite welcome.”

Will you just turn down the job? Stephanie silently urged as she kept her gaze from meeting his.

“Whenever I miss my hometown in New Jersey, all I have to do is look at the lovely people around me to know I have a new hometown right here in Heart Junction.”

Stephanie had to look at him. Maybe she could get a reading from his expression which would help her determine which direction his answer was going to take. She had no idea from his words or their tone whether he was going to refuse the job or not.

Big mistake. The instant she looked at him, he shifted his gaze from the mayor to her. He gave her the same peculiar look he’d given her the last three times he’d invited her to a social. The look he had before she’d each time quickly refused his attentions.

“Yes,” Dr. Wesley said thoughtfully, “a hometown, family right here in Heart Junction.” He slid his fingers through his dark blond hair. His gaze upon Stephanie became intense. “I wonder,” he said softly.

“I beg your pardon?” Mrs. Verseth said, moving her jaw in the peculiar way she had. “What did you say, Dr. Wesley? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

He stared a moment longer at Stephanie before he quickly shifted his attention to the mayor. “Herbert,” he said, decidedly, “Jim, Mrs. Verseth, and everyone else here, I want you all to know I would be honored to accept the position left vacant by Gavin Maitland. I hope I can make a good many contributions to this growing community.” He reached toward the mayor and shook his hand.

“Welcome aboard, son,” Herbert Verseth said, his dull brown eyes hinting at a rare smile. He drew back his hand and tried to smooth his always-unruly hair. “You’ll be a fine asset to Heart Junction as a member of the school board.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Dr. Wesley said. He tucked his thumb into the watch pocket in his waistcoat and moved his gaze back to Stephanie. “I look forward to working with you.”

Stephanie thought her heart would stop beating and she’d drop dead right there in front of everyone. Was he speaking directly to her?

His gaze moved on to Miranda Comstock, Stephanie’s companion teacher at the grade school, then to each of the other members of the board. “I look forward to working with all of you.”

Stephanie’s heart was beating wildly. She needed to get some fresh air. Right now!

She pushed out of her chair and tried to control her overreaction to the news that she’d be working with Aaron Wesley in the very near future. “I’m sorry to be so abrupt,” she said, brushing strands of dark hair from her face, “but I must leave. I...I have another appointment.”

A room full of strange looks rested on Stephanie, but she didn’t care. She needed to get away from Dr. Wesley as quickly as she could. Nothing else mattered.

Aaron watched Stephanie bolt out of the meeting room. He couldn’t help but smile. He loved making her uncomfortable. She deserved to be uncomfortable. How

many times had she dealt him a dose of discomfort when she'd refused to spend so much as a few hours with him?

He'd tried every way he could think of to get Miss Porter to spend time with him. But the most beautiful woman in town had turned down his invitations time and time again.

Now that he was going to be on the school board, she'd have to make time for him.

He smiled again. One way or another, he'd find a secret passage into Miss Porter's locked-up heart. He'd never backed away from a challenge, and he wasn't about to start.

"Dr. Wesley," Jim Schaeffer said, "since you are the most educated of all of us on the school board, I would like to nominate you for the job of overseeing the possibility of Heart Junction Grade School getting a principal to be in charge of the curriculum, classes and staff."

Earl Ferguson slapped the table. "Splendid idea, Jim. Aaron can work directly with Miss Comstock and Miss Porter in determining exactly what the duties of the new principal should be. We'll be needing another teacher or two as well in the near future with the way Heart Junction is growing."

"And don't forget the flour mill," Wes Craven interjected. "The new mill will bring in at least two dozen new jobs. Men with families will be moving to Heart Junction next year to staff the mill when it's completed. We'll have to figure ways we can educate those children in the facility we already have. We can't afford to build on to the school just yet."

"Yes, indeed," Antigone added, "we have much to consider in our school expansion and reorganization."

Herbert Verseth cleared his throat and tried to calm his unruly hair with his stubby fingers. "Can you handle the job, Dr. Wesley?"

Aaron couldn't have set up a better scenario himself, not if he'd plotted and planned for weeks. He tried to keep the smile on his face limited to the size of Rhode Island though inside it truly was the size of South America. He'd be working more closely with Stephanie than he'd dreamed, and he couldn't have felt more victorious!

He nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sure I can work with Miss Comstock and Miss Porter to come up with a plan the board and the city can be happy with." He stood up straight. "Of course, it may take quite a few weeks, might it not, Miss Comstock?" he said, glancing at the elderly teacher.

Miranda Comstock tilted her head and smiled at him. Her silver-blue eyes twinkled as she spoke. "Reorganizing the school and planning for the future will be a large task, indeed. But I have every confidence in your managerial and executive abilities, Dr. Wesley."

He smiled at her and bowed slightly. "I thank you, Miss Comstock, and I'll count on your many years of experience and wonderful insight to help me find what is best for the education of Heart Junction's children."

Antigone began to applaud, and soon the remainder of people in the room followed her lead. When the applause died down, Antigone stood and looked at Aaron.

"It seems we've settled a great deal tonight." She nodded toward him. "Doctor, thank you for your dedication to Heart Junction." She looked at her husband, who was

sitting next to her, took his arm and helped him to his feet. “Herbert, it’s time we go home.”

“Yes, dear, it’s getting late.” He waggled his bushy brows in the aggravating way he had. “Wesley, why don’t you get something to me on this school reorganization in a couple of weeks. Nothing too detailed, just enough to let me know you’re working on the project and making some progress.”

Aaron’s stomach knotted when he heard the mayor’s request. He hadn’t thought about the actual work involved in this project. All he’d thought about was the time he’d have to spend with Miss Porter. If the mayor’s intention had been to drag him out of his dreams of the loveliest lady in Heart Junction and into the real-life commitment he’d just made, Herbert had succeeded completely.

“I’ll let you, Mayor, and all of the board members know of my progress in a couple of weeks,” Aaron said confidently, ignoring his sudden regrets.

The others began to rise to their feet. A murmur went through the room as the mayor and his wife took leave. A few of the remaining people shook hands with Aaron, welcoming him to the school board and wishing him luck on his new project.

Within a few moments, the room was empty, and Aaron sat at the meeting table all alone.

“I had every intention of refusing the seat on the board,” he whispered to the empty chairs, “but, when she looked at me with those unbelievably gorgeous deep-green eyes, I had to take the job. I would do anything in the world to win the opportunity to spend time with Stephanie Porter.”

But what would Miss Porter think about having to work closely with him?

Aaron smiled as he stood and pushed his chair into the table. “I’ve always loved a challenge,” he whispered with anticipation in his voice, “and Stephanie Porter will be the Mount Everest of all of the challenges I’ve ever faced.”

* * *

Aaron marveled at the beauty of the late June morning. The cool air, drenched in sunshine, filled his body all the way to his finger tips every time he took a breath. Joy brighter than the sea-blue sky lived deep inside his heart. He would see Miss Porter in only two minutes.

He’d arranged a meeting with Miss Porter and Miss Comstock to take place at the schoolhouse. The mayor had expressed an interest in a plan for the school system being set up as soon as possible, and Aaron couldn’t have been more pleased. The sooner he began to break down the walls Miss Porter had erected, the better.

Knowing Miss Porter enjoyed the spotlight, Aaron decided to deny her what she craved. Hopefully, this lack of personal attention to her would prompt her to seek his attention, which was exactly what he wanted.

Aaron grinned with satisfaction as he neared Heart Junction Grade School. There were times when the study of human behavior required in his medical training came in very handy.

As he bound up the steps, Aaron gripped the bouquet of flowers he’d acquired from Louise Gunnerson. The beauty of the red and yellow Zinnias and pink and white

Dianthus amazed him. How could Mrs. Gunnerson extract flowers as lovely as roses from plain black dirt and ordinary seeds?

Aaron let himself into the school.

“Is that you, Dr. Wesley?” Miss Comstock must have heard the squeak of the door. She emerged from the classroom in the back of the building.

“It is I,” Aaron replied.

“Good morning,” she said, neatening her silvery white hair with her slim fingers. “Isn’t this a lovely day?”

“The day is splendid, indeed, but may I say it pales in comparison to Heart Junction’s most beautiful citizen,” he said in his most flattering tone.

A small chuckle crossed Miss Comstock’s thin lips. “Dr. Wesley, if I was forty years younger, I’d take what you said quite serious, and you’d find yourself in need of a preacher.”

“Would that be for burying me or for marrying me, Miss Comstock?”

She laughed and clapped her hands together. “I think I’ll let you figure that out on your own!”

Aaron smiled and settled his gaze on her eyes once more. “I am serious, Miss Comstock. Beauty knows no age, and yours has charmed men for decades, I’ll wager.”

“And decades,” she added with a girlish smile. “I’m very near retirement, you know. I’ve been teaching for almost fifty years, ever since I was seventeen.”

What a treasure Miranda Comstock was! “The school and the children will miss you terribly when you retire.”

She waved a hand. “Pish posh, they’ll do nothing of the kind. I’m as replaceable as a worn-out dishtowel. It is I who will miss the children, but I have no intention of being idle. In addition to teaching, I write history, you know. I intend to research and write about every county in South Dakota. I’ve always believed it is vital we know about the land where we live and the people who have dwelled it.”

Her eyes began to sparkle as she went on. “Won’t it be absolutely wonderful and thrilling to learn everything possible about the aboriginal people who inhabited this land long before we Europeans began to settle here a few decades ago?” Miss Comstock’s glittering expression reflected her true love of the land and its peoples.

“I’ve always found the various cultures of the American Indians to be fascinating. I shall look forward to your writings about all the peoples of this land.”

Her cheeks bloomed like roses set against snow. “Enough of an old lady’s dreams of writing great books. You are here to plan the future, not talk of the past.” She turned toward the room from which she’d emerged. “Miss Porter, Dr. Wesley is here,” she called.

Aaron had no doubt Miss Porter was fully aware of his arrival. Yet, she’d chosen to stay hidden inside the classroom.

When she stepped into the hallway, Aaron’s heart began to palpitate. It should be a crime punishable by death for a woman to be as beautiful as Miss Stephanie Porter. Didn’t she know it was unbearable for a man to gaze upon her without having the right to take her into his arms and hold her next to his heart?

“Good morning, Dr. Wesley,” Miss Porter said, lifting her chin as though she were showing some sort of defiance.

Aaron bowed slightly toward her. “Good morning, Miss Porter.”

A blind man could see the pleasant look she gave him was forced. "I trust you are well this morning." The tone of the pleasant words she spoke sounded a tad more like she was wishing he'd drop dead instead of wishing him good health.

"I'm fit and healthy as a new-born colt, Miss Porter."

She nodded toward him stiffly. "How wonderful," she said without any hint of emotion in her voice. Her gaze drifted from his countenance to the bouquet he held in his hand. "What lovely flowers." Her voice lifted as did the corners of her mouth.

For a moment, Aaron thought she might actually gift him with a sincere smile.

He held up the flowers. "They are lovely, aren't they?" He moved them toward Miranda. "They're for you, Miss Comstock. I wanted my first action as a school board member to be a show of gratitude to you for your many years of teaching."

Miss Comstock placed her fingers over her mouth. Her eyes began to glisten as she looked up at Aaron. Her fingers slowly uncovered her lips. "Thank you," she said, taking the nosegay from him. "I'll put them in water right away. I'm sure I have a vase in the cloak room."

She turned to go into the classroom, but she didn't go inside. "Dr. Wesley," she said, looking at him again, "I do thank you with all of my heart. It's been a long time since a handsome gentleman gave me flowers." She smiled at him and disappeared inside the classroom.

When Aaron looked at Miss Porter, he noticed her jaw had turned as hard as iron. "Is anything wrong, Miss Porter?"

"Wrong? Why would anything be wrong?"

He shrugged as though he couldn't see the jealousy filling her eyes. She no doubt expected the flowers to be for her. He'd brought her flowers on each of the last three occasions he'd invited her to go out with him.

"I hope nothing is wrong, but you do look a bit pale."

Aaron didn't think it was possible for her jaw to harden any further, but it did.

Miss Porter lifted her chin. "I assure you I am perfectly fine." She stared up at him a long moment, her deep green eyes blazing with passion.

Or perhaps it was hate.

No, it was passion. He preferred to call the intense emotion her eyes displayed passion.

"I'm glad you are well." He abruptly took her arm. "Shall we go inside and get started with our work?"

She pulled her arm away from him. "I suppose we must. We do have a job to do." She hastened inside the classroom.

Aaron followed close behind.

Miss Comstock sat at the large teacher's desk arranging the flowers. She looked up at Aaron when he approached her. "You purchased these from Louise Gunnerson, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I can tell. She has the greenest thumb God ever placed on this earth." She smiled sweetly. "I wish I could have a tenth of Mrs. Gunnerson's skill, but I'm afraid if I rubbed my thumb in grass for a week straight, it would still lack any shade of green. The only things I've ever grown well in my garden are dandelions and creeping Jenny."

Aaron chuckled lightly. "We are all blessed with different talents. And today, Miss Comstock, I am here to glean all I can from your great talent for teaching. I have no doubt you will be of great help to me in the reorganizing of Heart Junction's school system."

"I hope," Miss Comstock said, glancing at her colleague, "Miss Porter and I shall both be helpful to you."

Aaron glanced from one woman to the other. "Yes, of course. I meant I expect to gain great insight from both of you."

Miss Comstock set the flowers aside. "Please, Stephanie, Dr. Wesley, sit down. I've arranged our chairs close together so we can all see the papers and reports we'll need to consider as we make our plans."

Aaron held a chair for Miss Porter as she settled herself next to Miss Comstock. He seated himself next to Stephanie as closely as he could.

With an innocent, matter-of-fact business look pasted on his face, he pretended he couldn't smell the sweet aroma of Miss Porter's natural fragrance. He acted as though her nearness didn't make his heart beat faster. He denied his hand the access it craved to the lovely woman sitting next him.

Aaron cleared away the lump beginning to form in his throat. "Do you have any suggestions, Miss Comstock, as to where we should begin?"

Miss Porter turned her gaze on him. "I have a suggestion, if you don't mind me giving my opinion ahead of Miss Comstock."

"Little one," Miss Comstock said, squeezing the hand Stephanie had lain on the desk, "speak right up. We're all here to reach the same goal."

"By all means, Miss Porter. Speak up."

She tugged at the collar of her mint green shirtwaist as though it were restricting her breathing. "I think..." She stood and stepped away from the desk. "I think, Dr. Wesley, you should allow Miss Comstock and me to work on this project on our own. After all, you have no teaching experience. You're a doctor." She clasped her hands in front of her. "Granted, you're a well-educated man, and a competent physician, but you've never taught children. How could you possibly know what is best for them?"

Aaron stood and looked down at Miss Porter. The smile he gave her reflected the amusement fluttering in his heart. "Thank you, Miss Porter, for singing praises for my education and my abilities as a physician. I appreciate your kindness."

"It isn't kindness," she said, tugging at her collar again, "I'm merely stating facts. You possess a medical degree from a prestigious eastern medical school, and you've done wonders treating the populous of Heart Junction since you arrived. How you pulled Angelina Sanchez through her bout with pneumonia I'll never know." She lifted a finger in the air. "But it is also a fact that you are not now nor have you ever been a teacher. I feel Miss Comstock and I are infinitely more qualified to plan the future for Heart Junction's school system because we are the only ones here with teaching experience."

Aaron gave her a pensive look. "Perhaps you are right to a certain extent, Miss Porter. I certainly can't match Miss Comstock's fifty years of experience in teaching, but, then, neither can you. You've been teaching for how long, five years, perhaps?"

She placed her hands on her hips. "Three. I went to the Normal in Aberdeen after secondary school and finished when I was twenty. I came to Heart Junction to teach after that."

Aaron nodded toward her. "Forgive me. I thought you to be a bit older, twenty-five, perhaps."

Miss Porter lifted her chin. "I'm twenty-three, but the fact still remains I have had more teaching experience than you have had which is precisely the point I am making. Of the three of us, Miss Comstock and I are the only ones who are truly qualified to plan a curriculum and a future for Heart Junction Grade School."

Aaron shook his head and tried not to look smug. "I'm afraid what you're saying is not exactly right."

"I beg your pardon?"

"To earn money while I was at the University, I taught science classes at a boys' school to children aged ten to fourteen. Later, when I went to medical school, I had a fellowship to teach biology to University students." He shrugged. "I'm afraid, Miss Porter, my years of experience in teaching amount to approximately four and one half, not counting the years I taught religious education classes when I was seventeen and eighteen."

Miss Porter's fair complexion began to bloom in lovely shades of rose. She took hold of the back of the chair she'd previously been sitting in, apparently to steady herself. Momentarily, she pulled back her chair.

Aaron held her chair as she seated herself. "Should we get back to work?"

Miss Comstock patted Stephanie's hand and smiled at Aaron as he took his seat next to the somewhat embarrassed young teacher. "Dr. Wesley, I would love to hear stories about your experiences teaching at the boys' school if you'd like to share them some time. I taught in a girls' school in Indiana for a few years some time ago. We could compare notes and share our good times."

"I would be honored, Miss Comstock. But for now, we should probably get down to the business at hand." Aaron turned to Stephanie. "Miss Porter, what would you say is our first priority for improving the Heart Junction school system?" He hadn't meant to humiliate her, but he was afraid he had when he told her the facts about his teaching experience. Perhaps he could assuage her embarrassment by focusing on her importance in the job they had to do.

"Well..." Stephanie began slowly, "I suppose the most important thing to do is to consider the needs of the students and the community. Once we have determined those needs, we must establish goals to meet them. But our determinations must not be set in stone." The more she spoke, the more her strong sense of self confidence returned. "A growing community like ours is in a constant state of change. We must have the ability to adjust to every kind of change."

"I couldn't agree more," Aaron said, smiling at her.

"If there is one thing which never changes," Miss Comstock said assuredly, "it's that everything is constantly changing."

Aaron felt a strong sense of satisfaction in Miss Comstock's sage statement. Things did indeed change every day. And soon, he thought as he gazed at Miss Porter, a certain young teacher's heart would change too. Some day, Aaron mused, all the passion Stephanie Porter had held in her lovely eyes a short time ago would reappear, and it would be a reflection of her warm feelings for him.

At least he hoped that would happen.

~ * ~

MARI'S MIRACLE, Book Three of the Heart Junction Series

BLURB: 1914. Marigold Mahoney's father exiles her from his palatial city home to rural Heart Junction. Worse yet he hires a disagreeable farmer to be her driver. If Grit Truman had known Mari would be the spoiled spitfire she is, he may have turned down the driver's job. Then again, she is the most attractive woman he's ever met. Will Grit tame this little lady before she conquers him?

Excerpts, reviews at: <http://sites.google.com/site/franshaffsmarismiracle>

Mari's Miracle
Heart Junction Series Book Three
By Fran Shaff
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Chapter One

Marigold Mahoney waited in the train depot, fidgeting and fretting. She did not want to be in Heart Junction, South Dakota. She wanted to be in Minneapolis where she belonged.

Mari shook her head as she glanced at the five bags of belongings setting next to her. How would she survive in this tiny town with only a few of her personal things?

She wrung her hands. She should have brought her blue silk frock, her oak vanity and her dress form. Without her dress form, how could she keep her clothes from wrinkling? And without a maid, who would press her clothes?

Blast her father for exiling her to this dreadful, tiny town! It would have been better if he'd have disguised her as a boy and enlisted her in the military service. Her brothers were far better off in the military than she was in Heart Junction. At least they were able to travel to exciting places around the world.

She'd been only to New York, Chicago and New Orleans. She'd like to see Paris, Rome, London and Athens as well as her Irish homeland. Father had spoken often of his homeland.

"I beg your pardon," a deep voice called behind her.

Mari turned round and looked up into the most intriguing, deep brown eyes she'd ever seen. "Are you speaking to me, sir?"

"Yes, miss. Are you Miss Marigold Mahoney?"

Mari's fascination with the handsome gentleman nearly stole her voice. "Yes, sir, I am."

He nodded toward her. "Good day, miss. I'm Grit Truman. Your father hired me to be your driver."

She lifted her chin. "Charmed to meet you, I'm sure, but, Mr. Truman, you are late. I don't appreciate tardiness in my servants."

"Your servants?" he said, raising his brows. "Miss, I am no one's servant. I am your automobile mechanic. While it is true I will be chauffeuring you since you, like most women, are unable to drive an automobile, you may not now nor ever refer to me as your servant," he said firmly.

"Like most *women*? And just how many men do you know who have had experience driving an automobile, Mr. Truman? I'd wager from the meager representation of the horseless carriage which I have seen in this town there are few people of either gender who have even *ridden* in an automobile let alone driven one."

He chuckled lightly. "*Touché*, Miss Mahoney."

"*Touché? Parlez vous francais, monsieur?*"

Grit shook his head. "I may slip a foreign word into a sentence once in a while, miss, but I don't speak any language but good old American English."

She nodded and quelled her disappointment. Servant or not, she'd hoped for a moment this man with the deep, brown eyes and ruggedly handsome features might be an amiable companion she could converse with in more than one language.

"English is fine, sir, as long as you understand the language well."

He gave her a crooked nod and a peculiar look. "I do, of course."

She lifted an arrogant brow. "In that case, I presume you understood my father when he instructed you to meet me at precisely eleven-fifteen this morning?"

"Yes, miss, I did. Unfortunately, my horse didn't wish to accommodate my schedule or yours. She decided she'd drop her foal at ten. I couldn't abandon her. An animal deserves to be taken care of properly, and I can't afford to lose a good mare. As a farmer I depend on my animals to help me with my work."

"You're a farmer? A man of property?"

Grit rubbed his finger over his upper lip. "I am a farmer, yes, but I am not yet a man of property. I rent my buildings, and I sharecrop the land."

"You're a sharecropper?" Her tone was far too condescending, and she immediately regretted using it.

"Yes, miss. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"I don't suppose so. It's just, as a woman of means I'm not used to dealing with..." She stopped herself before she made matters worse by insulting him further.

"You have means, Miss Mahoney, or your father has means?"

"It's all the same, Mr. Truman."

He shrugged casually and gave her an unexpected smile. "Whatever you say, miss. If you say you have money, I believe you. I shall not hold your state of wealth against you. I enjoy the company of rich people as much as I enjoy the company of the poor."

"Whether or not you enjoy my company is up to you. Your job is to take me wherever I want to go, even if you strongly dislike being with me."

"Miss Mahoney," he said, giving her a look she could not define, "I assure you, I could never dislike being in the company of a woman as beautiful as you."

His surprising show of charm left her speechless. Worse yet, his totally improper compliment sent her heart into palpitations. Her strange reaction to him confused her. Why should her body betray her by responding as though she were attracted to this common farmer? Marigold quickly looked away so he wouldn't see the roses she could feel blooming in her cheeks.

"Miss Mahoney?"

"Yes?" she replied without looking at him.

"If you're ready to go, I'll take your bags to the carriage. I'll take three of them at once and come back for you and the rest of your luggage, if that suits you."

She could feel the heat in her cheeks burning as hotly as ever so she continued to look away from him. "Your proposal suits me fine, Mr. Truman."

She sensed him next to her as he picked up two bags and her trunk. When she was sure he was walking away from her, she looked at him. Her heart began to beat wildly. How strong he was! Her heavy trunk full of shoes, clothes and personal items was a feather to him. And what a confident, assured gait he had in his stride.

She judged him to be over six feet tall. His dungarees clung to his legs showing their powerful muscles. His blue cotton shirt stretched tight over his broad shoulders.

Grit Truman was a very attractive man.

Servant, mechanic, sharecropper, whatever he wanted to call himself, he was every inch male. If she were a silly woman like Betsy Lindstrom or Luella Senilla whom she knew from her finishing school, she'd be tempted to toy with Mr. Truman's affections.

But Mari did not believe in tempting the servants. She wasn't about to change her moral standards for Grit Truman, no matter how attractive he might be. She was a lady first and always, and her gentleman callers had always been boys and men of substance. She'd probably find no such men in Heart Junction, but that didn't matter.

She'd decided on the train ride to South Dakota if her father wanted her to learn to be independent that was exactly what she'd do. She'd become so independent she would never need him again.

She'd probably make herself deathly sick trying to attain her goal, but she'd do it just the same. She'd likely be helpless without servants to tend to her, hopeless without luxuries to pamper her and lonely without her string of beaux coming to call, but, thanks to her father's shoving her from the family nest in Minneapolis, she'd by heaven be independent.

"Miss Mahoney," Grit said, "I've got the other two bags."

She looked at him and saw he was holding both of the remaining pieces of luggage by one hand.

"I'll take you to the carriage now." He stepped next to her and placed his free hand on the middle of her back.

The instant he touched her, her stomach flipped and tingled. Mari placed her hand over her abdomen as she allowed Grit to urge her toward the door of the depot.

What was it she'd been thinking about a few minutes ago? Something about not fraternizing with the servants, wasn't it?

It seemed all logical thoughts had left her head. Mari's mind could think of nothing but the warm hand on her back stirring her insides.

In all of her twenty-one years, no man, no boy, no one had made her feel as unexplainably odd as Grit Truman was making her feel at that moment.

He led her to the boardwalk outside the depot and took her to a horse and buggy.

“What’s this? Where is the automobile my father sent?”

“I’m afraid it only arrived yesterday. I intended to assemble the car last night. Once my horse began to ail, however, I needed to tend to her. I am afraid I haven’t yet taken time to put the automobile together. I apologize for that. I rented this fancy rig at the livery stable. I hope it suits you.”

Mari turned to look up at him. “Mr. Truman, this rig is not suitable. I was expecting the Packard my father sent for me.”

“The Packard?” His tone was one of great surprise. “Miss Mahoney, your father didn’t send a Packard. The automobile he sent was shipped directly from Sears and Roebuck, and it looks nothing like a Packard. Why, this rig here is ten times fancier than the car your father sent.”

Mari ground her teeth. How cruel her father was being! She’d never in ten years have imagined her sweet, indulgent father could be so uncaring as to send her anything less than the Packard the family used on the chauffeur’s day off when there was no one to drive the Rolls.

She squared her shoulders and moved toward the primitive vehicle with the black leather seats and fringed covering. “This carriage will suffice.”

While Grit quickly placed the remaining two pieces of luggage in the back of the carriage, Mari waited for him to help her into the buggy.

When he returned to her he took her hand and held her arm firmly as she climbed into the carriage.

It had been a long time since Mari had ridden in a vehicle without an engine. She indulged in a secret smile as she recalled the last time she’d ridden in a horse-drawn rig.

Freddie Manigan had rented a carriage similar to the one she was sitting in now so he could take her for a ride in the park two days after her eighteenth birthday. It had been a romantic evening. She and Freddie and Alice Cummings and Joseph March had had a wonderful time together. And, when the evening was over, Freddie had given her her first kiss.

Grit settled next to her, took the reins and set the horse in motion.

She squirmed into the soft leather and sighed. Perhaps a ride in a horse-drawn carriage wouldn’t be so bad, she mused. At the very least, the situation had brought up pleasant memories of an evening and a man she would never forget.

“Are you ready to see your new home?” Grit asked as he drove along Heart Junction’s main road.

Mari gave him a tentative nod. “I’m ready, Mr. Truman.”

Two minutes later, after taking in the totally unimpressive sites of her new town, Mari realized quite clearly she’d told Grit Truman a lie.

She was not now nor would she ever be ready for life in a town as thoroughly unappealing as Heart Junction.

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FOR LOVE OF MAGGIE

Blurb: Triple Award Winner! Write Touch Readers' Award, More than Magic Award, CaraRomance Reviewers' Choice Award. Kayla Franklin is instantly attracted to Roth Simons. He feels the same way about her, but when he meets Maggie, her daughter who has Down Syndrome, he is shocked by the child's condition. Roth will do anything to make amends for his initial reaction, but will Kayla ever forgive him?

Excerpts, reviews at: <https://sites.google.com/site/forloveofmaggie>

For Love of Maggie

By Fran Shaff

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Chapter One

Roth parked his truck under an elm tree in the farm yard and walked thirty feet to Kayla Franklin's front porch. He stopped at the bottom of the steps and watched as a woman on the far end of the porch struggled to move a heavy set of old wooden shelves.

She had short, light-brown, curly hair, and perfect pink skin. She groaned as she struggled with her heavy burden. Roth smiled at her determination and admired the curve of her jeans when the wind blew her light blue shirt off her hips.

She groaned again, and Roth decided it was time to give her a hand. He bounded up the steps and strode toward her. He stood directly behind her and pressed a hand against the shelving unit over her head. The shelves moved instantly.

"Whew," she uttered. She spun around and looked up at him. "Thanks," she said, panting and wiping her brow with her fingers.

The second her gaze connected with his, Roth felt his chest tighten. His eyes widened and his throat began to constrict. "You're welcome."

She fidgeted from one foot to the other. Her eyes darted away from him before they returned to his bold stare.

He blinked and steadied himself with the hand which was still pressing against the shelving unit. "I'm Roth Simons. We had an appointment," he said, managing to regain the breath she'd stolen from him.

She extended her hand. "Kayla Franklin."

He grasped her hand with the one he'd had against the shelves. "Glad to meet you." A thousand sparks ignited the nerves in his arm, and current traveled from her hand directly into his heart.

She didn't pull her hand back right away. Instead she stared up at him with an odd look on her face, one he couldn't specifically identify, but it looked an awful lot like the way he felt in his gut at that particular moment.

He reluctantly let go of her and placed his meaty palm high on the shelving unit where it had been before. "We had an appointment."

"Yes, I know," she said, blinking blueberry eyes at him.

"You talked to my partner J.T. Baskin a couple of days ago about a remodel project." Roth reminded himself he was there to renege on J.T.'s agreement. He was just too darn busy to take on the Franklin job.

A warm April breeze blew a bronze curl off Kayla's forehead. "I can't tell you how pleased I am you've agreed to do this project for me. I've been trying for two months to find a carpenter who would take on this job. It's hard to get someone to do remodel projects. It seems most carpenters are looking for larger, more lucrative jobs."

Roth swallowed hard. She was right. They are, and so was he. "About your project," he began, working up the courage to cancel the job this lovely lady had expected him to do for her. "I'm not sure--"

She fidgeted again within the small space he'd allowed her between himself and the shelving unit behind her. "I am," she said, smiling up at him. "I'm sure you will do a wonderful job. I can feel it."

He pulled his hand from the shelves and straightened up. "What I'm trying to say, Ms. Franklin--"

"Call me Kayla. May I call you Roth?"

His gaze fell to her lips when she said his name. "I beg your pardon?" He wanted her to say his name again. He continued to observe her lips when she spoke.

"I said may I call you Roth?"

He lifted his gaze back to the blueberries setting in perfect symmetry above her exquisite nose. "Of course."

She folded her arms. "Would you like to sit down and discuss the project?"

You don't have time for this! Roth's common sense shouted. "Of course," his overruling fascination with her forced from his lips.

As he followed her to the opposite end of her porch and sat in one of her cushioned chairs, he admonished himself for the weakness she'd caused inside him. He ordered himself to get on with refusing her work and getting off her property before he did something really stupid--like taking on her project or promising her anything she asked of him or taking her in his arms and satisfying his curiosity about the taste of her flawless, full lips.

Kayla glanced over her shoulder toward the barn after she seated herself in her chair. "I'm not sure where I should start," she said, focusing on him. She laced her fingers and placed her hands in her lap.

Roth summoned a deep breath and lifted a hand. "I know exactly where to begin," he said confidently. "I'm afraid I can't handle your project." There. He'd said it. He'd made a clean break. It was all over.

She smiled and unlaced her fingers. She floated her delicate hands toward him and covered the forearm he'd laid on the armrest of his chair. "Don't be silly. I have complete confidence in you. If I didn't think you could handle the project, I never would have asked you or your partner to work for me."

Roth looked down at her hands. Shock waves were traveling from her touch to his heart again. He pulled his arm away and lifted his gaze to meet hers. "That isn't what I meant. Of course, I'm capable of doing your project. I've been doing carpentry for thirty

years, since I was ten years old. What I meant was..." He noticed disappointment touching the edges of her enchanting eyes.

Kayla Franklin was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, and she was weakening his resolve to renege on J.T.'s promise. If he didn't distance himself immediately, he'd be agreeing to rebuild her entire farm free of charge. It'd be worth it just to be near her.

Roth left his chair and walked to the porch railing. He leaned against a post and folded his arms. "You see, Kayla, when J.T. told you we could take on your project, he made a mistake."

"Kayla?"

Roth's gaze shifted to the front door as a woman came out of the house. She was a commanding woman, rotund, mid fifties, flicking fingers through a thick mop of short, black and gray hair. Her skin was the color of deep, rich cocoa, and her eyes matched the navy color of the sweats she was wearing.

She glanced at Roth. "I thought I heard a man's voice out here."

Kayla stood, stepped next to Roth and introduced the two people on her porch. "Alma Mendoza, Roth Simons."

Alma shook Roth's hand. "Glad to know you, Mr. Simons."

"Likewise," Roth said, wishing Ms. Mendoza's timing had been a little better. She'd stopped him from making it clear to Kayla he wasn't going to do her project.

Alma continued to pump Roth's hand enthusiastically. "I can't tell you how much your agreeing to work for her means to Kayla. She's been trying for months to get a carpenter out here, but they don't want to take on remodel jobs. I guess they don't pay as well as constructing big apartment complexes or building one of those mansions they build in the suburbs of Milwaukee." She let go of his hand and widened her smile. "It's wonderful to meet a man who isn't in business only for the big payoff, who keeps the little people in mind."

Roth shifted from foot to foot as Alma sang praises of him which simply were not true.

She looked at Kayla. "Honey, I wanted to let you know it took Maggie a while to fall asleep, but she's resting now. I'm not sure how long it will last, so you might want to keep it down when you go inside to discuss business."

"Maggie?" Roth inquired.

Kayla looked at him. "She's my little girl."

Aha! If she had a little girl, maybe she had a husband who could do her remodeling project for her. Roth wouldn't feel so bad about renegeing on J.T.'s agreement if there was someone else who could do her job. "So you have a family?" Roth said. "Is Mr. Franklin home? I'd like to meet him."

"There is no Mr. Franklin, Roth. I'm a single mother." Kayla turned to Alma. "Thanks, Alma. We'll be quiet."

"Fine," Alma said, reaching for the screen door with a big letter "F" in the middle of the metal gingerbread. "I'm going inside to read. I'll be in my room if you need me." She glanced at Roth before she fixed her gaze on Kayla. "I've got a feeling I'm leaving you in real good hands," she said suggestively.

When Alma went inside, Roth glanced at Kayla. Crimson colored her beautiful face. Alma had made her blush. Truthfully, her comment had made him feel a little warm himself.

“Would you like to go inside and discuss the remodeling, Roth?” she asked, sending an irresistible gaze his way.

She was standing far too close once more, and Roth had no resistance to her. She could ask him to remodel the capitol building in Madison for two cents, and he'd sign the contract immediately. What was this odd effect she had on him?

He stepped away from her and glanced over his shoulder. “I left my notebook in the truck. I'd better get it so I can make notes, take down measurements, do sketches.” What did he say?

“Sure, go ahead. I'll see you inside.”

Roth nodded toward her and went down the porch steps.

The second he was out of her air space, Kayla released a deep breath. “Whew!” she said quietly. For a moment, she thought he was going to tell her he wouldn't do the job. When he said his partner had made a mistake...

Thank God for Alma. Her timing had been perfect.

Instead of ending a job he hadn't yet started, Roth had agreed to work for her. Only one problem remained, she noted as she watched him walk to his truck. How did she keep the outrageous feelings he'd stirred inside her in check?

The second she'd turned round to look up at him, she felt her heart begin to hammer. He had a grin, which by comparison, could reduce the temperature of the sun to that of Antarctica. The workman's jumpsuit he wore looked like it was painted over his muscular physique, and his scent--fresh air and pine--intriguing, intoxicating, utterly alluring.

It had been ages since Kayla had been around a man who'd interested her at all, let alone one who captivated her as completely as Roth Simons did.

While he searched his truck for his notebook, Kayla hastened inside. She stood in front of the mirror next to the door and examined herself.

Her hair was wind blown, her nose was red from the sun and her shirt was full of wallpaper paste. She was a mess.

She flicked her fingers through her curls and tried to improve upon the way she looked, but nothing she could do in a few seconds would help much.

She peeked out the door and saw Roth coming up the steps. A small notebook was tucked in his breast pocket. She opened the door and let him in. “We'll go to the kitchen,” she whispered. “I've got some work I'll need you to do there.”

Roth entered and followed her through the living room which, on this rare occasion, wasn't full of Maggie's toys. They proceeded through the dining room into the kitchen.

“Would you like a glass of water or a soda?”

“No, thanks,” he said. “I think we should get right to business.”

Kayla nodded and motioned for him to sit at her ancient Formica-covered table. “I hope you don't mind a slight delay,” she said, “but it's after two, and I haven't had lunch. Alma left a tuna sandwich in the fridge for me. All right if I eat?”

“Please do.”

She went to the refrigerator and took out a plate. She smiled and sighed. “Alma did it again.” She looked at Roth. “She made me two sandwiches. She's always trying to fatten me up. Would you do me a huge favor and eat one of the sandwiches?”

She had gone to the table and put down a napkin in front of Roth while she was speaking. She set a sandwich in front of him before he could refuse.

He gave her one of his heart-melting smiles. “Sure.”

She set her sandwich on the table in the space next to Roth. She added two glasses of water to their meals.

“I hope you don't mind,” Kayla said as she seated herself, “but I always pray before I eat.” She bit her lip and shrugged her shoulders. “It's important to me to be grateful for what I have.”

Roth jerked back slightly and widened his eyes. “Mind? No, of course not.” He fidgeted a bit. “Should I leave?”

“Don't be silly. You're fine right where you are,” Kayla said, suppressing the grin his uneasiness coaxed from her. “It'll only take me a minute.” Kayla closed her eyes and gave thanks. When she opened them again, she found Roth staring at her.

She lifted her sandwich to her lips without saying a word and took a bite.

He followed her lead. Their conversation during the meal was relaxed and casual. Kayla found it thrilling to be so at ease with this handsome stranger. She wished they'd had ten courses to enjoy so her friendly, non-business moments with Roth could have lasted longer.

When they'd finished eating, Kayla set aside the dishes and began to explain to Roth what she wanted him to do for her. “As you learned a few minutes ago, I have a little girl.” Kayla sat forward and smiled. “She is wonderful.” She shifted in her chair and drew a foot up underneath her. “But she's also a handful. She's five-years-old and very inquisitive. I don't want to stifle her curiosity, but I do have to protect her.”

“Of course.”

“Maggie loves animals, and I plan to stock the farm with a menagerie for her. I moved to Green Valley from Milwaukee so I'd able to do that. When I was a little girl I lived on a farm until I was seven years old. I had a special kind of love for our sheep and cattle and horses, so I understand Maggie's affection for animals. I love Maggie very much, and I want to give her as full a life as I can. Alma is going to stay with me for a few months to help with Maggie while I fix up this place, but I'm afraid that, even with Alma's help, I can't get the farm in the kind of condition I want all by myself.” She reached for Roth's arm and squeezed it gently before she took back her hand. “I need your help.”

He cleared his throat and looked at her warmly. “You must be a wonderful mother.”

Kayla shrugged. “I'd do anything for Maggie, but it isn't because *I'm* wonderful. It's because *she's* wonderful.”

He leaned back and stretched his long legs under her table. “Okay,” he said, “what do you want me to do for this perfect child?”

She giggled like a little girl. “I said she was wonderful, not perfect.” She set her elbow on the table and pressed her cheek into her palm. “I want you to build safe areas for Maggie. I want her to have access to the house and barn with some limitations. In the kitchen, for example, I'd like you to wall in a play area over there,” she said, pointing to a

corner. "The area by the back door is big enough that she can have her own little space and lots of toys. While I'm working in the kitchen, she can have the freedom to play on her own without my having to keep constant watch over her."

"Sounds like something a five year old would like."

"And a thirty-six-year old too," Kayla said, grinning.

"Naturally," he said, giving her another of his warm smiles.

"Most of the work I want done is in the barn." Kayla pushed herself away from the table. "Want to go out there now?"

Roth pulled her chair back as she stood. "No time like the present," he said, rising. He slid his hand to the small of her back.

Kayla jerked at his unexpected touch, but he didn't remove his hand. She was glad he didn't.

They left the house and crossed the yard. When they reached the barn, Kayla flipped on the light inside.

Roth stepped away from her and examined the large, open space. "It looks like you could do just about anything in here you'd want to," he said, gazing at her.

"That's what I was thinking too. I'm hoping you'll be inspired with some terrific ideas."

"Have you got any suggestions which might help me get started in the direction you're leaning?"

"Let me fill you in regarding the menagerie I intend to get for Maggie. I'm sure you'll get a clearer picture than of what we need."

"Sounds great."

Kayla lifted her chin. "I plan to buy a couple of sheep, a goat or two, some chickens, maybe a pony, possibly a cow. I'm not sure exactly how to house them all in here. Obviously, they need separate stalls, but I also want Maggie to have as much access as she can to the animals so she can feed them and pet them and enjoy them."

Kayla glanced around the huge room. "The pens I want you to build will have to be different sizes for the various animals," she said, looking at him again. "I don't want them merely squared off adjacent to each other. I want walkways all the way around on the outside so Maggie can get close to the animals, but still be safe." She paused briefly. "This is all about giving Maggie as much access and freedom as possible so she can enjoy her curiosity and learn with all of her senses." As she inclined her head toward him she found herself mesmerized by the brown eyes which seemed to be looking inside of her. "Does my explanation of my vision help?"

His gaze serious, his eyes penetrating, he nodded. "It's inspiring." He slowly stepped away from her and walked around the barn, eyeing everything carefully. "You've obviously given this project a lot of thought."

Kayla watched him attentively. She tried to keep her mind off his appeal and on his reason for being with her. Business.

When Roth completed his survey, he returned to her. He leaned against the post she was standing next to. "I've got some ideas. Would you like to hear them?"

Kayla folded her arms and arched a brow. "Isn't that why we're here?"

He grinned and moved closer to her. He looked down at her from the top of his six-foot frame and stretched his hand out over the expanse of the barn. "I see a miniature golf course."

“A what?”

“Not a real golf course, but a layout like a mini golf course with pathways and toys for Maggie and the animals, benches and bins for food and supplies. Instead of going from one hole to another, Maggie can go from one pen to another. Let me show you,” he said, taking Kayla's hand. “It might be better if I walk you along my envisioned pathways so you can see exactly what I mean.”

The second his strong hand enveloped her small one, Kayla was hooked. She'd agree with anything he said, even if, by the time he'd finished explaining his idea, it hadn't been a plan a hundred times more wonderful than anything she'd imagined herself.

When they returned to the spot where they'd started, Roth let go of her hand. “What do you think?”

She placed her hand over her heart. “I think your plan is perfect!”

A grin lit his face. “I guess you like it then?”

“I guess I do,” she replied coyly. She was still grinning when she felt something scamper over the thin canvas shoes she was wearing. Kayla glanced downward and found two mice racing in circles across her sneakers.

She jumped to get away from the mice and landed with a thump against Roth's broad chest.

He caught her with one of his strong arms and began to chuckle. “Don't tell me a farm girl is afraid of mice.”

Kayla looked up at him and smiled. “Just a little.” A moment later she realized she was still pressed against his chest, wrapped in his arms, and she didn't mind it one bit. In fact, she liked it much more than she should have.

Kayla lost her smile and stared up into his eyes. She took a few steps back.

A deadly serious expression covered Roth's face. He took a step closer to her. “Kayla, I...” He glanced toward the front door. “Was there anything else?” he said, looking at her again.

“Anything else?”

“Anything else you wanted to say about the remodel project?”

She looked away. “Oh, the project.” She glanced at him again. “I think your ideas are absolutely wonderful, perfect, better than I had hoped.”

He smiled down at her. “I love hearing high praise from a beautiful woman.”

She swallowed hard. She turned and aimed herself toward the front door. When she started to walk toward it, he took hold of her arm and walked with her. His touch seemed to belong right where it was, and it gave her a deep sense of satisfaction to have him near her.

When they stepped outside, Kayla turned to look up at him. She fluffed her curls with her fingers and folded her arms in front of her. “I'm practically speechless over the ideas you came up with for the barn, Roth. You've chosen a design which is exactly what I knew I wanted but couldn't express in words. It's absolutely remarkable. We're thinking alike, reading each other's minds. That's very special considering we're strangers.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “Remarkable?”

“Remarkable,” she repeated, her eyes riveted to him, her heart racing.

His gaze suddenly left her and became fixed on something behind her. The gentleness which had enveloped his handsome face abruptly left. A look of pure disgust

or distaste or aversion or repugnance or something representing a form of those emotions replaced the sweetness he'd shown her a second before.

Kayla turned to see what could make him feel so utterly repulsed.

Maggie came bounding toward her, and Kayla spun back to Roth, horror in her veins and a knife in her heart.

He rubbed his hand over his face. "I'm sorry, Kayla, I didn't know she was-- I didn't know anything was wrong..." He shook his head. "I didn't know. I'm sorry," he said again.

"It's called Down Syndrome, Mr. Simons," she said, jerking her chin, "and it doesn't make her any less a wonderful little girl." She turned and walked away from him.

"I'm sorry, Kayla. I'm so very sorry," he called to her back.

She craned her head toward him and ground out her words. "You're fired!"

~ * ~

STOLEN SON

Blurb: Ella Mason knows Rafe Wallace is keeping a secret, but she doesn't care. For the first time since her son was stolen five years before she's happy, thanks to the new man in her life. Rafe hates lying to Ella, but what choice does he have? His agenda has everything to do with taking care of his son, and nothing can stop him from meeting it--even loving Ella. TOP PICK AWARD Winner from Romance Reader at Heart.

Stolen Son

By Fran Shaff

Award-Winning Contemporary Romance

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Chapter One

Ella jumped. The knock at the door nearly made her drop a whole handful of fresh bay leaves into simmering pot of tomato sauce.

"Just a minute." She set the leaves on a paper towel.

The knock sounded again, louder, harder.

"I'll be right there."

She stirred and inhaled her savory brew.

Another pounding on the door stole the last of her normally sweet disposition.

"All right. I'm coming!" She placed the lid on the pot, went to the door and swung it open. "What is the big--" She glanced at her caller and stopped speaking immediately.

Over six feet of broad, lean man inhabited the side entrance to her home. "Miss Mason?"

She shoved an annoying ebony curl away from her forehead. "I'm Ella Mason, and, at the moment, I'm very busy."

He arched a brow and twisted his mouth. "We, ah..." He cleared his throat. "We had an appointment. I'm Rafe Wallace."

Ella glanced over her shoulder at the pot on her stove. She also had a cake in the oven. "An appointment?" She looked at him again.

"Yes. My secretary called about a promotion my firm is having. You agreed to let us do some repairs on your house so we could use it as an example of our fine work."

"Oh, that." She waved a hand in front of her. "I thought you were coming tomorrow. Your secretary said July 11."

"Yes, ma'am. Today is July 11--Thursday. It's nearly four o'clock. Our appointment was at four."

"Today is the eleventh? But it can't be. I'm not ready."

"Ready?" He looked confused. "I can come back tomorrow if that would be more convenient."

The timer on the stove rang. She glanced over her shoulder then back at Rafe. "Come in." She grabbed his arm and pulled him inside. "Please, sit at the table. I'll be with you in a minute."

He pulled a chair from her ancient gray Formica-covered table. "Miss Mason, I really can come back at a more convenient time."

Ella went straight to the stove and turned off the timer. "No, no, today is fine." She lifted the lid on the pot of tomato sauce and gave the mixture a stir. She grabbed pot holders and pulled two thick layers of white cake from the oven. "We've got this bake sale at school tomorrow. It's a festival, really. They call it Summer Fling. I have to bring a cake and a few jars of my famous tomato sauce. The sale is a fund raiser for athletics. Tax crunch and all you know." She set the pans on the counter and blew on the cakes as if such a waste of effort would make them cool faster.

She could have sworn today was the tenth. She thought she had another two days to finish getting ready for the bake sale. Thank goodness she'd decided to bake the cake a day early. All the goodies were due at the school gym by eight that evening. It would be practically impossible to have the cake cooled and frosted by then, but she'd have to do the best she could.

"Is there anything I can help with?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?" If an elephant had crawled out of her broom closet she wouldn't have been more surprised than she was to receive this stranger's thoughtful offer.

He strode toward her and took the pot holders from her hand. "Can I help you with anything?"

She looked him over from his thick brown hair to the laced-up work boots peaking out from the bottom of his jeans. "You're kidding, aren't you?" she asked, focusing on his cobalt blue eyes. "You don't really know anything about cakes and tomato sauce, do you?"

"I might." He sent her a hint of a grin. "I think I can at least remove the cakes from the pans."

She gave him a tentative look.

"You don't believe me?"

She bobbed her head toward the island. “The cooling rack is over there. Take the cakes out of the pans, but, I’m warning you, those layers had better come out in one piece. I don’t have time to bake another cake.”

Rafe grabbed the round pans with his protected hands. He took the cakes to the island. He set one down and turned the other over on top of the cooling rack. He shook the pan, but nothing happened.

Ella opened a drawer, took out a butter knife and handed it to him. “It helps if you run a knife around the circumference of the pan before you try to empty it.”

He smiled at her. “Okay, now you know. I’ve never baked a cake in my life.” He took the knife, ran it around the edge of the pan and removed the cake. He successfully repeated his actions with the second layer. He turned his attention back to Ella when he finished. “Mind you, I’ve eaten tons of cake, but I’ve never baked one.”

His light tone and ability to make jokes about himself put Ella at ease in the middle of her turmoil. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to end up liking Mr. Rafe Wallace. That wouldn’t be a good idea. He was there on business, and, no matter how big a bargain his proposal had seemed, she had to keep a cool head about her. She certainly wasn’t going to get suckered into a business deal that didn’t turn out to be on the up-and-up. Any personal feelings she might develop for Rafe Wallace had to stay separate from any business decisions she might make concerning him.

“You’re on record then as being a fan of cake. Got any favorites?”

He stroked strong jaw. “Not really. As long as it comes with a potent cup of coffee, any cake will do.”

“An easy man to please. Good. I like easygoing personalities in a business relationship.”

He folded his arms over his light blue work shirt. “Don’t get me wrong. When it comes to eating, I’m not all that fussy. In business I’m quite different. I’m very particular as to how I do things, and I’m never easy going. I’m always very serious.”

“Okay, Mr. Wallace.” She turned back to the stove. “Then lets get down to business.” She lifted the lid on her tomato sauce and gave it another stir. “My sauce seems to be doing just fine. I’ll turn the heat down just a touch, and we can go outside and look at the repairs I’d like you to do.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

She glanced up at him. “Let’s go.”

He walked beside her and pressed his hand to her back. The heat from his palm surged through her. Her stomach did an unexpected flip, causing her to draw in a sharp breath.

He stopped moving and looked straight into her eyes. “Is anything wrong?”

She managed to shake her head.

He took her arm and patted her hand. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

The touch that had created panic in her a moment before now comforted her. “I’m fine.”

“Would you like to go outside now?”

“Yes.” She had no idea what had just happened or what kind of power Rafe to make her to react so strangely. But, whatever it was, she’d better be on guard. She needed a clear head if she was going to do business with this man.

Rafe let go of her arm and placed his hand on her back again as he urged her outside.

As soon as they stepped onto her deck, Ella took a deep, calming breath of sweet Montana air.

“The first thing I want you to take care of is this half-rotted deck. It’s a disgrace and a danger. Be careful you don’t trip and fall over one of the boards.”

Rafe studied the blistered boards, half dark green paint and half white primer showing through. He bent down and inspected the wood more carefully before standing. “This doesn’t look good,” he said, giving her a rueful glance.

“No, it doesn’t.”

He studied the deck further. “I’ll probably have to rip the whole thing apart and put in new supports and all new decking.”

Ella tilted her head and sent him a speculative look. “Still want to do all this work free of charge?”

He gave her a direct look. “My secretary made an offer, and you accepted.” His jaw got firmer and his eyes grew intense. “I don’t back out on promises, Miss Mason.”

Had she insulted him? He suddenly seemed different from the way he was in the kitchen. He looked sullen, discontented--almost as though she’d actually hurt his feelings in some way.

“I didn’t mean to imply that you were intending to renege on our arrangement. Actually, I wanted to be sure I wasn’t taking advantage of you. The deck is only the beginning of the work that needs to be done around here.”

His demeanor changed in an instant. “*You take advantage of me?*” He shook his head. “Not possible.”

“Really?” She lifted a brow. If this deal was as straight as what his secretary had offered, she’d definitely be getting the better end of the bargain. Where she came from--which, of course, was good old Billings, Montana--getting a much better end of a bargain could be construed as taking advantage of someone. But, in this case, Rafe knew exactly what he was offering.

“I want to propose a straight deal, just as my secretary explained. You allow me to do all your exterior repair work at a cost to you of materials only. You can even get your own bids on the materials if you’re afraid I might jack up the price, which I would never do.”

“So your reputation says.”

“My reputation?”

She folded her arms over her pink print knit shirt and gave him a confident look. “I checked you out. I know your firm has been in business for eight years. You and Logan Culpepper have a very good standing in the community. In fact, I couldn’t find one thing negative about C & W Construction no matter whom I asked.” She lifted her chin. “Your reputation is so good, I can’t help wondering why you’d make offers like the one you’re making to me. You should have all the business you can handle already.”

The look on his face told her she’d struck a nerve. He took a moment to respond. “You can never have too much business. Logan and I want to expand.” He looked away from her. “We’re reaching out to new areas, new people.” He turned back to her and gave her a smile she suspected was anything but natural. “You need repairs done. I can

do them for you at a bargain rate. If you like my work, you can refer new people our way. The way I see it, we both get what we want out of this relationship.”

She slid her fingers through her dark, short curls. She mulled over what he’d said. “I’d like to see your offer in writing.” She never was the trusting kind, at least not since--no. She couldn’t think of past traumas now. She had to stay focused on her business with Rafe.

“Done.” He extended her his hand.

She shook it and immediately regretted what she’d done. His warm touch once again set her off balance. Her stomach was flipping, her mouth was drying and the hand he continued to hold was burning.

He broke his connection with her and stepped back. “You mentioned other projects you wanted done. Could we see those now?”

Ella resolved to settle her rattled composure. “Of course.” She led the way across the deck, down the steps and around the end of the story-and-a-half, white clapboard house. “I set up the ladder a couple of days ago when I was checking the eaves after the last rainstorm we had.” She led him to the ladder and began to climb it. “My roof doesn’t leak, but the shingles are shot.”

He followed her up the ladder and walked over the top of her house as he studied the condition of her roof. He gave his head an uncertain shake and gave her a frank look. “You’re sure you don’t have any leaks? This looks pretty bad.”

“None that I know of.”

“We’d probably better take a look in the attic.”

She nodded. “I’ll let you do that on your own after I show you the shed. The attic is too small for both of us.” She’d never survive that kind of confinement with him. If his touch could send her totally out of kilter, who knows how she’d react to this captivating man in close quarters. She moved toward the ladder.

“Let me help you.” He took her arm.

Now that he’d touched her again, she couldn’t pull away. Being off balance on the deck was one thing. Unsteadiness on the roof top was quite another. How ironic, she thought. The cause of her misalignment was now protecting her from falling off the roof.

Once she was safely on the ladder, Rafe release his hold on her.

After they’d both set foot on the ground she led him to the shed. There she showed him the rot around the foundation and the leaky roof.

He examined the last of her projects thoroughly. When he finished, he folded his arms and twisted his mouth. “I’m not sure I can save it?”

“No?”

“I’ll have to inspect everything a bit more, but right now I’d say it looks like we’ll be seeing a lot of each other, Miss Mason. From what I’ve seen, this work will take most of the rest of the summer to complete.”

She bit her cheek. She was definitely taking advantage of him. “That’s what I figured.” She stuck her hands into the front pockets of her white cutoffs. “My realtor called this place a ‘handyman’s special.’ It was the only house I could afford. I don’t mind working on my home. I enjoy it.” She glanced around her yard. “You may not believe it, but I’ve done a lot already.”

“You have?”

“Yes, and I had big plans to do more,” she said confidently. “Until your office got in touch with me I’d intended to start ripping off the deck next week. The week after that I was going to take a class at the library so I could learn about re-roofing the house. I have to be back at school in six weeks. I needed to get the deck and roof done before then. I’d never have time to accomplish anything so labor intensive once classes began.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“I teach kindergarten.”

He nodded thoughtfully.

She shifted from one foot to the other. “If you’d like to take a look in the attic, I’ll get a flashlight.”

“Sounds good.” He motioned for her to lead the way to the house.

“While you’re finishing your inspection, I’ll check on my tomato sauce and make some lemonade for us. I’d imagine you could use something to drink if you’re as hot and thirsty as I am.”

“Lemonade would be real nice.”

They stepped up on the deck and entered the house. She took a flashlight from a cabinet near the door and handed it to him. “You can get into the attic from the garage or from the upstairs hallway. It’s easiest to use the garage entrance.”

“Garage entrance it is. I’ll let you know when I’ve finished my inspection.” He turned and left the room.

Ella went straight to her tomato sauce. She lifted the lid of the pot and stirred the mixture. She inhaled as she closed her eyes. “Mm.” She loved the smell of satisfaction. When the aroma of her tomato sauce filled the air this way, she knew she had a perfect batch. Tasting it was a mere formality.

She lifted a spoonful to her mouth, blew on it and tasted. The familiar flavor filled her senses. She smiled broadly. It was such a comfort to know there was one thing she could do really well. Everyone loved her tomato sauce. Her secret was in the tomatoes she grew herself. Even if she shared her closely guarded recipe for her prize-winning sauce, the robust flavor would never be duplicated. Not without the secret tomatoes.

Maybe it was silly that she could derive so much pleasure from gardening and cooking, but she didn’t care. A great abyss had filled her life for five years, a chasm of unimaginable proportions. Ella had to fill the emptiness with something. Gardening and cooking kept her fingers busy and her mind occupied. They eased her pain, comforted her on sleepless nights. She needed to love something which could never be taken away from her.

People could leave. Children could be stolen. But, gardens always came back. Tomatoes, herbs, spices, fruits and vegetables never left for long. They were easily replaced when used and always available. Her stove, pots and pans didn’t walk out on her. They were there for her whenever she needed them.

Ella placed the lid on her simmering sauce. She turned to the refrigerator and retrieved a handful of lemons. In a few minutes, she had a beautiful pitcher of lemonade. She placed it in the fridge.

She touched the cake cooling on the island. It was still warm. She glanced at her watch and decided, if she was to get the cake frosted, decorated and delivered to the school on time, she would have to put it in the freezer to cool. She wrapped both layers in cellophane and placed them in the freezing compartment of her refrigerator.

After cleaning up some dirty dishes, she began to wonder where Rafe was. He should have finished inspecting the attic some time ago. She went searching for him and found him in the back yard, standing in the rose garden.

Anger welled up inside her. How dare he! How could he!

“What do you think you’re doing?” she shouted and marched toward him. “Get out of the garden at once!”

Rafe’s deep-blue eyes, full of shock and bewilderment, grew as she neared him. “What on earth is wrong?”

“Get out of my rose garden. It’s off limits--get out!”

He didn’t belong there. No one belonged there but her. No one truly understood but her.

Rafe’s sharp gaze never left her, but he did leave the garden. He walked straight to her and took hold of her arms. “Miss Mason, calm down. I was only examining the set of the shed. It’s leaning. See?” He pointed. “I had to stand back to get a good view so I could see how far off plumb it is. I’m sure I didn’t stomp on any of the flowers.”

“The flowers aren’t the point.” She pulled out of his grasp. “I think you’d better go.”

He didn’t budge. He folded his arms and stood before her as impenetrable as solid granite. “No.”

“I beg your pardon?” She’d expected him to scurry away like a frightened rabbit. Hadn’t she made her anger with him clear enough?

“I’m not going anywhere. We have business to transact. I know you’re very angry with me at the moment, but you do have a lot of work that needs to be done, and I’m going to do it.” He relaxed his stance and touched her shoulder gently. When he spoke again, his voice was much softer. “I do apologize if I encroached on forbidden territory. As soon as you calm down, we’ll continue with our business.”

Ella took a deep breath. She reached for the strong hand on her shoulder. She squeezed his thick fingers. “I’m sorry I lost my temper, Mr. Wallace.”

He clasped the hand she had wrapped around his fingers. “It’s over, Miss Mason.” He squeezed her hand, sending surges of heat up her arm. “Let’s forget it and discuss the terms of our business arrangement.”

She pulled her hand away from him and shoved it into the pocket of her shorts. “Not today, Mr. Wallace.” She turned away and walked toward the house.

He caught up with her, took hold of her shoulder. “But we have a deal, Miss Mason. You wanted to put it in writing.”

“Yes, I know.” She couldn’t discuss their arrangement now. She couldn’t even look at him. “Get some estimates for the materials for the deck, the roof and the shed. Draw up a contract reflecting what we have already discussed. I’ll look at it on Saturday.”

“The shed has to be torn down and replaced. It’s leaning too much to fix it any other way.”

She continued to walk away from him toward the house, waving a hand about her. “Fine, fine. We’ll discuss it on Saturday. I have far too much to do today, Mr. Wallace.”

“I’ll see you Saturday then.” He made no attempt to follow her. “Will nine in the morning be all right?”

“Yes. Nine. Saturday.”

She needed to rest. She went into the house and found her favorite chair. She sank into it and began to cry.

“Mica,” she whispered, “stolen from me, so long ago. Will I ever stop missing you, sweet baby?”

She grabbed tissues from the table next to her chair.

“It’s our garden, Mica--yours and mine. I planted every seedling, nurtured each blossom for you, my darling, innocent little boy.”

For five years she’d missed her son, ever since he’d been stolen from the hospital shortly after his birth. She vowed to put an end to her mourning at the beginning of summer, yet should she be immune to setbacks like the one she had today? No one could expect that of her. She shouldn’t expect it of herself.

She’d explain her odd behavior to Mr. Wallace on Saturday. Maybe he’d understand, maybe he wouldn’t. It really didn’t matter. He would be working for her, not becoming her friend.

Ella dried her tears and closed her eyes. A few minutes’ rest and she’d be fine. She had to be fine. She had no other choice.

* * *

Rafe pulled into his parking spot at the C & W Construction offices. Just as he expected when he went inside, Logan was anxiously awaiting his arrival.

“Well?” Logan asked, running a hand through his disheveled, thick blonde hair. “What did you find out?”

“Let’s go into my office.” Rafe looked at his secretary, Terry Ainsworth, who was blatantly staring at him. “We’re out of donuts, Terry. Go to the store and get some, will you please?”

Terry rubbed a hand over her dark-skinned cheek and grinned at him. “I’d rather stay here and find out what’s had Logan looking out the window all afternoon. What have you two got going on?”

“Terry, just get the donuts--the coconut ones with the pink frosting. And get yourself a chocolate milk shake. You look like you’re losing weight.”

She chuckled as she logged off her computer and swiveled her chair. “You little charmer. My Henry should take lessons from you. He never did know how to sweet talk a girl.”

Terry was one in a million. Rafe would miss her terribly when she retired in September. She was definitely a busy body, but worth her weight in gold around the office.

“Just get the donuts.”

She smiled as she stood and took the ten Rafe handed her on her way out the door.

Once the two men were inside Rafe’s office, Logan asked, “What happened with Ella Mason?”

“We are definitely going to be doing business together. She has lots of work that needs to be done.”

“You think you’ll have enough time to really get to know her?”

“No question about it. Even if I work full time, it’ll take me until September to complete all the work she needs done. At least I can make it last that long if I need to.”

“Then, by September you’ll know.”

“Yes. I’ll know--but will I be able to go through with my plan?”

Logan slapped Rafe on the shoulder. “That, my friend, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.” He pulled back his hand. “You know I think you should forget the whole thing.”

Rafe walked to the window and looked out at the rolling hills surrounding him. “I wish I could, Logan. You have no idea how much I wish I could forget all about Ella Mason.” He looked at Logan again. “But I can’t.”

“None of this is your fault.”

“Doesn’t matter. My innocence is no excuse for my silence now that I know what happened. The only thing which will keep me from telling Miss Mason the truth is finding out she’s some kind of horrible person. That’s what I’m going to learn over the next few weeks.”

Logan stared at Rafe a long time. “And if she’s a good, trust-worthy woman? How are you going to tell her the truth?”

Rafe looked out the window then back at Logan. “I honestly don’t know. I only know if Ella Mason is a person I can trust, I’ve got to tell her the truth.”

“And if she turns out to be someone you can’t trust?”

Rafe swallowed hard. “Then God help me because I’ll keep my horrible secret as long as I live.”

~ * ~

A PARTNER’S PROMISE

Blurb: RECOMMENDED READ AWARD, EPIIE nomination for excellence in young people’s literature. 1880’s. Caught stealing! Eleven-year-old Axel O’Grady faces a choice--go to jail or leave New York on the orphan train bound for Iowa. Axel chooses Iowa, but he promises his best friend Nate he will return. Keeping his word won’t be easy, but A PARTNER’S PROMISE can never be broken.

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A Partner's Promise

By Fran Shaff

Award-Winning, Acclaimed YA Historical Novel

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Chapter One

“Read all about it! Man with two heads! Get your paper here!” Axel O’Grady knew how to sell newspapers on New York street corners better than just about any other newsie in the city. “Man with two heads,” Axel repeated as he took coins from a man in a dark suit and handed him a paper.

“Indeed,” the man said in a disapproving tone. “This is the eighteen-eighties, boy. Don’t you think it’s time you newsies showed respect for the modern reader of newspapers?” He tucked his paper under his arm. “Two heads, indeed.”

Axel grinned and pushed back the worn brown cap resting on top of his carrot-colored curls. He watched his customer take a few steps away. The man leaned into the corner of one of New York’s tall buildings and opened his paper.

A moment later the scowling fellow glanced back at Axel and jerked his chin.

Axel’s grin broadened. He knew in an instant his customer must have looked for the story of the man with two heads and found the headline: *Joseph Mann Appoints Two Presidents to Head Up Company*. Axel shrugged his shoulders at the man and turned back to bark out the headline which had earned him a good day’s wages. “Read all about it! Man with two heads!”

The bustle of activity along the streets of the large city made the warm, sunny day seem even more alive with the hope of a fresh spring season. The coins jingling in Axel’s pockets made the April afternoon brighter than any he’d known in a long time.

Once he’d sold all his papers, he shifted his gaze from passing potential customers to his partner, Nate Greenleaf. The lanky friend, whom Axel considered more brother than anything else, had a stack of unsold newspapers sitting next to him.

Axel walked over to his dark-haired partner. “Why don’t I take a dozen of those papers back to my side of our corner? I got lucky and sold all of mine.” He stuck his hands inside his pockets and jingled his coins.

Nate scratched his light brown cheek, narrowed his dark eyes, and grinned at Axel. “Got lucky?” He cocked an eyebrow. “I can tell from those twinkling sky-blue eyes, O’Grady, that you lied your way through your sales again. Which headline did you modify to suit your purposes today? The mayor’s party? The governor’s taxes? Or maybe you dug into the obituaries and took advantage of some poor soul.”

A sly smile slid over Axel’s freckle-covered face. He shrugged his shoulders and jostled the coins in his pockets again. “What’s the difference? We’ve got enough money from our sales to keep us fed for days.”

Nate playfully knocked Axel’s wool cap off of his head. “Why bother to sell anymore papers then? Let’s go eat.”

“Now you’re talking!” Axel bent to pick up his cap. As he placed it on his head, he said, “You know, since I turned eleven last week, I think I’ve been hungrier than I was before. Now I know why you’ve been eating like a starved dog these last two months. It’s the age, right, Nate?”

Nate tried again to knock Axel’s cap off his head, but Axel ducked. “Quit thinking so much. Pick up those papers so we can get some of the food you were talking about before we both turn twelve.”

Axel smoothed his cap over his head. He bent to grasp the stack of unsold papers. When he stood up again, he looked straight into the eyes of Johnny Miller.

The nasty fourteen-year-old boy towered over him.

Axel firmed his jaw and slammed Johnny with a deadly stare. “Get off our corner, Miller.”

Johnny, who was two heads taller than Axel, one taller than Nate, lifted a side of his mouth as he shoved long fingers through his tousled, thick waves of brown hair. “I told you before, I want this corner.” He grabbed Axel by the collar, causing him to drop

his papers, and dragged him next to the building. "This corner is mine from now on," he said through gritted teeth.

Nate quickly picked up the papers Axel had dropped and rushed to his partner's side. "Miller, let go of him."

Johnny glanced at Nate. He jerked hard on Axel's collar and lifted him off the ground. He pointed at Axel with his other hand, keeping his eyes on Nate. "This?" he said. "You want me to let go of this?"

Nate dropped the papers he was holding. He stiffened his spine and folded his arms. "I told you to put him down. Axel told you to get off our corner." He took two steps closer to Miller. "You'd better start doing what you're told, or you'll regret it."

"Why, you little..." Johnny quickly dropped Axel. He pulled back his arm and rammed his fist into Nate's face.

Axel fell on his backside when Miller released him, crunching his bones. Stunned from his fall, he could only watch as Johnny hit Nate in the eye, then the midsection, and again in the eye.

When he was finally able to move, he attacked Johnny from behind. He planted himself on Miller's back and tightened his arms around the big boy's throat.

Johnny yanked Axel's arms away and threw him to the ground.

Pain crashed through Axel's body as the bully's fists pummeled him. The taste of blood mingled with his dazed senses, and Axel struggled to stay alert. He tried to throw his arms against Johnny, who hovered above him, but he couldn't move.

Johnny's blurred image sneered down at him. Words echoed through a tunnel. "Now whose corner is it?"

Axel tried again to move, but he couldn't. He could barely see Johnny, but he knew what the big bully was doing.

Large hands found their way into Axel's pockets. Johnny quickly removed every coin Axel had.

When he'd robbed Axel, Miller went to Nate's unmoving body and stole his money too.

The thief stood over his victims and spat on each of them. He jingled the coins in his pockets. "Get off of my corner, boys, and stay off it, or you'll get more of the same."

Fire burned inside Axel's belly. He tried with all of his might to move, but he could do no more than lift his head. He drew in a painful breath and looked at his partner.

Nate's eye was bleeding badly, and he wasn't moving at all.

"Nate." Axel tried to shout, but his word was barely a whisper. Panic set in. He had to move. He had to get to Nate. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength.

He managed to sit up and drag himself to Nate. He rubbed his hand over the boy's bloody hair. "Nate, wake up."

He still didn't move.

Axel looked around. Dozens of people were on the street, but no one stopped to help. He looked at Nate once more.

Why would anyone help? Axel thought scornfully. He and Nate were just a couple of homeless kids. The city was full of them, and no one cared about them.

It didn't matter. He didn't need anyone. He and Nate had been on their own for years. He'd always taken care of his partner, and Nate took care of him.

"Nate! Nate, wake up!"

The boy remained motionless.

A tear rose in Axel's eye. Feeling ashamed of his show of weakness, he quickly wiped the offending tear away. "Nate, you nasty old bum, you wake up right now!"

"Young man!"

Axel looked up and saw a regal-looking older woman dressed in satin finery. Her hand was over her heart. "Just what is this world coming to?" she asked, shaking her head. "Mind your tongue, child. We'll have no nasty language on the streets of New York!" She shook her head again and stalked away.

Axel looked from the woman to his bleeding, beaten brother. He whispered a response to the uncaring woman's comment. "I guess New York doesn't need any good Samaritans either." It must have been the thought of losing his friend, his only remaining family, that brought his mother's Bible teachings to his mind, but he didn't have time to think about that now. He had to get help for Nate.

Bolting to his feet, Axel tottered a moment before he fell back to the ground. Everything went black, then light. "Help," he said weakly, and blackness surrounded him once again.

Some time later, Axel gazed up through a haze of dizziness. A police officer stood over him, nudging him with his foot. "I said wake up, boy."

He opened his eyes in time to see a wagon taking Nate away.

"You'd better go home, boy, if you have one. You can't lay about anywhere you please. Not in my city. Not in New York. No, sir!"

Axel sat up and looked at the tall police officer above him. "Where are they taking my friend?"

"The boy in the ambulance?"

"Yes."

"They're hauling him away. I told you, you can't lay about anywhere you please in New York." The dark-haired, pink-skinned officer who spoke with a German accent reached for Axel's hand and helped him stand up. "You all right, boy? Want to tell me what happened?"

"We had a fight," Axel said, trying to right his messed-up clothes.

The policeman pointed a thumb over his shoulder toward the wagon taking Nate away. "You and him? Looks like you both got in some powerful licks."

"Us two and another boy," Axel said, nodding. "Nate's my friend. It was a much bigger boy who attacked us."

The officer looked Axel over carefully. He gave his head a slight shake. "Humph, so someone else started the fight, huh?" He gave him a familiar disbelieving look. "Red hair, fair skin, blue eyes and freckles. You're Irish, ain't you, boy?"

Axel nodded.

"I figured as much. You Irish are always causing trouble, and you street Irish are the worst."

Axel opened his mouth to say something vicious in reply to the officer's nasty remarks, but he didn't have time to make matters worse. He needed to get to Nate.

The constable took another look at him. "You're pretty bruised up, but you'll be all right if you get home and take care of yourself." He glanced over his shoulder, then back at Axel. "I'm not so sure about the dark-skinned kid. The doctors'll have to figure that one out."

“Where will they take Nate?”

“He’ll go to the hospital over that way,” the officer said, pointing, “the one a couple of blocks from here.

“Thanks.” Axel started to walk in the direction the policeman had indicated.

The officer grabbed his shoulder. “If you’re thinking of following your friend to the hospital, forget it. Hospitals don’t let kids in unless they’re patients, and they don’t take patients who can’t pay unless they’re as bad off as your friend is. You’d better take care of yourself so you can help your friend when the hospital lets him out.”

Every inch of Axel’s body ached. What the officer said made sense. If he wanted to help Nate, he’d have to heal a little himself. Nate would be taken care of in the hospital. He looked up at the policeman. “Thanks, you’re right. I’ll go home.”

“See that you do,” the officer said as Axel walked away.

As he walked along the street, pain surged through his body. He could feel his eye swelling shut. He’d have a big enough job now taking care of himself. It was good Nate had nurses and doctors to help him. And he’d have food to eat in the hospital too.

The image of Nate’s beaten body formed in Axel’s mind, and a tear slid down his cheek. “God,” he whispered, “You’ve just got to take care of Nate for me.” He drew in a strengthening breath. “Please, God. Nate’s all I have.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fran Shaff is the author of contemporary and historical sweet romance, young peoples’ novels and short stories. She began writing in 1999, and she continues to produce romance and children’s novels. Her books are available in hardcover, paperback and e-book formats. Her short stories have appeared in such places as Woman’s World magazine and at prominent places on the Internet.

Ms. Shaff is a native of South Dakota. She has also lived in Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois. Her books are found in libraries and bookstores throughout the country and on the Internet.

AWARDS and HONORS

Fran Shaff has won the following awards and honors: Write Touch Readers’ Award, More than Magic Award, Herbert W. Blakely Award, Golden Rose Award, EPPIE nomination for children’s literature, two Recommended Read Awards from Fallen Angel Reviews, Top Pick Award from Romance Reader at Heart, E-book of the Month Award from MyShelf.com, and two CataRomance Reviewers’ Choice Awards, one nomination.

Books by Fran Shaff which are currently available or coming soon in hardcover, paperback and electronic formats include: THE TRADING GAME, CHANGE OF

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Visit Fran Shaff's website at: <http://sites.google.com/site/fshaff> for more information on her currently-available books and short stories.

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