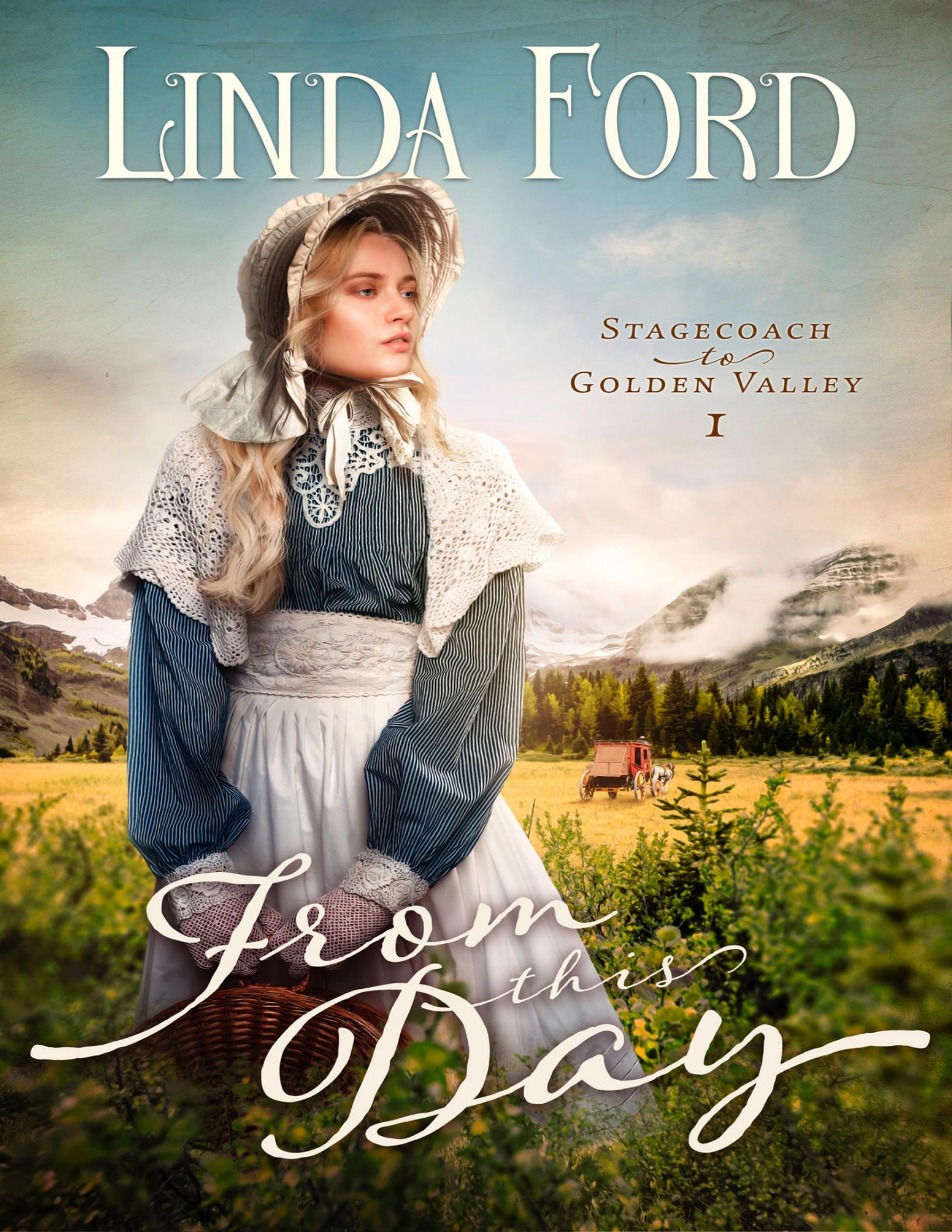


LINDA FORD

STAGECOACH
to
GOLDEN VALLEY
I

From this Day



From This Day

STAGECOACH TO GOLDEN VALLEY

BOOK ONE

LINDA FORD





“The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

— JOHN 10:10

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One

WESTERN CANADA, 1883

“W hoa! Whoa!”

The stagecoach rocked and rattled at the driver’s frantic call.

Now what? Addie kept the words inside her mouth. She reached out her arm to steady Mother Stone. They’d been delayed with an injured horse, and now this rain was slowing them down. Addie wanted to get to their destination and bury herself in the work she did helping the Stones. How else could she find purpose and satisfaction?

The older woman, who’d been mother to Addie these past eight years, blinked awake. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t—”

The door jerked open, cutting off her reply. The coach tipped as a man stepped aboard. Water dripped from his soaked clothing, ran off his hat brim, and puddled on the floor.

Addie shifted her feet aside and turned her knees to avoid getting wet.

“Sorry, folks, but I need a ride.” Rain blew in the open door, dampening the air and Addie’s clothes.

“Close the door.” The wizened man across the narrow aisle who continually wheezed, coughed, and mopped his brow coughed. “We’ll all catch the death of a cold.” His words choked off as he gasped for breath.

Although she’d steeled herself to hide her thoughts and kept her face expressionless, Addie wondered if it wasn’t too late for the elderly man,

who had introduced himself as Zeke Zacharius, to worry about the effects of the damp weather on his health.

The newcomer pulled the door closed. Cold air from the curtained windows continued to chill them.

The other passenger—a portly man who seemed full of his own importance—huffed. “Where do you expect to sit?” Mr. Bertrand spread his bulk across a large portion of the seat.

The newcomer removed his hat. He eyed the bench Addie and Mother Stone shared. Addie resisted the urge to spread herself wider as Mr. Bertrand had done. She lifted her gaze to the man and bit back a gasp.

His eyes were the most startling color. Silvery greenish blue. Like sunshine reflecting on dancing water. So unusual a color that she stared. Her cheeks warmed at her unblinking interest, and she tore her gaze away. He was a young man with hair as black as coal and the garb of a cowboy. Or did she mean rancher? Because he looked better off than most of the cowboys she’d encountered, his coat without tears, his boots in good condition, and—well, he simply looked well clothed.

Mother Stone slid to Addie’s side. “We’ll make room.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but I am wet enough to soak a badger. I’ll sit on the floor.” He lowered himself at Addie’s feet. She edged closer to Mother Stone to avoid contact with the man.

“Who be you? And what brings you out in this downpour?” Mr. Bertrand’s tone suggested the man must be crazy.

“Howdy, everyone. Name’s Nash Burns.”

One by one, the travelers gave their names.

He favored them all with a slight tip of his head and a curving of his mouth. And a flash of silver-tinted eyes. “I’m on my way back to my ranch. My horse came up lame.” His shoulders rose and fell. “The stagecoach will get me closer to home.” An airy snort passed his lips. “Faster than walking.” He returned his hat to his head and leaned back.

A weary silence filled the coach. Well, apart from the rattle of something in the boot, the creak of the wheels, and the clopping of six horses’ hooves in mud.

Would it ever stop raining? Addie sat back and tried to relax, which was impossible given the tightness of the quarters and weariness of her bones.

The coach jolted and stopped. It tipped as the driver got down.

All eyes followed the sound of the unseen man as he muttered to himself, then pulled open the door, forcing Nash to edge forward. "Folks, this here is as far as we go."

Before he could say more, Mr. Bertrand growled, "I paid to get to Golden Valley."

"Road's washed out. Coach is stuck in mud to my ankles. But if ya wanna walk the rest of the way, go ahead. Be warned, water's pouring off the mountainside. Guessing you're prepared to swim part of the way." The driver, known only as Hawk, turned to the others.

Mr. Bertrand harrumphed and muttered under his breath.

"You'll all be more comfortable in the way station. Grab what ya can carry and follow me as soon as I get the horses unhitched."

Before anyone asked any questions, Hawk was gone.

"I'll help." The coach bounced, jerking Addie's aching neck as Nash jumped down and followed him.

"Well, I'll certainly have something to say to the owners of this company. Imagine—"

Mother Stone cut off Mr. Bertrand's complaints. "What we can carry? What does that mean?" She peered out the window. "I don't see anything but rain. How far do we have to walk?"

"Here, Mother. We'll take our satchels." Addie handed one to Mother and clasped the other in her lap. All they had in them were a few essentials, such as what they'd need for an overnight stay. They'd already spent a night in one of the way stations. She shuddered at the memory. She and Mother had shared a thin pallet on one side of the room while the men spent the night on the other side. The proprietor took the single cot in a tiny alcove. Addie didn't object to the meager offerings. After all, along with Mother Stone and Preacher Stone, she had embraced a life of simplicity, sharing everything they had with those less fortunate. There was comfort in owning little. It tempted no one to consider robbing them.

A shiver sneaked across her shoulders, and it wasn't solely because of the cold.

Mr. Bertrand's never-ending complaints drew her attention back to the present. Mr. Zacharius coughed. The man was obviously unwell. Why was he traveling to Golden Valley? No amount of gold was going to cure his illness.

Nash Burns opened the door. "Folks, let's go. We'll soon reach shelter." He held out his hand to assist Addie to the muddy ground.

She grasped it, startled by the jolt that ran up her arm. Then she turned to help Mother Stone. On the muddy ground, the older woman clung to Addie's arm.

Mr. Zacharius gripped Nash's hand as he wheezed from the coach.

Mr. Bertrand hovered at the door. "I demand my money back. I didn't pay for this...this."

Nash chuckled. "Sir, if you could buy rain or pay for sunshine, people'll line up for your services."

With a harrumph, the man stepped down. "Mud will ruin my shoes."

"Follow me." Nash headed away.

Through the curtain of rain, the shape of the horses ahead indicated the direction they should go. Then, the animals disappeared in the deluge. She hunched her shoulders and shivered in her dripping coat. *Please, God, keep us safe.*

Rain slashed against her cheeks. Water trickled from her elbows and hair. Mud stuck to her shoes until she struggled under the weight of it. Mother Stone's grip grew heavy on Addie's arm. She took Mother's valise and carried it.

Nash glanced over his shoulder. His gaze flickered over Addie and Mother Stone and past them to the two men behind, one wheezing and coughing, the other muttering and complaining.

"How much farther do we have to go? This is unacceptable."

"You're welcome to stay in the coach." Nash's comment revealed a do-as-you-like attitude.

"Harrumph."

"Please." Mother Stone spoke softly, weariness sucking at her strength. "How far?"

"We'll soon be there," Nash spoke with patience.

He hadn't, however, said how far. Addie plodded along in his wake, each step growing increasingly difficult.

Behind her, Mr. Zacharius's wheezing competed with the pounding rain. Mother stumbled. Or, more accurately, folded.

Addie leaned over to grasp her arms. "Here. Let me help you."

"I'll be fine. I just need a moment."

Addie barely made out the weak words.

“Let me.” Nash eased Addie aside and scooped Mother from the mud. “Let’s keep moving although”—he chuckled—“I doubt we can get any wetter.”

“I can walk.” Mother meant to sound strong, but her whisper lacked proof.

“I’m sure you can.” But the man strode onward without putting Mother on her feet.

Addie hurried after him. Mother was so weak. Was it her age? The effects of travel? Or something more insidious? Surely, once they reached Golden Valley and got settled, she’d rally especially if Addie convinced her to eat better and rest more.

She paused to catch her breath and tried to shake mud from her feet. Mr. Zacharius bumped into her, and she moved onward. How far did they have to struggle through the rain and mud?

“Here we are.” Nash’s announcement drew her attention to the low building before them, its shape barely visible in the curtain of rain. No doubt it would be as unwelcoming as the previous way stations they’d encountered, offering little in the way of comfort. But at least they’d be out of the weather.

Nash’s boots thudded on the wooden step. He pushed open the door.

Addie followed. If she got Mother comfortable and something warm into her stomach—

“Howdy!” Nash’s call echoed in the stillness of the shadowed room. “Anyone here?”

No one answered.

Mr. Bertrand edged past Addie. “This is unacceptable.”

Did he mean the surroundings? The weather? Or life in general?

“We’re out of the rain.” Nash’s patient answer might have carried a touch of annoyance. He crossed to a chair by the stove and deposited Mother. “I’ll get the fire going.” Obviously, he spoke to Mother.

“You’re very kind.” Mother patted Nash’s hand.

“My mother raised me to think of others.”

Addie knew from experience that Mother’s sweet smile would feel like a blessing. The older woman had a way of reading people, seeing the good things about them, and encouraging them to be better people all without speaking a word.

As Nash rattled the stove lid and started a fire, Addie shed her dripping coat. This must be one of the places where the coach stopped only long enough to change horses, and the passengers could expect nothing more than a trip to the outhouse and a drink of water. Meager, to say the least. A narrow table with narrow benches beside it crowded in one corner. A cot strewn with tangled blankets stood close to it. The other furnishings were a tall cupboard and two chairs. She wrinkled her nose at the odor coming from the slop bucket.

Mr. Zacharius dropped to the bench by the table while Mr. Bertrand stood, arms akimbo, staring at the smudged window with water drooling down the outside of the glass.

At Mother's moan, Addie hurried to her side. "You're shivering." A needless observation. They were all wet, cold, and miserable.

Mr. Bertrand faced the room. "Where is our host? I need a hot drink and some hospitality. Is that too much to ask?"

Silently, Addie echoed Mr. Bertrand's complaint, although worded differently. Mother needed a warm drink and some nourishment. They needed to get to Golden Valley, where Mother could rest. And where Addie could assist Father in his work caring for the ill, the injured, and the less fortunate in the mining town. He counted on their help, even as Addie found comfort in the hope of ministering to others. Her insides tightened. Only by reaching out a hand of mercy would she ease that tension.



IF HIS HORSE HADN'T STARTED FAVORING ONE LEG, NASH WOULD BE back at his ranch by now. But he'd had to arrange for Star to be cared for by the nearby woodsman and then hiked back to the trail in time to flag down the stagecoach. Wanting to make sure he didn't miss the ride, he'd left in a rush, taking only his saddlebags that now hung by the door beside the satchels the others had dropped at their entrance. In hindsight, he wished he'd grabbed his slicker. Now, a further delay, though he wouldn't grouse about it like Mr. Bertrand did. After all, if you complain about the weather, it seems a tad too close to murmuring at God. And that wasn't a trail he meant to venture down.

But no need to fret. He'd be back in time to meet the herd of horses being delivered to the ranch. A smile drew his lips upward, and satisfaction filled his heart. He'd worked hard to save the money to buy that breeding stock. Honest work, honest gain. Those words might even be the motto of his life.

Mr. Bertrand cleared his throat. No doubt, meaning to let everyone know his opinion about the delay, the rain, the present company, and life in general. Didn't the man realize dissatisfaction made one miserable and often led to seeking ways that they thought would make life better? Even bending or downright breaking laws if they thought it would benefit them.

Nash shook his head. He didn't need to judge the man in such a fashion. He studied his fellow travelers. Unexpected company on his journey home. The unhappy Mr. Bertrand. Zeke Zacharius looked like a good wind would carry him away and it sounded like a wind had tried. Mrs. Stone, shaking with cold. And the younger Miss Stone. Addie. Her brown eyes held mystery and watchfulness. Blonde hair hung in damp lengths. Even wearing a plain gray shirtwaist and a dripping wet black skirt, she brought to mind warmth and sweetness. Why was a pretty young woman like her heading for the goldfields?

"Mother, let me take your wet shawl." She eased it from the woman's shoulders and hung it from a nail by the door. She eyed the blankets on the bed. Then, she squared her shoulders, plucked up one, and wrapped it around her mother. "At least it's dry."

About the best one could say for it. A layer of dust covered the window ledge. Ripe odor rose from the slop bucket. The smell of wet wool wafted from the two men.

The chair legs scraped across the floor as Nash drew it next to Mrs. Stone and nodded toward Miss Stone to sit.

"Thank you."

He'd filled the kettle from the water bucket when he started the fire. Now, it steamed. In the cupboard, he found tea leaves and a teapot. Good. He'd give Mrs. Stone a hot drink. All of them would benefit from the comfort of such. He poured the water over the leaves, gave the tea a few minutes to steep, and then handed Mrs. Stone a cupful. "This will warm your insides."

"Thank you, young man." Her voice was whispery. Her skin was pale. Was it more than cold and exhaustion?

A quiet snort eased past his teeth. That was more than enough to explain Mrs. Stone's weakness.

"Is there tea for everyone?" Mr. Bertrand's strident voice jerked Nash's attention back to the others.

"Lots." Would it hurt the man to ask politely?

He prepared a cup for Miss Stone. With a quiet thank you, she accepted it. He carried two more to the men on the narrow bench next to the table.

Mr. Zacharius's hands shook so hard it was a wonder he'd manage to get any of the liquid into his mouth.

Mr. Bertrand huffed and took the tea without so much as a word of thanks.

Nash poured tea for himself in a battered tin cup from the cupboard and lowered himself to the bench beside Mr. Zacharius.

Boots thudded on the step. The door creaked open. Cold blasted in, carrying droplets of rain on its breath. Hawk considered them. "Where's Shorty?"

"I'm guessing that's the man who lives here." Nash didn't wait for an answer. "No sign of him."

"He wasn't in the barn." Hawk pulled his hat lower. "I'll look around." Damp cold blew across the room as he stepped outside.

Rain pounded on the roof. Mr. Bertrand's cup scratched across the table. Mr. Zacharius's wheezing overlays all other sounds.

Nash hadn't thought to be concerned about Shorty's absence, assuming he was in the barn. Knowing he wasn't changed things.

"I pray the man has found shelter," Mrs. Stone murmured.

Nash nodded.

The travelers sipped their tea. Their cups empty, they set them aside. No one seemed inclined to talk, although Mr. Bertrand grumbled about the weather. Perhaps, like Nash, they waited for Hawk to return with good news.

The door crashed open, and Hawk stepped inside. "We got a problem."

All eyes jerked toward him.

"Shorty's hurt. I need help to get 'im."

Nash pushed to his feet. "I'll come."

"Could use another body." His piercing black eyes went to Mr. Zacharius, but he gave a little headshake, recognizing the man didn't have

the strength to face the weather. He turned his attention to Mr. Bertrand, who harrumphed.

“I did not pay good money to venture out into this weather for some needless mission of mercy.”

“We’ll manage on our own.” Nash heard the weary acceptance of his words.

“That won’t be necessary.” Miss Stone rose. “I can lend a hand.”

Shock and resistance burned through Nash’s veins. “You should stay inside where it’s warm and dry.”

“Not when someone is in need.”

Two

Mission of mercy. Mr. Bertrand's choice of words served as a reminder of her duties. An injured man needed help. She would go. It was as simple as that. Let Nash Burns look as surprised as he chose. Let him protest all he wanted. This task called her to action.

“Be careful.” Mother patted Addie’s arm.

“Of course.” She slung her wet coat tighter around her. She was wet clear through, as were all of them. The heat from the stove had just begun to make its way to her skin. As soon as she got back, she meant to get warm and dry, though it might take the rest of the day and all night to accomplish it.

Squaring her shoulders, she dismissed her discomfort. She’d dealt with worse in the past and survived.

“You’ll do.” Hawk’s words might have been resigned.

She followed him out the door, Nash at her heels.

In the pounding rain, her determination faltered. A purely miserable day loomed. Water sloshed at her feet. Wind erased every memory of heat. Visibility shrank to a few feet, urging her to hurry after Hawk lest she lose sight of him. Behind her, the slosh of Nash’s steps provided more impetus to stick close to Hawk.

They navigated through trees that dripped miserably.

Hawk stopped. She and Nash drew to his side. He pointed at a fallen tree, its shattered branches strewn at their feet, the trunk wheezing on the ground. She squinted and gasped.

“Is that Shorty?” A face almost hidden by a branch peeked out. Nothing more of him showed.

“It’s him.”

Nash swept aside a leafy branch. “Shorty?”

No response.

“He’s still alive,” Hawk said. “Barely. No tellin’ how long the man’s been here.”

Ignoring Nash’s presence, Addie edged in closer to Shorty, leaned over, gripping a branch to steady herself, and touched Shorty’s face. “He’s cold as ice.”

“Guessing we all are,” Hawk said.

She pressed her fingers to Shorty’s neck, seeking a pulse. Air rushed across her teeth when she detected one.

The tree shifted, putting her off-balance. She would have fallen except Nash caught her arm and pulled her back. “Whoa. We don’t need a second person to carry out.”

An alarming jolt of warmth rushed up her arm. She hadn’t come here to think of Nash as a man. He remained just a person. As she shrugged to escape his hold, she still teetered off-balance. Only his grip on her arm kept her upright. He eased her back until she steadied. He still didn’t release her arm, forcing her to shrug him off. But twisted branches had tangled around her feet, and she grabbed his arm to keep from falling.

He chuckled, and she bristled. How dare he mock her efforts to avoid him?

She might have voiced her protests, but Hawk spoke.

“Nash and me will lift the main trunk. Miss, you make sure nothin’ falls on Shorty.”

Nash and Hawk picked their way to the thick trunk and leaned into the task. Branches creaked and snapped. One released and sprang toward Addie, sharp twigs gouging her cheek. She staggered back and fell on leafy debris. Hoping no one—namely Nash—noticed, she righted herself and knelt beside Shorty, pushing aside branches snapping toward him. Her acute awareness of Nash made her grit her teeth. No room in her life existed for such feelings. Besides, what did she know about him apart from the fact that he owned beautiful eyes and he’d been kind to Mother?

The tree lifted. The men heaved it farther away. Shorty lay exposed. A dark area on the leg of his trousers suggested blood.

Nash hunkered beside her. He ran his hands along the man’s limbs. “Hard to say how injured he is.”

“He certainly isn’t going to improve out here in the cold.” She hadn’t meant to sound so sharp. But he seemed not to notice.

Hawk spoke from beside her. “Nash, help me get ‘im on this stretcher.”

Stretcher? Where had that come from? Hawk must have brought it out before he came asking for help.

“Miss Addie, steady his legs. ‘Pears one is injured.”

Nash and Hawk rolled the man to the canvas stretched between two long poles while Addie held Shorty’s legs together.

The man groaned but didn’t wake.

The men picked their way past the debris left by the fallen tree, through the woods, and across the muddy clearing. Addie hurried ahead to open the door and stepped to one side as they carried the man indoors and deposited him on the bed.

Together, they rolled Shorty, with Addie holding his legs steady, and eased the stretcher from under him.

The stain on the leg of his trousers widened.

“His wet clothes need to come off.” Nash’s silvery eyes impaled Addie, making it impossible to think. “Maybe you’d like to wait by your mother.”

His words jarred her into action. With burning cheeks, she hurried to Mother’s side, where she kept her back turned as Hawk and Nash undressed the man.

Mother’s color had not improved. If anything, a faint greenish hue had appeared around her mouth.

“Are you feeling poorly?”

“I’m tired.”

At the weary words, Addie studied the woman more closely. They’d been traveling for days, enough to suck the energy from even a younger woman. And they’d been almost drowned in the downpour. Of course, her skin felt cold. Did that explain the way she looked and sounded?

Cries and protests from the cot proved Shorty’s pain increased at the movement.

“He’s decent,” Nash called.

Addie hung her wet coat on the back of the chair, turned it toward the stove to hurry it in drying, and then returned to the narrow cot. A gray woolen blanket covered Shorty.

Nash peeled it back to expose Shorty’s leg. “It’s gouged pretty deep.”

An unnecessary observation. Addie could see it for herself.

Mr. Zacharius had fallen asleep with his head resting against his arms on the tabletop. His breathing sounded like he needed new bellows.

Mr. Bertrand shifted his back to the injured man. "I will certainly be letting the owners of this stage line know their service is not up to standards."

No one paid him any mind. Did he think Shorty had injured himself just to inconvenience Mr. Bertrand? Or that God had ordered it to rain on the day the man would be traveling? Mr. Bertrand surely had to be aware of the dangers he'd encounter traveling across the mountains.

She found the washbasin hanging behind the stove and filled it with the warm water left in the kettle. "Do you suppose he has any clean rags?"

Nash opened cupboard doors and drawers. "This do?"

The gray rag he held up seemed clean. She took it and began washing out the wound.

"Perhaps it's a good thing he's passed out."

She nodded at Nash's words.

Hawk looked through the contents of an upper cupboard. "I recall he had whiskey here. For medicinal purposes, mind." Bottles rattled. "Yup." He held up a dark bottle and carried it back to the cot.

Satisfied she had the wound as clean as she could get it, Addie stepped back.

Shorty mumbled something.

"I hope he isn't coming around. At least not now." Hawk spared the man a glance before he poured whiskey into the wound.

Shorty roared and reared upward.

Nash caught his shoulders and pressed him back to the bed.

The man kicked and shot out his fists. Hawk held his legs, and Addie reached under Nash's chest to pin the man's arms down.

Nash had removed his wet coat, and welcome body warmth wafted from him. When Shorty calmed and Nash stood back, coldness crept over Addie. She had good reason for being cold. Her clothes were damp, and slashing rain had washed every exposed inch of skin. Her skirts dripped, and her shoes were soaked.

But the chill didn't come from wet clothes or water from the sky. It originated from a place deep inside, a place permanently cold since she turned eleven years old, and her life had been shattered. She clenched her teeth and forced a deep breath into her lungs. She'd improved at erasing the

horrible pictures from her mind, but they occasionally flared like an out-of-control fire as they did now.

One way to end those memories involved turning her mind to other things.

“Does he have any other injuries?”

“Spect his ribs are sore.” Hawk studied the man who had passed out again. “No tellin’ if he’s hurt inside.”

The three of them watched Shorty’s chest rise and fall.

“I need ta tend the stock.” Hawk shrugged into his slicker and strode from the room. The thud of the door closing accompanied the snap of wood burning.

“I’ll put a dressing on his leg.” Addie chose the cleanest rags from the drawer and applied them to the wound, which still oozed. Finished, she stood back at Nash’s side. “About all we can do is watch and wait.”

“And pray.”

“Yes, of course.” Why had he been the one to remind her? She should have done so. Father would be disappointed in her. Not that she hadn’t prayed since they stepped out into the rain. For her, praying formed a constant murmur in the back of her head. *Please, God, be with us all and keep us safe.*

“Addie.” Her name carried on a faint whisper. Its urgency jerked Addie’s attention to her mother as her head dipped forward and her body angled toward the floor.



AT MISS STONE’S SHARP INTAKE OF BREATH, NASH TURNED TO SEE what alarmed her.

Mrs. Stone tipped forward, about to fall face-first to the floor. He jumped forward and caught her before flesh met wood. He shifted her into his arms. He felt her thinness through her damp clothes. This woman needed rest and food. A warm cot would do her a world of good. But Shorty lay injured and semiconscious on the only bed available.

Addie touched her mother’s face. “She needs to lie down.” Her gaze went to Shorty on the cot. Then brown eyes lifted to Nash, eyes full of concern replaced with determination. She stretched herself tall. Well, as tall

as her height would allow. The movement brought her eyes level with his chin. "I'll fix up something for her."

Mr. Bertrand harrumphed from where he sat planted to the narrow bench, his bulk pouring over the edges. "If you find extra beds, I demand one."

Addie's gaze met Nash's. She didn't roll her eyes, but the way they widened and how she tilted her head expressed the same disbelief at the man's demands. "I'll have a look around." She eyed the narrow, low door beside the cupboard. "What do you suppose is behind that?"

"There's one way to find out."

"Indeed." Her wet shoes squished as she strode over.

"Be careful." The warning came without forethought. He didn't expect any danger to dwelt behind the rough wood. But his arms were full of an older woman who moaned, leaving him helpless to assist.

Mrs. Stone opened her eyes. "I'm fine. I can stand." Words as weak as the sunshine outside.

He ignored her as he concentrated on Addie. She bent over, jiggled the latch, and pulled. The door didn't move. She yanked harder. With a squeal of protest, the hinges released. A cold draft swept across the floor.

Ducking down, she peered inside. "It's dark, but it appears to be some sort of storeroom. There are crates and—yes! Shelves."

Nash moved closer as she went into the room. If he had to, he would lower Mrs. Stone to the floor and go after her.

"Blankets! Even a fur." Addie grunted. "It's heavy." Something thudded to the floor.

"What's going on?"

"I'm coming." She grunted several times, then emerged half carrying, half dragging a buffalo fur. "This is exactly what Mother needs." She lowered it to the floor beyond the table and spread it out. "Mother, here you go."

Nash eased the woman to the fur.

She sighed. "Feels good. Thank you, dear."

Nash and Addie knelt beside the fur bed observing the woman.

Then Addie sprang to her feet. "I'll get blankets." She hurried back to the room and reemerged with an armload of blankets, slowing to kick the door closed behind her. Halfway across the room, she paused. "I'll warm them first." She opened the oven and spread two blankets on the door.

Minutes later, she brought the blankets and tucked them around her mother.

Mrs. Stone sighed. "Nice and warm."

Mr. Bertrand heaved to his feet and grabbed the two other blankets. "I don't mind being warm."

Addie rose and went to the man. "You're more than welcome to have one." She plucked the top gray blanket from his arms. "So is Mr. Zacharius." With steady fingers, she wrapped the woolen blanket around the man's shoulders.

Mr. Zacharius mumbled thanks, coughed several times, and then, with a sigh returned to sleep.

Now, everyone had a blanket except for Addie and himself—a fact Nash pointed out to her.

"I'm fine. The room is warm. Everyone is safe." Her gaze went to the outer door.

She must wonder what delayed Hawk.

A rumble filled the air, loud enough to drown out every other sound. The ground shook.

Mr. Zacharius jerked awake, his face pinched. "Thunder!"

Mr. Bertrand huffed. "There's been no lightning."

"Sounded more like a landslide." Nash made his way to the window, though he saw nothing but the weeping glass and the gray rain.

Addie's arm brushed his elbow as she joined him. "Do you think Hawk is safe?" she whispered.

"I'll go check."

"I suppose." She glanced over her shoulder. "I can manage on my own here."

She might have meant to sound strong and confident, but worry edged her words as if she didn't look forward to being alone with the needs of the others.

"I'll be back as soon as possible." He smiled down on her to reassure her. Perhaps even convince her she could trust him to do so.

"Of course." She lowered her head, hiding her eyes, then raised her chin to meet his gaze. "Go with God."

"Preciate that." Her words reminded him of Ma how she'd trusted God for her needs yet prayed for His continued guidance and protection. The door flew back almost hitting Nash's hand.

Hawk shook off the rain. "Landslide. I hope it missed the stagecoach. Otherwise..." He didn't finish. No need to. Without a stagecoach and indeed a road, they wouldn't be able to get to Golden Valley. Nash could maybe hike over the mountains, depending on the weather, but apart from Hawk, the others would never make it.

A little mental counting and he assured himself he had plenty of time to get back to take delivery of his horses.

"Warmth feels good." Hawk shrugged out of his slicker and hung it by the door. "How's Shorty?"

The three of them turned toward the man in question. Occupied with Mrs. Stone and the noise from outside, Nash and Addie hadn't checked on the man. Together, they crossed to the cot.

"Shorty, you awake?" Hawk touched the man's shoulder.

"Huh." Shorty's eyes opened, searching the room. "Where am I?"

"Your cabin," Hawk spoke with a continued drawl that left the words shortened and slightly musical. "You're hurt. You'll be right as fresh bread in a bit."

Shorty shifted. "I certainly have a sore leg." He rubbed his chest. "It feels like a big, old tree might have fallen on me."

Nash chuckled.

Hawk grinned. "A tree came down, pinning you to the ground. Good thing we came along."

Shorty glanced around the room. "Were you able to get the horses hitched by yourself?"

"Won't be needing horses for a spell."

"What? Why not?"

"Coach is stuck in the mud. Won't be able to dig it out for some time."

Shorty's expression went beyond surprise. "You are all here to stay?" He narrowed his eyes. "For how long, may I ask?"

Addie leaned over the man, pressing against Nash's leg. "Mr. Shorty, we won't be any bother for you."

Nash moved aside, giving her room.

"So you say, but what are you going to eat?" He lifted his head to study the others. "And where will you all sleep? I am not set up for that."

"We'll figure it out." She patted his shoulder. "You just rest and get to feeling better." She rose. "Do you mind if I have a look at your leg?"

"Could I stop you?"

Nash laughed. Even injured and hurting, Shorty had read the determination in Addie's quiet demeanor.

She rolled back the blanket enough to expose the wounded leg. Touched the dressing. "I believe it's stopped bleeding." She brushed her fingers against the skin above and below the gray fabric she'd bound over the wound.

They moved away from the cot.

"It will be a blessing if he doesn't get an infection."

"He's right about something." Nash frowned at the cupboards. "People will need to eat." The wood in the stack by the stove wouldn't last the night.

Addie opened the wooden cupboard doors and studied the contents. "He's got supplies we can use." She pulled out containers. "I'll put together something."

Mr. Bertrand slapped the table, jerking Mr. Zacharius awake with a startled cry.

"I paid for meals along the journey. I'm expecting something better than what we were given last night." He shuddered. "Is beans all this country has to offer?"

Addie held up a sack and shook it. "Beans." She took two cans from the shelf and showed them to the grumbling man. "More beans." Her gaze grazed Nash's as she turned back to the cupboard, and there shone from it amusement and something else. Determination? Yes, but perhaps also a warning that she didn't intend to cater to Mr. Bertrand's selfish demands.

Nash leaned closer. "I'm guessing you might be tempted to give him nothing but beans to teach him a lesson."

The flash in her eyes said he might be right. Then her attention slipped past him to where Mrs. Stone lay on the fur rug. "I've been taught to show Christian charity even to the undeserving." A weary sigh rumbled her lips. "Besides, how many of us deserve the good God has bestowed on us?"

From her flat delivery, she just repeated something she'd heard often. From her parents, no doubt.

"I don't disagree. I guess there are times I feel like justice is also deserved."

"I can't argue on that matter." Her voice hardened.

Not only had her voice hardened, but so had her expression. "Do you speak from personal experience?"

Her head lowered, her shoulders inching toward her ears, she didn't answer his question. But her stance said something awful had happened to her in the past.

Three



Justice! The word burned a hot trail through Addie's thoughts. Justice—nothing but an ideal. Some things couldn't be erased by man's determination. Only hell and God's judgment would suffice.

She forced air into her strangled lungs. Knowing the hereafter provided retribution offered no comfort. It did nothing to ease the agony of *this* life.

Her fingers popped, and she forced her hand to uncoil. She must relax. Mother Stone had taught her to leave such affairs in God's hands. "He is the righteous judge," she often reminded Addie. "We need to trust Him. Rest in His love and care."

Easy to say. Hard to feel, even though she believed every word. Believing and feeling, she'd learned, were not the same thing. Did not even dwell under the same roof.

A meal. These people needed to eat. Mr. Bertrand deserved more beans after his complaints, but Mother needed something gentler. As did Mr. Zacharius and Shorty. A soup would be better. If only she had—

The little storeroom. She'd seen the blankets. But there'd been other things there.

"I'll see what else Shorty has in there."

When she reached to pull the latch, Nash's hand caught it and eased the door open. "I'm going to take a look too."

She bent over and shuffled into the room.

Nash followed, a huff coming from him when his head encountered the low roof. He lifted the lid on the nearest crate. "More canned goods. Looks like mostly beans."

"I guess we won't starve but—"

He opened the second crate. "Well, well. What do we have here?"

She wanted to see what he'd found, but so little room existed except beside him. Swallowing back reluctance, she edged closer until they crowded together. She'd ignore him so she could assess the contents. "Clothes? What's he doing with all these?" She removed the top item. "A suit jacket?" Setting it to the side, she looked at a number of articles. "All fancy-dress clothes." Surprise erased her caution. "Are these his?"

Nash's eyes caught the faint light. "I don't know who else's they'd be. Our Shorty is a mystery."

"I would have taken him for a woodsman. Nothing more." She shook off her presumption. "I should know better than to judge a person by appearances." Mother and Preacher had drilled that into her. They meant it in a charitable way. But Addie took it further, always cautious of the possibility of something dark and sinister beneath the surface.

"Let's check the rest of these supplies." Nash pointed toward the other crates.

His arm brushed her shoulder, and she jerked away and hurried toward the nearest box. Yes, he seemed like a kind man, but looks could be deceiving.

The lid came up easily, and she peered inside and broke into laughter. She lowered the lid before Nash saw the contents. "Guess what?"

His gaze went to the crate and then to her. Forgetting the low ceiling, he straightened and banged his head. He rubbed the injured spot and winked. "If I keep this up, I'll be raising the roof."

She widened her eyes. Even humor must not be allowed to overcome caution—nor a nice pair of eyes nor a generous smile.

"Let me guess. It's more clothes. Fancy things."

She shook her head.

"It's not—" He shuddered. "Please, not more beans."

"Yes. Mr. Bertrand will be so pleased." The humor of their discovery filled her, and she laughed.

His chuckles rolled across the low ceiling.

"What's going on in there?" The man in question called, annoyance sharpening his words.

Addie pressed her fingers to her mouth. "We shouldn't be so pleased about his—"

"Comeuppance?"

Although neither of them laughed, they shared amusement in their quick glances.

“One more crate.” Nash nodded toward it. Being closer, he lifted the lid and dropped it again before she could peek inside.

She groaned. “Not more beans.”

This time, he shook his head.

“What?”

“You’ll never guess.” He kept his hand on the lid.

“Let me see.” She tried unsuccessfully to open it.

“Guess.”

Crossing her arms, she squinted at him. “You said I couldn’t.”

“You might try.”

She studied him. He teased her, and she liked it. Very well, why not enjoy the moment? “Snakes? Empty whiskey bottles? A rock collection?”

Each guess received a shake of his head.

“I give up.”

“You sure? There’s lots of things you haven’t suggested.” His arched eyebrows made her think he enjoyed this as much as she.

“Like what?”

“Did you say books?”

“You know I didn’t.”

He cocked his head toward the crate.

“Are you saying—?”

He creaked back the lid and waved his hand over the contents. “Books.”

She examined a few titles. Books on British history. A few works of fiction. “The book of peerage? Shorty becomes more and more of a mystery.”

“He certainly does.” Nash studied the spines of a handful of books, then returned them to the collection. “They will not feed us though.”

“I quite disagree.” She sniffed in a way she hoped sounded superior and not the effects of a dripped nose.

Lifting one of the thinner books, Nash pretended to bite it. “Nope. Don’t think I’d ever be that hungry.”

Amusement at his reluctant look rippled through her. “That’s not what I meant. But doesn’t the Good Book say, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’?” She didn’t finish the verse.

“God’s Word is food for the soul.” His stomach rumbled. “Excuse me. I’m ready to enjoy beans cold from the can. Let’s go. Ow.” His head cracked into the ceiling again.

“I want to see what’s in the baskets on the shelves.” She edged past the crates to where she’d discovered the blankets and peered into a basket. “Just what we need.”

Rubbing his head, he joined her. “Potatoes.” They checked the other baskets and discovered carrots, onions, and turnips. “The man didn’t survive on beans alone.”

“I can make soup. Mother will like that.” She couldn’t carry everything and handed him a turnip and some carrots. Together, they returned to the main room. “We found more beans.” She waited for Mr. Bertrand’s complaints before she added, “And the makings of vegetable soup.”

Nash accompanied her to the cupboard and set down the vegetables. “What can I do to help?”

“Can you find a large cooking pot?”

“I’m sure I can.” He poked through the cupboards. “Will this do?”

“It will. Thanks.” He didn’t release it immediately when she tried to take it. Surprised, she raised her gaze to his. A smile warmed his eyes.

“No need to thank me. We’re in this together, and together, we will do the best we can.”

For the space of a heartbeat, Addie couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. His words felt like a promise. A promise? Why would she think that? He only meant being shut in with the others. Nothing more. But an ache as big as the moon and as cold as the rain outdoors hollowed out her insides.

No. It was hunger. Nothing more.

She had all she needed or wanted in helping Mother and Preacher Stone. Reaching out to meet the needs of others filled that emptiness and carried few risks at least to her heart. *If you don’t have money, no one will rob you. And if you don’t open your heart to caring, it can’t be ripped to pieces.*



NASH WAITED A MOMENT, WANTING ADDIE TO SMILE AGAIN. BUT SHE took the saucepan and turned her back to him. Her lips had hardened into a harsh line.

A chill shivered across his shoulders. He'd enjoyed teasing her in the storeroom. Her eyes had sparkled. A smile curved her face. Her laughter had warmed him. Now it had changed—why? He could think of no reason she should suddenly find his presence objectionable.

But what more did he expect? They were strangers. Once they reached Golden Valley, they wouldn't likely see each other again. He seldom needed to visit the mining town. And she'd have no reason to venture to his ranch. Building his herd, getting ahead by the sweat of his brow, provided him with all that mattered.

Frying onions scented the room. His stomach rumbled again. He pilfered a can of beans from the cupboard and contemplated opening it and allaying his hunger. Instead, he set it aside and crossed to the cot to look down on Shorty. The whiskered man's rough clothes hung from nails set in the wall. They did not fit with the items in the storeroom. Who was he?

Ah. The mysteries of many who came West. Wanting to forget the past and live the life they'd chosen. One vastly different from the one they'd known.

Not unlike himself.

Mr. Bertrand complained about the poor quarters. Mr. Zacharius wheezed as he sprawled over his arms on the table. Shorty mumbled in his sleep. Mrs. Stone dozed with the blanket pulled to her chin. Hawk hovered at the window, chewing on his lower lip. No doubt, he was concerned about the coach and reaching his destination.

Nash's gaze went full circle back to Addie as she prepared vegetables and added them to the simmering pot. Caring for the others had fallen to her and him. Working together would be fun. But equally important, it provided an opportunity to repay society. Not that he'd done anything wrong, but the guilt of another's actions never quite left him.

Hawk spun from the window. "There's firewood in the woodshed. I'll bring some in." He shrugged into his slicker. A cold blast crossed the room as he left.

Addie's gaze followed his departure. Then she brought her attention to Nash, a question in her eyes.

He lifted one shoulder. "He's worried about the weather." And the coach and the road and his passengers.

"Harrumph." Mr. Bertrand's snort jangled Nash's nerves.

The man continued in the same sour note he'd used since the first moment Nash had met him. "He might put a little effort into our comfort."

"We're out of the rain. We're warm. There's food. We have much to be thankful for." Patience softened Nash's words. He had no intention of being drawn into Mr. Bertrand's attitude. As if the world owed him something. It was too much of a reminder of—

"Amen." Addie's voice rang clear. "God has provided everything we need. I am grateful we got stranded with shelter nearby. We came along in time to rescue Shorty, and we can enjoy warm food." Her gaze held Nash's, sending a feeling of unity into his gut.

She jerked her attention back to the soup. The metal spoon scratched across the bottom of the pot as she stirred the contents.

He leaned his elbows on the table. She moved smoothly and hummed as she tended the food. It was like watching a lullaby.

The thought surprised him, but he didn't bother to examine how or why. Enough to simply enjoy the moment, the delicious aroma making his stomach growl even louder.

Mr. Zacharius started awake and sat up. He sniffed, wiped his nose on a red handkerchief, and then sniffed again. "Something smells mighty good."

"Soup will be ready in a few minutes." Addie opened the cupboard and began removing bowls. "Some of us will have to eat out of mixing bowls."

"Harrumph."

No one responded to Mr. Bertrand's displeasure.

"I'll gladly eat out of anything." Mr. Zacharius rubbed his hands together.

"We'll wait for Hawk." Addie bit the corner of her mouth as she studied the closed door.

Did she worry about their driver? He hadn't been gone that long, had he? Nash hadn't paid a lot of attention. After all, the man could look after himself.

A sharp crack jerked him to his full height.

"What was that?" Mr. Zacharius asked, his voice thinning.

A thud shuddered through the house.

"I'll check on Hawk." Nash headed for the door.

But it burst open, and Hawk entered, his arms full of firewood.

"Another tree down." He dropped the wood in the box by the stove, the sound rattling the room. "Nasty out there."

Shorty wakened. His eyes were clear and focused—a good sign.

Mr. Bertrand grumbled that conditions weren't so pleasant inside either, but no one paid him any heed. He knew as well as they did that he'd find things a thousand times worse outside, but it seemed the man couldn't avoid complaining even when he had no need.

Water dripped from Hawk's slicker as he hung it by the door. "We'll be here the night. Get as comfortable as possible."

Again, no one paid Mr. Bertrand's grumbling any mind.

"Miss Stone has been kind enough to make soup for us." Nash's smile at her brought a flicker of appreciation.

She waved a big spoon toward the simmering pot. "It's ready. I'll dish it out."

Nash hurried to her side, took each bowl as she filled it, and carried it to the table.

"I'll sit with Mother." Addie lowered herself to the rug and helped Mrs. Stone sit up.

"I'll feed Shorty." Two bowls in hand, Nash perched on the end of the bench closest to the man.

"Would someone ask the blessing?" Addie asked.

Mr. Zacharius wheezed into his handkerchief.

Mr. Bertrand scowled.

Hawk squinted at Nash. "Go on," he said.

"Very well." He set the soup to the side and got to his feet. His ma would approve of him doing this. She'd guided him toward faith, sometimes gently and sometimes with a good swift kick in the rear. Mostly figuratively. He bowed his head, sobered by memories. But for her courage and God's grace, he would be in a much different situation.

"Father in heaven, we thank You for Your many mercies. You have given us shelter from the storm and food for the body, and we are grateful. Amen."

"Amen," Mrs. Stone and Addie echoed softly.

For a few minutes, the only sound came from spoons clanking on dishes and slurping of soup.

Nash offered Shorty a mouthful, but the man shook his head. "I will feed myself, thank you." He reached for the bowl. Nash positioned it on Shorty's chest, keeping an eye on it. Apart from a bit of slopping, Shorty managed on his own.

As soon as everyone finished, Addie gathered up the dishes and washed them.

Nash lit the lamp. It gave a yellow light to the interior. He put the dishes in the cupboard as Addie dried them. He wanted to say something to restore the camaraderie he thought they'd shared in the storeroom, but nothing came to mind. Except—

“Addie.” Mrs. Stone’s soft call ended his thought.

“What is it, Mother?” Addie hurried to her side and bent close to listen to her whisper.

“Of course.” She turned to Shorty. “We need to use your”—a loud swallow—“facilities. Can you direct us to them?”

“If you mean the outhouse”—he cleared his throat as if uncomfortable with mentioning the place—“you will find it around the corner toward the back.” He jabbed his thumb in the general direction.

“Thank you.” Addie assisted her mother to her feet. They crossed to the door and hesitated.

Nash would have offered them his slicker, but he’d left it behind. Hawk seemed disinclined to offer his.

“Please feel free to use my oilskin.” Shorty pointed to the wall.

Underneath a long black coat, Addie uncovered the waterproof garment. She draped it over both their heads, and they hurried out into the wet.

Silence followed their departure. Rain still slashed down. Nash stared at the door. They’d get wet even with the protection Shorty’s slicker provided.

The minutes slid by in the stillness. Five. Ten. Fifteen. More than enough time for them to make the journey. Had something happened? He envisioned a landslide that pushed them off the path and into—

Or a tree falling on them as it had on Shorty.

Or a washout they didn’t see in time and fell into.

There might be a bear out there. Or a crazy man. A man who would kidnap them for ransom. Maybe even kill them in the hope of finding money stashed in their pockets. Some people did dreadful things in the desire for gain. They think they deserve it no matter what means they used to get it.

Unable to sit there and not do anything, he jerked to his feet, the bench skidding back several inches. His boots thudded on the wooden floor as he crossed toward the door.

Four

Dreary rain obscured the view, but Addie made out the shape of the building they sought. She held the slicker around them and headed down the muddy path. Mother stumbled repeatedly. Yes, the mud stuck to their shoes might explain her difficulty in walking, but despite the cold, Mother's body gave off heat like a burning stove.

Addie would allow Mother to relieve herself, then get her back inside as soon as possible. They had medicines in the trunk, but they were out of reach on the coach. She'd simply do her best to nurse Mother. Thanks be to God for this shelter and food supplies, for wood to warm the cabin, and for men like Nash to help.

Their business done, they began the return journey. Twice, Mother had to stop, leaning heavily on Addie.

“We’re almost there.” Addie urged her onward. If Mother fell, Addie wouldn’t be able to lift her. She’d have to leave her in the mud and run for help.

Another step. Another pause. Rain soaked Addie’s black skirt. Mud encased her shoes. Mother would be enduring the same discomforts as well as her weakness.

Another step. Another pause. Mother’s weight on Addie’s arm increased. She staggered and fought to stay on the path. Light faded from the sky, shrouding the land in streaked gray. Water pattered on the leaves. To her right, a solitary bird gave a one-note protest.

The door ahead opened, throwing a wobbly yellow square into the rain. Then, a shape blocked the light.

Addie peeked from under the slicker. Nash hurried toward them. He wrapped his arm around them both and hustled them indoors.

Mother sighed and would have collapsed to the floor except for Nash's quick action. He tossed aside the rain protection, scooped up Mother, and carried her to the fur mat.

"She's burning up."

"I know." Addie knelt at Mother's side. "Where do you feel ill?" She stroked Mother's hair from the fevered brow and eased her wet jacket off.

"I'm fine." Except she wasn't.

"I'll get water for you."

Before Addie got to her feet, Nash hurried away and brought back a cup of water.

Addie slipped an arm under Mother's shoulders and helped her sit enough to drink.

"Thank you, my dear. Now, don't worry. I'll be fine." Her voice quavered and almost faded away.

"I know." Except she did worry and had no assurance Mother would be fine. This journey had sapped her strength. But she would take care of her to the best of her ability.

"I'll make tea." Nash returned to the stove and filled the kettle. Thankfully, Hawk brought in more water when he came to the house. "The rest of you make yourselves comfortable and try to sleep. We'll be as quiet as we can." He turned the lamp down. Dark shadows crowded the corners.

Mr. Bertrand mumbled about the lack of accommodation. He eyed Mother...or more correctly, eyed the fur she lay on. But nothing would persuade any of them that he should take Mother's place. He'd have to sleep resting on the table as Mr. Zacharius did or curl up on the floor. With much harrumphing, he chose the latter.

"It's come to a pretty pass," he grumbled, "when a man pays good money for passage, and this is what he gets. Harrumph."

Addie sloshed cool water into a basin and returned to Mother's side to sponge her face and hands. She loosened the collar of Mother's simple gray shirtwaist so she could apply the wet cloth to Mother's neck. Her damp clothing should have cooled her body, yet she still burned up.

The kettle steamed. The cupboard door squealed. Water gushed into the teapot.

Nash, leaning against the cupboard, watched her. Their eyes connected, his reflecting golden lamplight. He gave a slight nod. Whether to encourage her or promise to help or—

It didn't matter. She gained strength from the look.

Hawk grabbed his slicker. "I'll sleep in the barn."

Addie almost protested before Hawk added, "A bed of straw beats sleeping on the floor." He paused at the door. "Mr. Bertrand, you're welcome to join me."

"In a barn. I'm not a pauper nor a beggar."

"Fine."

Addie held back a grin at the relief in that one word. Hawk would enjoy the company of animals in peace and quiet.

Soggy cold swept across the floor as Hawk stepped outside. The door thudded shut. His boots sounded on the step. And then nothing but the rain pounding the roof.

She tipped her ear toward the ceiling. Had the noise grown less intense than it had been when they entered this place? Or had she grown used to it? Not that it mattered.

"We're here for the night," she murmured, more for her own sake than to inform anyone else.

"Come dawn, we'll assess the situation." Nash filled a cup with the steeped tea and brought it over for Mother. He returned and poured two more cups, handing one to Addie and then sitting cross-legged at her side, cradling the other between his palms.

Addie set her cup aside to help Mother, who drank her tea slowly and then closed her eyes. "I'll be fine as soon as I have a good sleep."

Addie didn't respond. Something more than lack of sleep brought on Mother's fever.

"I'll sit up and watch her. In case she gets worse." Addie wasn't ready to leave her unattended for the night.

"I'll keep you company."

She should protest, but she didn't. She found comfort in having someone sharing the evening, and she eased back to lean against the wall.

Nash scooted to her side. "Has she been sick long?"

The question startled her. "I put her weariness down to the trials of travel. I'm sure, once we reach Golden Valley, where she can rest and get better food, she'll regain her strength."

“No doubt that will make a big difference.”

Whether or not he tried to sound encouraging, his words dragged through her thoughts. Had she overlooked some need Mother had? Neglected her care?

“I’ve done my best to take care of her.”

“I didn’t mean otherwise.” He shifted to study her. “What takes you to Golden Valley?”

“Father Stone is there, and we’re joining him to help with his work.” She settled back. Talking about what they’d do proved to be a comfortable subject. “He’s a preacher, so of course, he is establishing a church. He reports that there are men and women who long for some religious instruction.”

Wood snapped in the stove. Mr. Bertrand snored loudly.

Addie continued. “He does much more than that, though. He’s purchased a building he wants to use to house widows and their children until they can return to their families.”

She looked away into the dark corners as she recalled what else he’d said and how it stirred a response in her. She didn’t want to talk about her plans. “Tell me about your ranch.”

“Well, it’s not big, but it’s productive. I’ve earned every penny that has gone into the land and buildings.”

“That’s an odd way of describing your success.”

His forefinger traced the wrinkle in his trousers. “Guess I don’t want to be like the miners in Golden Valley hoping to get ahead by luck or trickery. Robbing, cheating, and cards might seem like an easy way to some, but far better to earn what you have.”

“I certainly agree.” She’d never put herself in a position where someone might think of stealing from her.

“I’m going to raise horses. Horses with good breeding.” The pride in his voice said this was something of importance. “My ranch is in a wide valley. The mountains circle me. A river runs through. You should see it this time of year when spring flowers blossom everywhere. The mountains wear a cap of snow, green grass skirts them, and the sunrise paints them pink.”

“It sounds lovely. It must be nice to be able to call some place home and feel your roots growing deep.” Living a life of service meant the Stones moved from place to place, going where they were needed.

“Do you have family?” she asked. “A wife, children, parents...?”

“No wife. No children. My mother is alive. She lives to the south. My father is deceased.”

Did she detect a sorrowful note when he mentioned his father? Of course, she did. The loss of one’s parents hurt. But more than that edged his words...maybe regret. Or guilt?

How silly of her to think she knew anything about the man.

“Are you the Stones’ only child?”

“I’m not—” She didn’t need to tell everything about herself.

“Not what?” He watched her, waiting for a reply. When she didn’t answer, he added, “I’m curious as to what you meant to say.”

NASH DIDN’T HAVE ANY RIGHT TO EXPECT AN ANSWER. YES, HE wondered why she’d broken off and pressed her lips together as if to hold back a secret. He had reason not to reveal every detail of his family, but he couldn’t imagine that she would have such.

“Did I cross a boundary when asking about siblings?” Perhaps she’d lost brothers or sisters, and she didn’t like to talk about it. “If so, I’m sorry. Forget my probing. Please.”

Shifting closer to the fur rug, she again sponged her mother’s face.

Her actions provided an adequate answer, and Nash pulled his legs close to his chest. The lamp flickered as a draft crossed the room. The men snored. He should check on Shorty, but Nash didn’t move.

Addie returned to his side. “Her fever hasn’t broken, but she’s resting.”

“It’s quiet.”

She laughed. “You mean apart from the rain pounding on the roof, the wood crackling in the stove”—she turned toward the corner—“and Mr. Bertrand’s snores.”

The man she meant drew in a loud, rattling breath.

Addie cupped a palm to her mouth to hold back her amusement.

Nash grinned. “Fine. It’s almost quiet.”

They settled back against the wall, sharing a space barely wide enough to accommodate them. She turned her knees to the side to avoid encountering his legs, but their elbows brushed. He could almost believe the two of them were alone in the isolated cabin.

“I don’t object to you asking about my family. To answer your question, I don’t have any siblings. The Stones have no children. They took me in when my parents died. They are all I have in the way of family. I owe them so much for how they’ve helped me.”

He nudged his elbow into hers. “I’m sorry you lost your parents, but Mrs. Stone seems truly fond of you.”

“As I am of her.” She leaned toward Mrs. Stone and touched her forehead. “She’s warm. I should sponge her, but rest is valuable, too.” Her shoulder brushed along his arm as she resumed sitting, tipping her head back to the log wall.

“You should get some rest, too.” She must be as tired as the rest of the travelers.

“As should you.”

But neither of them moved. A yawn opened his mouth wide. He might be a little tired, too. “I’ll sleep by Shorty’s cot in case he needs anything.” He waited for her to indicate her plans.

“I’ll lie beside Mother. That way, I’ll know if she—” A yawn cut her off.

Nash patted her arm. “Good night then.” He eased to his feet and tiptoed to where Shorty slept. Nash had neither blanket nor pillow. In the past, as he rode his land, he’d slept on the ground without either, so this wasn’t new. The boards creaked as he lowered himself to the floor, crossed his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes.

As was his habit, he prayed before he slept.

God in heaven, thank You for Your provision of shelter and warmth and for traveling companions to help pass the time. Help Addie sleep. Allow her mother to get better. Help Shorty’s leg heal. Be with Ma and keep her safe. Most of all, thank—

Sleep claimed him.

He woke to darkness and an ache in his shoulder. Where was he? To his right came a moan and, with it, remembrance. His shoulder protested as he sat up.

“Shorty?”

“My apologies for disturbing you, but I have a pain that will not go away.” Shorty thrashed about.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Nash made his way to the cupboard where he’d left the lamp and lit it again. Light touched the room.

Shorty struggled with the bedcovers.

“Hang on. You’re all tangled up.” Nash returned to the cot and eased the blanket from under the man.

“It pulled on my leg.” Shorty’s sigh carried a mild groan.

“Maybe I should have a look at it. It might be bleeding.”

“The pain is gone now. Let me sleep.” Shorty snugged the blanket to his chin and waved Nash away.

Mumbling came from the other direction, and Nash turned to the sound. It came from Mrs. Stone.

Addie sat up, yawning. She seemed to struggle to orientate herself. Then, alertness jerked through her. “Mother, you’re burning up.” She hurried to the cupboard to put more water in the basin, then returned to the fur bed to sponge the older woman.

Nash squatted at Addie’s side. “Can I do anything to help?”

“Pray.” Addie dipped the cloth into the water. “She’s so hot.”

Mrs. Stone mumbled. Nash made out one word—*head*.

He took it to mean she had a headache. In response to Addie’s request, he spoke, “Father in heaven, the Great Physician, please touch Mrs. Stone and cure her of whatever this is.”

“Amen.” Addie’s voice wobbled between hope and fear.

Lamplight cast a shadow across Mrs. Stone. Mr. Bertrand snored but didn’t wake up. Mr. Zacharius wheezed. Rain still fell on the roof.

Nash didn’t know what he could do, apart from praying and offering Addie encouragement.

“I don’t remember ever being sick as a child,” he murmured. “What I mean is I have little experience with illness.”

“I’ve helped my parents tend to those who are sick or injured.” She dampened the cloth again, left it on Mrs. Stone’s forehead, and leaned back beside him. “Often, there isn’t much a person can do besides offer comfort.”

“And pray,” he reminded her.

“Of course.” She wet the cloth again, then settled back. “I remember a time that we encountered a family where all six of them were sick. Burning up like Mother is.”

“What did you do?” Had the outcome been positive?

“Sponged them. Got them to drink water.”

“And?”

“Mother has a medicinal tea she got them to drink. Three days later, their fevers dropped. They were weak, but they all got better.” Strength girded her words. “So will Mother.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Did I hear you talking to Shorty? How is he?”

“His blanket had grown tight across his leg and caused him pain. I untangled it. I wanted to check his leg, but he wouldn’t let me.”

“The worst thing would be for him to get an infection.” A shudder twitched across her shoulders.

“Maybe the whiskey will prevent that.”

“God willing.”

He didn’t respond. God didn’t always act the way one thought He should. “Bad things happen.”

“Indeed. But is it God’s will or man’s folly? Is it greed and cruelty that is to blame?”

“My ma taught me that I must not blame God when there is a consequence to man’s sin.” He’d struggled to accept the lesson. “There was a time I thought God should intervene in the things man’s evil brought.”

“Sometimes He does though,” She tended to Mrs. Stone before she finished her thought. “The Stones believe it is up to us to overcome evil with good. And leave no room for vengeance. ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay,’ the Bible says.”

Her voice began gently and ended up on a harsh note.

He almost reached to touch her arm. “Would you prefer vengeance at your own hands?”

“Of course not. How would repaying evil with evil have a positive effect?”

Something rattled against the side of the house. “Just a branch blowing by,” he said.

“How old were you when you lost your father?” The lamplight made her features appear sharp. They weren’t. She had a kind face and a gentle smile.

He sought a way to answer her. He’d lost his father long before he and Ma had moved away from him when Nash was thirteen. A year later, his father was dead. That provided more information than she sought and certainly more than he intended she should hear. “I was fourteen.”

Her hand, cool from dipping into the water, touched his forearm. "I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to lose a parent."

"Thanks. God led us to a new home. Ma found work with a kind rancher. She married him two years ago." Ma had waited until Nash had established his own life before she remarried, explaining that she didn't want him to ever feel she wasn't available for him. "How old were you when you lost your parents? And I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I was eleven. Eight years ago. It's a pain that will never go away, but God provided me a new home with the Stones."

"It's also eight years since my pa died."

Her gaze found his. Her brown eyes were even darker in the low light. She studied him hard, perhaps trying to read a special meaning into the fact that they'd both lost parents near the same time. A smile caught at the corners of her mouth. "My math is good enough to realize you are twenty-two. And already you have a ranch."

"And horses. Don't forget the horses."

"On no. Of course not."

They grinned at each other.

"My math is good enough to know you are nineteen. And—"

"An old maid." She wrinkled her nose.

"I was about to say, 'And busy doing good deeds.'"

"That sounds almost as dire as old maid. Or perhaps one goes with the other."

A verse he'd heard recently sprang to mind. "Doesn't the Bible say we shouldn't let our good be evil spoken of?" Would she hear the gentle chiding in his voice?

She blinked. Opened her mouth and closed it. Drew in an audible breath before she spoke. "Thank you for that reminder."

"You're most welcome." His grin widened. How pleasant to talk to this young woman. She intrigued him with her caring and kindness and quick humor.

Mrs. Stone sat up, throwing her arms into the air and mumbling unintelligible words.

Addie caught her by the shoulders. "Mother, everything is fine. Lie back and rest." To Nash, she said, "She's worse. I believe she's delirious. I don't know what to do."

Five

Panic clawed at Addie. What if Mother died? The Stones were all she had in this world.

Nash's hands covered Addie's as he helped her press Mother to the bed. Then he grabbed the basin of water and hurried to the pail. "Here's cold water." He set the basin at Addie's side. "I'll fill the bucket." Pausing only long enough to borrow Shorty's slicker, he stepped outside.

Rain continued to descend, and moist air raced across the floor. The door clicked shut, sealing Addie alone in the cabin. Not alone. She didn't mean that. With Nash's departure, all his support vanished. Not that she needed it.

I know what to do. Try and lower Mother's fever.

Addie's teeth chattered as she sponged Mother. The cloth grew warm as fast as she cooled it in the water. The water also grew warm. Mother continued to thrash about and mumble.

The door opened, and Nash returned. He put the bucket down nearby. "Any change?"

"No." The word sounded like a wail.

"What can I do to help?"

"I believe I'm doing all I can." It wasn't enough. If only she had the fever tea from the trunk.

Nash stood. "I remember one old cowboy telling me that a man should always carry some form of alcohol with him. A way to clean a wound."

"Like Hawk did." Why did he talk about that now?

"Also to treat fevers."

“Mother would never let alcohol pass her lips.” She shuddered even to think of it.

“Not like that. Add it to the water you are washing her with. It evaporates quicker.” He squatted beside Addie. “Do you want to try it?”

Could it help? “I have nothing to lose.”

Nash retrieved the bottle from the cupboard and poured a goodly amount into the basin. The fumes wafted over them.

“Mother will not be pleased to know she smells like a drunk.” Addie snorted a laugh. “She would be appalled. But if it helps...” She dipped the cloth and resumed sponging. Over and over, she dipped the cloth into the water.

Nash added cold water and more alcohol to the basin.

The night hours passed. Mother seemed less restless. Had her fever lowered? Addie couldn’t say for certain.

Nash continued to sit at Addie’s side. She welcomed his company. His talk kept her thoughts from venturing down an unwelcome path.

“I don’t know how Ma found the ranch we went to.” He put more wood in the stove and then returned. “Gib Jarvis is a good man. He gave Ma a job running his house, and he taught me about ranching, about cows, and especially, about working hard to get what you had.”

“You’ve mentioned that a few times.”

“What?”

“About hard work.” There’d been more than that in his words. “Honest work.”

“It’s something I firmly believe in. There are no shortcuts to success.”

“I can’t argue with that. The Bible has much to say about the evil of greed and envy. Sometimes, the innocent are hurt by someone else’s greed. But never mind that. Tell me more about this Mr. Jarvis. He sounds like a wonderful man.” *Please keep talking. Keep distracting me.*

“He is. At first, I helped around the yard. He showed me how to care for the animals. How to recognize illness and injury. He gave me a horse and taught me to rope.”

Caught up in Nash’s affection, Addie let her hands grow idle.

“The next spring, he took me with him on a roundup. And he paid me just as he paid the other men.” The words grew thick. “He didn’t have to, but he did. I saved every penny.”

“And bought yourself land.”

“Yup.”

She resumed tending to Mother.

“He even paid Ma, which he didn’t have to, seeing as he provided us with a home.”

“It appears we both can be grateful for the new places God gave us.” He couldn’t begin to understand how much the Stones had influenced her life. She might have grown into a bitter woman without their gentle guidance.

Mother drew in a deep sigh.

Addie stroked her brow. “I do believe she’s resting. The whiskey has worked to ease her fever. Praise God. And thank you for that suggestion.”

“You’re welcome. Only the credit belongs to Tiny.”

“Tiny?” What or who could he mean?

“An old cowboy who told me about using alcohol to ease a fever. Applied externally, not internally.” Nash’s wide eyes might be an attempt to convince her he was serious as a Sunday sermon, but at the twitch of his lips, she chuckled.

“Of course. Tiny is an unusual name.” Maybe that would prompt him to talk more about his life, about the cowboys he encountered, and—well, everything.

“Yeah. Tiny was—” He paused as if to consider her words. “Not tiny.” Again, that wide-eyed innocence and the twitching of mouth.

“Do tell.”

“A mountain of a man. And strong. I saw him lift a wagon right off the ground so the wheel could be replaced.”

She shivered. “I might have found him frightening.” A man of that size and strength could crush a smaller person.

“You wouldn’t need to. He was as gentle as a lamb.” He nodded, his smile genuine. “A good person.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She shifted to better study the man beside her. “I always considered cowboys rough and tough. Yet, you talk about Tiny and Mr. Jarvis as if they are—”

“Many of the cowboys I’ve known were indeed rough and tough. Their life demands they be so. It’s true some are also cruel and unprincipled. But many are kind and tender. I’ve been fortunate to know more than my share of the latter.” The lamplight flickered in his eyes as he stared at her. Only he seemed to be seeing something in the distance. Or in his past. Then he

blinked, and his gaze focused on her. “Gib didn’t allow cruel men to work for him. And he expected an honest day’s labor for an honest day’s pay.”

“Seems like you’ve made that philosophy the motto of your life.”

“What?” He blinked. “Oh, you mean about honest gain?” He didn’t wait for her answering nod before he hurried on. “I guess I have.”

Was there a story behind the decision? Or—“Did this Gib man teach you that?”

Another surprised blink. “I decided it on my own, though Gib’s behavior reinforced it as the best way to be.”

Addie checked Mother’s forehead. Warm but not hot. She settled back beside Nash. “I do believe she’s on the mend. Praise God. But I’ll watch for a little longer to be certain.”

“I’ll keep you company. If you don’t object.”

“I don’t.” She welcomed it. There wasn’t room to stretch out their legs. Nash drew his knees up, and she turned her legs to one side. “Do you have a house on your ranch?”

Or did he sleep in a tent? Perhaps a crude structure.

“I have a two-room log cabin. Its loft can be used for both sleeping and storage. The bedroom holds a wide bed that’s covered with a quilt Ma made me. I have two armchairs in the living area. I made my own table out of a slab of wood. It isn’t a perfect circle. I preferred to keep the shape of the tree. I think you’d find the place warm and cozy.”

“I’d like to see it.”

“Perhaps we can arrange a visit after you’re settled in Golden Valley.”

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to invite myself.”

“But would you truly like to see my ranch?” Hesitation slowed his words. Perhaps he didn’t consider it appropriate for a preacher’s adopted daughter to visit. She knew little about him but enough to believe him an honorable, upright man.

“I truly would. And I’m sure Preacher Stone would approve.” The preacher would have heard any unsavory information regarding Nash. And he’d arrange a suitable escort.

“Then I’ll make arrangements.” He chuckled, the sound low and deep. “I look forward to it.”

“As do I.” She seldom welcomed interest from a man. Nor did any man give her more than a dismissive glance. After all, she was a plain-looking,

plain-dressing spinster. Not that he'd offered to court her. Simply to show her the ranch he was so proud of. Nor did she expect anything more.

"Tell me more about what you and the Stones do."

Comfortable with that topic, she talked about the churches the preacher had started and the other work they'd done. "An epidemic raged last fall." She shuddered. "So many died despite us doing everything possible to help the poor victims."

"I'm sorry. No doubt you've witnessed many things you wish you hadn't."

"I have." Her closed-off throat strangled the words.

"Do you care to talk about it?"

"I—" The Stones were stoic about the awful things they dealt with, seeming to push them aside. The few times Addie had said anything about the loss and pain she witnessed, Mother had patted her hand and said, "Life and death are in God's hands. We cannot question His ways."

She repeated the words to Nash. "I don't mean to question Him, but—" A shiver rippled over her, and her closing throat fought the admission. "I held a tiny baby as it drew a last breath."

Nash cupped his hand over hers. He might be a stranger, but his presence provided a rock of comfort, and she turned her fingers into his warm, strong palm.

Things she had never been able to talk about poured from her. The children she'd helped. The injured she'd tended. The sick who died as she helplessly sat with them, offering what care and comfort she could.

His grip held firm.

Her confession ended. How long had she talked? And through it all, Nash had made comforting sounds. She felt empty inside, but in a good way as if garbage and debris had been tossed out.

With a satisfied sigh, she tipped her head back against the wall. "I didn't mean to say all that. But once I got started..." She hadn't been able to stop.

"I don't mind. It sounds like you've seen some hard things."

If he only knew that she hadn't even mentioned the hardest.

"Maybe," he continued, "a visit to my ranch would give you a restful time away from your responsibilities. You can sit on the veranda and look out at the mountains and flowers."

How inviting that sounded. She closed her eyes and pictured the scene she would see.

She opened her eyes. Where was she? Why this warmth beneath her cheek? Oh no! She jerked upright, staring into Nash's soft and watchful eyes.

"I'm so sorry." She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. The Stones would be shocked at her indiscretion of falling asleep next to a man she wasn't married to. Heat stung her cheeks, and she pulled her limbs tight to her body. "You should have wakened me."



NASH COILED HIS FINGERS TO STOP HIMSELF FROM REACHING FOR Addie. He'd known the moment her head drifted against his shoulder that she'd fallen asleep. Yes, it crossed his mind to wake her. But it had been a long day, and he'd let her enjoy a few minutes of rest. And then he, too, had fallen asleep, not waking until she jerked and gasped with the realization of her position.

"I nodded off too," he said by way of explanation.

Addie turned toward Mrs. Stone. "I should have been taking care of her." She pressed her palm to the older woman's forehead. "Still fevered but not like as much."

"That's good." He pushed to his feet, stretched to ease the cramping of his limbs, and returned to Shorty's bedside.

The hard floor punched into his back as he lay down. He shouldn't have let Addie sleep on his shoulder. Not that he regretted it. She'd fit so well. And he'd been reluctant to let her go.

He lifted his head. She lay beside Mrs. Stone, sharing the fur rug. Good. At least she'd be somewhat comfortable. No need for the lamp. He rose, turned it out, and returned to the unwelcoming place near Shorty.

Rain continued to pound on the roof. How long would they be stranded here? He smiled into the darkness. Not that he minded. Once they moved on, he and Addie wouldn't share the same degree of...of...friendship, he decided to call what they had here.

Mr. Bertrand called, "How long do I have to put up with this?"

Nash opened his eyes. Watery light barely made it through the window.

"It's still raining," Mr. Bertrand accused. Did he expect someone to have the power to make it stop?

Ignoring the demanding man, Nash looked toward the women. Addie sat up slowly, blinking away sleep. Her gaze found Nash. Her eyes grew wide and watchful. And perhaps welcoming, though that might have been his own wishes.

She turned her attention to Mrs. Stone. "How are you feeling, Mother?"
"Tired."

Addie held a cup of water to Mrs. Stone's lips. "It's still raining. You have nothing to do but rest." She headed for the door.

Seeing her intent, Nash scooped the slicker from the hook and draped it around her shoulders.

"Thank you." Her dark-eyed gaze held his for a moment, and then she hurried outside.

He turned slowly away from the door. "How are you feeling, Shorty?"

"I would like to get up if you could be so kind as to hand me my clothes." He nodded toward the items hanging from nails near his bed.

"Are you sure? You have a bad cut on your leg."

"I also have bruises up and down my body, but I am not lying in bed half naked." He sat up. He paled and grunted as he half lifted, half dragged his leg from the bed.

At least the bandage didn't show fresh blood. Nash handed the items of clothing to Shorty and remained nearby should the man need assistance.

By the time Addie returned, shaking water from the slicker before she hung it back on the peg, Shorty wore clothes and a pinched look.

"Shorty, what are you doing?" Addie rushed across the room.

Shorty held up a hand. "It is best if I get up. I do not want to get stiff." He perched on the side of the bed, making no move toward going further.

Addie stopped, studied Shorty, and then gave Nash a quizzical look.

He shrugged. "He's determined."

She nodded. "At least Mother is doing better."

Mr. Zacharius coughed and blew his nose several times while Mr. Bertrand continued to grumble.

"I'll see about breakfast." She crossed to the kitchen area.

Nash followed her to the cupboard, where they shared a grin at Mr. Bertrand's steady criticisms.

"Is there makings for coffee?" she asked.

"I believe there is." He located the coffee grinder and coffee beans while she measured out cornmeal and water and set it on the hot stove to

cook.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” She stirred the mush.

“We can’t move until it stops raining and the trail is cleared.”

“I’ll need to look at making more meals.”

“Did you find the bottled meat?” Shorty called.

“I did not.” She looked toward Nash, her eyebrows rising.

He shook his head. He’d not seen any meat.

“If you look in that cupboard, you will find it.” They followed the direction Shorty pointed.

Addie knelt to pull out an assortment of battered pots, a cracked bowl, and—“Right in the very back.” She emerged with two jars. “I can make stew.”

Hawk strode in and shrugged out of his slicker. “How did everyone sleep?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I slept well.” He stood before the stove, holding his hands out toward the heat. “We’re socked in. Not even an inch of blue sky to be seen.”

The coffee sputtered. Nash moved it aside, let the grounds settle, and then found cups of various sorts. Two chipped china cups with dainty handles. He shuddered at the thought of some rough-and-tough cowboy holding those delicate things. There were three tin mugs. Two small canning jars would serve as cups. Filling all the containers emptied the pot.

He offered a teacup to Mrs. Stone.

She barely opened her eyes as he spoke her name.

Addie would have to help her mother. Nash left the teacups on the edge of the table where she could reach them. Then he placed the rest of the hot drinks before the men and went to assist Addie as she served the cornmeal mush.

“You will find molasses in the cupboard.” Shorty indicated the one to the left, taking in a sharp breath as he raised his arm.

Using an assortment of plates and bowls, Nash handed out the morning food.

Addie put her plate and Mrs. Stone’s nearby, helped the older woman sit and eased her around until she rested against the wall. Addie looked expectantly at Nash.

What did she want? And then he nodded. “I’ll say grace.” He bowed his head and asked God’s blessing on His provisions. “And an end to the rain,

please.” Several of the others echoed his amen, the loudest one from Mr. Bertrand.

Addie balanced the bowl on Mrs. Stone’s legs. She watched her mother as she ate a portion of her own food. But the spoon remained at the side of the bowl.

“Mother, you need to eat in order to get your strength back.” Although her tone remained gentle, a touch of urgency quickened her words.

When Mrs. Stone made no move toward picking up her spoon, Addie took it, scooped up mush, and lifted it toward her mother’s mouth.

Mrs. Stone barely parted her lips. Addie managed to get little more than a taste into the woman’s mouth.

“Mother, please, you need to eat.”

“I’m too tired.” She sank back on the furs, pulling the blanket to her chin. “Let me rest.”

Worry lines crinkled Addie’s forehead. She pressed her hand to her mother’s brow and sucked in her lower lip.

Nash’s eyebrows rose in silent question. Was she worse?

Addie shook her head. Did she mean Mrs. Stone’s fever had risen? Or that she improved? Wanting to be sure, he began to rise.

“She’s no worse.” Addie gave reluctant attention to her own food. Her bowl was empty, and she sipped her coffee.

If only Nash could encourage her. Maybe he could divert her with conversation.

“Mr. Bertrand,” he began. “What takes you to Golden Valley?”

“I expected the stagecoach to.”

At his unexpected answer, Nash shared a quick grin with Addie.

Mr. Bertrand sent Hawk a hard look, which made no impression on the other man. He simply pushed his empty bowl away and cupped his mug between his palms. Perhaps hoping to signal that nothing could be done about the weather.

Mr. Bertrand released a less-than-patient sigh. “I have business to attend to. In a timely fashion.”

Nash didn’t respond. Everyone had business of one sort or the other to conduct, and no doubt, each of them believed theirs to be of utmost importance.

Mr. Zacharius coughed. Quieted it with a sip of coffee before he spoke. “I’m joining my son. He has a gold mine that I mean to help him with.”

Hawk eyed Mr. Zacharius. Although he didn't speak, Nash read his assessment. The wheezing man was in no condition to stand in the river and pan for gold or even to help with a sluice. Hawk's gaze connected briefly to Nash's, but neither of them voiced their conclusion.

Mr. Bertrand shifted his attention to Mrs. Stone and Addie. "The goldfield hardly seems the place for two ladies."

Addie sat up tall and squared her shoulders. "Our ministrations are needed wherever people gather. We'll take the gospel to those who need it and tend the sick and less fortunate."

Mr. Bertrand made a dismissive sound. "Your charity is wasted."

With a toss of her head that flipped strands of blonde hair across her cheek, she turned away. "Good deeds are never wasted." She gathered up the dishes and carried them to the cupboard, where she poured hot water from the kettle, sloshing it over the dishes in the basin.

Mrs. Stone didn't move from her rest, but five pairs of eyes followed Addie's movements.

Hawk stood. "I'll check on the stock."

"I will assist you." Shorty took one step, groaned, and sank down. "Perhaps I will go out later."

Nash joined Addie at the cupboard. "Don't let Mr. Bertrand's comments disturb you. He's so full of his own importance that he has no concern for anyone else."

"He doesn't bother me." Her laugh was more snort than amusement. "Though I admit I don't care to hear peoples' ill-informed judgment." She glanced over her shoulder. "Mr. Zacharius doesn't look strong enough to pan for gold."

"Let's hope his son is prepared to give him a warm place to rest."

She washed a dish. He dried it and placed it in the cupboard. The last spoon had been put away when a crash rattled the dishes.

Addie gasped. Shorty pushed to his feet and stood there wobbling. Mr. Bertrand grunted. "Sounds like the place is falling down."

Nash glanced upward. The ceiling appeared to be in place. But something had happened.

He grabbed his hat and hurried out into the rain.

Six

Addie shivered—less from the cold draft than from alarm. The cabin stood solid and in one piece. Mother hadn't even stirred, but the three men remaining indoors looked ready to bolt. Except where would they go?

She hurried to the window and rubbed away the film of moisture on the inside, which did nothing to remove the blurring rain trickling down the outside. Leaning closer, she squinted, trying to see through the wavering gray curtain. At least fire posed no danger under these conditions.

Although she made out nothing but shadowy shapes of nearby trees, she remained at the window. *Lord God, keep us safe in here. Keep Nash and Hawk safe out there.*

A figure emerged from the rain. Air whooshed from her lungs as she made out Nash. Praise be to God. His boots thumped on the step. Then he entered the cabin, shaking water from his clothes.

“Is everything—?” She didn’t finish the question.

He hung his hat before he answered. “Another tree came down. This one caught the corner of the woodshed. I’m sorry, Shorty. There’s been some damage.”

“This mountain appears set on destroying me. It could be time for me to move on.”

Addie barely spared Shorty a glance. “Hawk is all right?” she asked Nash.

“A might aggravated at this delay, but other than that, yes.”

“Aggravated, is he? Harrumph.”

Neither Addie nor Nash looked toward Mr. Bertrand. Let him grumble and complain if he must. Addie didn't intend to pay any attention. What did Preacher Stone say? "Grumbling is the death of joy," she murmured the words under her breath as Nash moved closer in time to hear them.

He nudged her arm. "That's the truth."

"Father Stone said it often." She edged in to whisper, "Is it as bad out there as it appears from inside?"

"If you mean, has the constant rain made travel treacherous?" He glanced back at the others and lowered his voice even more. "I have to say I feel like the whole side of the mountain might come down."

"Nash! What do you mean?"

"Forget I said that."

"No. Explain yourself." Realizing the others were straining to hear, she moved closer to the cupboard and talked about making stew, so they'd assume the two of them were only concerned about the next meal.

"Perhaps I'm overreacting to so many trees coming down. But it's all in the same general area, and I can't help wondering why." Seeing her struggle to open the jars of meat, he reached over to twist the lids free.

A deep rumble thrummed beyond the cabin walls, and she turned toward the sound. It grew louder, echoing in her stomach and chest. The walls shook. The cupboard and its contents rattled. She grabbed Nash's arm, clinging to it to steady herself. The vibrating floor rattled her teeth. The sound increased to a deafening thunder that seemed to last forever, though it could only be a few minutes. Then it faded. Ceased.

She released an overdue breath. Then there came another thud.

In the ensuing silence, no one moved. No one breathed. Mother hadn't even stirred.

"Oh." The word carried heat and embarrassment. She shouldn't be hanging on to Nash. Good thing Mother slept. She dropped her hand to her side.

"What was that?" Mr. Zacharius's voice trembled.

"I don't know without checking." Nash dashed from the cabin.

Had he even noticed that she'd reached for him? It appeared not, and she puffed out air.

From outside came the sound of voices. So Hawk was still in one piece. Wasn't he?

Her lungs refused to work as she waited for the response to her question.

Voices faded away, leaving her without an answer.

Shorty hobbled toward the door. "I need to have a look." He opened the door, took in the rain descending, shook his head, closed the door, and hobbled back to the cot where he sat. "Perhaps I will wait for one of them to tell me what has happened."

Everyone but Mother stared at the door. Even Mr. Bertrand had nothing to say.

The minutes ticked by in heavy silence as they strained for any indication as to what happened.

"At least the cabin is in one piece." Shorty's words hung in the air.

Boots thudded on the step. Finally, they'd have some news.

Nash entered and faced the anxious group. "It was a small landslide."

"Sounded big," Mr. Bertrand managed.

"What damage?" Shorty asked.

"It missed everything of importance."

But a frown pinched the space between his eyes. Addie stepped toward him. "You don't sound relieved."

"It's possible it's taken out the road."

Mr. Bertrand came to his feet sputtering. "Are you saying we're stranded here? For how long? It's unacceptable."

Nash dropped his hat to the peg. "We won't know until it stops raining and we can assess the situation." He scrubbed his hair back. "You might as well relax." He smiled at Addie, though his eyes remained serious. "Let's make dinner for this bunch."

"Indeed." She emptied the jars into the biggest pot Shorty had and set it over the heat. "I'll prepare vegetables."

Nash joined her at the cupboard. "While you do that, I'll make biscuits."

She blinked. "You?" The man proved to be good at a number of things. Though she had yet to taste the biscuits he made, so her assumption might be premature.

"I told you my ma cooked for Gib. I often helped her." The big bowl he found thumped to the work surface. "There's lard?"

"A whole tin of it." She pointed to its location.

With the sureness of a man who knew what he was doing, he scooped flour from the bin into the bowl.

The vegetables forgotten, Addie watched. "Hmm. A man of many talents."

"Thanks."

"Who said it was a compliment? It might have simply been an observation." She began peeling a potato.

"It was both. Admit it."

Although he was right, she didn't mean to let him know it. "Well, as they say, the proof is in the pudding." She bent to get another potato from the basket just as he bent to get more flour. Her head crashed into his, and she drew back. "Sorry."

"My fault. I got distracted."

"Distracted? How?" Did he mean her presence? No. She had no call or desire to build fanciful dreams.

"By your admiration of my skills."

"My—" She sputtered. "Where did you get that idea?"

"From you." He tapped her chin. "Whoops. I left a smudge of flour." Taking up the nearest towel, he swabbed at her face.

She couldn't blink, even though her eyes felt much too wide.

In his nearness, she made out the streaks of silver in his irises, the fan of tiny white lines at the outside edge of his eyes, and the dark growth of whiskers on his lower face. The towel hung from his hand, inches from her face. The moment stalled. Neither of them moved.

What did he see? Or imagine he saw? A disheveled spinster? A lonely woman afraid to open her heart to possibilities? She should dismiss that latter question because it wasn't true. Her life provided all she wanted or needed. Reaching out to help those less fortunate. As if by doing so, she might prevent the needless deaths of her parents. Why hadn't anyone helped them?

That idea didn't seem correct, but she couldn't put her finger on the problem. Except her parents hadn't died of neglect. Or illness.

Besides, helping others only meant she did her part to erase the result of man's evil from the world.

The pot sputtered, and she jerked around to deal with it, stirring the contents far longer than required. Steeling herself to deal with her errant feelings.

Three deep breaths and she thought she could work next to Nash without doing, saying, or thinking anything silly.

While he chopped the lard into the flour, she continued peeling vegetables and adding them to the stew.

“I didn’t mean to offend you.” He spoke softly.

“No. No. You didn’t. Not at all.”

“Are you sure? You’ve grown very quiet.”

Maybe she had. But not out of being offended. Her reaction to his teasing had been unexpected. So unlike her. She had a reputation for calmness and—

An unfamiliar, mischievous imp drove away every other thought. “I was simply considering”—she dipped her finger into the flour—“how to get revenge.” She flicked the flour at him.

The surprise on his face brought a gurgle of laughter up her throat.

“Wait. I got some on you.” She grabbed the nearest towel, the same one he’d used, and wiped flour from his cheek. Whiskers rasped under her touch. Her hand slowed, stopped, and hung at his face. Her fingers refused to move. The muscles in her throat tightened so she couldn’t swallow. Behind her eyes, her pulse ticked.

A slow, heart-stopping smile curved his lips.

If she didn’t know it wasn’t possible, she’d say that smile left her knees without strength.

What was wrong with her?

He captured her hand and slowly lowered it. Slowly removed the towel from her fingers. He slowly swiped it at her nose. “I guess we’re even.”

Not even close, she wanted to protest. *Not unless you are jerked off-balance as much as I am.*

He set the towel on the cupboard and turned his attention back to making biscuits.

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t—

“Your stew needs to be stirred,” he murmured.

Stew? Oh right. But her body refused to turn toward the stove. A spatter of hot liquid touched the back of her hand. Her fingers found a spoon. She stirred the pot.



NASH CHOPPED LARD UNTIL THE FLOUR MIXTURE LOOKED LIKE TINY white peas. He dribbled in water until the dough became soft and pliable. He'd made biscuits often enough to do it without much thinking, which was good because he found himself distracted.

What had made him behave that way? So boldly touching Addie's nose. He should be ashamed of himself. Ma would scold him for it, saying, "Be cautious with how you conduct yourself around young ladies. Don't toy with their feelings." Words she'd said so many times. Not that he'd forgotten. Nor would he ever. Any more than he'd fail to heed the one admonition that had always seemed most important perhaps because it came from the Bible. "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life."

He knew beyond a doubt that the heart could lead a man astray. Whether in desiring a woman or monetary gain.

Addie was not the sort of young lady who should be treated frivolously. She'd been raised by a preacher and seemed content to live a simple life. Maybe even to live on a ranch?

Not that those things gave him the right to be so bold.

But, his heart argued, wasn't she equally bold?

She had been. They'd both enjoyed a little teasing.

And her eyes...so full of surprise that gave way to what he took to be enjoyment.

Having circled back to the moment their gazes had connected, and something passed between them, he grinned. They could be stuck here for a few days. No reason the time couldn't be enjoyable.

No reason at all.

While she chopped carrots into the stew, he kneaded the dough, pressed it into a square, and cut it into biscuit-sized smaller squares.

One hand on the cupboard, Addie watched. "Square biscuits?"

"More efficient. Less waste."

She considered his reason. "Fine. I concede you might have a point."

The biscuits fit on a baking sheet. "Concede?" He did his best to look stern. Mere inches separated them. He leaned closer so they were almost nose to nose. "You wish you'd thought of it first, don't you?"

Her eyes widened, watching him without blinking. "Did your ma teach you that?"

"Who says anyone taught me? Maybe I reasoned it out on my own."

“Did you?” Her gaze lowered to his nose, his chin, rose to his mouth, and paused there. She swallowed loudly and returned to staring into his eyes. “Did you?” The words whispered across his skin.

Did he what? What did she mean? All he could think of was how close she stood, how warm her breath, how he wanted to capture the strand of hair that hung past her cheek.

“Nash?”

His name breathed from her lips.

“The biscuits?” She tipped her head to the cupboard.

Yes, they were talking about biscuits. About why he cut them in squares. And who had taught him to do so. He’d teased her that he didn’t need anyone to give him the idea.

“I might have thought of it on my own, but one of the chuckwagon cooks working for Gib did it.”

“There you go. Was that so hard?”

Hard to confess? No. Hard to keep his mind on the subject? Yes. In fact —“I better get these baking.”

She stepped aside to allow him to open the oven door.

He slid them in, closed the door, and then remained there for no other reason than Addie had to be at his side in order to stir the stew.

A scraping sound outside drew his attention. The doorknob rattled, and Hawk stepped in. His boots showed the signs of having been very muddy before he’d done his best to clean them, which explained the scraping sound. He hung the slicker on a peg. Muddy water puddled on the floor. Rubbing his hands together, he faced them.

“Any chance there’d be some hot coffee?”

Using a towel, Nash shook the pot. “There’s some here, but it’s not fresh.”

“I’ll take it.” Hawk took the mug Nash filled and sat at the table.

All eyes watched him as he stared into the cup’s dark contents. He swallowed back three mouthfuls and set the container down with a hard sound that made Addie jump. Then he leaned back, noticing everyone’s interest.

“Still raining.” The pounding on the roof made his observation unnecessary. “No telling when it’ll stop.” Again, nothing they didn’t all know. He turned the cup around twice. “The road’ll be a mess.”

Nash glanced at Addie. She appeared as confused as he about Hawk's report.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide, and shrugged one shoulder.

He nodded. For a moment, they studied each other. When Hawk spoke again, Nash slowly, reluctantly shifted his attention back to the man.

"Everyone's safe, including the animals."

If he brought good news, why did he sound so morose? Was there something he wasn't telling them? Maybe Nash could pull the man aside and find out.

"Someone will come looking for us." A long sigh. "When the rain stops."

"The biscuits!" Nash rescued them. "Perfect." They had risen nicely. The tops were golden brown.

"The test is in the tasting." Addie grinned at him.

"Then let's eat so everyone can taste that they are good." Seeing no platter nor the necessity of one, he put the tray of biscuits directly on the table.

Behind him, Addie hefted the pot of stew and set it on the wooden surface.

Together, he and Addie brought an assortment of bowls and plates, forks and spoons, and half a dozen knives.

Addie checked on her mother. "She's a little feverish, but nothing that concerns me. Sleep is good for her."

Nash slid along the bench so she crowded in beside him around the table. Her arm pressed to his side. He grinned at her and chuckled softly when pink stained her cheeks, and she lowered her eyes. He expanded his chest with pleasure at the sign that she enjoyed this as much as he, perhaps with as much caution and surprise.

At the way everyone looked toward Nash, he understood they expected him to ask the blessing, and he nodded, pleased to do so.

"We have much to be grateful for. Safety, a dry shelter, and food."

Shorty cleared his throat. "You are making serious inroads into my supplies."

"I'll see that the company replaces them," Hawk assured the man.

"I'll pray." They were too tightly packed for Nash to try to stand, so he bowed his head where he sat. "Thank You, God, for all Your blessings. For

safety and sustenance. Bless this food, and may it taste as good as it smells. Amen."

A muffled sound came from Addie.

He pushed his elbow tighter to her arm. Signaling he knew, she tried not to laugh.

Despite the circumstances, the persisting rain, Mrs. Stone's illness, and their crowded conditions, Nash enjoyed the meal and the company, except for Mr. Bertrand's constant complaining, which Nash ignored. He didn't mean to let the man suck the enjoyment out of the moment.

Addie took a biscuit, broke it apart, and lifted a portion to her nose. She sniffed without revealing anything. She nibbled off a piece and chewed, nodding several times. Swallowed and drank a mouthful of water.

He nudged her. "Good, aren't they?"

For a moment, she stared at her plate, her hands holding the halves of the biscuit.

What was wrong with them? He bit off a large bite and chewed. Tasted fine. Good, in fact. As good as he'd ever tasted. He tried another bite. Still good.

Addie watched him.

Did he see her lips twitch? He met her gaze and held it, challenging her. She laughed. "They're good."

"You're a tease." But he sat back, pleased with her acknowledgment.

"Maybe a little." Something flickered through her eyes. "Though not often. Not often at all." Her words ended in a whisper. She seemed surprised at her confession and jerked her attention back to her food and what the others were saying.

He listened as well. Mr. Zacharius wanted Hawk to guess as to when they might resume travel. Of course, the driver had no more idea than the rest of them.

"This is dreadful weather," Shorty said. "I have had more than enough of rain and snow and cold. The mountains are not the place for me."

"Where do ya plan to go?" Hawk asked.

"The prairies. I hear they are as flat as if someone rolled them out with a rolling pin."

Hawk shook his head. "Seen 'em. Boring. And windy. Always windy."

"Have you seen them?" Shorty looked to Nash.

“I have. Crossed them coming here.” He and Ma had taken the train as far as the lines went, then traveled by wagon the rest of the way.

“Do you agree with Hawk? Are they boring?” Shorty waited for Nash’s answer.

“There’s a certain sameness to them.” He thought back to those days. “The word that comes to mind is freedom.”

“Really? Be so good as to explain.”

He collected his thoughts. “The open spaces felt wide and inviting. Offering a man the chance to start over. Or to forge ahead with no obstacles in his way.”

Shorty expelled a noisy breath. “I like the sound of that. Indeed. As soon as I can get out of here, I shall head for the prairies, wide-open spaces, and freedom.”

Why did Shorty seek freedom? Did it have something to do with the books Nash and Addie had found in the storeroom?

The meal finished, Nash helped Addie clean up. They stood at the cupboard.

“We’ll be here overnight again, won’t we?” Her words were tight, as if the idea troubled her.

“It’s still raining.” The coach remained stuck, and the road might be washed out. No need to point out all the problems. “Why?”

“Mother has been restless. Did you notice?” She glanced back to where Mrs. Stone still lay on the fur. Twice, she’d awakened and called for a drink. Addie had taken her water. But when she offered her food, Mrs. Stone had refused. She’d retreated to her covers but couldn’t seem to find a comfortable position and tossed from one side to the other.

“I did. Does that worry you?”

“I’d be lying if I said it didn’t.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “Have you considered that she is better off here than riding in the coach?”

Addie raised her face to him. “She needs to get to Golden Valley and her own bed as soon as possible.” A smile warmed those wide eyes. “Thank you for making me see this delay is for her good.” Her lips rumbled with a soft chuckle. “You’d think I’d remember God’s promise to provide everything we need.”

“It’s easy to forget.” He meant to be reassuring, so why did she frown?

“Sounds like you have a story.”

“Sorry. I don’t know what you mean.” Worry wound around his spine. But she could not have learned anything about his past.

Seven

The wet rag hung from Addie's hand as she studied Nash. Why did he seem reluctant to explain what he meant? Not that it was a concern of hers. But something in his tone when he'd said that the prairies offered freedom and a chance to start over, and then his comment about it being easy to forget God's promises made her wonder about his past. What challenges and trials had he faced? Yes, his father had died. They'd moved to the ranch he'd mentioned. And now he had his own place. "I can't imagine you got your place without encountering a few tests and trials."

His smile crinkled the edges of his eyes. "It's taken hard work and perseverance."

"Of course." She'd hoped for more detail. "No setbacks?"

The smile fled. "I've had some for certain."

"But you never wanted to give up?" Why did she press him? Because, she admitted, she wanted to know about this man. What did he consider important? Where had he found his strength, and did he turn to God when he sought encouragement?

"Working hard for my place has been my dream since we began to live on the Jarvis ranch." He lifted the lid on the coffeepot, swirled the grounds, and dumped them into the slop pail. "Gib encouraged me. All hard work yields a profit, he'd say. One time..." Nash paused his story as he poured the fresh coffee grounds into the pot and added water. "I had found two maverick calves in the bushes. They were unbranded, and no other animals nearby. That means they belong to anyone who finds them, so Gib said they were mine. Two heifers." He put more wood in the stove and set the pot to boil. "I pictured them as the beginning of my herd. Gib helped me get my

own brand. You can imagine how proud and happy I was when I put it on that pair."

His crooked smile suggested a slight embarrassment over how pleased he'd been.

To let him know she understood and didn't think him silly, she patted his forearm.

With a quick nod, he continued. "I wish I could say I started my herd with them, but I didn't." His lips flattened into a hard line. "They both died."

"No! Oh, Nash, how disappointing." Her fingers tightened on his arm.

He covered her hand with his. "Thanks. It was a bitter blow. When I found them both dead, I got very angry. I couldn't even tell how they'd died. Gib said maybe they'd eaten a poisonous weed, but I searched and never found anything." His shrug didn't convince her he no longer cared.

"So what did you do?" Obviously, he hadn't given up his dream.

"I packed up a saddle horse, told Ma and Gib that I was going into the mountains, and rode away."

"They didn't try and stop you?"

"Nope. Guess they figured I needed to sort things out for myself." The coffee sputtered, and he pulled it aside.

She set out enough cups for everyone, and he filled them. Together, they carried them to the table where the others sat visiting. Mother remained sleeping, sometimes calling out in her sleep.

Addie and Nash took their coffee to the cupboard.

"How long did you stay in the mountains?"

"Two weeks. I made a camp, and every day, I rode around, enjoying the scenery. At first, anger and disappointment raged through me. But a man can't be in the mountains without being aware of God's power and majesty. Day by day, other things replaced my anger."

Outside, something snapped. They held their breath, waiting to learn if it meant another landslide or a falling tree. But the only sound came from the rain battering the roof.

"When did you decide to return?" Addie asked when it seemed he wasn't going to continue his story.

"One day, I sat on the crest of a hill overlooking a beautiful valley. I sat at a crossroads. I could forget about hard work and find an easy way to get what I wanted."

The way he quirked his eyebrows made Addie think he'd seriously considered the latter. A little tremor twitched across her shoulders. There were some dreadful ways of taking the easy route. Taking advantage of others, robbing people, holding up trains—

“Even as I thought that, I knew I'd never stoop to doing the things others did. Hurting others. Robbing others. The easy way held no appeal. I made a decision as I sat there. I would honor God in my dealings. If He chose to bless my work, fine. If He let me struggle without achieving what I had my heart set on, I'd accept that too.”

“Nash, that is such a powerful choice. And He's blessed you?”

His smile sent silver lights dancing straight into Addie's heart.

“You know that green valley I told you about?”

“Yes.”

“That's now mine. That's where my ranch is.”

“Oh, how wonderful!”

He squeezed her hand. “God is good.”

“All the time,” she said. Nash was a fine man. Something inside her lifted upward like a flower to the sun. The flower seeking warmth and life-giving light. Her heart seeking—she tried to stop the thought from growing—life-giving, heart-healing love. Where had such an idea come from? But she couldn't dismiss it. Couldn't forget it.

Mr. Bertrand's strident voice drew her attention. He complained to Shorty and Hawk and likely the whole world that a delay like this indicated poor planning.

Hawk leaned back. How he kept his expression and voice so calm, Addie didn't know.

“If you can do better, you're welcome to march out there and do it.” Hawk's words carried a hefty load of doubt.

Mr. Bertrand sputtered, but he didn't say anything more about it. At least not at the moment.

Shorty told about other stagecoaches that had stopped longer than expected. “But this is only the second time I have had people stay overnight.” His scowl suggested he didn't enjoy overnight guests.

Mother wakened. “Addie?”

Cup of water in hand, Addie hurried to her and helped her sit enough to drink it. “Would you eat anything?”

Mother lay back. “No thanks, dear.”

Addie lingered at her side. Mother's forehead remained warm. Her skin was pale and clammy. Addie got cool water and bathed Mother's face, hands, and neck.

"That feels wonderful," Mother said. "Thank you. Now I'm ready to rest." She waved Addie away.

Addie sat back on her heels. At least Mother's fever had lowered. She'd feel better if she'd sit up and take some nourishment. The trip had really worn her out. But like Nash said, this rest in a dry cabin would do her good.

She looked in Nash's direction. He watched her, his expression gentle. Thank God Nash had wandered to the coach when he did. Maybe God had sent him not only to help out the travelers but also to—

No. Why would she think God had sent him to encourage her? But her heart had a little crack of hope she would not admit to.



NASH STUDIED HIS COMPANIONS. MR. BERTRAND WORE A PERMANENT scowl. What had transpired in that man's life to leave him so unhappy? Mr. Zacharius had little to say. Coughing, wheezing, and wiping his brow consumed most of his energy. Shorty shifted in his chair out of either boredom or an attempt to ease his pain. Hawk, on the other hand, remained quiet and watchful—no doubt wondering how he would get these people to Golden Valley.

Finally, Nash let his attention settle on Addie, where she sat on the floor beside her mother, who had again drawn the blanket to her chin and curled into a ball.

Addie brought her soft gaze to Nash.

He smiled, offering her—what? He couldn't explain to himself what he meant. Except he wanted her to know he'd help her in any way she needed. Together, they could face whatever lay before them.

Huh?

Yes, fine, he meant to help her and the others as long as they were holed up here with the rain pounding on the roof and mud bogging the trail. After that? Well, they'd each go their own way.

Shorty slapped the table. The sound reverberated through the cabin, and everyone jerked to alertness. "Enough of this sitting around feeling

discouraged. You will be here until you can depart. Make the best of it. Nash!"

Nash stiffened. What had he done to annoy the man? And would it earn him a tongue-lashing?

"You pull that little door open, and you will find a storeroom."

Nash nodded. "I've seen it."

A scowl scudded across Shorty's features. Then he waved toward the cupboard. "There are books in there. Would you get some and bring them out? I would go myself, but my leg says no."

"That's a good idea." Nash had wondered what they'd do to pass the long afternoon and evening hours cooped up together. "Addie, do you want to help me?"

She sprang to her feet and rushed to his side. "I'd love to."

The door squealed as he opened it. They ducked inside and passed other boxes to the crate where they'd discovered the books.

"It still surprises me that Shorty has all these." Addie blew dust from the top layer. "These titles make me think he might have been a magistrate or a—" She shrugged. "Guess I can't picture him in England living in a castle."

"Like many in the West, it appears he's got a past he wants to escape."

Her hands idle on the wooden crate, she frowned. "I never thought of it in those terms. I've always thought people heading west into new land were seeking adventure or a more challenging life. But now I wonder how many are running from something." With a puzzled shake of her head, she lifted a book and turned it over.

She had no idea that right before her stood a man determined to forget his past.

"This might interest someone."

"Yes." Though he didn't read the title. "Let's pick out a few." Forcing his attention back to the task, he helped select books—three works of fiction, a history book, one on geography, and two travel diaries. "Maybe this will quiet the complaining."

She drew back, her eyes darkening. "I'm sorry. Am I annoying you?"

"What? No. Addie, I didn't mean you. Why would you think that?" He blocked the doorway so she couldn't leave.

"I'm the only one here...besides you." Each word huffed out.

“What about those out there?” He jerked his head toward the other room.

“Them?” She blinked and drew her lips into—

Squinting and leaning close, he let out an exasperated huff. “You’re joshing me, aren’t you?”

Her laugh rebounded to the corners of the room.

“You are a tease.”

“And you like it.”

Their gazes crashed at her assessment and his silent admission. Yes, he liked it. Very much. More than he had a right to. Except—

What stopped him from showing his interest in her?

He had his own place. He had a house suitable for a family. In fact, why had he built it as if he had, in the back of his mind, behind the debris of his past, always planned for a family of his own?

Only one thing stood in his way. The secret of his past he wanted no one to know. Ever.

“Shall we?” He stepped aside and gestured for her to leave before him.

They set the books on the table, and everyone except Mrs. Stone, who continued to sleep, chose a title. Nash picked the travel diary of David Thompson and looked around, uncertain where he wanted to sit. The benches were a bit crowded.

Addie claimed one of the novels and sat on the floor with her back to the wall close to her mother. In the same spot as they’d been last night. Where she’d fallen asleep on Nash’s shoulder.

“Mind if I join you?” He waited for her go-ahead nod before he lowered himself to her side. He had so much he wanted to know about her. But not now, with the others so close. Surely there’d come a time and a place before they reached Golden Valley and parted ways. He’d make sure of it.

For now, he’d bide his time, and he opened the book and began to read.

Quiet descended, carrying only the rain on the roof, the turning of pages, the ticking of the clock on the wall by the cupboard, and the hitch of Mr. Zacharius’s breathing.

The recounting of exploration and discoveries proved interesting enough, but Nash kept losing his place.

Addie didn’t seem to have the same problem. She turned the pages at a steady pace. Twice, she groaned as if the characters in her book had made a foolish choice. Once, she laughed softly.

Nash held the book open on his lap. His reading forgotten; he rested his head against the wall and studied Addie. She'd brushed her hair at some point, and it hung in a neat braid down her back, various shades of blonde running in and out of the curves. Her neck was slender, the skin white, unmarred except for a row of freckles along her hairline. They were so pale no one would have noticed them without close scrutiny, which explained why he'd observed them. Her ears were smallish, and he smiled at that realization, though he couldn't say why.

Her shoulders twitched.

Had she grown aware of his study?

Before he got his attention back to the pages, she caught him staring.

What did he see in her eyes? Surprise? Or was it—?

She met him look for look. Examining him as much as he examined her. Her gaze scanned his face, dropped to his right shoulder, crossed his chest in a measured pace, reached his left shoulder, and returned to his face, stopping when their eyes connected.

The air between them shimmered with possibility.

Mr. Zacharius coughed long and hard, jarring their attention toward him.

They looked at each other again, but the boundaries were again in place. The moment had passed. He shifted his gaze to the window. Rain still streaked it. According to the clock, the afternoon drew to an end.

Addie eased to her feet. "I'll see what I can find for supper."

He followed on her heels. "I'll help."

Side by side, they examined the cupboard's contents. Despite Mr. Bertrand's complaints about beans, those would have to do for supper.

"I'll make biscuits again," he offered. "Unless you'd like to."

She held her palms toward him. "I couldn't compete with your expertise."

He scoffed. "I have no doubt you can make them as well as I."

"Oh, I don't think you can be certain of that." One of those palms lowered with a dismissive wave. "You go ahead while I slave over the beans. First, I have to find a can opener."

They grinned at each other.

Hawk left, saying he had to do chores. By the time he returned, the biscuits were ready to eat. Addie had found a can opener, opened half a dozen cans, and dumped them into the big pot.

Before she went to the table, she took water to her mother, waking her to drink.

Mrs. Stone again refused food.

At the way Addie's eyes dimmed, Nash squeezed her shoulder. "She's resting." As if that wasn't obvious. But what other assurances could he offer?

Addie nodded. "And she isn't burning up. But I wish she would rally."

They joined the others at the table, crowded together. Nash resisted the urge to put his arm around Addie's shoulders, draw her even closer, and offer his comfort.

Again, he said grace and included a request for Mrs. Stone to get better. Addie rewarded him with a whispered thanks.

Only one person complained about the menu. Everyone else thanked Addie and Nash for preparing the food.

After the meal, Mr. Zacharius offered to help with the washing up, but Addie waved him away. "It's not necessary, but thanks."

Nash hoped he didn't smile wide enough to make the others wonder at the reason, but it pleased him that Addie didn't want to share their time together with anyone else. But how long could they linger over the few dishes, pretending to be busy so they could stand side by side, talking softly?

"Did you ever reach a crossroads in your faith such as I did?" It seemed like a good place to begin learning more about her.

She squeezed the water from the washrag and twisted it to within a fraction of destruction. Although she hadn't answered his question, he knew she had.

"I did."

"Care to tell me about it?"

Her shoulders rose and fell as she drew in several deep breaths. Just when he thought she'd refuse, the words ground from her throat.

"It happened after my parents died." She turned to face him full-on, troubled emotions racing through her eyes. "They died needlessly and cruelly."

He placed both hands on her shoulders to still their quivering. As she leaned into his grasp, the shaking quietened. "I'm sorry," he murmured, wanting to crush her to his chest and erase every ugly memory.

Her gaze searched his, and he held steady, letting her look long and deep.

“So many things ran through my mind when it happened, but mostly, I asked why. Why hadn’t God protected them? Weren’t we supposed to trust Him to take care of us?”

He squeezed her shoulders tighter. Oh, for the freedom to hold her.

“The preacher and his wife took me home.” She glanced at Mrs. Stone to indicate they were the same people. “I was silent for days. Then I cried endlessly for days. Poor Mother. She didn’t know what to do.” A smile drove away the shadows of her memories. “She did the right thing. She hugged me when I let her. She prayed over me, and I know she prayed lots when I wasn’t with her. When I stopped crying and started asking questions, hard, accusing questions, both she and Father listened, and when they thought I would hear what they had to say, they read Scripture to me and helped me see that bitterness and unforgiveness were a poison to the one who harbored them and did nothing to the other person.”

He nodded. “Did anything specific make you accept that? Perhaps a time and a place when you chose God’s way over yours?”

“Like you did?”

“Yes.”

“I did not have a hillside experience. But—” She grew thoughtful as if recalling something. “One Sunday, I sat in church as Father preached. The sun filtered through the frosted windows. Someone had brought a bouquet of lilacs, and the scent filled the room. A little girl I’d helped take care of when her mother lay ill sat across the aisle. She turned and waved. The whole family sat together, their illness in the past. I remember thinking how pleasant life was. And a Bible verse came to mind. ‘This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.’ That’s when I decided to enjoy every day God gave me. Yes, sometimes the days are loaded with trouble and sorrow, but even then, I can rejoice because God is my strength and my salvation.” She laughed a little. “I think I said more than I needed to.”

“Not at all. I can see you live that lesson.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened.

Sensing she wanted to hear more, he continued. “You take care of your mother. You are patient with others. I’ve never seen any crossness in you.”

“Thank you for saying that.” She planted her hands over his, where they still gripped her shoulders.

They stood that way as she drank from his eyes.

The door opened and closed as Mr. Bertrand grumbled his way to the outhouse.

Addie and Nash dropped their hands to their sides and stepped back, leaving Nash with a yearning he’d never before experienced.

He allowed himself to think this would become the beginning of something special between them, unmarred by his past. His insides quaked as if the past shook itself in warning.

If only he could be someone other than who he was.

Eight

ddie picked up the nearest object—a mug—and dried it, although it had been washed and dried already. She'd never told anyone about the riot of emotions she'd experienced after the death of her parents. Nor had she before realized that she'd, indeed, faced a crossroads of faith as he called it. Father would be pleased to know it had been in church as he preached that she put aside the past and chose to trust God with the future.

She owed so much to Preacher and Mother Stone. What would have become of her without them—a young girl with no home? She'd have been sent to an orphanage or, given her age, become a mother's helper in a home overrun with children. Not that she didn't like children. She did. But she'd once watched a girl about the age she'd been back then struggling under the weight of a toddler on her hip. The toddler's runny nose dripped on the girl's shoulder. Two slightly older children tugged at her, whining and crying. It did not look like a happy way to live.

The cup was as dry as wood. She forced her restless hands to stop polishing it and put it in the cupboard, all while Nash watched her every move.

She resisted an urge to press her hands to her shoulders where he'd held her, providing comfort and stability. Something about his touch and even his presence made her fears go from a rolling boil to a gentle simmer. She folded the drying towel into thirds and, with equal care, draped it over the bar close to the stove to let it dry.

And still, Nash waited. His presence reassuring and unsettling. He must wonder at the way she fussed about the position of the towel. Drawing in a

deep breath, she forced herself to face him. The heat stinging her cheeks could be explained away as caused by being close to the stove.

She couldn't meet his eyes and settled her gaze mid-chest. "The dishes are done." A needless comment. What else could she say?

"Are you all right?" The depth of his voice jerked her attention to his eyes.

"Yes! Of course. Why would you think otherwise?"

He shrugged, but the warm concern in his gaze did not falter. "If I had to guess, I'd say telling me about that time in your life triggered memories that were both good and bad."

Exactly. He'd pinpointed her confusion, and it had nothing to do with his hands on her shoulder and her wish that they were still there. "The bad is in the past. The good is my here and now."

His smile filled his eyes with silvery sparks reminiscent of stars on a clear warm night.

"Thank you for telling me. It makes me see even better your sweet, gentle spirit."

She gulped so loud everyone must have heard. Then she sputtered with laughter. "I'm no saint."

"Nor would I want you to be."

Laughter fled. "What does that mean?"

"Saints are otherworldly. Or as Ma once said, 'Too heavenly minded to be of earthly good.'"

More sputtered laughter escaped her lips. "I doubt you've met many of that description."

He chuckled. "Only one."

"Do tell."

They leaned against the cupboard as they talked. The others read contentedly except for Mother who turned to her other side, mumbling in her sleep. Mother always said sleep was the greatest healer.

Nash folded his arms. "A student preacher came one summer a few years ago. An upright, godly man. Except he was narrow-minded. His judgments were harsh. There existed not one drop of human kindness in him. Pious words about God's law and God's righteousness cloaked everything he said but never a word about His grace. That's when Ma said that." His chuckle was as much regret as amusement. "I couldn't help but wonder how many individuals he turned from the kingdom."

Mother snorted awake and tried to sit up, reaching into the air for something.

Addie hurried to her side. "What is it? What do you want?"

When Mother mumbled, Addie made out enough to know they needed to make a trip to the outhouse. She helped Mother to her feet and held her steady.

Seeing their intent, Nash lifted the slicker from the peg and draped it over them. He opened the door.

Mother staggered and fell against the wall.

Addie pulled her upright and clung to her.

They took two unsteady steps together.

"She's never going to make it." Nash scooped her into his arms. "Lead the way."

"You're going to get soaked." As would Mother.

"Take my slicker," Hawk said.

Nash draped it over his head to cover Mother and his shoulders. He'd still get wet, but it protected Mother.

Addie huddled into Shorty's rain gear.

They stepped into the rain and hurried along the muddy path. Addie slipped on the wet ground and grabbed Nash's elbow to steady herself.

"Hang on."

And she did. At the door of the little building, he set Mother on her feet. Then Addie assisted her while Nash waited in the rain.

The rain! Addie cocked her head toward the sound on the roof. It didn't sound as loud as it had.

Done their business, she opened the door. Nash again picked up Mother, and they began their return journey.

"It isn't raining as hard."

"I noticed that." Nash paused long enough to look around. "There's a hint of light in the west."

"It's almost over." Of course, she was happy about that. They all needed to get to Golden Valley for whatever reason they had. But it meant an end to the time she and Nash shared. Except—must it? Yes, he'd continue to his ranch, but wouldn't he have call to visit the mining town? Would it cross his mind to pay her a visit? Besides, hadn't he suggested she visit his ranch, and hadn't she agreed?

They reached the cabin without an answer to her questions. Because there was no answer. They had only the few hours before they left the cabin.

She gave Mother water. Offered her a biscuit, but Mother refused and curled up under the blanket.

Nash stood nearby, watching. She met his gaze, needing, wanting something from him, though she wouldn't acknowledge it.

“Sleep is good,” he murmured.

Addie nodded.

With Mother sleeping, the kitchen area clean, the dishes washed and put away, she had little else to do. So she picked up her book, rested her back against the wall, and began to read.

Nash sat beside her, his legs curled up, and he opened the book he read. After a few minutes, he put his finger in the book and lifted his head. “I thought David Thompson wrote this book, but it’s written by someone else and tells about his life. It’s amazing to think how much of North America he explored and mapped. He overcame many challenges. His father died when he was young, and at seven, his mother placed him in a school for the disadvantaged. It doesn’t appear he let those circumstances deter him.” Nash tapped the book. “I’m in awe of what he achieved when it would have been easy to idle through life feeling sorry for himself.”

“That’s fascinating.” She didn’t mean only the information about the explorer. Nash’s enthusiasm proved equally spellbinding.

They both returned to their reading.

“Addie,” Nash exclaimed, “the man lost the sight in his right eye, but it doesn’t appear to have slowed him down. What a marvelous life he lived.”

“No room for self-pity?”

“None whatsoever.” His eyes glistened. “I feel like he’s an example of how I should choose to live.”

Addie smoothed the crinkled cuffs at her wrists. “Seems to me that is how you have already chosen, isn’t it?”

“I hope I have. Like you said, we should leave the past and live in the here and now. But to read about someone who did kind of opens my eyes.” One corner of his mouth quirked upward. “Sorry. Guess I’m getting a little enthused about it.”

“I don’t mind.” She gave off fiddling with a fraying thread.

“That’s good. I’ll try not to interrupt your reading again.” He bent over the book, but she didn’t immediately return to her own story.

Nash’s enthusiasm, his determination to be a good man, his—well, everything she’d learned about him so far—filled her with admiration.

Afraid he would catch her staring at him, she continued the story she’d begun before supper. A story about a man and a woman crossing the mountains, much as she currently did. They worked together and were destined to find love.

A sigh escaped her as she read the hero’s words to the heroine. It drew Nash’s attention.

“Something good in your book?”

“I think so.”

“Read it to me.”

If he found the love stuff amusing or even trivial, it would erase the pleasure the words had given her.

“Please.”

How could she resist his gentle pleading? “Very well. But you must promise not to mock.”

“Of course, I won’t. I promise.”

“Very well then.” She settled her spine to the wall. “This is what the young man says to the young lady, ‘I loved you the first time we spoke though I knew it not at the time.’ She replies, ‘Sir, how do you know it now?’”

Addie’s cheeks warmed as she continued to read words so intimate it felt like she spied on the couple. “‘Now?’ he said. ‘Because you dwell on every breath I breathe, you accompany every thought I think, you reside in every step I take. You are what brings joy to my very being.’” Addie’s voice faded. Would Nash think her foolish to be so moved by the tender words?

He cleared his throat. “That’s nice.”

Nice! That was like saying the rain was damp. And she’d thought him a tender man!



A READING LIKE THAT REQUIRED MORE THAN “THAT’S NICE.” BUT Nash couldn’t find words to express how they’d stirred his heart. He cleared

his throat. Opened his mouth and closed it without uttering a sound.

Addie's eyes narrowed, and she turned back to her book.

He'd disappointed her. And he'd disappointed himself. "Addie, that's the kind of love a woman deserves."

Her gaze returned to his, her smile driving the shadows from the room. "I'm glad you think so." Her lashes lowered to hide her eyes. "I feared you'd think it silly."

"Not at all." He gave a low chuckle. "But I must say, I'm in awe of a man who can find those words on the spur of the moment."

"Ahh. But he didn't. The author did, and who knows how long he or she labored over getting them right?"

"That's true. And a relief to know I wouldn't be expected to come up with such fine words without the help of an author."

They both grinned.

Something flickered through her eyes and disappeared so quickly he didn't get the chance to identify it. It might have been surprise.

"Have you forgotten"—her voice dipped so low he leaned closer to hear her—"you have an author? We both do."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Doesn't the Bible say that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith?"

"It does. I've never thought of it as...well, as being as personal as that. Like the author of a book."

"Nor have I."

Their looks went on and on, probing, and, for Nash's part, finding in her a depth of wisdom and peace. Could she find something similar in him?

She blinked. "It reminds me of a benediction Father uses from time to time. 'May God go before you to lead you, behind you to protect you, beneath you to support you, and beside you to befriend you.'"

"That's beautiful. Our ever-present, ever-caring, ever-guiding God."

Neither of them spoke as peace and blessing filled the air.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"For what?"

"For turning an excerpt from a novel into a spiritual application."

"You had as much input into that as I did." He continued without considering his next words. "We make a good team."

Her eyes widened. Had he said more than he should? More than he had a right to? He was about to apologize when Hawk pushed to his feet, his

chair scraping across the floor.

“I’m going to the barn for some shut-eye.” He slipped into his slicker and left the room.

Moisture blew in the door, reminding Nash that it still rained. He turned his ear toward the ceiling. Certainly not as hard as it had been.

He closed his book and stood as well. “Guess it’s time for me to go to bed too.” When had Mr. Bertrand curled up on the floor? And Shorty retired to the cot? Already, he snored. Mr. Zacharius slept on the table as he’d done the previous night.

Nash lay on the floor beside Shorty’s bed. Then realizing the lamp burned, he sat up, checked to see that Addie had settled next to her mother, then turned off the light.

Darkness cloaked the room. The day had been enjoyable, above and beyond any he could bring to mind. Learning about Addie, being drawn into her observations on life, hearing about her past had all served to give him a growing appreciation for the sort of person she was. If not for needing to see his horses delivered, he’d enjoy a few more days getting to know her better.

He woke, straining to hear what he found different. The rain had stopped. He should be grateful, but he wasn’t. His time with Addie would be over all too soon.

Shorty groaned and sat up. His feet bumped into Nash.

“It’s morning, and I need to go outside,” he said.

Nash scrambled to his feet and stood aside so the man could limp out. Cold air filled the room when the door opened and closed. In the gray light, Nash hurried to get the fire going. Not wanting to disturb those still sleeping, he lifted the lid and put in kindling as quietly as he could, but impossible to do without a degree of clanging and thudding.

Across the dimly lit room, Addie sat up, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

The squawk of the door signaled Shorty’s return, and Addie hurried out.

Nash ground the coffee beans and dumped them into the coffeepot. The others stirred in various degrees of coming awake, apart from Mrs. Stone who didn’t open her eyes yet moved her hands as if reaching for something.

Addie returned and joined Nash at the stove, holding out her hands to the warmth.

“How is your mother?”

“She tossed about all night, mumbling lots. I woke thinking she talked to me, but I don’t think she was even awake.”

“You’re worried about her.” Offering comfort gave him an excuse to press his hand to her shoulder.

She leaned into his touch. “She’s still a little warm. Nothing like the first night but—” She faced him full on. “I don’t like that she isn’t herself.”

If only he could offer reassurances, but he didn’t know if the woman was exhausted and needing rest or seriously ill. Either way, what could any of them do? “I expect that travel has worn her out.” It was the best he could offer.

“It has.”

He heard the “but” that she didn’t say. He’d best offer her a shift in the direction of her thoughts. “It’s stopped raining.”

“I noticed.” She mixed cornmeal and water in a pot and set it to cook. “How long will it be before we can travel again?”

“I really can’t say.” It would depend on the trail’s condition and how much damage the landslide had done.

The coffee sputtered, and he filled cups for everyone as they waited for the food to cook. The men’s eyes all turned toward the window where Mr. Bertrand peered out.

“Finally, we can move on,” he said.

The man must know there were obstacles to continuing the journey. Nash didn’t bother to point them out.

Steps thudded beyond the door, and Hawk entered. “Coffee’s ready. Good.”

Nash handed him a cup. As Addie dished out the mush, he carried the servings to the table. No one suggested he say grace nor did anyone else offer, so he prayed, thanking God for the end of the rain as well as the food. Silently he also thanked Him for this time learning about Addie.

For several minutes, the only sound came from cutlery against tin or crockery.

Hawk finished and sat back. “I need to check the trail.”

“Enough of delaying. Hitch the horses to the wagon, and let’s be on our way.” Mr. Bertrand almost shouted the words, his voice loud enough to startle Mrs. Stone.

She cried out.

Addie checked on her mother, and then turned to Mr. Bertrand. "Please keep your voice down."

"Harrumph."

"We'll move on as soon as we can. However, the horses can't fly."

Another grumpy sound from Mr. Bertrand.

Hawk continued as if he hadn't heard. "I'll check on the coach and the trail toward Golden Valley. Nash, will you see how things are in the other direction?"

"Of course." Never mind that he'd counted on a few more hours of enjoying Addie's company.

"Let's go." Hawk got to his feet and crossed the floor, but Nash didn't move.

Everyone looked at him, no doubt wondering what had him nailed to the bench.

He pushed his reluctant body upright. "I'll be back later."

If his gaze rested longer on Addie than on anyone else...well, it did.

And if he read regret in her eyes...well, he'd believe he did.

Nine

Addie stared at her empty bowl. Of course, Nash needed to help Hawk. “The sooner they fix whatever is the matter, the sooner we can resume travel.” Mr. Bertrand pointed out the unnecessary.

Addie knew it as well as any of them. Still, the room held hollow places with Nash gone. He’d be back. But she found no comfort in the words.

A weary sigh breathed past her lips as she gathered up the dishes and carried them to the basin. She washed every item carefully. No one offered to dry them for her. Not that she needed help or even wanted it. All too soon, every dish had been washed and dried. The towel hung by the stove, folded precisely.

How could she pass the day? She faced the room. Shorty rocked back and forth on his feet as he looked out the window. “I should be out there.”

“Your leg isn’t up to it,” she pointed out.

“I know.”

Was he worried about his injuries or anxious to have his place to himself again?

Mother called out. Addie gave her water before she fell asleep again. Surely, she had improved.

Addie could listen to Mr. Bertrand complain, Mr. Zacharius wheeze and cough while Shorty sighed and shuffled at the window, or she could return to her book. She sat on the floor and opened the pages. But the story that had intrigued her yesterday no longer did. The spot beside her where Nash had sat as he read held nothing but cold air. Somehow, that made it impossible to concentrate.

How silly! Her whole world didn’t depend on him.

She forced her attention to the words and doggedly read.

Later, she glanced up at the clock. Only twenty minutes had passed. It was going to be a very long day.

Page after page, she read. She got up several times to offer Mother water.

“Where are we?” Mother asked. Finally, she wakened enough to put a sensible sentence together.

“Our stagecoach got stuck. Remember?” Addie brushed her hand over Mother’s forehead. Either she was still fevered, or the room was too warm though no one complained.

“Vaguely. How long have we been here?”

“This is our third day. But the rain has stopped, and there are men checking to see when we can move on.”

Mother sipped water. She closed her eyes. “I’m very tired.”

“You rest.” Addie sat back. Mother had occasionally given into exhaustion in the past and stayed abed until she felt better. But not this long. Of course, she hadn’t been able to rest while they traveled.

The ticking clock reminded Addie that the morning had passed, and no one else had offered to make dinner. That task fell to her.

She opened the cupboards.

Shorty joined her. “I know everyone expects to eat.” He sounded like hunger was unacceptable.

This drew Addie’s lips upward. “I can make potato soup.”

“That sounds like a fine idea.” His eyes brightened.

“How did you learn to cook?” She chopped an onion and put it to brown as she peeled potatoes.

“It was either learn or starve. A good neighbor to the south where I used to live was kind enough to give me lessons. She bottled the meat for me.”

Listening to Shorty helped pass the time.

Addie’s gaze slid past him to the window. When would Nash return?

The onions gave off a savory scent. She chopped the potatoes and added them along with enough water to make a sufficient amount of soup. In Shorty’s cupboard, she found an assortment of spices and added a touch of rosemary and thyme. When the potatoes were cooked, she mashed them, leaving the soup lumpy. She liked a little texture though she knew some preferred it smooth.

The meal was ready. Should they wait for Nash and Hawk?

Shorty leaned over the pot and sniffed. "It smells quite good. Is it ready?"

"It is." She filled bowls for them and left enough for Nash and Hawk. There'd be enough for Mother, too, if she could be persuaded to take some.

Joining the men at the table, Addie glanced around. "Who is going to ask the blessing?"

Mr. Bertrand's grunt gave his answer.

Mr. Zacharius managed a wheeze.

That left Shorty. If he refused, Addie would do it, but she'd prefer he did.

He cleared his throat. "I remember a grace I heard many years ago." He bowed his head. "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food. Amen."

"Amen," Addie echoed. "I have also heard that prayer a time or two."

Shorty turned his attention to the food. "This is good soup. I watched you make it, so now I know how."

"Glad to be of service." Her words startled her. Service. She'd planned to spend her life in the service of others, helping the Stones, in large part to repay their kindness. Not that they'd ever suggested she owed them. Had God sent this delay so she could enjoy Nash's company and maybe even consider another direction for her life? Not that Nash had given her any reason to believe it possible. But he had the house he'd built. Wouldn't he need someone to keep it clean and prepare meals for him?

Everyone had finished their food, and she hurried to the cupboard to wash dishes.

She'd been building an imaginary life on a nonexistent foundation. All because of that book she was reading. Nothing but fantasy. Yet as soon as she'd dried the last dish and put it away, she returned to the story, anxious to see how it turned out.

A rattling sound outside jerked her from her reading. Nash and Hawk back?

But the door didn't open. Shorty limped over. "It is Nash. He is cleaning mud off his boots."

Addie put the book aside, preferring real life to the imaginary one she'd found on the pages.

Nash stepped in and glanced around. "Hawk's not back?"

"He has not yet returned," Shorty answered.

“I made soup.” Addie filled a bowl and put it on the table.

“Smells good.” Nash sat on the bench.

“Are you going to tell us what you found?” Mr. Bertrand demanded in more of an order than a question.

Nash scooped two more mouthfuls before he answered. “It’s as Hawk feared. The landslide has covered the road on the back trail. It will take men and horses several days to clear it.”

Mr. Bertrand harrumphed. “Well, at least it’s not the direction we need to go.”

Nash finished his soup. “Thanks. I enjoyed that.”

Addie took the bowl, washed it, and put it away.

“Would you like to see your surroundings without rain obscuring the view?” Nash asked when she’d finished her task. “Shorty’s picked a nice spot.”

“I thought so.” Shorty shook his head. “At least before things started falling down around me.”

Addie checked Mother. She still rested. “I’d love to see the place.”

Nash opened the door, and they stepped out into a steaming yard as the sun lifted moisture from the ground.

Puddles and mud patches dotted the area. Her foot slipped as she tried to avoid one.

Nash caught her arm to steady her. “Careful. I wouldn’t want to have to extract you from the mud.”

Her laugh came out higher than usual. “One can’t but wonder how many ways we can be mud-bound. First the coach, then the landslide, and now me.”

“Let me guide you.” He gripped her elbow and helped her navigate the path, though she truly didn’t need help. Nor did she intend to refuse it.

“Where are we going?”

“Do you want to see where the tree fell on Shorty’s woodshed?”

“Lead on.” She honestly didn’t care where they went, happy to be with him. She gasped as they rounded the corner of the small building. A tree lay across one corner, exposing Shorty’s wood supply. “It’s going to be hard for him to keep his wood dry.”

“With Hawk’s help, we can pull the tree off, and I’ll make sure the wall is repaired before we leave. It’s the least we can do for him.” They passed the building and approached the barn and corrals, where more than a dozen

horses looked up at them. Three nickered and trotted to the fence for attention.

“Hello, you.” Addie scratched one neck after the other, and as she and Nash moved on, the horses followed until they reached the end of the yard.

“I’ll show you what the landslide did.”

She let him lead her across the damp ground. A fallen tree lay before them, and he guided her over the thick trunk, his hands holding hers. A fitting picture, she decided, of the sort of man he was. Helping others over the obstacles in life.

The ground grew steeper, and she clung to him to keep from slipping sideways down the slope.

He drew her to a halt. A swath of mud obliterated every stalk of vegetation. Huge trees lay slaughtered beside the mud, brought down by the force.

“I’m very grateful that missed the cabin.” She clasped a hand to her throat.

“When Mr. Bertrand complains, I’m tempted to bring him out here.”

She snorted. “I doubt if that would change him.”

“Probably not. But look to the side.” He caught her shoulders and nudged her.

“Oh my!” A placid lake of purest blue reflected the sky. “It’s like every hue of every blue in the world has been poured into the water.” She couldn’t stop staring. “And an abundance of wildflowers.” Yellow, orange, pink, blue. “A rainbow of colors.”

“Shall we go closer?”

“Oh, please, let’s.” How blessed to see such beauty and share it with Nash, who seemed as impressed as she.

She clung to him as they navigated the steep slope. The man was a rock, steadyng her each time her foot wobbled. She wasn’t afraid at any time, knowing he’d keep her.

They reached the flowers, and he released her hand to let her brush her fingers over the blossoms. The beauty overwhelmed her, and she lifted her hands to the sky and laughed. “It makes me want to sing.”

A smile on his lips, he asked, “What would you sing?”

“The doxology.” A song of praise suited the occasion.

“Then why don’t you?” His smile settled into pleasant lines.

“Will you join me?” The air between them filled with sweetness, and she didn’t mean solely the scent of flowers.

He nodded.

“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise Him, all creatures here below.”

Their voices blended in perfect harmony, his deep and sure, hers higher. She barely finished before her throat tightened. She had never known a more holy moment.

When he indicated they should sit on a nearby log, she didn’t hesitate.

This scene was too beautiful to leave. The company was sweeter than the flowers.

She pretended she hadn’t thought that and sat beside him with a sigh of contentment. “The mountains are so majestic.” They surrounded them, some purple in the distance. Others breathing down their backs.

“I remember the first time I saw them.”

At the deepness of his voice, she shifted to watch him. His gaze drifted to the distance.

“What did you think?” she prompted.

“Ma was taking us west to Gib’s ranch. I admit I’d been somewhat fearful. We were starting over without my pa. I couldn’t help but wonder what it meant.” He plucked a yellow blossom from near his boot. “When I saw the mountains, I knew everything would be all right.” He picked another yellow flower. “I don’t know why I thought that, but I did.” His gaze touched Addie’s.

When she realized he waited for her response, she spoke slowly, considering her words. “Perhaps the mountains remind us that we are so small and God is so big. Yet His love surrounds us like those mountains surround this lake.” She swept her arm across the scene.

“I doubt I thought anything so profound. After all, I was a callow youth.” His laugh carried a note of wryness. “But it’s certainly true.”

They sat side by side, soaking in the peace.

He continued to pick flowers and twist them together. “Life became so different for us after we moved.”

“How so?” Though losing one’s father and moving far away were big changes.

His voice rumbled in a chuckle. “I could say it was easier. And that would be true. But it was also tougher. Both Ma and I worked harder than

we had before, but I don't think either of us minded." He concentrated on the flowers in his hands, his voice deep, his words full. "On more than one occasion, Ma said it felt good to be living a life where we reaped the benefits of our hard work."

Hard work. Honest labor. They seemed to be the motto of his life. A good motto. One she admired. One that made her feel safe.

"Lean forward." His words were a gentle invitation.

"Why?" She did so without an answer from him.

A wreath of yellow flowers hung from his hands. He lifted it and dropped it to her head.

"I crown you Lady of this Lake."

She touched the flowers that lay on her head.

Lady of the Lake? Or was he crowning her Lady of his Heart? She had no reason to think that and yet...yet....



NASH DRIFTED HIS HAND ACROSS HER HAIR, RESISTING THE URGE TO cup her head and pull her close. Every beat of his heart whispered her name. Every flower breathed her sweetness. The lake reflected sunlight that echoed in her eyes.

"Addie," he whispered. His index finger trailed down her cheek.

Her eyes widened.

Had he shocked her with his boldness? He hadn't meant to, and he withdrew his hands to his knees and sat back. He should say something, but not a single word came to his mind.

"I remember the first time I glimpsed the mountains." She spoke slowly, softly, making it possible for him to bring his thoughts into submission. "It was only a few months ago. Preacher Stone had been invited to speak at a little church while their regular minister returned East to care for his dying father." The words drifted off, carried to the placid blue water.

He waited as she grew silent, perhaps remembering that time. He was about to ask her to continue when she huffed out a breath.

"I should have been used to moving. It's what we did. Always going where people needed help. But this time, I didn't want to go." Her eyes

darkened. "I wanted to stay in one place long enough to decorate a house the way I'd like it and"—her voice lowered—"make friends."

Her longings tugged at his heart, and he captured her hand and held it, offering sympathy and comfort. He smiled when she turned her palm to his and squeezed before she continued.

"We were on the train to our destination. Mother told me to look out the window. I did." Her eyes sparkled. "Past the nearby lake, the mountains rose, jagged, crowned with snow, and glistening in the sunshine. I felt like God reached out to me, saying that He—the maker of the mountains—was big enough to take care of me. I knew then everything would be fine."

"You have such a strong faith," he whispered.

"No, what I have is a faithful God."

Their gazes connected, her eyes steady. He hoped his were as well, as they shared this moment with birds singing around them.

A splash jerked their attention to the lake, where a duck did a noisy landing.

"Come on." He pulled her to her feet.

She readily followed him. "Where are we going?"

Did it matter where they went? Only that they walked hand in hand. "Let's have a closer look at the lake."

Grass bent before their feet. Flowers bowed out of the way. Near the shoreline, the vegetation grew rougher, darker in color. They reached a spot where water ran from a lively stream into the lake. They could go no further in that direction. But they didn't turn back. Instead, they looked out at the blue, blue lake.

"Shorty has a beautiful place to live," she said.

"Yet, he's talking about leaving."

"You'd think he'd want to stay here." She nudged aside a rock at her feet.

"Given the books in his storeroom, I think the man is running from something. Or trying to find peace from his past." Nash knew that urging.

"Father Stone often says that a man will be forever restless until he finds peace with God." She pushed her braid over her shoulder. "But can you think of a better place to find that peace than right here?"

"I do know a place equally suitable. My ranch."

The moment hung between them, full of possibility. Would she recognize his invitation? And if she did, how would she respond?

A pebble rolled away from under her foot. She bent to pick it up and toss it into the water. It landed near the shore with barely a splash.

Her answer was not to answer? Was she being kind, not wanting to hurt his feelings?

Of course, he'd spoken out of turn. They didn't know each other well enough for him to be speaking in that fashion. Practically inviting her to his ranch, which he'd already done. And she'd said she'd like to see his place. Only this time, he didn't mean a quick visit but something more permanent.

She threw another rock. It went farther and plopped into the water, scaring away the duck, who gave a protesting quack. Shorebirds burst into the air with the rattle of reeds and rush of wings.

Pitching rocks seemed like a good way to relieve his disappointment. He grabbed a handful and tossed them into the water, one by one.

Addie threw with equal determination.

He scooped up another handful of stones. Several were flat, perfect for skipping, and he threw underhanded. The rock skipped twice.

Addie lowered her arms and watched him.

He skipped another rock.

She imitated his stance, drew back her arm, and let a rock fly. But it landed in the lake in a widening ripple of circles. "How do you do that?"

He illustrated by doing it again.

Her try failed. "What am I doing wrong?"

The appeal in her eyes brought him closer to her.

"Let me help." He stood behind her and caught her arm to draw it back. "Flick your wrist." He held her by the shoulders as she followed his instructions.

Again, the rock sank.

"Try again."

Another failure.

He chose more rocks, handed them to her, and resumed his position behind her, holding her, showing her how to toss the rock.

The rock sank.

"Why can't I do this?"

"Addie, are you crying?" The tears coursing down her cheeks were answer enough. "It's just a silly little trick."

"That's not it."

"What's wrong?"

She sniffled and dashed away the tears. “My pa tried to teach me how to do this, and I couldn’t.”

He guided her to the nearby log and eased her down beside him, his arms clasping her shoulders. She held his gaze as she talked.

“I was maybe eight years old. Pa said he kept hearing wonderful things about a waterfall north of where we lived. He wanted to take Mama and me to see it. I don’t remember where we were living or what the falls were called, but I will never forget the trip.”

Hearing her voice quiver, Nash would have pulled her closer. But he didn’t want to break her intense stare, so instead, he let her find comfort in his steady gaze.

“Pa said it was too far to go in one day, so we took supplies to stay overnight.” Her audible swallow informed Nash just how special she found this memory.

“We couldn’t drive the wagon right to the falls, so we made a camp. Pa set up a tent. Then we walked up the trail to where water raced to the edge of the rocks and then flung itself over to crash into the river below. The rushing water echoed in my chest like music. Spray wet our faces. I laughed with pure joy. Papa wrapped his arms around Mama as they gazed at the display. I think seeing their love pleasured me as much as seeing the waterfall.”

Her sweet smile brought an answering one to Nash’s lips. He didn’t recall seeing that sort of love between his parents, although Ma had insisted Pa had been a different man when they first married. Before he gave into greed. Nash brought his attention back to Addie as she continued her story.

“That evening, Pa made a fire, and Mama cooked a meal over the coals. We laughed a lot. Mama and Pa hugged me often. That night we slept together in the tent, me between my parents. We visited the falls again in the morning—the sunlight fractured in the water. A rainbow hung over the falls. We stood hand in hand enjoying the spectacle. Pa skipped rocks on the water.” Her words crackled at her memory. “He tried to teach me how, but I couldn’t do it. I’ve never been able to. I feel like I’ve failed him.” She ended on a wail.

Nash drew her to his chest and rubbed her back. “I don’t think he’d believe you’ve failed. I think he’d look at how you’ve helped the Stones, how you help others, and he’d be proud.”

“I hope so. I try.”

He held her as her muffled words breathed into his shirt.

Her crying ended, but she didn't move. Nor did he. He'd hold her as long as she'd let him. But it would never be enough. The latter thought blasted through him.

With a deep sigh, she pushed upright and wiped her face on her dress sleeve. She wouldn't meet his gaze. "I'm a mess."

He caught her chin and turned her face toward him. "Addie, you are not a mess."

Brown eyes met his. Although she didn't say anything, he heard her silent request to say more.

"I'm glad you told me about your parents. It's sweet that they were so loving and kind."

She nodded, never breaking eye contact.

"They loved you very much." That was evident in the way she talked about them.

Again, she nodded, drawing in a slow breath. "I miss them."

"Of course."

"I will always miss them." A dark shadow darted through her eyes. "Their deaths were so needless."

"They were so young."

"Too young."

Was it his imagination, or were her words edged with steel?

Then she smiled, driving away any hint of darkness. "I've dampened your shirt." She touched the spot.

"It's nothing." He pressed his palm to the place. The cool spot warmed under his skin. Lifting his hand from his chest, he slid his fingers along Addie's cheek, drying the last remnant of moisture.

She caught his hand.

The moment hung silent and brimming with possibility.

Her gaze lowered. Pink blushed in her cheeks. She moved his hand from touching her. "Thank you for your kindness."

Kindness? The word barely grazed the breadth of the feelings flooding him.

But it was enough for now. A good start. "You're welcome." A very good start. "We should get back."

Hawk would have returned. He'd have plans about getting the stagecoach on its way to Golden Valley.

The damp, slippery ground required that Nash hold Addie's arm as they climbed the hill and made their way to the cabin.

Hawk greeted them once they entered. "Good. You're here. I need your help."

Nash paused only long enough to give Addie a shrug and hopefully convey his reluctance at leaving her. Then he followed Hawk. The man's strides were long and rapid.

Why was Hawk in such a hurry?

Ten

Addie frowned at the closed door. Moments ago, she had Nash at her side. The future looked brighter than the sunlight bursting through the window. She wrapped her arms around herself. Perhaps it was a good thing Hawk had called him away. Before she'd wandered too far down a path that both excited and frightened her.

Excited because of the way her heart leaped when he touched her. The way she'd longed to lean against him as he tried to teach her to skip rocks. And the allure of a future that included him.

Frightened because of how easily her heart had gone after him. She'd never had a beau. No young men ventured close. Not that she minded.

Because...

She clamped her lips together to hold back a gasp as the reason flashed through her thoughts.

After the pain of losing her parents, she'd promised herself she would never love anyone like she'd loved them. She'd never allow anyone or anything to fill the void their deaths had left.

A memory surfaced. Pa and Ma embracing. Their show of affection embarrassed Addie, but it also made her feel safe. Pa had held out one arm and invited her to join them. She'd been enfolded between them, surrounded by their love for each other and for her.

Pa's words came to her. Words she'd forgotten until now.

“Sweet Addie, your ma and I pray that someday you find a love as wonderful as ours.”

Oh, Pa, I forgot that. He'd be disappointed in how she'd rejected every advance by every man. Except now. Could Nash be the answer to her

parents' prayer?

Warmth bubbled up inside her. She tamped down the urge to laugh.

But he hadn't said anything when she indicated she longed for a place like where they sat. One of peace and permanency.

Not that she regretted the life she lived with the Stones. She'd found satisfaction in helping others. Like the Stones had helped her in her darkest hour.

But if this was God's answer to her parents' hopes and prayers, then she would be open to where it led.

Enough of dreaming and hoping. God held her future in His hands, and she'd trust He would bring the best. Yet, she released the building laugh. Perhaps He already had.

Mother rested more quietly than she had previously. She wakened enough to drink a cupful of water. Then, with a gentle word of thanks, she lay back on the fur. "I'm feeling better, but I'm so tired."

She might have fallen back asleep or simply closed her eyes to indicate she wanted to be left alone. Either way, Addie sat back. Rest was good. Patience was also good.

Needing something to occupy her hands and thoughts, Addie went to the kitchen with Shorty following.

"What are you going to make?" he asked.

"What would you suggest?" She'd looked in the cupboards and the storeroom. He had the basics in the way of cooking supplies.

"Well, now, I often yearn for pie. Can you make a pie? Might you allow me to watch and learn how?" His words, as always, were precise as if being cut from a dictionary.

"I can certainly make a pie. But what will I use for filling?" She hadn't seen anything useful for pies.

"I always favored raisin pie, and there's raisins on the top shelf." He reached into the dark recesses of the shelf and pulled out a sack of them. "I bought them with plans to make a pie." He shrugged and gave a self-mocking laugh. "When I got them home, I realized I did not know how. Do you think—?"

The raisins were dry, but she'd boil them until they plumped up. "I'll make you pie. At the same time, I'll teach you how to do it for yourself."

"You are the best. The very best."

“I’m not, but thanks for saying it.” She poured enough raisins into a saucepan for a pie. On second thought, she made it enough for two pies. As she worked, she explained each step. He proved to be an eager student. Under her guidance, he soon had dough rolled out. She demonstrated how to ease it into a pie pan.

They returned to the stove. The raisins were plump. She had him measure flour into sugar and add it to the boiling pot. When the mixture had thickened, he poured it into the two pies. Together, they added the top crust and slashed vents for the steam to escape, then put the pies in the oven.

“You are now officially a pie baker,” she said.

“Thanks to you.” He shifted his gaze from the oven to her. “I could use someone like you around here.”

Was that an invitation? To do what? Become his housekeeper? Or his—the word *wife* stalled in the back of her brain.

She studied him more closely. Until now, he’d been the man they’d rescued from under a fallen tree. But he wasn’t old. In fact, if he cut his hair and shaved his whiskers—she shook her head. His offer—if it had been one—did not interest her.

“How is your leg?”

Interest died in his gaze. “It hurts some, but nothing a man cannot live with.” His attention returned to staring at the oven door. “How long for the pies to bake?”

“I’d guess forty-five minutes, but we’ll need to check on them from time to time.”

“I thank you for showing me how to make a pie.” He inhaled deeply. “They smell quite fine.”

Awkward silence lingered.

Mr. Zacharius sat up with a noisy intake of air. “When will Hawk and Nash return?”

“What’s to stop them from walking to Golden Valley and leaving us here to fend for ourselves?” Mr. Bertrand’s harsh words grated.

“They wouldn’t do that.” Addie’s voice grew firm as she crossed to the window. “They’ll be back.” The horses stood at the corral fence looking toward the trail. Did they hear something?

Needing to use the outhouse, she stepped outside and moved down the path, pausing to study her surroundings and listen for unusual sounds. Apart from birdsong and the rustle of leaves, she heard nothing of interest. They

would return despite Mr. Bertrand's cynical pronouncement. And when they did, a meal would be waiting for them.

With Shorty's company and help, she had mashed potatoes, bottled meat in rich brown gravy, and turnips ready for supper. The pies cooled on the cupboard. Still Hawk and Nash hadn't returned. Addie would have waited until they did, but Mr. Bertrand wouldn't allow it.

"I paid good money for this trip. Is it too much to expect I should be served a decent meal at a decent hour?"

She served the food, keeping back enough for the two men. Mother refused to take anything except water.

"You need to eat to get your strength back."

"I will. Just not now."

Addie couldn't persuade her to change her mind.

The others had eaten. She'd washed their dishes. Dark shadows hovered in the corners. Shorty lit the lamp. Still, the other two hadn't returned. Addie stayed at the window, watching for them.

Mr. Bertrand cleared his throat. "You might as well give up. It's like I said. They aren't coming back for us."

"I don't believe that."

Mr. Bertrand harrumphed. None of the others spoke a word in favor of Nash and Hawk.

Did they know something she didn't?



"IT'S TOO DARK TO SAFELY CONTINUE," NASH CALLED TO HAWK.

Hawk straightened from his efforts. "Right." He shoved his hat back and studied the situation. Rocks, brought down by the rain, lay scattered across the trail half a mile or more from where the coach sat firmly ensconced in mud. A trench had washed out part of the trail. It would need to be filled in before they could continue. And then they'd have to dig out the coach.

"Help will be coming soon." Hawk had said it several times. And yet, no one had appeared. If Nash ventured a guess, he'd say no one planned to come. Likely, they had things to take care of in Golden Valley.

“Let’s get back to the cabin.” Nash stuck his shovel in the ground. He’d be back tomorrow to continue this backbreaking task. Right now, he wanted a hot cup of coffee, a warm meal, and Addie’s welcoming smile. Had she missed him? Did she wonder why they were so late? Pleasure pulled his mouth into a smile.

Hawk joined him, and they climbed a slippery incline as they began their return.

Nash stopped. “Do you smell that?”

“Food? Both sweet and something savory. My mother always said both were needed in a meal.” It was the most words Hawk had strung together at once.

Nash moved forward before Hawk finished, the man hot on his heels.

The aromas intensified with each step closer. By the time they reached the door, Nash swallowed repeatedly.

They paused to kick mud off their boots and then stepped inside.

“Glad you’re back. I saved supper for you.” Addie’s words and smile were as welcoming as he’d hoped.

“Mr. Bertrand suggested the pair of you had walked to Golden Valley and left him to find his own way.” Shorty snorted.

The words barely registered with Nash as Addie set two cups of steaming coffee on the table and two plates of food. Neither he nor Hawk wasted any time taking their place. They both drank several swallows of coffee. Then Hawk waited while Nash murmured a quick prayer of thanks. They ate in appreciative silence. Not until his plate had been scraped clean and Addie set portions of pie before them did he look up.

“Are you going to tell us what you were doing out there?” Mr. Bertrand demanded.

Nash glanced toward Hawk, informing him he should answer.

“The trail is blocked.” Hawk then explained the problems they faced. “Help will be coming from Golden Valley. In the meantime, Nash has been kind enough to help.”

Mr. Zacharius cleared his throat. “Are you able to tell us how long this will take?”

“It depends on when help arrives and how many men come.”

“That’s not very definitive.” Mr. Zacharius’s hand shook as he rubbed at his weary eyes.

The poor man must be exhausted. He'd slept at the table both nights and often broke into violent coughing.

"I'm sorry. It's the best I can do."

Nash's attention shifted from the others to the enjoyment of dessert. "I certainly wasn't anticipating a pie."

"Shorty and I made it." Addie grinned at the man she meant.

"Miss Addie showed me how." He scraped his thumb along the edge of the wood tabletop. "She will make someone a good wife." The tips of his ears glowed a bright red.

Nash forgot the tasty morsel on his fork and stared at Shorty, then Addie, who smoothed the fabric of her plain black skirt and avoided looking at Nash. Had something happened between them while he'd been away? Some sort of attraction? What would someone like Addie see in the man? What did he offer that Nash couldn't?

Unable to find an answer, he finished his dessert.

Addie reached for his empty dish. Her arm brushed his shoulder. His heart tilted toward her. His gaze followed her as she washed the few dishes and put them in the cupboard.

"Join us." He patted the spot on the bench beside him.

With a quick smile, she sat at his side. "Tell us about the rocks you're moving. How big are they? How many of them?"

"Some are large. It takes both of us to roll them out of the way." He did his best to describe the scene they'd encountered.

Mr. Bertrand mumbled something about the delay being unnecessary, but no one paid him any mind.

"What was that?" Mr. Zacharius jerked upright, his breath whistling past his lips.

Nash didn't point out his breathing made it hard to hear anything else. They all strained to listen.

"There it is again."

Nash tilted his head. A slight thud followed by a scratching.

"Is someone there?" Addie edged in close to his side. "Why don't they knock or open the door?"

"Maybe it's a branch tossed by the wind." He kept his voice low and, hopefully, calming.

More sounds came from outside.

One way to find out what was there. He and Hawk rose at the same time. They crossed to the door and paused to listen.

More sounds. Grunting.

“Nash, be careful,” Addie whispered.

She hadn’t said Hawk’s name. Only his. Nash’s insides warmed. “I’ll be careful.” He nodded to Hawk, indicating the nearby poker. The man picked it up, then stood with it raised and signaled Nash to open the door.

“One, two, three,” Nash whispered and yanked the door open.

A pointy face and bright eyes stared at him. Then, the fox raced away, disappearing into the nearby trees.

Hawk lowered his weapon.

“Just a curious fox.” Nash returned to the bench, bringing relieved laughter from the others.

“Could have been worse,” Mr. Bertrand grumbled.

Would the man have been happy for it to be something more sinister?

“Like what?” Addie asked.

“Robbers. People know the stagecoach is late. Some enterprising person might think it makes us vulnerable and come to rob us.”

“If they want to rob the coach, they wouldn’t need to come here,” Hawk pointed out.

“Well, maybe a bigger animal.” Mr. Bertrand leaned over to confront Shorty. “You ever see bears around here?”

“Of course. We are in the mountains, so it is to be expected.”

“Any ever come calling here, at the cabin?” Mr. Bertrand seemed set on seeing disaster.

Shorty examined his thumbnail.

“I take your silence for a yes.”

All eyes turned to Shorty. With a shrug, he said, “One fall, late in the season, a big one discovered my supplies and helped himself to them. He ruined most of my winter stores. Thus, I built that storeroom.” He jabbed his thumb in the direction. “I could ill afford to let bears rob me.” He stared into the distance and then spoke again. “I once encountered a bear out in the woods. A sow with cubs. She did not care for my intrusion.” He paused as they all held their breath to hear the rest of the tale.

“Shorty, what happened?” Addie asked.

“She rose up on her hind legs. I had to lean back to look at her face.” He shuddered. “Her teeth were big and sharp. She waved her paws at me. Have

you ever seen the size of a bear's paws? They're huge." He held his hands out to indicate what he meant.

Addie shivered and pressed into Nash so firmly that he had to lean toward her to keep his balance.

"And claws this long." Shorty indicated their length. "I glanced over my shoulder. Could I hope to outrun her? Or climb a tree? It did not seem possible."

"Shorty!" Addie's voice rang out when the man stopped and seemed disinclined to continue.

Shorty lifted one shoulder and favored them with a regretful look. "Turns out I did not have to outrun the bear. I simply had to run faster than my partner."

"Partner? You have a partner?" Mr. Bertrand glanced around the room as if expecting someone to emerge from the shadows.

"Had one."

Mr. Zacharius gasped. "Are you meaning to tell us that the bear—" He shook his head and didn't finish.

Hawk looked at the table, making it impossible to see his expression. But did his lips twitch?

Nash laughed. "He's joshing us. Shorty, you got us good."

Shorty looked sheepish and a little pleased with himself as one by one, the others realized it was a tall tale. Mr. Bertrand grumbled about not being able to believe anyone while the others laughed.

Their noise disturbed Mrs. Stone, and she sat up. "Addie, are you there?"

Addie hurried to her side. "Mother, are you feeling better? Let me get you a drink." She filled a cup with water and carried it to the woman.

Mrs. Stone took a swallow and handed it back. "I need to go—" She nodded toward the door, and Addie helped her up. The older woman moved slowly and unsteadily.

Nash followed, prepared to assist if it need be.

Mrs. Stone moaned. "My head hurts." Her knees began to fold.

Nash caught her and followed Addie to the little house outside. He stayed within calling distance and then carried Mrs. Stone back and deposited her on the fur rug. She moaned several times and cupped her hand to her head.

Addie knelt beside him. "She's fevered again."

He'd guessed as much.

"I need to be taking better care of her." Addie hurried to fill a basin with water, sponged her mother's face and neck, then left the cool cloth on her forehead. "I don't know what's wrong with her. Why isn't she getting better?"

He patted Addie's shoulder. "You're doing what you can."

"I don't know that I am." She leaned toward him. Perhaps seeking comfort from him?

"What else could you do?"

Her glance circled the room as if an answer lay within it. Her gaze reached his and stalled there.

"I don't know. But I don't dare fail."

Fail? Why did it feel like she wasn't meaning only in caring for her mother?

There were so many things he didn't know about her. It would be enjoyable to learn them.

Eleven

Addie had let herself be distracted by spending time with Nash and teaching Shorty to make pie. Yes, she should help with meals while they were stranded here, but caring for Mother must be foremost in her mind.

“Don’t let me keep the rest of you up.” She meant the comment for all of the others but forced herself not to look at Nash as she spoke.

He studied her as if wanting to keep her company as she tended Mother. She almost asked him to do so but managed to keep her mouth closed against the words. She needed to focus on Mother.

He nodded and backed away. “I’ll leave the lamp low.”

Shorty had retreated to the cot. Nash stretched out beside it. Mr. Bertrand lay in his usual spot, and Mr. Zacharius remained at the table, his head resting on his forearms. Hawk slipped outside, seeking rest in the quiet of the barn.

Addie was alone. No. How silly. She wasn’t alone. Besides, she didn’t need distractions. Over and over, she sponged Mother, grateful to be able to offer comfort and care.

Mother caught her hand. “You’ve always been such a helpful girl. Right from the first day.” Her weak voice faded away.

Why had Mother chosen that moment to say such a thing? Addie’s stomach clenched. Did her mother think this was the end and she needed to speak those words before—?

No. Addie would not let her thoughts race to such an awful conclusion. Instead, she redoubled her efforts to take care of Mother.

The night deepened. The lamp flickered. Mr. Bertrand snorted and heaved himself to his side.

Addie's head fell forward. She yawned. Have to stay awake. Have to take care of Mother. Dip the cloth in the water. Put it on Mother's forehead to cool her.

She struggled to keep her eyes open and stay upright. Her body yearned for rest. Why couldn't she lie beside Mother and still continue to sponge her? The soft fur cradled her body. A sigh rose from deep inside.

COFFEE! THE AROMA SIFTED INTO ADDIE'S SENSES. WHY WOULD anyone make coffee in the middle of the night? She opened her eyes. Gray light filled the room. Light? She jolted upright. How long had she slept?

"Good morning." Nash lifted the coffeepot from the stove. "Would you like a cup?"

"I didn't hear you get up. How could I have slept through you starting the fire and making coffee?" Neither were silent tasks.

Hawk sat at the table with the others. She hadn't heard him enter the cabin.

"You must have been tired."

She checked Mother. "She's still hot." She scrambled to her feet to get more water and returned to Mother's side to sponge her face.

Mother jerked awake at the touch of the cold cloth. "Leave me be. I want to rest."

"You've got a fever. I need to cool you."

"Addie, please." Mother caught Addie's hand to stop her from continuing. "Is it too much to ask for a little peace?"

A little peace? Mother had done nothing but rest since they'd made it to the cabin. And people hadn't been noisy. Fine, yes, there had been laughter yesterday when Shorty told his tall tale, but on the whole, they'd been quiet.

Addie sat back on her heels. She only wanted to take care of Mother. She'd thought Mother would appreciate her efforts. Instead, she was annoyed.

I'm sorry. The words remained silent. Water splashed as Addie dropped the cloth into the washbasin and stepped away. Swallowing back her hurt, determined no one would guess how she felt, she joined Nash at the stove and took the cup of coffee he offered.

"Breakfast is ready." He nodded toward the golden biscuits.

“I can’t believe I slept through this.”

“I can’t either, though I tried to be quiet.” He placed the biscuits on the table.

“You should have wakened me.” Not a hint of annoyance touched her words as her attention focused on the food.

She brought the syrup and sat beside him. After he prayed, they ate. She’d barely had time to take a bite when Hawk and Nash pushed back.

“We’re headed back to the trail,” Nash said.

Hawk donned his hat and reached for the door handle.

Nash paused, his gaze resting on Addie as if he wanted to say something. He flashed a smile. “You take care, hear?”

“I will.” But her words bounced off the closed door.

Mr. Bertrand split open a second biscuit. “I’ve had enough of this delay.”

Shorty snorted. “I might add that I have had enough of you all eating my supplies.”

Addie’s sigh stopped further complaining. She finished her food, drained her cup, and then gathered up the dishes. Before she had washed them, Mother groaned, and Addie returned to her side.

“I am going to wipe your face.” Whether or not she welcomed the action, Addie had to do what she thought best.

Mother’s eyes followed Addie’s every movement.

Addie left the cloth on her forehead. Mother’s eyes were glassy and unfocused. *Please, God, make her better.* A shudder rattled Addie’s teeth. She did not want her Mother’s death on her conscience.

The rattle of crockery drew her attention to the cupboard where Shorty washed the dishes, and she sprang to her feet to dry.

“I would have gotten to them.”

Shorty shrugged. “I am capable of washing up.”

“I know. But we’ve invaded your home. We shouldn’t make extra work for you.”

He leaned closer. “Do not tell anyone, but I have enjoyed having a little company. Of course, I could do with less complaining.” He tipped his head to indicate he meant Mr. Bertrand.

“Couldn’t we all?”

They looked at each other and chuckled.

“I wonder how Hawk and Nash are doing?” Let Shorty think she wondered about both of them, missed them both equally. Perhaps she could believe the same thing.

“I would like to help but—” He tapped his injured leg.

“Are you keeping an eye on it? No redness or swelling?”

The tips of his ears turned red. “It is fine.”

Addie put fresh, cool water in the washbasin and returned to Mother’s side. As the morning hours ticked away, Mother’s fever got worse.

Shorty offered Addie a bowl of soup. “I hope it is as good as yours. I tried to remember everything you did.”

Addie tasted it. “It’s every bit as good. You’re a fast learner.”

Shorty held her gaze a moment longer, cleared his throat, and looked down. “You are a good teacher.” He hurried to the table to join the other men.

But neither Hawk nor Nash returned to share the meal.

They were clearing the trail. Nothing more. No need to worry they’d encountered a bear. Or been in the path of a landslide or a falling tree.

As Father said, “Worry is borrowing tomorrow’s problems to carry today.”

The spoon scraped crockery as she ate the soup, then handed the bowl to Shorty. She turned her attention back to Mother. Tension caught at Addie’s neck at the red spots in Mother’s cheeks. Her fever was supposed to be going down.

Addie touched her forehead. She was so hot.

Her hand trembling, Addie sponged Mother’s face, hands, and neck.

If only she had the fever tea in Mother’s trunk.

She sprang to her feet. “I have to get something from our luggage.” Surprised looks shot her way as she dashed out the door to hurry down the trail.

The muddy and slippery ground forced her to slide down the slope to reach the coach. The land fell away to a ravine. Beyond that, the mountains encircled the place, guardians of nature. Bright spring flowers dotted the green grass. Dark pines drew boundary lines.

She brought her attention to the coach. Mud clung to the wheels. Digging it free and getting it back on the trail would be a challenging task.

She picked her way through the mud. The coach tipped at an angle that made her reach for the step. Her weight brought a movement. She held her

breath and then exhaled.

It was only the normal sway of the coach. She had the door open, balanced partway into the riding area, but she couldn't reach the trunk, stored on top, from here. She lowered her feet to the mud, stepped on a spoke, and climbed to the driver's box. Her breath stalled in her chest at the view before her. The wheels hung over the edge, leaving nothing to the far side but the yawning ravine. Rocks and clumps of grass dotted the embankment. The coach shuddered under her weight. Did she imagine it shifted?

She was poised to jump should the wheels slide further over the edge. Then her breath wheezed out. The wheels were firmly encased in mud. The coach wasn't going anywhere. Her gaze drank in the beauty before she climbed to the roof. On hands and knees, she picked her way to Mother's trunk stowed in the far corner.

Water dribbled from the lid as she opened the trunk. The contents had stayed dry. Thank goodness. The tin containing Mother's medicinal teas lay at the bottom. In order to reach it, she pushed aside woolen clothes and a pair of sturdy shoes. The tin itself was too heavy and awkward to carry back, so she opened it and took out the package of leaves she needed. Careful to keep things dry, she closed the tin and lowered the lid.

As she rose, the coach swayed. This time, she didn't imagine the conveyance tipped toward the abyss.

Addie crouched low, clinging to the rails. She had to get off before the coach slid down the slope. She gritted her teeth to stop them from shivering. On her hands and knees, she prepared to ease toward the roof's upper edge. She'd jump from there.

But when she lifted one knee to move forward, the coach dipped. She let her knee return to the wood and held her breath until the rocking motion stopped.

She clung to the rail, not daring to move. How was she going to get off this thing and safely reach the ground?



“IT WON’T BUDGE.”

While Hawk scowled at the offending rock—more like a small boulder—Nash considered the obstacle. They couldn't drive six horses pulling the stagecoach around it. It would have to be moved. "We'll have to get a horse and a rope. I'll go back. You can work at filling the washout."

"I expected someone would come looking for us by now." Hawk stared down the trail.

"Maybe there's been some kind of disaster at Golden Valley." Nash had considered the many reasons why help hadn't appeared. "Or maybe there's been a washout or landslide closer to town."

"Yeah."

Or maybe they simply had their hands full dealing with the aftereffects of the heavy rain.

As Hawk bent to move dirt into the washout, Nash hurried back to the cabin. He had no need to go inside. After all, the horse and rope were at the barn. But he got the animal, found a rope hanging on the wall, and then went to the cabin.

Three men sat at the table reading. Mrs. Stone remained on the fur. She looked poorly. He didn't see Addie. Assuming she'd gone to the outhouse, he waited.

Shorty looked up at him. "You did not bring Miss Addie with you?"

The words made no sense. "Why would she be with me?"

"When she was gone so long, I thought—" He shrugged. "I guess I was wrong."

Gone! Where? When? Why? Nash's fingers creaked at how hard he coiled them. He voiced his questions.

Shorty's eyes narrowed. "She left—" He glanced at the clock. "At least an hour ago. Maybe an hour and a half. She said she was going to the coach to get something."

Nash dashed out the door before Shorty finished. He grabbed the horse's bridle and, slipping several times, trotted to where the stagecoach lay mired in mud. He and Hawk had checked on it earlier, noting how the pressure of the mud had pushed the far wheels toward the cliff's edge. It wouldn't take much to tip the whole affair over. It would roll over and over, reaching the bottom in a thousand pieces of shattered wood and bent metal. And should someone be on the coach, they would be broken beyond—

He ground down on his teeth so hard that his jaw muscles popped.

Surely, she would have seen the danger and stayed back.

But then, why hadn't she returned to the cabin?

Lord, keep her safe. He breathed the prayer over and over as he raced onward. The distance had not seemed this far before. Now, he wondered if he'd ever get to the conveyance.

He crested the rise and looked down on the scene. His heart slammed into his ribs and refused to give another beat. His head echoed with his thunderous thoughts.

Addie crouched on the roof, clinging to the railing.

"Don't move," he called.

At his call, her head jerked up. And the coach rocked.

He remained motionless as he considered how he would rescue her. It would take only one wrong move—or one too many deep breaths—to send it crashing to destruction.

"I'll talk. You listen. But don't move so much as a muscle." He uncoiled the rope and tied it to the harness on the horse. "The horse will stay here while I tie the rope to the coach. He'll hold it in place so you can get off. It will be all right. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise." This was one promise he meant to keep at whatever cost.

"I'm coming down. Don't be alarmed at any noise I make. Stay still." He had to get the rope around anything solid without upsetting the precarious balance. Even the jarring of his boots on the ground could be enough to do so. With that in mind, he held tightly to the rope as he eased down the slope. "I'm almost at the bottom." He kept on talking in an effort to keep her from startling. It also helped him stay calm.

"Be careful." She kept her head down, muffling her words on her arms.

The wagon creaked.

He held his breath until it settled. "Don't move. Don't talk. Don't do anything until I tell you to."

His boots were on the muddy trail. He lifted one foot and put it down with extreme caution. He paused. When nothing adverse happened, he took another step. The pounding of his heart was enough to send the coach crashing over the edge. He had only to reach out to grab the step, but tying the rope there would not stabilize it well enough. So he cautiously moved closer. It might work if he eased the rope around the doorposts. He prayed they were strong enough to hold the entire weight. Inch by careful inch, he dragged the rope forward and slipped it through the doorway and out the

window. He drew up the slack and tied a knot that would take three strong men to undo.

“I’ve hooked up a rope. Now I have to get the horse to back up. Back,” he called to the horse. But plainly, the animal hadn’t been taught voice commands. “I have to go to the horse, and then I’ll come get you. Don’t move.”

Every nerve urged him to rush up the slope, but he used his head and moved slowly and carefully. At the top, he urged the horse to back up, drawing the rope tight. Would the animal be able to hold it if it began to slide? He had to trust that it would.

Still moving with caution, he returned to the stagecoach and Addie.

“Addie, can you crawl to the driver’s box? I don’t know how secure this contraption is, so go slow and careful.”

Vibrations as she moved warned that things were still unstable.

She reached the driver’s seat and crouched there.

“Jump. I’ll catch you.” He braced himself.

She leaped from above him, straight into his arms, sending them reeling backward. He almost went down but managed to keep his feet under him. She clung to him, her arms around his neck. He leaned against the cool, damp embankment and held her. He never wanted to let her go.

With a muffled groan, he pressed his cheek to her hair and tightened his arms around her. Their hearts beat in frantic unison. Fear still raged through his veins. Slowly, it gave way to relief.

“You’re safe. Thank God that He protected you.”

“It was so scary.” Her words were spoken into his chest. She shifted, lowered her arms, and wrapped them around his back, clutching at the fabric of his shirt. A shudder twitched across her shoulders. “If you hadn’t come along...”

If he hadn’t... He closed his eyes and willed away what would have happened. “Addie.” He cupped his hand to her head and snuggled her more firmly to his shoulder. “Addie.” Her name was sweet on his tongue. “Addie.” No other word came.

“Nash.” Her voice carried a smile.

His chest expanded with the first deep breath he’d taken since he’d seen her precarious situation. “If something happened to you...” He couldn’t finish.

“It didn’t.” She tipped her face toward him. “Thanks to you.”

Her movement caused him to lower his hand. He trailed a finger along her jaw to her chin.

“Do you realize how much I care for you?” His words were deep with unfamiliar emotion.

“I feel the same about you.” She fit her cool hand to his cheek.

He brought her palm to his lips. He wanted to kiss her. Would she allow it? Before he decided, her eyes widened, and she jerked back, allowing a cool draft between them.

She patted her skirt, dove her hand into the pocket, and pulled out a rattling package. “Whew. I didn’t know if this had fallen out.”

“What is it?”

“One of Mother’s teas. This one is good for fevers, which is why I had to have it.” Her gaze went toward the cabin. “Mother’s fever was rising again.”

He reached for her hand. “Addie.” But she had already made her way up the slope, anxious to get back to the cabin. His arm fell to his side.

“Thank you for rescuing me.”

She was safe. That was all that mattered.

Wasn’t it?

Twelve

Addie rubbed her chest. It still hurt from holding her position on top of the unsteady coach. As she prayed for help, she'd pictured Nash rescuing her. Not that she was about to admit that. He'd come, and she'd had no hesitation as she jumped into his arms, where she'd found sweet comfort. Shamelessly, she'd clung to him, never wanting to let go. Yes, of course, some of her reaction—in fact, most of it—came from relief at being safe. But something else existed. A longing to belong there, his heart beating beneath her cheek, his arms holding her, his breath against her hair. Her name on his lips filled her with sweetness. And possibility.

How sorely she'd been tempted to stay in that shelter. Drink of what he offered. Or at least, what she thought he offered.

But Mother had been left alone far too long. So Addie trotted to the cabin. When she burst through the door, Shorty jolted to his feet.

"We have been worried about you. Where did you go? What happened?"

Mr. Zacharius sat upright. "She's safe."

Even Mr. Bertrand forgot his usual complaining.

"I'm all right." One glance at Mother, and she knew the fever had not abated. She poured water into the kettle and set it to boil. "I went to get this special tea from the stagecoach. The coach had almost gone over the edge. It was rather unsteady." Did her words sound as strangled as they felt? "I couldn't get down without fear of sending it crashing to the ravine." She measured the leaves into the teapot and poured in hot water. Now, to let it steep long enough. Mother always warned her that rushing wasted it.

"How did you get off it?" Shorty asked.

“Nash came along with a horse and rope.” She shrugged. No need for them to know the details. “And now here I am.” She swirled the teapot’s contents.

“What about the stagecoach?” Mr. Bertrand demanded. “How will we get to Golden Valley if it’s at the bottom of a ravine?”

“It was still standing when I left.” No doubt Nash would do all he could to bring the coach back to its wheels. Her insides spasmed. What if it went over the edge, taking him with it?

“Incompetence such as I’ve never seen.” Mr. Bertrand’s strident words scratched along Addie’s spine like cat claws. Could the man think of something besides his own comfort for once?

The tea must be ready. She poured some into a cup, cooled it with a little water, and sank to the floor by the fur mat.

“Mother.” She shook her shoulder gently.

“Umph. What?”

“I want you to drink this tea.” Addie helped Mother sit up and held the cup to her lips, grateful when she swallowed. But after three mouthfuls, she stopped.

“You need to take it all.” She tipped the cup to Mother’s mouth.

Mother turned away.

Addie rubbed her arm. “Please. It will make you feel better.”

The skeptical look in her mother’s eyes conveyed how much she doubted it.

By much urging and persistence, Addie got her to drink the entire cupful. Then she let her lay back. “I am going to wash you with cool water.”

“Leave me rest.”

“I will once I’m done.”

Shorty brought her a basin of water, and Addie did her best to cool Mother’s fevered brow. The water grew too warm to be of any use. Would the tea do its job?

Her arms hurt from clinging to the stagecoach rails for so long. She sat back, rubbing them and then moving her hand upward until her fingers rested on her jaw where Nash had touched her. With her eyes closed, she revisited that moment. The way he’d caressed her, the murmur of her name on his lips... Did it mean more than gratitude for her safety?

Did she want it to mean more?

Since she'd been taken in by the Stones, she'd followed them from one needy area to another. She'd often regretted leaving friends behind and wished she could stay, but she'd also welcomed the chance to move on, hoping to find something that would satisfy the longing in her heart. A longing she couldn't even identify. She only knew it existed.

Being in Nash's arms made her wonder if that place could be filled.

Shorty sighed as he moved toward the stove. "I expect people will be wanting to eat."

She sprang to her feet and hurried to join him. "Do you have anything in mind?"

"I kind of favor beans and biscuits. It is my favorite meal."

"I should have cooked beans. We're using up your canned supplies."

"It cannot be helped. But I will start beans baking now. They won't be ready for supper, but if you are here tomorrow—" He shrugged.

Tomorrow? What would it bring? She was anxious to get Mother to town. But things would change once they left here. She'd be in Golden Valley helping the Stones. Nash would go to his ranch. The others would go their separate ways as well.

While Shorty opened cans and poured beans into a cooking pot, she mixed up biscuits, cutting the dough into squares as Nash had done. It certainly made sense.

She considered the cupboard's contents. "I could bake a cake."

Shorty stood beside her. "Can you make gingerbread cake?"

"I believe I can."

"And show me? I cannot tell you how often I have longed for that flavor. You know, a man gets lonely by himself and begins to miss things he did not realize were important to him."

"Maybe people as well as things?" she gently suggested.

"Could be. Could be."

She pulled spices and baking soda from the cupboard. "You appear to have everything you need to make this."

"Everything but the know-how."

Mother had taught her how to bake without eggs, so she measured out the other ingredients. "Do you want to write this down?"

"You tell me, and I will remember."

She mixed up the batter, put it to bake, and then brought more tea to Mother who drank it with a little urging. "I do believe your fever is letting

up."

"I'm so very tired." She curled on her side and closed her eyes.

Addie sat back, allowing herself a measure of relief. Now that Mother's fever was breaking, she'd begin to get her strength back.

A little later, the beans bubbled, the biscuits were golden, and the spicy gingerbread aroma tinted the air. Everything was ready. But Nash and Hawk hadn't returned. Seeing Shorty's impatience, the way Mr. Zacharius looked at the food, and the protests building in Mr. Bertrand's expression, she knew better than to suggest they wait for the pair.

Mr. Bertrand complained about beans and biscuits again, though he took a generous amount of both. And helped himself to two large pieces of the ginger cake. He didn't offer any praise, but Mr. Zacharius thanked Shorty and Addie for the good meal.

Shorty studied his fork holding a piece of the cake. "I might make this every week now that I know how. It satisfies my longing for ginger cake." He lowered his fork and stared at the tabletop. "However, it does not satisfy anything else." He ate the last of his cake.

As they had the night before after they'd eaten, she carried the dishes to the cupboard, and Shorty joined her. He plunged the dishes into hot water, and then handed her the washed dish.

"Shorty." She spoke slowly, not wanting to offend the man. "I get the feeling you have someone you long to see."

"I maybe do."

Neither of them said anything further. They'd finished cleaning the kitchen when boots thudded on the step outside. The door swung open, and Hawk entered.

She glanced past him, waiting for Nash.

But he didn't appear.

Her heart grabbed her ribs making it impossible for her to breathe.



NASH TURNED THE HORSE LOOSE IN THE CORRALS AND HUNG THE ROPE back on its hook. Hawk had made sure feed and water were available for the animals. The horses whinnied and tossed their heads.

“I know,” Nash soothed. “You’re anxious to be on your way. So is everyone else.” Though the sense of urgency he began the trip with had faded. Yes, he wanted to be there when his horses arrived. He couldn’t be certain what the men delivering them would do when he wasn’t. They could turn them loose in the corrals if they weren’t willing to wait. Whatever they chose to do, he would deal with it when he got back to the ranch. Now, he sought excuses to stay in Golden Valley and spend time with a certain young woman. Remembering how she’d mentioned waterfalls, he thought of a couple he’d like to show her. There were also two within hiking distance of his ranch. He’d really like to take her there.

After closing the gate behind him, he trotted after Hawk and burst into the house.

Addie’s wide, surprised gaze met his. She drew in a tiny gasp.

He smiled, letting her know how glad he was to see her.

Her lips curved upward. “There’s food.” The smile lingered as she loaded up two plates. It remained when she put the plates on the table. Her look lingered on him, and her smile reached upward to her eyes and curved her face.

She was glad to see him. He tucked the knowledge into the depths of his heart where he would cherish it for the rest of his life.

Shorty placed a serving of cake before him. Ahh. Ginger. The aroma had tugged at his senses and tried to get his attention.

“Well,” Mr. Bertrand huffed. “I expect you have the road cleared and the stagecoach ready to move on. It’s about time.”

Nash let Hawk answer. After all, it was his responsibility. And Nash had more interest in enjoying the cake and the smiling presence of the gal beside him.

“We managed to get the coach back on the trail. Took some doing. But we have a little more work to do before we can depart.”

“I thought you said help was coming.” Mr. Bertrand’s tone suggested the failure hung on Hawk’s shoulders. Both he and Nash were concerned that no one had come. The very absence hinted something was wrong further down the trail.

He’d suggested they should check, but Hawk assured him the road was open to the next way station. “We can get that far.”

Nash understood what he didn’t say: That it fell on Hawk’s shoulders to deliver passengers and goods. Delays were frowned upon.

Their plates scraped clean, Addie reached for them.

“I’ll do it.” Shorty carried the dishes to the cupboard and washed them.

Nash cleared his throat. “Addie, I have something to show you.” He held out his hand to assist her.

“Yes?”

“It’s outside.”

Something he took for eagerness raced through her eyes before she lowered her head. “Fine.”

Impatient to be alone with her, he stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind them. They stood side by side, her hand in his, his arm pressed to her shoulder. Cool air carried the fragrance of pine trees.

“What did you want to show me?”

Her question jolted him into action. “This way.” On his walk to the house, he’d noticed how the trees parted and opened up to a wide view. Now, he led her in that direction.

“It’s beautiful.”

Stars lit the dark sky, so numerous it was hard to fathom and so bright. “I feel like I could reach out and capture a handful.”

“The heavens certainly declare God’s power and glory.”

A lazy breeze drifted past, and she shivered.

“You’re cold. Here, I’ll keep you warm.” He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, smiling when he detected no resistance as if she welcomed their closeness.

They stood in awed silence. On his part, he enjoyed being with her too much to move.

“I’m wondering if you have any ill effects from being stuck on the roof. How long were you there?”

“It seemed longer, but at least an hour I’d guess.”

She hadn’t answered his first concern. Did that mean—?

“Are you hurt somewhere?” His arm tightened around her.

“Oh no.” She gave a quiet chuckle. “I admit my arms are a little sore.”

He ran his hand up and down the length of her arm. “Does that help?”

“It does. Thanks.”

His hand grew still. Resisting the urge to press his cheek to her hair, he concentrated on the scene.

She gasped. “A falling star.”

“I saw it.”

“Did you make a wish?” She turned to look into his face.

“I’m making one right now.” *I wish this moment would last forever.*
“Did you make one?”

The starry light danced in her eyes. “I might have.”

“Tell me what you wished for.” Had her wish been at all like his? Dare he hope it had?

“You know I can’t do that. If I did, my wish wouldn’t come true.”

The way her gaze intensified, looking deep into his eyes until he felt as if she’d found a home right inside his heart made him believe they both wanted the same thing.

“Addie!” Her name filled his senses. It took him two breaths before he gathered his thoughts into words. “We will soon be on our way to Golden Valley.”

“Where we’ll part ways.”

Regret edged her words and made him want to rejoice. “I could come and visit.”

She ducked her head and whispered, “I’d like that.”

He pressed his lips to her hair. It wasn’t the kiss he longed for, but her invitation was a fine start.

They lingered on the slope, enjoying the view and each other’s company.

“Tell me about getting the stagecoach back on the road. I worried you were in danger.”

She’d worried about him? What a lovely thought.

“I got Hawk, and together we managed. Then we had a huge rock to move. That’s why I had the horse to begin with. And as it turns out, it proved to be a good thing.”

“I prayed so hard for rescue. And along you came. An answer to my prayer.”

Of course, she only meant rescue, not his personal appearance. But he let himself interpret her words the way he wanted. That she was glad to see him. “I’m pleased you think so.”

“I was certainly happy to see you.” Did the thickness of her words mean what he hoped it did?

“Hawk would have rescued you.”

“I expect he could have, but—” She shifted without leaving his arm.
“I’m glad it was you.”

In her direct, steady gaze, he allowed himself to believe she meant more than rescue.

And he was quite prepared to give it.

“How is your mother?”

“The tea has helped her. Her fever has finally broken.” Addie shook her head. “She’s very tired, but I think it’s from all the travel. I hope that’s all it is, though she was exhausted before we began this journey.” Her shoulders rose and fell in a deep sigh. “She works so hard. Both she and the preacher do. Always helping others.”

“Why the regret in your voice?”

“I didn’t realize there was.” A smaller, softer sigh. “I guess I sometimes feel like I’m one of their causes. You know, a task they need to do.”

He didn’t believe that to be the case, but obviously, Addie had her reasons for thinking that way.

She continued. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure they love me even as I love them, but it makes me feel like I need to repay them. I’m always trying to work off that debt.”

“Addie, I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Her snort contained only a hint of amusement. “I didn’t know I did until this moment.”

“Is it my fault? Something I said or did that made you feel that way?”

“Oh no. I think it’s just the circumstances. Maybe being here with little to do has given me the time to realize a few things.”

“I don’t like to think of you being unhappy.”

“That’s the thing. I’m not. Although, at times, I wonder if...”

Nash waited as long as he could before he prodded her to finish.

“I wonder,” she whispered, “if there is more for me in life.” Her gaze bored into his. Full of questions, as if asking if he knew what she needed.

Me. I can offer you something more—a place where you can stay forever.

To their left came a snuffling and bushes rustling. The sound of a big animal moving through the trees.

“We better get back.” He caught her hand and hurried her toward the house.

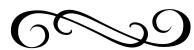
Warmth and yellow lamplight greeted them.

He hadn’t said what he wanted to say. Hadn’t made the offer he wanted to make. In all likelihood, it was too soon.

He'd make sure to get an opportunity later to say the words.

After all, the future lay ahead of them, unmarred by the past—especially his past.

Thirteen



Shouldn't Addie be relieved something moving in the bushes had brought an end to their conversation? But mostly, she was disappointed. She'd opened her heart and confessed something she'd never admitted to even herself. She wanted to be free of striving to fulfill her duty to the Stones. Not that they asked it of her. No, they'd deny such expectations if they knew what she'd said. They were genuinely generous people.

But when she'd said she wondered if something more existed for her, she'd hoped he'd say there was, and he'd help her find it.

Hawk was talking to Mr. Bertrand. "I see no reason we won't be leaving tomorrow, but I can't promise. Roads and weather will determine our journey."

Mr. Bertrand harrumphed.

Hawk pushed to his feet. "Been a long day. I'm going to sleep." He eased past Addie and Nash and headed for the barn.

And peace and quiet. Addie almost envied him.

"Thanks for showing me the stars," she murmured to Nash before she went to Mother and touched her brow. "Cool," she murmured, glancing at Nash as she did.

"That's good news. Especially if we resume travel tomorrow."

"Indeed." Addie might have wished for another day or two here for Mother to rest. But also time to take walks with Nash. Of course, they'd see each other after they reached Golden Valley. They'd as much as promised to do so. But her reassurances did nothing to ease the loneliness growing in the pit of her stomach.

Mr. Bertrand grumbled his way to the spot on the floor where he'd spent the previous three nights.

Mr. Zacharius stayed at the table. Poor man must long for a comfortable bed and something to ease his cough.

Addie closed her eyes. Why hadn't she thought to bring back one of Mother's teas to help the man? How selfish and thoughtless.

Without apology, Shorty claimed the bed while Nash settled beside him on the floor.

Addie lay down next to Mother, so keenly aware of Nash's breathing nearby that she wouldn't sleep.

But she did and woke to Nash lighting the lamp. She sprang to her feet. "Is something wrong?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you. No. Nothing wrong. But Hawk is anxious to get things moving." Nash scooped coffee beans into the grinder and ground them.

Hawk stepped inside with a bucket of fresh water and filled the coffeepot.

The men needed to eat before they returned to the task of clearing the trail, so Addie hurried over to start breakfast. With three people in the kitchen area, she kept bumping into Nash. Each time, her insides did a hop and a skip, and she smiled even as she murmured, "Excuse me."

And each time, she raised her eyes and met his answering grin.

If she had to guess, she'd say he enjoyed this.

The coffee sputtered. Hawk poured a cupful and carried it to the table. Mother sat up, and Addie helped her to the outhouse.

"You seem improved today," she observed.

"I'm feeling better." But she clung to Addie's arm as they traversed the path to the little place out back.

"That's good. It appears we will be resuming our journey today."

Mother nodded. "Good. I can't wait to get settled and see Mr. Stone, of course."

"Of course."

The food was cooked and served, and the meal was eaten in haste. When the door closed behind Hawk and Nash, Addie told herself she didn't feel lonely. She needed to keep busy, and it wasn't hard to find that something.

Over the course of the days they'd been here, mud had been tracked into the cabin. She'd clean the floor and make sure they left the place as tidy as they'd found it.

Mother chose to sit on one of the chairs, so Addie rolled up the fur and took it to the storeroom. If something prevented them from leaving, she'd bring it out again.

Shorty held the door for her and helped her stow it away. She spied a bucket he must surely use for cleaning purposes and brought it out.

When Shorty understood her intention, he held up a hand. "No need to do that."

"Shorty, your leg is still mending. Besides, I need something to pass the time while we wait."

He nodded. "Very well."

She scraped and swept up most of the mud. Then she filled the bucket with warm water and, on her hands and knees, scrubbed the floor.

The men moved aside as she washed under the table.

Satisfied with the job she'd done, she dumped out the dirty water and returned the bucket to the storeroom.

"It looks good," Shorty said. "And it reminds me of other times." He didn't say anything more, and she didn't like to prod.

But her concern for the man drew her to his side. She sat beside him. "Shorty, do you have someone to go back to? Someone who might be waiting for you?"

The bench creaked as he rocked back and forth. "I doubt I would be welcome." His voice quavered. "I did something awful."

"There's nothing unforgivable."

"I would like to believe that is so. But even if it is true, maybe I can never forgive myself."

"Oh, Shorty." She pressed her fingers to the back of his hand. "If God can forgive even those who crucified Jesus, I know He can forgive us. And if God forgives, shouldn't we?"

"I had a son." The words exploded from him. "He died because I was too engrossed in my reading to watch him." He bent over his knees and moaned, a sound so full of agony the room echoed with it.

Addie waited and prayed, wanting to say the right thing. "Have you punished yourself long enough? What about your wife? Have you punished her long enough?"

He rocked back and forth. Then, with a groan, he got to his feet and staggered out the door.

Mother heard it all. "We need to pray for that man's heart."

Apart from that very important thing, Addie could do little else. She stared out the window. Well beyond it, Shorty leaned on the corral fence. The horses trotted up to him. Then he slipped into the barn.

She turned from the window. Beans had baked all night. They'd be ready for the noon meal. It might be their last meal here. Why not celebrate with another cake? Though she felt more like mourning than celebrating. She measured raisins into the pot and set them to boil. When they'd cooled, she added the other ingredients and put the cake in the oven to bake.

A glance at the clock told her noon time was an hour away.

The coats and shawls hung in a jumble by the door. She'd tidy that up.

Shorty's slicker hung on the hook by itself. She straightened it so it hung neatly.

Jackets—some still damp—crowded together. She hung the damp ones by the stove to dry. She took her shawl and Mother's and folded them on their bags.

Saddlebags hung crookedly from another hook. Did she recall Nash had them slung over his shoulder as he carried Mother here? Yes, she pictured him dropping them hurriedly, his concern about getting Mother settled.

The leather lay twisted. It needed to be straightened. She lifted the affair and lay it on the floor to smooth it out. A smudge on the underside caught her attention. She bent closer. Letters had been burned into the back. By squinting, she made out the first two.

S T.

The next few letters had been scratched or burned so they were hard to read. She angled the piece toward the window.

U.

Was the next letter *R*?

With a damp finger, she brushed along the marks until she knew for certain the last letter.

M.

S-T-U-R-M.

Sturm.

Her hands failed her, and she dropped the leather. "Sturm." The whispered word burned across her lips.

The murdering beast had taken her parents' lives.

She shoved the offending bit of leather away. It could dry into a twist. She didn't care. Her eyes burning, her fists clenched, she sat back on her heels.

Who was Nash?

Sturm had a son. She'd never seen him. The authorities informed her he'd moved away prior to the dreadful event.

Could Nash be the missing son?

Or had he acquired that...that...offending object some other way? Perhaps he'd purchased it without realizing who had owned it. That would be one explanation for the way someone had tried to scratch out the letters.

Drawing in one deep breath after another, she calmed her anger. She wouldn't judge Nash until she knew the truth. But she'd be watching him very closely to see if he was the man he appeared to be.



“I’LL GET THE HORSES. YOU GET THE PASSENGERS MOVING.”

Nash hurried to do Hawk's bidding and burst into the cabin. Everyone turned at his entrance, but he cared only to see brown eyes welcoming him.

Her gaze slid past him, and she turned to the cupboard where she dried a dish and put it away. They'd eaten dinner. He and Hawk would grab a quick mouthful before they left.

Although he waited, she didn't turn toward him.

“We’re ready to depart.” His words lacked the enthusiasm they should have carried. Would she offer him food? Shorty filled a dish for him.

Not bothering to sit, Nash wolfed the food down and handed the dish back.

“Miss Addie made cake too. Spicy raisin. It is good even if it is not ginger cake.” Shorty presented him with a small plate holding a generous portion of cake.

Nash ate the serving. “It’s very good. Thank you, Addie.”

“You’re welcome.” Her words lacked warmth, and she showed him nothing more than her back.

The empty plate gave him an excuse to go to the cupboard. “Addie, what’s wrong?”

Her whole body jerked as she faced him. "Nothing. Nothing at all." She flung away. "I need to help Mother get ready to travel." She skittered off as if chased by a snarling dog.

He looked at Shorty. The man watched Addie's hasty departure, then turned toward Nash.

"Well." That's all Shorty said. It was enough for Nash to realize he was as surprised by Addie's behavior as he was. And from the look in his eyes, he was equally confused.

Hawk stepped inside. "Is everyone ready?" Seeing the pot of beans, he scooped out a bowlful and ate them hurriedly, then grabbed a square of cake. "Sorry to leave you to clean up after us, Shorty, but we need to be on our way." He led them from the cabin.

Nash slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and helped lead the horses to the coach and hitched them in place while the others climbed inside. He stood at the door, one foot on the step, his gaze on Addie. Again, she refused to look at him. Her interest in smoothing her skirt was nothing more than avoidance. Of him. But why?

"I'll ride with Hawk."

No one voiced a protest, and he swung up to the driver's seat, tossing his saddlebags in with the other luggage.

Neither man spoke as the horses trotted along the repaired road. If he was inside, he would have pointed out the boulders perched on the shoulder and explained how they'd moved them. He could have told them when they crossed the spot that had washed out and been repaired. They turned a corner where a waterfall gushed down the mountainside. Would Addie notice it and remember the sweet time they'd enjoyed as she told him how her father had taken them to some falls?

What happened to change her so that she wouldn't look at him?

He could think of nothing.

She'd told him she needed to work off a debt to the Stones. Had Mrs. Stone said or done something to remind Addie of that? Perhaps making her feel there was no room in her life for anything else but their work.

"Whoa. This is where the passengers have to walk." They'd reached a section of road barely wide enough to accommodate the coach wheels. Hawk and Nash had discussed how to handle this situation, and Hawk had said he thought they'd manage. "But"—he'd said—"I won't put the travelers at risk."

“I’ll tell them.” Nash climbed down. He pulled open the door.

“Another delay. This is—”

Nash ignored Mr. Bertrand’s complaint. “The road is narrow and slippery. Hawk wants us to walk.”

Mr. Bertrand was the first out, grumbling the whole time.

Nash helped Mr. Zacharius, who took in the scene.

“Oh my!” He looked behind them, but there was no going back for any of them.

Mrs. Stone grasped Nash’s hand, and he guided her to a dry spot before he turned to assist Addie. But she climbed down on her own. Her foot landed in a mud puddle that, if she’d accepted his help, she would have avoided.

Lifting her skirt hem, she shook her foot and turned, her gaze crashing into his with such force he drew back. Before he could ask for—hope for—an explanation for her behavior, she jerked her attention to the others and joined her mother.

“I’ll help you.” He spoke to Mrs. Stone but meant it for Addie as well. “It’s very slippery. Addie, wait here, and I’ll come back for you. You too.” He extended his offer to the men.

Mrs. Stone clung to him as they picked their way across the treacherous trail. A sheer drop-off on one side and numerous puddles at their feet... some deep enough to go over low footwear.

Mr. Bertrand marched ahead of them, but after splashing himself with mud twice, he slowed down and followed Nash. The incline of the road caused Nash’s feet to slide backward several times. He barely caught himself and prevented Mrs. Stone from falling on her face.

They reached the crest. He led the woman to a grassy spot. Mr. Bertrand chugged after them.

Stubborn Addie had started up the trail. Her feet mired in the mud, and she fell forward on her hands.

“Wait!” he called, but the look she sent his way blared refusal. Unmindful of the mud he sent spraying from his boots, he hurried back to her. “I’m going to help you.” Whether or not she wanted it. “Give me your hand.” He extended his arm and waited.

“I can do it.” She pushed upright and then tried to free a foot from the mud. It didn’t release, putting her off-balance.

He caught her arm and prevented her downfall. “I don’t know why you’re angry with me.” The words came through gritted teeth. “But I’m not about to let you lay in the mud because of it.” His grip on her arm remained firm as she worked her shoes free.

Their progress was slow. He meant to get some answers from her before they reached dry ground. “What have I done to offend you?”

“Was Mother all right when you got to the top?”

“She’s fine.” He didn’t want to talk about her mother, the mountains surrounding them, or whether or not those were storm clouds building in the west. “You’re not. Why?”

She struggled to free one foot from the mud, balancing her weight on his arm.

“It’s time to move on.”

But he didn’t lift his foot, didn’t take a step forward. “Don’t you think I deserve to know why you are treating me this way?” He moved in front of her and looked into her face.

Her gaze darted to the side, shifted to the sky behind his shoulder, and then to the valley gaping to the side. Inch by inch, her gaze came to him, at first looking at his chin, but then making its measured way to his eyes.

She studied him.

Anger—or was it regret?—seeped from her gaze. Then she gave a sigh and a little nod. “I’ve been behaving badly. I apologize.”

“That’s not an explanation.”

She lowered her gaze to his chin. “I—” Determination flared in her eyes, turning the irises to darkest brown and sending a trickle of alarm across his shoulders.

Her swallow was audible. She inhaled deeply. “I have bad memories that sometimes put me in a...well, a bad mood. I regretfully admit that sometimes I let that affect how I treat others.”

Yeah, it sounded reasonable—almost. “Why me?”

“Sorry?” Her brows rose.

“Why treat me like that but no one else?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it without uttering a word. Then she tried again. “All I can say is I’m sorry. I regret my behavior. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course.” Forgiveness was easy even though he didn’t understand.

Mr. Zacharius had almost reached them, carefully choosing his own way up the hill. He gave them a curious look as if to ask why they'd chosen this muddy, unforgiving spot to have any sort of discussion.

Indeed. But Nash had to know what was going on between himself and Addie before he continued, and he didn't mean only the trail or the ride to Golden Valley.

She'd given an explanation, and he accepted it even though it left unanswered questions.

Her behavior hadn't fit with the picture he'd constructed of a gentle, kind, sweet young woman.

Was she what he thought? Or was she given to times of unkind behavior?

Fourteen

Addie stood at Mother's side as Hawk and Nash guided the horses over the treacherous trail. One misstep and the coach and animals would go over the edge. There'd be no bringing them back.

Nash and Hawk wouldn't let that happen without doing everything in their power to prevent it. Even putting themselves at risk. A shudder rattled her teeth. Nash could die before her very eyes, leaving her with a guilty conscience for the rest of her life.

Why hadn't she told him she'd seen that name on his saddlebags? Given him a chance to explain? But even though she'd decided not to judge him, she had to her shame and regret.

She'd tell him the first chance she got to speak privately to him.

The outer back wheel slid toward the drop-off. "Oh no." She grabbed Mother's arm and hung on. Hawk and Nash, with the latter closest to the edge, pulled on the horses, urging them to put in more effort. He slipped, going down on his bottom.

"No. No." She whispered the words, her legs buckling. She drew in a draft of damp air when he regained his footing, and the horses moved forward.

The coach reached higher ground, all four wheels safely on solid ground. The spectators released sighs of relief. Nash and Hawk set to work cleaning the horses' legs and kicking mud off the spokes. This was not the time to ask Nash about the saddlebags. But now that she'd made up her mind to do so, Addie wanted to get it done. She'd missed the friendship and openness she and Nash had shared so naturally.

Hawk turned to them. “You can get in the coach again, and we’ll be on our way.”

Nash assisted Mother and Addie up the narrow step. Addie smiled at him, a silent promise to clear the air between them. A flash of sunlight in his eyes rewarded her. He dipped his head in acknowledgment before he backed away and climbed up to join Hawk.

She wasn’t disappointed. It wasn’t as if she’d ever get a chance to say anything private in the coach. But Addie sighed as she took her place by Mother. Travel had been challenging for the older woman, and Addie studied her closely. She was pale and tired-looking.

“I’m fine,” Mother assured her.

Addie nodded. Thankfully, Mother was improving and able to endure the rest of the journey even though she wasn’t fine and likely wouldn’t be until she settled back in the company of Father.

They rattled and swayed along the trail, every turn of the wheels bringing them closer to their destination.

The horn sounded, signaling to the next station that they were drawing near. The first time Addie heard it, she’d leaned out the window expecting an army to approach. Mr. Zacharius had explained.

There would be no time to say anything to Nash here. Hawk was in more of a hurry than usual. They would barely have a chance to use the outhouse and get a drink from the well.

The coach swayed to a stop. Addie helped Mother down, and they rushed for the little house tucked away in the trees. By the time she’d gotten water for them both, the fresh horses were prancing, eager to be on their way.

Nash waited to help them aboard. She only had enough time to thank him and hope he understood her smile offered an explanation when they found an opportunity. Then, with Hawk calling for him to hurry, he joined the impatient driver, and they rattled onward.

In places, dust billowed around the wheels and filled the coach, but mostly, they dealt with mud. Addie sat on the outward side, admiring the spectacular scenery—green valleys dotted with orange and yellow wildflowers and, at other times, nothing but rocks and jagged cliffs. More than once, she glimpsed deer and moose and a large animal Mr. Zacharius called elk.

Water splashed around them as they crossed a stream.

She settled back, content to wait for a chance to ask Nash about those letters. He'd have a reasonable explanation, of course. And she'd explain why she'd had such a strong reaction—but wait. Was that necessary? She'd taken the surname Stone to escape people murmuring behind their hands when they saw her.

Of course, she'd tell him should their friendship turn into anything more serious, but not until then. She'd not risk knowledge of her true identity making him wary around her.

They rattled onward. Dark shadows striped the trail and obscured the scenery. The edge of the road disappeared in the gray light. How deep the valley was at their side! Her teeth chattered. It didn't seem safe to race on into the darkness. She gripped the window frame and peered ahead. But the look provided no reassurance. They might be heading into danger for all she could see.

Her heart thumping in her throat, she sat back and closed her eyes. She didn't want to see what lay ahead.

“Whoa. Whoa.”

She jerked up at Hawk's call. Had they arrived at safety? The last overnight stop before they reached Golden Valley?

Mr. Bertrand flung open the door and stepped down. “I'm counting on better fare than we had back there.”

His comment rankled. “We did very well, especially since Shorty wasn't expecting us.”

“Harrumph.”

Mr. Zacharius signaled the ladies to go ahead of him, and Addie urged Mother to her feet.

Nash helped them down. As soon as they were safely on solid ground, he turned his attention to helping Hawk.

“You folks go on in,” Hawk called while he dealt with the horses.

Mr. Bertrand marched into the low cabin with the others on his heels. He grumbled that it didn't look any better than Shorty's place.

But there were three rooms. Perhaps she and Mother would be allowed some privacy. In which case, she'd see about a proper wash and clean clothes, though the items would be impossibly wrinkled from having spent days stuffed into a valise.

“You sit. I make tea.” A dark-skinned, diminutive woman spoke from beside the stove.

The others plopped wearily at the table, but Addie went to the stove. “My name is Addie Stone. Can I help?”

Dark eyes considered, and then the woman nodded. “I am Dawn. You take cups to them.”

Two steaming cups in her hands, Addie returned to the table. Dawn followed with two more. She waved Addie toward a chair, but Addie shook her head.

“I’ll help.” Supper would be expected. And welcomed.

Again, dark eyes in a beautiful face studied her. Again, Dawn nodded. “You help.”

A big worktable occupied space in the kitchen area. A variety of vegetables lay on the surface—some that Addie didn’t recognize. Dawn put a large frying pan on the stove to heat, and then in a soft voice, instructed Addie on preparing vegetables. She added a root that smelled like onion to the hot pan.

Venison steaks sizzled, and the vegetables were cooked when Nash, Hawk, and a third man entered. The latter was tall and broad-shouldered with dark brown hair tied at the back of his head.

“This is Bart,” Hawk said. “Hello, Dawn.” He sniffed. “Smells good.”

“It’s ready.”

They gathered around the table. Although Addie had chosen a chair next to an empty one, Mr. Zacharius took that chair, and Nash sat across the table’s far end.

His gaze met hers. Full of uncertainty. Her behavior had given him cause to wonder, but she’d fix that as soon as possible. Seeing that name had shaken her, but she’d give him a chance to explain. Surely, he’d have a reasonable—acceptable—explanation.

The meal was excellent. Even Mr. Bertrand found it impossible to complain.

Addie insisted on helping Dawn with the dishes even though the other woman said it was her job. That done, and with Mother settled on the bed in the room off the living area, Addie gathered up her courage to face Nash. Their discussion must be in private.

“I’d like to go for a walk.” She headed for the door.

Nash rose to his feet. “It’s not safe to be out there alone.” He hesitated as if uncertain what her reaction would be.

“I’d be glad of your company.”

Nodding, caution lingering in his eyes, he joined her.

Night had fallen, soft and pine-scented. Stars filled the sky like sparkling raindrops. They sauntered along the clearing's perimeter and paused at the trail they'd so recently traveled.

"Nash, you must wonder at my behavior today."

"Yeah." Caution rang in his answer.

"I'd like to explain what happened."

"Do you want to sit?" He indicated the grass-covered slope that provided a natural bench.

She lowered herself to the ground and then wished she hadn't as he stood over her. "Sit." She patted the spot beside her.

He hesitated, then joined her. Although their shoulders touched, a vast chasm separated them.

"I wanted to leave Shorty's place as clean as when we got there." That information had nothing to do with what she wanted to say, but *planning* to ask about that name proved easier than bringing the words to her mouth. "After I cleaned the floor, I thought I'd tidy the things hanging on the hooks by the door." No need to tell him of all the items she'd moved nor to describe the hooks, yet that is what she almost did. *Get on with what you want to say.* But, both the painful memories associated with that name, and the idea that Nash had a connection created a dam against her words.

"I fail to see how that offended you nor how it turned you against me."

"Your saddlebags were there. I meant to straighten them. That's when —" She gulped. "I made out letters burned into the back." Her whisper growled from her throat. "Sturm. Why do you have something with that on it? Do you know awful things are associated with that name?" Agony quivered on her words. The dip of his eyelids informed her that he did.

"It was given to me." His hands hung over his knees as he leaned forward, tension rippling across his forehead. "I tried to scratch it out, but I never could."

She rocked back and forth. It seemed a reasonable explanation.



NASH SLOWED HIS BREATHING. HE MUST NEVER LET ANYONE GUESS how troubling that name was to him. He shouldn't have kept those

saddlebags. They'd belonged to his father—a shameful part of his past that he wished to never remember. But they were good quality. He'd done his best to erase the letters branded on the leather's backside. No one before had made them out.

It didn't surprise him that she recognized the name. Surely, everyone west of the Atlantic Ocean had read about the horrible murders of a young, innocent couple. The motive had been abundantly clear. The husband had done well in business. Nash's father wanted to benefit from the man's efforts.

Nor did Addie's reaction surprise him. No one could read or hear about that event without bitterness surging up their throat.

“I’m glad you told me the truth.”

She nodded. “I judged you based solely on five letters on a piece of leather.” She twisted her fingers together so hard the tips grew red. “It was wrong of me.”

“I understand how you must have felt to see that name. I think anyone would have had the same reaction.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t fair. I wanted to be honest.” Her dark eyes bored into his. “I wanted an explanation from you.” A smile softened her intensity. “And you’ve given it. Thank you.”

Thank you? What sort of explanation had he given? Certainly not the truth. How would she respond if he confessed the whole truth?

His throat worked at trying to swallow. He'd hidden it for a long time. Finding safety in denying his name. But he wanted Addie to see him for who he was—the son of a murderer—and accept him as a good man who, through hard work, earned everything he had.

He coughed to ease the tension in his throat. “My father gave me those saddlebags.” Would she understand what he meant?

“They’re good quality.”

A truth jolted through him. Good quality? Pa always insisted on the best. Had he stolen them? Or purchased them with money he'd robbed from an innocent victim?

“I should never have kept them.” Every word dripped with bitterness.

“But why? They were a gift from your father. Surely, they mean something to you.”

His bitterness grew into blazing anger, and he blurted out the truth. “My father was Morton Sturm.”

Surprise in her eyes gave way to a horror that twisted her face into shock.

“I can see you understand who I am. The son of a murderer.” His eyes closed, he swallowed back bitterness and regret. “My mother fled town with me long before the murders. We changed our names and started a new life. I grew up away from the dark shadow of my father. Or so I thought. Seems the past is catching up to me.” Now numb inside, he shifted to watch Addie, not surprised her shoulders were rigid, her expression frozen.

“Addie, I might be the son of a murderer, but I am not like him in any way. He wanted to live a life of luxury without working for it. I will not take anything without earning it myself.”

She still did not move. A breath shuddered in.

“I don’t know what to say.” She pushed to her feet, moving as if her limbs lacked strength.

When he rose and started to follow her, she waved him away.

“I need time.”

Fifteen

Addie didn't recall returning to the cabin nor preparing for bed, but she had done both, for she lay beside Mother, staring at the dark ceiling.

His father murdered her parents.

It was the only thought she could summon.

His father murdered her parents.

What did it mean? Why had God allowed their paths to cross? Allowed those painful memories to flood to the forefront?

His father murdered her parents.

Did Nash have any inkling how it had felt for an eleven-year-old to return home to discover the bleeding bodies of her parents? Did he even know a child had been left orphaned?

His father murdered her parents.

What would he say if he knew?

How would he react if he knew she was that child?

The questions roared in her brain throughout the night. She welcomed the lamplight filtering into the room and pots clanging on the stove, signaling morning. Boots scuffed, and waking people yawned. Morning had arrived. Time to get up. To resume their journey. Today, they would reach Golden Valley. All of it no longer mattered. In her heart, she'd returned to the days following the deaths of her parents, lost in sorrow and confusion.

Mother dressed, then turned to Addie. "You were restless last night. Is something bothering you?"

His father murdered her parents.

"No. Yes. Maybe."

"What is it?"

“I—” She shrugged. “It’s nothing. You know how I sometimes feel sad. That’s all it is.”

“Did something trigger your memories?”

His father murdered her parents.

Telling Mother would only give the woman something else to worry about. Besides, wasn’t she supposed to be past this overwhelming grief? And anger, although she didn’t like to admit to that emotion. “Perhaps it’s just the idea of starting over again.”

“Child, you don’t have to follow us. If you find a place where you want to make a home of your own, you are free to do so. In fact, I would be happy for you because then I’d know you’d left behind the past and were ready to enjoy the present and embrace the future.”

“I know, and I am.” Though, she wasn’t sure what she agreed to. How astute of Mother to know Addie longed for permanency. Maybe Mother understood the need even more than Addie did.

She thought she’d put the past away, but this proved her wrong.

Mother patted her hand. “I’m going to pray about the matter.” She bowed her head. “Our Father in heaven, You have given us everything we need for life and godliness. Everything. Although we sometimes overlook that promise. Dear Father, Addie struggles with the pain of her losses. Only You can heal that wound. Please guide her into Your way. In the precious name of Your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

As always, Addie was encouraged and blessed by Mother’s prayer.

“Now, let’s join the others.” Mother stepped toward the door.

Addie gathered their belongings and followed.

A glance around the room revealed Nash’s absence. Her shoulders relaxed. It would be easier if they avoided each other for the rest of the trip.

He must have felt the same way, for he didn’t join them for the meal. And when they went to the coach, he held the horses, keeping them from racing down the trail. Addie helped Mother to climb inside. Then she followed without assistance from anyone.

The four passengers clung to worn leather straps as the coach jerked into motion. None of them spoke. Even Mr. Bertrand’s complaining was almost nonexistent.

Mile after mile, they bounced and swayed. Addie’s head fell to her chest, only for her to be jolted awake at another body-shaking rough spot on the trail.

They reached the first way station. She would have stayed in her corner, except Mother murmured that she needed to use the outhouse, and Addie climbed her weary way down to help her.

She would not look toward Nash. She wasn't ready to. His absence at breakfast had informed her that he wasn't either. Yet, as they returned to the coach, she couldn't stop herself from sweeping her gaze over the horses. Only to see if they were ready to go, of course. Her attention stalled at Nash, who again held the horses.

He shifted and slowly turned in her direction. Their gazes crashed. His full of—

Her own anger and confusion blinded her. If she had to guess, she'd say the same things burned from his eyes.

He was Morton Sturm's son.

The fact blocked every other thought, and she tore her gaze away, returned to the coach, plunked in the corner, and closed her eyes. An action that did nothing to block her thoughts. Just as keeping her eyes closed for the next hour also failed to make it impossible to think.

Nash was Morton Sturm's son. Son of a murderer.

The words went round and round in her head. Son of a murderer.

The coach bounced hard enough to jar her from her seat and forced her to open her eyes.

Not that eyes open or closed made any difference. The same thought raced through her head with hobnailed boots.

Son of a murderer. Son of a murderer. Son of—

She jerked back against the leather seat. He would have been fourteen at that time. He said they'd left his father before that. At fourteen, she'd considered herself quite grown up. After all, she'd dealt with things that forced her to mature. In hindsight, she was a child and thought as a child.

Nash, too, had been forced to grow up at a young age. He'd moved, changed his name, and started work for Gib Jarvis.

Son of a murderer? Or innocent victim?

Which was it? Could it be both?

The words rattled in her head in time to the bouncing and swaying of the coach.

The horn sounded. They were approaching another way station. Again, she would have chosen to stay inside, hiding from Nash and reality. But Mother again said she needed to go out.

Addie paused on her way back to glance at Nash where he stood at the front of the horses, holding them in preparation for the continuation of the journey. Something that hadn't seemed necessary earlier.

Again, he shifted so his eyes met hers. And darted away before she read anything in them. The set of his jaw and his pulled-down lips said everything she needed to know.

He had taken her coldness, her shock to mean judgment.

Did it? Certainly, to a degree, but the words continued to race through her head. Son of a murderer.

Or innocent victim?

Their next stop was Golden Valley. She'd be going home with the Stones. He'd be returning to his ranch, where he had a house with room for a family that overlooked a pretty valley where the family could see wild animals and watch sunsets.

If they had more time, they might have been able to find a way to deal with his news, but they were running out of time.

Not that she wanted to deal with the information he'd given her. He was Morton Sturm's son. The man who had viciously murdered her parents and forever changed her life.



“YOU’RE QUIET, MAN.”

“I’m a man of few words,” Nash responded to Hawk, in no mood for conversation.

His father had hung for murder after a fair trial.

Nash didn’t get a trial. All he got from Addie was judgment for being his father’s son. Even though he’d done everything not to be like his father in any way, he was fair in all his dealings. He lived up to his word. He worked hard to get ahead.

He never knew what Ma had said to Gib and didn’t know if the kind man knew their real identity, but Gib had always been fair and accepting. He’d been more like a father to Nash than his own had been.

But it didn’t change the facts. Nash was the son of Morton Sturm. Taking on a new name meant nothing in the long run.

Why had he kept those saddlebags? Yes, they were good quality. But he'd not earned them.

Or had he?

Didn't he deserve at least that much in exchange for who his father was?

All that aside, he should have tossed them years ago. Not that he thought of his father when he used them. So why did he keep them?

For only one reason. He wondered...hoped...someone would realize his real identity and yet see him for who he was. Not who his father was.

Someone had seen the name. A burning raced up his throat. And relegated him to son of a murderer.

Yes, he admitted it. He'd hoped his confession to Addie would have led to understanding and acceptance.

Instead, he had been tried and judged and all but hung.

Smoke rose from a chimney in the distance. They would soon be in Golden Valley. He'd borrow a horse and ride home to his little cabin on the side of a mountain. He'd raise horses as he planned, and he'd keep his identity a secret.

“What's going on?” Hawk pointed to the town.

People gathered in the street, lingering on a perfectly good day when they should be home working. The miners should be at their claims, but they stood in knots, talking and waving.

“Something's up,” Nash said.

“Don't look like good news.”

Nash agreed. “I'd say there is anger filling the air.”

They raced down the street and pulled in before the station. Nash dropped to the ground to hold the horses. Hawk set the brake and joined him, pausing only to tell the passengers to wait in the coach until he found out what was going on.

Addie peered out the window. She scanned the street, then brought her gaze to Nash. Her brows rose in question.

He shrugged. He knew no more than she at the moment.

She ducked back inside.

Mr. Bertrand complained about yet another delay. Mr. Zacharius coughed, but Nash heard no one else.

Who was he expecting to hear? Hoping to hear? How foolish to wish for Addie's voice.

The crowd surged toward them, dragging a man and shouting. He struggled to make out any words. Except the ones that rose louder and louder until they couldn't be ignored.

“Hang him. Hang him.”

Nash moved to stand in front of the pushing throng, his arms crossed, his legs wide. They stopped. “What’s going on?” His voice rang out, silencing the crowd.

A dozen men answered.

Nash held up his hand. “I can’t make out what you’re saying.” He pointed to the man who seemed to have the most to say. “You. Tell me.”

“This man”—he indicated the one held by half a dozen others—“decided to shoot everyone in sight.”

A roar of anger rose.

The spokesman continued. “He killed three and injured others. Look at her.” He indicated a woman with blood staining her dress at her waist, a little girl clinging to her, eyes too big for her face.

“They was claim jumping.” The accused’s shouts were silenced by someone’s boot.

Nash studied the angry crowd. Guilty or not, the man deserved to be allowed to speak. Not everyone was guilty because people said so. “Whatever this man has done, he will be dealt with lawfully.”

A dozen voices spoke at once. He knew their message without hearing the words clearly. “Who gives you the right to interfere?”

Crossing his arms and facing the angry mob without revealing the way his heart hammered, he answered. “Seems I’m the only one to show any common sense and self-control.”

“You’re not the only one.” A man in a black coat joined him. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Preacher Stone.”

Addie’s father. The end of the journey for her. And the end of his time with her.

“I’m of the same mind.” Another man stood shoulder to shoulder with Nash, and then four more joined them.

The crowd’s roar turned to angry muttering. Then, slowly, one by one, several men walked away.

He needed to act before the dozen remaining turned violent. “Is there someplace he can be locked up until a trial can be held?”

Preacher Stone answered. "There's no jail. Just as there's no lawman, but he could be secured at the livery barn."

The men with Nash edged forward, turning the others in that direction.

Addie and Mrs. Stone stood by the stagecoach. The preacher called to them. "Take care of this woman and child."

As Nash went to the barn, Addie and Mrs. Stone rushed to the injured woman. Another innocent victim of a murdering man.

Was it possible Addie would see the truth about the victims?

Would she allow the son of a murderer a chance to prove his innocence? His goodness?

Sixteen

Addie didn't have time to study the town that would be her home. She and Mother rushed toward the injured woman and child.

Mother put her arm around the woman. "Come along. We'll take care of you."

When Addie tried to draw the child away, she shrank back, clinging to her mother's skirts. Very well. She understood the fear consuming the girl. It was as familiar as her name.

"Where are we going?" Addie asked.

Mother stopped. "Why, I don't know. Where does Mr. Stone live?"

From behind windows, they'd been watched. Perhaps seeing the confusion on Mother's face, a buxom woman stepped from the nearest building. "I take it you're the preacher's wife?" At Mother's nod, she continued. "That's his house at the end of the street. The one with a white cross painted over the door."

"Thank you." Mother hurried onward.

Addie edged between Mother and the injured woman. "I'll help her. You go on ahead and see where she'll go." She didn't care for the idea of her mother holding her up when she was so weak herself. "What's your name?"

"I'm Mrs. Hammel. My daughter is Mary." The woman leaned closer to whisper in Addie's ear. "She's only six and very frightened."

"I'll do my best to help her."

Mother waited at the door. "There's a cot in one room. I don't know if it's intended for you—"

"Let's get Mrs. Hammel there."

The woman settled on the narrow cot. Mother glanced from Mary to Addie.

Addie bent before the child. "Mary, why don't you come with me while your mama is fixed up?"

Mrs. Hammel nodded. "You go with her. I'll be right here."

Addie held out a hand. When the girl shrank back, Addie lowered her arm. "Let's have a look around. I've never been here before."

Silently, Mary followed her as they explored. There were three small bedrooms. One held Father's things and would soon hold Mother's. That left the far one for Addie.

She stared at the cot, the dresser, the ladder-back chair in front of a tiny table that could serve as a writing desk, and the wardrobe. A window overlooked a patch of grass and one waving tree. She'd be living here now.

Mary watched her, shifting her weight back and forth from one foot to the other.

They continued onward to the cozy living room with four armchairs, three bulging bookcases, and a fireplace. The kitchen held a square wooden table, six chairs, a gleaming stove, and cupboards. Beyond were the pantry and back entry. The kitchen beckoned, offering something for Addie to do. Keeping busy had always been the best way to put aside her troubles.

"I'll make tea for your mama and see if the preacher has cookies on hand."

Mary sat at the table, her hands under her thighs, her gaze darting from Addie toward the room where her mother lay.

"Mrs. Stone is very good at taking care of people." She'd taken care of Addie through the turmoil of her emotions. Addie stiffened against the pain that grabbed her insides like a cruel vise. If what the crowd said was correct, this child had lost her father. Thankfully, not her mother. But that wasn't what hurt the most. Nash had defended the murderer. Stilling a moan that rushed to her mouth, she explored the cupboards. Found the tea and a canister of cookies.

She gave two cookies to Mary, who murmured thanks but stared at them like they were foreign to her.

Mother called for warm water, and Addie took her a basin.

"Is Mary—?" the worried mother asked.

"She's fine. Anxious to see for herself that you are too."

“I don’t want her to see this.” She indicated the bleeding wound on her side. Her wide dark eyes filled with tears that she blinked back. “I don’t know if she realizes her papa is dead.” She choked and couldn’t continue.

“She’s safe. That’s what matters.” It wasn’t all that mattered, but for now, Mrs. Hammel needed to focus on that one thing. And her own healing. The wound in her side would heal more quickly than the wound of her loss.

Just as Addie must keep her thoughts on dealing with little Mary. She returned to the kitchen.

A knock came on the front door.

Mary gave a little cry.

“You stay here. I’ll see who it is.” Addie opened the door to two men with their luggage on a trolley. Her lungs emptied in a gust. She directed them to put everything inside by the door to be dealt with later. Then she returned to Mary. “It’s just our luggage.” They both needed a diversion, so she talked about the trip over the mountains. “The stagecoach had to stop often to change horses. The trail is rough. And we had to deal with a landslide and a washout.” They’d spent three days at Shorty’s. Three days in which she’d enjoyed getting to know Nash. Except she hadn’t known the real man—son of a murderer.

Or innocent victim?

She sat across from Mary. They both had cups of tea—Mary’s diluted. This child was even younger than Addie had been when her parents were killed. But she had her mother.

Mother emerged from the bedroom, carrying the basin of water and the blood-soiled dress. “Mary, your mother would like to see you.”

Mary ran to her mama.

Mother sank wearily to a chair. “I hope Mr. Stone and Nash aren’t attacked by that crowd. They were very angry.”

“As well they should be if that man shot people.” But she hadn’t thought of Father being in any danger. Or Nash. Of course, she wasn’t overlooking him. She simply didn’t know what to think of him. Son of a murderer? Innocent victim? But the way he’d run to the defense of that man who shot Mrs. Hammel’s husband made it hard to view him as the latter.

“Our trunks are here.” It seemed like a safe topic.

“We can unpack later.”

“Of course. I’m assuming Mrs. Hammel and Mary will be staying with us for the time being?”

"She tells me she has no family here or, indeed, anywhere. Poor woman."

Steps sounded outside the door, and they turned as the preacher entered, wiping his hand across his brow. "A messy business. How is the woman?"

"Mrs. Hammel. It's only a flesh wound," Mother said. "She's resting in the middle room. Her daughter, Mary, is with her. Mrs. Hammel tells me the child didn't see what happened. For that, we can be grateful."

"How many dead? How many injured?" Knowing the numbers would let Addie know how angry she should be.

"Three dead. Four injured. The other injured were all men, and they are tending their wounds back at the claims, prepared to defend them."

Addie offered Father tea, and he sat facing Mother. "This isn't the welcome I'd wish for you."

Mother's smile was gentle. "It's why we've come."

"You need to rest," Addie said. "I'll take care of things." She told Father how ill Mrs. Stone had been and then turned her attention to seeing to preparations for the evening meal.

The Stones retired to the living room, their words soft as they caught up on their news.

Work. Keep busy. It normally kept Addie from thinking too much. But intruding thoughts continually surfaced. Murders. Justice. Mercy. Where did everyone belong on that spectrum?

The meal ready, she set the table. Should she take food to the bedroom for Mrs. Hammel?

Mother had gone into the room. Soon, the two women and Mary emerged, Mrs. Hammel wearing a dressing gown.

"I have things back at the cabin." She shuddered.

Preacher Stone assured her he would take care of it.

Although it was pleasant to be gathered around the table, together with Father for the first time in weeks, a pall hung over them because of the dreadful thing that had transpired.

Addie struggled to swallow every mouthful. She avoided looking at Mary because every time she did, she remembered the shock of seeing her murdered parents.

The meal over, she refused Mrs. Hammel's offer of help. She wanted to forget her past. Numb herself to the memories. But after she'd cleaned the kitchen, it was too early to go to bed.

“I’m going for a walk,” she announced.

The Stones nodded.

“Don’t go far,” the preacher warned. “People are uneasy.”

Addie stepped outside and hovered at the step. Uneasy. It described her feelings. She only went as far as the end of the backyard and stood staring at the pine trees and the jagged mountains circling the town. The sound of water trickling over rocks informed her of the river nearby. The river where men panned for gold. And where they fought for claims. And shot each other.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly. This wasn’t the same as discovering her parents, but it felt painfully similar. She’d made it through that time, and she’d only been a child.

But how had she done so? She couldn’t remember. The Stones had surrounded her with tenderness, even as they would Mrs. Hammel and Mary. They’d prayed over her. And repeated words of encouragement. She brought some of those words to her mind. God would never leave her nor forsake her. He was her rock. Her shield. Her strong defender. A shelter in the time of storm. A sure and steady foundation.

In Him will I trust and not be afraid. She repeated the verse over and over until peace returned, and she made her way back to the house. With Father’s help, she put her trunk in her room and unpacked. She hung her clothes in the wardrobe, tucked her books atop the dresser, and her Bible on the little table beside the framed picture of her parents. Her heart skipped once, then returned to normal. Having her belongings around her gave her a sense of security. Lastly, she brought out her journal. She didn’t make daily entries in it. But when she wanted to speak to her parents, she wrote in this book. Tonight, she felt such a need and opened to a fresh page.

Mama and Papa, we have arrived at Golden Valley after a challenging ride. I met a man. I let myself grow fond of him. He seemed so noble and upright, but I learned it was his father who killed you. And we get here to learn of a man shooting and killing three people. It brought everything back to my mind. The shock of seeing you on the floor. The agony of the trial. The—well, you know. I’ve told you so many times. Mama, Papa, will I ever get over missing you?

She closed the book. Even as she closed her heart. She’d had quite enough of murders and pain.



NASH RENTED A ROOM IN THE BUILDING THAT CALLED ITSELF A HOTEL. He certainly wouldn't let any woman he knew stay in the establishment. The food was barely edible. Not that it mattered. His appetite had vanished. Still, he downed a few mouthfuls before retiring to the room where he discovered a rumpled bed with unwashed sheets. He lay down fully clothed.

Sleep wouldn't come.

It had taken every bit of self-control to calmly tie that man in the barn and to reason that he needed a trial. Only the notion of hanging someone without due justice made it possible. He didn't care for being judged for something he had no part in. Wait. Did he mean that man he'd helped tie up or himself? He closed his eyes, admitting it was the latter. Addie had judged him for who and what his father had been.

The racket below grew louder as the evening progressed. Too much strong drink had that effect. Of course, everyone was upset after what had happened. Three dead. Four injured, including that woman. And her child witness to her mother bleeding. His teeth creaked as he thought of it.

The noise rose and fell. Had they started to disperse? Except it seemed to have moved outdoors.

He pulled his hat over his eyes and tried to block out the sounds. Surely, they would tire soon and go home. Go to bed. Things would look better in the daylight. For all involved. Except perhaps the widow of the one victim.

Eventually, he fell asleep, whether or not because the noise ended or simply because he was exhausted from fighting his thoughts.

He woke the next morning and stared at the unfamiliar room. Right. He was in Golden Valley. He jumped from bed. Had the town taken upon itself the necessity of a trial for the man? With a start, he realized he didn't even know his name.

His boots on, he clattered down the stairs. The chairs were turned over on the tables. Someone may or may not have swept the floor.

“Hello?” The only answer came from the rustling of rodents racing for cover.

Adjusting his hat, he stepped into the street. A man rushed past, turning away from Nash. Still offended by what he perceived to be Nash's defense

of the murderer. Nash continued down the street, passing businesses, most of which weren't yet open, and made his way toward the livery barn.

He ground to a halt, unable, unwilling to believe his eyes.

From a rope secured above the loft door hung a limp body.

Nash blinked. Swallowed hard. Twice more and then raced onward.

Two men with eyes as hard as rocks stepped forward. "We tried him. Hung him for what he done. Fair and square."

"Lot more than he deserved," the second man added.

Nash leaned back on his heels. "It's on your heads. Take the body down."

"We done decided to leave it there long 'nough to serve as a warning to anyone who thinks they can do ta same thing."

Nash met their hard glares with one of his own, then spun around and stalked off.

Some would see it as justice. It was out of his hands. He'd done what he could. Hadn't let his anger rule his decisions.

He passed a house with a white cross painted over the door. This must be where the preacher lived. He'd let the man know what happened. Seemed fair, considering the preacher had defended the man's right to a trial.

His knock echoed. Footsteps crossed to the door, and it opened to—

Addie!

He hadn't expected to see her. Or had he secretly wished for it? Admittedly, he did not want to leave town without some sort of agreement between them. How would that look after his admission that he was Morton Sturm's son dashed the friendship they'd enjoyed? Words failed him. And then he blurted out what he wanted to say.

"Came to see the preacher."

"He's still in bed." Her eyes revealed nothing. Perhaps because the rising sun almost blinded him.

She remained in the doorway. No invitation to enter. No sign of welcome.

"How are the woman and child?" He glanced past her shoulder.

"Mrs. Hammel has a flesh wound." Addie's expression hardened until her face was all sharp lines and dark shadows. "The wounds to their hearts are far more serious."

Understanding what she meant, he nodded but could offer nothing in the way of encouragement. “Being here with you and the Stones will help those wounds.” Like Gib had helped Nash heal inside.

Addie crossed her arms, a signal of dismissal, if he needed further evidence she wasn’t happy to see him. “Is there something more?” Her question shot out like a bullet.

“Maybe I’ll come back later.”

“I could relay any message you have.”

Would giving her the news make her see things from his side? “That man was hung last night.” He began to tip his head toward the barn, then stopped. No need for her to think she should look. It was a grisly sight.

She closed the door behind her and faced him. “Justice was served.” Cold, hard words. Condemnation.

“Shouldn’t a man be allowed to speak in his defense?” That man was guilty, but he meant something more. “A man shouldn’t be judged for something he didn’t do.” Would she see that he pled his own case?

She rubbed her lips together as if considering his words, then pursed those lips. “Who speaks on behalf of the innocent? Like that woman and child. Who defends them?”

“Even hanging can’t undo what’s done.”

“There is no justice for them.” Again, a tip of her head toward the door to indicate who she referred to.

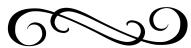
“There are victims on both sides of the story.” If he hoped she’d understand he meant himself and offer—

“Nash, my name is Addison Lanier.”

“Lanier?” Why did that name seem familiar in a way that sent tension up and down his spine?

“That’s right. Your father killed my parents.”

Seventeen



Addie's limbs were heavy. Her breathing was almost nonexistent. Yes. She was Addison Lanier. Daughter of the couple who'd died at the hand of Morton Sturm. Shivers raced through her limbs and pooled in her chest so every breath jittered in and out.

Nash lifted a hand as if to reach for her. He seemed to think better of it and pressed his palm to his chest. His mouth opened and closed with an audible click. His Adam's apple bobbed.

The moment hung between them full of shocked silence.

Nash spoke first. "Addie, I..." He drew in a noisy breath. "I can't believe it." His hand moved back and forth over his chest. "I'm so sorry. You were only a child."

She nodded. "Eleven."

"I'm sorry." He squared his shoulders. "But you realize that wasn't me. I wasn't there. And I have chosen a different path for my life."

His waiting crowded her thoughts. Pressed at her pain. Throbbed in the pit of her stomach.

Not a word came.

His shoulders rose and fell. "I thought we had some sweet regard for each other." A waiting pause before he hurried on. "I know I've grown fond of you. I thought...I wondered..."

The sharpness of her pain emerged in words. "What your father did is unforgivable."

"I agree. But I'm not my father. Addie—" He reached toward her.

She backed against the door.

He lowered his hand.

“I can’t. I can’t.” She wrenched the door open and rushed inside, closing it and then collapsing against it.

Father Stone entered the kitchen and drew to a halt. “Addie, is something wrong?”

Wrong? Yes, more than she could fathom. Nash was right in thinking something warm and special had developed between them in those sweet, innocent days before the truth had been revealed. Now those moments had been snatched away. Gone the way of her parents. Nothing left but memories both good and sad.

She straightened. “Mr. Burns brought the news that the murdering man was hung last night.” Each word stung her tongue. “Excuse me.” She crossed to her room and closed the door.

Why did Nash have to be Morton Sturm’s son? That fact built an impenetrable wall between them.

She pulled her journal out and opened the pages. Then she closed it and put it away without writing anything. What could she say to her parents? And what did she expect they would say? They weren’t able to answer. To comfort and guide her. Thanks to Nash’s father.

As she returned to the kitchen, her shoulders sagged despite her best efforts to hold them up. Mother was already busy at the stove. So Addie set the table and helped with breakfast preparation. The familiar work did little to ease her.

With Mary at her side, rubbing her eyes and yawning, Mrs. Hammel emerged. “Thank you for washing and mending my dress.” Her hands smoothed down the fabric. “And taking care of—” She jabbed a finger toward the wound in her side. “And us.”

Mother flew to her side. “No one would fault you if you stayed in bed today.”

“No. I have things to take care of.” Mrs. Hammel glanced toward Father Stone where he sat at the head of the table nursing a cup of coffee. “A funeral?”

“I’ll take care of the details,” Father assured her.

Her nervous fingers worried her bodice. “I’ll need something else to wear.”

“I must go to the mining camps today. Can I bring you something?”

Mrs. Hammel hesitated, then shook her head. “This is something I must do on my own. But if I may leave Mary here—”

Mother didn't let her finish. "We'd be happy to entertain Mary."

A few minutes later, they gathered around the table for the meal.

As was his custom, Father opened his Bible to read a Scripture when they'd finished eating. "I think this is timely. 'To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.'" His expression gentle, his eyes kind, he spoke to Mrs. Hammel. "I know it's too early for you to see how this is possible—joy for mourning, praise instead of heaviness—but it is because of God's unfailing love. Look for it, reach for it, expect it, and welcome it."

"Thank you," Mrs. Hammel murmured. "I will do my best." She choked back a sob as she squeezed Mary's hand. "I have a very good reason to move forward."

A reason to move forward. That's what Addie wanted...needed. Something besides helping the Stones with their charity work.

Her insides wailed as she thought of the house Nash had described. She pushed aside the idea and bowed her head as Father prayed.

Then she lost herself in an active day—unpacking and sorting out the kitchen to familiarize themselves with the contents and preparing food for the funeral. Ladies came by to welcome them to the community and to express their condolences to Mrs. Hammel. And they brought food.

Mrs. Hammel arranged for someone to take her to her cabin and returned with her belongings. "I brought everything. Do you mind if I keep it here while I decide what I'm going to do?"

Mother said, of course, she didn't mind. "Don't be hasty to make decisions. You need to allow yourself time to mourn."

Mrs. Hammel's eyes grew watery. "I'll do my mourning in private."

The funeral was the next day. Mrs. Hammel put on a brave face for her little daughter but carried a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

Addie sat near the front of the church beside Mother. People crowded into the sanctuary. Many of those attending probably came out of curiosity. They wanted to see how a woman whose husband had been murdered looked. Addie could have informed them that the changes were on the inside. Like anger and sorrow and pain and regret and—

Unforgiveness?

Was she guilty of that?

The service ended, and she followed Mrs. Hammel down the aisle. She glanced at the crowd as they left, wondering if she'd see a familiar face.

Nash wasn't there. Well, she didn't expect he would be. No doubt he'd gone to his ranch and the horses he expected to be delivered.

Would she ever see him again?

Did she want to?



NASH LEFT AS SOON AS PREACHER STONE UTTERED THE LAST AMEN. He'd been able to see the back of Addie's head, but he didn't mean to wait. It was hard enough without another rejection.

The other two murdered men had been duly laid to rest at the mining area's little cemetery, with only a graveside service and Preacher Stone praying over the graves.

Nash didn't know the men. He couldn't explain why he'd been witness to their burials. It had seemed the least he could do to make amends for what a murderer had done. As if, in some small way, he could make amends for what his father had done. Not that he was responsible, but not everyone believed that way.

Unforgivable.

The word she'd uttered so quietly thundered inside his head.

He rented a horse from the livery barn, grimacing as he passed under the place the body had hung before someone removed it and placed it in an unmarked grave. So far as Nash understood, only the two gravediggers and the undertaker had been there.

At the store, he filled two sacks with supplies and hung them over the back of the horse...over the condemning saddlebags. Grabbed the leather but uncoiled his fingers and allowed the bags to settle back in place. He'd carried them all these years. No reason he should stop now.

The reins were slack in his hand as he rode toward his ranch. He perked up as the house and corrals came into view. His herd of horses were in the nearby pasture. A man rose from the veranda and watched him approach.

"Howdy," he called. "Thought I'd wait to see if anyone showed up to claim this bunch."

“Got delayed,” Nash explained how Star had come up lame, forcing him to seek passage on the stagecoach. “And then a landslide made us hole up for a few days.” He didn’t add that murders in Golden Valley had further delayed him.

He wanted to put that out of his memories.

“Let’s have a look at what you brought.” The two of them sauntered to the pasture to study the animals. “They look to be in good condition.”

“I was told not to push them.”

“You brought them by yourself?” That would have been quite a task.

“Nah, but didn’t see any reason for the others to hang about cooling their heels.” The man straightened. “Now that you’re here, I’ll be on my way.” Ignoring Nash’s offer to spend the night, he got his horse from the barn and, with a touch of his finger to his hat brim, rode down the trail Nash had returned on.

“So that’s that.” No one else would hear him, but Nash would get used to that. He tended his mount, spent a few more minutes studying his newly acquired horses, and then headed for the house. The slanting sunrays warmed the inside. A fly flew across the room and banged into the window. Nash stared at the insect as it continued to batter the glass. Stupid thing. Didn’t have the brains to realize how futile it was.

Nash snorted. He wasn’t much smarter than a dumb fly wanting something he couldn’t have. He unpacked his supplies, filling his cupboards. Then he circled the house, went into the living room, and out again without going to the bedroom. Why had he built a home meant for a family? In the back of his mind, he’d known being the son of a murderer made it an impossible dream.

Hunger called. He opened a can of beans and ate them cold right from the can. A man could survive without someone to cook his meals and share his dreams.

He tossed the empty can into the woodbox and strode outside.

He needed to keep busy. What was that verse Gib often quoted, mostly in good fun? “Nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works.” A verse found in Ecclesiastes.

Nash had plenty to do.

Night fell. His work would wait until morning. First, he’d best sleep. He stretched out on his bed, adjusting himself to the familiar mattress. His own bed, in his own house, with his plans for the future, should be enough.

Except sleep eluded him.

He squeezed his eyes tight and tried not to think of Addie's shock when, as a child, she'd discovered her parents. His closed eyelids didn't stop his imagination from filling in details. Brown eyes wide. Like he'd seen with the child staying with the preacher.

Ice flowed through his veins. His father was responsible for changing Addie's life.

His father, not him. Not him. He knew it. Would have thought Addie did too.

Sourness burned his throat. Yes, he was the son of Morton Sturm. But his choices had led him in a different direction. Choices guided by his mother and Gib Jarvis who talked so openly about the value of following God's guidance. One verse the man had often quoted came from Psalms. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." He'd always add, "What better guide could a man want for?"

Nash groaned. *God, I chose to follow You, my heavenly Father, not my earthly father. I trust You to guide me into—*

Had he expected God would make his life easy? Eliminate challenges? A sigh fluttered his lips.

I choose to follow You even now. Though, I'm asking that Addie change her mind about me. Sees me as a good man despite my name. His choice and his trust were challenged by Addie's rejection more than learning of what his father had done.

Ma had hesitated to tell him when she got the news. Said she'd been surprised. They'd left because he was a robber. But that was a far cry from murder.

"Greed," she'd said in a mournful tone, "can drive a man to do dreadful things."

Had his father even considered how his actions impacted Nash's life? If he'd cared, he would have changed his ways and come after them.

Thank goodness Gib had been a good substitute father. *Thank You, God.*

Sleep eventually claimed him.

Over the next few days, he chopped wood. He brought in more logs and chopped them. He checked the fence holding his horses. He planted a garden. That all done, he saddled up and headed back down the trail to get Star. He stopped at Shorty's for the night.

The crates had been pulled from the storeroom to the wall beside the door. Two valises rested atop them. The bed had been stripped of blankets and sheets.

“Looks like you’re leaving.”

The man rubbed his hands together and grinned. “That I am. And it is thanks to Miss Addie.”

“How’s that?”

His grin faltered. “I am a married man. Our little son is dead because of my carelessness. What I did was unforgivable. Addie told me I needed to stop punishing myself and my wife.”

“Hmm.” Too bad she didn’t listen to her own advice and offer forgiveness to him.

Shorty served a meal with gingerbread for dessert. “Miss Addie showed me how to make this. When I get home, my wife will be surprised by how well I can cook...well, a few things.”

“I’m glad for you.” If only Nash could see the future as bright and exciting as Shorty did.

Shorty’s face clouded. “She might have given up on me by now. Or perhaps be willing to forgive me.”

Neither of them spoke. Nash wasn’t going to offer empty assurances when he understood how difficult forgiveness could be.

The lines in Shorty’s face hardened. His fist slammed his thigh. “I will never give up trying to win her back. Never.”

The chasm between Nash and Addie yawned too wide for a bridge. She wouldn’t forgive Nash’s father and, by extension, Nash. Nor did he blame her. What his father had done was unforgivable.

The next morning, he returned to the trail, leaving behind a man eager to return to his wife and beg for understanding.

What would happen to Shorty if his wife refused to forgive him? Would he disappear into the mountains again? Or stay and win her over?

The questions plagued him as he returned to the place he’d left Star. The horse had healed and eagerly welcomed Nash.

Nash scratched behind his ears. “Did you think I’d abandoned you? I’d never do that. But you needed time to rest and heal.”

Would time do the same work for Addie?

Eighteen

Addie flung herself into the work the Stones did in ministering to the ill, the injured, and the needy, and there was plenty of it. An outbreak of the flu struck one of the mining camps. Addie insisted she could handle helping Father. Mrs. Hammel offered to assist, but Addie pointed out that Mary needed her. Mother wanted to accompany them. Until Addie reminded her that she was still run down after her own illness, and Father urged her to stay home and rest.

The dwellings at the camp were shacks that barely protected against the weather. No wonder so many were sick. Miners coughed. Often, their wives and children were pale and lethargic. Addie went from one home to the other, making medicinal tea, sponging fevered brows, and preparing broth for the sick to sip.

She stepped from the home of a sick family. A crowd of men down the hill waved their arms at Father and shouted. An angry mob was not what they needed, and she picked her way over the rough terrain to stand by Father.

“What’s wrong?”

Father sighed wearily. “That man’s wife died. He wants to blame someone. He’s gotten others riled up.”

“Us? He blames us?” She shrank back. She’d seen how irrational a crowd became, fueling anger rather than calmness.

“Not at this point,” Father assured her. “They want to storm that house —” He jabbed his thumb toward the door up the hill behind him. “The family moved here recently, and they are blaming them for bringing the illness.”

“Is it possible?”

“There is no way to know, and even if they did, how is burning them out going to change anything? But it’s easier to find someone to blame than to accept loss and move on.”

Addie nodded. She understood the need to assign blame.

Isn’t that what she’d done to Nash? Not that she hadn’t moved on. She’d done so years ago.

But now was not the time to think of him. Besides, it was too late to change anything. He’d gone to his ranch.

Remembering how Nash had faced the angry crowd back at Golden Valley, she stepped forward and held up a hand to get the attention of those gathered in front of her.

When they grew quiet, she spoke, first addressing the man whose wife had passed. “I am sorry for your loss.”

The man rumbled.

Before he spoke the angry words surely building, she continued. “I can understand the need to do something to make things better.” Even if that wasn’t what the man had in mind. “I believe it’s a waste of time to look for someone to blame. This disease might have come in because of the dirty water many of you drink. Or from some wild animal droppings. Or the bad air.”

Some of the miners dug into the hillsides, breathing in dust and dampness. A number of unsuitable conditions were tolerated because of the desire to find gold.

“If you care to clean up any of those, that’s a good thing. But right now, why don’t we work together to help those who are ill?” She shifted her gaze from man to man, grateful many of them listened intently. “Those households where everyone is sick need their wood supply replenished. They need clean water—not the stuff you’ve all tramped through in your search for gold. Animals need to be tended. Let’s do what we can instead of wasting time over things we can’t change.”

A man in the back yelled. “I’ll get wood for those over there.”

“I’ll help.” The men dispersed to take care of the needs. All except the man who’d lost his wife.

Addie approached him. “What can I do to help you?”

“Can you bring my wife back?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

The man seemed to shrink in stature. Then he strolled away. Father patted Addie's shoulder. "Look what you've accomplished." Not certain what he meant, she didn't respond.

"You encouraged them to look for ways to help each other and move forward." He patted her twice more. "I'm going to check on that family." He pointed to the house he meant.

"I'm going there." She waved in the opposite direction.

As she trotted from one home to another, she smiled. Men carried wood, chopped it, took water to a pen of chickens, and generally helped those who were sick.

Eight days later, she visited the last of those who'd been ill. Not another person had died, and the man who'd lost his wife had left the area.

"I believe it's over," Father said at her side. "Now it's time for you and me to get some rest."

Back at Golden Valley, they sank into kitchen chairs while Mrs. Hammel served them tea and Mother set out cookies.

"It's good you were here to help Mother," Addie said to Mrs. Hammel.

"She's been a wonderful help." Mother smiled at her. "And she has some news."

Mrs. Hammel sat in a chair opposite Father. "I've decided to move into town." Her lips quivered. "There's nothing left for me at that mining shack. I've found a house and had my belongings moved in. I only waited for you to get back before I moved."

Father considered the woman. "I have purchased a house for those in need. You're welcome to live there."

"Thank you, but I want to be independent."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I need to say goodbye to the past so I can move forward."

"Very well. We wish you all the best. I'd like to pray for you and your future." He bowed his head and did so.

"Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd best get Mary settled in our new home." She called Mary from their bedroom, scooped up a valise, and led the child away.

Addie stared after the woman. She thought she could leave the past and start anew. If only it was that simple. No doubt she would be surprised by how often the past returned without invitation and at the most troublesome times.

“Will she really be able to forget the past?” Addie hadn’t intended to ask the question aloud.

Father and Mother exchanged looks before Father spoke. “I don’t know that she means she can forget it, simply not let it have more importance in her life than it should.”

Addie pretended to understand.

“You’ve done that too.” Father didn’t know her past had never been forgotten, nor did he know it had recently slapped her across the face just in case she thought she’d put it behind her.

“She told me moving forward begins with forgiveness,” Mother added.

Forgiveness? Addie had always thought she’d come to terms with her parents’ murder. She’d found relief when Morton Sturm was hanged. Discovered purpose and belonging with the Stones. And then she’d met Nash. She’d opened her heart to him before she knew his identity.

Was God playing a cruel joke on her? Testing her?

That evening as she prepared for bed, she pulled out her journal and opened it to her last entry.

She began to write, letting her thoughts and concerns flow from her fingers much as she used to let her words pour out, especially to her mama.

Hi, Mama. I know you can’t read this. But I feel like I’m talking to you, and you are listening. You were always so patient and understanding with my childish fears and concerns. I am no longer a child, and yet I still have fears and concerns. If anything, they’ve become bigger and more overwhelming. I told you about the man I met—Nash—and how I learned to care about him. He never said he loved me, but he gave me reason to think he did. He gave me hope for a future together.

She recalled how he’d held her to comfort her, how he invited her to see his ranch.

Like I said, his father was Morton Sturm. How can I look at him and not think of who his father is? Am I judging him?

After all, he hadn’t committed murder. He wasn’t even living nearby when it happened.

NOT ONLY HAD THE STONES TAUGHT HER TO SEEK CONSOLATION IN HER Bible, so had her mama. She’d helped Addie memorize many verses. “If you store them up in your mind, they will come to your remembrance when you need them.”

She opened the pages of her Bible but didn't read anything as one such verse came to the forefront. "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." The verse had been a comfort and challenge many times in her life.

Was she wasting the precious days God provided by holding to the past?

Another thought followed that, and a shout rose to her lips. She managed to hold it back. Not only was this the day the Lord had given—it was the life He'd given. One in which she should rejoice and accept the good things He'd given instead of wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Instead of overlooking the possibility that Nash loved her because she knew without a shred of uncertainty that she loved him. It was a truth she couldn't miss once she stopped dwelling on her past.

She pulled out a sheet of paper, and her pencil flew over the page as she wrote to Nash, begging forgiveness for her harsh judgment and unforgiveness.

I'd love to see your ranch and the house you built if that invitation is still open.

How should she sign the letter?

She smiled and chuckled. Why not go all the way?

She wrote, "Love, Addie."

Tomorrow, she'd post it, and then she'd wait for him to get his mail or for someone to take it to him.



NASH RODE HOME, THOUGHTS CHURNING ROUND AND ROUND. SHORTY and his determination to win back his wife's affection on his mind. Forgiveness or unforgivable. But the word *forgive* shouted the loudest.

Could Addie forgive him for simply being a Sturm?

Could he forgive—?

His thoughts jerked so hard Star wagged his head in protest.

He forgive? Forgive what?

Addie? She'd judged him because of his name. That wasn't fair. But yes, he could forgive that. He did forgive it.

All because of the name he'd long ago abandoned.

His father's name, not his.

His jaw creaked as it often did when he thought of his father.

His father had done evil and saddled Nash with that awful memory. Thankfully, Mama had refused to go to the trial or even admit she knew the man.

His knuckles popped with how hard he squeezed his fists.

What Morton Sturm had done was unforgivable.

Nash jolted, sending Star into a sideways prance. "Easy, boy."

He was guilty of unforgiveness even more than Addie.

It was time to let it go so he could move forward without the burden of carrying it.

Star did not like how Nash's thoughts sent jerks through his limbs. Nash dismounted and stood on the crest of the cliff, looking out at the jagged granite mountains and the lush undergrowth.

"They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever."

He believed the words were from a psalm. For certain, they were from the Bible. Gib had often said them as he looked out at his beloved mountains. "It means," he'd say, "that those who trust in God will be as solid as these mountains." Then he'd give a little chuckle. "Even more so, for our God is a sure foundation. A rock that can't be moved."

"Lord," Nash whispered. "I forgive my father. Thank You that I wasn't there when he did that. Thank You that Your love is not limited by what he did." He breathed in sweet peace. "And if it be Your will, please help me win Addie's forgiveness...and her love."

He swung into the saddle and continued onward, leading his borrowed horse, which gave him the perfect excuse for going to Golden Valley. Not that he needed an excuse. He would be like Shorty and work at winning Addie's heart no matter how long it took.

The streets were quiet, with only one wagon tied in front of a store. Nash rode to the livery barn, shuddering as he looked at the loft door. He delivered the horse, paid for its use, and turned toward the house where the preacher lived.

Addie stepped from the door. Nash tied Star's reins to the nearest hitching post and trotted toward her.

His pounding footsteps alerted her, and she turned.

Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. Then something warm replaced that look.

Was she glad to see him?

“Addie,” he said when he drew close enough to be heard.

“Nash.”

The air between them shimmered with uncertainty and, on his part, a large dose of hope.

“I’ve come to see you. I—” Whatever he’d meant to say vanished.

She waved a letter before him. “I wrote you. I was about to mail it. Here.” She thrust it into his hands. “Read it.”

He looked at the envelope.

“Not here.” She led him into a little clearing in a grove.

He broke the seal, unfolded the sheet of paper, and proceeded to read. A lump grew in his throat at her words asking for forgiveness. The lump expanded when he read her closing. *Love*.

“I’m so sorry for being judgmental.” Her voice wobbled. “I can’t hold on to the past and move forward.”

“I forgive you.” He choked back the lump. “I realized I needed to forgive my pa if I wanted to live a life free of that memory.”

“We’ve both had to learn about forgiveness.”

He rattled the letter. “Love, Addie?”

She lowered her head, but not before he glimpsed the red creep into her cheeks.

He caught her chin and tipped it upward, waiting for her eyes to lift to his. “Are you saying what I hope you’re saying?”

“I guess that depends. What do you hope for?”

“That love is a possibility between us.”

Her eyes shone. “I hope it is because that’s how I feel.”

“You love me?” His words were only a whisper. “Even though—”

She pressed her fingers to his mouth. “For who *you* are.”

He whooped, sending birds from the trees in startled protest, and pulled her into his arms. “Addie Stone, I love you with my whole heart.” He lowered his head and caught her ready lips with his.

Epilogue



Addie snuggled close to Nash as the wagon rattled over the narrow trail to his ranch.

In the days and weeks following their admission of love, he had come to town often. As they spent time together, walking and talking, sitting with the Stones over a meal, or attending church, her love for him had grown. He was everything she needed and wanted.

They journeyed to his ranch in his wagon—her first visit to what would be their future home. The narrow trail wound around rocks, and at times, the edge of the road dropped away, sending her heart plummeting to her toes. But it gave her reason to cling to Nash's side.

She laughed with joy.

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Happy?"

"So happy. For the most part, I've welcomed the life the Stones lived—moving often. It protected me from getting too close to people. But being with you...I realized I've been afraid to open my heart to love." Her smile flattened. "It hurts so much when that love is lost."

His warm fingers curled around her hand. "I'm not planning to leave. God willing, we will grow old together." His fingers tightened. "Surrounded by our children."

Tears welled up in Addie's eyes, making it difficult for her to speak. Instead, she pressed closer.

"Whoa." He stopped the wagon. "There's your first look at your home."

A peaceful sigh escaped her chest. The log house stood before a stand of tall pine trees, with the barn and corrals further away. Horses grazed in

the nearby pasture while a river sparkled in the distance. Sunlight bathed patches of green grass. Mountains rose like huge guardians.

“As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from henceforth even for ever,” Nash quoted, his voice heavy with emotion.

She lifted her face to him, and they shared a tender kiss, sealing their love for each other.

He flicked the reins, and they drove onward to the house. He helped her down and opened the door for her.

As they stepped inside, sunlight drew blocks of light on the polished wooden floor. To one side, she glimpsed a red cloth in the center of a wooden table. She chuckled as she recognized the irregular shape of a tree.

“Let me show you around.” Nash led her from room to room, making suggestions for changes she might like.

The tour complete, they stood in the center of the kitchen. “Addie, you’ve hardly said a word. Are you disappointed?”

“Disappointed? Not at all.” She grabbed his arms and faced him. “It’s perfect. Better than perfect.” Laughter bubbled up. “Must we wait so long to get married?”

“We promised the preacher we’d wait. It’s only two more weeks.” He sighed as he pulled her to his chest. “It feels like forever.”

“I know.”

He lowered his head and claimed another kiss, holding her in his strong arms. She rested her cheek against his chest, his heartbeat sounding in her ear. “You’re a good man, Nash. I’m proud to think of being your wife.”

He didn’t kiss her, instead, his arms tightened around her. “Thank you.”

She’d done her best to make him understand he didn’t bear any stigma because of who his father was, and she would continue to do so.

“Do you want to see the rest of the place?” he asked.

“Of course.” Though she didn’t mind if they simply stayed there holding each other. But she accompanied him outside to see the garden, the horses, and the barn. They eventually made their way to the river.

“This will be our spot.” Pride rang in his voice at the surprise he’d prepared. Silver glistened in his eyes.

He’d made a bench. She laughed and hugged him and gladly joined him there. The water gurgled by. The sun peeked through the branches. And her love for him swelled in her chest.

TWO WEEKS LATER...

Preacher Stone had been told about Nash's father. He said Nash's legal name would go on the documents, but as far as he was concerned, they could be known as Mr. and Mrs. Burns.

On a day bright with sunshine and hope, they were married before their small group of friends and family. Preacher Stone announced, "I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Burns. May God bless your marriage with joy, understanding, forgiveness, and a passel of children."

Addie and Nash laughed.

They welcomed the blessing.

Later, at the ranch, Nash swept her off her feet and carried her into the house. Before he lowered her to the floor, he said, "I promise I will do my best to fulfill the preacher's words. I hope to bring you joy. I promise to always seek to understand and forgive. And"—he kissed her gently—"I look forward to the passel of children." His next kiss was more insistent. "Addie, I am a happy man. I thank God for the stagecoach being delayed, so we got to know each other. You have filled my life with..." He grinned at her. "More than I thought possible." He set her on her feet but kept his arms around her.

Just before she lifted her face for another kiss, she whispered, "Nash, I love you more than words can say."

His kiss silenced the need for words.

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Blessings,

Linda Ford



About the Author



Best-selling and award winning author Linda Ford grew up devouring books and making up stories in her head, often late at night when she couldn't sleep. But she hadn't planned to write. Instead, she dreamed of running an orphanage. In a way, that dream came true. She got married, had 4 homemade children, adopted 10 and lived her dream. She lives on a small ranch in western Alberta, where she can see the mountains every day. She and her husband continue to enjoy their children and grandchildren. Even after **publishing over 100 books**, Linda still finds a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction in creating imaginary worlds and has no plans of slowing down in her passion of writing!

For more about Linda check out lindaford.org.

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