



Love Inspired HISTORICAL

Cowgirl Under the Mistletoe

Four Stones
Ranch

LOUISE M. GOUGE

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Cowgirl Under The Mistletoe

«HarperCollins»

Gouge L. M.

Cowgirl Under The Mistletoe / L. M. Gouge — «HarperCollins»,

A Colorado Christmas Courtship Deputy Grace Eberly can outshoot and outride most men in Esperanza, Colorado...but lassoing a husband is an impossible task. At least she has her good friend Reverend Micah Thomas to keep her company. When outlaws threaten their community, the two join forces to stop them, and Grace's feelings for the reverend deepen. But she's sure he'd never love a too-tall cowgirl in trousers and boots. Micah believes that it's time to find himself a wife—someone sweet and ladylike who can help him better serve the town. So why do none of the elegant young women of his acquaintance stir his heart like the feisty tomboy deputy? As they work to bring peace to the community, will Grace and Micah finally see that they make the perfect team?

A Colorado Christmas Courtship

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“I'm thinking of changing my style.”

Micah looked at Grace. “What do you think?” He indicated the bowler he sported, so different from his Stetson. Although both were black, the bowler changed his look from that of a man who belonged in the West to a citified dandy.

Grace coughed out a little laugh, unable to subdue a slightly derisive edge to her tone. “You goin' courtin' or something, Rev?”

He turned his attention back to the mirror. “I've been thinking about it.” He spoke absently, as if talking to himself.

Grace's heart plummeted to her stomach. Now she'd lose his friendship for sure. Then what would she do? One thing was sure. She wanted the best for her friend, so maybe she should help him look for a young lady who was worthy of him. That idea didn't sit too well with her, though she couldn't imagine why.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *Cowgirl Under the Mistletoe*, the fourth book in my Four Stones Ranch series. I always love to read a Christmas story during the holiday season, so I'm pleased that this one is coming out this month. I hope you enjoyed the adventures of my heroine, Grace Eberly, and my hero, Reverend Micah Thomas. When I began writing this series, I had no idea that Micah, the wise, steady young minister who advised my three previous heroes in matters of the heart, would find an unlikely love match of his own with one of the feisty Eberly girls. My heroine also grew naturally from the previous stories. After Grace courageously saved the town of Esperanza in *Cowboy Seeks a Bride*, I knew I wanted to reward her with her own story.

My setting for this series is the beautiful San Luis Valley of Colorado, where I lived as a teenager, graduated from Alamosa High School, and attended Adams State College. Later my husband, David, and I settled in Monte Vista, where my parents owned and operated a photography business, Stanger Studios. Three of our children were born in Monte Vista, and one was born in Alamosa. Even though we moved to Florida in 1980, my heart remained attached to my former home in Colorado. Writing this series has been a sweet, nostalgic trip for me.

Those familiar with the history of this area of Colorado may recognize a little bit of Monte Vista in my fictional town, Esperanza. I could have used the real town, but then I would have shortchanged the true pioneers of Monte Vista, who deserve accolades for their courage and foresight in building such a fine community. In addition, I wanted the freedom of artistic license necessary to create an interesting story without offending the residents of my former home. Any resemblance between my characters and those who actually settled in this area is strictly coincidental.

If you enjoyed Grace and Micah's story, be on the lookout for more stories set in my fictional town of Esperanza.

I love to hear from my readers, so if you have a comment, please contact me through my website: blog.louisemgouge.com.

Blessings,

Louise M. Gouge

Florida author LOUISE M. GOUGE writes historical fiction for Harlequin's Love Inspired Historical line. She received the prestigious Inspirational Readers' Choice Award in 2005 and placed in 2011 and 2015; she also placed in the Laurel Wreath contest in 2012. When she isn't writing, she and her husband, David, enjoy visiting historical sites and museums. Please visit her website at blog.louisemgouge.com.

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

All things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

—Romans 8:28

This book and series are dedicated to the intrepid pioneers who settled the San Luis Valley of Colorado in the mid to late 1800s. They could not have found a more beautiful place to make their homes than in this vast 7500-foot-deep valley situated between the majestic Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountain ranges. It has been many years since I lived in the San Luis Valley, so my thanks go to Pam Williams of Hooper, Colorado, for her extensive on-site research on my behalf. With their permission, I named two of my characters after her and her husband, Charlie. These dear old friends are every bit as kind and wise as their namesakes. I also want to thank my beloved husband of fifty-one years, David Gouge, for his loving support as I pursue my dream of writing love stories to honor the Lord.

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October 1884

Esperanza, Colorado

The Denver & Rio Grande train pulled out of the Esperanza station, sending last night's dusting of early snow into small flurries. They rose up to meet the white smoke streaming from the engine and leaving behind the smell of burning coal. As Deputy Grace Eberly watched the departure, she swiped away an unexpected tear and then glanced around. It wouldn't do to have folks see their deputy sheriff crying like some silly girl. Fortunately, the only person left on the platform was good ol' Reverend Thomas, who really wasn't all that old, just friendly. He smiled and touched the wide brim of his well-worn black Stetson.

"You're going to miss your sister, aren't you?"

She stepped over to him and gave him her best deputy scowl. "You'd better not tell anybody you saw me cry." Tall as she was, she could stare down on most men but stood eye to eye with the reverend when she wore her boots.

"You? Cry?" He grinned in that annoying way of his that showed he wasn't in the least bit intimidated by her badge, her gun or her height. "Not at all. I assumed you had some grit in your eyes."

She chuckled. He could always be counted on to cover for folks, especially her. Of all the people in town who might want to condemn her for being a trouser-wearing female peace officer, this man of God would seem the most likely. Instead, he appeared to understand her abiding need to hold outlaws accountable for their evil activities. When her next-younger sister, Beryl, had been shot by that no-account Dathan Hardison and his slimy partner, Deke Smith, the minister had been a great source of comfort to the family. Never once did he condemn Grace for crippling Deke with a well-aimed bullet. She could almost allow that his prayers above all others had kept Beryl from dying.

Thoughts of her closest sister brought another annoying swell of emotion. Beryl had survived the shooting, went off to boarding school for a spell and then came home only to fall in love with an English dandy who'd come to town for a holiday. Now she and Percy lived in England, and the family would probably never see them again.

To make matters worse, Grace's next-to-youngest sister, Laurie, now rode on the train speeding eastward along the tracks. Once it crossed La Veta Pass through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, it would head north, taking her back to music school in Denver. Her short visit home had ended far too soon. Grace would miss her something terrible.

With Maisie, the oldest of the five sisters, busy with her doctor husband and their new baby boy, Grace considered looking to their youngest sister for companionship. But Georgia walked around with her head in the clouds reading books all the time. Grace didn't care much for books. Besides, at fifteen, Georgia was a bit young to depend on for a close, womanly friendship. With Beryl and Laurie gone, Grace had never felt so alone in all of her twenty-three years.

Sure as shooting, none of the other unattached younger women in the area wanted to pal around with her. And, like Maisie, her married friends had husbands and children to tend to. But, also sure as shooting, Grace never expected to marry. What man wanted a wife who stood half a head taller than he did and could likely outride and outshoot him?

Grace had watched the dainty behavior of her friends Susanna and Marybeth, who'd married the two oldest Northam brothers and lived at the next ranch over. She'd admired the gals' fancy manners and pretty speech. Even Grace's younger sisters had begun to copy those female ways, although they still worked the family ranch like men, as all of them had since childhood. But Grace couldn't bring herself to act all silly and helpless around men. The cowhands on their family ranch would laugh themselves blue in the face if a giant of a woman like her ever put on such airs.

Being tall and broad-shouldered did give her some advantages on her days off when she did her share of helping her folks keep the ranch going. She could buck hay bales all day long and had never seen a mustang she couldn't wrangle, another reason men steered clear of her. What did she care? Weren't a single one she cared to take up with.

"Grace." The minister still stood by the yellow clapboard train station. He'd been mighty nice to join the family in seeing Laurie off, but for some reason he'd hung around. Maybe waiting for a telegram. She could hear the clickety-click of Charlie Williams's telegraph just inside the open window.

"Yeah? You need something, Rev?"

"Indeed, I do." His waved a hand toward Main Street. "Mrs. Winsted's daughter-in-law opened that new ice cream parlor last week. Have you been there?"

"Nope, sure haven't. Seems sort of disloyal to Miss Pam." Never mind that Grace loved ice cream. She'd keep taking her noon meals at Williams's Café.

"Not at all." His Southern drawl rolled out pleasantly on his baritone voice, just like when he preached his heartwarming sermons every Sunday. "In fact, Miss Pam can't say enough nice things about Nelly Winsted's desserts."

"That a fact?" She pondered the idea for a moment. "You don't think it's too cold for ice cream?" The October wind hadn't picked up for the day, but there was still a bite in the air.

"It's never too cold for ice cream." He chuckled in that kindly way of his, and her heart felt an odd little kick. Oh, no. She would not let herself grow feelings for the unmarried preacher. Every unattached girl for miles around wanted to lasso this handsome man and drag him to the altar. She would not line up and make a fool of herself like the rest of them did. Nothing would ruin her reputation as a competent, dependable, levelheaded deputy faster than her acting like a moon-eyed heifer.

"Would you like to give it a try?" From the way he asked the question, Grace guessed the minister was looking for companionship, too, if only for this morning. Safe companionship, with no worries she'd try to hogtie him. She'd proved that to him ever since that time several years ago when he'd bought her box dinner during the church fund-raiser, disappointing a whole passel of girls who'd hoped he'd choose theirs.

While they'd eaten, the two of them had discussed Bible verses she'd been wondering about, a safe subject for any two folks, and she'd learned a whole heap of important stuff about the Good Book, the only book she considered worth reading. Since then, they'd had several more chin-wags about the scriptures, and they'd grown comfortable around each other. That day at the fund-raiser, she'd figured he'd bid on her box to keep her from being left out. He was kind that way, and she admired him for it. Admired, nothing more. She wouldn't ruin a good friendship by thinking on useless feelings.

"Come on, Grace. Let's try out Nelly's place."

Right about now, a big dish of ice cream sounded like the perfect way to console herself over Laurie's departure. Food could comfort a body that way, especially sweet food. "If you insist."

"I do." He offered his arm.

She stared at it like it was a long-tailed jackrabbit.

"Um..." More of those foolish feelings wound around her heart, so she stepped back. "Don't mean to be rude, Rev, but as deputy sheriff, I'm gonna decline your gentlemanly offer, if it's all the same to you." She offered a crooked smile. "Appearances, y'know."

"Ah, yes." His eyes revealed no offense at her refusal. "I understand."

Good thing he did, because she didn't. She didn't like this brand-new giddy response to an old friend. Must be all the weddings that had happened in recent months. But she'd locked away her hopes of marriage as securely as most girls locked up their hope chests. No sense at all in dreaming about things that would never be. She'd leave that to her dreamy-eyed youngest sister, Georgia.

* * *

Micah Thomas liked keeping company with Grace Eberly. Unlike most other unmarried girls in his congregation, she never behaved in that giddy, flirtatious manner that made him uncomfortable. She had a level head and an honest way of looking people straight in the eye. Her friendship was the perfect antidote to this strange depression he'd felt lately. Until last Friday, when he'd joined two more local couples in holy wedlock, he'd been able to conduct weddings without a single thought of marriage for himself. Like the Apostle Paul, he'd always felt called to remain single so he could do the Lord's work without the encumbrance and expense of a wife and children.

But even before last week's ceremony, he'd begun to sense that something was missing in his life. It didn't help that Genesis 2:18 kept coming to mind. If the verse was true—and he believed every verse in the Holy Bible was God-breathed truth—that “it is not good that the man should be alone,” then the Lord would have to bring him a “helpmeet” from someplace, because he certainly had no plans to court any of the young ladies in the congregation. That would stir up all sorts of hornets' nests, namely among certain mothers, each of whom thought her daughter would make a perfect preacher's wife.

Micah knew better. It took a special woman to marry a minister, one with her eyes wide open, knowing her husband's congregation would hold her to a higher standard than anyone else, higher even than the preacher. Such a woman would have to be especially strong both spiritually and emotionally, and more than a little sure of herself as a person. Some ministers' wives he knew of had faded into sad little shadows under such demanding scrutiny. He would have to make sure it never happened to the woman he married.

If he married. He still had a hard time reconciling marriage and his God-given ministry, which took all of his waking time and then some. Then there was the matter of the small salary he earned as the minister of a small-town church. Folks gave what they could, but it wasn't enough to support a wife. If the Lord wanted him to marry, He'd have to bless a particular enterprise Micah had undertaken a while back, one that no one in the congregation knew about, or needed to know about, even though it was perfectly honest and aboveboard. But the chances were slim it would be successful.

“What's your favorite ice cream flavor?” Grace shot him a glance without missing a step, her stride as long as his, yet as graceful as that of a mountain lioness.

“Back home we had blackberries growing wild on our land, so I'm partial to blackberry syrup over vanilla.” He pictured his family's Virginia home, tragically broken by the war. Because of his uncle's stand against slavery and Micah's agreement with his uncle, only one friend had ever kept contact with Micah's branch of the family after the war. Recently that friend, Joel Sutton, had written to say some folks were coming around to mend fences and renew old friendships. Micah would have to think about asking him to send him a bride, just as Rand Northam's family had done for him. After three years of marriage, Rand and Marybeth were still as happy a couple as Micah had ever seen.

The more he thought about it, the more the idea appealed to him. After all, in the Bible, Abraham had sent a trusted servant to choose a wife for his son Isaac, and Isaac had loved Rebecca from the moment he laid eyes on her. Not every couple had to know each other for a long while before they fell in love and married. Arranged marriages could turn out just as well. If Micah decided to go on a quest for a wife, he might do well to seek Joel's help.

“Maybe,” Grace said, “we ought to get a group together and go up to Raspberry Gulch next summer so you can get your fill of berries.” Her blue eyes, no longer tear-filled, sparkled in the midmorning sunshine, as though she were ready for the excursion today.

“Sounds like a fine idea.” Anything to keep her spirits up. Micah had noticed her drooping shoulders at church yesterday, the way she used to carry herself before she earned everyone's respect for stopping an attempted bank robbery. On Sunday, he'd figured she was missing her younger sister even before Laurie left. Today he could see how right he'd been.

Grace really was a pretty girl, despite her tomboy ways, with a sweet face and ready smile. She and her sisters all had the same fiery red hair. But where the others had masses of fuzzy curls, Grace's

thick waist-length hair was straight, except where the ends curled up in a thick cluster. She usually wore it tucked up under the wide-brimmed cowboy hat that now hung down her back on its leather strings. For some reason, today she'd let her hair blow in the autumn breeze. He liked the look on her. He'd tell her that, but she didn't receive compliments too well.

They arrived at Nelly's Ice Cream Parlor, and Grace opened the door to usher Micah in. He wouldn't chide her for it. It was just her way, as when she refused to take his arm. Many other girls in town would have grabbed onto him as though he were a prized bull to be shown off.

"Thank you." He stepped over the threshold into the warm, bright room and removed his hat. Right away, the aromas of cinnamon, coffee and sugar filled his nostrils and whetted his appetite for something sweet.

Several customers waved or called out a greeting as they sat at small round tables dotting the room. The backs of the white wrought iron chairs were shaped like hearts, and more than one person seemed to be eyeing his or her companion with a hint of romance. Micah could see he would be conducting more weddings in the near future. Once again, that odd melancholy crept into his chest, this time even stronger. Yes, he needed to look for a wife. It truly was not good for a man to be alone.

* * *

"Welcome, Reverend Thomas, Deputy Eberly." Nelly Winsted came out from behind the serving counter, drying her hands on a white towel with red stripes. "Have a seat wherever you like." When the Rev responded to her greeting in his usual friendly way, she gave him a sugary smile that reminded Grace the woman was an unattached widow.

An odd protectiveness sprang up in her chest. The last thing the Rev needed was another female chasing after him. Best to charge right in and head her off in a different direction. "Howdy, Nelly. How's business?" Silly question. The room was near to full of customers, so anybody could see she was doing well.

Nelly turned a dimmer smile her way. "Why, just fine, Deputy, thank you. My mother-in-law was right when she invited me out here to open my store. Everybody likes ice cream, don't they? Now, what may I bring you?" Her gaze returned to the Rev, and her smile lit up again.

Honestly, the woman was thirty-six if she was a day, way too old for the Rev, who was just shy of thirty. She had a thirteen-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter, to boot. Maybe that explained her flirty ways. She wanted a pa for her children and figured the handsome preacher would be the best influence on them. Grace couldn't fault her for that.

"Let's sit over here." The Rev waved a hand toward a table by the window, which did Grace's heart good. He wasn't ashamed to sit where every passing citizen of the town could see them together. That was a long sight different from some other unmarried men in town who only spoke to her when they had a crime to report. Not that she saw the Rev's actions as favoritism. He treated everybody in his flock with the same kindly regard. Weren't nary a person in these parts he wouldn't chat with till the cows came home, if that person had a spiritual need or just a listening ear.

As they took their seats, he said, "Miss Nelly, I'll have some vanilla ice cream, if you please. Would you happen to have any blackberry syrup to go on top?"

"Why, yes, I do. I'll bring it right out. And you, Deputy Eberly?"

"Same. No syrup."

The little woman bustled away like she was on important business. Grace supposed she was, especially with supporting two children all by herself. When she brought their glass bowls of ice cream, she'd added a touch of whipped cream and some pecans to the Rev's two large blackberry-topped scoops. Grace's bowl held one small plain scoop. She could barely hold in a laugh at the widow's obvious ploy.

"Will there be anything else?"

The Rev ordered coffee, and Grace gave a nod that she'd have some, too.

After Nelly brought their coffee, she focused on Grace. “By the by, Deputy, did my mother-in-law happen to tell you about her stolen items?”

Grace sat up straight. “No, ma’am, she didn’t.” She hated to leave her ice cream unfinished, but such was the nature of her job. “I’ll check into it right away.” She shoved back from the table.

“No need to hurry, Deputy.” The Rev set a hand on hers, sending a bothersome tingle up her arm. She quickly dismissed it. “If the matter were urgent, Mrs. Winsted would have contacted you right away.”

Grace didn’t want anybody to think she shirked her duty, but what he said made sense. She glanced at Nelly, who seemed less than pleased by the Rev’s words. “Did Mrs. Winsted report the thefts to Sheriff Lawson?”

“Could be.”

“I sure would regret letting this fine ice cream of yours go to waste, Nelly.” She gave her a crooked grin. “Mind if I finish it before I check into those thefts?”

Nelly blinked and sputtered, offering a strange combination of smile for the compliment and a huff of annoyance, probably because Grace wanted to stick around. “Of course not.”

Grace scooted her chair back up to the table and dug in, taking small bites like her dainty friend Rosamond would instead of filling her spoon and shoveling it all into her mouth like she wanted to do. “Mmm-mmm. Mighty good.”

The Rev also took small bites like he wasn’t in any hurry to finish either. “Now, Deputy, which Bible passage shall we discuss today?”

“What—?” Grace blinked just as she caught the hint in the Rev’s eyes. “Oh. Um. Well. I, uh, I’ve been troubled by Romans 8:28—”

“Excuse me.” Nelly bustled away again. She was the only skinny female Grace had ever seen who could bustle when she walked.

His eyes twinkling, the Rev concentrated on his ice cream for a moment before asking, “What in particular troubles you about the verse?”

Now she was on the spot, but he was the rascal who put her there. “I suppose ‘all things work together for the good’ means ‘all things.’” She released a sigh, thinking of her sisters who no longer lived here, especially Beryl. This man had a gift for seeing right through a person, so she might as well open up, at least partways. “I understand why Laurie wanted to go to music school, ’cause she sings and plays piano so pretty. She may even decide to come back and teach here in the Valley. That’d be a blessing for sure. But I just wish Beryl and Percy had decided to buy some land here instead of going back to England to settle down.”

Understanding filled his remarkable gray eyes, fringed all the way around as they were with dark lashes. My, they gave him a particularly appealing look. “You were especially close to Beryl, weren’t you?”

Grace nodded. “Growing up we looked almost like twins.” She coughed out a dismal laugh. “Until I grew taller than our older sister when I was twelve and she was thirteen.” Shrugging away the memory of those awkward times, when all the boys on the schoolyard began to taunt her, she sighed. “Beryl and I still did everything together until...” An unexpected lump clogged her throat.

“Until the bank robbery?”

The kindness in those fine eyes threatened to undo her, and she could only nod.

“Beryl never blamed you for her injury. She believed you did the right thing to stop that robbery. And remember, you saved Marybeth from the outlaws. Everyone admired your courage, especially Beryl.”

“I know. Last year, after she and Rosamond opened their high school, we got close again, and she made sure I knew she didn’t hold a grudge against me.” She chuckled softly. “I even helped her straighten out a couple of boys in her science class.”

“Good for you. I know she appreciated it.” His gentle smile didn’t waver, while most men would have scowled at her ability to tame unruly scamps both young and full grown.

Grace scooped the creamy remains from her bowl into her mouth and savored the rich vanilla flavor. “Gotta say this for Nelly, she sure can whip up a fine batch of ice cream.” She shoved back from the table, stood and adjusted her gun belt around her hips. “Guess I’d better head over to the mercantile and see what Mrs. Winsted has to say about those robberies.”

The Rev took his last bite and stood, too. “I’ll go with you. I need to purchase a few supplies for the parsonage.” He placed a dime on the table to pay for the ice cream.

“Thanks. I’ll pay next time.” Grace wouldn’t make a scene, but she also wouldn’t let him pay for all of their fellowship times. Her job and her share of the family ranch provided more than enough to give her a comfortable life and far more than his measly salary as the church’s pastor. Maybe she should sneak an extra fifty cents or more into the plate each Sunday to help with his support. That’d buy him some good cooking at the Williams’s Café or maybe a new Sunday shirt.

“I just might take you up on that, Grace.” He put on his hat and made it to the door before her and opened it. “Anytime you want to talk about your sister, I’ll be happy to listen. Or Romans 8:28.”

“I just might take you up on that, Rev.” She echoed his words in a singsong way to show him she was all right now. He rewarded her with one of those teasing smiles. They had an odd sort of understanding in their friendship, it seemed, and she liked it a whole heap that it was two-sided.

Their boots thumped in rhythm on the boardwalk as they approached Mrs. Winsted’s mercantile, marking a companionable cadence. A quick look revealed that Dub Gleason and his gang, a bunch of worthless bums, weren’t sitting in front of the store. Maybe it was too cold for them. She’d attended school with them, and they still liked to torment her with insults when they thought nobody else was looking.

Grace couldn’t guess why the Rev wanted to stay in her company today, but she wouldn’t complain. It did her heart good to know she had a friend to confide in. Or just to spend time with. ‘Course, it wouldn’t last for long because one of these days, he’d give in and marry one of those pretty little gals who clamored for his attention, and propriety would cut short their friendship. It would be hard to take a step back and regard him only as her pastor. In fact, the thought soured the ice cream in her belly.

* * *

Although he didn’t need to refill his pantry quite yet, Micah silently thanked the Lord for giving him an excuse to stay in Grace’s company. At the train depot, he’d felt the Lord’s nudging to stick around and see how he could help her. He was pleased to see she seemed to have perked up a little over the past hour. Still, despite her cheerful words, her eyes exuded a lingering sadness, and he couldn’t guess how to help her overcome her loss. He’d have to make it a matter of more concerted prayer because Grace Eberly was an important asset to this town and the surrounding community. Both she and everyone else needed to recognize that.

Welcoming them both to the mercantile, Mrs. Winsted first turned her attention to Micah. “What can I do for you today, Reverend Thomas?”

Micah thought she should assist Grace first, but if he said something to that effect, both ladies might end up being embarrassed. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll need some flour, cornmeal, beans, rice, bacon—”

“A bit early for your usual monthly order, isn’t it?”

Micah gave her a bland smile. “I’m honored that you remember my schedule.”

“We aim to please.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Homer!” Her clerk emerged from the back room. “Reverend Thomas’s regular monthly order.”

Micah gave her a slight bow and approached the counter where Homer Bean had begun to assemble his purchases. Behind him, he could hear Grace ask Mrs. Winsted about the thefts.

“Why, I’ve already told Sheriff Lawson everything I know. Such odd things to be stolen and odd that I didn’t notice them being carried out. A coffeepot, a bag of coffee, some tins of food, a box of expensive linen stationery.” The sensible shopkeeper’s voice held an uncharacteristic note of worry. “I gave the sheriff a complete list, and he said he’d look into the matter.”

“Yes, ma’am, he and I both will.” Grace’s soft response held a calming quality, almost like a mother soothing her frightened child. “You can count on us to make sure your shop is protected.”

Micah’s heart warmed. Grace certainly had a comforting way about her. He couldn’t imagine why some cowboy hadn’t come along and married her. Maybe while he was searching for his bride, he could search for a husband for his good friend. She deserved a fine Christian husband to show her how remarkable she was. Of course, it would take an equally remarkable man to be her partner in marriage.

“Can I help you carry these groceries, Rev?” Grace came to the counter and started to lift the wooden box Homer had filled.

“Thanks, but I can manage.” Micah took the box from her. No Southern lady he’d known would ever offer to carry such a load or even be able to, but these cowgirls were a different breed.

“I almost forgot your mail.” Mrs. Winsted, also the town’s postmistress, retrieved some letters from her little cage at the back of the store and tucked them into Micah’s box.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Two letters. More than he usually received in a month. An odd little kick smote him in his chest. Would he already have an answer from New York? No time now to check the fronts of the envelopes. With his hands too full to doff his hat to Mrs. Winsted, he gave her a friendly nod. “I’ll settle my bill soon.” And if that letter was the one he’d been looking for, maybe he wouldn’t always have to keep a tab. Though he mustn’t get his hopes up too high in that regard.

She shook her head. “I’m not worried about you paying your bill, Reverend. Not like I worry about some in this town.”

Micah paused briefly. This wasn’t the moment to inquire about her concern, so he’d save it for another day. “Thank you.”

“Well,” Grace said as they left the store, “I’d best head over to the office and see what Sheriff Lawson has to say about those thefts.” She touched the brim of her hat, a manly gesture he wished she wouldn’t do. “Thanks for the ice cream.”

“You’re more than welcome.” With the heavy box in his hands, Micah couldn’t return the courtesy of doffing his hat, but she was already headed down the street anyway. He lifted a silent prayer that someday a fine man would come along and treat Grace like the lady she was, the way she deserved to be treated.

Micah sighed. Dear Grace. If the Lord wanted him to help her, He’d have to show him how. One thing he’d learned in his seven years of ministering to this congregation was that a wise pastor never tried to change a person. His job was to love and accept his flock as they were and let the Lord make the changes. One thing did occur to him. Finding the thief might take her mind off of her sister’s departure. Maybe he could even help her investigation. He would enjoy having more time in her company.

By the time he’d walked the two blocks to the parsonage, his heavy load was wearing on his arms. He managed to balance the box against one hip as he opened the door, which he never locked. Other than storekeepers, no one in these parts locked up, but if thieves were at work, he might have to reconsider that practice and warn others to do the same.

After putting away his groceries, he took the letters from the box. The first was from Joel Sutton. Micah had been thinking of Joel not an hour ago. Maybe the Lord was nudging him to write that letter to his friend and ask for help finding a mail-order bride. It all depended on what the second letter said.

Sure enough, it was from New York. His pulse racing, Micah tore it open. A bank note fell to the floor. He snatched it up. Two hundred dollars! Gulping so loudly he could hear himself, he slumped into a chair to read the missive.

Dear Mr. Thomas,

We are delighted to inform you that your novel has been accepted for publication by Wyatt, Leader, and Davis Enterprises. Please find enclosed an advance on the sales we fully expect your exciting story to garner. In addition, we hope you will consider Wyatt, Leader, and Davis Enterprises when seeking to publish your next story. Our readers eagerly await every such book about the Wild West. With the added element of Christian morality infusing your story, we expect to greatly broaden our readership. Although our authors generally prefer to use their own names in an effort to find fame, your chosen nom de plume, A Cowboy Storyteller, seems most fitting in this case.

Unless we hear from you to the contrary, we will rush the publication of this delightful novel so it will be in the hands of numerous booksellers by early December, just in time for Christmas. With its seasonal theme, we can expect sales to set records, thereby generating significant royalties for you.

Please sign and return the enclosed contract. We urge you to send another story as soon as possible. Yours sincerely...

Micah laughed out loud. If this wasn't the Lord's leading, he didn't know what was. Now he could get married. Whatever Joel said in his letter, Micah would answer right away. To his shock, Joel's letter announced that he and his sister would arrive in Esperanza the first week in December. Displeased with the failure of Reconstruction, they were leaving the South in hopes of finding a more peaceful life in Colorado. Joel also said his sister, Miss Electra Sutton, had recently graduated from finishing school, and she hoped to find an upstanding Christian husband who held on to none of the bitterness many felt over the war.

Micah laughed again. "Lord, You never cease to amaze me. You put the thoughts in my mind even as You were laying out Your plan. Are You bringing a bride right to my doorstep?"

As a finishing school graduate, Miss Sutton would be a great asset to his ministry. Further, with the sale of his book, he would be able to support her without asking the church for a raise in salary, something he knew they couldn't afford to give him. Micah recalled that the newly married Rosamond Northam Wakefield, also a finishing school graduate, always wore the latest fashions. Miss Sutton would no doubt be fashionable, as well, and he would have to support her wardrobe choices.

What would she think of him? Of his far from fashionable and somewhat threadbare clothes? Only one solution came to mind. He would take some of his earnings from the sale of the book and change his entire wardrobe, beginning with his old broad-brimmed Stetson. One of those handsome new bowler hats would be more fitting for a minister.

He'd go over to the haberdasher's right now and make that purchase. After that, he would visit the tailor next door. Joel and Miss Sutton would be here in December. That should give him enough time to have new clothes made.

He laughed aloud again. In a few short hours, the Lord had certainly shaken the very foundations of his simple bachelor life. And Micah couldn't be happier about it.

* * *

After leaving the Rev, Grace headed back to the sheriff's office just north of the bank. She found Sheriff Lawson seated at his desk shuffling through wanted posters. He looked up at her with a scowl.

"Bad news, Grace. Those varmints who tried to rob the bank in '81 have escaped from Cañon City State Penitentiary with the help of their old gang."

Her blood turned cold, and her heart seemed to stop. She drew in a slow breath to calm herself and hide her alarm. "That a fact?"

"Just got a letter from the prison warden. Hardison's gang helped him and Smith break away from a work crew bustin' up rocks in a quarry near the prison." He snorted in disgust. "Turns out I

put three of his gang in a Kansas prison five years ago.” He shuffled the posters again. “I’m looking through these to see if I can find pictures of Hardison and Smith. Not counting the newcomers in the past three years, I’m probably the only person around here who doesn’t know what they look like.”

Even though the crime had taken place over two years before Lawson came to town, he knew all about their robbery attempt and how Grace, two of her sisters and two of the Northam brothers had kept them from succeeding.

“Word from other inmates is that they vowed revenge on the people who stopped them.” The sheriff held up a poster briefly before continuing his search. “Said they’d ‘finish the job,’ just like their gang said to me when they were sentenced.”

Grace snorted, doing her best to sound unconcerned. “Just let them try.” Brave words, but bravado wouldn’t keep her friends from harm.

All things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

The verse she and the Rev had briefly discussed came to mind. Right now it didn’t seem to her that these “things” were working together for good. But at least Beryl and Laurie would be safe from the two varmints, as would Tolley Northam, who’d gone to law school in Boston just over a year ago. If Hardison’s gang was set on revenge, the folks who’d especially need to be on the lookout were Rand and Marybeth Northam. And Grace, of course.

On her way home this afternoon, she would make it her business to inform the whole Northam family about the breakout. And her own ma and pa would also need to keep their eyes peeled and their guns handy. Grace’s family never went anyplace without weapons because of snakes and coyotes in these parts, but now they’d have to be even more careful of the two-legged kind of danger. At least Georgia hadn’t been involved in stopping the robbery, so the outlaws wouldn’t be after her. Unless they decided to—

She shook off her forebodings. In spite of the threats, she had other matters to attend to.

“Mrs. Winsted tells me she had some things stolen from her mercantile.” Grace wouldn’t wait for Lawson to get around to telling her about the thefts. Sometimes he forgot to mention important stuff and yet expected her to know it. Maybe it was because his wife anticipated all of his thoughts. Grace never made any claim to being a mind reader. If she ever married, which she wouldn’t, she’d let her man know from the start that he needed to speak out.

“Yep.” The sheriff combed a hand through his thick, graying hair. “I figure it’s some local boys just getting into mischief.”

“If we catch ’em and put ’em behind bars for a few days, that’ll give ’em a scare they won’t soon forget.” Grace checked the coffeepot sitting on the potbellied stove. A slow fire kept the brew simmering, and even this early in the day, it had already turned to sludge. She settled for a drink of water from the cold crock Mrs. Lawson kept on the side cabinet.

“Maybe get them into Sunday school classes.” The sheriff accepted the tin cup Grace offered him. “Nate and Rand Northam have turned around several boys with their good teaching.”

Grace nodded, although she still thought a few days in jail would be a good place for wayward boys to start. “Just have to find the troublemakers.”

They tossed around several ideas, not the least of which was asking other merchants in town whether they’d noticed small items missing from their stores. They’d also need to inform folks about the outlaws.

“I’ll go over to the hotel.” Grace adjusted the hang of her gun belt on her hips. “The shops over there might be easy targets with all the comings and goings of unfamiliar folks.”

“Yep. You do that.” Lawson continued to pore over the posters like he was digging for gold. “I’ll check the other end of town.”

“Yessir.” Grace ambled out of the office and strode down Main Street toward the Esperanza Arms. She’d never understand why Rosamond and her new dandy husband, Garrick, had chosen that

name. Maybe Garrick's uncle, the Earl of something or other, had planted that English-sounding name on the hotel. Maybe they'd named it for the wing currently being added to the north end of the building and the wing they planned to build to the west. Grace reckoned they couldn't exactly call it the Esperanza Wings. She laughed out loud at the thought.

"What's funny?" The Rev fell into step with Grace as she continued down the dusty street.

"You following me, Rev?" She kept on laughing, even as her heart did a stupid little hop.

"Not on purpose." He chuckled. "We just always seem to be going in the same direction."

A bothersome shiver, not at all unpleasant, swept down Grace's spine. She had to stop these involuntary reactions to him. No man had ever affected her this way. The Rev himself hadn't ever. It was downright nonsense. But when did feelings ever have anything to do with good sense? She mentally put her foot down, ordering those feelings to vamoose.

"So, what were you laughing about all by yourself?" He seemed in a jolly mood himself.

She dared to cut him a glance, knowing he'd be wearing that teasing grin. She was right, so she returned a smirk. "I was just wondering why they named the hotel what they did."

They stepped up on the boardwalk outside the building at the same moment Rosamond and Garrick Wakefield emerged through the fancy etched glass doors.

"Well, what do you know?" The Rev waved a hand toward the couple, who'd shared a double wedding with Beryl and Percy last year. "Here are the folks to ask."

"Ask what?" Rosamond's eyes shone with pure joy, just as they had on her wedding day. They'd recently returned from their honeymoon and now were teaching at the high school as well as running the hotel.

Grace tamped down a mild case of envy, both for their happiness and for their getting to see Beryl last summer.

The Rev shook hands with the Englishman. "Good morning, Garrick. How's business?"

"Excellent, Reverend." Garrick's brown-eyed gaze lit on his pretty wife, and he smiled. "Couldn't be better."

Grace wondered what it would feel like to have a man she loved look at her like that.

Rosamond sidled over to her and touched her arm. "What was your question?"

Grace traded a look with the Rev, and they both laughed.

"I was just wondering why you called the hotel the Esperanza Arms when it's wings you're adding, not arms. Why not call it the Esperanza Wings?"

While the Rev and Rosamond laughed heartily, Garrick tilted his head and blinked. Then he chuckled. "And you came all the way over here together to ask that?"

Grace hiked up her gun belt. "I don't know why the Rev came, but I'm here on official business."

Everyone sobered right up.

"What is it, Grace?" Rosamond lifted her hand and came just short of putting her arm around Grace's waist, as she might any other female friend.

Grace stepped back an inch or two before that could happen so she could maintain a look of authority. "Two things. There's been some items stolen from Mrs. Winsted's mercantile. I need to check with the shopkeepers here at the hotel—" she waved a hand toward the row of six shops that lined the south side of the hotel along Main Street "—to see if they've had the same trouble. Anybody said anything to you?" She directed her question toward Garrick.

"Not to me." He looked at Rosamond. "Sweetheart?"

"Not at all. Surely they would tell us. Don't you think it's a good sign they haven't reported a robbery?"

"Pretty good." Grace nodded. "I'll just tell 'em to be on the lookout. Sheriff Lawson thinks it might be boys out for mischief."

"What's the other thing?" Rosamond moved back over to Garrick, and he placed a protective arm around her. She nestled under it, and they both stared at her like they were expecting bad news.

Grace wondered what it would feel like to have a tall, strong man put his arm around her that way instead of her always having to be the strong one. She cleared her throat crossly to dismiss the foolish idea.

“Dathan Hardison and Deke Smith broke out of Cañon City State Penitentiary with the help of their gang. They’re vowing revenge on the folks who put them there.”

Rosamond gasped. “Rand and Marybeth.” Naturally her first concern would be for her brother and his wife, who had helped to stop the bank robbery and put the outlaws in prison.

Grace considered her own sisters’ participation in stopping the robbery. “Good thing Laurie and Beryl aren’t here.” Once again, she’d allow that Romans 8:28 applied in this case.

“You’re in danger, too, Grace.” The Rev grunted in his gentlemanly way. “But I don’t think anyone will be safe as long as those men are free. We’ll have to pray those lost souls will see their need for salvation before they cause any more harm.”

Grace clenched her jaw. She had been praying, and look what it got. The varmints broke out of the strongest prison in Colorado, and now the decent folks of Esperanza would be living in fear until they were caught. For the hundredth time in nearly three years, Grace wished she’d shot Dathan Hardison and his crazy-as-a-loon partner dead.

“Well, I’ve got business to tend to. ’Scuse me.” She touched the brim of her hat like a man would do and strode away, her heels thumping on the boardwalk. The Rev caught up with her, only this time the cadences of their footfalls didn’t quite match, as they had earlier.

They arrived at Cappello’s Haberdashery at the north end of the building and stepped inside the open door.

“Welcome, welcome.” The sprightly little Italian man grinned broadly, causing his wide black mustache to wiggle oddly. “What can I do for you fine folks?”

Grace asked about possible thefts, and he reported that no such thing had happened in his establishment.

“But I shall be on guard.” Mr. Cappello waved an index finger in the air like Caesar vowing to defend Rome. “And you, Reverend Thomas. What is your pleasure today?”

The Rev was already trying on hats in front of a mirror on the glass countertop. “I’m thinking of changing my style.” He looked at Grace. “What do you think?” He indicated the bowler he sported, so different from his Stetson. Although both were black, the bowler changed his look from that of a man who belonged in the West to a citified dandy.

Grace coughed out a little laugh, unable to subdue a slightly derisive edge to her tone. “You goin’ courtin’ or something, Rev?”

He turned his attention back to the mirror. “I’ve been thinking about it.” He spoke absently, as if talking to himself.

Grace’s heart plummeted to her stomach. Now she’d lose his friendship for sure. Then what would she do? One thing was certain. She wanted the best for her friend, so maybe she should help him look for a young lady who was worthy of him. That idea didn’t sit too well with her, though she couldn’t imagine why.

As Grace and the Rev checked with the other five businesses, all reporting they’d had no thefts, she felt like she was in the company of a different person. That hat truly did the Rev no justice, not out here in Colorado. He looked more like some city slicker, a dandy, a tenderfoot, like the ones who came through town from time to time and either toughened up or fled back East.

They neared the street where they’d go their separate ways, and he stopped and touched her arm. “Grace, I’ve been thinking.”

“You’re gonna take that silly-looking hat back to Mr. Cappello.” She could only hope.

He chuckled and shook his head. “No. This is a bit more serious than our differing opinions about my attire.” He glanced up and down the street. Although a whole lot of people walked about tending their business, none were close by. “I want to help you and the sheriff investigate the thefts

at the mercantile.” His gaze was steady, like when he was making an important point during one of his sermons. “And I want to help you put Hardison and Smith back in prison. Hardison may have thought very little about our few short private chats, but I learned more about him than he realized.”

“That a fact?” She considered the idea. With Sheriff Lawson getting a bit absentminded these days, she knew she’d need help to solve both crime problems. She had in mind her married friends, the Northam brothers, but maybe the preacher, being single, would prove a better partner. He did have a whole heap of insight into human nature. “Yeah, that sounds good.” She laughed. “Who would suspect that a preacher, especially one wearing a bowler hat, might be trying to catch outlaws?”

He blinked like he was surprised, and she feared for a second or two that she’d overdone her teasing. Then he laughed with his usual good humor. “So it’s a deal?” He held out his hand.

She gave it a hearty shake. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter Two

Micah prepared his notes for the Wednesday night prayer meeting with special care. He must say just the right thing about the outlaws and the local robberies. The people of Esperanza were hardy, stouthearted folk. Otherwise they wouldn’t be living here in this harsh land. But no one ever benefited from their town leaders stirring up alarm. Of course most folks probably already knew about both threats.

Most of the time, only a third of the congregation came to prayer meeting. Some folks lived too far out of town to make a midweek trip. Others only came on Sunday to put on a show. The more involved members of the church knew the importance of praying together, so they made every effort to attend on Wednesday evenings.

After one more prayer for guidance for tonight, Micah made his way from the parsonage to the church, entered by the back door and set his notes on the lectern.

At the same time, Nate and Rand Northam came through the front door, early as always, to set out hymnbooks. Micah walked up the aisle to shake their hands and then glanced over Rand’s shoulder. “Any other Northams coming tonight?”

“No, they all stayed home,” Nate said. “Grace told us about Hardison and his crazy crony, so we moved our wives and children up to the big house so our folks could look out for them.”

“If only I hadn’t killed Hardison’s cousin.” Rand’s drawn expression revealed both worry and sorrow. “He never would have come to Esperanza for revenge in the first place. He never would have noticed our small town.” He shook his head. “Never would have tried to rob the bank.”

Rand had shot the outlaw’s cousin, a wanted murderer, for cheating in a card game in Del Norte over six years ago. Three years ago, Hardison had showed up and tried to charm the community, all the while threatening Rand in private. He’d even come forward in church one Sunday pretending a conversion experience. But his eyes lacked the look of a man whose repentance was genuine, so Micah hadn’t trusted him from the start. In their few subsequent chats, Micah further discerned the falseness of his supposed conversion.

“You’ve been forgiven, Rand.” Micah set a hand on his younger friend’s shoulder. Here was a prime example of true repentance. “You need to forgive yourself once and for all. Besides, as you well know, men like those two don’t need an excuse to do evil.”

Rand’s expression cleared. “Thanks. I have to keep reminding myself that the Lord’s truly and completely forgiven me. Times like this make it harder.”

“Just look at it this way, brother.” Nate poked an elbow into Rand’s ribs. “Mother can’t ever get enough of her grandchildren, so this is her opportunity to spoil them.” He chuckled. “Poor Dad. He won’t have a moment of peace with the three of them climbing all over him.”

“Soon to be four, come December.” Rand’s remorseful expression cleared, and paternal pride took its place. “I’m glad for an excuse to make Marybeth stay with Mother. She always tries to manage things on her own, but Randy’s getting to be a handful, and in her condition...” He stopped and offered

a self-conscious grin, as if embarrassed for discussing such a private matter with them. “She needs Mother’s help.”

At the reminder of Rand’s impending expansion of his family, Micah had an odd moment of longing, a yearning even, he’d never felt in all his twenty-nine years. How rewarding it must be to have a wife and children to care for. He’d love to have a sweet little daughter or an energetic little son to rear. Maybe when Miss Sutton arrived, he’d be well on his way to having that family. Only two months until he found out if it was even a possibility.

Forcing such thoughts to the back of his mind, he recalled his discussion with Grace about all things working together for good. Here was another positive thing about Hardison’s escape from prison. Marybeth had to let go of her independent streak and depend upon her kindhearted in-laws for protection.

Micah probably wouldn’t be able to convince Grace that anything good could come from the outlaws’ escape. He hadn’t seen her since Monday, but he did know she hadn’t liked the new bowler hat he’d bought to improve his wardrobe before Miss Sutton’s arrival. Somehow the thought bothered him. Maybe he shouldn’t have bought it, but Mr. Cappello didn’t carry wide-brimmed hats such as cowboys wore, and he needed the business. Micah couldn’t please everyone. Besides, he liked his new look, including the suits he’d ordered from the tailor. Maybe he’d make a few more changes before Miss Sutton arrived. If Grace didn’t like them, he’d have to tease her out of her disapproval.

Other folks began to fill the small church, all moving forward to the front pews to keep the prayer meeting cozy. While the Northam brothers handed out hymnbooks, Micah greeted each person with pastoral affection. These were his children, even the old ones. If he never had a wife or offspring of his own, he would always thank the Lord for giving him this responsibility and joy.

George and Mabel Eberly, Grace’s parents, arrived along with their youngest daughter, Georgia. Grace soon joined them in the second row. She sat sideways on the pew, probably so she could keep an eye on who came into the sanctuary. That protectiveness always impressed Micah. She made a good deputy. A good friend.

Would she still be his friend if she found out his next book was about her? He’d better keep that a secret, just as he’d decided not to let anyone know about his writing. Folks might be offended if they knew he’d created some characters based on them. Worse still, they might no longer trust him as their pastor. Not that he’d ever think of using situations shared with him confidentially. No success was worth betraying a friend.

Rand led the congregation in an opening hymn, and then Micah took his place behind the lectern. As he surveyed his flock, he noticed that every man wore a gun and every woman carried a reticule that drooped as though containing a heavy object. At the same time, every congregant’s expression bespoke peaceful determination. Micah chuckled to himself. He needn’t be concerned about these good folks. They’d look out for one another. In fact, after the prayer meeting, he’d go home tonight and clean his own guns. The men with whom he’d attended seminary in Massachusetts would be shocked, but out here in the American West, Micah wouldn’t be the only preacher who carried a sidearm.

* * *

After the final prayer, Grace’s parents, Georgia and the rest of the congregation filed out of the pews to the stirring tones of “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” a song well suited to the battle that threatened Esperanza. Grace stayed in her seat in the second row because she never tired of hearing Mrs. Foster play the church organ. The kindly old lady’s face always took on a sweet glow while she played, as though the words to the songs came straight from her heart.

Tonight it wasn’t the music that kept Grace seated, but a bittersweet pang. Due to Mrs. Foster’s fine teaching, Laurie had thrived as a piano student well enough to be accepted at the Denver Music Conservatory. After she completed her studies, she might find a teaching position—or a husband, either of which would probably take her away from home forever.

Grace already felt bereft. With Beryl gone for good and Laurie's return not certain, nothing would be the same around here. Of course Grace wouldn't want Laurie to pass up an opportunity to teach music someplace else, but she hoped her sister would come home in a year or so and take dear old Mrs. Foster's place as the town's music teacher. In spite of her enthusiastic playing, the older lady was growing feeble and often needed help to get her chores done. Just yesterday, Grace had moved into her boardinghouse to be closer to work. Even though she needed to do that, it took her away from her family. Her days seemed to be getting lonelier and lonelier with everyone she cared about moving away or occupied with their own lives.

"You're deep in thought." The Rev walked over and sat beside Grace, resting one arm on the back of the pew. "Anything you want to talk about?"

"Nope." Grace emphasized the word with a shake of her head. Here was another person she cared about who would likely be leaving her. Not going away, but leaving the closeness of their friendship as soon as he found some young lady to court. "Just listening." She nodded toward Mrs. Foster.

"She certainly has a gift, doesn't she?" The Rev smiled as the last chord died away.

Mrs. Foster gathered her music, stepped down from the organ platform and followed Grace's family up the aisle. These days she was still trying to persuade Georgia to work harder at her piano playing, but Georgia never seemed to remember to practice.

Grace stood and settled her gun belt on her hips. "Time to go."

The Rev stood, too, even though he'd had a long day of ministering to folks in the area before conducting the prayer meeting. Always the gentleman, even around Grace. She appreciated his courtesy since he was the only man in town who treated her that way. Well, except the Northam menfolk, but they didn't count because they were like brothers to her and her sisters.

"It's mighty good of you to move in with Mrs. Foster." The Rev followed Grace up the aisle toward the double front doors. "I'm sure she appreciates the company."

"You know it's not just for company. When Hardison tried to court Marybeth, Mrs. Foster did all she could to stop him. The sheriff and I want to be sure she stays safe."

"As I said—" The Rev gave her that look of his, the one she liked and disliked at the same time, chiding her for not receiving compliments well. "It's mighty good of you."

"Uh-huh." She didn't know why she hated to be praised. She just did.

They'd reached the front doors and stepped outside into the cool evening. The Rev's house was closer to the church's back door, so he hadn't needed to escort her out.

"There you go following me again." She pulled her hat up on its strings and plopped it on her head.

He chuckled, a warm, comforting sound that always made her feel good.

"Actually, I've been trying to think of a way to ask you something."

Her heart stumbled oddly, so she posted her hands at her waist and cocked her head. "Yeah?"

"You know I'm a fair shot with a rifle, but I've never learned to fast draw my revolver. Would you teach me?"

She gave him a sidelong look. "You funning me, Rev?"

He laughed out loud. "I'm entirely serious. You never know when it will come in handy, especially with notorious outlaws making threats against our community."

Grace faced him and crossed her arms. "I'm a little confused. You're a man of peace. A minister of the Gospel. But you want to learn how to outdraw an outlaw."

"Outdraw an outlaw. That has a poetic ring to it, however disconcerting the idea behind it may be." His jolly expression faded. "To tell the truth, I've wrestled with the notion and prayed about it for some time. The Lord reminded me that He sent David to defeat Goliath and Joshua to bring down the walls of Jericho, to name only two biblical warriors. I wouldn't like to take a man's life, but I do believe it's no sin to protect good people from danger."

A sense of wonderment filled Grace's mind and heart. There was no end to the depth of this man. "Rev, I'd be pleased and proud to teach you all I know about how to draw fast. If it doesn't snow, let's start tomorrow morning before the winds get bad."

"Would Friday work as well for you? I have some folks to visit tomorrow."

"Friday it is."

A pleasant sensation warmed her heart at the thought of spending more time with the Rev before he found his bride. As she strode up the dark street toward the boardinghouse, hurrying to catch up with Mrs. Foster, she decided to help the older lady prepare his supper for tomorrow evening. The married ladies in town took turns sending meals to the minister, but they'd deemed it unseemly for the single ladies to participate lest it become a contest to win him through their cooking. Of course, the Rev didn't know anything about that. Nor did anyone need to know if Grace put some of her own cooking into Mrs. Foster's basket. She'd have to think real hard to decide which of her special recipes to prepare.

* * *

On Friday, after Grace completed her morning rounds of Esperanza and the surrounding area, she rode out to the vacated ranch northwest of town. A thin layer of powdery snow covered the house, which was little more than a ramshackle cabin, and the grounds, which included the barn and two or three other outbuildings. In a nearby field, straggly cornstalks and a rusted plow bespoke broken dreams of a pioneer family who'd come out here about the time Grace's father and Colonel Northam had staked their claims and succeeded in building vast cattle ranches.

The Rev waited for her by the corral, so she rode that way. From time to time, she wondered what people thought about her spending time alone with him. Young women of good character always took along a chaperone when they were in the company of a man, even when a couple began to court. Yet no one had ever mentioned such a thing to Grace, as if they weren't concerned about her reputation. Or didn't consider her a lady. While it made her deputy job easier, something always nagged at the back of her mind about it, not to mention causing a dull, foolish ache in her chest. But since the Rev had reminded her that the Bible said all things worked together for good for God's people, He must have planned for her to be tall, plain and gawky so she'd make a good deputy.

Before leaving home this morning, Grace had made up her mind to enjoy his company for as long as she could before he found himself a wife. So as she rode into the barnyard, she summoned up a happy disposition more like her sister Maisie's than her own.

"Mornin', Rev." She pasted on a big smile as she dismounted from Mack, her black gelding, and ambled over to him. The Rev wore his black Stetson, looking more appropriate for today's task than he would in that ridiculous bowler.

"Good morning, Grace. It's a great day for shooting." The Rev held a small burlap sack that clattered like it was full of tin cans. "Let's see how many of these we can knock off the fence." He nodded toward the corral.

"Good idea." Grace helped him line up the cans on the top rail. "You know, Rev, these cans won't be shooting back. Are you sure you can face a man who's trying to gun you down?"

He grunted. "Not at all sure. As you well know, it would be a real test of mettle." His eyes lit up with a look she took for admiration, just not the kind she'd begun to wish for. "A test you passed quite admirably three years ago, young lady."

A silly streak of gladness jolted through her at his calling her a lady, especially considering her earlier thoughts. She stared down at her boots and kicked at a rock. "Didn't exactly have a choice back then, did I? It was them or us." And they'd nearly killed Beryl, a tragedy Grace had never been able to shake off, even after Beryl recovered and went on with her life.

"Yes, it was. And we all need to be ready to protect one another just as you did the first time Hardison and Smith came to town, especially since they might be bringing their gang with them."

“Then let’s get to it. The wind will be kicking up pretty soon.” Grace had a feeling these lessons weren’t really necessary, but at least it gave her more time with the Rev. She would take all she could of that.

* * *

Micah wished he could convince Grace that nobody faulted her for the shoot-out at the bank. She’d saved lives that day, not to mention every depositor’s bank account. But like Rand, when the memories came back, she let them get to her. As her pastor and friend, he would continue to seek the Lord’s guidance in encouraging her. So often she shrugged off his compliments.

What would it take to give her more confidence? Was there any way he could help, or should he leave that up to their female friends? Once he was married, he wouldn’t have to worry about such things; all the more reason to marry soon. If Joel’s sister turned out to be the Lord’s choice for him, Micah would soon be able to set aside such concerns when counseling young ladies. His wife would always be nearby to ensure propriety.

“First of all,” Grace interrupted his thoughts, “you need to lower your gun belt.” She demonstrated by adjusting her own to a comfortable drawing level.

Micah did as she said and then tucked his frock coat behind his holster. “Like that?”

“Yep. Now show me how you draw.”

Suddenly self-conscious, Micah had an unexpected memory flash before his eyes. His older brother had always dared him to do this or that and then taunted him for not performing perfectly the first time. He dismissed the memory. Grace might tease him, but she wouldn’t criticize. He gripped the handle of his gun and quickly slid it from the holster, then fanned the hammer with his left hand, firing off three rapid shots. Each time his hand hit the weapon, it threw off his aim, and not one shot struck an empty tin.

“Uh-huh.” Grace’s tone held no condemnation. “Mind if I ask where you learned that?”

He cleared his throat, and his face warmed. “Last July Fourth at the fastest draw contest.”

“Uh-huh,” she repeated. “Sometimes cowboys like to show off with that style because they think it looks fancy. But if you ask ’em, they’ll admit it’s a little hard on the gun’s action. Plus their six-shooters need fixin’ real often. Anyway, it’s not even the fastest draw.”

“Ah.” Micah returned his Colt Peacemaker to its holster. “And I fell for it. All right, you show me the right way.”

She gave him a brief nod and stepped away several paces from him. “Thumbing is the best way. You grip the handle and at the same time place the tip of your thumb on the hammer.” She demonstrated as she spoke. “As you begin to draw, let your thumb roll off the inside of the hammer. At the same time you’re drawing, get a full grip on the handle, aim and squeeze the trigger.” Her Colt .45 fired three times before Micah could blink, and three tin cans flew off of the fence.

He whistled in admiration. “I see what you mean.” He slowly went through the smooth motions, returned his gun to his holster and then drew quickly but without firing. The roll of his thumb seemed the key because it had to bring the hammer back and yet not hold it there. The pull of his trigger finger felt instinctive. On his third draw, he fired, knocking a can from its perch.

“Good job, Rev.” Grace seemed about to slap his shoulder, but turned the gesture into a strange little wave. “Most folks can get the hang of it with one lesson. You have the advantage of being real good with your rifle. I didn’t have to remind you to keep your eye on the target.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Warmth spread through his chest. Her approval meant a great deal to him. Maybe she wouldn’t mind if he confided in her about his plans for courting. After a few more fast draws, a reload and a few more cans scattered across the corral, he holstered his gun. “I think we’re done here, but I’ll keep practicing. May I buy you some ice cream as a thank-you?”

An odd, almost vulnerable look crossed her pretty face. “I’d rather have some of Miss Pam’s pie.”

“If we’re going there, we’ll just have dinner. What do you say?”

She shrugged in her endearing “aw-shucks” way. “Sounds good.”

While Micah retrieved the battered cans from the corral, he spotted fresh hoofprints in the smattering of snow. “Say, Grace, I didn’t think anyone was living here.”

She strode over to him and eyed the ground and then knelt down to trace the wider-than-normal horseshoe print with a slight indentation on one side. “Hmm. Could be our man Hardison. Could be a drifter taking shelter last night.”

She stood and walked toward the half-open barn door. Micah followed her inside, and they both looked around. The unusual hoofprint wasn’t repeated, and nothing caught their attention as being disturbed.

Outside again, Grace tilted her head toward the run-down cabin and spoke a little louder than necessary. “Well, let’s get back to town.” She drew her gun and walked toward the wood frame abode.

“Good idea.” Micah also spoke loudly, while the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Had they been watched the whole time they were shooting?

Grace again tilted her head, this time toward the side of the cabin. Micah nodded and ambled around the corner to peer in through a shattered window. The room held broken-down furniture, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

From the other side of the room came the screech of a rusty-hinged door opening, and soon Grace appeared in the room. She caught his gaze and shook her head. “The snow on the porch didn’t have any prints, and the dust hasn’t been disturbed in any of the rooms, so I reckon nobody’s been in here.”

Micah nodded his agreement. Every afternoon, the wind blew a new coat of dust over the entire San Luis Valley, so those fresh hoofprints could only be a few hours old.

He met Grace by their horses. “Why would anyone want to ride into a corral like that if they weren’t going to take shelter in the barn or the cabin?”

“Maybe some drifter stopped to see if there was any hay in the barn.”

“Could be.” Micah heaved out a quiet sigh of relief. The idea that they might have been watched had unnerved him, and yet Grace had remained as cool as an autumn day. Most girls he’d ever known were skittish as colts about such things. What a woman Grace was! He felt privileged to be her pastor and her friend.

* * *

The Rev didn’t seem to be in any hurry to get back to town, so Grace kept Mack’s pace to a moderate walk. After a few hundred yards, the Rev seemed inclined to talk, so she gave him an inviting smile.

“Something on your mind?”

He chuckled in that way of his that always put her at ease. “I could use your advice.” He tilted his Stetson back on his head a ways. Once again, she felt pleased that he hadn’t worn his dandified bowler hat. That thing sure did annoy her, though she couldn’t say why she concerned herself so much with his appearance.

“About shooting?”

“No. I think we covered that this morning.” He gazed east across the San Luis Valley toward Mount Blanca, which was nearly snow-covered despite it only being October. “I have guests coming to visit from Virginia around the first of December. Joel Sutton’s a childhood friend. After the war, he and his folks were the only people who remained friendly. The rest treated my family badly because my uncle fought for the North.” He gave her a rueful smile. “Some in the South continue to fight the war even though it’s been over for almost twenty years. Even my decision to attend seminary in Massachusetts angered many people, and they didn’t want any part of me after I graduated. Couldn’t get hired in a church, no matter how many I applied to.”

Grace shook her head in disgust. The war wasn't his fault. In fact, he was truly a man of peace. Those people didn't know what they were missing to reject him that way. "Their loss is Esperanza's gain. Now tell me about this Joel Sutton."

The Rev leaned down to pat his horse on the neck, a gesture Grace found endearing. He took care of his horse just like he took care of the folks in his congregation and anybody else who needed a kind touch, including her. "Joel and I have been corresponding for a few years, and now he wants to come out here, he and his sister."

Grace didn't need for the Rev to tell her the rest. This sister was probably a gracious Southern belle like Susanna Northam, all pretty and petite and just what the Rev needed in a preacher's wife. But if all things worked together for good, then Grace should assist him all she could. Maybe she'd even play matchmaker and help him get the job done.

"So, are these folks going to stay at the hotel, or should I see if Mrs. Foster wants to take in a couple of new boarders?" Grace liked that plan. She could get the measure of the woman and decide if she was good enough for the Rev.

"No, I think they should stay at the parsonage. I have those two extra bedrooms, and they're rarely put to use."

Grace held her breath and counted to ten while she considered how to answer. "Will you be comfortable with a single lady staying in your home?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I wanted your advice. Do you think anyone will be offended, considering that Joel will be there, too?"

For some odd reason, Grace wanted more than anything to say yes, the whole town would be offended. That by all means, Joel and his sister should stay someplace else. Anyplace else. But she couldn't lie. Nor could she explain her reservations about the plan. After several seconds of listening to the clop of their horses' hooves and an occasional bird calling out from the thickets along the road, she sighed to herself.

"Well, Rev, we don't have a whole heap of gossips around here, and most folks don't pay them any mind when they do speak out of turn." She had to force a smile as she finished her thought. "I think you should have your friends stay at your house so they don't have to pay rent. Maybe that sister can feed you some fine Southern cooking and put some meat on your bones."

Why had she said that?

He sent a worried frown her way. "You think I'm too thin?"

Oh, my, no. Not thin at all, and certainly not the opposite. He appeared as strong as any hardworking cowboy, although she had no idea how a preacher who read books and visited the sick all day could be so well put together. She also had no idea why she'd made such a foolish remark about putting meat on his bones. The local ladies kept him well fed with their best cooking. Now, how could she turn this into teasing?

"Naw, not too thin." She grinned. "Just on the edge."

He laughed. "Don't say that to Mrs. Foster. She already sends over enough food for a small army."

"I've noticed that." Grace chuckled. After some serious thought last evening, she'd decided to put four pieces of her special fried chicken into Mrs. Foster's basket. Of course he had no idea, and Mrs. Foster had promised not to tell. Not that Grace meant anything by it. She was just trying to be helpful. That was all. Yet it pleased her that he hadn't complained about last night's supper.

* * *

"She did something special with that fried chicken last night." Micah could still taste the mouthwatering fare. "Best I've ever eaten."

Grace looked away quickly, and Micah followed her gaze westward toward the San Juan Mountains, seeing nothing of significance.

"Something grab your attention?"

“Nope. Just checking the landscape.” She gave her familiar dismissive shrug, but when she faced toward town again, she seemed to be fighting a smile.

Maybe she was embarrassed about her comments regarding his health. Ladies and gentlemen didn’t usually discuss such matters. And yet Grace always spoke the truth, painful or not, so Micah had a feeling she might be right about his condition. He’d always vowed not to become a flabby, indolent preacher, like some he’d met. However, being too thin wasn’t any healthier. So far he’d managed to stay fit, but maybe he needed more exercise.

Very few people knew that, weather permitting, he rose early six days a week before anyone else was out and about so he could run around the outskirts of Esperanza. After that, he lifted the barbells Bert, the blacksmith, had made for him, which he kept hidden in one of his extra bedrooms. He’d have to find a new place for them before Joel and Miss Sutton arrived. Would have to find another place to do the lifting. Maybe when he ran, he needed to add another lap around town.

Other than Bert and the sheriff, no one seemed to know about his exercising, which was just as he preferred it. Like his writing, he kept his exercise private, a part of his life that belonged to him alone. Once he married, he’d tell his wife, of course. But for now, he did what he had to do to keep up with the hardy folks in his congregation. No one needed to know how he managed it. In fact, telling others about it might seem boastful. And surely his cowboy friends would laugh at him for having to go out of his way to stay strong and healthy while their normal work kept them in fine fettle. Not that he minded teasing. Their good-humored remarks made him feel even more a part of the community. But he would still keep his exercise a private matter.

“I hope Miss Pam still has some of her beef stew left,” Grace said as they dismounted in front of Williams’s Café. “I didn’t realize how late it was.” She nodded toward the brand-new clock tower above the bank. “One thirty. The pickings will surely be slim.”

Before Micah could voice his agreement, Mrs. Winsted barged out of her store two doors down from the café.

“Grace, where have you been? I couldn’t find the sheriff, either.”

All business now, Grace hitched up her gun belt and strode over to Mrs. Winsted. “What happened?”

Stifling his surprising disappointment that their time together would be cut short, Micah followed her onto the boardwalk and focused his attention on Mrs. Winsted.

Hands fisted at her waist, the older woman glared at Grace as though her troubles were the deputy’s fault. “Why, I’ve been robbed again, and this time it’s even worse.”

Chapter Three

Grace eyed Dub Gleason and his friends, who sat outside the store and watched with smirking grins. She didn’t suspect them of the thefts. To a man, the four of them were the laziest polecats she’d ever seen. The most energetic thing they did was make fun of her when no one else was around.

“Let’s go inside.” She nodded toward the open door of the mercantile. No use broadcasting the details of the robbery. As stupid as Dub and his friends were, they’d blab anything they heard all over the place. The guilty party might hear them and figure out a way to hamper the investigation.

Mrs. Winsted turned in a huff and stormed back into her store. Grace didn’t fault her for being upset, but it seemed this usually levelheaded lady was becoming more like her daughter-in-law every day.

Behind her, Grace could hear the Rev’s footfalls. She turned and gave him a quizzing look.

He returned that bothersome attractive smile of his. “As I said the other day, I want to help.”

“Right.” She shrugged. “Come on, then.”

Inside the store, Homer Bean, the clerk, was straightening merchandise behind the counter.

“Hey, quit that.” Grace tried not to bark the order, but Homer jumped nonetheless. “Don’t be moving stuff around. I need to look for clues, and you might cover them up.”

“That’s just the thing.” Mrs. Winsted pressed trembling hands against her temples. “Nothing seems out of place. If I didn’t know my inventory like the freckles on my granddaughter’s nose, I’d say nothing had been stolen. Whoever took the items cleverly shuffled the other merchandise to fill the empty spaces.”

When Grace reached back to retrieve the pencil and pad of paper she kept in her hip pocket, her elbow met something solid. She glanced to the side and saw it was the Rev’s arm. A pleasant shiver slid up to her neck, but he seemed unmindful of the contact. Instead, he was staring around the large room, frowning thoughtfully like he was the deputy doing the investigation. Grateful for his help, she poised her pencil over the paper. “Now, ma’am, what was stolen?”

“Well...” Mrs. Winsted huffed a bit and stared off as though gathering her wits. “Several woolen blankets, a tan Stetson, a pearl-handled Colt .45, a Remington rifle and ammunition for both guns.” She gazed around the room. “That’s what we’ve figured out so far.” She tilted her head toward Homer to indicate he was the other part of we. “Last time it was a coffeepot, a bag of coffee, some tins of food and other such items a person might steal if he was needy. This time it’s much more serious, with guns being stolen and all.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Grace listed the items on her pad. “Show me where they were displayed.” Even though she knew the store pretty well, she hoped to calm Mrs. Winsted down by keeping her occupied.

The locked gun case appeared just as the woman had said. Seven handguns were displayed in an orderly fashion with no obvious empty spaces.

The Rev bent down to study the lock on the front of the case. “It doesn’t look as though it’s been tampered with.” He straightened and looked to Mrs. Winsted. “Where do you keep the key?”

Grace felt a pinch of annoyance that he asked the question before she had a chance. She’d have to talk to him later about letting her lead the investigation. “Is it nearby?”

“No.” Mrs. Winsted walked toward the door to the back room. “I’ll fetch it.”

“Wait. I have an idea.” The Rev gave Grace an apologetic grin. “If you don’t mind?”

Grace answered with a scowl, but he’d already turned his attention back to Mrs. Winsted.

“I know this may sound odd,” he said. “However, it may help us to find the thief.”

Mrs. Winsted glanced doubtfully between the Rev and Grace. “Deputy?”

Grace hid her annoyance with a smile and a shrug. Oh, she truly must speak to the Rev about this. He was damaging her image of authority. “Go on, Rev. Anything you can do to help.”

“Very well.” His gray eyes twinkled with excitement, which considerably diminished her irritation. Not only was he way too handsome when he smiled, he seemed to be enjoying himself in a mighty big way. She couldn’t scold him for either one of those.

“I recently read Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, which is a collection of his short stories. In one story, a murderer was caught because his bloody thumbprint was left on a piece of paper, and he was later identified through that mark. Recent research has shown that no two people have identical finger marks. Maybe we could find the thief’s prints on the key or this case.” He indicated the glass display. “Of course, we’d have to be sure no one else touches either one while we figure out how to capture the image. Then we can try to find the person whose prints match it.”

Grace stared at him with new respect shaded with just a smidgen of skepticism. If what he said was true, it would help law enforcement immensely.

“Oh, dear.” Mrs. Winsted frowned in dismay. “I’m afraid we already dusted and wiped down everything this morning. It’s the first thing Homer does every day. Isn’t it, Homer?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The young, sandy-haired clerk had joined them by the gun display as soon as the Rev started talking about the Twain story. “And I’ve already handled the keys this morning when I showed Mrs. Bellows some items in the jewelry case.”

“Hmm.” Grace wrote brief notes so she’d remember to tell the sheriff about the whole conversation. She wondered whether he’d heard about finger marks. “Let’s have a look at the other places.”

Mrs. Winsted pointed to a plaster hat stand molded in the shape of a man's head. "They stole the tan Stetson that should be here and put this porkpie hat in its place." She leaned against the display case, and her usually friendly face drooped into a weary expression.

Grace patted the woman's forearm. "Don't worry, Mrs. Winsted. We'll get to the bottom of this. Now, who were your last few customers just before you closed up yesterday?" She glanced at Homer to include him in the question.

They both offered names, and Grace wrote them on her pad, flipping to a second page to list them all.

"The last person out the door was Adam Starling," Homer said. "He bought some flour for his mother and asked to put it on their tab." He cleared his throat. "Not that this means anything..."

"Go on." Grace kept her eyes on her notes. She'd had some concerns about sixteen-year-old Adam but would keep that to herself for now.

"Well..." Homer shuffled his feet. "The last thing Adam looked at was the pearl-handled Colt .45 that's missing now. Said he sure would like to have one like it someday. I, uh, I took it out of the case and let him hold it. I don't like to make judgments about folks, but if a man could look hungry at a gun, then I'd say that was how Adam looked at that revolver."

A sick feeling rose up inside of Grace. She snapped her notepad closed and stuck it back into her pocket. "All right. I'll report this to the sheriff. If either of you think of anything else, let one of us know."

She strode toward the front door only vaguely aware that the Rev was on her heels. Outside on the boardwalk, he touched her arm to stop her. She did stop, but only because Dub and his friends had wandered down the street.

"Grace, I can see what you're thinking, but you're wrong about Adam."

She shifted her gun belt and gave him her best deputy glare. "That so?"

"Yes." He wasn't in the least bit intimidated by her tough posture, which pleased her in the oddest way. "Why would such a hardworking boy risk everything—his family, his reputation, his jobs—for a gun? Or for any of those other missing items?"

"I'll admit he's always seemed like a straight-up fella." She wouldn't speak about the way Adam avoided her. Lots of men in town avoided her because they didn't know how to behave around a female peacekeeper. She preferred that to Dub Gleason and his pals. "But you gotta admit a poor family like the Starlings don't have much in the way of necessities. Maybe he needed the rifle to kill jackrabbits for their supper."

The Starling family had been in town for about a year and a half. Adam's father had yet to recover from injuries sustained when outlaws beat him and stole the payroll he was delivering for the railroad. Adam was still in high school, and he worked hard at three jobs to support the family. Mrs. Starling took in sewing and laundry, but the family still needed help from the church from time to time. Grace didn't mind their receiving charity. Christians were supposed to take care of needy folks. But the way Adam had been avoiding her recently, refusing to look her in the eye at church or ducking around corners if he saw her during the week, caused her some concern even before the robberies. What could he be hiding?

"I'm sure the Starlings already have a gun of some sort for small game hunting."

Grace eyed the Rev. "I suppose. But from what Homer said, seems like Adam wants something finer than whatever they have."

"That doesn't mean he'd steal to get it." The Rev exhaled a sigh that almost sounded cross, not his usual calm reaction to troubles. "Adam comes from a decent Christian family. His father held a position of trust for the railroad, and Adam has always been a fine young man. Everyone in town knows how hard he works."

"Maybe he's tired of working so hard." Grace crossed her arms over her chest. "I know he had to spend a lot of his savings to get that special medicine for his little sister last winter."

“Now, Grace—”

“Now, Rev.” She held up a hand to silence him. “You don’t want to suspect him because you always see the best in everyone.”

“Is that a fault?” An uncharacteristic hint of defensiveness colored his tone.

My, he was getting peevish. Grace ignored the question. “You also preach that nobody’s righteous, that we’ve all sinned and come short of the glory of God. The Bible tells us how God’s judgment came on evildoers in a mighty way. Think about Jericho or Sodom and Gomorrah. Or the Babylonian captivity.”

His jaw dropped slightly, and he stared at her for a moment and then shook his head. “We certainly can’t discount those Old Testament stories, but through Jesus Christ, God extends mercy.” He took on his concerned preacher look, tilting his head slightly and stared into her eyes. “You know this, Grace. You’ve accepted Jesus as your Savior.”

“I have.” His gaze bored into her, and she stared off in time to see the sheriff enter his office down the block. “But even if a man’s trusted the Lord, he can still go wrong if he’s tempted bad enough. Adam may just be taking a wrong path. If he is, it’s my job to make sure he doesn’t get away with it.”

“Make sure he doesn’t get away with it, or restore him to the right path?”

“Same thing.” She wouldn’t enter a war of words with him because she’d be sure to lose.

The Rev blew out another long breath. “Admiring a fine gun doesn’t make him guilty of theft.” He again tilted his head in an appealing way. “Neither does being the last customer of the day.”

Grace started to mention how Adam had been avoiding her of late but changed her mind. The Rev would only find a way to turn her suspicions around. “Well, I just saw the sheriff go into the office, so I need to go over and report the robberies to him.” She stepped down from the boardwalk onto the dusty street.

The Rev chuckled and called after her. “Does that mean you won’t be having dinner with me?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Aren’t you sick of my company by now?” It was a dumb thing to say. Even as rough-mannered as she was, she knew better than to say such a thing to a friend.

“Not at all, Grace.” Was that a trace of sadness in his eyes? “But I have a feeling you’re tired of my preaching. Thanks for the shooting lesson.” He tipped his hat and gave her a little bow. He was one of the few men in town who offered her such courtesies. “Good day, my friend.”

Her heart aching over their disagreement, Grace watched him walk away. This was best, of course. In a couple of months, the Rev’s guests would arrive, and that Miss Sutton wouldn’t want a plain, too-tall, gawky female deputy hanging around her future husband.

One thing was sure. Grace would get to know the lady to be sure she was good enough for the Rev. If she turned out to be a snob, Grace would... Well, she’d figure something out to discourage him from marrying the wrong woman both for the Rev’s sake and the sakes of all the good folks in the congregation. She chuckled to herself. If the lady truly was the uppity sort, Grace and her sisters, Georgia and Maisie, would teach her a thing or two about living in the West.

* * *

Feeling the loss of his friend’s company after a mostly pleasant morning, Micah stopped into Williams’s Café and purchased some sandwiches to eat at home. Odd how he’d only recently begun to understand what it meant to feel true loneliness. All the more reason to get married. Joel and his sister couldn’t get here soon enough to suit him so he could find out whether the Lord had chosen Miss Sutton to be his wife.

Seated at his kitchen table, he laughed to himself over the way Grace had irritated him earlier as they discussed Adam Starling. Micah rarely got irritated, so he’d been surprised by his own reaction to Grace’s unbending attitude about punishing the thief. This had been their first real disagreement, and he’d found himself bothered by her Old Testament legalism, which was clearly at odds with her name. He supposed her occupation affected her view of wrongdoers. Or perhaps she’d chosen her

occupation because of her views. In any event, a series of sermons about how God's grace and mercy were more powerful than vengeance might open her eyes and her heart. Besides, if Adam was the thief, he needed help, not punishment.

Micah briefly considered consulting Garrick Wakefield, who'd helped the Starlings when they came to town last year and now employed Adam at the hotel. Yet he didn't want to cast doubt on the boy. It was probably best for him to speak to Adam himself to see if he could discern any guilt in his demeanor. For now, he would do some of his own investigating to find out whether Mark Twain's assertions about finger marks were true. Further, the next time he was in Mrs. Winsted's store, he'd advise her and Homer not to disturb that sort of evidence if the robbers struck again. Other than that, he would search for other clues about the thefts.

He finished the first roast beef sandwich and eyed the second one. "Miss Pam," he murmured to himself, "your cooking is just too delicious. This should be my supper, but I can't resist eating it now." His appetite always increased in colder weather.

As he ate, he considered what had been stolen. No jewelry was missing, although the glass display held several valuable gold rings, watches, bracelets, watch fobs and assorted brooches and tie pins. If the thief needed money, he could sell such items in another town and word would probably never come back to Esperanza. The only missing merchandise appeared to be survival necessities. Micah couldn't imagine the Starlings needing woolen blankets because the church had supplied them with quilts. Further, Mrs. Starling was an excellent seamstress and could make more if they needed them. As for the guns, no one in Esperanza would take such weapons because all of their neighbors would recognize them as stolen. When the time was right, Micah would tell Grace about his thoughts.

His dinner finished, Micah went to work organizing the bedroom he'd used as an office for the past seven years. Yesterday he'd purchased a single bed, bedding and a chest of drawers to accommodate Joel. His large oak desk took up too much space, so to give Joel some privacy, he'd need to move it to the small room behind the church sanctuary. After school let out, he'd find Adam and ask him to help arrange the furniture. He'd also use the opportunity to try to detect any signs of guilt in the boy.

Although Micah had appreciated Grace's advice about hosting the Suttons, he decided to ask Mrs. Foster, as well. He walked the two blocks to the elderly lady's boardinghouse, where he found her in the kitchen, as usual. She motioned for him to take a seat at the table, where she placed a piece of lemon cake before him.

After enjoying a few delicious bites, he explained his situation and asked her advice.

"Why, it sounds fine to me." She poured Micah a cup of coffee and handed it to him. "Just be sure Mr. Sutton is always in the house with you and his sister, and propriety will be satisfied."

"That should be easy enough." Micah spent more time away from the parsonage than in it. "Now, what do you advise for furnishing her room?"

Mrs. Foster thought for a moment. "I have a spare bedroom suite in storage left by a tenant who moved back East. You may have that."

Micah sat back and grinned. Once again the Lord had provided before he asked. "That would be wonderful. Thank you, dear lady. You've solved two problems for me."

He would need help to move the furniture. Since Adam would be in school until almost four o'clock, Micah returned home to review his sermon notes for Sunday. Satisfied with what he'd written, he retrieved his most recent manuscript from the top drawer of his desk.

He liked this story even better than the one he'd already sold, but he needed to work on his main character a bit more. He jotted down a few notes about his conversation with Grace regarding the thefts because the incident perfectly suited his fictional female sheriff. Following Charles Dickens's custom of naming characters after their personality traits, he'd tentatively called his heroine Willa Ketchum, but today the name sounded a little silly. He tapped the end of his pen against his cheek and stared out the window beside him.

“Charity.” He said the name aloud, but it didn’t sound right. “Mercy? Grace?” He laughed. “That would give me away for certain.” The new name would have to wait.

He sat back and stared at the half-filled page. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine the next scene for his story. In his mind’s eye, he saw Grace wearing that determined look on her fair face as she insisted Adam was the thief. Micah had intended for his heroine always to be clever at solving crimes, always successful at catching outlaws.

“Well, Miss Ketchum, maybe it’s time you made a mistake.”

Chapter Four

December 1884

“Finally. Hardison and Smith.” Sheriff Lawson pulled two wanted posters from a newly arrived stack. “You wouldn’t think it’d take two months to get these sent out after a prison escape.” Studying the photographs printed on the papers, he grunted. “Hardison looks like a snake oil salesman, and Smith looks like forty miles of bad road.”

Grace peered over the sheriff’s shoulder. “Yep. That’s them all right.” A mixture of disgust and sorrow filled her. “Hardison wasn’t bad to look at, and he dressed and spoke well, so he had a lot of people fooled.” She hadn’t paid all that much attention to the man when he first came to Esperanza because she hadn’t been a deputy at the time. Her stopping these two slimy varmints in the midst of their evil deeds had motivated folks to offer her the job. “As for Smith, he didn’t show his ugly face in these parts until the day they attempted to rob the bank.” She shook her head, as if that would get rid of the bad memory.

“It’s interesting the way these sorts always find each other.” The sheriff scratched his jaw as he always did when he was cogitating. “Like Jud Purvis and the rest of their gang I put in the Kansas penitentiary, they all seem to have a magnet inside that draws evil to evil.”

“I wouldn’t argue with that.” Grace was glad to see the keen look in his eyes as he studied the posters. He’d been hired for his reputation as a no-nonsense lawman who always got his man. With Esperanza being such a peaceful town and community, he’d had very little to do over the past year and a half. Since news of the outlaws’ escape arrived in October, though, he’d stood straighter and walked with a more purposeful stride. Grace supposed a man needed to feel useful, but she would just as soon no criminals ever reared their ugly heads to threaten her loved ones and friends. Reminding folks to obey the law and keeping the peace were her reasons for wearing a badge.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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