

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

LAURIE KINGERY

*Could his love heal
her heart?*

The
DOCTOR TAKES
A WIFE



Laurie Kingery
The Doctor Takes a Wife
Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»
Серия «Brides of
Simpson Creek», книга 2

Аннотация

Indulge your fantasies of delicious Regency Rakes, fierce Viking warriors and rugged Highlanders. Be swept away into a world of intense passion, lavish settings and romance that burns brightly through the centuriesLaurie Kingery makes her home in central Ohio where she is a "Texan-in-exile. "Formerly writing as Laurie Grant for Harlequin Historical books other publishers, she is the author of sixteen previous books the 1994 winner of the Readers' Choice Award in the short historical category.She has also been nominated for Best First Medieval Career Achievement in Western Historical Romance by Romantic Times magazine. When not writing her historical books, she loves to travel, read, e-mail write her blog.

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“My dance, I believe?”

“Are you sure you’ve danced with every other female in town, from the oldest to the youngest?” Sarah asked archly.

He raised a brow, and in that moment she knew she’d made a mistake.

“Ah, so you were watching,” he said, grinning.

“I most certainly was not,” Sarah insisted. “I never sat down myself, except when the musicians took a break. I only just realized that you hadn’t made good your threat to claim a dance.”

“Threat?” he echoed. “I believe I only requested a dance, as proof of your goodwill. And I was waiting for a waltz, Miss Matthews.”

“Oh? Why?” she asked. Was this girl asking the daring questions really her?

Again, the raised brow. “If you have to ask that, Miss Sarah Matthews, then it’s no wonder the South lost the war.”

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But God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

—II Timothy 1:7

To the wonderful people of San Saba County, Texas, and in memory of the real settlement of Simpson Creek, and as always, to Tom

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Chapter One

“You look very lovely today, Miss Matthews,” said the voice in an accent that was as far from the usual drawl Sarah heard around her as Maine was from Texas. She stiffened, schooling herself to assume a polite expression as she looked up into the blue eyes of Dr. Nolan Walker.

A lady, she reminded herself sternly, did not make a scene in public, and most certainly not while standing in the receiving line at the wedding of her sister. Even if the speaker was a Yankee outsider who had no business being here.

“Thank you, sir,” she replied in a carefully neutral voice, and did not quite meet his gaze. “May I present Lord Edward Brookfield, Viscount Greyshaw, the groom’s eldest brother, come all the way from England?” She watched out of the corner of her eye as the Yankee doctor shook hands with the English nobleman next to her.

The men exchanged greetings.

“And may I also present—” she began, intent on passing the Yankee on down the line away from her.

Nolan interrupted her. “Miss Matthews, I was wondering if we might sit together while enjoying the refreshments?” He nodded toward the punch bowl and the magnificent quadruple-tiered wedding cake that Sarah considered the crowning achievement of her baking career. “I...I’d really like to get to know

you better.” He had dropped the “g” on “wondering,” while “together” and “better” came out “togethah” and “bettah,” and yet his accent was wholly unlike a Southern drawl.

The utter effrontery of the man! Hadn’t she already made it clear back in October, when he’d come to town to meet her that she Was Not Interested in being courted by a Yankee and a liar? He’d written her a handful of letters telling all about himself, except for the one fact that made him Unacceptable—that he was Yankee. She’d only found out when he’d come to meet her on Founders’ Day—right before the Comanche attack.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” she said crisply. “I’ll be busy helping to serve the cake and the punch. Now—”

“Perhaps a dance, then? I understand there’ll be dancing later.”

She glared at him. “Out of the question,” she snapped. “Now, if I may be permitted to continue, you’re acquainted with Miss Caroline Wallace, aren’t you, the bride’s best friend?” She gestured to the bridesmaid standing next to her.

She didn’t miss the surprised look Lord Greyshaw gave her, nor the sympathetic one he bestowed on the Yankee. Perhaps there would be a chance later, after the wedding, to explain to Nick’s eldest brother why a properly brought up young lady of the South did not encourage familiarity with pushy northern interlopers?

Mercifully, the doctor now allowed himself to be handed on down the line. The next person to approach was Mrs. Detwiler,

an elderly widow, resplendent today in deep purple bombazine. Sarah hoped the woman had not heard what had passed between her and the Yankee doctor, for Mrs. Detwiler was sure to have an opinion on it, likely one contrary to Sarah's.

But luck was with Sarah—the older lady had indeed missed hearing the Yankee's words and Sarah's tart replies.

"You girls all looked lovely up at the altar," she proclaimed. "Was it dear Milly's idea to have her attendants decked out in different fall hues? She certainly picked colors that looked good on each of you."

Sarah smiled and glanced down at the gold Gros de Naples fabric she wore, knowing it complimented her blond coloring just as the mossy green cloth complimented Caroline Wallace's brunette hair and as the rust color played up Prissy Gilmore's strawberry-blond tresses. "Yes, and she sewed them all, too, as well as her bridal dress," Sarah said, gazing at Milly who was at this moment sharing a happy smile with Nicholas Brookfield, her English groom.

"My, her fingers must have been busy!"

Mrs. Detwiler didn't know the half of it, Sarah thought. Milly had not only had all that sewing to do, but had also determinedly learned how to cook under Sarah's tutelage. While she wasn't yet the confident cook and baker that her sister was, Sarah thought it wasn't likely Nick and the rest of the men would starve with Milly minding the ranch kitchen once Sarah moved in to town. Now that Milly was a bride, Sarah had wanted her sister to be free to

manage her house, and she had wanted to try her own wings, too. So when Prissy had begged Sarah to teach her cooking and the other housewifely arts, Sarah found a way to kill one bird with two stones and had agreed to move in with her.

“I declare, it’s the wedding of the decade for Simpson Creek,” Mrs. Detwiler gushed.

Sarah nodded. At the very least, it was the first wedding since the war ended, as well as the first which had resulted from Milly’s founding of the Society for the Promotion of Marriage—or, as it was more commonly known, the Spinsters’ Club. Milly deserved to be the very first bride, and the happiest, Sarah thought, growing misty-eyed with love and pride. “Now it’s your turn,” the old woman announced, cupping Sarah’s cheek affectionately.

Sarah cringed inwardly, hoping no one else had heard. “Oh, I don’t think so, ma’am. Several others in the club have made matches and are engaged to marry, and I don’t have a beau at the moment. But I’m in no hurry,” she added in the most carefree tone she could manage. She wouldn’t want Mrs. Detwiler to guess that her words had made Sarah remember Jesse, her fiancé who hadn’t returned from the war.

“Pshaw,” the older woman retorted. “A pretty girl like you? You should have beaux by the dozen. Why don’t you see if you can catch the bouquet when your sister throws it, hmm?”

“I—I’ll see what I can do,” Sarah mumbled, feeling the crimson blush creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. “Um... may I present Viscount Greyshaw, the groom’s eldest brother?”

Mrs. Detwiler allowed herself to be distracted, and gazed up at the Englishman. "I've never met a real lord before," she burred. "Am I 'sposed to curtsy?"

Edward Brookfield smiled graciously. "We could just shake hands if you like."

Everywhere she went during the post-wedding festivities, Sarah felt Dr. Walker's gaze upon her—when she helped Milly cut and serve the bridal cake, while she ladled out cups of punch, during her chats with other guests, such as Nicholas's visiting English brothers, the viscount and the vicar.

"So you're going to move into the cottage with Prissy when we come back?" Milly was asking. She and her groom were spending their wedding night in the hotel, then leaving in the morning for a week's honeymoon in Austin.

"Yes, Prissy's very excited about it," she said, seeing her friend laughing and talking across the room with some of the others from the Spinners' Club. "Well, we'll see how it works out. You'll take me back if I don't like it, won't you?"

"Of course," Milly and Nick said at once, then Milly added, "The ranch will always be your home, too—but I think this will be good for you. Sarah, you will write down all your recipes as you promised before you go, won't you? You know them all by heart, but it's not so simple for me."

"You'll do fine," Sarah assured her. "And don't you worry about a thing while you're gone, you two," she said. "I'll keep Josh and the rest of the hands well fed and looked after, I promise

you.”

“I’d never doubt it,” Milly said. “Sarah, who do you keep glaring at?” she said, following the direction of her sister’s gaze.

“That...that Yankee!” Sarah sputtered. “He keeps staring at me. He’s got nerve, coming here just as if he belonged!”

“We did invite the entire town,” Milly pointed out mildly, looking surprised and somewhat disappointed at her sister’s outburst.

Sarah couldn’t blame Milly for her reaction. Sarah had always been the meek one, the quiet one. She’d never exhibited such a dislike of anyone, so her open dislike of the doctor was bound to attract her sister’s attention. “And he is the new town doctor,” Milly added.

Sarah sighed. If Dr. Harkey hadn’t been one of the few casualties during the Comanche raid on Founder’s Day, when everyone was gathered in town to celebrate, Nolan Walker might have ridden right back out of town after she refused to talk to him. But now it looked as if he was going to stay forever.

“He does rather look like a hungry lion who’s spotted a lonely gazelle,” Nick said with a grin, after glancing at the man. He turned back to Sarah. “Would you like me to go have a word with him?” he asked, assuming a fierce expression and clenching fists. “You’re my sister now, and I won’t have blackguards bothering you.”

Sarah tried not to laugh at his mock-menacing features and failed. “No, thank you. I’ll take care of it,” she muttered, rising

to her feet.

“Sarah—be nice, please,” Milly said in a warning tone. “Just for today, at least.”

“I won’t challenge him to a duel, I promise,” Sarah said, and stalked across the floor full of milling guests.

She saw him watching her advance, as he leaned negligently against the wall in his black frock coat and trousers, sipping a cup of punch.

“I won’t have you staring at me,” she announced. “Stop it immediately!”

A slow smile spread over Nolan Walker’s angular, high-cheekboned face, making him even more handsome than he had been a moment ago, blast the man. “But you’re the most beautiful woman in the room, Miss Matthews. You even outshine the bride. So why wouldn’t any normal man want to look at you?”

She blinked in astonishment at his audacity, hating the flush that crept up her neck again. “In the South, we’re taught staring is ungentelemanly and rude. So I’d like you to desist—please.” She resented having to add that polite word.

“Tell me, Miss Matthews, just why do you dislike me so much? You hated me on sight.”

Not on sight, she thought. On hearing. She’d been more than pleased with her first sight of him, happy and relieved that he had proven to be every bit as appealing in person as he had seemed in his letters. Then he’d spoken, dashing her hopes with the evidence of his deception. He was worse than just a Yankee

—he was a Yankee who had almost tricked her into caring for him. And yet his outlandish accent was curling around her heart in such a dismaying way. “I don’t hate you,” she argued. “It’s wrong to hate. But it ought to be very obvious why you’re not welcome here.”

A spark flared in those blue eyes. “I’m not? Your sister invited me here today. The other single ladies speak to me. Townspeople with ailments and injuries have shown no hesitation to come to my office. The South is a hospitable region, I’ve always been told, and so I’m finding it here. Only you, Miss Matthews, have been openly hostile to me. Why? Or are you too cowardly to tell me?”

Sarah felt her fists clenching at her sides. She took a quick look around her, to make sure no one else was watching them, but the other conversations buzzed on, unabated. Even Milly’s face was turned away from them, however Sarah suspected that to be a deliberate act on Milly’s part rather than lack of curiosity.

Sarah drew herself up. “This is neither the time nor the place,” Sarah said, falling back on her dignity.

“So you will tell me, some other time?” he challenged, his blue eyes dueling with hers, and finally, making her look away first.

“If it’s so important to you.”

“Oh, it is, I assure you, Miss Matthews, or we would not be having this conversation. But I have a suggestion to make to you.”

“And that is—?” she asked, wary. He was leading her into a trap.

“Why don’t we make a truce, just for today, at this special

occasion? Your sister's been giving us these worried little glances the whole time we've been talking."

Sarah jerked her head around, only to see that Milly was in deep conversation with Nick's middle brother, Richard. Was Dr. Walker lying about Milly, in an effort to make Sarah feel guilty?

"Why don't we agree to be civil, even pleasant, to one another today?" Dr. Walker went on. "We can go back to being best enemies tomorrow, if you like."

"Best enemies?" she repeated, and sternly smothered an impulse to laugh. "What an absurd man you are, Dr. Walker! Very well, just for today I'll pretend I don't wish you'd ride out of town and never come back."

She'd thought her last words would make him flinch, but he only grinned. "If you mean it, you have to agree to dance with me, Miss Matthews. Just one dance."

Chapter Two

She opened her mouth to reply—to refuse, Nolan was sure—but she was interrupted by Prissy Gilmore, who dashed up to Sarah and tugged at her arm.

“Sarah, come on! Your sister’s going to throw her bouquet!”

Sarah looked back at him, as if she still might toss off a refusal before joining the gathering group of women and girls in the far corner of the church social hall, but he spoke before she could.

“You won’t catch it,” he told her, as if it was an accomplished fact.

His words stopped her, made her go rigid—just as he expected.

“Oh? And why is that, Dr. Walker?” she inquired, giving each word chilly emphasis.

He gestured at the women. “Look at them. Lots of tall ladies there. Besides, you don’t want it badly enough.”

As he’d hoped, she responded to his words as if they had been a dare. Raising her chin, she demanded, “Is that so? Well, we’ll see about that.” She whirled around and caught up with Prissy.

He grinned when the mayor’s daughter, unnoticed by Sarah, smiled conspiratorially at him over her shoulder.

“Prissy” was short for Priscilla, he knew, but what an inaccurate nickname. There was nothing the least bit prim and proper about the cheerful, outgoing girl. She’d been so kind to

him after Sarah had taken to him in such dislike the day he came to town, and had helped him save face by letting him escort her to the picnic. He guessed with a little effort on his part, she would have been willing for him to court her instead. But it had been just his luck that the moment he had spotted the willowy golden Sarah, he'd lost his heart.

He wished it wasn't so. It made no sense. He'd never been one to chase disdainful women just to see if he could change their minds about him, merely because it was a challenge. But he'd begun falling in love with Sarah Matthews when he'd read her letters, and once he'd laid eyes on Sarah, Prissy Gilmore could be nothing more than a friend to him—and he was glad to have her friendship, for he sensed that she'd be willing to do whatever she could to help him win Sarah.

He wasn't sure anything would work, though. He faced the fact that he might eventually have to give up and admit Sarah would never do more than despise him. And then he'd have a choice to make—stay in town and watch her choose someone else in time, or leave Simpson Creek and go back home to Maine. He had no one there any longer who mattered to him, though.

Did she hate him because he was a Yankee? Was that all there was to it, a rebel Southerner's reflexive dislike because he'd been part of the Union army?

Nolan had been charmed by her first letter, introducing herself as a representative of the ladies who'd advertised for bachelors for the small Texas town. He knew he ought to have

told her which side he'd fought on in one of the letters he'd written from his friend Jeff's home in Brazos County. But he'd been aware of enough anti-Yankee sentiment in Texas to think he'd have a much better chance of acceptance if Sarah got to know him first through his letters. They were getting along very well as long as they communicated by letter, but as soon as he'd uttered his first syllables in her hearing, she'd backed away in disgust.

He sighed, watching as the guests fell silent, and the bride turned her back to the clump of unmarried ladies of all ages and heights. Sarah had made her way to the front. He thought he saw her dart a glance in his direction, but then the bride made a few feints at throwing her flowers, and Sarah Matthews became all business, staring at the silk bouquet with the intensity of a sheepdog spotting a straying ewe.

Milly flung the bouquet, and Sarah leaped for it, catching it despite the efforts of a taller girl behind her trying to lean forward and snatch the prize while it was still airborne. The bride ran over and embraced her sister, followed by the groom, while everyone cheered and gathered around them. Sarah was soon hidden from his sight—but not before he saw her shoot him a triumphant look.

It was a start, he thought. Even if she'd sought his gaze only to mock him, it was better than the icy way she had ignored him ever since he'd arrived in town. Now she had caught the bouquet, though, and tradition decreed that meant she would be the next to be married.

“And now we’ll have the throwing of the garter,” Prissy announced, cupping her hands to project her voice over the hum of conversation. “Would all the unmarried men please gather at this end of the room?”

Nolan walked toward the gathering throng made up of grinning young boys, a couple of graybeards and men whom he knew were courting various members of the Spinsters’ Club. As he approached, he spotted the new Mrs. Brookfield and her husband leave the social hall, but by the time he had positioned himself behind a short youth not old enough to grow a beard, they had returned. Smiling, Nicholas Brookfield waved a circlet of blue, lace-trimmed ribbon over his head.

“Catch it, Pete!” called one of the bridesmaids, the one who had been standing next to the English lord in the receiving line. “I want us to get married next!”

A dark-haired fellow on the left side of the group called back, “I’ll try, sweetheart!” and everyone laughed.

Nolan surveyed the crowd. Was Sarah watching? She was, and pretending not to care, he noticed with amusement.

The Englishman turned his back to them, just as his bride had done to the ladies. “Good luck, gentlemen!” he cried. “Who’ll be the next lucky groom?”

Nolan dared a wink at Sarah, but before he could see her reaction, Nick Brookfield tossed the garter. It flew through the air, and Nolan launched himself upward as the tiny missile flew straight and true as if the groom had been aiming it precisely at

him.

And perhaps he had. Brookfield met his gaze and grinned as Nolan waved the bit of ribbon and lace above everyone's heads as they applauded and clapped him on the back.

"Thanks," Nolan murmured, handing the garter back to Brookfield, who returned it to his blushing bride before turning back to him.

"Don't mention it, old fellow. And don't give up. Sarah's a good woman—I think you'll find she'll be worth a bit of persistence on your part."

Nolan's eyes sought and found Sarah, who was watching him with an unreadable expression on her face. Then she turned away, pretending a great interest in something her sister was saying to her.

It means nothing, Sarah told herself. She wasn't a believer in omens, so there was no significance to Nolan Walker catching the garter as she had the bouquet. It was all just part of the traditional tomfoolery at weddings. Catching the bouquet or garter guaranteed nothing. Anyone could see that Caroline Wallace and Pete Collier would be the next bride and groom, despite not winning those prizes.

At the opposite end of the room, the fiddlers were tuning up for the dancing. She supposed she would have to dance with the cursed Yankee, if only to spare herself the scene that might follow if she refused.

The first dance, of course, was the bride and groom's dance,

and the musicians struck up a waltz. Sarah forgot all about the Yankee while watching Nicholas Brookfield, her new brother-in-law, whirl her sister ever so gracefully across the floor as if they had been dancing together all their lives.

They were so perfect for each other, she thought, seeing the loving way Nick gazed down at her sister, and she up at him as if no one else existed in the universe. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes. She remembered how he had only had eyes for Milly from the first day he had arrived. Lord, please grant them a long and happy life together, and lots of children.

She felt a twinge of aching sadness, too. Milly's happiness also meant changes for Sarah's life. It would never again be Milly and Sarah, two sisters alone against the world. Milly now had a husband to tell her deepest hopes and secrets to. Please, Lord, if You see fit, find me a husband, too, a good man who also loves You. I know that if it's Your will for me to marry, You'll send a man who's neither a liar nor a Yankee!

Almost against her will, her eyes searched the hall for Nolan Walker, but she didn't see him. Had he left? Good, she thought fiercely. She could relax and enjoy herself if she knew he wasn't here to plague her any more.

Then someone tapped her on the shoulder. She started, giving an involuntary cry that came out soundng remarkably like a mouse's squeak, thinking Dr. Walker had managed to circle his way around to her without her noticing his approach and was now claiming his dance. But it was only Edward, Viscount Greyshaw.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss Sarah," he said, looking as startled by her reaction as she felt. "I—I didn't mean to take you unaware. It's time for us to join in, I believe," he said, nodding toward the pair still waltzing in the middle of the hall.

"O-of course," she said, giving a weak laugh. "I didn't mean to jump. I'm afraid I was so intent on watching my sister and your brother dance, I didn't see you coming."

"They do make a handsome couple, don't they?"

Fitting her gloved hand to his, she joined him on the floor, thankful that she had lately practiced with Nick and could give a competent accounting of herself. It would not do to tread on a lord's feet.

In a few moments, Caroline Wallace and her counterpart among the groomsmen, Richard Brookfield, joined them in their waltzing, and then Prissy and old Josh, the foreman of their ranch. They certainly made an odd couple, the old cowboy and the young, vivacious Prissy, and Sarah knew that old Josh would have rather faced a horde of Comanches again than be dancing in a fancy frock coat. But Nick had become like a son to him, so he'd been honored when Nick and Milly had asked him to be in the wedding. Sarah saw him laughing at something Prissy had just said, and figured Prissy's lively chatter was keeping Josh's self-consciousness at bay.

A Virginia reel followed next. Lord Edward remained with her, remarking, "You know, we call this one 'Roger de Coverley' at home." He was a good dancer, and so was his younger brother,

Richard, who claimed her for the Schottische which followed. He drew back when a square dance was called after that, though, unfamiliar with the American dance. Josh came to Sarah's side and asked her to partner him.

Sarah had seen Dr. Walker in the crowd during the waltz, and when the band struck up the reel, she saw him ask Jane Jeffries, one of the Spinsters who had been widowed by the war, to dance. To Sarah's surprise, Jane accepted, a smile lighting her usually somber face. Didn't she know that Dr. Walker had served in the same army responsible for her husband's death?

Nolan sat out the Schottische, taking a chair next to Maude Harkey, another of the Spinsters. Maude wasn't dancing tonight, for she still wore deep mourning for the death of her father, Dr. Harkey. How did Maude feel, speaking to the man who had taken her father's place as town physician? Yet she seemed pleased that Dr. Walker had sat down with her.

How kind of him to keep Maude company since she can't dance tonight, a voice within Sarah whispered, but Sarah firmly squelched it. He probably just feels guilty that he's the town doctor only because her father died.

Sarah was even more surprised to see him up again when the square dancing began, partnering Faith Bennett. Well, aren't you the ladies' man? The spiteful thought distracted her and caused her to stumble in the "Allemande left" the caller announced.

Pay attention to your steps, Sarah. Did you expect him to gaze longingly at you until he finally gathers his courage to claim his

dance? Of course she wasn't jealous, she told herself. One wasn't jealous over someone one didn't want. His behavior just proved he was a liar and a deceiver—a typical Yankee, in short!

Chapter Three

The lead fiddler announced the last dance of the night, a waltz. After this, Milly and Nick would go to the hotel for the night, and the guests would all disperse to their homes.

By this time, Sarah's nerves were raw, expecting at the beginning of every dance that Dr. Walker would come to claim her, but so far he hadn't. She had not lacked for partners, for someone else always asked her, but dancing with others did not mean she avoided him. Every dance but the waltz meant being passed to other dancers for at least a few seconds. Still, Dr. Walker had seemed intent on charming every woman in town except her.

Once, he had even managed to get Mrs. Detwiler up on the floor, and the older lady had clearly enjoyed it, though she was red faced and out of breath by the end of it. Sarah saw him fetching her punch while she sat and fanned herself. Sarah wouldn't have minded spending some time in a chair herself, being fetched a cool drink, for her feet were aching from all the dancing and her hair had long since fallen from its elegant knot.

Now, though, she felt a kinship with the gazelle Nick had mentioned earlier as she saw Dr. Walker crossing the floor toward her.

"My dance, I believe?"

"Are you sure you've danced with every other female in town,

from the oldest to the youngest?” Sarah asked archly.

He raised a brow, and in that moment she knew she’d made a mistake.

“Ah, so you were watching,” he said, grinning.

“I most certainly was not,” Sarah insisted. “I never sat down myself, except when the musicians took a break. I only just realized that you hadn’t made good your threat to claim a dance.”

“Threat?” he echoed. “I believe I only requested a dance, as proof of your goodwill. And I was waiting for a waltz, Miss Matthews.”

“Oh? Why?” she asked. Was this girl asking the daring questions really herself?

Again, the raised brow. “If you have to ask that, Miss Sarah Matthews, then it’s no wonder the South lost the war.”

She felt herself flushing so hotly that it took all her strength of will not to open the fan that dangled from her wrist and start using it. “If we stand here arguing all through the dance, Dr. Walker, we will miss it altogether.”

The couples had just arranged themselves on the floor, and the fiddlers had struck only the first notes, but he took her hand without another word and led her onto the floor. In a moment they were gliding over the floor with the rest of the dancers.

Sarah saw Milly, waltzing with Nick, watching her, her smile even brighter than before because her sister was dancing with the Yankee doctor. Good for you, Milly mouthed. She probably thought Sarah and Dr. Walker had agreed to bury the hatchet.

Sarah smiled back, not wanting Milly to worry that she'd only agreed to postpone the battle, not call it off.

She found to her surprise Nolan Walker was an excellent dancer, better even than the Brookfield brothers, who had probably been taught to waltz in their English nursery. His steps were so smooth he made it easy to follow him, so she was never in any danger of treading on his toes.

"Thank you, Miss Matthews," he said when the last notes died away and the other couples drifted off the floor. "I enjoyed that very much."

She couldn't say she'd enjoyed it as well; she'd been too conscious of his nearness and his gaze trained on her the whole time. "You're welcome, Dr. Walker. You...you're an accomplished dancer," she said, determined to give credit where it was due.

"Surprised?" he asked. "I assure you, Miss Matthews, we Yankees do not all live in caves, coming out only to devour raw fish."

Before she could catch it, her mouth fell open at his gibe. "Are you making fun of me, sir?"

He grinned. "Not at all. I was only teasing you, my thorny Southern rose."

How could one man be so infuriating? "I'm not 'your' anything, Dr. Walker. And now that you've had your dance with me, you must excuse me while I go see if my sister needs any help before she leaves."

“Very well, but don’t forget about that talk we’re going to have.”

His blue eyes dared her to claim she didn’t remember what he was talking about, but Sarah was not a dishonest person and she remembered all too well that he’d demanded she tell him sometime why she was so hostile to him.

“Oh, I won’t. I’ll look forward to it,” she said.

He bowed, but Sarah felt his gaze on her as she walked away.

The next morning, Sarah met Nick’s visiting brothers outside the church. The newlyweds were not with them, but Sarah hadn’t really expected them to be up this early. They were to meet after church in the hotel’s restaurant for Sunday dinner. After that, the newlyweds would depart for Austin in a specially hired coach, accompanied by Edward and Richard, who would pay their respects to the embassy branch in the Texas capital before journeying back to the coast and boarding a ship for home.

“A pity my wife’s so near her time,” Lord Greyshaw remarked as they walked up the steps that led into the church. “She’d have loved your Texas, Sarah.” Amelia, Viscountess Greyshaw, was only a couple months from delivering their second child. It had been felt the ocean voyage and overland travel would be too risky for her, and Richard’s wife, Gwenneth, had remained at Greyshaw to keep her company in their husbands’ absence and to watch over Violet, their younger sister.

“Yes, such mild weather, for late autumn, to be sure,” Richard agreed, looking up appreciatively at the blue sky. “At home we’d

be gathered around the hearth complaining of the dank cold.”

“Oh, it’ll get colder closer to Christmas,” Sarah replied. “Every few winters, it actually snows. You gentlemen must come again and bring your wives and children.”

“Eddie’s already taken me to task for not bringing him,” Lord Edward said, grinning as he mentioned his son. “He’d like to meet a wild Indian. Oh, dear,” he murmured, seeing the shudder Sarah hadn’t been able to suppress. “I do apologize. I had forgotten all about the attack. How dreadfully clumsy of me.”

“That’s all right,” Sarah said, gazing behind the church where, on Founder’s Day, the Comanches had come galloping across the creek and into the town. “Hopefully, now that we have the fort, it won’t happen again. There’s a cavalry regiment that patrols the area regularly and in any case, the Comanches are in their winter quarters now, up on the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plains. We’d better go in, gentlemen,” Sarah said, as the bell began to toll from the steeple above them. She played the piano for the services every Sunday and knew Reverend Chadwick would be waiting on her to begin the service.

She was relieved to see that once more, Dr. Nolan Walker did not grace a pew. She had never seen him attending services since his arrival in Simpson Creek. He must be an unbeliever. Just one more reason not to be friendly to him.

Sarah would have been surprised to know that Dr. Walker was seeing a patient in his office at this very hour.

“Th-thank you for seeing me at this time, Doctor,” said the

pale, mousy little woman who'd entered his waiting room. "I—I wouldn't want to come when you had other patients coming and going...."

She'd knocked so softly at his door he almost hadn't heard her from his quarters behind the office. He had only just arisen from bed, the tolling of the church bell having awakened him from the sleep he'd finally achieved at dawn.

"And why is that, Miss Spencer? Surely you have a right to consult a physician as much as anyone else in Simpson Creek."

"I...I don't want anyone to know I'm seeing a doctor," she whispered, eyes downcast. "They might wonder why. I—I'm expecting a child, you see."

He looked at her quickly. If Miss Ada Spencer was pregnant, it was not obvious, as yet. But that explained the reason for the furtive visit, if it was true.

"Are you certain? That you're...ah, with child?" he said, wondering for the thousandth time why women in this day and age spoke of it in hushed tones or euphemisms and couldn't use the correct term for something which was, after all, a natural thing and should be a happy event—unless, of course, a woman was unmarried.

"Yes, I'm sure," she insisted, and told him all the symptoms she had been having.

"I'll need to examine you," he said. "Would you be more comfortable if there was another woman present? Would you like to come back when you can bring someone?"

Still looking down, she shook her head. "I haven't told Ma," she said. "She'd be ashamed of me. She'd want me to keep to home now that I've 'disgraced' myself. She's in church now, so she doesn't know I'm here."

Was Mrs. Spencer a church-going hypocrite, praying for the heathen in Africa while oblivious to the trouble within her own house? He was familiar with the type, but he hadn't met the woman so he shouldn't assume that was the case. Did Ada Spencer have no friends, then? But perhaps she had no one with whom she was willing to trust her secret.

"I just want to make sure the baby's healthy," she murmured, glancing timidly up at him, then away again.

"Where is the father?" he asked, careful to keep his tone neutral.

"Dead," Ada said, her tone as lifeless as the word. "He died when the Comanches attacked in October."

"I see." Simpson Creek had suffered half a dozen casualties that memorable day he'd arrived. And now there would be a child born who would never know his father because of it, and a woman who might be bowed down with shame the rest of her life. "I'm sorry."

A tear trickled down Ada's sallow face. "He wasn't going to do right by me anyway," she said. "He was leaving town that morning. It was his bad luck he happened to run into those savages."

Nolan remembered the man who'd appeared at the church,

tied onto his horse, who'd lived only long enough to give a few moments' warning of the impending raid.

"And what do you plan to do, Miss Spencer? It's none of my business, of course, but if you stay around town, people will eventually know that you're with child. Have you considered relocating to another town—even another state, where you could say you were a widow?"

Again, she shook her head. "Ma and Pa are old. I'm the only one left at home to take care of them. They won't turn me out, even once they know."

But they won't give her emotional support, either. He sighed, and wished he had a nurse he could call on to be present.

"Very well, let's have a look," he said, opening the door to his exam room and beckoning her inside.

Afterward, he waited for her at his desk in the adjoining room. "If you're expecting, it's very early," he said, after she came in and sat down. "At this stage, I can't be certain. When did you... that is..." He stopped, aware of the awkwardness of his question and wishing he could just spit it out instead of having to dance delicately around the point. He'd been so much more comfortable around soldiers, saying what he meant without having to think about it so carefully.

"In September," she said, thankfully sparing him having to come up with another euphemism. "It...it was only once or twice...."

Nolan Walker sighed. Obviously once or twice had been

enough. It was useless to wish the dead man had behaved honorably and married the girl before leaving her with child and getting himself killed.

She wasn't a bad-looking woman, he thought, though in her present depressed, shame-faced state it would be hard for a man to see her better qualities. How did one go about suggesting to a woman in this predicament that if she held her head high and was pleasant and charming, some good man might well come to accept her and the coming baby?

Ah, well. He was a physician, not a counselor or matchmaker. Perhaps he could persuade her to trust Reverend Chadwick with her secret. The minister seemed like a decent man who wouldn't shame this poor woman still further, but could give her good advice. And perhaps in time, she would trust one of her friends enough to enlist another's company at her appointments with him, if her mother wasn't willing once she knew the truth. Ada Spencer belonged to that Spinsters' Club, didn't she? So she must have some acquaintances, at least. He'd feel a lot more comfortable when he needed to examine Miss Spencer if she brought another female with her.

"Very well, Miss Spencer," he said. "If all goes well between now and sometime in the middle of June, I see no reason that you cannot deliver a strong healthy child. I'll need to see you a few times before then, of course."

"The middle of June? That's when my baby will come?" A spark of joy lit the woman's narrow face, and he marveled. Even

while she risked disgrace, a woman could find joy in the thought of a coming baby.

“Based on what you told me about when the child was conceived, yes. Though babies, of course, have a mind of their own and can come earlier or later than when a physician predicts.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re quite welcome, Miss Spencer.” He rose to indicate the appointment was over, and she moved quickly toward the door.

“Oh, and Miss Spencer,” he said, trying to make his request sound casual, “why don’t you bring a friend with you next time you come? I’m sure it would be wiser for the sake of your reputation.” And mine.

She looked back at him, then bolted out the door without another word.

Chapter Four

“My message,” Reverend Chadwick began, “is one I have felt compelled to preach today, the subject of forgiveness. Certainly this is a timely subject, in view of the recent national conflict that nearly tore our country in two forever. Maybe the Lord wanted me to speak on this because one person present is struggling to forgive another. But really, it doesn’t matter whether one person or twenty needs to hear it. I take my text from Matthew Chapter Eighteen, in which Peter is asking Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother.”

Sarah winced inwardly. Of all the subjects for the pastor to preach about! And just after she had been thinking that his failure to attend church served as an additional reason why Dr. Nolan Walker deserved neither her forgiveness nor her friendship...

Reverend Chadwick went on to describe how Jesus had decreed one should forgive seventy times seven. “Now, does the Lord mean we are only to forgive four hundred and ninety times? No, dear people, He means infinitely. If we don’t forgive, we aren’t forgiven—simple as that.”

Sarah shifted uncomfortably in the pew, hoping the elegant Lord Edward and his kindly brother Richard didn’t notice. The white-haired pastor seemed to be speaking straight to her, though he wasn’t looking in her direction.

“In fact,” Reverend Chadwick went on, “the Bible goes so far

as to say if we take our gift to the altar, and discover we have something against our brother, we're to go and make things right with him first."

Very well, then. She had brought a tithe of her profits from her bakery sales to put in the collection plate, but she'd hold on to the coins until she'd had a chance to speak to Dr. Walker. That was the right thing to do. It wouldn't be easy—much would depend on how he responded, but surely Pastor Chadwick's choice of this topic meant that she was to forgive Nolan Walker for serving with the Union Army. She could pay him a visit this very afternoon, after she and the Brookfield brothers met with the Milly and Nick for dinner and she saw them all off to Austin. After all, she was already in town, and had left dinner on the stove for the cowhands, so she didn't have to get back to the ranch soon.

She sighed, at peace with herself now, and admitted she was even looking forward to seeing the blue-eyed doctor and hearing him talk in that outlandish accent again. With some difficulty, she forced her attention back to the sermon.

"Time to go see the newlyweds," Edward murmured, after they had shaken hands with Reverend Chadwick and had spoken with several members of the congregation.

"Yes. I think marriage will be good for Nicholas, especially marriage to your dear sister," Richard told Sarah. "He's made an excellent choice. Just think, Edward, now there's only Violet for us to see safely married...."

"As she's hardly out of the schoolroom, I hope that will be

some time from now,” his brother said, but Sarah was no longer listening.

Instead of gazing down the main street of Simpson Creek to her right, toward the hotel where they would meet Nick and Milly for dinner, she had glanced to her left, where a low white picket fence surrounded the doctor’s office.

Just as she looked, the door opened. Perhaps Nolan had peered out, seen her emerge from the church and was coming to greet them? Perhaps she could say something to indicate she would like to talk to him later?

But instead of Nolan Walker, she saw a female figure emerge, glance furtively at the townspeople strolling away from church, then turn away and walk quickly down the alley that ran past the side of the doctor’s office. A dark bonnet hid her features as soon as the woman turned her head, but in those brief seconds when she had been facing toward the church, Sarah recognized Ada Spencer.

What is she doing there? Doctors don’t have office hours on Sunday mornings. Therefore she must have been there for a completely nonmedical purpose. Thinking about Ada’s secretive manner, Sarah was suddenly sure the two had been Up to No Good.

She thought back to the summer, when Ada had been giddy with excitement over being courted by that Englishman Harvey Blakely. Blakely had come to try to blackmail Nicholas about his past or, if he wouldn’t cooperate, to expose Nick’s disgrace

in India, but after failing to discredit Nick, Harvey had been the first casualty on the day of the Comanche attack. Ada had been a virtual recluse ever since, and never came to the Spinsters' Club meetings. When she thought about her, at all, Sarah had assumed Ada was still mourning her English beau, scoundrel that he had been. In the excitement of her sister's wedding, Sarah had forgotten all about Ada.

Now, though, it seemed that Ada had set her cap at a new bachelor, and perhaps Nolan Walker was all too willing to meet with the vulnerable woman in his office at a time when they wouldn't likely be interrupted by patients.

They probably hadn't even remained in the office. Behind it was the doctor's private living quarters— Sarah knew this from her long friendship with Maude Harkey, the late doctor's daughter and also a member of the Spinsters' Club who had shared those quarters with her father until his death in the Comanche attack. When Dr. Walker had taken over as town physician, he had been offered the space, and Maude had moved in with a married sister in town.

Sarah's heart sank. Though she had been looking forward to clearing the air with Dr. Nolan Walker, and perhaps more, she knew now she had been right all along about him.

Dr. Walker was nothing but a Yankee opportunist—little short of a carpetbagger. And now, it seemed, he was a womanizer as well, and was engaged in an improper relationship with a woman who had already proven she was more than willing to go to any

lengths to have a suitor.

Resolutely, Sarah turned her face away from the doctor's office, and gazed directly ahead of her toward the hotel. She'd go straight home after her dinner with Milly and her new husband. She'd cook a fine supper for the cowhands and perhaps begin planning for her move to the cottage she would be sharing soon with Prissy.

It was a good thing she'd found out about Dr. Walker's true character before she'd made a fool of herself. Perhaps she should warn the others in the Spinsters' Club, she thought, firmly ignoring the ache in her heart.

The time had gone by quickly. Milly and Nick had arrived home December 23, and Sarah welcomed them back with a wonderful supper.

"Oh, Sarah, why don't you stay till after New Year's?" Milly said the morning after Christmas. "It doesn't seem right, your moving out right now. Why not stay till then?"

"It was a wonderful Christmas, wasn't it?" Sarah said. "Your first one as husband and wife," she said, smiling at the couple across the table. "But Milly, I can't keep putting it off. Today's the perfect day. Bobby and Isaiah are already set to load up the buckboard right after breakfast, aren't you?"

Down the table, the two cowhands nodded.

Sarah looked forward to sharing the cottage with Prissy, for her lively and vivacious friend knew no strangers. It would be fun teaching Prissy how to cook and manage a household. And what

would it be like, not having to cook three square meals a day for hungry cowboys, and hitch up the horse whenever she had baked goods to deliver?

An hour later, all was in readiness for her departure.

“Now remember, you—”

“Can always come back,” Sarah finished for Milly, from her perch on the driver’s seat of the wagon loaded with her bed and chest of drawers, as well as a pair of chairs Milly said she could spare. “I know. And perhaps I will, after I teach Prissy a few basic kitchen and housekeeping skills.”

“She couldn’t possibly be any slower to learn to cook than I was,” Milly said. “Now, with the fried chicken, you dip it in the beaten eggs, then the flour and spices, right?” She was to cook her first dinner without help tonight, and she’d already admitted she was nervous about it.

“Right. Actually, I’m more worried about teaching Prissy how to launder clothes than the cooking,” Sarah said. “She still thinks doing the laundry consists of handing her dirty clothes to the housekeeper. But don’t worry, your first supper will be fine.”

“Of course it will, darling,” said Nick, who’d been helping Bobby and Isaiah load the wagon. He put an arm affectionately around his wife’s waist.

Sarah watched them with a certain wistfulness. She was so happy for her sister, yet wondered if she would ever know this happiness herself.

She straightened and nodded to Bobby, sitting next to her and

holding the reins, and Isaiah, who waited on his horse beside them. They were coming along to help her move her furniture into the cottage. “We’re burning daylight, as Josh would say. I reckon we’d better get going.”

By noon, the men had unloaded everything on the wagon, placed it all wherever Sarah and Prissy had directed in the little cottage, rid the house of a mouse that had sent Prissy shrieking in panic out into the yard and departed. Now Sarah and Prissy sat down and enjoyed the sandwiches Sarah had packed for their midday meal.

“It’s shaping up well, isn’t it?” Prissy said, surveying with satisfaction the room that served as a combined dining area and parlor. They had arranged the round oak table between the kitchen and the couch and chairs, and there was a fireplace along the back wall. Behind the dining room and parlor, a short hallway divided the two bedrooms.

“Small, but cozy,” Sarah agreed. “But I just realized something I should have thought of before...”

“What’s that?”

“Now that I’m here, I won’t have the wagon to deliver my baked goods to the hotel and mercantile. It’s a lot to carry, so I’m either going to make at least a couple of trips back and forth to the cottage, or—”

“I could help you carry your pies and cakes,” Prissy offered.

“Thanks, but it’s not fair for you to have to do that several times a week. I think I’ll just go see if Mr. Patterson has a little

pull-cart he could trade me for this week's pies." She arose, and took her woolen shawl and bonnet from the pegs by the door. "I need to discuss with him and the hotel owner when I can start delivering again, anyway." She had notified her customers she would not be baking again till after the move. "Do you want to come with me?"

"No, I think I'll work on arranging my bedroom," Prissy said. She stretched and rubbed the small of her back. "I have a feeling my bed's going to feel very good tonight, after all the boxes we've been carrying and the furniture we've been arranging and rearranging. Oh, and while you're there, would you look and see if they have anything lighter for curtain material? Mama's castoff damask curtains are just too dark and heavy for this room, don't you think?"

Sarah nodded her agreement. "I'll look at the bolts of cloth while I'm there. Perhaps a dotted swiss..." Sewing was Milly's area of expertise, but surely she could sew a simple pair of gathered curtains.

It only took her five minutes to walk from the cottage on the grounds of the mayor's property, out the wrought-iron gates and down Simpson Creek's main street to the mercantile. The weather was cool, and lowering clouds in the north promised colder weather still, perhaps even a "blue norther." Might they even have some snow? It was too bad it had not come in time for Christmas, if so...

Distracted by her thoughts, she didn't remember to look out

for the warped board that lay halfway between the hotel and the mercantile—

—and suddenly she was falling headlong, her arms flailing in a vain attempt to regain her balance. She cried in alarm as her shawl slid off backward and her forearms skidded along the rough boards. The fabric of her left sleeve snagged on a protruding nail which sliced a three-inch furrow into the tender flesh of her arm, leaving stinging pain in its wake.

And blood. A crimson trickle, then a rivulet welled up from the lacerated flesh, staining the cloth. Dizzy and nauseated at the sight, she closed her eyes, hoping she was not about to faint.

Then there were voices and running footsteps from inside the store, and a pounding on the boards as someone ran up the walk from behind her. “Miss Matthews! Are you all right? I saw you fall.”

Sarah recognized the voice of Mr. Patterson, the owner of the mercantile. She heard another voice asking, “Wait, don’t try to move her. Can you hear me, Miss Matthews?” She recognized that voice, too—that of the very last person she wanted to have witnessed her humiliation, Dr. Nolan Walker.

Her recognition galvanized her and kept her from giving into the blackness that she might well have surrendered to otherwise. She opened her eyes. “Of course I can. I’m fine. Just...give me a minute.”

She opened her eyes, and saw that he was kneeling beside her. “Can you move your limbs, Miss Matthews?”

“Of course I can,” she said again, and to prove it, struggled to sit up.

“Wait. Just lie there a moment, get your bearings.” he commanded her, coolly professional. “Lift your head.” He wrenched off his coat, and laid it under her head.

“I assure you, Dr. Walker, I have my bearings.”

He ignored her. “Mr. Patterson, could you please get me some clean cloths and water?”

By now a trio of curious cowboys riding by, and a couple of small boys who’d been shooting marbles across the street, had stopped to gawk at her, and she felt her face flaming with embarrassment. “Please, I don’t want to be a public spectacle.” She reached out a hand. “And it’s cold. Help me inside.”

“Very well, just sit up for a moment, don’t rush—”

She was not about to act the fragile, swooning belle in front of this man. Paying no heed to his injunction, Sarah used his hand to pull herself to her feet. Then she accidentally caught a glimpse of her bloody sleeve. Her head swam, and the black mist threatened to swamp her again. If only she had a vial of smelling salts in her reticule, as proper ladies did! Suppressing a shudder, she looked away from her injured arm and allowed Dr. Walker to help her into the mercantile.

Inside the store, Mr. Patterson had set out a chair in front of the counter, and Mrs. Patterson bustled about, setting a bowl of water and some folded cloths on top of the flat surface.

She sank gratefully into the chair, and felt the soothing, cool

wetness of the cloth the mercantile owner's wife wiped on her forehead, murmuring, "You poor dear, that was a nasty fall!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Patterson, I—I'll be all right," she felt compelled to say, though she still wasn't completely certain.

"You'll want to look away," she heard Dr. Walker saying, as he peeled back the blood-stained, ripped sleeve from her injury. He then took another cloth and soaked it in the water, wrung it out, used it to sponge the blood away. The cut stung like a hundred red ants were biting her at once, and Sarah bit her lip, determined not to cry out.

Then Dr. Walker patted it dry, and used a long dry cloth to wrap around her arm, ripping one end of it into two strips to tie it expertly, binding the bandage.

She had to admire his cool professional manner. He'd done it all in less time than it took for Mrs. Patterson to stop clucking over her.

"Thank you, Dr. Walker," she said, standing. "I—I appreciate what you've done. I'm sure it will heal up nicely now." She'd have to return another day to see about the curtains and the wagon. Right now she wanted nothing more than to escape his gaze and that of the Pattersons and go back to the cottage. She'd doubted he'd accept payment for his impromptu doctoring, but perhaps she could bring him a cake by way of thanks.

"It's a blessing he was there," Mrs. Patterson murmured in agreement.

"Oh, I'm not done, Miss Matthews. That's a nasty gash you

have, and it's going to need proper disinfectant and some stitches to heal properly. You need to come down to the office with me where I can do it properly."

Her eyes flew open. "Oh, I'm sure that's not necessary," she protested.

"And I'm sure it is. Come along, Miss Matthews," he said, tucking her uninjured arm in his.

"But—"

"Best listen to the doctor, dear," Mrs. Patterson was saying.

"Yes, he's treated wounds on the battlefield, after all," her spouse added.

She felt herself being pulled out the door, willy-nilly. She trusted his medical judgment, but she wasn't sure she was ready to be alone with him, even if she was only a patient to him in this instance.

Chapter Five

His hand under her elbow, and keeping his eyes on her still pale face, Nolan led Sarah carefully down the steps to the street. Behind them, a dog had found the bonanza of apple pie splattered against the wall and on the boardwalk and was happily lapping it up.

It was the coldest day he'd experienced since coming to Texas, but it was still nothing to what the weather would be like in his home state at this time of year. Back in Maine, there might well be a foot of snow on the ground and a bitter wind blowing. Folks would be swathed in heavy coats, hats, boots and knitted scarves. Perhaps he'd miss seeing snow eventually, but right now he savored the warmth of the sun on his face.

Then he felt Sarah shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No, I—I'm fine."

Nolan whipped off his frock coat again anyway and settled it around her shoulders over her shawl. She had sand, he thought—real courage and grit. She hadn't given in to her faintness when many ladies would have, but he had to remember she'd just had a traumatic experience and had lost some blood.

Sarah blinked at the gesture, and a little color crept into her cheeks. "Th-thank you."

They said nothing more during the short walk to his office.

He ushered her inside, seating her in his exam chair which had a flat surface extending over each arm. He was thankful he'd had sense enough to clean and boil his suturing instruments last night, even though the hour had been late—after he'd finished taking care of a cowboy who'd been cut by flying glass in a ruckus at the saloon. The instruments lay on a metal stand, concealed by a fresh cloth, but he wouldn't bring them out yet.

"I'll be right back. I'm going to put a pot of water on for coffee when we're finished," he said, deliberately not giving her the chance to demur before he walked down the hallway that led to his living quarters. She'd need something hot and bracing when he was done.

Returning, he stepped over to a basin, poured a pitcher of water into it and began to scrub his hands and forearms with a bar of soap, remembering all the times the other field surgeons had made sport of him for what they called his "old maid fussiness" when he was preparing to operate. "I can amputate twice as many legs and arms as you can in half the time, Walker," one of them had boasted. "And I don't use gallons of carbolic, either." News of the use of carbolic acid's role in preventing infection had come from Europe in the last year of the war, but only a few doctors in America believed in it.

"Yes, and you lose most of them to infection days later," he'd retorted, "while most of mine live to re cover. So I still come out ahead."

He felt her curious gaze on him, watching as he scrubbed

up and down, the harsh lye soap stinging his skin. Then he poured diluted carbolic acid over his hands. When he looked back while he was drying his hands on a clean towel, though, he found her staring at his open rolltop desk. He'd been looking at a small framed daguerreotype he normally left hidden in a drawer, and when he decided to stroll over to the mercantile, he'd absentmindedly left it out on the desk.

"That's my wife and son," he said, when he could find his breath. "They died the summer before the war began."

Her eyes widened and grew sad. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly, then seemed to hesitate, and he knew she was trying a polite way to ask the question.

"Cholera," he said, sparing her the need.

"Oh...how terrible," she murmured. "You had no other children?"

He shook his head, firmly suppressing the old pain within him. "No. Now you're going to have to be brave," he said, knowing his words would distract her from further questions. He brought the bottle of diluted carbolic acid and a basin to the armrest. Pulling a stool over, he sat, then carefully unwrapped the bandage around her arm. He held her arm over the basin, and caught her gaze.

"This is going to sting," he warned. "You want a bullet to bite?"

He'd hoped his little attempt at humor would make her smile, at least for a moment. but she only shook her head and looked away, putting her other hand to her mouth.

“Go ahead,” she whispered.

He poured the carbolic acid over the wound, wincing inwardly as she gasped and clamped her free hand over her mouth.

“Sorry. I don’t want you to get blood poisoning or lockjaw from that rusty nail.”

After removing the basin, he rolled over the tray of instruments on its stand and unscrewed his jar of boiled catgut suture in alcohol, pulled out a couple lengths and laid them on the stand among his instruments. Then picking up a suture needle, he threaded it.

“This is going to hurt, too, I’m afraid, though not as much as that carbolic.”

“Do what you have to do,” she said, tight-lipped, her face as white as the unbloodstained part of her bodice.

He bent his head to his task. She couldn’t know how much harder this was for him than it had been to suture a soldier’s cuts, knowing his touch was inflicting more pain on the very woman he cared about so much. He had to steel himself to ignore her wince each time he inserted the needle into her flesh. Thanks to his experience in battlefield surgery, he was able to close this relatively uncomplicated wound quickly. When he was finished, he looked at his patient.

Her head lay back against the headrest of the chair, her eyes were closed. Pearls of sweat beaded her pale skin.

“I’m done,” he said, wondering if he ought to get out the vial of hartshorn he kept in his desk for swooning ladies. “You were

very brave, Miss Matthews.”

She opened her eyes and smiled wanly at him. “Thank you.”

He saw her dart a glance at the neatly sutured wound before she raised her gaze back to his face.

“This may scar a little,” he said, “but not as much as if we’d just bandaged it. And you’re going to have to watch it for infection. Any red streaks or swelling or drainage, you come back to see me immediately. I’m going to rebandage it,” he said, and took up a roll of linen, which he circled around her forearm and tied by the ends as he had at the store. “Now I’ll get that coffee I promised you.”

“Oh, but you needn’t bother—” she began, but he cut her off.

“No bother, I want some, and I need to see a little more color in those cheeks before I let you out of that chair. If I let you get up now, you’ll collapse like a wilted lily.” Wishing he could invite her back to his kitchen but knowing it would seem improper to her, he left without waiting to hear any further protests.

He returned a moment later, carrying two sturdy crockery mugs full of steaming coffee.

“I took the liberty of putting sugar in yours,” he said. “I didn’t know if you take it that way, but you need the sugar for energy right now.” Then, a little less certainly, he said, “It’s probably a little strong for you. I could get some water—”

“No, it’s fine,” she assured him. “Josh, our foreman, always says it isn’t ranch coffee unless it’s so strong the spoon stands up in the cup.” She took a tentative sip, then another deeper one

before he spoke again.

“Is this a good time to have that talk?”

“T-talk? What talk?” Sarah stammered. She should have known he would take advantage of being alone with her like this to claim the fulfillment of her promise. She could hardly refuse to talk to him, now that he’d played the Good Samaritan and taken care of her wound.

His expression told her that he knew she’d been playing for time to think, that she knew exactly what talk he meant. “The talk you promised me at the wedding, even said you’d look forward to, and have avoided ever since. The talk in which you’re going to explain why you don’t like me.”

“I haven’t avoided you,” she protested. “I’ve been very busy at the ranch, what with Milly being off on her honeymoon and all. I haven’t come into town except to deliver my pies and cakes, go to church and attend a meeting of the Spinsters’ Club.”

He raised an eyebrow as if to imply that if she could do all that, she could have made time to talk to him. “So why don’t you? Like me, that is. You seemed to like me well enough when we were corresponding, but as soon as you set eyes on me, you no longer did.”

Sarah sighed. She was trapped and there was no getting around it. She’d promised to do this and she had to honor her word. She owed him her honesty, at least—but now that it came down to it, and especially after what he’d done for her today, she didn’t feel as righteous about her dislike as she had before. Or as certain.

“Perhaps you find me a homely fellow, not much to look at,” he ventured, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

She met his gaze head on. “Dr. Walker—”

“Nolan,” he corrected her. “We’re not speaking as doctor and patient now.”

“I’m sure you have some sort of a mirror,” Sarah said, “so you know very well you’re not ugly.” Quite the contrary, she thought, looking into his deep blue eyes and studying his strong, rugged features. She took a deep breath. “All right, but remember you asked to hear this. I didn’t like you because you’re a Yankee.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “So you thought well enough of me until I spoke to you.”

“Yes, and that’s your fault. You never said you were a Yankee. By writing to me from Brazos County, you allowed me to believe you a Texan.”

“So you dislike me strictly because I come from the North,” he stated. “Doesn’t that sound rather arbitrary on your part, seeing as the war’s over? As I mentioned, it hasn’t prevented the rest of the townsfolk from accepting me. Why is it so important to you?”

Sarah sighed again, steeling herself to the pain of talking about Jesse. “I was engaged to a wonderful man before the war began,” she said. “Jesse Holt. He...he died in the war—at least, I have to assume that, since he never came back. The men who did come back said...” She looked down as she struggled to finish. “Sometimes when men were killed, they...they...couldn’t be identified.”

Nolan's eyes, when she looked up, were unfocused, haunted, as if he was remembering that and worse.

"I loved Jesse," she said simply. "I...I can be your friend, I suppose...that is to say, we don't have to be enemies. But you came in town to court me, isn't that right? How can I keep company with someone who fought with the Union, when they killed my Jesse? And don't tell me that you were just a doctor, caring for the wounded," she said, when she saw he had opened his mouth to speak. "You wore blue." All the old grief swept over her, threatening to swamp her, and she bent her head, struggling against tears that escaped anyway. She put a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said. "I...I thought I was over it."

Now it was Nolan's turn to sigh. "I know," he said, shifting his gaze to the daguerreotype on his desk. "Mostly, I only have pleasant memories about Julia and Timmy...but once in a while someone will walk like her, or a little boy will remind me of him... But I know they wouldn't want me to mourn forever, Sarah."

She noticed he had switched to using her first name, but she didn't correct him.

"It's been over five years now since they died," he said. "I want to go on with my life. I...know it might be too soon for you."

"I wanted to go on with my life, too," she said. "Meet a good man, get married... That's why I agreed to join the Spinsters' Club when my sister started it."

"But you didn't want to meet a Yankee."

She let the statement stand. “You’re free to court any of the other ladies in the group, or find someone elsewhere, you know.”

“I know,” he said. He raised his head to look at her, and it was a long silent moment before she found the strength to look away.

“We’re friends, at least. That’s something.” He gave her a half smile. “Here’s some bandages,” he said, reaching inside a box and taking out several rolls of bleached linen. “Keep the arm clean and dry and change the dressing every day. Will you come back in a couple days, so I can satisfy myself that it’s healing properly?”

She nodded, thinking she could bring him that cake then, and offer to pay him something, also. “Do you have to take out the stitches?”

He shook his head. “No, they’re catgut—made of sheep intestines, really—so they’ll absorb on their own inside, and the part that’s showing will disintegrate and fall out.”

She stared at the bandaged wound and shuddered. “Sheep intestines?”

He chuckled. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you that.”

Then he smiled at her, and she was so struck by what a compelling smile he had that she forgot all about sheep and their insides.

Chapter Six

“Oh, Sarah, that looks divinely delicious!” Prissy gushed two days later, watching as Sarah put the finishing touches on her blackberry jam cake with pecan frosting. “Will you teach me how to make that one for the New Year’s Day party?”

Sarah looked up from her work, pushing back a stray curl which had escaped from behind her ear. “What New Year’s Day party?”

“The one my parents are giving. Remember the afternoon party on New Year’s Day my parents always gave before the war? The whole town came, and everyone from the nearby ranches. Papa wants to start having it again as a sign that things really have gotten back to normal. I meant to mention it sooner,” Prissy said with an airy wave of her hand. “You know, it’s really the last big social event till spring for the whole town, if you think about it,” Prissy went on. “You can’t plan on anything big for certain, what with the unpredictability of winter weather, though we might manage something smaller with the Spinsters’ Club, if some candidates show up. *Que sera, sera*, as the French say.”

What Prissy was saying was true. The Spinsters’ Club had been started in the summer, when it was relatively easy for an interested candidate to travel to Simpson Creek. They had a taffy pull coming up, but that was all until at least March.

Oh, well, it didn’t matter to her anyway. Even before her sister

had founded the Spinsters' Club, Sarah had been a homebody, content to wait on the Lord to provide her a beau if He willed it so.

"But at least all the ladies of the Spinsters' Club will be coming, and the ones who are being courted will bring their beaux. You never know who might bring an eligible man to the party as a guest," Prissy said, still thinking out loud.

"Oh, and I told Mama we'd bring a couple of desserts." It was a typical Prissy-style change of subject. "Why don't you bake your cherry upside-down cake, and I'll make one like this—" she pointed to the one Sarah was completing "—if you'll teach me, of course."

"Sure I will." Sarah vaguely remembered attending some of those extravagant open-house parties the mayor and his wife had hosted in those halcyon prewar years, though she had barely been old enough to put up her hair before the last of them.

Mentally, she readjusted her plans. She'd been thinking of asking Milly if it was okay if she and Prissy came out to the ranch for dinner for New Year's. Now, of course, she'd have to think about what she was going to wear, as well as making a dessert to contribute. Perhaps Milly and Nick would come into town for the party.

"Or maybe you should make the biscuits. I declare, yours are the lightest, the fluffiest...I don't think I'll ever be able to make biscuits like that." Prissy let out a gusty, dramatic sigh.

"Oh, I don't know...the ones you made this morning were..."

um, much better,” Sarah told her with a grin.

“You mean they were almost edible this time, as opposed to the lead sinkers I made last night for dinner,” Prissy said, with a rueful laugh. “Your sisters’ pigs probably wouldn’t eat them.”

“It just takes practice. You’ll be making fine biscuits before long, I promise.”

Prissy seemed reassured. “Is that for the mercantile, or the hotel?” she asked, gesturing at the cake.

“Neither. I promised to see Dr. Walker so he could check my wound, so I’m going to take it with me when I go to the office this morning.”

“Ohhhhhhh!” Prissy said, drawing the syllable out, her eyes dancing with glee. “So your heart has thawed toward the handsome Yankee.”

“It’s done no such thing,” Sarah said quickly. “At least not the way you mean.” She avoided her friend’s knowing gaze. “It’s just the polite thing to do. He was very kind to me that day.”

“Hmm,” Prissy murmured, clearly unconvinced by Sarah’s casual words. “It must be nice to have a knight in shining armor. Oh! You might as well deliver his invitation to him personally,” Prissy said.

“Invitation?”

“To the party, silly. Mama had asked me to take the invitations around town this afternoon, but you can save me that stop, at least.”

Before Sarah could say anything else, Prissy dashed into her

bedroom and was back in a couple of minutes, waving the cream-colored vellum envelope with its handwritten invitation inside. Of course Dr. Nolan Walker is to attend the party like everyone else. Suddenly attending the party had become much more complicated. How was she to act around him?

“So what are you going to wear?” Prissy asked.

Sarah shrugged. “I don’t know...I suppose you have a suggestion, now that you’ve seen the entire contents of my wardrobe?”

Prissy giggled. “I think you should wear that lovely red grenadine dress with the green piping. Very festive. And men like red dresses.”

“I don’t give a fig what color Dr. Walker likes!”

“Ah, but I said ‘men.’ You applied my generalization to Dr. Walker.”

Caught. Sarah tightened her lips and glanced at the clock on the mantel as she reached for the cake cover. “This is a silly conversation, Prissy Gilmore,” she said primly, “and I’m going to be late if I don’t leave now.”

The sound of her friend’s giggles followed her out into the street.

Really, she was going to have to warn Prissy to cease and desist with her matchmaking efforts, Sarah thought as she walked down the street, avoiding ice-rimmed puddles—she didn’t want to fall again. She was not going to change her mind about Nolan Walker, she really wasn’t, and the sooner her friend understood

that, the better. She didn't want to be embarrassed at the party. Perhaps she would wear the red and green dress, but really, her selection had nothing to do with the town doctor... When she'd pointed out he was free to court anyone else, he'd simply said, "I know," so surely that meant he realized she was never going to reconsider her position with him, and he was now considering other options....

She'd said they could be friends, hadn't she? Had she been too hasty to indicate there could be nothing more? Even with all she'd had to do in the last few days because of her move into town, Nolan Walker had seldom been far from her mind.

So intent on her thoughts was she as she turned and strode up the walk that led to the doctor's office that Sarah almost bowled right into a figure descending the steps.

"Oh!" she cried, tightening her grip on the cake plate and looking up at Ada Spencer. "I'm sorry, Ada, I didn't see you. I'm afraid I was lost in thought."

The other woman gave a short laugh. "That was certainly obvious!" Her eyes narrowed as they focused on what Sarah was carrying. "A treat for the good doctor? My, my, he's going to grow fat with all the goodies the ladies of the town are bringing him," Ada said archly. "Why, just the other day I brought him pralines myself. Have a nice visit with Dr. Walker. I must be getting home—we spent far too long chatting, the doctor and I. I don't know where the time went."

Sarah stiffened as the other woman stepped past her and went

out into the street. So “all the ladies in town” were bringing treats to the doctor, were they? Or was it only Ada? Suddenly Sarah felt foolish and pathetic carrying the beautiful cake, like a schoolgirl with a silly infatuation. She could turn around now and take the cake back down the street to the mercantile and sell it. Yes. That’s what she’d do, and then return to the doctor’s office and have him check her wound, as she had agreed.

“Well, good morning, Miss Sarah,” Dr. Walker said, opening his door. Through the window, he’d seen her coming up his walk right after he’d just closed the door on Ada Spencer. Surely Sarah’s coming was his reward for being patient and kind during Ada’s unexpected visit, made under the pretext that she’d felt something was wrong with the baby. It had taken him an hour to calm her and send her on her way, and now here was Sarah Matthews, looking lovely in her loden green shawl and navy holly-sprigged wool dress. And bearing a gift, he thought, spotting the covered plate she carried. Well, well.

He saw her start. Clearly, she hadn’t been expecting him to open the door before she’d even had the chance to knock.

“G-good morning, Dr. Walker. I...I’ve come to have you check my arm, if you have the time.”

“Please, call me Nolan,” he said, guessing she called him “doctor” to maintain a distance between them. “And of course I have time. It will only take a minute. Come in,” he said, opening the door and gesturing for her to enter. “And what is that you’re carrying?”

Two spots of pink bloomed on her cheeks. “I brought you a cake, to thank you for your kindness the other day when I fell—as well as the dollar I owe you for the doctor visits,” she said, pointing to the placard that indicated his prices. She set the cake on a chair next to his inner office door and began to fish about in her reticule.

“Please forget about the fee.” He put out a staying hand. “I’m sure this cake will be quite enough in the way of payment, and how thoughtful of you to bring it. May I?” he said, putting his hand on the lid of the cake plate.

“Of course. But I’ve been told you’ve been receiving quite a lot of such things,” she said, “so it won’t be all that special.” Her tone strove to be unconcerned, but he heard the disappointment underneath.

His hand stilled and he gazed at the entrance door. He’d seen Ada and Sarah exchange a few words on the walk, and hadn’t missed the quickly suppressed dismay which had flashed across Sarah’s features. What had the other woman said to her?

“Nonsense,” he said, going ahead and lifting the top and staring at the delicious-looking confection it had concealed. “This looks wonderful, Miss Sarah. I’ve been told you’re quite a cook—and now I’ll be able to discover that for myself.”

She looked at him as if she wondered where he could have heard such a thing or if he was trying to flatter her, but said only, “Well. I hope you enjoy it. But I don’t want to waste your time, Dr. Walker. Why don’t you have a look at my wound and then

I'll be going?"

He followed her into the office, closed the door behind him, then gestured for her to sit in the chair. He began to unwrap the linen roll, noting with satisfaction that as he had instructed, the bandage had obviously been changed from the one he had applied, and once he had completely removed it, the wound itself proved to be free of redness, swelling and drainage. His sutures had held. He pressed a finger into either side of the wound, and was pleased to see that she did not flinch.

"It's no longer painful?"

She shook her head.

"It appears to be healing well," he said. "I want you to continue to keep it clean and dry, and change the bandage every day, and by, say, New Year's Day, you can leave the wrapping off, get it wet and so forth." He saw a flush of color rise in her cheeks again and realized he no longer needed to hold her forearm. He released it.

"Oh, that reminds me," she said, once again reaching for her reticule. "Prissy asked me to give you this for her parents." She held out a vellum envelope.

Curious, he opened it, and saw that it was an invitation to an open-house party at the home of the mayor and his wife on New Year's Day. "A party," he murmured. "Are you going?"

"Of course. I live right on the grounds now, you know, in that little cottage with Prissy."

She'd mentioned her move when she'd been in his office the

last time, after her fall. She would have been surprised to know he thought of her every night when he went into the hotel restaurant right across the street from the mayor's house for his supper. If he had been on better terms with Sarah, he would have called to bring her some little thing as a housewarming present, but he hadn't thought she'd welcome such a visit.

"Good. I'll see you there, and I'll bring your cake dish and cover with me—unless you need them before that?"

She must have thought it was a dismissal, for she arose and said, "No, at the party will be fine. Good day, Doctor."

He couldn't bear for her to leave so soon, but he had no good reason to keep her here—unless she would allow him to share the concern that had been weighing on his mind. He'd thought about waiting to bring it up till he knew her better, but after Ada's disturbing visit, he wanted to speak of it now.

"Please," he said, rising, too. "If you have a minute, may I discuss something with you?"

She glanced at him sharply, her eyes wary. Probably she feared he was going to revisit their conversation about why she would not let him court her. He sat back down, and as he was hoping, she sank back into her seat, too.

"I'm worried about the lady who just left, Miss Spencer. How well do you know her? Are you friends?"

She blinked. "Friends?" She gave a shrug. "I used to think so...I've known her for years, and she was a part of the Simpson Creek Spinsters' Club when it started, but lately..."

Her voice trailed off, and her eyes looked troubled. He wondered if that meant she knew about the baby.

“Why do you ask?” Her tone was curious, but not guarded. No, Ada hadn’t told her.

Here was the tricky part. He wanted to make sure Ada Spencer had friends to help support her, but he didn’t know if she’d told anyone about the baby she claimed to carry. He was no more certain than he had been at Ada’s last visit that she actually was with child, and had been troubled to see that once again she’d come alone, disregarding his request to bring another female with her. And she’d seemed even more brittle, emotionally, when she’d come today than she had before.

He took a deep breath. “It’s difficult for me to say,” he began, “without violating her confidence...but I will say she seems troubled. I—I’d hoped she had friends to confide in.” He waited to see what she would say.

She hesitated, but at last she said, “Ada’s been keeping mostly to herself lately. She used to seem as carefree as any of us, but...that all changed after that Englishman came to town—the first man who was killed the day of the Comanche attack, remember?”

He nodded. Despite all the horrors Nolan had seen in the war, the image of the arrow-riddled, bloody figure slumping on his horse was a sight he’d never forget.

“They were courting,” Sarah said. “She stopped coming to the Spinsters’ Club meetings once that began. Afterward, we all

assumed she was grieving, but then..." Her voice trailed off and she bit her lip, looking away.

"Then?" he prompted.

"Forgive me, Doctor...Nolan...I, uh...thought that you—that is, the two of you—were...um..."

Her face was scarlet now, and he guessed what she had been thinking. It was exactly as he had feared, and he could guess Ada Spencer had given Sarah that impression.

"I'm not sure what you thought, exactly, Miss Sarah," he said carefully, "but Miss Spencer is my patient. Only my patient."

"I...I see."

Did he imagine it, or did she appear slightly less distressed?

"She's going through a difficult time," he said. "I think she's in need of friends, Miss Sarah. I know it's asking a lot, but would you perhaps be willing to...be a friend to her?"

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