

Penelope and Cole share a meal...

He smiled at her. "I like to help. This way, I get to pay you back for all you've done for me. You know, saving my life and all."

She returned his smile. "I like the fact that you're here."

Her heart thumped loudly in her chest. Did she just say that? It was such a bold thing to do. And yet, losing a husband after being married for only a year had taught her that she couldn't spend her life waiting. She had to make the most of the moment, and though she understood she couldn't come right out and ask him to stay with her, she could be subtle and let him know he was more than welcome if he wished to leave everything he'd known behind to be with her.

Forcing her attention back to the food, she finally bit into the biscuit.

"I like being here too," he softly confessed, not making eye contact with her.

Her heart leapt. There was hope then. She was sure of it. Maybe he was considering it. She certainly hoped so. He was, by far, the most wonderful man she'd ever met. Randy was dear to her of course. He'd always have a special place in her heart. But there was no denying her feelings for Cole. Maybe, he'd come to feel the same way for her.

A Chance In Time

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imagery and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

ISBN 1449513778

EAN- 9781449513771

A Chance In Time

All Rights Reserved.

Copyright 2009 Ruth Ann Nordin

V1.0

Cover Photo © Copyright Shutterstock Images LLC. All rights reserved – Used with permission. Front and back covers.

Cover Photo © Copyright JupiterImages Corporation. All rights reserved – used with permission. Back cover image and spine image.

This book may not be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in whole or in part by any means including graphic, electronic, or mechanical without expressed written consent of the publisher/author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books

<http://www.ruthannnordin.com>

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*A Chance in
Time*

Ruth Ann Nordin

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

Other books written by Ruth Ann Nordin

An Inconvenient Marriage

An Unlikely Place for Love

The Cold Wife

Falling In Love With Her Husband

Romancing Adrienne

With This Ring, I Thee Dread

Falling In Love With Her Husband

Meant To Be

Eye of the Beholder

His Redeeming Bride

Dedicated to Danielle Watson, Cyn Goustin, and Bonnie Steffens whose input while I wrote this is greatly appreciated.

Chapter One



Late spring 1899

*L*oneliness. It was a constant companion out in the middle of a vacant North Dakota prairie. Vacant, that is, except for a woman. A woman who ventured out west as a mail-order bride only to have her husband die shortly after they built their home. A woman who spent a year alone with nothing for company except two horses and the howls of coyotes in the middle of the night. Their howls echoed the resounding emptiness in her heart, in her life.

Penelope Jordan packed her things. Today she'd return to civilization. She had enough of being isolated from other people. God, after all, did not create man to be alone, and after spending endless hours by herself, she learned how true that lesson was.

Loading her belongings into the wagon didn't take long. The two geldings obeyed her command to move forward. At long

last, she was leaving. She didn't look back at the one room cabin. It was a cruel reminder of all that she'd hoped for but lost. A lifetime with someone who was to be her lover and friend.

But she wouldn't dwell on the past. Things that could have been were better left untended to. And so she guided the geldings northeast where the nearest town was. She'd take a job. She didn't care what that job was as long as it involved being near other people.

Twenty minutes passed before she found him. He was lying down, on his stomach, in the tall grass. She pulled the horses to a stop and set the brake before she stepped down from the wagon. She rushed over to him. He was badly burned from spending a good length of time in the sun. Blisters had formed on his hands and face. How lucky he was that his clothes covered the rest of him.

"Mister?" she called.

No response.

She tucked a rebellious strand of hair back under her bonnet and knelt beside him. "Mister." She nudged him in the arm.

Still, no response. His blond hair ruffled from the wind's activity, and thankfully, his beard had protected most of his face. The poor man. What he must have gone through to end up like this.

She took a deep breath to settle her sudden anxiety. What if he was dead? She glanced at the miles of grass that spanned in all directions. If he was dead, should she carry his corpse to town? He should have a proper burial, shouldn't he? Or should she leave him to the elements and let nature take care of him?

He groaned.

Startled, she turned her attention back to him. "Mister?" She shook his shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

Instead of giving her any answers, he grew silent.

She touched his face and realized his skin was hot. Maybe it was from the sunburn...or maybe it was a fever. He really didn't look well. She stood up and ran to her wagon where she picked up the canteen that had been resting next to her seat.

When she returned to him, she realized he was having trouble breathing. She turned him over, hoping the change in position would help.

He moved his lips as if to speak but no sound came out. She gently lifted his head and tucked it into the crook of her arm before letting the cool liquid seep into his mouth. She watched him swallow. His eyelids fluttered until they opened. He had light blue eyes, but they were unfocused. He most likely didn't even see her.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

He gave a slight nod, winced and then closed his eyes again.

She couldn't help but feel sorry for him. She'd never seen a man who looked worse off than he did, except for her husband as he struggled for his last breath through fluid-filled lungs. The reminder struck a cord of panic through her. Not this time. She wasn't going to let another man die if she could help it!

She let him sip on the water until he passed out. Setting the canteen by his side, she felt his forehead again. It was too hot. There was no way she could blame this on his sunburn, even if it was severe. How many days had he been wandering through the vast wilderness? What was he doing out here? He didn't even have a horse...or if he did, the horse was long gone. She shook her head. Such things didn't matter right now. She needed to get him to the cabin where he could rest.

The task of bringing one of the geldings to him and pulling his dead weight onto it was daunting, to say the least. He must have been a head taller than her. But she managed it. The journey back to her solitary home took longer than normal, but she wanted to be careful so she didn't cause the stranger more

damage than he'd already endured. By the time she dragged him onto her bed, she was out of breath and sweating so badly that her clothes stuck to her like a second layer of skin. Still, she ignored her aching back and arms and checked his pulse. His breathing was shallow but steady. He was still alive. That's what mattered.

The sunlight drifting through the small window hit something shiny in his shirt pocket. She squinted and took the object. She stood and examined it. Cool, metal, silver. A thin line traced it's sides, so she dug a fingernail into it and it opened. At least, she assumed it opened. She saw numbers and months and symbols she didn't recognize. What in the world was this thing? A small blue pulsing light startled her.

She quickly shut the thing and threw it in the small dresser drawer by the bed. Rubbing her hands on her dress, she wondered what that thing was. She glanced at the man who lay silent on her bed. *Who are you?* Maybe he was dangerous. Maybe she shouldn't have brought him here.

As soon as the thought came to mind, she dismissed it. He was in no shape to harm her. But...just in case. She searched his clothes and found a wallet in his back pocket. It had some money, though not much. He didn't have any weapons on him. She had a gun. Her husband had taught her how to shoot. She had a knife she used for skinning rabbits and deer and cooking. She decided she'd hide her gun and knife. If she needed to, she could defend herself.

Finding comfort in the reminder, she decided to turn her attention to putting her things away so she could tend to the ill man.

Chapter Two



Cole Hunter drifted in and out of awareness. At moments, he thought he was running. Then at other times, he knew it was an illusion. He hadn't moved at all. Instead, he was lying on his back somewhere. Images of a man pursuing him haunted him. He knew the man, but for some reason, he couldn't recall the name. He moved his legs. At least he tried to. Was he running or not? Was the man still chasing him? What did the man want?

He gulped. His mouth felt dry. Hot. Hot like fire. Wincing, he tried to touch his face, but his arms wouldn't budge. He couldn't be on fire, and yet, that's what the heat reminded him of: fire.

He took a deep breath. The air around him was warm. But there was no smoke. Relief set his mind at ease. Still, there was the lingering question: Where in the world was he? He struggled to open his eyes, and for a moment, he thought he did.

A light struck his vision. He wanted to turn his head but couldn't. It was as if he were paralyzed.

His heart sped up. He could feel the frantic beating of it. He didn't like being helpless.

Relax, Cole. The sooner you relax, the sooner you can figure out what's going on.

He inhaled and exhaled, counting to ten each time. It worked. His heart slowed. Good. Now he could focus. Since all he managed to catch were glimpses of light, he decided to let his other senses give him clues.

The place was silent. No. That wasn't exactly true. There was a faint humming. It faded in and out like a radio station that wouldn't give him a clear signal. He ordered his fingers to move and they finally inched forward. Paper. What was he doing on paper? His head was inclined on something soft. A pillow? Then what was he on? A bed made of paper? That didn't make sense. Ignoring the oddity of it, he turned his attention to the smell. He already knew there was no smoke. The last thing he remembered, he was walking along an endless stretch of flat land that never seemed to end. But he didn't smell the tall grass or the fresh air as the wind refreshed him from the sun's intense heat.

The sun. That could be the source of light. It also explained the heat. But no. That couldn't be right. He knew it wasn't right. He wasn't walking. He couldn't even move his legs though he tried. He groaned in aggravation.

"You'll be alright," someone said in a soft tone. "Here."

Whatever he was lying on shifted and something cool and damp covered his forehead. It reminded him of cold water. He had been swimming. The man swam after him. Why?

"Try to drink," the voice instructed.

Whoever tended to him pressed a wet cloth to his lips. He tried to suck the water out of it but his mouth wouldn't comply, so he allowed the water to trickle on his tongue.

He had gulped water during that cold moonlight swim. He recalled the splashing, the man shouting at him to return...something. What was it? Then he remembered what he had been holding in one hand, making sure it didn't get wet. Time travel. He had stolen a time machine the size of a cell phone, and the man was trying to get it back. Blake. The man's name was Blake.

But Cole had escaped. Or was he still in the water? No. He wasn't. His mind became jumbled as he tried to focus on the water someone was giving him. Tall grass. Sun. Heat. Unbearable heat.

"Cole, come back!"

Cole knew the voice was in his mind. It was Blake calling out to him, still pursuing him. He knew he wasn't really out in the prairie, but he ran anyway. His feet were sore, his chest hurting from the exertion of the chase, and his hand clenching the time travel device.

The chase seemed so real. The further the soft voice drifted, the deeper he fell back into his mind and before long, he lost consciousness.

Penelope checked her food supply in the underground cellar. She could probably make it another two months before she needed to go to town for more. At that time, the man she'd brought home would either be well enough to travel with her or dead. She sighed as she gathered some potatoes into her arms. She hoped he'd make it. She didn't ever want to watch another man die. Once was bad enough.

She walked up the steps and shut the door, making sure it was secure. Her husband had built everything, but working with his hands wasn't his gift. Still, she felt a smile tug at her lips as she recalled how proud he'd been to make the buildings on their

property. He was a good man. Sometimes she missed him. A part of her would always love him. She glanced up at the clear sky wondering if he could look down at her. What he must think of her bringing a stranger home!

She shrugged off the thought and turned to the cabin. As soon as she crossed the threshold, she saw that the stranger had finally woken up. He tried to sit up but fell back onto the thin mattress which squeaked in protest. Quickly putting the potatoes on the table, she rushed over to him.

“You mustn’t get up before you’re ready,” she softly warned him.

She picked up the towel on the dresser. and dipped it into the bowl of water and pressed it to his forehead. Sitting beside him on the bed, she pressed her hand against his cheek. Good. His skin felt cool. When she realized he was studying her, she grinned. Naturally, he was wondering where he was.

“You’ve been unconscious for four days,” she informed him.

“Four days?” He gasped and tried to sit up but groaned and layed back down.

She wished he wouldn’t press himself so hard. He wasn’t ready to get up yet. She forced aside the admonition and said, “I found you in the fields up north that way.” She pointed out the small window. “I feared you wouldn’t survive.”

“Four days?” he asked, looking bewildered. Then his eyes drifted down the length of his naked body. “Where are my pants? Where’s my...?” He hesitated. “Where’s the thing I had in my pocket?”

“Everything you had is in the dresser drawer.” She wanted to ask him what that odd silver thing was but refrained. Maybe she didn’t want to know. Maybe he was an outlaw or something. Maybe the less she knew, the better. She cleared her throat and continued to smile at him. “You have no need to worry. I had a

husband. I know what a man looks like when he doesn't have clothes on."

"You *had* a husband?"

"He passed away a year ago. We came out here to build a home and to farm, but he got sick our first winter here." It had been a long time since she said those words aloud. The last time she said them, it was to the preacher who buried him. She shoved the memory back into the corner of her mind where it belonged. "It wasn't meant to be, I guess."

"Then what are you doing here? Don't you have relatives to go to?"

"No. I didn't have any family. I was a mail-order bride, and he lived out here, far from anywhere."

"So how have you managed all by yourself?"

"I learned to grow a good-sized garden. I make it to town a couple times a year and I have a cellar to keep foods from rotting. It's nothing fancy, mind you, but it works."

"You came from back east?"

"Rhode Island."

"That's a lot different from here."

She laughed. Was it ever! But in a way, being out here made her self-sufficient, and she liked that. "It's another world out there."

His gaze fell to his body. Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "Do you make it a habit of taking men into your home and undressing them?"

She found his humor appealing. Things had a tendency to be too serious with no one to talk to. "Believe it or not, you're the first person I've come across in eight months. I found you lying face down in the fields."

"And you carried me here?"

Still grinning, she shook her head. "You are an odd man. How do you think I'd manage a feat like that when you're a foot taller than me? I put you on my steed and brought you here. I

was on my way to town. I'll make another attempt when you're well enough."

He finally smiled. A gorgeous smile. "You still haven't explained why I'm naked."

"That's simple. You had a fever, so I had to keep you cool. Your fever broke last night. I hoped it meant you would wake up today." She removed the cloth from his forehead. His color had returned. Yes, he looked much better. Now she could stop worrying that she'd have to arrange for his funeral. Turning her attention to more practical matters, she asked, "Do you need to use the privy?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "The what?"

"Do you need to urinate? If you are too ill, you may use this container." She picked up an empty jug by the bed.

"No. I can go outside."

She nodded and stood up to help him, but he shooed her away and eased himself up from the bed. When he stumbled forward, she dropped the empty jug and caught him. Placing his arm around her shoulders, she said, "I can help you. I might be a woman, but I'm not useless."

He glanced at her. "Of that, I have no doubt."

He meant that, and she appreciated the compliment. Back in Rhode Island, she'd been a helpless creature. Out here, such was not the case, and it was nice to have that acknowledged by someone who didn't know her past. She helped him to the front door and out of the house.

She pointed to the small wood barn, the well, and the cellar. If he was going to stay here to heal, then he'd need to know where everything was. The cabin itself was self-explanatory. A couple of chairs, a table, a cookstove, a bed and a dresser. It didn't get any fancier than that. She hoped he wouldn't mind the meager accommodations. If he was used to what she had in Rhode Island, he was bound to be eager to return to civilization.

But he didn't show any outward signs of disgust or dismay, so that was a good sign.

As soon as they reached the outhouse, she waited by the door while he did his business. It felt strange to do something this familiar with someone she hardly knew. And what did she know about him? Nothing really. Though she suspected she could trust him. Something in his expression told her that deep down, he had a good heart.

The door to the outhouse opened. "Can I get dressed?" he asked.

"Of course. I'll help you back to the house and then you can get your clothes. Then I'll make you some soup."

"Will you take me to town? I need to get on a train to Fargo."

Oh. So he had some place to go. Well, of course, he had some place to go. He wasn't seeking her house out as he walked across the prairie. "I'll take you but I need you to rest up first. You're in no shape to travel for two days."

"Two days?"

"That's how long it takes me to get to town. That's why I don't make the trip very often."

He sighed, looking disappointed.

She didn't know what else to say, so she let him wrap his arm around her shoulders and helped him back to the house where he got dressed.

Chapter Three



Cole watched Penelope as she cut up potatoes for the soup. He wondered what she thought of the time travel device. She saw it. That was the only explanation for it ending up in the drawer. He had slipped it into his pocket while he dressed. Thankfully, she allowed him privacy to do that. But she had returned before he had a chance to check the location of the missing chip. Without it, he was stuck back in this time.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

She glanced over her shoulder. Stray strands of her blond hair fell over her blue eyes.

He had the urge to go up to her and brush them out of her eyes but didn’t dare.

“You need to rest. You’re still not well,” she said in a soft voice that he likened to an angel. “You’ll need your strength before you’re up to doing anything.”

She was right, of course, but he didn't like feeling helpless. He wanted to contribute something. "I think I'll walk around for a bit. I need to stretch my legs."

Even as he said the words, he wondered if his body was up for the task. As it was, he was doing good to stand. But he couldn't rest until he checked that location of the chip. Was it still in Fargo? If he didn't get the chip, he'd never get back to the 21st century where he belonged.

"Alright," she replied, "but I'm going to get you something first." She put her knife down and went out the door.

He wondered what she had in mind. Considering the fact that she saved him from an early grave, he knew she wouldn't do him any harm. His gaze drifted to the open window and he saw her enter the barn. That meant he just bought some time. Well, he wasn't about to waste this opportunity. He quickly dug the time machine out of his pocket and flipped it open. The energy signature revealed that the chip was still in Fargo. Breathing a sigh of relief, he closed it. Good. It hadn't budged. That had to mean that no one else had it. If someone was in possession of it, then it would be changing locations.

His body felt weak as he limped forward. He sat in one of the two kitchen chairs and wiped his forehead. He couldn't believe the simple walk across the room made him break into a sweat. Yes, he was bad off.

She returned a minute later with a tall branch that reached up to her nose. "This might help you. If you get weak, you can lean on this."

His heart warmed at her thoughtfulness. "I've decided you're right. I'm not up for it yet."

She nodded and placed it next to the table. "If you need it, it's here."

He considered his next words with great care. He didn't wish to upset her, but he wanted to know why a lone woman out in the middle of nowhere would dare nurse a stranger back to

health. For all she knew, he could be a cold blooded killer. *But are you that much better? You are a thief. The time machine isn't yours.* He shoved the self-accusation aside. He'd deal with his sin later.

"May I ask why you brought me here?" he finally asked.

She didn't make eye contact as she returned to the small table by the cookstove and resumed her work on the potatoes. "I saw you and knew that you'd die if I didn't help. There's nothing close by, and I couldn't risk the journey to town."

What could he say to that? She didn't know his past. Here she was, a good Samaritan, someone who saw someone in need and didn't hesitate to help. He decided against telling her that she would have been better off leaving him for dead. Instead, he said, "Thank you."

She smiled in his direction, and he sensed that, in some way, she was actually glad he was there. "My name is Penelope."

"Cole."

He couldn't help but be struck by her beauty. Women in his day didn't usually pull their hair back into buns like she did, but even so, she was much more pleasing to look at. He looked away from her, ashamed that such thoughts would come to him. Surely, she'd be better off with a more respectable man, one who didn't lie and steal to get what he wanted.

"So," he began, wishing to break the awkward silence that hung between them, "you've lived here all by yourself for how long?"

"About a year now."

"You mentioned that you had a husband. What happened to him?"

"He got sick. It was hard winter, and neither of us were prepared for it."

But she'd survived and carried on in this place. "It must get lonely out here."

She simply nodded as she stirred the potatoes in the pot.

"Are you able to keep track of the days?"

“I have a calendar. At the end of each day, I make a mark on the day.”

“What is today?”

“June 2.”

He slowly exhaled. It had been April 23 when he went back into the past, and he was no closer to returning to the future than when he started searching for that missing chip. Time. Time wasted running from Blake, time wasted arguing with lawyers over alimony checks, time wasted with a woman who made him miserable, time wasted in believing that tomorrow would be better than today. He shook his head through his past. Or his future...depending on how one decided to look at it.

“Do you make it to town often?” he asked, recalling that she mentioned it being a two day journey.

“I go about twice a year.”

“By yourself?”

Her lips curved in amusement. “Who else would accompany me?”

He returned her smile. “Of course. But you must know someone in town, someone you can visit while there.”

“There is my husband’s sister. I don’t know her very well though. As soon as I came off the train, he married me and took me out here.”

His ears perked up. “There’s a train station in town?”

“Yes. New Rockford is a good-sized place. At least, it is compared to here.”

New Rockford? He’d never heard of that place before. He wondered how far it was from Fargo.

“You don’t have any money,” she said. “You’ll need new clothes. The ones you have on are torn.”

He glanced at his ripped jeans and shirt. “You’re right.” Clothes were the least of his concerns, but he couldn’t tell her that.

“I have some money saved. You can use that to purchase some.”

He blinked in surprise. Why in the world would she do that? “That’s not necessary.”

“I know. But I want to do it.” Before he could reply, she motioned to the large trunk in the corner of the cabin. “My husband’s clothes are in there. You can wear those for the time being.”

In a way, it felt odd to be granted a dead man’s clothes, but he could see her logic. They weren’t doing her husband any good. “Thank you.” Again.

It seemed the list of things to thank her for was a mile long, but he’d find a way to repay her for her kindness.

“Are you hungry?” she asked as she added salt to the soup.

“A little but not much. Actually, I’m more thirsty than anything else.”

She set the ladle aside and grabbed a cup from the shelf. She picked up a pitcher and poured water into the cup.

“I could have done that,” he told her. He hadn’t expected her to run to fetch him some water. He’d just been making conversation.

“You need to rest up. When you feel like you can move around without getting dizzy, then I won’t baby you so much.”

“If that’s the case, I may be dizzy for a long time,” he joked. It wasn’t every day a man got treated like royalty.

“Well, if I catch on that you’re fibbing, then I’ll have to stop.”

He liked the twinkle in her eye as she handed him his cup. “Thanks. Yet again.”

She sighed. “I should thank you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And what have I done?”

A Chance in Time

“You gave me someone to talk to other than myself.” And with that, she turned back to the soup, signaling that this particular conversation was at an end.

Chapter Four



*T*wo days later Penelope was in the barn feeding the two horses when it started to rain. She had just finished filling the trough when something wet hit her arm. Glancing up, she was rewarded with two fat raindrops that nearly hit her eyes. She quickly backed up so she could get a good view of the hole in the roof. It wasn't a big one, but it could become a problem if she didn't do something about it right away.

She hastened to the nearest wall and retrieved the ladder that her husband had left there. She feared that Randy had rushed through building this barn, and now she was proven right. Never mind that he hadn't listened to her. She was a woman. What did she know? Rolling her eyes at his joke, she strode out of the building. As much as she had loved him, she had to admit the man wasn't perfect. But then, what man was? Men, after all, were human.

Sighing, she examined the structure and estimated where the hole was on the roof. The rain came down harder. It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of water on her. Had she been alone out here, she'd take this opportunity to actually bathe. She did that when it rained like this. It was easier than dragging water from the well and heating it up for the tub. But she didn't dare bathe this time. Not with Cole in the cabin, resting up after nearly passing out that morning.

She found the right spot along the edge of the barn and set the ladder against it. Testing it to make sure it was sturdy, she decided it would work. She hurried back into the barn and found the material her husband had used to make the roof. She dug out some nails and a hammer. Fortunately, she had taken the time to watch him. As she headed out the door, she noticed the growing puddle on the floor. If she didn't take care of this roof immediately, there'd be further damage, and who knew if she could handle that much repair?

After she put her supplies in a bag, she swung it over her shoulder and made her way to the ladder. She was halfway up when someone called out to her.

"What are you doing?" Cole demanded.

She stopped and looked down at where he stood at the foot of the ladder. "There's a leak in the roof. I have to fix it."

He looked appalled. "You'll do no such thing. Get down here. I'll take care of it."

She hesitated. Fixing it wasn't something she wanted to do, and if he could...If he knew how...

"I use to work in construction when I went to college," he informed her, as if he could read her mind. "I know how to do this."

His offer was tempting. She wouldn't lie. But..."But you're still sick."

“It’s better for me to be sick than for you to be dead. Now, please get down before you fall and break your neck or something.”

Relieved, she obeyed. She didn’t realize her body was shaking until her feet landed safely on the ground and she handed him the bag. “Everything you need is in here.”

“Good. Go to the house and dry up. There’s no sense in both of us being sick.”

“Alright. And I’ll make some coffee so you can warm up when you’re done.”

He nodded and didn’t look back as he climbed the ladder.

She waited until she was back in the cabin before she peered out the window to see what progress he was making. He was already on the roof, looking as if it was perfectly natural for a person to climb up on a roof and start patching it up.

“I hope he doesn’t get worse,” she whispered.

She shrugged off her wet clothes and dumped them in the corner of the room. She’d wash those later. Right now she had other matters to tend to. She went to the dresser and pulled out dry clothes. At one time her yellow dress had been vibrant and decorated in finely sewn flowers. Now it was faded and some of the flowers had fallen off. It was slightly tattered along the hemline. She realized it was proof of how different her life was on the prairie. Back in Rhode Island, she’d never put on anything so shabby.

She finished buttoning the top button of her dress and stood still for a moment, wondering if she should entertain foolish notions of looking attractive for a man she hardly knew. Her husband got to see her at her best when he met her at the train station. She’d worn a brand new pink dress and had her hair nicely done for him. That dress had since become rags.

Her hand settled on the knob on the drawer next to her undergarments. It’d been a long time since she gave any concern to her appearance. She slowly opened the drawer and studied her

brush, hand mirror, ribbons, barrettes, and her two necklaces. Diamond necklaces. They were expensive. They had no use out here. She realized she could sell them but hated the thought of giving up a part of her past. The gold and diamonds would last her a lifetime of memories while the clothes wouldn't. She needed something tangible to connect with the person she once was. Had her parents not threatened to marry her to that awful Don Ferguson, she wouldn't have become a mail-order bride.

Closing her eyes, she recalled the morning she told her parents the news:

Her father bolted from the breakfast table, nearly upsetting the orange juice. "You what?"

"I answered an ad to be a mail-order bride. I can't marry Don," she replied in a shaky voice. "He keeps a mistress. I don't want to be married to a man like that."

Her mother sighed and settled back in her chair. "It's common. Your father has had several over the course of our marriage."

"And that doesn't bother you?" she demanded, appalled to find this out...and like this!

Her mother shrugged. "It is the way it is. Marriage is a contract binding wealth. Don's financial standing will make you one of the richest women in the country."

"I don't want to be rich. I want to be happy."

Her father laughed. "Happy? You think struggling to make ends meet will make you happy? You're nothing but a dreamer, Penelope. Dreams were fine when you were a little girl, but now it's time to be a woman. You are marrying Don and that is that."

"No. I've already packed. I'm leaving today."

He stopped laughing and stormed over to her. "You ungrateful brat. Your mother and I have raised you in the best

schools and given you everything you've ever wanted. And this is how you repay us?"

Her mother quickly stood up and ran over to them. "Penelope, don't go," she pleaded. "If you wish for love, then find a lover. Just be discreet about it."

Penelope took a step back. She blinked back the tears from her eyes. "That sounds like a miserable existence."

"Do we look miserable?" her mother asked.

She took a good look at them. Her mother offered her usual charming smile. Her father glared at her. It suddenly occurred to her that her mother's smiles had been faked. Her laughter had an undertone of sorrow to it. Her father was perpetually angry. Yes, she decided. They looked like the most miserable people she'd ever seen, and if she married Don, she'd end up the same way.

"I'm sorry but I can't marry him," she softly replied. She turned around and stiffly made her way to her luggage.

Randy warned her not to bring more than one bag. He'd warned her that life out west was completely different from what she was used to. In fact, he'd tried to talk her out of going when he found out she came from money and would have to give it all up to be with him. But she loved the way he wrote and thought they would do well together. At least his plan of being out on the prairie involved no one but her. He'd be too far from town to take a mistress. And that appealed to her more than anything else he'd said.

She picked her travel bag, wondering just how different her life was about to become. She took one more look at her parents. "I love you both."

Her mother pressed a hand to her mouth to hold back a sob.

Her father's face grew bright red. "If you walk out that door, don't you dare come back."

She almost tripped on her shoes as she crossed the threshold. Tears stung her eyes and her body trembled. Never did she think the day would come when she'd have to leave everything she ever knew behind. Deep in her heart, she knew she was doing the right thing. There was a peace that she couldn't explain.

The last thing she heard her father yell as she walked down the porch steps was, "Don't come back!"

She opened her eyes, her body slightly shaking from the memory of that day over two years ago. There was no going back. But she didn't want to return either. She learned to love the prairie, even if it did come with its moments of loneliness.

Her fingers brushed her wedding ring. The small gold band was not as fancy as her necklaces, but it was the best he could afford. Randy had been a good husband to her. She didn't regret coming out here to meet him. She'd loved him and he'd loved her in return.

And now for the first time, she was beginning to care for someone else. *It's foolishness, Penelope. You don't know Cole. But you didn't know Randy either and look how that turned out.* She finally closed the drawer. Maybe another day she'd worry about how she looked. For now, she'd take it one day at a time and see what happened.

Chapter Five



Cole went through another round of coughing. The phlegm finally came up into the handkerchief that Penelope had given him. He gagged at the sight of it. Being sick...again...was not his idea of a good time. He laid back on the bed and took a deep breath, his lungs thrilled with the temporary reprieve from the congestion. Even if he did feel like he'd been pulled through the wringer, he was glad the roof was repaired. He vowed to fix the whole thing once he was well enough.

He stared at the ceiling. He needed to rest if he wanted to get out of here. He had to get to Fargo, and the sooner he did that, the better. Who knew where Blake was? For all Cole knew, he was making his way to Fargo right now. But there was no way Blake could know the location of the chip. That simple logic reassured Cole enough so that he didn't do something stupid...like take off right away.

Rest. Yes. He needed rest. He closed his eyes and breathed in and out, letting the action calm him.

At least the rain had finally stopped. It had rained the entire day and then most of that morning.

The door opened so he opened his eyes and turned his head in Penelope's direction. He smiled at the concern in her eyes.

"It looks worse than it is," he assured her before he went into another coughing fit.

She quickly placed the bucket of water on the table and dipped a cup into it. When he stopped coughing, she held the cup out to him. "This will help."

He tried to say thanks but the tickle in his throat made him think better of it. Accepting the cup, he sat up and drank the cool liquid and handed it back to her. "Thank you."

To his surprise, she leaned forward and touched his forehead. "Good. Your fever hasn't returned."

He liked the feel of her hand on his skin. He liked it too much. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'll be fine. This is just a common cold."

"As long as you keep getting better, I won't complain." She removed her hand and went to the table where she set the cup down. "I never should have let you fix the roof while it rained. You would have been better off to wait until now."

"If I had waited, you'd be looking at a hole the size of my hand instead of the small crack. That roof was falling apart fast."

"Maybe so but a roof can be repaired. Life is much more fragile."

She meant her husband, he realized. He guessed that being a bride for only a year had taught her that lesson. "At least you two were happy."

It was better than he and Evelyn had done. Five years he stayed married to her, only to find out she and her brother had been playing him for a fool. Why didn't he notice the uncanny

resemblance between the boy he thought was his son and his brother? *Because my brother and I share the same genes. How was I supposed to put two and two together until I dug out that birth certificate and confronted them?* And what a way to confront them—while they were in bed together.

He forced the memories aside. That was all in the past. Well, in *his* past anyway. “Tonight, I’m going to sleep on the floor. You need to get your bed back.”

She glanced his way as she crossed the room to a trunk. “I’m fine on the floor.”

“Maybe. But you’re a woman. It’s not right for me to take the bed.”

“You’re sick.”

“I’m well enough to sleep on the floor now.”

She sighed as she opened the trunk. “Alright. I’m too relieved you’re alive to argue with you.”

A smile crossed his lips. She was probably the only person who cared about that, and it made him feel good. It made him feel like he actually mattered.

She pulled out a rifle.

“What’s that for?”

“We need meat. I’m going to hunt.”

“You hunt?”

“My husband taught me shortly before he got sick. He insisted that I needed to know how to take care of myself if something were to ever happen to him.”

“Smart man. I’m sorry he died.”

She stared at the rifle in her hands and took a deep breath. “I am too.” She looked up at him. “But I can’t bring him back. I have to move on.”

He nodded. What else could she do? All of life was about adapting to whatever crap came someone’s way. Whether it was him and his crummy marriage that ended in a divorce or her

happy marriage that ended in death, they had their own difficulties to overcome.

“Good luck hunting,” he said as he settled back onto the bed, suddenly feeling tired. “And I promise to spend my time resting.”

She smiled before she left.

A beautiful smile. Much too beautiful for a thief.

Chapter Six



*T*wo weeks passed and, to Penelope's relief, Cole returned to full health. She wouldn't lose him like she'd lost Randy. She blinked. Lose him? That was an odd thought for someone she hardly knew. She forced the observation aside and finished making breakfast.

Cole returned from feeding the horses, looking silly in clothes that were much too tight on him. His steps halted and he raised an eyebrow. "Something funny?"

Clearing her throat so her chuckle would cease, she said, "You're taller than my husband was. His clothes don't fit you very well."

He grinned and shrugged. "Who am I to complain? At least they stay on."

She set the biscuits and pancakes on the plates before turning to the small table where she placed them. "I hope you brought your appetite."

"I did. You better watch out though. It seems like I'm hungry all the time now."

"That's because you need to get your strength back. I have extra food prepared."

He sat at his place at the table. "I'll try not to eat you out of house and home."

"Eat as much as you want. I'm just glad you're alright."

"You may not be saying that when you realize how much I'm capable of wolfing down."

She smiled at his joke and joined him at the table. He sat in front of her, which she privately enjoyed since it gave her liberty to look at him without being obvious. Now that his sunburn had healed and he had shaved, she could see his face clearly. He was a handsome man with his dark blond hair with bangs that fell over his forehead. He pushed them back, but they usually ended up falling forward again. He had kind eyes, a nice nose, and full lips. His shoulders were broad and his body strong. Yes, she did enjoy looking at him.

She touched her bun. What did she look like? She knew she'd let herself go since her husband died. Did she let herself go too far? Randy used to like her hair when it was down. Maybe she should do that again.

He picked up a biscuit and put butter on it. "Do you make your own butter?"

She nodded and took her hand off her hair.

"Isn't it a lot of work? Don't get me wrong. This stuff tastes better than anything I bought from the store, but it can't be easy. Don't you have to churn this stuff?"

He had an odd way of talking, but she liked it. Smiling, she replied, "I don't notice how much work it is. I did when I first came here. But I don't anymore. I guess I got used to it."

“That’s only natural.” He took a bite and swallowed. “This is really good. I’m glad I have enough of an appetite to enjoy it.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you’re well enough to enjoy it too.” She picked up her biscuit and decided to butter it as well.

“Today I want to teach you how to repair a roof.”

“Why?”

“Because you might need to know how to do it in the future.”

She glanced at her uneaten biscuit. Suddenly, she had lost her appetite. That meant he planned to leave, didn’t it? Of course, he’d leave. He had a life somewhere. Fiddling with the napkin in her lap, she asked, “May I ask what your life is like? I mean, before you came here?”

He frowned for a moment then shrugged. “There’s not much to tell. I worked hard. I rarely slept in. I was just there. Just getting by.”

That was such a vague answer that she didn’t know what to make of it.

“It’s peaceful out here,” he continued before he put the rest of the biscuit in his mouth and chewed.

“Yes, it is. I enjoy it.”

“I do too. I feel as if everything is right with the world. I would like to build a fence for the horses, if that’s alright with you.”

“My husband never got around to that. I would like it. The horses need a place to roam.”

“I’ll do that after I replace the roof. I forgot to ask. Do you have enough supplies to make a roof?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll take you down to the cellar and show you everything. Then you can decide what you can and can’t do. I know my husband wasn’t the greatest builder around, and some of the things around here need fixing.”

He smiled at her. "I like to help. This way, I get to pay you back for all you've done for me. You know, saving my life and all."

She returned his smile. "I like the fact that you're here."

Her heart thumped loudly in her chest. Did she just say that? It was such a bold thing to do. And yet, losing a husband after being married for only a year had taught her that she couldn't spend her life waiting. She had to make the most of the moment, and though she understood she couldn't come right out and ask him to stay with her, she could be subtle, she could let him know he was more than welcome if he wished to leave everything he'd known behind to be with her.

Forcing her attention back to the food, she finally bit into the biscuit.

"I like being here too," he softly confessed, not making eye contact with her.

Her heart leapt. There was hope then. She was sure of it. Maybe he was considering it. She certainly hoped so. He was, by far, the most wonderful man she'd ever met. Randy was dear to her of course. He'd always have a place in her heart. But there was no denying her feelings for Cole. Maybe he'd come to feel the same way for her.

But what if he wants children? A flicker of apprehension made her lose her appetite again. She couldn't give him any. What if he decided to leave because of that? She would have to tell him. But not today. Today, she'd simply enjoy the time they did have together.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to finish the meal.

Chapter Seven



*T*wo weeks later, Cole checked the time travel device. He sighed and put the device in the drawer under his clean shirt. For the time being, he wore the clothes that Penelope's deceased husband wore. The man had been shorter than Cole, but the clothes and pants fit well enough. He sighed and shut the drawer. He had to get to Fargo.

Penelope entered the cabin, carrying a jar of pickles. "I remember you said you liked these." She motioned to the jar and placed it on the table. "I will be going to town in a couple weeks. I'm running out of supplies."

He nodded. He knew the time was nearing when he'd leave. He'd been anticipating it for the past month, but now that it was close to coming, he didn't experience the relief he expected. Which was ridiculous, of course. He had no reason to stay. He

certainly had no business staying, not with a woman as good as Penelope.

She grabbed a pot from the shelf and set it on the cookstove. "I thought I'd make stew. We still have rabbit meat to eat."

"That sounds good. I'll take care of the horses." It was the least he could do, especially for everything she'd done for him. "I'll be back."

She smiled as he left.

He pushed aside the twinge of guilt. He didn't deserve one of her smiles. Penelope was much too trusting of strangers. A woman who could bear the harsh winters of this land should have been more careful when selecting a man to heal, feed and clothe. Someone like Blake would have been a better choice.

He made it to the well and released the rope, watching as the bucket descended into the dark hole. Where was Blake anyway? His eyes swept his surroundings and not a single person could be seen for miles in any direction. For the moment, he was safe. But he had to get to Fargo. There was no doubt about it. The sooner he left this homestead, the better both he and Penelope would be.

As long as Blake didn't find him before he found the chip, everything could be set back in order. He could dig for gold out in California in 1848 and strike it rich. He'd never have to worry about money ever again. He could even come to this time and give Penelope money to make sure she'd never have to work hard another day in her life. There were many things money could buy, many things it could provide, and he'd make sure to return her kindness when he could.

He retrieved the bucket full of cool water and carried it to the barn where the horses waited in the stalls he reinforced. He poured the water into the trough where the horses quickly approached. He turned to the straw that he'd brought up from the cellar and put it in another trough for them to eat.

Penelope could use another barn. As it was, the weather had beaten the roof down, and if he hadn't repaired it, it would've fallen within the year. There was no doubt about it. The woman needed money to build things that would last. Her husband might have been a good man, but he didn't know much about building or maintaining his things.

Yes, Cole would get that gold and come back to give her some of it. But he wouldn't tell her it was from him. She seemed to think he was a good man, the kind she could take home to meet her mother, and as foolish as it was, he liked her version of him. The last thing he wanted to do was destroy it. That was when he made his decision. He would place the gold near the well. If he buried it but let a piece of it stick out of the ground where she usually stood, then she'd find it and dig it up. She'd assumed she discovered it and all would be well. Yes, that's what he'd do.

When he returned to the house, she was stirring the pot. He took a moment to study her. She had her back turned to him. The blue dress she wore had faded flowers on it and was frayed at the edges. He sighed. Not only did she need a better house and barn, the poor woman needed clothes that could sustain the elements of life out here, in the middle of nowhere. Her mattress was thin, and despite the discomfort, she didn't voice a single complaint. He actually preferred his blanket on the floor. She needed a good quality bed. It didn't have to be fancy. Then his eyes took in the single pot. What woman wouldn't want more cooking supplies? He examined the whole cabin and shook his head. There seemed to be no end to the things she needed. But with enough gold, her problems would be solved.

She peered over her shoulder and frowned. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No. I feel fine." But, in a way, that was a lie. He did get sick to his stomach when he thought of how she'd been living

over the past year. He lumbered to the chair at the table and sat down. "Penelope, can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"When your husband died, didn't any men come by to see you?" It seemed to him that as soon as the bachelors discovered her availability, they would have been beating down the door to marry her.

She shrugged and kept her eyes on the stew. "Men wish to have children to carry on their name. I had an accident when I was a girl. I can't have children."

He noted the sadness in her voice and the slumping of her shoulders. "Even so, I'm sure you had some who were interested," he softly said.

She shook her head.

"Then why did your husband marry you?"

She didn't respond. Instead, she continued to stir the pot.

"Penelope?"

Sighing, she touched her cheeks with her free hand, and he wondered if she was crying. She took a deep breath. "I didn't tell him." She spoke so low that he could barely hear her.

"But you told the other men?"

"I hated myself for lying. I couldn't do it again."

"And when none of them came to see you, did you wish you hadn't told the truth?"

She softly laughed. "No. I felt better having been honest. It was hard keeping it from Randy."

So that was her husband's name. Not that he cared. He rather preferred to think of Randy as the unnamed man who'd long since been removed from her life. He chastised himself for such thinking. Shifting in his chair, he cleared his throat. "You never know. One of the men might come to see you someday. Not all men value a woman based on whether or not she can give him children."

She looked at him, and he quickly lowered his eyes. A moment of tense silence passed before she spoke. "I can't open the jar. Will you do it?" She motioned to the sealed jar of pickles on the table in front of him.

More than happy to do anything for her, he nodded and did as she asked.

Chapter Eight



*P*enelope had some time alone in the cabin while Cole worked on the fence, so she closed the door to the cabin and took a bath. Stepping out of the tub, she wrapped the towel around her body and walked over to the dresser. She noted the trembling of her hands as she pulled the drawer open and pulled out her brush, mirror and barrette. It'd been over a year since she gave any care to her appearance.

Cole's words gave her hope. She confessed that she couldn't have children, and he didn't seem to mind. Other men had. But he hadn't. Maybe he wanted to stay with her after all. The thought made her heart skip a beat. She could think of nothing better than to have him stay.

After she towel dried her long blond hair, she ran the brush through it. It fell softly past her shoulders and down to the middle of her back. When it completely dried, it would be wavy.

She recalled how Randy liked that. Maybe Cole would too. She picked up the mirror. Living on the prairie had made her skin tougher than it used to be. The sun had done that to her. She rarely wore a bonnet or hat unless it was too bright outside and she wanted protection for her eyes. Most of the time, she exposed her fair skin. That wouldn't have happened back east. Her hands weren't as smooth either. But she thought she was still pretty. Hopefully, Cole would agree.

She set the mirror down and pulled her hair back with a barrette so that the wind wouldn't blow it in her eyes. That part of living on the prairie bothered her, which was why she started wearing buns.

She placed the mirror and brush back in the drawer and shut it before she turned to get dressed. There was nothing she could do about her attire. If he decided to stay, she'd buy a better dress. If he didn't...She sighed. If he didn't, then what would be the point?

Gathering her courage, she opened the front door and dragged the metal tub so she could empty it on the grass. Then she placed it out in the sun to dry. Wiping her hands on her dress, she went to see where Cole was. She decided she would ask him what he wanted for lunch. That was innocent enough, and it gave her an excuse to see him. And let him see her.

She found him hammering a wood post into the ground with a sledgehammer. Examining the distance between him and the barn and the erected posts, she said, "You are making a long fence."

"I want the horses to have plenty of room to roam," he replied. He tested the post, seeming to be satisfied, and turned to her. His eyes widened, and he took a moment before he spoke. "I see you finally got that bath you've been wanting."

"Yes." Despite the cooling wind, her face felt hot. If she could calm the racing of her heart, it'd help. "I feel better. Cleaner."

He smiled. "You look nice."

She returned his smile despite the nervous flutter in her stomach. "Thank you."

"Did you come out to watch me build the fence?"

"Actually, I came to find out what you want to eat at lunch."

"Anything you make will be fine."

She nodded. This wasn't exactly conducive to a conversation. Glancing at the stack of fence posts six yards away from them, she asked, "Do you want to teach me how to do this, like you did with the roof?"

He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "I can teach you how to repair this fence, but that should wait until I'm done. There's no sense in you knowing how to do this part."

"Are you thirsty?"

"A little."

"I'll get you something to drink." She turned to go back to the house when he stopped her.

"I found a canteen in the cellar. It's never been used, so I filled it up with water and brought it with me."

She sighed. She didn't know what else to talk about, and she had no reason to come back before lunch was ready. But she didn't want to be alone. Maybe she'd be fine with it if she knew he'd stay. She didn't know though. She watched him as he went to retrieve several posts and brought them beside them.

"There's no sense in running back and forth for each one," he explained as he picked one up. He found a place for it and pressed it into the ground. "It's been ten years since I did anything like this."

Finally, something to go on! "What did you do for those ten years?"

He took the sledgehammer and pounded the top of the post. "I think you could say I was a scientist. I tried to figure out if some things were possible or not."

“Really? Like what?”

He hesitated for a moment. “You know Thomas Edison?”

“You worked with him?”

“No. I do things similar to what he does. I invent things.”

“What kind of things?”

He finished pounding the post into the ground and took a deep breath before he faced her. “I don’t know how to explain it. I mean, it’s nothing you would be familiar with.”

“Can you describe it?”

He glanced at the sky before he exhaled and shook his head. “No. I can’t.”

“Are you going back to it?”

As soon as she asked the question, she cut off the eye contact with him. Instead, she focused on the post and mentally noted the precision with which he had managed to set it up. He obviously was better trained for this kind of thing than Randy had been.

“No, I’m not,” Cole replied.

She dared a look in his direction. Should she even ask him what he was planning? Deciding to hedge on the topic, she said, “You’ve done a lot to help me out here. I appreciate it.”

“It’s the least I can do.” He smiled and grabbed another post. “This is actually fun. I didn’t enjoy construction as much as I enjoy this.”

“Maybe you can keep doing this.” This time she didn’t look away, even though her heart raced and cheeks grew warm. She fiddled with the fabric on her dress.

He glanced her way, and she wished she could decipher the message in his eyes but she had no idea what he was thinking or what he meant when he answered with a vague “Maybe.” Then he returned to his task.

Deciding against bringing up more of this topic than she already had, she said, "I'll get started on lunch," and strolled back to the house.

Maybe. Why did he tell her "Maybe"? Cole chastised himself for saying that word. But then, one could reason that he didn't mean that he'd do this kind of work here...with her. No. He knew what "Maybe" implied, and it was wrong for him to hint that he might stay here. It wasn't fair to her. A woman who spent a year of her life alone didn't need to believe that she'd never be lonely again.

Cole knew all too well the bitter sting of loneliness. Marriage didn't guard against the emotion. After all, he'd been married and felt more alone during that disaster than he had after the divorce when he was physically alone. In some ways, being married to a woman who committed adultery was a worse kind of loneliness. It meant outright rejection. Yes, there were times when one was better off staying single.

Being married to Penelope wouldn't be like that. It'd actually be everything he hoped his first marriage would have been. He sighed. Penelope was a good woman. Why hadn't anyone married her yet? It couldn't be because she couldn't have children. That was the stupidest reason he'd ever heard for a man not to marry a woman.

He shook his head and returned to setting up the fence posts. Just as he didn't understand some women, he guessed it was fair to say he didn't understand some men either. Maybe some people, in general, were dumb.

Chapter Nine



The day came when Penelope had exhausted all of her supplies and needed more. She'd delayed the trip for as long as she could. Cole hooked up the horses, and he had the clothes he'd been wearing when she found him. There was no reason to believe he was coming back with her. He'd given her no indication he was. Though she did her best to look pleasing to him, he hadn't said anything more than that she looked nice...and that was the day when he started putting up the fence.

She didn't know whether to scream or cry. Or she could slap him. What was wrong with him anyway? Couldn't he tell she loved him and would do what she could to make him happy? Wasn't she pretty enough for him? Or was the place he came from so important that he couldn't stay? Or maybe he planned to come back with her. Just because he wore his clothes instead of Randy's, it didn't mean he was leaving.

She groaned. There was only one way she'd know. She was going to have to ask him. Then she'd know and be prepared for it if he was leaving. Taking a deep breath, she left the cabin and shut the door behind her.

"Are you ready?" he called out to her.

She nodded and walked over to him. She waited until he faced her before she spoke. "Will you stay in town?" There. She couldn't get any more blunt than that. Exhaling, she anxiously waited for his response.

But he didn't answer her. Instead, he held his hand out toward her. He wouldn't even look her in the eye.

This wasn't good. It *couldn't* be good. But she needed those supplies, so she had to go to town. She accepted his hand, even though a part of her wanted to stand still and demand an answer. If he was leaving, why wouldn't he just say it? Why make her hope? *And when did he ever give you hope? Really, he didn't give an indication that he was going to stay.* Knowing that didn't make the sting any less painful.

He walked to the other side of the wagon and hopped in beside her.

She gathered the reins and released the brake. He had every right to go. She wished she knew where he was going to. What was more important than her? It wasn't his job. It had to be something. Maybe...Could he be married? The thought hadn't occurred to her before.

She clenched the reins in her hands as she urged the horses forward. She didn't want to think it. But what if it was true? Dare she even ask? No. She couldn't. She didn't want to know. She didn't want to think she might have fallen in love with someone she had no right to love.

But if he was married, then he needed to go home to his wife. It was only right. And that would explain everything, wouldn't it? What other reason could there possibly be?

She glanced in his direction for a moment. He looked unhappy but didn't speak. Perhaps this hurt him as much as it hurt her. Still, if he was married, then they had to do the right thing. Settling into the silence that hovered between them, she turned her gaze forward.

Cole studied Penelope's profile as she steered the wagon into town. He wanted to remember her, to sear her beauty into his memory forever. He'd miss her when he left. It was a real shame that they weren't allotted more time together. Had she been born in his time, or he born in hers, perhaps things would have ended differently.

He decided that he could at least load her wagon full of supplies before he left. She stopped the horses in front of the general store, and he got out first so he could help her down.

She took his hand and thanked him.

When they entered the store, she gave the owner a list of supplies she needed, and Cole helped the owner fill her wagon. Once Cole loaded the last box, he glanced at the train station.

"When is the next train due to leave for Fargo?" he asked the owner.

"About an hour from now."

"Thanks."

Cole stood by the wagon, watching Penelope fiddle with her long sleeves as she waited for him. She looked at him and he sensed the unspoken question in her eyes. She'd asked him if he'd be returning with her, but he hadn't said. He couldn't. His future wasn't here with her, and if she knew what kind of man he was, she wouldn't have him.

He'd anticipated getting back on the train, but now he dreaded it. Taking a deep breath, he approached her. "Would

you like to get something to eat? It's been a long time since you've been to a restaurant."

It wasn't what she wanted to hear, he knew, but she nodded and strolled with him to the restaurant. During their meal, they didn't say much to each other. He couldn't think of anything to talk about. How did a man say, "I think I'm falling in love with you but I can't stay" to the most wonderful woman in the world? He couldn't, so he didn't. He lingered for as long as he dared, but the hour came to a close and he needed to get on the train. This was where they were meant to part. She'd go her way. He'd go his. And he'd dream of her every night for the rest of his life, wondering if she would think of him and wondering if she found a good man, a decent man, to marry.

He walked her back to the wagon, and she turned to him. The wind blew the stray strands of her hair around her head. Her blue eyes looked up at him. He tried to stop himself, wanted to stop, but he couldn't. He closed his eyes and kissed her. Her lips were soft, the softest he'd ever felt on a woman. And despite the fact that they were in public in the late 1800's, he took her in his arms and deepened the kiss. She responded to him, matching his passion with hers, and he marveled that he could mean so much to her in the short time they'd known each other.

He reluctantly let her go, aware of the stares from onlookers.

She smiled at him. "Cole, we can find a preacher and get married. I hoped you loved me, and I love you too."

He almost said yes and took her to the first preacher they could find but then he caught sight of his reflection in the store window and remembered who he was.

"I can't," he softly said, hating the words even as he spoke them. He saw the hurt in her eyes and quickly looked away. "You'll do better without me."

"You're wrong." She moved close to him and rested her hand on his arm. "Please stay."

He winced. “I have to go. I don’t belong here. I’m sorry.”

Before she could further protest, he strode away from her. He knew she watched him, but he refused to look back because he knew if he did, he’d end up running back to her. His hand wrapped around the time travel device in his pocket. Fargo. He had to get to Fargo. He entered the train station. It was small but Blake was nowhere in sight, and the train came to a stop.

He glanced out the window and clenched his jaw, refusing to let the image of Penelope still watching him change his mind. He’d come too far to turn back now. He’d find a way to make it up to her. He’d bury the gold where she could find it. Her future would be secure. He’d do one thing right in life before he died.

He must be married. That was the only reason why he would leave. Penelope knew the intensity in his kiss meant he loved her. There was no mistaking it. She’d been kissed by the man her parents wanted her to marry, and she’d been kissed by Randy. She knew the difference between a kiss given out of obligation and one given out of love. And Cole loved her.

She stared out the window of her sister-in-law’s house. The train had left a good hour ago. Cole was on it, heading off to who knew where...and probably to his wife.

“You haven’t moved from that spot since you got here,” her sister-in-law softly spoke.

Penelope turned from the window that faced the train tracks. “I’m sorry, Sandra.”

The older woman smiled and motioned to the couch in the parlor. “We have the house to ourselves at the moment. Once Lawrence brings the children back from his parents’, we won’t have any peace.”

She accepted the invitation and sat down. What point was there in looking out the window? Cole wasn't coming back. Maybe if she said that to herself long enough, she'd believe it.

Sandra settled next to her. "How have you been doing?"
"Fine."

"Penelope, I know that we don't know each other well. My brother took you out to the middle of nowhere right after you two married. Granted, we see each other the few times you come to town, but you haven't looked this sad since he died."

She took a deep breath, wishing Randy's sister hadn't been the type that was so perceptive. "I met someone."

"And?"

"And nothing. He just left on the train."

"Tell me about it."

Penelope hesitated but realized that she needed someone to talk to. Sandra was Randy's sister, and it almost felt like a sacrilege to admit she loved another man...despite the fact that Randy was no longer alive. To her relief, Sandra didn't balk at the thought of her falling in love with someone else.

Sandra took her hand in hers. "If Cole is married, then this is for the best."

"I know. But if he isn't..."

"If he isn't?"

"Then why didn't he stay?"

She offered a sympathetic smile. "I'm afraid that's something you'll never know."

It was true...and obvious.

"Will you stay here a couple of days? The kids would like to see you."

Penelope nodded. "Yes, I can do that." And if Cole returned, then she'd be close by. She chided herself on such thinking. *He's not coming back and no amount of wishing or praying will make that happen.* Turning back to the conversation, she asked, "How old are my two nieces and nephew now?"

“Would you believe they are ten, seven and three?”

“Already?” She sighed. “Time goes fast.” Though out in the middle of the prairie where her little home stood, it seemed to stand still. It seemed as if the world moved on without her.

“Oh, you’ll have to meet Martha.”

“Who’s Martha?”

“She’s an Indian. We don’t know what tribe she’s from or her real name. She doesn’t speak English, and we don’t speak her language either. She arrived in town off one of the train cars, and not the one you pay to be on.”

“She hopped a train?”

Sandra nodded. “The men found her when they were unloading crates of supplies for the general store. They brought her to the church and the preacher and his wife took her in.”

“I wonder why she would leave her tribe?”

“I suspect the fact that she’s expecting had something to do with it. Of course, it’s all speculation on our part. No one will know the truth until she learns our language. Anyway, this Sunday, you’ll get a chance to meet her.”

“Alright.”

Sandra stood and smoothed her skirt. “The kids will be home any minute. Let’s get your things put away. I’m sure they’ll want to talk your ear off.”

Penelope joined her in walking up the narrow stairs. She welcomed the chance to be surrounded by children who weren’t old enough to ask her questions about her love life...or a lack thereof. It might be the thing she needed to take her mind off Cole and what could’ve been.

Chapter Ten



Penelope knelt in front of Randy's tombstone and let her tears fall. She'd spent a week with Sandra, and now it was time to leave. This was her last stop before heading back to her home. The home she and Randy planned to stay at...where they were supposed to grow old together. She placed the flowers down and leaned against the tombstone. She didn't know why it made her feel close to him when she did that.

"You should have taken me with him," she prayed. "Why did you separate us?"

It seemed like a cruel twist of fate to escape a life of misery with a man who wouldn't love her to find one that did--one that died before his time. But even as she mourned Randy's passing, her thoughts were on Cole. Twice she had loved...twice

she had been loved...and both men were taken from her. One she buried. The other she watched board a train to never see again.

She hadn't slept well. Each night, she rolled over in the bed in Sandra's house to either see Randy lying beside her or Cole lying on the floor. Visiting Randy's sister brought back his memories with surprising force. A part of her would always love him. Cole hadn't replaced him. But Cole had another part of her now. And even though he was alive, she couldn't have him.

After a fitful sleep, she woke each morning and watched the passengers as they left the train station, always hoping that Cole would be one of them. But he never was.

And she was tired. Tired of fighting the inevitable.

She touched the cool surface of the tombstone. "You would have liked him, Randy. I know you don't want me to spend the rest of my life alone, but I don't think there's any other future for me."

She closed her eyes and recalled the last time she'd spoken to her husband. She placed the cool, damp cloth on his forehead and tried not to cry. She couldn't remember a time when she'd been more terrified. He didn't look good. His face was pale, and his breathing was rough. She'd prayed for him and read to him. But she could tell he wasn't getting better.

The bitter wind pounded against the cabin and she pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders. She hastened to the cookstove and threw in more wood, mentally calculating how much they had left. In the morning, if the snow let up, she'd go to the cellar and bring more up to the barn.

"Penelope."

She turned to the raspy voice. She rushed over to him and grabbed his hand. "I'm here. What do you need?"

Opening his eyes, he looked at her. "I love you, sweetheart. You"--he coughed--"you know that. Don't you?"

"Yes. I love you too. Can I get you something to drink? Are you hungry?"

“No.”

“Can’t you try?” He hadn’t had anything to eat or drink in three days and nothing she tried made him want to have anything. “Please?”

“My time is coming, sweetheart. I’m going home.”

She shook her head and tightened her grip. “No! Fight, Randy. Don’t give up.” Her body trembled at the thought of letting him go. Why would God do this to her? To him?

He cupped her face in his hands. “I’m so glad you came to me. You were the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He brushed the tears that fell down her cheeks. “Promise me you’ll marry again. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I don’t want anyone else!” Her voice choked and she could no longer control her sobbing. She embraced him and let her head settle on his chest. “Fight. Just hold on. If you can get through another night...”

“I’m sorry.” She felt his lips on the top of her head as he wrapped his arms around her. “I’m so sorry.”

Then his hold loosened and his arms fell back to his sides. She didn’t want to look up but knew she had to. When she saw his lifeless eyes staring ahead, she broke down and continued to cry on his chest. No more raspy breathing. No more heartbeat.

No more smiles. No more laughter. No more kisses and hugs. No more stupid fights over things that didn’t matter. No more working on the land together. No more friendship. No more love. In one moment, their marriage had become null and void, and all that was left was a piercing agony that wouldn’t let her go.

But in time, it did let her go. After she brought his body into town and watched the men lower his casket into the ground, she could never imagine loving anyone ever again. She knew he wanted her to. When the men came by for her while she stayed with Sandra for a month after the funeral, she quickly told each one she couldn’t have children and that was enough to get rid of

them. Originally, that had been her intention. She didn't want to marry again. Then she returned to her lone cabin and spent months trying to sort out why a loving God would allow such a thing to happen.

She didn't have the answer. All she could do was trust in Him and carry on with her life. Everything had been mechanical and empty. Until she found Cole. Then there was a reason to live again. Maybe there would be a reason to live yet. If she couldn't have the man she loved by her side, then maybe she could make someone else's life easier.

She wiped her tears and took a deep breath to settle the emotions raging through her. "I'll never forget you, Randy. Thank you for the year we had together."

She stood and walked back to the wagon. She climbed into her seat and picked up a canister. She held it to the woman in the passenger seat. "Water?"

The young Indian turned her eyes to her. "W-ater," she slowly pronounced.

Penelope pretended to drink from it to show her what she meant.

Martha nodded. "Water." She took the canister and drank from it.

Penelope wasn't sure what made her offer to take Martha back with her. The poor thing was younger than her, but she wasn't a child either. The growing child in her womb was so large that Penelope guessed she was within a month of giving birth. And though Martha couldn't speak her language, Penelope saw a fear in her eyes. For some reason, Martha didn't feel safe. As soon as she learned that a group of Indians was searching for her in town, Penelope understood that Martha had run from them. Why? She might not ever know. But she wouldn't allow the young woman to go where she didn't want to be.

After Penelope took the time to draw out her cabin and the route to it, Martha agreed to come with her, and Martha

looked so relieved that Penelope somehow knew she was doing the right thing.

Martha finished drinking and pointed to the grave.

“Husband. My husband. He’s dead,” she whispered.

She pointed to herself. “My husband dead.”

Penelope gave her new friend a closer look. “Your husband is dead? Like that?” She motioned to the grave.

“He dead.” She made a swinging motion, letting her hand stop at her neck.

Though she couldn’t be sure, Penelope thought Martha was telling her that her husband had been beheaded. And white men were more likely to use guns than something that swung. Something that swung? An axe? Indians used axes. If she put the pieces together well enough, the Indians killed Martha’s husband, which explained her fear.

Penelope took a deep breath and eyed the rifle the peaked from under their seat. If they ran into trouble, she’d need to be prepared. She reached out and touched Martha’s arm. “Friend.” Then she pointed to herself. “Friend.”

Martha smiled. “Fr...end.”

Penelope nodded. “Friend.” Then she picked up the reins, released the brake, and let the horses take them home.

Chapter Eleven



Cole stared in disbelief as the man dumped Ted's unconscious body on the floor of the abandoned home that Cole had found. The man was supposed to find the chip and bring it to him...but not like this! The time travel device had led Cole to Ted Jacob who had the chip in his pocket. All Charles was supposed to do was retrieve the chip. The plan seemed simple enough. What was Charles thinking?

Charles held out his hand, palm up. "Where's the ring?"

"Are you crazy?" Cole asked as soon as he found his voice. "I didn't ask you to bring Ted. I asked you to bring the charm."

There was no way he'd tell a man in the 19th century about time travel. The plan was simple. Simple! And now Charles went and made it complicated.

"I couldn't get into the house," Charles explained. "That damn dog kept barking. I had to wait until Ted came out. As it was, I had to fend off the dog when he attacked me. I'll tell you, that mutt may not look like much, but he's got it where it counts."

Cole swallowed the lump in his throat and dimmed the light on the kerosene lamp so Ted wouldn't wake up, at least not right away. This wasn't how he planned things to go. Charles was supposed to sneak into Ted's house, find the chip, and bring it to him. Ted wasn't supposed to be directly involved in this. Now, as he stared at Ted on the scratched wooden floor, he considered his options.

If Ted woke up and discovered what happened to him or if that wife of his found him missing and sent the marshal to investigate, this could easily turn into a disaster. Then he'd be arrested and sent to prison where he'd be stuck here indefinitely. He might even lose the chip for good and never get out of this time. Or he might never see Penelope again. He shoved the thought aside.

Great. This was just great. Anxious, he ran his hands through his hair.

"I brought the charm," Charles said, his tone firm. "That was the deal."

"That deal didn't involve your bringing Ted."

"You didn't say I couldn't." Charles held his hand right under Cole's nose. "Now, hand over the gold ring."

"No. You didn't follow my instructions. Take Ted back and get the charm. Then we'll talk."

Charles scowled and pulled out a gun from his back pocket. "No. We'll talk now."

Cole froze. He didn't want this to get worse than it already was.

"I did this for the gold. Hand it over and I'll let you live."

Cole dug into his pocket. So much for being in control. He took out the ring, and as he did, the kerosene lamp's light hit

the ring, making the gold shine bright. Gold. Almost like the golden hair of an angel. His angel. Penelope. Was this what he'd traded a future with her for? Gold. Something cold and hard, something that could be lost in a split second, something that ultimately didn't matter? It might buy things but things didn't last forever. They certainly didn't satisfy, for no matter how many possessions a man obtained in his life, if he didn't have someone to share those things with, his life remained empty.

"I feel sorry for you," Cole softly stated as he gave Charles the ring.

"Don't. I'm not the fool who just lost his gold." Grinning, he slid it into his pocket. "Nice doing business with you." Then he left.

Cole took a deep breath to settle his nerves. He couldn't afford to lose his head over this. *I don't want to go to jail!* He just wanted to get out of the trap of paying his ex-wife every single cent he earned. If he could save aside enough money to put aside where she couldn't find it, he could have some peace. That's why he took the time machine in the first place. He didn't want to cause trouble.

He stole the device on Friday and was going to return it first thing Monday morning. But then his nosy co-worker Blake followed him and before he knew it, he was stuck in 1898. What was supposed to be a simple idea turned into a full-blown nightmare!

Ted groaned.

Cole turned his attention to him. Was he conscious? He knelt beside him. Ted still looked out of it. Okay. Cole had to act and he had to act fast. Maybe he could grab the chip and leave before Ted saw him. Then Cole would find Blake and give him the stupid device, which had turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. Cole would plead with Blake to let him remain a free man. Then he'd get on his hands and knees and beg Penelope to take him back. That was the plan.

Cole gingerly reached into Ted's pocket, hating himself for being sneaky...again. Just as his fingers brushed a cool metal object, a fist landed right in his face. Cole jerked back from the force of the punch. He quickly looked over at Ted who jumped up and raised his fists.

"What's going on? Where am I? Why did you bring me here?" he demanded.

Cole held his hands up and slowly stood. "Look, I don't want a fight. I just want a chip that you have in your pocket."

"What chip?"

"The silver chip. It's the size of a fingernail and it's round."

Ted lowered his fists. "Wait a minute. You look familiar."

"You do too. It took me awhile to figure it out, but you work at Jacob Innovation Creations, don't you?" The same place Cole had worked for ten years.

"That's right. You're Dr. Hunter. You bumped into me on your way out of the building a couple months ago. That was in April."

"Yes. Three and a half months ago. Right before we ended up in 1898."

"Are you the reason Megan and I are here?"

"Yes, I am, but that was an accident. I was trying to go back in time alone. I didn't mean to take anyone with me." He dug his hand into his shirt pocket and produced a silver rectangular object. "This is the JIC Time Machine. I helped to create it. When I ran into you on the train, a chip fell out of it and into your pocket. I found you by tracking the energy signature from that chip."

Ted didn't look convinced. "If you were able to track the chip, then why did it take you three months to find me?"

"It's a long story. Let's just say that I ended up near Devils Lake before I jumped off the train and had a heck of a time

getting to Fargo.” He walked over to Ted and showed him the device. “I’ve been having financial problems. I thought if I took this and went back to the California gold rush, then I could recover. I didn’t intend to bring anyone back in time, and I planned to bring this back before anyone knew it was missing. I’m sorry you ended up here.”

“Actually, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.” Ted searched his pocket until he found the smooth metal object. “Why didn’t you just come up to me and ask for this?” He handed Cole the chip. “I would’ve given it back.”

“I didn’t want to get you involved in my problems. I didn’t mean for Charles to strike you on the head and bring you here. He was supposed to slip into your house and get the chip.”

Ted chuckled. “That’s why the dog kept barking.”

Cole smiled, relieved. “Thanks. You know, for not being upset.”

He shrugged. “There are worse things that could’ve happened to me.”

Cole inserted the chip into the device and turned it on. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. “It still works. I can take you and Megan back to the future.” It would only be right, especially since Ted didn’t mention anything about turning him into the marshal.

“No. We’re meant to be here.”

Footsteps alerted him to someone’s presence. Charles pointed a gun at them and motioned for them to back up. “You know, I got to thinking. If you were willing to give up a gold ring for that charm, then that charm must be especially valuable. So”—he held his hand out, palm up—“hand it over.”

Cole swallowed the lump in his throat. Just when he thought things had calmed down! “No, Charles. I’m not giving you this device. It’d be much too dangerous if it got into the wrong hands.” And Cole realized he had no business dealing with it either. He couldn’t wait to give this thing back to Blake!

“I didn’t ask if it was a good idea, did I? I ordered you to hand it over or you’ll be making a trip to meet your maker,” Charles hissed.

“Be reasonable,” Ted said in a soothing voice. “This is a worthless piece of junk. It’s not worth going to jail over.”

Charles laughed. “I won’t be going to jail because I won’t get caught.”

“I can’t let you have it,” Cole said, his tone firm despite the anxious pounding of his heart.

“Are you willing to die for it?” Charles asked, amused as he cocked the gun.

Cole didn’t want to die. Not when he finally found a reason to live. But he couldn’t let time travel loose in this century. The device had to go back to Blake. *If only this was a dream...*

“Hey!” Charles screamed and turned the gun toward the window before he shot it.

Cole tensed, unsure of what to do.

To his shock, Blake rushed into the cabin with a barking dog at his heels. “Hands up!”

Charles spun around and shot Blake who landed, face first, onto the floor. While Ted struggled with Charles to get control of the gun, Cole ran over to Blake and turned him over.

“Blake?” He saw blood seeping through the man’s shirt. Praying that the bullet wound wasn’t fatal, he ripped the shirt open and nearly cheered when he saw that Charles had shot Blake’s shoulder instead of something more serious.

While a woman and Ted fought Charles for control of the gun, Blake spoke. “Cole. This isn’t who you are. We went to college together. I know you. You’re better than this.”

Cole didn’t want to cry. Men didn’t cry. But he allowed his eyes to tear up anyway. “I’m sorry, Blake. I made such a mess of my life. I have the JIC Time Machine and it’s working.” He took Blake’s hand and gave him the device. He felt as if the

weight of the world had just been lifted off his shoulders. Finally, he made things right...at least with Blake and their boss.

Blake coughed and then smiled. "The prodigal son has returned home."

Cole laughed. It was such an odd statement, even if it did fit with all that had happened. "We'll get you to a doctor. Then you can go back to the future."

"Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"You might not have to go to jail. If I explain that you did right in the end, you can probably avoid that, though I expect you'll be fired at work."

"It's not that. I found a woman here. A good one. If she'll have me, I intend to spend the rest of my life with her."

Blake chuckled. "It's about time. That ex-wife of yours was brutal."

"Freeze! Don't anybody move!" someone yelled.

Cole saw the marshal arrive just as Charles shot at him. Cole leapt up and grabbed Charles' wrist while Ted snatched the gun out of his grasp.

The marshal jumped back up. "Get off of him!" he told the blond who'd was banging Charles on the back.

She obeyed and fell to the floor with a thud.

Pointing the gun at Charles, he said, "That's enough, Charles." He gasped for air. "I thought there was something suspicious going on when Blake Landon came to talk to me. Now, I know I was wise to follow him out here." He glanced around at everyone in the cabin. "I think all of you have a lot of explaining to do."

Cole hoped this explaining wouldn't land him in jail, but as he glanced in Blake's direction, he knew his friend would stick up for him. Maybe that would help. Maybe not. Either way, he vowed from here on out, he'd do the right thing.

Chapter Twelve



Penelope pointed to the horse and looked at Martha.

“Orse,” Martha said.

“Horse,” Penelope corrected.

“H...horse.”

“Good. You’re doing good.” She smiled and pointed to the hay.

Martha shook her head.

“Hay. Horse eats hay.”

“Hay food.”

“Yes. For horses.”

Penelope decided that Martha had learned enough for now, so she led the younger woman back to the house. She grabbed four potatoes and set them on the table.

“Potato cut?” Martha asked.

“Oh, yes. Thank you.” Penelope hastened to grab the knife from the shelf and gave it to Martha. “I’m going to get the meat from the cellar. I’ll be right back.”

Martha shook her head.

Penelope thought over her words. “Me get meat. Food. To eat.”

“Yes. Eat.”

Penelope smiled and went to grab the meat from the deer that Cole had shot before she helped him cut the deer and preserve the meat. The sight of it shouldn’t have brought tears to her eyes but it did. When would she be able to go about her business around her home and not be haunted by his memory? She should recall Randy since he built it. But she didn’t. She thought of Cole.

Sighing, she wiped the tears and grabbed the slab of meat to take back to the cabin. When she saw Martha gasping in pain, she ran over to her. “Martha?” She threw the meat on the table and sat her in a chair.

“Baby,” Martha said, holding her stomach.

“Baby is coming?”

“Baby. Hurt.”

There was no doubt about it. Martha was probably in the early stages of labor. Penelope took the knife from Martha and set it on the table.

Martha relaxed and looked at her. “Happy...to be...friend.”

She smiled and squeezed her hand. “I’m happy to be your friend too. Baby is coming. That’s good.”

“Good.”

“Maybe painful but good.” Penelope pointed to her. “Mother.” Then she pointed to her belly. “Baby.” Penelope decided to get things ready for the birth.

As the day passed into night, Penelope did everything she could to make Martha comfortable. It was around one in the

morning when Martha gave her last push and Penelope caught the baby in her hands. After a moment, the baby gave out its first cry. Penelope laughed and gave the little girl to her mother.

Martha held her child and cried. The pain of labor had been replaced with tears of joy, and Penelope was glad to see a person born in this place after there'd been death and sorrow over the past year. It was time for happiness.

"Girl," Penelope told Martha.

"Girl. Baby girl."

Penelope nodded before she set to the task of cleaning things up.

Two weeks passed with the two women taking turns staying awake to care for the baby. Penelope found that both Martha and her baby brought a sense of comfort in her life. Even with the heartache still fresh, at least she wasn't alone in the world anymore.

The late morning brought a clear blue sky and enough wind to cool the summer heat, so Penelope decided she'd weed the garden before it got too hot in the day. She glanced at Martha who slept with her baby before she slipped on Randy's gloves and tied her hat around her head. She didn't often wear a hat but thought she should to avoid burning her skin.

As she stepped out of the house, she caught sight of a familiar figure. She stood still, not believing her eyes. He came back in her dreams but not in real life. And yet here she was, wide awake, and he was here. She blinked to make sure she wasn't imagining things. Cole. It *was* Cole. He had returned!

She wanted to run to him but shock held her in place, so she waited as he approached her, his steps slow as if he wasn't sure she'd welcome him back. But how could she not when she loved him?

He stopped a short distance from her and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you. I love you, Penelope. I don't deserve you. You're a good woman, but I've made a real mess of my life. I've done things I'm not proud of, and after I tell you what they are, you may not want to be with me. You see, I—"

"Are you married?" she interrupted. That was the only reason she could think of that would not make her want to be with him. She prayed that wasn't what he meant.

He shook his head. "No."

The sense of relief she felt at knowing for sure overwhelmed her. She exhaled. "I thought when you left me, it was because you were already married. I thought you had a wife to go back to."

"No. I was married, but I got a divorce two years ago. I caught her sleeping with my brother. But there are other things, things you should know."

She stepped forward, bridging the gap between them. Other things? What did they matter? He wasn't married. He was free to be with her! "Cole, I don't care what you've done. I just care about who you are. The past doesn't matter. You can't change it."

He bent his head, but she caught the tear that trickled down his cheek.

No more tears. She'd seen enough of them to last a lifetime. Smiling, she reached up and brushed it away.

He took her hand in his and kissed it. His lips were warm. His actions gentle. "I love you. I want to make a life here with you. Will you come to town with me? We'll leave right away and find that preacher you mentioned."

She laughed. "I'll marry you, Cole. But we should have something to eat first. Then we need to get ready for the trip."

“Alright, but let’s be quick about it. I’ve waited too long to meet someone like you, and I don’t want to waste any more time.”

She didn’t want to waste any more time either. She stepped up on her toes and kissed him, glad she was finally free to express her love to him. And as strange as it was, she felt as if Randy was happy for her. When the kiss ended, she leaned against him and closed her eyes, enjoying the way he held her.

“This isn’t getting things done to go to town,” he said.

She chuckled. “Are you impatient?”

“I just want to make sure you don’t change your mind.”

“You have no need to worry about that.” Reluctant, she pulled away from him. “Cole, there’s something that happened while you were gone. When I was in town, I was visiting Randy’s sister and she introduced me to Martha. I don’t know anything about her except that she’s an Indian who is hiding from someone. She gave birth a couple weeks ago here, and her child is lighter than her.”

“You think a white man is the father?”

“There’s no doubt about it. I don’t know exactly what happened, and she doesn’t know enough English words to tell me. I just know that she’s afraid, so I brought her here to keep her safe.”

“Do you plan to keep her here?”

“I thought it would be best.”

He caressed her cheek. “You have a good heart. As much as I admire that about you, I want you all to myself so I’m going to build her a cabin. That should be a good spot.” He motioned to a section of land that was half an acre from where they stood. “I want to do some things with you that wouldn’t be appropriate for others to see.”

Blushing, she playfully shoved him away. “Not until we’re married.”

“Why do you think I’m anxious to get to town?”

“Well, if you’re that anxious, then you won’t mind getting the horses and wagon ready?”

“It’d be my pleasure to do anything for you.” He kissed her before he headed for the barn.

Heart light, she went to the house.

Chapter Thirteen



Cole rode the steed while Penelope, Martha and the baby took the wagon. He wanted to be close to Penelope so he could touch her, but he reminded himself that later that day when they reached town, they'd be married and then he could stay in the same room with her at the inn. Then he'd be able to kiss and hold her at his leisure. He smiled at the thought of finally being able to enjoy a woman who loved him back.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize Penelope had stopped the wagon until she called his name. Stopping the horse, he glanced back. "Is something wrong with the wagon?"

Penelope pointed to the south.

He turned his gaze in that direction and frowned. What were the chances that someone would be this far out from town at

the same time they were? He'd only traveled this path three times now but he never saw anyone an hour outside of town. Squinting, he barely made out the fact that the three riders weren't white. He looked over at Penelope and saw that she had grabbed a rifle from under her seat. She motioned for Martha to hide in the wagon.

This didn't seem promising. Cole led the horse to them just as Penelope covered Martha and the baby with a blanket. "Who are they?" he asked, his body primed to fight.

"Martha can't tell from here but she thinks they are from her tribe." Penelope turned to him. "What do you think we should do?"

"Get under that blanket with her. I'll take care of this."

"Do you know how to shoot a gun?"

"Yes." Okay, so it was a BB gun, but he did manage a good shot at the cans when he was younger. The real thing couldn't be much different. "Give me the gun."

She did as he ordered and, to his shock, she pulled out another one.

"What are you doing?"

"Two of us stand a better chance against them."

"No. I won't let you risk your life like this. Now, get under the blanket." He glanced at the approaching riders. Three men. Indian. He'd seen a couple of Native Americans in Devils Lake, but they had been wearing white man's clothes. These looked like they came right out of a movie. He took a deep breath to stabilize his nerves. If they weren't heading toward them at breakneck speed, he might have had time to think of a good plan.

Penelope had already jumped off the wagon and hid behind a wheel. She peered around the side of it before she waved him over. "They have arrows. You better get behind the wagon before one of them shoots you."

Partly annoyed because she was able to keep a clear head when all he could think of was "run!", he obeyed her. The horse stayed by him but shifted, as if uncertain about what to do. *He's*

not the only one. Cole knelt behind the other wheel and tried to get rid of the ringing in his ears so he could focus. He was a scientist, not a gunfighter, damn it!

“You shouldn’t be out here,” he whispered to Penelope. “You should be hiding.”

“But I’m good at shooting. I can help you.”

Well, that was probably true. “Okay. Just stay out of sight. If anyone has to run out there, it’s going to be me.” He prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

“Woape!” one of the Indians called out.

Cole turned to Penelope.

“That must be her real name,” she softly stated.

Cole peered around the side of the wheel and saw the three men on their horses. He gulped when he realized they had their arrows pointed at the wagon. Terrific. All he wanted to do was get married, and now that might not be happening. At this point, he didn’t even mind not getting married. He just wanted all of them to get out of this alive. *And to think I complained about getting that root canal two years ago!* He shook off his thoughts and forced his attention on the men in front of him.

“Woape!”

The Indian continued to speak in a language that Cole didn’t understand. Then, to his shock, Penelope replied. Her words came out stilted and slow, but she spoke the same language. Cole just stared at her, wondering what else she could do.

When Penelope stood up, he grabbed her hand. “What are you doing?” he asked in a whisper.

“I think it’s alright. I’m going to talk to them.”

“But...” He glanced around the wheel and saw that they were still holding their bows and arrows. “But they have weapons.”

“I don’t think they mean us any harm.”

He didn’t feel good about this. Things could get ugly...and fast. But Penelope looked determined, so he knew this was going

to happen whether he liked it or not. He nodded and stood up. "Fine. But I'm going with you."

He followed her as she approached the three men on horseback who had stern looks on their faces. He forced aside the urge to shove her back behind the wagon when he saw that she had lowered her rifle. What was she doing? He decided that one of them needed to show common sense, so he held his gun at eye level. Never mind that his knees were shaking and he had a hard time holding the gun steady. The important thing was that he *looked* like he knew what he was doing.

She stopped in front of the Indian in the middle of the group and slowly said something. It sounded like a question.

The man who she directed the question to pointed to the south and spoke to her. Then he waved his arm through the air, said "Woape" and he motioned to Cole.

Cole almost dropped the gun. Why did the Indian point at him? He didn't do anything. Well, nothing that involved the Indians.

The Indian made a sweeping motion with his hand before he beat his chest and let out a long howl.

This was worse than watching a movie in a foreign language, Cole decided. At least in movies, they had subtitles...and he'd be safe in the theater instead of out here. Maybe he shouldn't have been in such a hurry to get to town to marry Penelope. Sex just didn't seem worth it at this point.

Penelope set her gun down.

"What the-" Cole began.

She shook her head at him. Before he could protest, she directed her attention to the man, said, "Woape," and made a cradling motion.

The man's eyes widened and asked a question.

She nodded.

He pointed to Cole.

Cole's jaw dropped. Was the Indian suggesting that he got Woape pregnant?

Penelope nodded and said two words.

"Are you kidding me? I didn't do anything to her," he replied.

She glanced at him. "Not you. We're talking about a white man. You represent white men."

He relaxed, but only slightly. "What's going on?"

"I'm not exactly sure but it sounds like their village was raided and Woape was kidnapped. The Indians here have been searching all over for her. They didn't know she got with child until I told them. I don't think they want to hurt her. I heard him say 'daughter'. He must be her father."

As soon as she headed back for the wagon, he joined her. "What are you doing?"

"I need to talk to Woape."

Cole was torn between keeping the gun aimed at the Indians and going with her to find out what was going on, but he finally decided to stay where he was. If one of the men put an arrow in his bow, he'd need to shoot.

He glanced at Penelope as she talked to Martha...or Woape. Cole wasn't sure what to call her anymore. The young woman handed Penelope the baby and slowly got out of the wagon. Cole directed his attention back to the men and noticed that the man in the middle, her father, had a caring look in his eyes. That was when Cole realized he could relax. The man wasn't there to harm her. If what Penelope said was true, then he was happy to see his daughter again.

Woape lumbered toward the men, her head bowed and seeming unusually small. That was when Cole realized that she couldn't be older than sixteen. In his time, she'd be in high school, not out on the prairie with a newborn. She was much too young to have gone through everything she had—whatever the details of her life were. He knew he'd never know the full story.

As he listened to her father talk to her in a soothing tone and her hesitant reply, he understood that everything was going to be alright for her. He relaxed and let the gun rest at his side.

Woape turned to Penelope and said, "I go."

Penelope nodded and handed the baby to her mother.

"Penelope," Woape said, looking down at the baby. "Name of baby. Penelope."

Penelope smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Thank you, Woape. Friend."

"Friend."

Penelope hugged her before they walked over to the men. Penelope helped her on the horse. The father wrapped an arm around his daughter's shoulder. Woape held onto her child and settled her head on his chest.

"Friend," her father told Penelope.

"Friend," Penelope replied.

The three men nodded to Cole and turned their horses. Cole watched as they trotted off. If it had been a movie, he couldn't think of a better ending. He gave himself permission to relax. Considering that he managed through the experience without losing control of any bodily functions, he figured he handled the event very well. Of course, Penelope handled it a lot better.

"Do you usually have run-ins with Indians?" he asked as they strolled back to the wagon.

"No. That was the first time that's ever happened."

And how did you keep your cool through it all? He didn't ask the question. He couldn't have her thinking he was a wimp. Instead, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her close to him. "Well, I'm glad it's not an every day thing. I prefer it when it was just us out at your place." Yes, that sounded much better than, *If I have to go through another experience like this, I might have a heart attack.*

She smiled and kissed him. "I'm looking forward to being your wife, Cole." She frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“It just occurred to me that I don’t know your last name.”

He laughed. “I guess you’re right. I never told you. Hunter.”

“Penelope Hunter. I like it.”

“Then we’d better get to town and make that official.”
Among other things. He gave her one more kiss before she climbed into the wagon and he hopped on the horse.

Chapter Fourteen



One year later...

“It was nice seeing you,” Penelope told Sandra as she gave her a big hug.

Cole stood in the parlor and waited for the two women to stop gushing over each other. He’d already said his good-bye to Sandra’s family. It still felt weird to be with Randy’s family, but they had welcomed him, and he figured that they were Penelope’s family. At least, that is how she talked about them.

“Next time you’re in town, we’ll have to have a picnic out in the park. Come in early spring. That’s when the flowers are in full bloom,” Sandra said.

“We will,” Penelope promised.

After they left the house, Cole took her arm and stopped her in front of the wagon. "Have you given any thought to what we discussed before we came to town?"

Penelope nodded. "Are you sure, Cole?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"You won't have me all to yourself anymore."

"I don't mind. Not for this."

A smile spread across her face. "Let's go. Sandra said the train will be arriving in a half hour."

"Your wish is my command."

She giggled. "That is the funniest expression I've ever heard."

He shrugged. "It's a common one from where I come from." He put his arms around her and whispered, "But I admit that in all the places I've ever been, you are still the most wonderful woman I've ever met."

"You keep talking like that and I'll have to kiss you as soon we get out of town."

"Who says we have to wait?" Before she could respond, he let his lips caress hers.

A chorus of giggles turned their attention to Sandra's children who watched them through the window.

"We'd better go," he said, chuckling.

Once they got into the wagon, he directed the horses to the train station where the orphan train was expected to arrive. He helped her down from the wagon, sensing her excitement.

He did want a child, and he knew Penelope wanted one too. This seemed like the logical thing to do, especially since the children coming in on the train didn't have parents to care for them. He hated the thought of children not having someone to care for and love them, and he couldn't think of a better mother than Penelope.

When the train pulled into the station, they waited as the children were brought forward. A few farmers seemed to be

particularly interested in the strongest boys and took them. That left a lot of the girls or weaker boys. Two children, in particular, seemed to draw Penelope's interest, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why. They were Indian children. One girl and one boy. Both looked sad and malnourished, making Cole wonder what had brought them here. The boy looked to be five and the girl was probably two.

"What about them?" Penelope whispered.

"Can you communicate with them?"

"Let me see." She walked over to them and asked, "Can you understand me?"

The boy and girl clung to each other, visibly trembling.

"They must be brother and sister," Cole softly stated.

"I think so too. They remind me of Martha. I wonder if they come from her tribe?"

Turning to them, she spoke to them in the Indian language that Cole hadn't taken the time to learn. Now, he wished he had. But how was he to know that these children would be coming off the train?

The boy answered her.

Penelope glanced at Cole. "He speaks the same language that Martha did. I want to take them home."

He nodded. He doubted that the other people would be willing to take Indian children into their homes. "Tell them we'd like to be their parents."

Smiling, she did as he requested.

Though the boy looked uncertain and the girl looked terrified, the boy nodded.

It would take time for the children to get used to him and Penelope, Cole realized. But they had time. Time to get to know each other...time to be a family. In his heart, he felt that this was right, and with the way Penelope's face glowed, he couldn't help but smile. Yes. A family. Maybe not a typical one, but then again, his life was far from typical. A man who'd come out of the

future to make a life here in the past wasn't exactly one who had an ordinary life.

"We need to get them some better things to wear," he told Penelope. "Then we can head out."

"Thank you, Cole."

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

The boy scrunched his nose in disgust.

"Tell him that he better get used to it because there's going to be nothing but hugs and kisses in our family."

Penelope laughed and talked to the boy.

The boy shook his head but gave a slight smile as the girl looked up at Penelope and Cole and also smiled.

Everything would be alright. Satisfied, Cole made arrangements to make the adoption official.

Ruth Ann Nordin