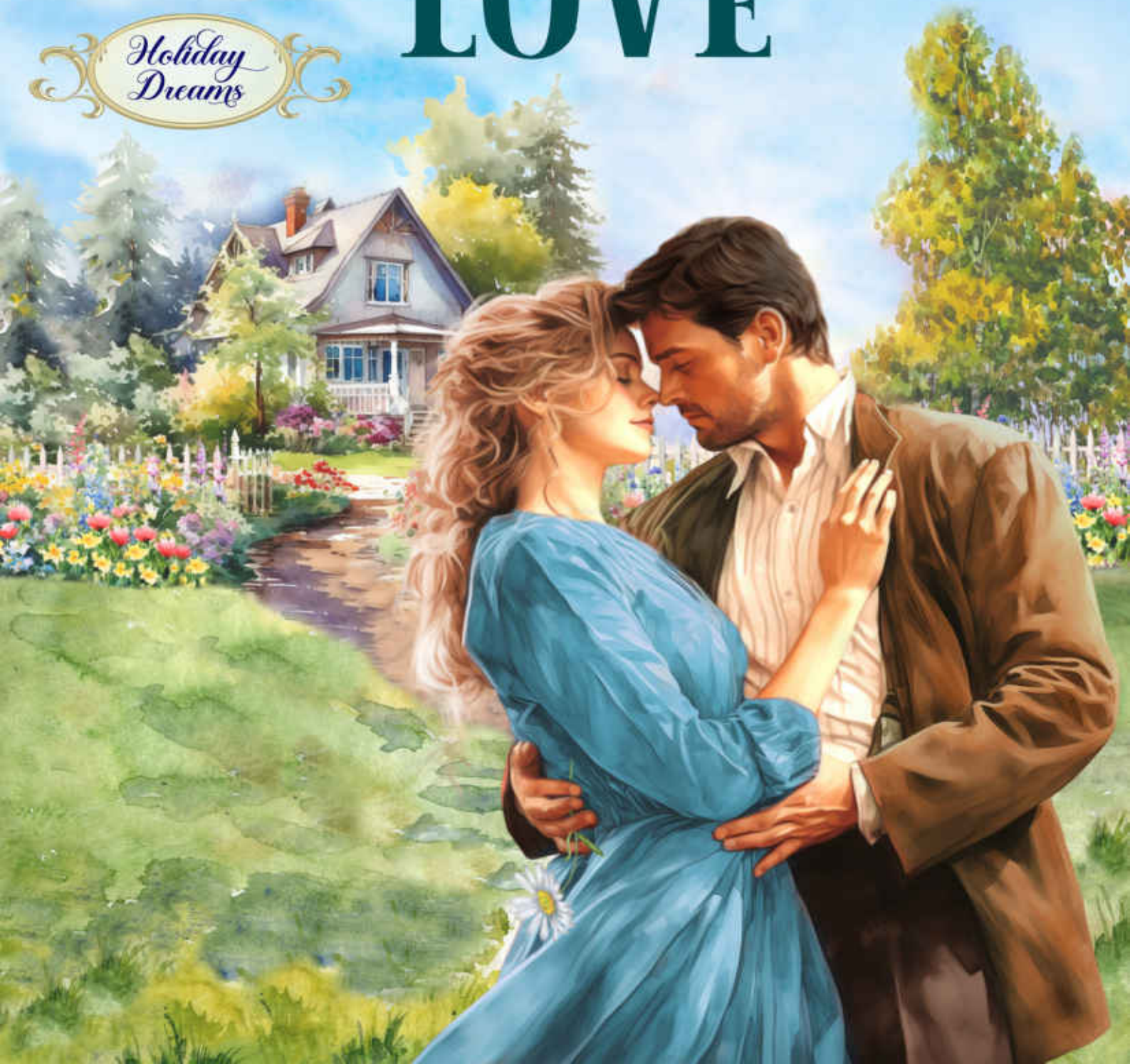


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
SHANNA HATFIELD

# DREAMS *of* LOVE

*Holiday  
Dreams*



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# DREAMS *of* LOVE

*Holiday Dreams Book 1*

A Wholesome Historical Romance

by

*USA TODAY Bestselling Author*

SHANNA HATFIELD



# *Dreams of Love*

*Holiday Dreams Book 1*

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# Dedication

*To those who let love  
find their dreams ...*

# Chapter One



*August 1885*

*Holiday, Oregon*

“Mind telling me what you think you’re doing?”

The deep, masculine voice directly behind her made a shiver slide down Zara Wynn’s spine despite the unrelenting heat pressing in all around her. Her cotton dress stuck to her back, and the delicate lace edging clung to her throat until she felt as though she might suffocate.

Ignoring the voice and the man, she continued jamming two hairpins into the lock on the door of the teacher’s quarters located at the rear of the schoolhouse.

Zara had been hired as the new schoolteacher. The school board wasn’t expecting her, though, for another two weeks. There’d been no help for her hasty departure from home or unannounced arrival. She’d hoped once she arrived in Holiday, a growing mountain town in Eastern Oregon, it would be a simple matter to find the school and someone to open the door.

However, nothing was going according to plan. An hour ago, she’d only taken four steps away from the train depot when a miner with an apparent aversion to bathing and who was missing most of his teeth had grinned and offered to marry her. Appalled, Zara had cast a frosty glare in his direction and hastened her step, although she’d had no idea where she was heading.

Based on articles she’d read about western towns, she had assumed she’d find the schoolhouse at one end of Holiday or

the other. She'd maintained a quick pace away from the depot until she had come to the main thoroughfare. Slowly, she'd wandered past a saddle shop, a hotel, and a general store. When she'd reached a corner, she had stopped to admire the cross on top of the church that appeared to reach high into the brilliant blue of the afternoon sky.

It was then she'd noticed the school on the street behind the church. With hurried steps, she rushed past the church, turned at the corner, and made her way up another block to the school. She'd felt along the eaves for a hidden key and looked beneath a few rocks by the door to the teacher's quarters. Unable to locate one, she'd pulled out two hairpins, hoping to pick the lock.

She'd never attempted to do such a thing, but how hard could it be?

With her tongue planted in her cheek, she continued working the hairpins in the keyhole.

A throat cleared, reminding her she wasn't alone. Heat from the man radiated over her as he moved nearer, increasing her state of discomfort. Prepared to give the stranger a dismissive, cool glare, Zara glanced at him over her shoulder and found herself unable to look away.

A cowboy—based on his attire in denims, dusty boots, and a black hat—stared at her like she was a misbehaving child. He was ruggedly handsome, at least what she could see with the hat he wore tugged down low and shading part of his face. Dark scruff covered his cheeks and chin, making her think he'd not taken time to shave that morning, or perhaps several mornings. His nose leaned a little to the left, like it had been broken in the past. He was broad shouldered and muscular, with an unyielding look in the way he carried himself.

"I'll only ask one more time. What are you doing?" He took another step closer. "If you don't want to find yourself in one of my jail cells, you'd best answer."

Slowly, Zara dropped her hands to her sides and straightened from her bent over position. She turned and faced

the large man, noticing a badge pinned to the vest he wore.

“That won’t be necessary, Marshal. I was hoping to open the door to my accommodations since I couldn’t find the key.”

“Your accommodations?” the lawman questioned. “The teacher we hired isn’t due to arrive for two weeks. Mind telling me your name?”

Zara added as much starch to her spine as she could muster considering the sweat-drenched fabric that clung to her as well as the fact that she’d been in town only an hour and was already in trouble with the law. “Miss Zara Wynn. I corresponded with Grant Coleman about the teaching position.”

The marshal studied her a moment, then muttered something beneath his breath she had no hope of hearing. He rubbed a hand over his chin and pinned her with a penetrating glare. “Does Grant know you’re here?”

“No, sir. I assumed I could locate someone from the school board to allow me into the teacher’s quarters when I arrived in town. I do hope my unexpected arrival won’t be an inconvenience.”

“It um ... certainly catches us by surprise.”

Her eyes widened at his use of the word us. “Are you on the school board?”

The marshal nodded, then swept off his hat. Zara took in his rich black hair, deep brown eyes, and a scar that ran from his left temple down to the corner of his eye. Her fingers longed to reach out and touch the scar, so she clenched the wrinkled fabric of her skirt.

“My name is Dillon Durant. Marshal Durant. I do serve on the school board, but only because Grant bribed me with some of his daughter-in-law’s fresh doughnuts.”

Zara smiled as Marshal Durant settled his hat back on his head. “Fresh doughnuts are unquestionably coercive.”

“Indeed.” The marshal moved back and waved his hand in the direction she’d come. “I have a key in my desk, but I



have to warn you that the teacher's quarters are a mess. It might be best if you spend the night at the hotel."

Zara wasn't penniless, at least not yet. But she had no interest in squandering her hard-earned money on a hotel if there was a perfectly good place for her to sleep that wouldn't cost her anything.

"Perhaps I could see the quarters before making up my mind?" she asked, then followed as Marshal Durant led the way to his office, which happened to be located kitty-corner across from the church.

He pushed open the door, then moved back so she could precede him inside.

She stepped into the office, uncertain what to expect. Until that moment, she'd never been inside a lawman's place of business. The walls were painted a soft shade of yellow, which surprised her as much as the tidy appearance of the place. One corner held a huge roll-top desk with a bentwood chair on wheels pushed up on one side. Two straight back chairs sat side by side on the other. A big clock hung on the wall by the desk with a filing cabinet beneath it. An oak-framed doorway led into a hallway where she could see jail cell doors standing open. At least there weren't any prisoners inside suffering in the heat.

A tall wardrobe, an overstuffed armchair, a bookcase with three full shelves, a side table with a lamp, and a small dining table with two chairs pushed up to it by a big potbellied stove took up most of the rest of the space. In the far corner of the building was a small chest of drawers next to a wrought-iron bed neatly covered with a green, blue, and yellow feathered diamond pattern quilt.

"That's a lovely quilt. Someone is quite talented to make that pattern."

Dillon glanced at her as he continued digging around on his desk. "Thanks. My grandmother made it for me. She told me I needed a bit of warmth and color in here."

“It’s very nice.” Zara returned to surveying the rest of the space. Pegs on the wall at the foot of the bed held coats and a hat that looked like it had been trampled in a stampede. A mirror hung to the side of the pegs with a shelf where the marshal’s unused shaving mug and brush rested. A stand beneath it held a plain white wash basin and pitcher.

It looked as though Marshal Durant lived at the jail. Did that mean he wasn’t married? Or did he have a family out of town where he went on his days off? Why did it matter to her either way?

Questions jittered around in her thoughts, but she batted them away and watched as the marshal opened one of his desk drawers. He extracted a ring of keys and sorted through them, then held one up as he turned to her.

“Let’s go take a look at the teacher’s quarters.”

She walked out the open door and started back toward the school. The marshal fell into step beside her.

As they continued up the street, he gave her another studying glance. “You’re the first female teacher the school board has hired. We’ve gone through six—or is it seven?—teachers in the past two years. They take the job, teach for a while, get gold fever, and quit. The last fellow we hired only lasted six weeks. He left at the beginning of May, so we just let the children out early for the summer.”

“I see,” Zara said although she didn’t. How could a qualified, dedicated teacher just abandon his students? She couldn’t imagine doing such a thing. Children needed to be taught. To learn. To grow academically.

Zara watched as the marshal stuck the key in the lock and opened the door. He gave it a push, and the hinges creaked. With a fortifying breath, one that smelled of the pine trees growing on the mountains around them, and something entirely masculine she found rather unsettling, she walked into the room.

Horrid smells hit her nose as heat assaulted her face. Before she could turn away, a rat scurried over her foot on a

path of escape out the door. Startled, Zara jumped and screamed, stamping her feet in case the rat decided to race up her skirts.

The marshal had the unmitigated audacity to chuckle as he pulled her back outside.

“Like I said, Miss Wynn, the place needs a little attention before you can move in.”

Determined to assess the disgusting state of her future residence, Zara boldly marched into the quarters and surveyed what she could only describe as chaos. There were papers everywhere, an overturned chair at the table, and cabinet doors hanging open. One hung by a single hinge at an odd angle. Mice had settled in and built cozy nests in the bed. Food that had been left behind had dried into a revolting mess on both the stove and the table. The heat trapped inside along with the stench of the recent rodent occupation was more than Zara could bear.

Her stomach roiled, and she was grateful her belly was empty since she'd skipped both breakfast and lunch on the train.

“Come on.” The marshal placed his hand on her elbow and escorted her outside. “I'll take you to the hotel, then see what can be done about getting this place habitable for humans.” He guided her to the corner, turned at the church, and headed down the main street she'd strolled along earlier. Silence fell between them, which was fine with Zara. She was disconcerted, disheartened, and disappointed.

As they stood on the corner in front of the mercantile, waiting for a wagon to pass to cross the street, the marshal glanced down at her. “Do you have trunks or just that bag you've been packing around?”

“My trunks are at the depot. The stationmaster said he'd keep an eye on them for me until I could get them moved.”

“Is there anything you need out of the trunks tonight?”

Zara shook her head. “I can make do.”

The marshal gave her an approving nod, then guided her across the street and into the hotel.

Surprised by the luxurious appearance of the hotel lobby, Zara released the breath she'd been holding. She hadn't expected anything nice based on her experiences thus far in Holiday.

A middle-aged woman smiled at them from her position behind the front counter. "Afternoon, Marshal."

"Howdy, Edith. This is Miss Zara Wynn, the new schoolteacher. She arrived sooner than expected, and her room behind the schoolhouse hasn't been cleaned since Mr. Godfrey ran off to strike it rich."

"Oh, dear." The woman reached across the counter and offered Zara's hand a comforting pat. "I'm Edith Piedmont, Miss Wynn. My husband, Grover, and I own the hotel. I'll get you set up in a room. Dinner service begins at five in our dining room. If you've been traveling, I'm sure you'd like a nice bath. I can arrange to have a tub brought up to your room."

"Thank you, Mrs. Piedmont. A bath and a meal would be wonderful."

Edith ran her finger down a column in the open ledger on the counter, penciled in Zara's name, then had her sign the register. The woman gave her the total for a night's stay and Zara happily paid it.

"I have a lovely room on the second floor. It's quiet. If you want to take a look, I'll get a tub up to you right away."

For reasons beyond her comprehension, Zara felt like weeping. Rather than succumb to tears, she managed to offer the kind woman a smile. "Again, thank you, Mrs. Piedmont."

"Of course, Miss Wynn, and please call me Edith." Edith smiled at Zara, then turned her attention to the marshal. "Will you let the school board know our new teacher is here?"

"Planned to do that, Edith. Since you're married to one of the members, will you pass that news on to Grover?"

Edith grinned. “I shall.”

Zara took the key the hotel proprietress held out to her, then turned to the marshal. “Thank you for your assistance, Marshal Durant.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Wynn. I reckon since I saved you from blood-thirsty vermin, you can call me Dillon.” He tipped his hat to her and left before she could find a suitable response to his ridiculous comment.

There were no blood-thirsty vermin, and he certainly hadn’t saved her, even if his presence had been oddly comforting when the rat had run over her shoe.

Edith gave her a questioning glance but said nothing as Zara took a firmer grip on her bag and then climbed the stairs. Her limbs felt weighted as she reached the second floor and found her room. She unlocked the door and swung it open, then stepped into the corner room, where a welcome breeze blew in the open window, carrying the pine-tinged air.

Although Holiday wasn’t anything like she’d anticipated, she appreciated the fact that it smelled like Christmas. Zara moved over to the window, pushed it open wider, and breathed deeply of the clean, crisp air. A tap on her door drew her from inhaling the refreshing breeze. She hurried across the room and opened the portal to two young men carrying a large metal bathtub.

They’d barely set it on the floor when a maid hurried in with a stack of fluffy white towels tucked under her right arm and a bucket of steaming water in her left hand.

“Hello, Miss Wynn. Mrs. Piedmont wasn’t sure if you’d prefer a hot or cool bath.”

“Cool would be delightful,” Zara said, watching as the maid poured the water into the tub.

“We’ll have this ready in a jiffy,” the young maid said with a smile as she nudged the two young men out the door. Zara stepped into the hall, watching the maid playfully cuff one of the young men, and noticed the resemblance they

shared. They were likely siblings. They hurried into a room at the end of the hall and then returned carrying buckets of water.

“Mrs. Piedmont said she forgot to tell you there are washrooms at the end of the hall on each floor.” The maid pointed to the door where they’d drawn the water.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, Miss.”

In no time, the tub was full. Zara was more than ready to wash away the sweat and dirt from her recent travels.

“If you need anything at all, Miss Wynn, just ask for me. I’m Rachel, and this is my brother, Nick, and our cousin, Rob.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all, and thank you.” Zara gave them each a coin, then closed her door, eager for the cooling water of the bath.

When she sank into the tub, the water was colder than she’d expected. She drew in a gasp, but once the initial discomfort passed, she found it to be quite pleasant. Zara scrubbed with a sliver of fragrant lavender soap from her traveling bag and washed her hair.

It took a second scrubbing before she felt clean. She lifted a pitcher of water Rachel had left behind and poured it over her head as a final rinse before she got out of the tub and dried off on the soft, sunshine-scented towels.

Her stomach growled as she hurried to pull on the clean undergarments she took from her traveling bag.

Quickly combing her blonde hair before the waves tangled, she took her dirty clothes and washed them in the tub of water, laying them over the furniture to dry before she slipped on a clean but terribly wrinkled dress that had been packed in her bag since the day she’d fled the only home she’d ever known.

As she pulled her still-damp hair up into a knot at the back of her head, she thought about the journey that had brought her to town.

Up until a month ago, she'd never heard of Holiday, Oregon. Then, in a moment that seemed like divine guidance, she'd picked up her father's discarded newspaper and noticed an advertisement for a schoolteacher in a small town in Eastern Oregon.

Desperate to escape her current circumstances, Zara had taken a few coins from the hidden stash she kept under the floorboards beneath her bed, raced to the telegraph office, and sent a telegram, inquiring about the position. Her missive was immediately answered, and she sent a letter, along with references, to the school board in Holiday.

Experience wasn't something she lacked. She'd been teaching school in Davenport, Iowa for the past five years and loved it. Just not enough to stay in town when her father and the man he'd decreed she would marry were making her life utterly miserable.

When she'd received a telegram letting her know she was hired for the position, she'd hastily packed her things and set her plans into motion. The following evening, while her father had been off doing his nightly gambling and drinking, she had stood outside the house where she'd spent her entire life and had given it one final glance. She'd climbed into the wagon she'd hired to haul her and her trunks to the train station and then boarded a train headed south. She'd switched trains three times before arriving in Omaha and boarding the train that would carry her into the West.

With her roundabout route to Omaha, Zara anticipated if her father and her unwanted fiancé, Conroy Devoe, attempted to find her, they'd lose any trace of her long before they made it to Omaha.

Zara glanced down at her simple cotton gown. It was a relief to wear it instead of the itchy, miserable black bombazine dress she'd worn all the way to Baker City. People wouldn't think anything of a widow traveling alone, so Zara had pretended to be one. Clad in the somber dress and a black hat with a veil, it proved to be as off-putting as she'd hoped. She had sweltered in the ensemble, but it had kept anyone

from asking her probing questions or getting a good look at her.

In Baker City, she'd had just enough time to wash up in the lavatory at the depot and slip into a clean dress with a straw hat. She'd stuffed the despised black outfit in a trash barrel just before boarding the Holiday Express line.

She smiled, recalling the name painted on the side of the train's engine that had brought her to Holiday. *Hope*. She certainly could use an extra helping of hope now. Zara had been in a depressingly short supply of hope since the day her father had come home with Conroy in tow, announcing his plans for her to wed the detestable man.

Her father, and Conroy, for that matter, had offered any number of reasons why she should be overjoyed to become Conroy's wife. However, Zara was convinced the only reason her father had agreed to the marriage was because he was in debt to Conroy and it was the easiest solution to his financial troubles.

Zara had known her father had turned to drinking, and then gambling, to deal with his grief when her mother had passed two years ago. Regardless, the past six months, he'd been spending more and more time at Whiskey Spoon, the den of iniquity that Conroy owned.

It wasn't until her father had informed her that he'd promised her hand to Conroy that she realized just how deeply in debt her father was to the morally devoid bully.

Tears, pleading, and even questions about what her beloved mother would think of what he'd done had failed to sway her father from the course he'd set for her future.

Left with no alternative other than marrying Conroy, Zara had fled.

It broke her heart to leave behind the many precious keepsakes that had belonged to her mother. Keepsakes her father would no doubt eventually sell to cover his debts.

A few treasures were carefully packed into her trunks. The family Bible. Her mother's set of china. A vase that had



belonged to Zara's grandmother. Seeds from her mother's favorite flowers. A coverlet her mother had been creating when she'd died so suddenly one November morning.

The doctor had said it was her heart, but Zara was sure her mother's heart wasn't the only one to fail that fateful day.

Her father's heart had seemingly shriveled overnight until there was nothing left of the loving, jovial man she'd always known.

At first, Zara had thought they could offer each other comfort in their grief. It took no time to realize her father had no intention of letting his grief out. Instead, he buried it with every swig of the whiskey he guzzled and every turn of the cards he'd begun to play.

Since the day of her mother's funeral service, her father hadn't set foot in the church they'd always attended. Zara had found comfort in the fellowship of gathering with other people who lived their faith, while hearing God's truth in the pastor's sermons had given her encouragement to make it through another hard week of dealing with her father.

Sharp pain pierced her heart when she thought of the bitter man her father had become. At least she had sweet memories from her childhood, when she and her parents were so happy and life had seemed so carefree.

If she could make a wish and return to those days, she would, but wishing wouldn't make it so. All she had left now was the possibility of a better tomorrow, assuming she hadn't made a disastrous mistake in traveling across the country to accept the position of schoolteacher in the town of Holiday.

Although the town had a terrible time keeping teachers due to gold fever, Zara certainly had no intentions of mining.

Schoolteachers were expected to adhere to a strict code of conduct, one she knew well from teaching in Davenport. To be above reproach in her actions and words. That's exactly what she would be. She wondered what rules the school board in Holiday might impose. She hoped they wouldn't be that

different, or more stringent, than those of her last teaching position.

Regardless, she intended to give her best to the position and her students. After all, she had three weeks to prepare before classes began. Grant Coleman, who had corresponded with her on behalf of the school board, had assured her she didn't need to arrive until a week before classes were scheduled to start.

However, due to her father's unexpected insistence she fulfill his bargain with Conroy, Zara had refused to linger in Davenport on the chance she might well and truly find herself married to a man she loathed.

Here in Holiday, she could make her own choices and pave her own way into her future, even if tomorrow seemed rather uncertain and daunting.

Zara pinned her straw hat on her head, picked up her reticule, straightened her spine, and hurried downstairs to the dining room, suddenly ravenous for a good meal.

After letting Edith know she appreciated the bath, Zara ate a delicious dinner. When she finished, she considered going for a stroll around town but thought better of it. A female on her own wasn't exactly safe at night, especially in a new town where she had no idea where anything was located.

She thanked Edith again as she passed by the front desk, then made her way back to her room to find the tub had disappeared and a vase with fresh flowers had been placed on the desk.

Gently fingering the petals of a daisy, she decided, perhaps, Holiday might offer her more than she'd originally anticipated.

An hour later, as she rested in bed with a book she'd brought from home, her attention was not on the adventure story, but on visions of Marshal Dillon Durant as he'd looked when she had turned and seen him for the first time that afternoon.

In spite of his threat to arrest her, he was a rather intriguing and handsome man.

## Chapter Two



“Nan? Are you in here?” Dillon asked as he stepped into the parlor of the house that had become his home. “Nan?”

No one answered, and he wondered where Nan could be. The woman had been like a grandmother to him since he arrived in Holiday. Nan Nichols was nearing eighty and no longer got around as well as she used to, but her mind was sharp, and she was more than capable of caring for herself.

“Nan?” he called as he made his way down the hallway, looking in the dining room and the room that had once been her husband’s library. Dillon missed Gene like he’d miss a beloved grandfather. Gene had taught him so much in the few years they’d had together before the old man had just gone to sleep one night and had never awakened.

Nan had accepted her husband’s death with her usual strength and quiet dignity. Dillon had been the one who’d had to fight through his grief. Together, though, he and Nan had come out on the other side of it, closer because of the experience. Three times a week, more often if he could manage it, Dillon dropped by Nan’s house to check on her. If he wasn’t otherwise occupied, he took her to church on Sunday mornings and out to lunch at the hotel after the service. It was a treat they both enjoyed.

Dillon made his way to the kitchen, but the stove was cold to his touch. He was accustomed to something cooking, filling the air with a mouth-watering scent. The lingering aroma of the yeasty bread Nan had no doubt baked that morning mingled with the delicate floral perfume of blooming

flowers that blew in with the breeze through the open windows.

After washing his hands at the sink, Dillon raided the cookie jar, taking three golden honey cookies before setting the lid back in place.

He bit into one of the soft, sweet cookies and glanced around. The kitchen gleamed from a recent cleaning after Nan's Friday baking spree.

The summer heat was oppressive, though. Maybe it had worn her out and she was taking a rare nap. He took a step down the hall toward the bedroom she'd moved into after Gene had passed, but a noise drew him up short.

Quietly sidling over to the window, he cocked his ear and listened to Nan singing one of her favorite hymns about amazing grace. He listened as she finished the first verse, then strode outside and along the wrap-around porch to the side of the house, where she rested in a rocking chair with a bowl of green beans in her lap.

"I see you found the cookies. I baked them this morning before it got so horrendously hot." Nan smiled at him and patted the seat of the chair next to hers. "There's a jug of lemonade in the springhouse. Why don't you pour each of us a glass? We can sit here in the shade for a spell and enjoy the breeze."

Dillon nodded and set his two uneaten cookies on the table beside Nan. "You won't eat my cookies while I'm fetching lemonade, will you?"

"Would I do such a thing?" she asked with a twinkle in her faded blue eyes.

"Yes, you would." He grinned and leaned down to kiss her velvety cheek before stepping off the porch and hurrying over to the springhouse, where he retrieved the jug of lemonade. While it wasn't as cold as it would be if they had ice, it was still cool and refreshing. He drank a full glass, refilled it, and poured one for Nan, then carried them outside with three more cookies.

Nan brushed cookie crumbs from her hands without a hint of remorse for snitching his cookie and took the glass he held out to her.

“Thanks, Dill.”

“You’re welcome, Nan.” He settled into the rocking chair by hers, one that Gene used to occupy, and set it into motion as he sipped the lemonade and ate cookies.

“You’re quieter than usual today. Something happen in town?” Nan asked, knowing him well.

Too well, sometimes, if her ability to read his thoughts was any indication. All too often, when he had a problem he needed to work through, or something that greatly troubled him, it was Nan he turned to. Not necessarily for advice, but a listening ear. She had a way of guiding him while making it seem like it was his idea all along.

Dillon had no intention of telling her about the new schoolteacher arriving and trying to pick the lock of the teacher’s quarters.

Well, he might tell her that, but he had no plans of mentioning the woman was young and beautiful. She might have been disheveled from her travels and the heat, but despite that, she was still extremely pretty, with pale blue eyes and blonde wavy hair. She had a lovely smile, not that he’d seen much of it.

Truthfully, the woman looked exhausted and ready to drop. He probably shouldn’t have laughed when the rat had run over her foot, but the shocked expression on her face, along with the stomping dance she’d executed, had been comical.

Dillon felt bad, though, about the terrible state of the teacher’s quarters. The school board members had all been busy over the summer months and had simply forgotten to clean up after the last teacher had run off. Now, the place was a mess and it would take more than a little effort to make it a place fit for Miss Zara Wynn to live.

Zara.

He liked that name, even if it was one he hadn't heard before. It suited her. Feminine, but strong. That's the vision he had of the new schoolteacher.

Her less-than-forthcoming answers to his questions, though, had made him wonder what had driven her to leave her home in Iowa and travel all the way to Holiday earlier than she needed to be there.

Dillon was good at reading people. He had to be in his line of work. Without a doubt, he knew Miss Zara Wynn was running from something or someone. However, she had glowing recommendations from the school where she'd worked the past several years. It wasn't like Holiday had an abundance of people willing to take on the job of teaching the town's youngsters. Holiday needed her, so he left his questions unanswered. For now.

After leaving Zara in Edith's capable hands, he'd ridden out to Elk Creek Ranch and had a chat with Grant Coleman about getting the teacher's quarters cleaned and repaired.

Cora Lee, Grant's daughter-in-law, had assured him she would have a group of women there in the morning to clean if one of the men would see to rodent removal. Dillon volunteered for the task although he had far better things to do with his time, like keep the peace in their mostly peaceful town.

He'd borrowed some traps from Grover Piedmont, who always seemed to have a surplus, and set them in the teacher's quarters and the schoolroom before he'd decided to ride out and check on Nan.

The quiet country atmosphere was just what he needed to settle his disturbing notions about the new teacher.

"You might as well tell me what thoughts are tripping around in your head, Dillon. I'll wheedle them out of you sooner or later." Nan grinned at him as she set her half-empty glass of lemonade on the table and returned to snapping green beans from the bucket resting by her feet.

Dillon finished his last cookie and gulped his lemonade, then set his glass next to hers before he reached into the bucket and picked up a handful of beans.

He snapped a few ends and looked over at Nan. She appeared hot, like everyone else in the area, but not as though the heat was sapping her strength.

In fact, her rosy cheeks only made her appear more like the fairy he sometimes accused her of being. Nan was a tiny thing, barely five feet tall, and that was if she stretched a bit. She loved tending her trees, garden, and flowers. Her yard was one of the comeliest for miles around, with flowers blooming along the fence line and porch and even behind the house, where she had what she called her cutting garden with dozens of varieties of flowers. He didn't know how she did it, but she managed to keep everything watered despite the heat.

It was the first time he could remember it being so hot in Holiday, at least since he'd been in the area. Usually, this time of year was warm but not unbearably so. The past few days, the temperature had climbed higher and higher until Dillon wished he could stay out here with Nan, peel off his shirt, and go for a dip in the cooling waters of the creek that ran through the property.

He might do that anyway, if Nan invited him to stay for supper, which he knew she would. With the stove cold, though, one of them would have to build up a fire in it, especially if she was planning to cook the green beans they were snapping.

"Want me to stoke a fire in the stove?" he asked as he snapped more beans.

"Heavens, no! The kitchen is hotter than Lucifer's breadbox as it is. I thought we could cook supper in the bunkhouse. I built a fire in the stove earlier."

Nan and Gene used to have hired hands to help them tend to the cattle they raised, but Gene had retired, sold the cattle, and rented the pasture ground before Dillon had moved to Holiday. The bunkhouse had stood empty for years, but Nan kept it clean and sometimes used the kitchen there when she



needed an extra stove. Apparently, she also cooked there on days it was too hot to light the stove in her kitchen.

Dillon grinned at Nan and continued snapping beans. “The new schoolteacher arrived today.”

“Is he as homely as Mr. Godfrey? That man looked like he’d been whacked not once but twice with an ugly stick.”

Dillon shook his head. “This teacher looks nothing like Godfrey. Miss Wynn might take exception if you compared her to the last teachers.”

Nan stopped snapping beans and gave him a discerning look. “Miss Wynn? How old is Miss Wynn?”

Dillon shrugged. From reading the woman’s application he knew her age and address, and the school where she’d previously taught had offered glowing references about her character and teaching abilities. Yet, he was hesitant to share any detail with Nan. Why he wavered, he had no idea. Normally, he could talk to her about anything.

“Dill. Tell me about her. How old is the new teacher?”

“She recently turned twenty-three.”

“Oh, I see.” Nan returned to snapping beans. “And what does she look like? A hideous hag? Warts? Pointy chin? Missing teeth?”

A chuckle rolled out of him at the picture Nan painted. “No. She’s blonde, fair-skinned, blue-eyed. Kind of pretty.” She was undeniably pretty.

In fact, Dillon hadn’t stopped thinking about just how pretty she was since the moment he’d happened upon a stranger trying to break into the schoolhouse, but that was ridiculous. He had no time for relationships even if he were interested in Miss Wynn, which he most certainly was not.

“Kind of pretty, is she? Hmm,” Nan said, then fell silent.

Dillon could practically see the wheels spinning in her head. First, she would come up with some thin reason to venture into town, then she’d happen to run into Zara Wynn.

Somehow, Nan would drag him into her romantic matchmaking schemes.

But Dillon was having no part of it. None.

“Before you start envisioning wedding bells ringing, you know I’m not interested in a relationship with anyone, even if Miss Wynn does seem nice enough.”

“And pretty,” Nan supplied, then smirked at him as she got to her feet, hefted the bowl of beans, and headed toward the bunkhouse.

Dillon took the bowl from her and followed as she led the way into the log structure that actually seemed cooler inside than the house, even with the stove going. He stoked the fire while Nan put the beans on to boil with several pieces of bacon and part of a sliced onion.

While she peeled potatoes, he milked and fed the cow, Maudie, and then checked on Nan’s horse, Flora, that she kept for pulling her buggy. He hauled water out to the garden and drenched the plants, then washed up and returned to the bunkhouse to find Nan dishing up plates with green beans, fried potatoes, fried slices of ham, and fluffy biscuits.

“Be a good boy and grab a jar of jam from the kitchen, would you?” Nan asked as she carried the plates outside to a small table for two beneath the maple tree. The shade and the breeze made it feel significantly cooler there than anywhere else.

Dillon dashed inside and retrieved jam and butter. After setting them on the table by Nan, he filled the glasses they’d emptied earlier with cool well water. When he took a seat beside Nan, she wrapped her hand around his and asked a blessing on their meal. While they ate, she asked about people in town, if anyone had mentioned plans for the harvest festival, and if he’d seen Mrs. Milton, the blacksmith’s wife recently.

“Why would I be seeking out Mrs. Milton, Nan?” he asked, confused by the woman’s line of thinking. Anne had arrived in town in November as a mail-order bride to R.C.

Milton. They'd married the next day and been living in wedded bliss since then. In fact, he'd seen the couple at church on Sunday, which Nan well knew since she'd been sitting right beside him.

Nan pushed a piece of potato around on her plate with her fork. "I just wondered how she's faring in this heat in her delicate condition."

Dillon fought the urge to roll his eyes. Why did social etiquette state a woman being pregnant had to be referred to as a delicate condition? As far as he could tell, Anne Milton was a specimen of health and happiness. Nothing about her seemed particularly delicate, and that included the upcoming arrival of her baby. Not that he paid attention to such things, but Dillon had heard R.C. telling Jace Coleman the baby was due in late October. By his calculations, Anne had two more months of misery ahead of her before the "blessed event," as Nan would refer to the baby's arrival.

"Like everyone else, I think she's getting along as best as she can. R.C. dotes on her, as you know."

"I do." Nan smiled. "He's a good man. And so are you, Dill. Now, tell me more about the new schoolteacher. Is she getting settled into the teacher's quarters?"

"Not exactly." He relayed the story about finding her picking the lock, the rat running across her foot, and his escorting her to the hotel.

"Cora Lee said she'd round up a cleaning committee. I set enough traps to catch a hundred mice and half that many rats. The place should be empty of rodents in the morning, then the women can make it nice for Miss Wynn."

"You should get her a kitten. It would keep her company and take care of any unwanted visitors. Did you set traps in the schoolroom? I'm sure it is equally as bad as the teacher's quarters."

Dillon had set traps in there, but the rodent population seemed concentrated where there had been food left out and fluffy bedding to nest in.

He'd hauled the mattress and linens out to the burn pile behind the mercantile and, with permission from the store owners, lit the whole mess on fire.

With the windows open, the teacher's quarters would air out quickly; at least he hoped it would. When he'd gone in to set the traps, all he could smell was vermin.

"I'll take care of it, Nan. We can't have Miss Wynn running off before classes even begin because her accommodations are a disaster."

"No, we certainly can't." They finished the meal, and Dillon hauled water for Nan's flowers out by the fence while she did the dishes. After banking the fire in the bunkhouse stove and closing the door, he fixed a wobbly step on the front porch, and then decided he'd better get back to town. If trouble came in Holiday, it was usually in the evening hours.

"Next time you come, if you can find some ice, I'd be happy to make ice cream."

"I'll do that, Nan. Thanks for dinner. It was delicious as always." He kissed her cheek, then walked around to the front of the house, mounted his horse, Fellow, and rode back to town.

Later that night, after he'd broken up a fight at the Ruby Palace brothel and tossed one drunk in jail to sleep it off, he settled on his bed at the jailhouse.

Uncomfortable from the heat but exhausted, he fell asleep dreaming of watching Zara Wynn attempting to pick the schoolhouse lock.

## Chapter Three



Zara awoke while it was still dark outside, rested from a good night's sleep, even if visions of a handsome lawman had danced through her dreams.

Ready for her first full day in the town that would become her new home, Zara got out of bed and hurried to dress. Edith, bless that woman's kind heart, had offered to press Zara's dress, and she had agreed, knowing she'd feel better if she didn't look like she'd slept in her clothes. Edith had sent the pressed dress with a maid to Zara's room just before she'd been ready to turn in for the night, which seemed early, but she'd needed the rest.

After styling her hair and fastening it with enough hairpins to keep it in place, she grabbed her reticule and headed downstairs.

It wasn't until she went to the hotel dining room only to find it not yet open that Zara realized she'd forgotten about the time difference between Iowa and Oregon.

Eager to explore, she stepped outside as dawn stretched across the morning sky. Regardless of anything else, she loved the fragrance of pine on the breeze. She sniffed with appreciation and then looked around.

Holiday seemed so quiet and sleepy; Zara didn't think there was any harm in going for a walk around town. She strolled along Main Street, as she'd learned it was called last night at dinner, going all the way from the end of town where the school was located to the opposite end where the blacksmith had a business.

She wandered along several side streets, becoming familiar with the layout of the town and where certain businesses, like the post office, doctor's office, and bank were located.

When she'd known she was leaving home, Zara had taken all the money she'd hidden away beneath her bed, kept safe from her father's pilfering of her earnings, and hastily sewn the coins into the clothing she'd tucked into her trunks and the bag she'd carried. If her trunks had remained undisturbed on the journey, the money would give her something to fall back on in case this teaching position didn't work out and she found it necessary to travel elsewhere.

At any rate, she didn't think it would be a terrible idea to open an account at the Holiday bank and put part of her earnings in an account there. She certainly wouldn't have to worry about her father dipping into her coffers now.

Part of her pitied him, but he'd made his choices and would have to live with the consequences. She just hoped Conroy wouldn't do anything dastardly when she was no longer available to use as a bargaining chip to clear her father's debt.

The whole situation had been so archaic and tragic. There were days her father ranted and raged like a cavedweller, telling her he was the man of the house and in charge of her. That might have been true when she was a child but not as an adult.

Zara realized she should have moved out when her father first began exhibiting such questionable behavior. Her friend Violet would have welcomed her in the small apartment she rented above a dress shop. Instead, Zara had stayed, praying for her father to change. To return to the good man he'd once been.

Now, she'd lost all hope that her caring, loving father was still somewhere inside the despicable shell of a man he'd turned into since her mother's death.

She sighed and surveyed her surroundings. It was far too lovely outside to dwell in the past. Determined to set aside her

maudlin thoughts, Zara followed a road out of town where she could hear water. Ahead, sunlight glinted across the silvery-blue surface of a river. She was nearly to the bank when movement in her peripheral vision drew her to a stop. A man rose out of the water, his bare skin glistening in the golden light of morning.

Stunned by his unexpected appearance, she felt helpless to do anything but gape as he ran a hand through his hair, then ducked beneath the water again. The intelligent—not to mention proper—thing for her to do would have been to turn away and forget she'd seen anything. Only she felt rooted to the spot.

The man broke the surface of the water a second time and swam a few strokes. He must have touched the bottom of the riverbank because he started to walk out of the water. He was far enough away, Zara couldn't clearly see his features, but if she wasn't entirely mistaken, she was ogling the marshal.

Heat filled her cheeks as she finally spun around before she saw more than the V-shape of his abdomen muscles. Zara lifted her skirts, hustling back into town, chastising herself with every step for ogling a man who had no idea he wasn't alone.

She raced up to her hotel room and took a moment to gather her composure, smooth her hair, and wash her hands and face before she made her way downstairs. Edith waved to her as she crossed the lobby and entered the dining room.

Zara took a seat by a sunny window and didn't have to wait more than a minute before a waitress took her order. The woman quickly returned with the cup of tea Zara had requested and set it before her with sugar and cream.

She was stirring a bit of sugar into the steaming liquid when she felt a presence beside the table and looked up into Dillon Durant's smiling, handsome face.

“Morning, Miss Wynn.”

“Good morning, Marshal Durant.” Zara felt her cheeks warming as she thought about seeing him in the river, if it had

been him, which she felt certain she hadn't been mistaken about the identity of the man with a chiseled physique.

The marshal's hair was combed, and he'd shaved away the scruff on his face. She could see a slight cleft in his chin that hadn't been visible before. The scruff had also hidden just how delectable his bottom lip looked.

A sudden, insane desire to find out if he was as good at kissing as she imagined made her fasten her gaze on her teacup.

"Mind if I take a seat?" he asked, already pulling out the chair across from her.

She didn't feel she was in a position to refuse when he'd been helpful to her the previous afternoon. Rather than speak, though, she lifted a hand and motioned to the chair.

He sank onto it, setting the hat he carried on the seat next to him.

She glanced up long enough to find him studying her. The warmth in her cheeks spread to her ears and down her neck. She wasn't someone who easily blushed, but something about the marshal—such as seeing him nearly naked—had definitely caused her to be overtaken with a telltale flush.

Zara sipped her tea, hoping it would hide her embarrassment.

"Penny for your thoughts," the marshal said.

Zara choked on the tea she'd just swallowed. If the man had any idea she'd been thinking about seeing him bare chested in the river, or how much she'd like him to kiss her, he would escort her directly to the train depot and send her on her way, explaining to the school board she was an unfit teacher for the students of Holiday.

"Are you well, Miss Wynn?" he asked, looking concerned as she coughed into her napkin.

Eyes watering, she nodded her head, hoping he'd give her a moment to tug the fraying edges of her composure back together. When she ceased coughing and dabbed at the



moisture that had leaked from her eyes, she sat back and released a long breath.

“Shall we start again?” the marshal asked, sounding patient and almost indulgent.

“Please,” Zara said, mustering a small smile.

“Miss Wynn, a good morning to you. If you have no objection, I’d like to discuss the schoolhouse with you over breakfast. Would that be satisfactory?”

“Of course, Marshal Durant.”

“Call me Dillon. Please.”

She nodded once. “Dillon,” she said quietly.

It was a strong name for a strong man. After all, she’d just seen how strong his shoulders and chest and ... She yanked her thoughts in line before they continued down a path they had no business traveling.

“I would be most pleased if you’d refer to me as Zara. It seems we’ll be working together for a time, at least until you can foist me off on one of the other school board members. It seems too formal to call me Miss Wynn, unless, of course, there are students around.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “And I don’t intend to foist you on anyone, Zara. All the board members have been made aware of your arrival. We had an informal meeting of sorts, and volunteers are coming to clean the schoolhouse and your quarters this morning. I set traps for the rodents last night and emptied them earlier this morning. I did reset them, just to make sure there aren’t any vermin lagging behind. Since tomorrow is Sunday, we thought you might like to move in on Monday.”

“That would be wonderful.” Zara looked forward to being on her own. Even if the quarters were nothing more than a large room with a kitchen area on one end and a bed on the other, it would still be solely her space. Besides, it would be a welcome change not to worry about her father stumbling in drunk at all hours of the night.

Dillon interrupted her thoughts. “After breakfast, if you’d like, I can escort you to the schoolhouse and introduce you to the women who are helping with the cleaning.”

“I’d like that very much, Marsh ... I mean Dillon. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Dillon leaned back and smiled as the waitress brought Zara’s breakfast and set a plate in front of him.

“Edith said to bring you your usual order,” the waitress said, giving Dillon a warm smile. “I’ll be back with your milk.”

Zara looked across the table. “Might I assume you eat here with frequency?”

“At least once a day,” Dillon admitted and lifted his napkin, snapping it open, then draping it across his lap.

After the waitress brought his milk, Dillon bowed his head and offered a quiet word of thanks for a new day and a filling meal and even mentioned Zara’s arrival. It warmed her heart that he’d include her in his prayers.

She added her amen to his and glanced up to find him looking at her. Concerned she had something on her face, she resisted the urge to scrub at her nose and cheeks and instead picked up her knife to spread berry jam across her toasted bread.

She took a bite, enthralled with the taste of the jam. It was nothing like she’d ever had before. “What kind of berry is this?” she asked, then took a second bite before Dillon could answer.

He slathered butter and jam on a biscuit. “Huckleberry. They grow wild in the mountains here. Edith buys them from a widow who sends her kids out to forage for berries. The money she makes off the berries keeps them in food for the winter.”

“Oh. I ...” Zara had no idea what to say to that, so she focused instead on eating her meal.

The food was every bit as good as her dinner had been the previous evening. She finished her tea, wiped her mouth and fingers on her napkin, then looked at Dillon. He was digging coins from his pocket to pay for their meals.

Hurriedly, she opened her reticule to pull out her money, but he placed his hand over hers. The warmth of his touch seeped into her hand and created a trail that trickled up her arm and into her heart.

“Please, Zara. Don’t insult me by not allowing me the pleasure of buying your breakfast.” The boyish grin he added to his words made him hard to resist. When he smiled, he looked much younger and far less intimidating.

She smiled at him, charmed. “Just this once,” she said, determined not to let him think she was a charity case, or worse—a woman hunting for a husband.

“Just this once,” he repeated and left money on the table before he stood, settled his hat on his head, then offered her a hand. She rose to her feet and felt that warmth trailing up her arm again when his hand settled on her elbow.

“Should I get my hat and gloves?” she asked, feeling improperly attired without them.

“You’re fine just the way you are. In fact, if you don’t want to get that pretty dress all dirty today, you might want to change. At the least, borrow an apron from Edith.”

“Oh, well, I ... the rest of my clothes are in my trunks. Do you think Edith would mind loaning an apron to me?”

Dillon shook his head. “Let’s ask her.” He guided her toward the front desk. “Edith, we’re heading to the schoolhouse to clean. Would you have an apron Zara can borrow so she doesn’t ruin her dress?”

“Of course! Wait just a moment,” Edith said, then hurried through a doorway behind the front desk. She soon reappeared with a folded white apron and handed it to Zara. “I wish I could come offer my help this morning, but Saturdays are such busy days, and we are short one staff member as it is. Tom Harrison got bitten by the gold fever bug and quit yesterday.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Dillon said, then took Zara’s elbow in his hand again. “Have a good day, Edith.”

“We will. You do the same, Marshal.”

Dillon lifted a hand in parting, then opened the door, holding it as Zara stepped outside into the bright sunlight. Heat already beat down on them, and she wished she could have bottled the pleasant early morning temperature from her walk around town. Thoughts of her walk led to visions of Dillon in the river, and her cheeks once again seared with heat.

“Are you sure you are well, Zara? You look a mite feverish. If you want to rest today, no one would think anything of it.”

Zara’s gaze flicked to him, only to find him studying her. His eyes, while shaded by his hat, held concern.

“I’m very well, Dillon. I promise. But thank you for inquiring.”

He didn’t say anything further as he guided her to the schoolhouse. Two buggies and one farm wagon were parked outside, the horses in the shade of a nearby tree. The doors to the school and the teacher’s quarters were open as were all the windows.

“Dillon Durant! You march in here and remove this ... monster, please!” a voice called as they reached the schoolyard.

“That would be Nan Nichols. She sort of adopted me as her grandson. I told her it was too hot for her to come today, but that woman never listens to a word I say,” Dillon grumbled as he walked with Zara up the steps and into the schoolhouse.

Zara stood just inside the doorway, taking in the rows of desks, the chalkboards lining the walls, the teacher’s wide desk, and even a piano shoved into one corner with an American flag hanging from the wall above it.

Four women stopped cleaning to look at her. One of them was older with snowy white hair piled on her head, but even then, Zara thought she looked more like an impish fairy than a grandmother. There was a tall young woman with stunning

blue eyes and a golden braid that encircled her head. A second woman with blonde hair was so beautiful, she appeared almost angelic. The fourth woman, who was clearly in a delicate condition, stood with a broom in one hand and the other pressed against the small of her back, apparently trying to relieve her obvious discomfort.

“Miss Zara Wynn,” Dillon said, giving her a gentle nudge forward when she remained near the door. “I’d like you to meet my adopted grandmother, Nan Nichols. The one with the broom is Anne Milton. Her husband owns the blacksmith shop and livery on the other end of town. Cora Lee Coleman is holding the stack of slates. And the one with the angelic face is Henley Holt. Her husband is our town doctor, and Henley is his assistant. Ladies, please welcome Holiday’s newest schoolteacher.”

“We’re so pleased to meet you.”

“Welcome.”

“It’s wonderful to have you here.”

The women circled Zara, and their sincere words of greeting made her feel welcome. While Dillon emptied the traps, including one that held an enormous rat, Zara slipped on the apron Edith had let her borrow and started taking books off shelves. Everything in the schoolhouse would need to be cleaned. Cora Lee said more women would come to help clean the teacher’s quarters later.

As they worked, they visited, telling her about the town. Zara was shocked to discover Cora Lee, Anne, and Henley had all been mail-order brides. Only Anne had married the man who’d sent for her, though. It seemed Cora Lee’s father-in-law had attempted to play matchmaker, sending for her for one son, only to have her marry his other. Henley had come to marry a man who was supposed to open a hardware store, but he’d struck gold and left town before she’d arrived.

Zara listened in fascination as Henley shared about meeting Doctor Evan Holt on the train and falling in love before she stepped foot in Holiday.

“It all worked out just as it was meant to be,” Nan said, as she chased cobwebs out of a corner with Anne’s broom.

An hour passed before more voices came from outside and three more women appeared. Cora Lee introduced them as Mrs. Spangler, Mrs. Rogers, and Mrs. Howard. All three of them had children and were eager to welcome a woman schoolteacher.

Together, they scrubbed every inch of the teacher’s quarters and the school. When they finished, not a rodent remained. Every pane of glass in the windows glistened and shined, as did the floors and the two stoves.

“I can’t thank you all enough for your help,” Zara said when they finished the work and sat on desks in the schoolroom, enjoying slices of the plum cake Cora Lee had brought to share. For lunch, they’d enjoyed fresh vegetables from Nan’s garden, ham and cheese sandwiches provided by Mrs. Rogers, and tree-ripened peaches contributed by Mrs. Howard. Now, with the afternoon half gone, they were ready for a break and the wonderful cake laden with plums and slivered almonds.

“It’s our pleasure, Zara. We’re all so pleased to have a woman teacher. Those men finally listened when the womenfolk insisted a female wouldn’t be as likely to run off in search of gold. We don’t care what anyone says, if you find a special fella to love and get married, you can still teach as long as you want to,” Nan said, with a pointed look out the door. “There are a few eligible young men just waiting to settle down.”

Zara glanced over her shoulder as Dillon headed toward the school from across the street. She knew then, watching him walk, he was, without a doubt, the man bathing in the river she’d happened upon that morning.

For the fourth time that day, her cheeks turned red. What was this town—and this man—doing to her?

## Chapter Four



Dillon wondered if a lightning bolt would burst through the roof of the church and strike him dead should he surrender to the temptation to punch Pastor John Ryan in the nose.

Normally, he'd never think such a thing about a man of the cloth, who also happened to be his friend. However, the way John kept glancing at Zara through the service had put Dillon on edge. The proprietary feeling got even worse when they stood in line after church to shake the pastor's hand. John hung onto Zara's hand far longer than was polite. At least to Dillon's way of thinking.

As his feelings of possessiveness increased, so did his agitation. Zara wasn't his. She never would be. But he battled the urge to start swinging when John leaned closer to Zara and said something that made her smile.

Dillon felt a hand settle on his arm and looked down at Nan. Mirth filled her expressive eyes and she grinned at him. "Pastor Ryan is a handsome young man, Dill. If you think you have a claim to stake, you better get to it."

"I'm not staking a claim on anyone, or anything," he said in a gruff whisper although that was exactly what he wanted to do.

He observed the pastor, trying to look at him from a woman's objective. It wasn't outlandish to say he was attractive, with his square jaw, full mouth, and short nose. He had a thatch of thick dark brown hair that was generally parted and combed into submission with care, like it was today. John was almost as tall as Dillon, and for a man of the cloth, he had

a strong physique, often helping around town or on neighboring farms when assistance was needed. John wasn't afraid of hard work, and it showed in both his physical appearance and his humble attitude.

Up until this moment, Dillon had considered John to be his closest friend in Holiday. Now, though, he felt like the pastor had turned into an enemy as he continued to speak with Zara, drawing out another smile.

"Stop brooding," Nan said, smacking Dillon's arm with her reticule. "If you aren't willing to court her, don't be mad when some other fella steals her away."

Before he could remind Nan that he wasn't interested in courting anyone, she walked over to talk to Edith Piedmont.

"I don't brood," Dillon said under his breath, but Jace Coleman turned to look at him. His eyebrows lifted, and the grin that spread on his face caused Dillon to consider making it disappear with one well-placed connection of his fist.

Botheration! What was happening to him? He was in the church, thinking about pummeling not only his friends, but anyone who dared to look at Zara.

Admittedly, she was hard not to notice, with her thick golden hair caught up in a loose bun that allowed tendrils to wave around her sweet face. The floral-printed gown she wore seemed to make her cheeks pinker and her eyes bluer. He and R.C. Milton had hauled all of Zara's trunks to the schoolhouse Saturday afternoon once the women had finished cleaning. Zara had decided to move into her quarters Monday, just in case more rodents happened to be running loose.

Rupert and Goldie Rogers had donated a mattress that would be delivered Monday morning, and Anne and Cora Lee had offered to contribute bedding and linens. Dillon knew Nan would insist on providing something too, whether it was a tablecloth and napkins, or perhaps curtains for the windows.

However, what Zara did or didn't do was none of his business. She didn't belong to him and never would.



Besides, she didn't seem all that interested in pursuing a relationship with anyone either.

A bit of smug satisfaction filled him when Zara extracted her hand from John's, offered him a polite, somewhat aloof smile, then walked outside with Cora Lee and Anne.

Dillon made it through the line, shook John's hand, and hustled out the door. As he charged down the steps, he saw Zara climbing into a buggy with Jace, Cora Lee, and Grant Coleman. She and Cora Lee took seats in the back, laughing at something Grant had said.

As Dillon gaped after their departing buggy, he felt movement beside him and glanced down into Nan's wrinkled face. "If you think you can behave yourself, we've been invited out to lunch at Elk Creek Ranch. Henley and the doc, and R.C. and Anne will be there too."

Dillon wondered if Nan had finagled an invitation on his behalf or if Cora Lee had invited them yesterday and Nan had forgotten to tell him. Regardless, he was pleased to be heading out to the ranch for lunch.

Cora Lee was one of the finest cooks for miles and miles around. Any invitation to pull up a chair at the Coleman table and indulge in her well-prepared meals wasn't one Dillon was inclined to refuse. Besides, it was good for Nan to get out. She spent too much time alone with nothing but her flowers and his occasional visits to keep her company.

He held his arm out to Nan and mustered a genuine smile. "Shall we get going then?"

Nan wrapped her arm around his and gave him a pleased look. "We shall."

On the way out to the ranch, Nan chatted about the weather, her garden, tidbits of news the women had shared the previous day while cleaning the schoolhouse, and the berry pies she'd baked that morning to contribute to the meal.

Dillon thought Nan's pies were among the best he'd ever tasted. "I look forward to a slice of your pie, Nan. No one makes crust as flaky as you do."

“Thank you, Dill. I enjoy baking more than cooking these days, and it’s always nice when there is someone to enjoy my efforts with me. Cora Lee mentioned making ice cream. My, oh my. Won’t that taste wonderful on a hot day like today?”

“It will,” Dillon said, already looking forward to the meal. An afternoon with friends, good food, and the opportunity to spend more time with Zara all held a great deal of appeal.

Dillon reminded himself he had no intention of getting to know Zara better, other than perhaps as a friend. He could be friends with a woman, couldn’t he? One who wasn’t married? There wasn’t a law against that, and he would know if there were.

So, why then, did the idea of being only friends with Zara make his stomach feel sour? If he mentioned it to Nan, she would no doubt voice her thoughts on the subject, but he didn’t need her to tell him he liked Zara. He knew that without anyone pointing it out.

The past two nights, visions of her, of her blue eyes and sweet smiles, had filled his dreams. Most of the time, Dillon had nightmares from his years of working as a lawman in Texas where he’d seen one too many brutal murders, chased one too many outlaws, and witnessed one too many unnecessary deaths.

The brittleness his past had brought to his spirit was why he’d turned in his badge and left. He’d decided to travel west and somehow found himself employed as a guard, working at a large mine near Baker City. He hadn’t enjoyed the work, and when he’d heard about the opening for a marshal in Holiday, he’d eagerly applied.

He felt as though Holiday was where he was supposed to be, like God had guided him to a place that was mostly peaceful. The worst thing that had happened since he’d taken the job was last December when Jace Coleman’s brother, Jude, had kidnapped Cora Lee, then tried to kill Jace. Other than that, breaking up a fight at the brothel or saloon was about the

extent of the excitement Dillon had to deal with, and he didn't mind that at all.

However, it was almost unheard of for him to close his eyes at night and experience dreams of love.

Everything he'd seen and endured as a lawman had hardened him. Aged him before his time. Left him feeling weathered, as though a part of his humanity had been stripped away by the horrors he'd witnessed in his work.

He wasn't fit for a woman like Zara. He would have bet a month's wages that she had never broken the law before, with the exception of her attempt to break in to the teacher's quarters with her hairpins. No doubt lingered in his mind that she had never even considered breaking the law. It wasn't in her nature to think that way. She seemed too sweet and gentle.

Even if he were interested in her, in pursuing her, he wouldn't. No woman should have to deal with his nightmares, or, as Nan so clearly pointed out earlier, his propensity to brood. Dillon tended to look at people through the jaded perspective gained from arresting too many liars, thieves, killers, and people devoid of a moral compass.

Dillon knew his work and experiences made him reluctant to take people at face value until he got to know them.

Yet, even though he'd only met Zara a few days ago, he could sense her innate goodness. The woman was without guile, a person who could be trusted. After all, the parents of Holiday were about to entrust her with their children for hours every day.

Then again, they'd given the same task to that idiot Godfrey.

"Oh, look! Cora Lee has a table set up in the shade. Won't that be lovely?" Nan said, drawing Dillon out of his musings and back to the moment as he stopped the buggy by the front yard gate and helped Nan out. He carried her pies over to the table, shook hands with Jace and Grant, then went

to unhitch Flora down by the barn so she could rest in the shade until it was time to pull the buggy home to Nan's place.

When he returned to the yard, Zara was laughing at something Anne Milton said. Whatever it was had caused R.C.'s face to turn as red as a ripe tomato. Jace thumped the brawny man on the shoulder before he hurried into the house.

Dillon took time to wash up before he walked over to join the jolly group that included a newcomer to the area.

"Rowan Reed. Nice to see you again," Dillon said, shaking the rancher's hand. He'd arrived in Holiday back in the spring. The cowboy had purchased a run-down property a few miles south of town and was turning it into a real ranch. He rarely came to town and had only been in church a handful of times, at least that Dillon knew about. Then again, Dillon often missed the service due to his work.

It was nice the Coleman family had included the cowboy in their gathering today. Dillon had an idea Rowan had seen some hard times and had come to Holiday to move past them, or hide from them. Either way, as long as the rancher stayed out of trouble, Dillon had no intention of digging into the man's past.

Grant pulled out a chair for Nan, and everyone began filling the seats. Dillon found himself sitting across from Zara, while Rowan sat on her right and Nan occupied the seat to her left. While Dillon would have liked to sit next to Zara, he could watch her better, gauge her reactions better, from his seat across the table.

The meal was lively, with amusing conversations and delicious food. After stuffing themselves on fried chicken, potato salad, yeasty rolls, fresh corn, savory beans, and sliced peaches, no one was ready for dessert.

The men, led by Jace, cleared the table and did the dishes. Dillon tried not to appear obvious as he kept an eye on Zara. She, Henley, and Cora Lee went for a stroll down by the barn, while Anne and Nan remained in the shade of the trees. Nan had a ball of yarn in her hands and was showing Anne how to untangle a knot in what appeared to be a baby blanket. He

assumed by the yarn's pale shade of blue that Anne was hoping for a boy.

"See something of interest?" Jace asked as he handed Dillon a bowl to dry.

Dillon scowled at Jace's teasing grin. "I do. That new horse in the pasture. When did you get it?"

Jace exchanged a look with R.C. that left Dillon irritated, but he talked about buying the horse from a breeder in Baker City and hauling it home on the train. Jace had worked as an engineer for several years now, and seemed to love the work. For the most part, he was home of an evening since he mainly drove the Holiday Express line between Holiday and Baker City.

Dillon was sure that if Jace's work required him to be gone for days or weeks at a time, he would have quit and remained at the ranch with Cora Lee. After all, they hadn't been married a year yet. Neither had the doctor and his wife. In fact, they'd wed only a few months ago.

Surrounded by men who had recently wed, Dillon hoped he wouldn't catch something fatal to his bachelorhood from them and find himself proposing to anyone. When a picture of Zara popped into his thoughts, Dillon fought the urge to wallop himself in the head to knock the vision loose.

Before he succumbed to the urge, Grant brought up a school board meeting planned for the following week.

By the time the men finished drying and putting away the dishes, the women were all gathered around Nan and Anne, laughing at something Henley said.

"How about some entertainment?" Jace asked, handing Evan Holt a deck of cards.

The doctor handed the deck back to Jace and shrugged. "You'll have to ask my wife."

Dillon had heard about Henley being quite a hand with cards, but he'd never witnessed it for himself. He glanced over at Rowan and shrugged, and the two of them followed the other men outside.

“Would you do us the grand honor of showing off a few card tricks, Henley?” Jace asked, setting the deck of cards on the table in front of her.

Henley nodded and began to shuffle the deck. Dillon watched her execute a few tricks, then shifted his focus to Zara. As though spellbound, she watched as Henley’s fingers flipped the cards so effortlessly and quickly, it almost seemed magical.

When Henley finished the trick, Zara was the first to applaud.

“I think it’s about time for ice cream,” Cora Lee said, rising to her feet and heading into the house. Zara hopped up to help her while Henley did a few more card tricks before dessert was served.

Dillon savored every bite of the creamy, cool ice cream as well as a piece of Nan’s strawberry pie and a thick slice of the chocolate cake Cora Lee had made. Rowan shoveled in his food like a man who hated to do his own cooking. He glanced over at Dillon as though he would understand. Dillon most certainly did and nodded once before Rowan returned to his dessert.

Since the rancher appeared far more intent on the ice cream than Zara, Dillon concluded he wasn’t competition for the schoolmarm’s hand. Then again, Dillon wasn’t pursuing her anyway, so would it matter if Rowan took a fancy to her?

He forced himself to stop watching Zara and instead kept an eye on Rowan while pretending to listen to a story Grant was telling about the early years when Holiday had been nothing more than a muddy mining camp. Rowan was hiding something, of that Dillon had no doubt. He had yet to decide if he needed to pursue it or wait for his secrets to present themselves.

That was the thing about secrets, they never stayed hidden for long.

## Chapter Five



“You really are the sweetest, nicest, most wonderful friends in the world,” Zara said as she hugged first Cora Lee, then Henley and Anne.

The three women had arrived a few minutes after Zara had unlocked the door to the teacher’s quarters on Monday morning, all bearing useful gifts.

Cora Lee had brought sheets and two blankets for the bed. Henley had brought pillows and towels. Anne had given her a lovely cloth for the table with a set of four beautifully embroidered napkins that matched it.

“This is all too much and far too kind.”

“It’s our way of saying welcome. As you may have noticed, we’re still a growing community, and there is a shortage of women our age. We have to stick together,” Cora Lee said, giving her another hug. “Truly, we are so pleased to have you here. Even though none of us have children to send to school yet, we will someday. It is important to us to have good teachers.”

“Thank you,” Zara said, overwhelmed by the acceptance and kindness she’d experienced since her arrival in Holiday last week.

Even though she was a newcomer—a stranger—she’d been made to feel at home. Welcomed. Appreciated.

She’d had to run away from her father and travel across the country to experience those feelings, but she was glad she’d come to Holiday. Right now, she didn’t have a single

regret for her actions. Not when they'd brought her to a town she thought she would come to love.

As Holiday grew, Zara hoped to grow right along with it. She sent up a brief prayer of thanksgiving for the Creator's keeping and guidance, then smiled at her friends as they helped her unpack her trunks. She reverently placed her mother's Bible on the small table by the bed, then turned at a knock on the door.

Rupert Rogers and one of the delivery boys he employed at the mercantile carried in a new mattress that fit perfectly on the bed.

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Rogers." Zara reached for her reticule. "May I please pay you for it?"

"No. Not a penny, Miss Wynn. Consider it our contribution to welcoming you as our teacher. We're so pleased to have you in Holiday." The man tipped his hat and left before Zara could do more than call another word of thanks after him.

When lunch rolled around, Evan Holt arrived and escorted them all to the hotel, where R.C. met them. The six of them enjoyed a cold lunch, since it was still so hot outside, then Anne returned to the blacksmith shop with her husband, while Henley went with Evan to see a patient.

Cora Lee walked with Zara back to the schoolhouse, but instead of lingering, she gave her one more hug before she climbed in her buggy and left for home.

Zara unlocked the schoolhouse door and went inside, meandering down the center aisle toward her desk with her eyes closed. She could smell chalk and smoke from the stove. She could hear the childish voices of her students. She could feel the excitement of learning thrumming around her.

When she bumped into the teacher's desk—her desk—she stopped and turned around, then sucked in a startled gasp.

Marshal Dillon Durant lounged against the doorframe. She wondered how long he'd been standing there, watching



her. Long enough that he probably concluded she was slightly touched in the head or full of fanciful nonsense.

Zara had never been fanciful, although her dreams of late certainly seemed to veer in that direction. While she'd attended various functions in Davenport, escorted by polite young men, she'd never been courted. Never met a man she wanted to court her.

Yet, something about the marshal, something she couldn't explain or define, drew her interest. He was a man of the law. A man who had likely seen more terrible things than any human should witness. Aware of the hardness about him, of the slightly weathered edge to him, she also sensed a softness in him. A gentleness that lingered in his heart. That, she was sure, is what pulled her thoughts to him again and again.

Last night, as she'd curled into her comfortable bed at the hotel, she'd dreamed of him. They were standing in front of a lovely house where flowers bloomed in profusion, and he handed her not one but two big bouquets of flowers. She wore a blue gown, and her hair was down. Zara didn't own a dress like the one in her dream, and she always pinned up her hair. Nevertheless, the dream had felt so real, she'd awakened and reached out, expecting to find Dillon in the bed beside her.

Now, as she watched him walk toward her, she wondered if he could read her thoughts. She certainly hoped not, because the firm set of his jaw softened, and she saw a hint of a smile on his kissable lips.

"Afternoon, Zara. I heard you and your helpers got all your things settled this morning. Do you think you'll be comfortable here?"

"I certainly will be. Mr. Rogers brought over a brand-new mattress this morning, and Cora Lee provided sheets and blankets." Was it improper to discuss bedding with the marshal? It seemed innocent enough, but then thoughts of her dream returned, and she felt that unwanted glow beginning to blossom in her cheeks again.

To hide her blush, she turned and motioned to her desk, which now held a globe of the world, as well as an inkwell, a

new writing tablet, a box of chalk, and the books she'd brought with her that she'd used in her classroom back in Davenport. She would take time to rearrange a few things in the classroom another day.

"Would you like to see my room?" she said, and opened the adjoining door into her quarters without thinking.

Dillon walked to the doorway, but didn't step inside. "It looks really nice, Zara. The girls did a great job of helping you get it set up. Any more trouble with rodents?"

She shuddered at the thought of all the vermin that had been carried out in traps. "No, thank goodness. Cora Lee checked the traps earlier, and they were all empty. I hope they stay that way."

"Me too," Dillon said, then took a step back. "I reckon I'd better get back to work. Just wanted to see how you are settling in. If you need anything, you know where to find me."

"Thank you, Dillon." Zara stepped back into the classroom, closing her door behind her. "Grant mentioned having the school board meeting here Thursday evening. Should I provide refreshments?"

"No. Cora Lee usually sends cookies or something sweet. Edith has Grover bring over sandwiches from the hotel's restaurant, and I typically provide the coffee, although with it as hot as it's been, we might just skip that."

"I could make lemonade. Should I plan to attend?"

"You'd be welcome to, but you aren't required to do so."

"I'll decide about attending later. Thank you, Dillon. Have a nice afternoon."

He tipped his hat to her, then hurried down the school's steps and headed in the direction of the jail.

Zara watched him walk away, wondering what he'd look like from the back if she happened to catch him bathing in the river again.

Shamed by the direction of her thoughts, she shut the door to the school and retreated to her quarters, intent on

finishing the coverlet her mother had started. It would look perfect on her bed. As she sat at the table and spent the afternoon working, she couldn't help it if her mind wandered to an early morning stroll along the river.

## Chapter Six



“Howdy, Marshal. Got your mail right here,” the postmaster said, handing Dillon several envelopes, a magazine, and a flat package wrapped in brown paper.

“Thanks. Enjoy your day.” Dillon settled his mail in one hand, then turned and pulled open the door to the post office, waiting as Mrs. Jamieson entered before he stepped outside.

The day was warm, but not as sweltering as it had been a few weeks ago. Last week had cooled down to a bearable level, and now, with school in session, the temperatures had dropped down another notch to being quite pleasant.

Dillon wasn't in a rush to return to his office, so he walked all the way to the end of Main Street and waved at R.C. as he worked in the blacksmith shop. The pinging sound of him pounding on a piece of metal carried out to the road. It was a wonder the man hadn't gone deaf from the noise, but he seemed to love his work.

Curious, Dillon wondered how that noise would affect a sleeping baby. He knew R.C. wanted to build a house soon, but he was saving up to construct more than a small one-room place. Knowing R.C., he probably had plans for something grand. Something with plenty of rooms he and Anne would fill with children.

Longings for a home and children of his own made an image of Zara pop into his mind. That woman waltzed through his thoughts with alarming frequency, even if Dillon had no intention of pursuing her.

If he ever did decide to look for a woman to wed, he wouldn't need to search any further than the schoolhouse.

From reports he'd heard around town, the children already adored Zara, and school had only been in session for a week. There were twelve youngsters attending school, varying in age from four to eleven. A handful of older students would likely begin attending class once harvest was over.

The children claimed Zara was firm but kind, as well as patient, and that she made learning engaging and fun. If he'd had a teacher like Zara when he'd been in school, maybe he would have liked it more and gotten better grades. Then again, he'd never been one who enjoyed sitting still for too long.

Dillon headed back toward his office, strolling along one of the side streets. When he turned at the corner and sauntered past the doctor's office, he noticed Evan and Henley sat outside on their porch, enjoying glasses of lemonade.

"Are you telling me you ran out of patients?" Dillon asked with a teasing grin as he stood at the end of their walk.

"Hush! Someone might hear you and decide they need immediate medical attention," Henley cautioned with mock seriousness.

"This is the first break we've had all day. We wanted to enjoy a little sunshine and fresh air," Evan explained, motioning to a pitcher on a side table by Henley. "Care for a glass of lemonade?"

"No, but thank you. I'd best mosey on back to the office. You two enjoy your afternoon."

Evan gave Henley a tender look. "We plan to, Dillon. We certainly plan to."

As Dillon continued on his way, he wondered what it would be like to be loved so completely, so freely, so deeply. He'd never been loved. Not by the parents that left him at an orphanage when he was a baby. Certainly not by any of the staff at the orphanage. The closest he'd ever come to being loved was Nan and Gene Nichols. However, being their

unofficial grandson wasn't the same as having the unbridled affection and passion of a beautiful woman.

But a man who had seen what Dillon had, who'd experienced living nightmares that still haunted his dreams, had no business tangling a woman in his troubles. None at all.

Thanks to an old sheriff who'd taken Dillon under his wing, he had learned there was One who loved him unconditionally. No matter what happened on earth, Dillon was as certain of God's love as he was the sun would set in the west. Still, there were days it didn't hurt to have a reminder or two that he didn't walk through life completely and utterly alone.

Dillon thought about going to see Pastor Ryan. John usually knew just what to say when Dillon needed a word or two of encouragement. Instead of pestering his friend, though, he returned to his office and decided to sort through the mail.

He opened the envelopes first. Nothing unexpected. A few replies to inquiries he'd made on behalf of one of the local mine owners. A note of thanks from someone he'd helped a few months ago. A letter from one of his fellow orphanage residents. He and two of the boys he'd grown up with still kept in touch from time to time.

He read the letter and set it aside to write a reply to later. He set the magazine by his bed to thumb through after he turned in for the night.

After returning to his desk, he opened the flat package and pulled out several wanted posters. He generally got a stack of them every month or so. Often, by the time he received them, the criminal had already been caught.

He glanced at one poster after another, studying facial details and committing them to memory in case he came upon anyone who looked like the drawings and fit the descriptions.

One thing Dillon excelled at was never forgetting a face. It had saved his life a few times when he'd worked in Texas. He just hoped none of the men on the wanted posters found their way to the little haven he'd found in Holiday.

It might have started out as a rough mining camp, but the town was growing and gaining a respectable reputation. Hiring an experienced, dedicated schoolteacher had been a logical next step in their growth. Just like it had been a step when Doctor Evan Holt had moved to town, and Pastor Ryan.

Before they knew it, Holiday would be on the map as a friendly, family-oriented town. Dillon hoped he was alive to see that day.

Methodically, he went through the stack of wanted posters, setting one on top of the other. When he made it to the last one, he couldn't believe he was looking at a drawing of Zara. There wasn't a single doubt that it was her face. Even if he had been wrong, there was her name printed in bold lettering. It wasn't a wanted poster but one that said she was missing. Her fiancé, a Conroy Devoe, was offering a handsome reward to anyone with information about her whereabouts.

Dillon rocked back in his chair. Zara was engaged to be married. And she'd run away. He wasn't sure which part of the unwelcome news was the most disturbing.

He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, trying to decide what to do. Part of him wanted to march straight to the school and demand an explanation. Another part of him felt the urge to wad up the missing person poster and stuff it in the stove. No one would know she was here. The more reasonable part of him concluded he needed to tread carefully and uprightly.

Dillon snatched the poster off his desk, folding it up to fit in his pocket, grabbed his hat and headed out the door. He cut diagonally across the street and jogged around the church to the parson's home. Impatiently, he rapped on the door once, waited no time at all, and pounded on it with his fist.

"John!" he called, hoping if his friend was home, he'd hasten to the door. "John!"

"I'm fairly certain you are disturbing the peace," John said, leaning out one of the open church windows. "Can you arrest yourself?"

Dillon grinned in spite of the turmoil brewing inside him. “No, I can’t. Do you think you’re up for the job?”

“Doubtful. Wait a minute. I’ll be right there,” John called, then disappeared inside. It didn’t take long for him to lope down the church steps and over to the house. “Come on in. Mrs. Bonner left a basket of cookies this morning.”

“Are they the cinnamon ones? With the nuts?”

John nodded and led the way inside. “They are indeed. I may have eaten half a dozen of them earlier, but I might need one more.”

When they were settled in the sunny kitchen at the table with the basket of cookies between them, John offered Dillon a thoughtful glance. “I assume you came over here for more than eating my cookies.”

Dillon shoved the last bite of a cookie in his mouth and nodded. “I could use your perspective on an ... issue that just arose.”

“Okay,” John said, brushing cookie crumbs off the legs of his pants, then giving Dillon his full attention.

That was one of the many things Dillon admired about the pastor. When someone asked for his assistance, he gave all his attention to the person. The man also listened more than he spoke, which was a skill most people never mastered.

Dillon cleared his throat, trying to think of where to start. He didn’t want to mention Zara’s name, to maintain John’s innocence in the situation. “If you met someone, admired them, found their character to be sound and true, then received information that suggested you didn’t know them as well as you thought, and by law, were compelled to reply to the information, what would you do?”

John gave him a confused look. “Can you be a little clearer than the muddy residue at the bottom of a bucket full of pond scum?”

Dillon sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Let’s say, hypothetically, a man named Jed came to town for a job. Jed seemed like a good person. Did well in his job. Fit in with



the community. Gave every example of being kind and caring. Then one day a letter arrived in my office, saying Jed was not actually just Jed, but had gone missing a month ago and Jed's betrothed was offering a reward for any information that might bring him back. By law, if I know Jed's whereabouts, I need to respond to the letter and provide what information I can. But what if, in my gut, I know Jed didn't go missing by accident. What if Jed was miserable and circumstances weren't as they appear, and the last thing Jed wants is to return to the life he fled? Do I do what the law requires, or do I do what I feel is right?"

John sat back and let his gaze drift out the window as he silently absorbed what Dillon had shared. Finally, he turned back to Dillon with a resolved look on his face. "I can't tell you what to do, Dillon. Only you can decide. I know sometimes it's hard to choose between what the law dictates and what you think is right, but you'll have to make that call. If you act in good faith and remain upright and true, I think that is the best advice I can offer." He leaned forward and placed his hand on Dillon's arm. "But we can pray."

"That would be good." Dillon bowed his head and willed the pounding in his heart that had started the moment he'd recognized Zara's face to calm. He listened as John prayed for Dillon to have wisdom in his decision and for whatever happened to follow God's plans.

"Amen," Dillon said, then stood and shook his friend's hand. "Thanks, John. Sorry to bother you."

"You know I'm here anytime. I don't think I was probably much help to you, but trust in God's leading, my friend. What does He prompt you to do? That's how you'll know the right choice to make. I hope Jed can clarify some of the details for you. Perhaps that will help with your decision."

"Perhaps." Dillon picked up the hat he'd tossed on the chair beside him, settled it on his head, and left through John's back door.

He glanced at his watch and concluded school would be getting out momentarily. He went for a walk down along the

river. It was a place he came to when he needed to think and be alone. After skipping a few rocks on the water, he walked back to the schoolhouse and found the door wide open as Zara cleaned the blackboard behind her desk.

A board creaked beneath his foot, and she spun around, recognition drawing out her smile. “Oh, Dillon. Hello. What brings you by?”

“Mind if we talk a minute?” he asked, motioning to two of the larger desks at the back of the classroom. He wouldn’t begin to fit in one of the smaller desks located close to her desk.

“Of course. What can I do for you?” she asked, wiping the chalk dust from her hands onto a rag, then leaving it on a corner of her desk.

Dillon pulled the poster from his pocket, unfolded it, and spread it flat on top of a desk.

Zara’s smile melted like candle wax left in the sun on a summer day as her gaze landed on the poster. She snatched it off the desk and read it.

The paper drifted from her fingers as her knees gave way, and she began to sink to the floor.

“Don’t you dare faint on me, Zara Wynn. You’re made of stronger stuff than that,” Dillon growled at her, helping her to sit on the end of one of the desks. He pressed on the back of her neck until she bent forward with her head down by her knees.

He heard her draw in several shaky breaths, then she lifted her head.

“Better?” he asked.

She nodded, then pointed to the poster on the floor. “Where did you get that?”

“Came in the mail today. If I have it, so does every sheriff’s and marshal’s office in the country.” Dillon picked up the poster and held it out to her. “Care to explain why you’re listed as a missing person or who Conroy Devoe is?”

“Not particularly.”

“I see.” Dillon didn’t, though, as he took a seat at the desk beside her. “I can send a telegram right now letting them know you’re here. Safe. Unharmed. Or you can tell me what happened to send you fleeing from a man who clearly wants to marry you.”

Zara blew out a long breath and shook her head. “He doesn’t want to marry me. Conroy wants to own me. I never thought ... never expected them to do this. I was sure they’d lose my trail and give up.”

“Who are *they*?”

“My father and Conroy.”

A dozen questions reared up to pelt his thoughts, but he tamped them down. “How about you tell me why you are on a missing person poster?”

Zara straightened her spine, folded her hands on her lap, and met Dillon’s gaze. He saw determination in her eyes and steel in her spine and experienced a spurt of pride in her. She wasn’t a person who cowered.

“It started when my mother passed two years ago. It was unexpected. Her heart just stopped working one day. Father didn’t take it well, not that anyone does with something like that. He stopped attending church and started drinking. Gambling. Conroy owns a gentleman’s saloon, I suppose you’d call it. There are card games and women of ... well, you know. Anyway, I had no idea how far into debt Father was to Conroy until they came to the house one day and announced their plans for me to marry Conroy to settle my father’s debts.”

Dillon’s fist clenched. “Your father bartered you to the saloon owner, is that what you’re saying?”

Zara nodded, her face flushed and red. “That is correct. Conroy says he plans to marry me, but I’m not so certain. Now that I’ve had time to consider it, I have a feeling there would be a sham ceremony, then he’d force me into working at his

establishment. He's mentioned more than once he could get top dollar for a face like mine, whatever that means."

Dillon felt a primitive, overwhelming urge to pummel something. Preferably Zara's father and Conroy Devoe. How could a father bargain his daughter like a piece of property? She was a human with just as much value as anyone else, not something to be bartered.

"So, you ran away, is that right? Did you take anything of theirs when you left? Anything someone could construe as being stolen?"

"No!" Zara shook her head. "Well, I took my mother's china and a few of her things I couldn't bear to leave behind. Things she would have given to me if she were alive. Things my father will likely sell to pay his debts. They are as much mine as his, aren't they?"

Ownership for sentimental items was a blurry line Dillon had no intention of clearing. Not when there were far more important matters at hand. "When did you leave Davenport?"

"The day after Grant Coleman sent the telegram saying I was hired. I packed what I could and left right after Father headed to the saloon for the evening. I didn't take a direct route here, hoping if someone went looking for me, they wouldn't find me. Then there were the widow's weeds."

"Widow's weeds?" Dillon asked, confused.

"I dressed as a widow until I got to Baker City. I figured the veil would hide my face, and no one wants to talk to a grieving widow. I hardly spoke to anyone the whole train trip here."

Dillon wanted to tell her she was clever and resourceful and had been smart in her decisions, but he kept those thoughts to himself.

"Zara, I believe every word you are telling me." Dillon reached out and took her hands in his. "But by my duty to the law, I have to let them know where you are."

## Chapter Seven



Zara glared at Dillon. She tried to jerk away from him, but he held on as the warmth of his hands engulfed her suddenly chilled fingers.

“Why on earth would you tell them where I am after what I just shared with you? If Conroy finds me and drags me back to Davenport, he’ll most likely make me a ... he’ll turn me into ... it won’t be long before I’m ruined!” Zara had refused to think about it when she was in Davenport, but with the miles distancing her from her father and Conroy, she couldn’t think of a single reason Conroy would actually marry her. She felt it, clear down to her bones, that was the story he fed to her father just to get her to become one of his many soiled doves. She wouldn’t stand for it. She absolutely refused to go back.

“Look, Zara, I don’t want to do this, but I have to do this. I won’t contact Conroy or your father. I’ll send a telegram to the sheriff. I’ve encountered people like Conroy before. He likely won’t put in the effort required to bring you back. You’re safe here. I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“By alerting them to where I am. Can’t you just forget this poster came? That you ever saw it? Please, Dillon? Please?” Zara felt tears stinging her eyes, but she did her best to blink them away. If Dillon did this, she could never forgive him. She would see it as a betrayal, and that would stand between them forever.

“I don’t have a choice, Zara. I took an oath to uphold the law, and this is part of it. I wish I could pretend I never saw this poster. That you aren’t a runaway.”

“I’m not a runaway. I’m twenty-three years of age. I’m more than old enough to make my own choices.”

Dillon’s gaze narrowed. “Which is why you snuck off when no one was there to stop you, boarded a train dressed as a widow, and no doubt created an untraceable trail for them to follow if they did try to follow you. Do I have that right?”

Zara shrugged, in no mood to answer him or be reasonable. She was angry and hurt, and, quite frankly, scared witless. Maybe she should pack her bags and board the morning train. She could head to California, or venture to Arizona. There were many places she could disappear.

She stood and walked over to stand at one of the windows. Dillon’s footsteps echoed on the floorboards as he moved behind her.

Gently, he turned her around and used his forefinger to tip her chin up, forcing her to look at him.

“I know what you are thinking, Zara. You’re thinking about running. But consider this: you can keep on running, but those posters are everywhere. It’s just a matter of time until someone with no scruples at all decides to claim the reward and turn you in. They might even force you to go with them, hold you captive for a ransom, force themselves upon you. Any number of tragic things could happen. Please, please promise you’ll stay here where I can at least keep an eye on you and keep you safe.”

“Safe?” She scoffed at Dillon and jerked away from him. “If you want to keep me safe, then forget you ever saw that poster. We can burn it right now, and the only two people who would ever know are standing in this room.”

“No, Zara. I won’t lie. I won’t dodge my duty. You shouldn’t ask me to. I have to do this.”

“No! No, you don’t. You don’t!”

Unable to contain her emotion, Zara turned and raced into her quarters, locking the door behind her. She collapsed on her bed and buried her face in her pillow to muffle her cries of despair.

If even Dillon, whom she'd considered her friend, refused to listen to her, what hope did she have?

## Chapter Eight



“Since it is such a beautiful autumn day, I think we should spend the last hour of class outside.” Zara smiled at her students, knowing her words would stir their excitement. “We’re going to see how many pretty leaves we can collect. Everyone, line up, and we’ll start our quest to find leaves.”

The students quickly formed an orderly line and marched outside. Zara breathed deeply of the comforting pine scent of the air, now tinged with a spicy hint of autumn.

Although it was only the first week of October, the nights were already growing cold and frosty, causing the leaves to change colors.

The afternoons, though, were lovely and golden, full of sunshine and gorgeous skies.

In fact, as she walked outside, holding the hands of the two youngest pupils, Zara couldn’t think when she’d seen a prettier afternoon.

Since the day Dillon had come to her, telling her he had to reply to the missing person poster, she hadn’t spoken to him. Hadn’t sat near him at church. Hadn’t even looked at him when she’d passed by him on the street. Cora Lee, Anne, and Henley had all offered support without pressing her for details. So many times, she’d wanted to tell them the truth, but she was mortified by the entire situation. Humiliated by the fact that her father thought so little of her that he’d schemed to give her to Conroy to clear debts he would soon run right back up again. What would he give to the detestable man then? The



house Zara's mother had turned into a welcoming home? His own life in servitude?

Weeks had passed with no word from Dillon. She assumed that if he'd received a response from anyone in Davenport, he'd have surely let her know.

As it was, she'd stopped looking over her shoulder, relieved she hadn't followed her first instinct to run. Dillon was right. She was safest here in Holiday, in the town that had welcomed her into the friendly fold of the community. If she were off on her own again, there was no telling what might happen if someone realized there was a reward out for news of her or her delivery back to Conroy.

Even though she was still livid with Dillon for making her whereabouts known, she knew he'd stay true to his promise. If anything happened, he would protect her. It wasn't in him to not keep his word. To stand idly by when someone needed his help.

Dillon was a good man. To a fault, if his need to follow the law to the letter was any indication. She shouldn't blame him for doing his duty, even if that was exactly what she'd done.

"Miss Wynn! Look at my pretty leaf!" A sweet six-year-old girl held up a large maple leaf.

"Oh, Clara, it's lovely!" Zara admired the leaf then handed it back to the child. "Be sure you keep that one."

"I will!" Clara raced off to join her friends as they ran through the trees at the edge of town.

"Please stay where I can see you, class. No one go farther than the edge of the woods," Zara called after the students. Two of the older boys slowed their fast pace to race into the trees and waited for some of the younger students to catch up with them.

Zara helped the two little ones with her find a few leaves. After each of her pupils had gathered a handful, they sat in a circle in the sunshine in the schoolyard and sang silly songs. Zara gave each child a sugar cookie she'd baked with raisins

for the eyes, nose, and mouth, then dismissed them a few minutes early. It truly was too nice a day to keep them inside. She waved as they raced for home, then went back inside to grade assignments and clean the blackboards.

It would be a simple matter to have one of the students clean the blackboards for her, but she liked to do it. The task gave her time to think.

She finished grading assignments and stood to clean the blackboard behind her desk. With a cloth in hand, she heard a board creak behind her and turned, then felt the strongest urge to bolt.

Conroy stood next to her father, both of them looking triumphant.

“Well, well. Look who we found, Arthur. Your runaway girl.” Conroy walked down the center aisle and around her desk. He grabbed her chin in his hand in a painfully tight grasp that made her want to wince, but she boldly met his gaze.

No longer would she cower in front of him or her father. She was her own person. Neither of them had any right to dictate how she lived her life. She jerked her head back, pulling out of his clasp, then circled the desk, trying to keep something between her and the horrid bully.

“Get your things packed. We’re leaving on the train in thirty minutes,” Conroy commanded. “Stupid backwater town. Couldn’t you have found somewhere closer to hide? Your father and I have traveled for days to get here.”

“No one asked you to come. I certainly don’t want you here.” Zara continued edging away from Conroy, trying to make it to the door. If she could escape, she could run to the church or the jail. Pastor Ryan or Dillon would help her. Of that, there was no question.

“Is that any way to speak to the man you are going to marry?” Conroy asked with a sly grin that made him look like a snake about to strike its prey.

“Stop, Conroy. Stop with the lies. We all know you have no intention of marrying me. That is a lie you and Father

concocted to get me to go with you. Isn't it?" Zara glanced at her father as his face turned a mottled shade of red, a sure sign she'd caught him in his deception. "I won't go with you, and nothing you can say will convince me to get on the train today, tomorrow, or ever. I'm staying here."

"Well, how about this?" Conroy pulled a pistol from his coat pocket and aimed at Arthur Wynn. "If you refuse to fulfill your father's contract to me, I will kill him. Does that inspire you to go pack your bag and walk with us to the depot?"

"It might not inspire her to leave, but it sure makes me want to put a bullet between your beady eyes."

Zara jerked at the sound of Dillon's voice. He'd walked so silently into the schoolhouse, none of them had realized he was even there.

"And who might you be, cowpuncher?" Conroy asked, shifting so the pistol pointed at Dillon instead of Zara's father.

"Marshal Durant. That means I can throw both of you in jail and leave you there until the circuit judge happens along to hear your trial. He's due to come in February, I think."

"What?" Arthur asked, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "No. That won't be necessary. We'll just take Zara and never return. How about that, Marshal? Will that suffice?"

"Nope. It won't. As far as I'm concerned, both of you are threatening a law-abiding citizen for no reason. I can add threatening to do harm to an officer of the law to the charges if you like. And if you think you can shoot me and run off with Zara, you'll need to reconsider that. I have a witness listening to everything in the teacher's quarters and another standing just outside the door."

Conroy looked furious, but he slowly lowered his gun and set it on top of the nearest desk.

"Mind picking that up for me, Zara?" Dillon asked, tipping his head in the direction of Conroy's weapon.

Zara snatched it up, then hurried to the doorway. She moved behind Dillon, where neither her father nor Conroy

could reach her.

“Here’s the choice I’m offering to both of you, Mr. Devoe and Mr. Wynn. You can leave right now, get on the train, and never come back. Never bother Zara again. Or I can haul you to jail for any number of things. Way I see it, Mr. Devoe, Mr. Wynn here is the one who is in breach of contract, or whatever you want to call it. It’s illegal to barter humans, in case you weren’t aware of the fact, so in light of that, are you sure you want to continue to press this matter? If so, I’ll have to arrest you, then have an investigation launched into all your enterprises to see what other illegal matters might turn up. It could take months and months of your business being shut down while every square inch of every transaction you’ve ever conducted is examined beneath a magnifying glass.”

Zara cast a glance at Conroy and saw he’d gone from appearing arrogant and confident to a sickly hue of green.

“If you’d rather not endure that, you can run back to the depot, get on the train, and forget you ever heard of Zara Wynn and the town of Holiday. If I so much as even hear a rumor that you or one of your representatives are bothering Miss Wynn, I will shoot first and ask questions later. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly.” Conroy inched toward the open door with his hands held up in surrender. He glowered at Zara’s father as he passed him. “I’ll deal with you later, Arthur.”

“Not if you don’t want those investigators on your doorstep tomorrow morning.”

Conroy looked defeated as he raced outside. Zara watched as he did, in fact, run in the direction of the depot.

“As for you, Mr. Wynn, I’d strongly advise you to cut your losses and find somewhere else to live. Conroy likely won’t leave matters alone if you continue to frequent his establishment. But you are not welcome in Holiday. I’ll expect you to be on the morning train out of here.”

“I’ll leave with Zara in the morning.”

“No!” Zara shouted in unison with Dillon.

“What part of she’s staying here wasn’t clear to you?” Dillon asked, taking a step closer to Zara’s father as he holstered his weapon. “She isn’t leaving with you. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.”

“She will if she knows what’s good for her,” Arthur shouted, then took a swing at Dillon.

Zara screamed a warning, but Dillon had already ducked, grabbed her father’s arm, and swung him around, pushing him down until his cheek was pressed against the top of a desk.

Pastor Ryan burst into the room from the teacher’s quarters, looking worried.

“About time you got in here,” Dillon grouched as the pastor tossed him a pair of handcuffs. Dillon fastened them around Zara’s father’s wrists, then grabbed the back of his suit jacket and pulled him upright. “I think a little time in a jail cell might do you some good, Mr. Wynn.”

“No! You have no right to do this. None. She’s my daughter! I can do as I wish! I’ll have your badge over this, you dolt!”

As Dillon pushed Arthur past her, Zara could smell the alcohol on her father’s breath. Maybe if Dillon locked him up long enough to dry out, he’d come to his senses.

Appalled by the words that spilled out of her father’s mouth as Dillon pushed him along, Zara covered her face and wanted to disappear. She jumped when a hand settled on her shoulder, having forgotten the pastor was there to witness the tragic condition of her once loving, devoted father.

“Miss Wynn, I am sorry for what transpired here today. It had to be both frightening and disheartening. If you want to talk about anything, my door is always open, and anything you say will be held in the strictest confidence.”

“Thank you, Pastor Ryan.” Zara managed to give the man a weak smile.

John took a step back from her. “Don’t let the deplorable actions of anyone dim your hope or your faith, Zara. What your father tried to do is terrible, and Mr. Devoe seems like a

soul in desperate need of saving. I'll continue to keep you in my prayers.”

Zara nodded before tears began to fall and quietly retreated to the teacher's quarters, where she could cry in private. How could a man she'd once trusted, the man who'd raised her, clothed her, fed her—even doted on her during her childhood—have turned into such a heartless cad?

The answer to that question was one she'd likely never know.

## Chapter Nine



“You need to eat,” Dillon said, looking through the bars into the cell where Arthur Wynn sat on his bunk, pushing his food around with a fork instead of eating it.

The man had been as sick as a dog the first four days he’d been in the jail as the alcohol worked its way out of his system. Doctor Holt had come every day to check on him, but there wasn’t much he could do.

Evan encouraged Dillon to keep the man drinking water as much as possible and just let nature run its course.

Now that Zara’s father was on the other side of the sickness, he’d lost enough weight that his clothes hung on him, and his face looked gaunt. Dillon wasn’t sure how much of that was from the illness and how much came from remorse.

Sober, Arthur Wynn was a far different man than the one who had tried to assault him a week ago. This man was quiet, introspective. Pastor Ryan had spoken with him at length the past two days.

Dillon chose to leave them in privacy, but he knew enough to understand Arthur deeply regretted how he’d treated Zara. He was ashamed of what he’d done and feared what Conroy would do to him if he dared return to Davenport.

He could have set some of Arthur’s anxiety to rest, but now didn’t seem like the right time. Not when Dillon had things he needed to say to Zara first.

When one of the older boys had run into his office and told him two men were in the schoolhouse yelling at the teacher, Dillon had grabbed a pair of handcuffs and raced out the door. The boy had explained as they'd run that he'd forgotten his lunch pail and gone back to retrieve it when he'd heard the loud voices from inside the school.

Dillon had tossed the handcuffs to the lad, and asked him to fetch Pastor Ryan. He'd given the boy instructions to tell the pastor to wait in the teacher's quarters.

From his hidden position just outside the door, Dillon had listened to Conroy and Arthur threaten Zara, but she hadn't cowered in fear. He'd been so proud of her, while simultaneously being terrified one of the men would hurt her.

It was in that moment he realized that if anything happened to Zara, he wouldn't be able to stand it. How could his life go on without her in it? It had been hard enough being in town with her, knowing she wouldn't talk to him, but at least he could see her, watch over her.

But if anything happened to her, he would never, ever forgive himself.

Although he had been duty bound to report her whereabouts, he'd known it would only be a matter of time until Conroy, or one of his representatives arrived to drag Zara back to Iowa. It had taken longer than he'd anticipated for them to come, but he'd been ready. He'd already had a speech all planned to convince Conroy to return to Davenport, where he'd been arrested the moment he stepped off the train.

Zara hadn't been the first human he'd agreed to accept as a barter. In fact, he had numerous illegal enterprises that were under investigation as well as two charges for unsolved murders. Conroy would spend the rest of his life rotting in jail, and Zara would never have to worry about him bothering her again.

However, her father was a different matter. Whether the man returned to Davenport and resumed his plummet into despair or he turned his life around and chose to start over elsewhere, Dillon planned to make it clear he was not



welcome in Holiday. His main concern was ensuring Arthur would never bring more harm, shame, or hurt to Zara.

Before he chased Arthur out of town, though, he felt the need to have a conversation with the man regarding Zara's future. A future Dillon fully intended to spend with her.

"Look, Arthur," Dillon said, moving back and leaning against the wall opposite of the jail cell. "You need to eat and get your strength back if you want me to let you go."

Arthur looked up at him, surprise clear in his expression. "Let me go? I thought you planned to keep me in here until I die or a judge comes to town."

Dillon shook his head. "I'm already tired of cleaning up after you and toting meals in here. Besides, you snore like a hibernating bear, and it's disturbing my beauty rest."

Despite himself, Arthur chuckled. "Well, we can't have that, can we?" He picked up his biscuit and took a bite, then another.

"I can't let you stay in town, Arthur. Not until you get yourself together. You hurt Zara deeply. If I allowed you to stay in Holiday now, I have no doubt you'd hurt her again. What you need is to figure out where and how you can start over. I just can't let that be here. Do you understand?"

Arthur nodded and broke off a piece of cheese. "I do understand and agree. I've been a terrible father, a terrible person since her mother died. She was my everything and with her gone, I just ... fell apart. It was wrong to involve Zara in my problems, and I can hardly fathom what I agreed to do. What kind of monster have I turned into?"

"The kind that can be redeemed if he chooses. I'm pretty sure Pastor Ryan has said the same thing during his visits with you."

Arthur nodded and took another bite of cheese. "He did. Said he'd pray for me. I know I've been lost, so incredibly lost, but I want to find my way back. To earn Zara's forgiveness."

Dillon shook his head. “Forgiveness isn’t earned. It’s a gift that is given freely. If you asked, Zara has probably already done that. What you’ll have to earn is her trust, and that isn’t going to be a simple task. First, you have to get your life together and prove to her you are worthy of her trust.”

“I know. I want to.” Arthur sighed. “I will.”

“Good. In the meantime, I was hoping ... well, here’s the thing about your daughter. I love her. I’ve loved her from the first moment I saw her, and I will love her until my last breath. I promise to love her every day of my life. While it might seem odd for me to be having this conversation with you, I would like your blessing to marry her. Someday, when you are once again a part of her life, I want this settled between us. Zara is my everything, and I would do anything for her. May I have your blessing to marry your daughter, sir?”

Arthur’s eyes welled with tears, and he nodded his head. “Of course, son. Of course you may. You’re one of the finest young fellows I’ve ever encountered. The past week, you’ve treated me with respect and given me as much of my dignity as possible considering the circumstances. You’re a good man, Marshal, and I can’t think of anyone better to ask for Zara’s hand. You have my blessing, but the one you’ll have to convince is Zara.”

Dillon grinned. “I know, but I have a plan. Do you happen to know or remember her favorite flower?”

“All of them. Zara has always loved flowers of every shape, size, and color. She used to pick big bouquets and bring them in the house whenever the flowers were in bloom. She and my wife both loved flowers.”

“Thank you, Arthur. You finish your lunch, then I’ll need to leave to take care of a few things.”

Arthur stood and set his tray of food on the bed, then walked over to the door of the cell. He stuck his right hand through the bars.

Dillon reached out and shook it.

“Thank you for being a good man and loving my little girl, Marshal.”

“That’s my pleasure.”

Three hours later, Dillon leaned against the rail at the bottom of the schoolhouse steps as children trailed outside. He ruffled the hair of the boy who’d come to fetch him last week, then started up the steps once all the children had left.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching Zara sit at the desk, looking over assignments her students had turned in. Every parent he’d spoken with had only good things to say about her, about how much their children enjoyed being taught by her, how much the students were learning. It seemed the school board had finally found the perfect teacher for their community.

And Dillon had found the perfect woman for him.

He just needed to let Zara know that.

“Come on. You need to see something besides these same four walls,” Dillon said, stepping into the schoolroom and making his presence known. Zara had hardly been outside of the school since the day her father and Conroy had attempted to abduct her.

He intended to get her out of the building and her thoughts for a while if she would cooperate.

Zara glanced up at him, then back at the assignments she graded, shaking her head. “No, thank you. I have work to do here.”

Dillon walked around the desk, pulled out her chair, and lifted her to her feet.

“See here, Marshal Durant! I do not appreciate being manhandled. I’ll thank you to remember that.”

Dillon held his hands out to his sides. “I wasn’t manhandling you. I was merely helping you up. There are those in town who think you might have accidentally glued your bustle to the chair, but now I can officially say that isn’t the case. They will all be so relieved.”

Zara blew out an exasperated breath, but he caught the barest hint of a smile on her lips. “You’re worse than a twelve-year-old, Marshal.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, winking at her. “Come on, Zara. Just for a little while. You need some fresh air. I promise you’ll enjoy it.” He held a hand out to her, and she reluctantly took it.

Dillon didn’t give her time to grab her hat and gloves or fuss with her hair. He led her out of the school and closed the door behind him, making sure it was locked, then guided her to the buggy he’d borrowed from R.C.

It wasn’t until she was seated and he’d started on the road out of town that she seemed to relax and release her tension.

“It’s so lovely out,” she said, taking in the scenery around them. “Is it always so pretty here in the autumn?”

“This is the prettiest one I can remember,” he said, looking directly at her.

She turned her head away, but not before he caught sight of her pleased smile.

They rode along in silence for a few moments, then Zara looked at him again. “Where are we going?”

“Nan’s place. I thought you might like to see her.”

Zara’s expression brightened, and she sat a little straighter. He could see excitement in her eyes as she glanced at him. “I adore Nan. Thank you for thinking of a visit to see her.”

“Of course. I go out to check on her every few days. In trade for chopping wood and milking the cow, she feeds me dinner. I think I get the better end of the bargain.”

Zara scooted a little closer. “I think it’s wonderful that she is like a grandmother to you. It’s too bad she and her husband never had children of their own.”

“She would have made a wonderful mother,” Dillon said as he guided the horse off the road and onto the lane to Nan’s house.

As they rounded a bend, Zara sucked in a gasp. “Oh, the flowers!”

Nan’s yard looked almost as lovely in the fall as it did in the spring with a plethora of colorful blooms.

“I figure you and Nan can talk about flowers while I see to milking the cow.”

Zara almost jumped out of the buggy as soon as it stopped moving at the edge of the yard.

Nan opened the front door and waved to her, motioning her into the house. Dillon had ridden out earlier and discussed his plans with Nan. She’d keep Zara busy while he saw to the few chores, then they’d eat dinner together.

Dillon hurried through milking Maudie and feeding her and the horse. He carried in enough wood to fill the box in the kitchen and the one by the fireplace in the parlor to overflowing.

He washed his hands and returned to the kitchen, where Zara and Nan were laughing together as they dished up food.

Nan carried much of the conversation as they ate. Dillon had grown nervous, wondering what Zara would say to him if he actually worked up the courage to bare his heart to her. He had to. If he didn’t, he’d spend a lifetime pining for her, and that wasn’t something he wanted or was willing to do.

As soon as they finished the meal, Nan suggested they go for a walk so Dillon could show Zara the flowers. Before Zara could argue or find some reason to linger inside, he cupped her elbow and guided her out the back door.

She tossed him an annoyed glance as she marched down the back porch steps but then took his hand and tugged him over to a crimson blooming bush he thought was a chrysanthemum.

“Isn’t it incredible?” she asked, bending down to sniff the blooms before she wandered over to a grouping of flowers the color of peaches.

Dillon followed her, carrying the stems she picked. When she stopped and turned to him with a happy smile, he felt his heart flip over in his chest.

“Thank you, Dillon, for bringing me here. It’s such a peaceful, lovely place.”

“You’re welcome.” Dillon set the bouquet he’d been holding on a stump Nan used for a seat when she was weeding, then took both of Zara’s hands in his. “There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

“What might that be, Marshal?” she asked, her expression open and curious.

“Love,” he blurted, and watched her eyes widen in surprise.

“Love?” she repeated.

“Zara, I’m not a poet. I’m not a tender man. I’ve seen too many things in my years as a lawman to be anything but brittle around the edges, but you make me want to be gentle and spout ridiculous sonnets.” Dillon sighed, feeling like an idiot. John had advised him to speak from his heart, so he decided to follow his friend’s advice. “Zara Wynn, from the moment I first set eyes on you trying to pick the lock on the teacher’s quarters, I’ve loved you. You’re beautiful and sweet, caring and kind. You’re also strong and determined and full of pluck. Marriage to me won’t be easy, but it will be worthwhile because I promise to love you every day of my life. To shelter and protect you. To encourage and support you. To wrap you in my love and hold you in my heart for as much time as the good Lord sees fit to give us. Would you consider allowing me to marry you, Zara? I love you with all my heart, and I always will.”

“You love me?” she asked, appearing stunned by his admission. “You love me and want to marry me?”

“Yes. I know it’s rather sudden, but one thing I realized last week when I thought Conroy might accidentally shoot you was that I can’t waste my time living in my dreams. I want to

make those dreams come true. My dreams, Zara, are of you. I deeply, truly, and faithfully love you.”

Tears spilled from her eyes, but she nodded her head before launching herself into his arms. “I love you so much, Dillon. I’m sorry I’ve ignored you. I was just so ashamed of what happened and still so angry that you let Conroy and Father know where I was.”

“I did do that, but I felt it was the best way to keep you safe. I assumed Conroy, or one of his thugs, would eventually show up to try to force you to return to Davenport. What you don’t know is that I’ve been in contact with the authorities there, and Conroy is in jail, where he’ll remain for the rest of his life. You weren’t the first girl he accepted to cancel a debt. He has any number of illegal enterprises that were all brought to light when investigators began looking into his affairs. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you any of this earlier, but I didn’t want you to feel like bait while we waited for Conroy to appear.”

“You should have told me, but I’ll forgive you if you think you could get around to finally kissing me. I’ve been wanting you to since the day you shaved the scruff off your face.”

Dillon smirked, settled his hands on her waist, and drew her to him. Slowly, he lowered his head to hers and let his lips brush over hers in a featherlight touch.

Much to his surprise, Zara bracketed his face with her hands and kissed him with such ardent yearning that he lifted her off her feet and returned her hunger and urgency with more passion than he’d dreamed they might share.

“May I ask one more favor?” Zara whispered as she lifted her head from his.

“Anything, my love. Ask me anything.”

“May we marry here, among the flowers, this coming Saturday afternoon?”

Dillon pulled back far enough to stare into her face to see if she was serious. “You will really marry me? This Saturday? Right here?”

Zara nodded. "I will if you kiss me again."

"With pleasure," Dillon said, lowering her until their lips connected in another heated exchange.

He spun her around in a circle and let out a whoop that probably carried all the way back into town.

"Did she say yes?" Nan called from the house.

"Yes!" he and Zara both answered, then laughed together.

Together was going to be such a wonderful experience. One they'd have a lifetime to enjoy.



## Chapter Ten



“You take my breath away,” Dillon whispered in Zara’s ear as they strolled through Nan’s garden Saturday afternoon.

Thankfully, the day had dawned without a cloud in the sky and the sun came out to chase away autumn’s chill.

Pastor Ryan had performed their wedding ceremony beneath a bower of flowers Cora Lee and Henley had helped decorate.

Zara had cried happy tears when her father had asked for her forgiveness and if she would allow him the honor of giving her away.

She’d joyfully walked down an aisle strewn with colorful autumn leaves to Dillon, who looked so handsome in a new brown coat with a crisp white shirt. He’d worn a tie for the duration of the ceremony, then he’d taken it off and stuffed it in his pocket.

Cora Lee and Henley had insisted on taking Zara to Baker City Friday morning, declaring a special closure day at school, while they helped her choose a wedding dress at a delightful shop owned by a friendly woman named Maggie. Zara had fallen in love with a blue gown that had rows of flounces on the skirt and fit her like it had been made with her in mind.

Their wedding was even better than anything she might have dreamed.

Now, as their friends and loved ones enjoyed cake and punch served on Nan’s porch, Dillon led Zara along a path

through the flowers. He'd already picked enough flowers that she had a bouquet in each hand, but she loved it. Loved this place. Loved this man who was now her husband.

She'd felt so betrayed by Dillon when he'd shared her whereabouts, but true to his word, he'd protected her. Zara hadn't known how to go to him and express her feelings of gratitude and remorse, so she'd remained hidden at school, unwilling to share what was in her heart.

For a few terrifying moments, she'd thought Conroy might actually shoot Dillon and if that had happened, she was certain she would never have recovered from the loss. She loved Dillon. Loved him so deeply and completely, she couldn't imagine her future without him in it.

As he'd wisely said, marriage wouldn't be easy because they were both determined, sometimes stubborn, and often opinionated, but it would be worth it.

"Are you enjoying your day, Mrs. Durant?" Dillon asked as she stopped to admire a vibrant yellow bloom.

"I am enjoying it, Mr. Durant." She grinned at him over her shoulder. "Or must I refer to you as Marshal?"

"You can call me whatever you like as long as you keep smiling at me like that."

Zara cast him another flirty smile, then continued their stroll. She felt Dillon touch her hair and before she could stop him, he'd pulled out nearly every hairpin.

"Dillon! What will everyone think when they see me with my hair all amiss?"

He offered her a boyish grin. "That I'm one very happy husband."

She laughed and playfully swatted him with one of the bouquets she held. Suddenly, she recalled a dream she'd had of being in a place full of flowers, a bouquet in each hand, while she wore a blue dress. She'd been dreaming of her wedding day and hadn't even known it.

Honestly, she still felt like it was all part of a dream. A wonderful dream of love that had come true.

Dillon slid a hand around her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her tenderly. “I love you so much, Zara, and I always will. I hope you don’t mind living in the teacher’s quarters for now until we can start building a house.”

“Or we can always accept Nan’s offer to move here. She’s lonesome, Dillon, and I think she would love the company.”

“I’ll think about it. Maybe in the spring, after we’ve had a few months to enjoy being with one another. I can think of worse things than spending a cold winter night cozied up to you,” he said, nuzzling her neck, then burying his hands in her hair. “You are a rare beauty, Zara, inside and out. I am honored more than words can say that you agreed to marry me. I’ll do my best to be a good husband to you.”

“And I’ll do all I can to be a good wife, starting now, by suggesting you kiss me again.”

Dillon swept her into his arms, making her laugh before she lost herself in his kiss.

This was what she’d longed for and dreamed of. A love of her own with a man who would always treasure her heart. Sometimes, the very best dreams did come true.

*Keep reading for a preview of Pastor John Ryan’s story!*

# Soft Honey Cookies Recipe

*If you want to make soft, delicious honey cookies like Nan served Dillon, give these a try!*

## **Soft Honey Cookies**

### Ingredients:

2  $\frac{1}{3}$  cups all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons cornstarch

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon baking soda

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon baking powder

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon cinnamon

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter, cold, cut into eight pieces

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup honey

$\frac{2}{3}$  cup granulated sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup brown sugar, packed

2 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup granulated sugar to roll cookies in prior to baking

### Directions:

Whisk the flour, cornstarch, baking soda, baking powder, salt and cinnamon together and then set aside.

Cream together the butter, sugars, and honey, mixing on medium speed until light and fluffy, about three minutes.

Add in the eggs and vanilla, then mix in dry ingredients until incorporated. (Be careful not to overmix.)

Chill cookie dough in the fridge for at least an hour (or overnight). This step helps keep the cookies from spreading.

Line baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Scoop approximately two tablespoons of cookie dough at a time and roll into balls. Roll in granulated sugar until coated.

Place on baking sheet and bake cookies for about eight minutes, until dough is just set but not yet starting to brown.

Remove from oven and allow cookies to cool ten minutes on the baking sheet, then transfer to a wire rack.

Makes about 24 cookies.

## Author's Note

When I first sat down to write [\*Valentine Bride\*](#), I never dreamed that one story would be the beginning of all my Holiday books.

I hope you enjoyed *Dreams of Love*, the first book in the new Holiday Dreams series.

If you haven't read any of the other Holiday stories, start with [\*Holiday Hope\*](#), which is the story of Jace and Cora Lee Coleman and the beginning of Holiday. After that check out [\*Henley\*](#), and [\*Love on Target\*](#).

When I wrote *Holiday Hope*, there were several secondary characters I wanted to give their own story, like Marshal Durant, Pastor John Ryan, and Evan Holt. You can read about Evan's journey to romance in *Henley*. I'm so pleased to give Marshal Durant his happily ever after in this story. Be sure you read about Pastor John Ryan falling in love in *Dreams with Faith*, and Rowan Reed finding a woman to love in *Dreams of Courage*.

There were just a few things I wanted to mention that inspired things in this book.

I love quilts. Just love them. I have several, some made by my grandmothers and my mom, as well as Captain Cavedweller's grandma. We have a few quilts made by my auntie's mother-in-law, and some we received as wedding gifts. They are all so very precious to me, and they each include a story. When Zara recognized the pattern of Dillon's quilt, that was just a little nod to my loved ones who are no longer here who added color and beauty to my life through their quilts stitched with love.

Huckleberries grow in the mountains near where we live. I've never gone out hunting them, but I am so happy when we find someone selling them. They are so delicious baked into a pie or especially in a sauce over cheesecake. Yum! In fact, one Christmas when CC's parents were staying with us for the holiday, I made a huckleberry cheesecake for dessert on Christmas Eve. I'd planned a big elaborate breakfast for

Christmas morning, but all they wanted was to eat more huckleberry cheesecake! Just remembering that gives me the biggest smile.

The sugar cookies Zara bakes for her students that have raisins for faces are inspired by a memory my dad shared with me. When he was a little boy, his mother told him not to ask his grandma for cookies, so he'd stand by the cookie jar and stare at it, but not ask for one. Of course, his grandmother gave him a cookie! He said she made sugar cookies that had raisins for the mouth and nose, and it was a memory he treasured—those cookies, and his time with his grandmother.

I am so grateful to you for reading this story and hope you'll enjoy the others in the series. Be sure to check out *Dreams with Faith!*

Special thanks to Katrina, Allison, Alice, Linda, and my Hopeless Romantics team for helping make this story the best it can be!

Keep dreaming big dreams!

*Shanna*

# Preview Dreams with Faith

*January 1886*

*Altoona, Pennsylvania*

“Is there a particular reason you’re trying to stir up a heap of trouble, little sister?”

Keeva Holt glanced over her shoulder at her brother. She might have stuck her tongue out at Davin, but his firm grip on the back of her coat was the only thing keeping her from toppling out of the sleigh her father drove down the curving road to the church. She leaned a little farther out, draped her purple scarf over the corner post of Mr. Lubbock’s fence, then plopped back into her seat.

As she adjusted her skirts, she cast another look at Davin. “I’m not stirring up trouble, just offering an incentive.”

“An incentive!” Davin nearly shouted, drawing the gazes of both their parents. “It’s not an incentive, Keeva. You might as well race up to a bee’s nest and give it a good kick while you’re at it.”

“I might if it weren’t snowing!” Keeva tamped down the urge to kick Davin. Just because he was older, he seemed to think that entitled him to boss her around. She’d be eighteen at the end of March, and then she’d be all grown up, beyond anyone telling her what to do.

“What’s going on back there?” their mother asked. Eira Holt was a force to be reckoned with on a good day, and Keeva had no desire to stir her mother’s wrath.

“Nothing, Mam. Davin’s just excited about getting to church this morning.” Keeva offered her mother a sweet smile.

Eira narrowed her gaze and pinned Keeva a suspicious glare, then noticed the scarf fluttering on the fence post behind them. “Why is your scarf on Mr. Lubbock’s fence? What tomfoolery is afoot?”

“Well, Mam, I simply—”



Before she could offer an explanation, Davin cut in. “She told Oliver and Matthew the one to claim her scarf on the way to church could sit by her today.”

“She what?” Eira asked in a loud voice that drew the gazes of fellow travelers heading for the church. Lowering her voice, she glowered at Keeva, disapproval practically radiating from her entire being. “Explain, daughter.”

Keeva scrambled for a way to convey the details of the challenge she’d issued to Oliver James and Matthew Baumann yesterday at Mariah Bainbridge’s skating party. Both boys had made it clear they wanted to court her, and she hadn’t yet decided which one she liked better. In the meantime, it had been grand fun to see them battle each other for her affection.

“Yesterday, at Mariah’s party, this saucy imp challenged Ollie and Matthew to see who would earn the right to sit beside her during this morning’s church service, as if she was a queen bestowing some grand honor.” Davin blurted before Keeva could clap a hand over his mouth to silence him. He tossed a teasing grin her way. “For reasons no one will ever know, both of them seem to be quite daffy over Keeva. I keep telling Ollie he could do much better, like Mariah, for instance, but he seems quite taken with this one.”

When Davin reached out to tug on a tendril of hair she’d positioned just so by her ear, she slapped his hand, earning an icy scowl from her mother.

“Maureen Keeva Holt! How could you do such a thing?” her mother asked with a dark scowl. “You know Oliver and Matthew get along like two wild cats with their tails knotted together. You might as well have poured kerosene on a blazing fire.”

Her mother was only partially correct. Oliver and Matthew had been friends since Matthew’s family had moved to town three years ago. The two boys had developed a competitive streak with one another that was wider than the river and three times as deep, causing them to constantly be at odds over one thing or another, but it was mostly all in good nature. Their latest competition had been over Keeva.

“Oh, it’s fine, Mam. I just—”

“Sometimes, Keeva, it would behoove you to listen more than you speak.” Her father looked back at her, and Keeva snapped her mouth shut. Not often did Hiram Holt speak his mind, but when he did, every member of their family listened.

Eira gave Keeva one more censorious glare before she spun around on the seat, whispered something to Hiram, then shook her head, as though she couldn’t believe Keeva was her child.

Keeva loved both of her parents, but the past year, she felt as though she and her mother spent most of their time together ramming their heads and tempers together in a most unpleasant manner. Nothing Keeva did pleased her mother. She was sure her mother was constantly watching her, waiting to find some miniscule thing to criticize.

Like challenging two dashing young men to claim a seat beside her for the church service this morning.

The truth was, Keeva hadn’t told Oliver and Matthew how to compete. She’d merely stated the fellow who arrived at church with her scarf could sit beside her during the service.

Despite the cold and snow, the church yard was full of sleighs and wagons when they arrived. Families hurried inside out of the frosty temperatures, but Keeva lingered a moment, pretending to search for a lost glove.

“Stop dawdling,” Davin chided, pulling the supposedly lost glove from her coat pocket.

She felt like smacking him across the back of his head with it but instead quietly pulled it on.

Hiram got out and reached up, settling his hands on Eira’s waist, then lifted her down to the ground. Davin stepped out of the sleigh and turned to give Keeva a hand when the sounds of thundering hoofbeats carried in the still winter air. Although it was still snowing, the flakes were light, falling gently as they gave the earth a fresh coating of white, like the fine sugar her mother used to top her decadent apple cake.

Keeva turned in the sleigh and watched as Oliver and Matthew raced each other down the hill. Both young men were tossing taunts to each other and laughing uproariously as they charged along the road, intent on claiming Keeva's scarf.

People who hadn't yet gone into the church stopped to watch the two mischievous young men.

"Those foolish idiots are going to break their necks," Eira said, then grabbed onto Hiram's arm. "Can't you put a stop to it, Hiram?"

"Not at the moment, love. Not until those two make it down the hill." Hiram shook his head and settled a protective arm around his wife, then gave Keeva a look thick with condemnation. "We will be having a conversation this afternoon, daughter."

Keeva dreaded what her father might say but shoved it from her mind. She turned her attention back to her two suitors. They were handsome, charming, funny, and sweet. Outwardly, they were matched in height and width, but they looked nothing alike. Matthew's hair was as pale as whipped butter, while Oliver's shimmered as black as a raven's wing.

Yet, they both had captured Keeva's interest. She'd been unable to choose one over the other, caring for them differently, but equally. The girls at school had been quite jealous of her beaux, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that they adored her and she felt great affection toward them.

When they weren't fighting or jostling to gain her attention, she had a marvelous time with Oliver and Matthew.

Like today.

Excitement coursed through her as she watched the two energetic, athletic young men race their horses down the hill. A few girls hurried closer to the fence around the church yard to watch. Davin climbed back into the sleigh so he could get a better view of the race.

Oliver pulled ahead on his big black horse, then Matthew edged past him on his speckled roan. Back and forth they went while everyone watched, waiting to see who would win.

Suddenly, Keeva wished she'd heeded Davin's warnings yesterday that she was causing trouble. While she didn't mind being the center of Oliver and Matthew's attention, she had no desire for half the church congregation to discover that the reason the two young men rode so recklessly down the hill was because of her.

"I told you," Davin said under his breath as he leaned near her ear, as though he could read her thoughts.

Keeva might have swatted at him and batted his words away, but at that precise moment, Oliver's horse hit a patch of ice.

As though she witnessed it in slow-moving motion, Keeva saw the horse lose its battle to find his footing. One minute the animal was upright, the next it had flipped over on top of Oliver.

"Ollie! No!" Keeva yelled, but her voice was lost in the numerous screams piercing the air.

Matthew drew his horse to a stop, hopped off, and ran over to Oliver. He fell to his knees beside the prone figure of his friend.

The horse lunged to its feet, but before it could run off, Davin jumped out of the sleigh and dashed to catch the reins.

Oliver's head rested at an unnatural angle, his body crumpled and still. Too still. When Matthew released an unearthly, desperate howl of despair, Keeva knew the worst had happened, and it was all her fault.

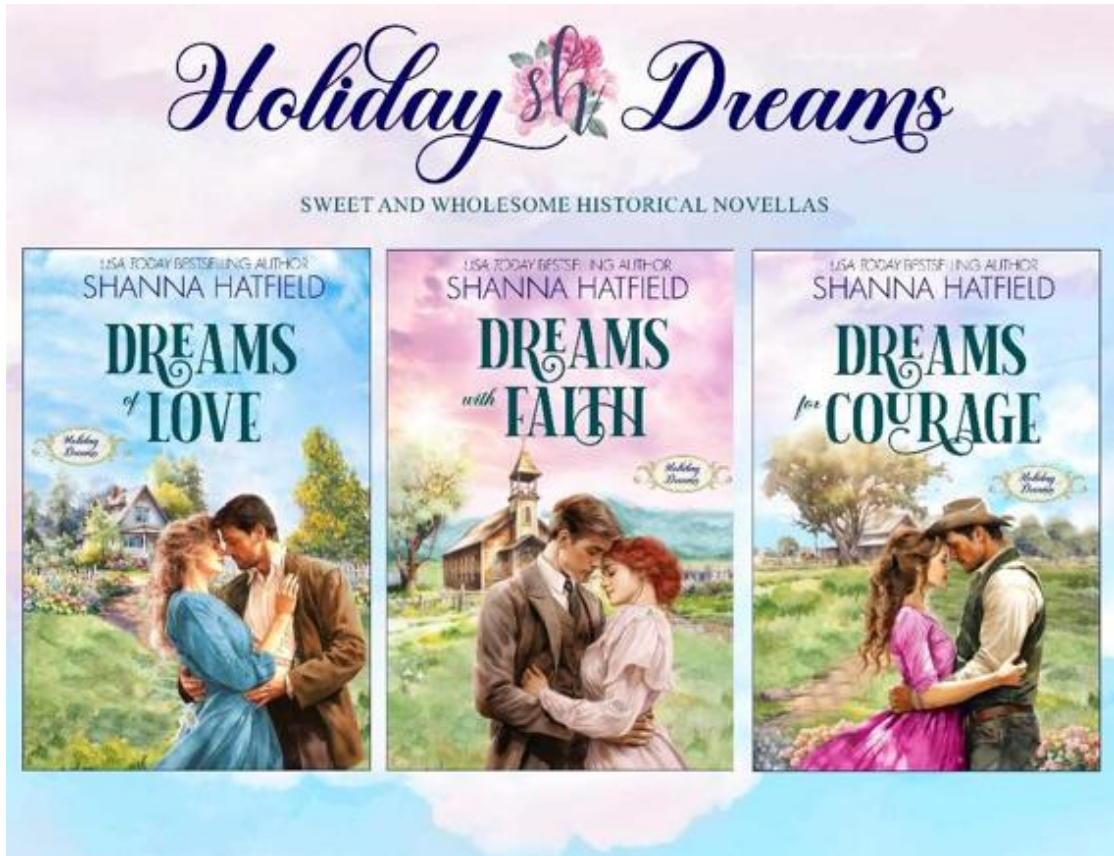
"No, Ollie. No," she whispered. Everything around her blurred, then faded into darkness.

[Available on Amazon](#)

# Thank You

Thank you for reading [\*Dreams of Love\*](#).

If you enjoyed the story, I'd be so grateful if you would leave a review. It's a great way for readers to discover new-to-them authors!



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# About the Author



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*USA Today* bestselling author Shanna Hatfield is a farm girl who loves to write. Her sweet historical and contemporary romances are filled with sarcasm, humor, hope, and hunky heroes.

When Shanna isn't dreaming up unforgettable characters, twisting plots, or covertly seeking dark, decadent chocolate, she hangs out with her beloved husband, Captain Cavedweller, at their home in the Pacific Northwest.

Shanna loves to hear from readers.

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