

Priscilla
HIRES A
HUSBAND

LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

PRISCILLA HIRES A HUSBAND

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ISBN: 978-1-60374-721-9
eBook ISBN: 978-1-60374-722-6
Printed in the United States of America
© 1996, 2013 by Loree Lough

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (Pending)

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Prologue

Baltimore, Maryland
June 1868

*P*riscilla! Priscilla, wait!"

Priscilla turned toward the excited voice and saw Molly running toward her, waving an envelope in the air. Molly had always been a good friend, but she had a tendency to make mountains of molehills—surprising for a girl who stood head and shoulders taller than most men in town.

Priscilla had been on duty since midnight and, after a twelve-hour shift in the children's ward, she was exhausted. What she needed was a long, hot bath, after which she'd sip a glass of cool lemonade out on her tiny balcony.

She slumped onto the hard wooden bench near the hospital entrance. *What imagined emergency is it this time, Molly?* she wanted to ask. But despite her many trials and tribulations, Molly

meant well. Priscilla took a deep breath and patted the empty space beside her.

The moment Molly sat down, she grabbed Priscilla's hand. "While you were assisting Doctor Peterson, a man delivered a letter for you. Said he's been trying to contact you for weeks." She rolled her pale blue eyes. "And what a funny little man! All dressed up like a bridegroom, but with the manners of a billy goat." Molly giggled and drew a finger across her upper lip. "He had this skinny little mustache and—"

Priscilla summoned her last ounce of patience. "That letter?" she asked, nodding toward the envelope in Molly's hand. If she didn't get her friend back on track, there was no telling how long Molly might take to hand it over.

"Oh. Yes. Of course." She gave it to Priscilla. "Silly me, going on and on about the man instead of getting to the point." Giggling again, she added, "He said to tell you to come to his office as soon as possible. Said it's urgent." Molly leaned forward and whispered, "And that the contents of that envelope will most likely affect your whole entire future!" She tapped it for emphasis.

Priscilla frowned and stared at the fanciful script on the envelope's front. *Priscilla Hanson*, it said, nothing more. She didn't recognize the name printed in the upper left corner of the heavy linen stock. "Horace Miller, Attorney at Law," she read aloud, "Baltimore, Maryland." Tucking in one corner of her mouth, she said, "I wonder what an attorney wants with me?"

Molly thumped the heel of her hand against her forehead. "You'll never find out if you don't open it!"

Priscilla glanced again at the long, flat envelope in her hands.

"Open it, before I die of curiosity!" Molly said, squeezing her hand.

Priscilla's heart thudded and blood pounded in her ears. *It's bad news*, she told herself. *What else could it be, delivered this way?* Whatever news the envelope hid, she didn't relish the idea of

reacting to it here, near the crowded hospital entry. Despite the busy hallway, she suddenly felt very alone. "I'll read it, just as soon as I get home."

Immediately, she rose to leave, but just as quickly found herself unable to move, for Molly had gathered her into a fierce hug. "Oh, Priscilla, please don't shut me out. You're always shutting people out. If it's bad news, you're going to need a friend. And I'm your friend. You know that, don't you?"

Priscilla's voice was muffled by Molly's ample bosom when she said, "Of course you're my friend—my closest, dearest friend. And I appreciate your concern," Priscilla added, stepping back, "but I have a feeling that this is something I have to do by myself." At the disappointed expression that turned down the corners of Molly's mouth, Priscilla mustered a smile. "If I need you, I'll come straight to your house." She might have ruffled the big redhead's mop of curls...if she'd been able to reach up that high. "I promise."

"Really?" her friend asked, eyes narrowed warily.

"Really." She stuffed the envelope into her nurse's bag and shoved open the heavy wooden door without looking back.

Her rooms, directly above Mable's Fine Ladies' Dresses, were three short city blocks from the hospital, and Priscilla walked the distance in half her usual time. She was always careful not to clatter up the narrow steps that hugged the store's back wall, just as careful never to slam the door or stomp about on the wide-planked floors, but she'd committed all three transgressions that hot, summer afternoon.

Tossing her navy, red-lined nurse's cape onto the sofa, Priscilla dropped onto the seat of the slat-backed rocker that Grampa Ned crafted for her. Running her tongue over her lips, she took a deep, trembling breath, and then, with quaking fingers, broke the envelope's seal.

The attorney's cover letter explained that, at his client's request, he was forwarding to Priscilla the last will and testament of Briannah Hanson.

The moment she unfolded the one-page document, Priscilla recognized her other grandmother's familiar feminine script. *Leave it to Grandmother to pen it herself rather than trust the lawyer to do it for her*, Priscilla thought, grimacing.

Her father's mother swooped into Priscilla's life several times a year, wrapped in thick furs or feather boas, bedecked with rubies and diamonds and smelling of lilacs or roses...and always reminding Priscilla of a huge bird of prey, for once she descended, the whole house pulsed with unease.

For as long as Priscilla could remember, Briannah had been a formidable woman, a force to be reckoned with. Priscilla supposed that being required to run Morning Choice Plantation at such an early age produced the domineering, dictatorial attitude that defined her.

At eighteen, Briannah had inherited a sizeable fortune from her father; by twenty-two, she had more than tripled her financial worth. During those years, she'd earned a reputation for being as shrewd and savvy as any Boston banker.

By twenty-five, deciding it was time to create the heirs to whom she would will the farm, she set her sights on Maurice Hanson, the only man in Baltimore whose holdings equaled her own. "It was the only way I could be sure," Priscilla once overheard her grandmother say, "that he wasn't marrying me for my money!"

All-business by nature, Briannah demanded the best...not only of herself but of everyone around her as well. She did not tolerate errors and abhorred laziness. Etiquette, she always insisted, was part and parcel of civilized society; dressing properly for every occasion, for example, was expected procedure.

She loved to surround herself with important people, and so she became involved with well-known actors, writers, artists, and politicians. She loved luxuries, like imported chocolates, the latest rage of confectioners, pastel silks, and dainty laces. Her greatest love, though, were books. Priscilla couldn't remember ever seeing

her grandmother without a big, leather-bound volume nearby. And oh, how the old woman loved to visit the countries she read about in those books.

One such trip had cost Briannah her life.

She'd barely begun a world cruise when a nor'easter overturned the huge vessel, leaving no survivors. Priscilla had only learned of the tragedy at sea several weeks ago, when the cruise line officials released its list of passengers.

A month before leaving on her holiday, in what would be her last letter to Priscilla, Briannah outlined the plan for her granddaughter's future:

Upon my return, I shall enroll you in Boston's finest young women's finishing school, despite your advanced age. After all, it is never too late to polish one's rough edges. Following your graduation, you will be introduced to only the most suitable young gentlemen, after which you will choose the one who will become your husband. I have but two regrets in life, Priscilla: That I had but one son, and that he had but one daughter. I have seen the world. Now, in my old age, I want to be surrounded by family. That is why I have come up with this plan, for it is you, Priscilla, who will make that happen for me.

That her grandmother actually believed she could dictate another person's future infuriated Priscilla. A bit of that anger surfaced as she looked at the letter in her hands. This document, no doubt, was more of the same. *She probably wants me to step into her shoes and become a spiteful, bossy old woman who's feared and hated by all*, Priscilla thought. *Well, as appealing as that might sound to you, Grandmother, she thought, I won't do it! I'll live my life as I see fit, and that's that!*

Purposefully, she pursed her lips and continued reading the most recent delivery:

April 2, 1865

I, Briannah Marie McKenzie Hanson, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath all of my possessions to my only living heir, Priscilla Marie Hanson, under the stipulation that, before she takes possession of my estate, Priscilla takes a husband. If she refuses to comply with my request—

It was all Priscilla could do to keep from crumpling the will into a tight ball and tossing it into the fireplace. *Request!* Priscilla fumed. *Comply with my order, is more like it!* She forced herself to read the remainder of the brief legal paper:

If she refuses to comply with my request, all of my holdings will become the property of the Center for the Arts.

How typically selfish of her to leave everything to strangers if she doesn't get her own way! Why, she could have done something useful with all those riches, like leaving her money to the Children's Home, where youngsters orphaned by the Civil War live, instead of leaving it to a bunch of whining, snooty, blue bloods!

Her attention was drawn to the bottom of the page, where Briannah added a postscript:

You were a stubborn and willful child, Priscilla, so I must presume you have grown into a stubborn and willful woman. Do not misunderstand: I do not see these as negative traits, for I, too, have always been stubborn and willful. These qualities will see you through many trials and tribulations. I am not as evil and dictatorial as you no doubt believe. I'm doing this for your own good, because, believe it or not, I love you more than life itself.

And it was signed simply, *Grandmother.*

Priscilla folded the will and slid it back into the textured white envelope. With quiet deliberation, she crossed the room and pulled open the narrow drawer in the center of her desk.

Priscilla longed to marry, but she knew that living a solitary life would be far more fulfilling; years of watching her parents battle over what Briannah wanted had taught her that much. And Priscilla had fared quite well without a love interest. Putting all her energies and attentions into her work commanded the respect and admiration of doctors and nurses throughout the hospital. In another year, she would be in charge of an entire east wing, and the salary from that would make it possible for her to purchase a little house of her own. What did she need a husband for!

She stared at the official-looking paper, evidence that, even from the grave, Briannah needed to rule. *You dictated every detail of my father's life and my mother's, too*, she thought, scowling, *but you will not dictate mine!*

As if to underscore her decision, Priscilla stuffed the envelope into her desk drawer and slammed it, hard.

One

*A*nd I hear-tell that Miz Briannah is gonna give the whole kit an' caboodle to that fancy art school if Prissy don't take a husband," Edward said.

"You must be joking."

But something told him the man had been dead serious.

Caleb had heard numerous rumors about Briannah Hanson, none of them good. As a Christian, he believed he should ignore gossip and treat the woman well, so on the few occasions he'd met her face to face, Caleb showed nothing but respect for the elderly blustery blond. Besides, if he hadn't learned anything else in his twenty-nine years, he'd learned that humans judged one another far more harshly than the good Lord would. The tall, wiry ex-slave shook his head and grinned. "Miz Briannah made herself a reputation for a lot of things in this town," he

said, winking one gray-green eye, "but making jokes wasn't one of 'em."

Caleb's frown intensified, "But to force her own granddaughter to marry in order to claim what's rightfully hers...." It was his turn to shake his head.

Edward's smile vanished. "If I were a betting man—and I ain't, of course—I'd bet Prissy is mad as a wet hen right about now."

"Can't say as I blame her."

"She won't do what Miz Briannah said in the will. I've known her since she was a baby. That's one girl who ain't gonna do nothing but what she wants to do!" Edward punctuated his comment with a hearty laugh. "Why, I remember one Christmas when she came to the farm with her mama and her daddy, Miz Briannah told her she was gonna own the whole place one day...iffen she married the right man." Edward snickered softly, then added, "She looked the old woman straight in the eye and said, polite as you please, 'Grandmother, if I marry, rest assured it will be the right man. And if I marry, it will be for love and nothing else.' Then she smiled real sweet and tacked on, 'But I thank you for trying to protect me, all the same.'" Edward bent over and slapped his bony knee. "Why, she couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old at the time."

Caleb smiled. He had met Briannah's granddaughter only a time or two, but once was more than enough to burn an indelible memory of her into his brain. The top of her curly blond head barely reached his shoulder, and she had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. What's more, her big eyes were fringed by the longest, thickest lashes he'd ever seen.

Once, he'd been in the livery stable when she came in to give big John a bottle of liniment for his lumbago. "Have Esther rub some of this into your lower back," she instructed in that musical voice of hers, "morning and night, and your muscles will loosen up in no time!" She wagged a maternal digit under John's nose before

releasing the medication. "And you'll do well to stop pretending God gave you the strength of a work horse," she warned. "No more lifting things twice your weight!" With that, she sent the smithy a merry wink and was on her way.

Yes, he could easily picture her stamping one tiny foot and refusing to marry for money.

"Well, I'd best be on my way," Edward was saying.

Caleb forced his mind back to the present. "Good to see you," he said. "Give Caroline my best."

"Oh, that reminds me," Edward said as he removed his plaid cap and scratched his nappy head, "Caroline wanted me to tell you there's a big pot of your favorite stew bubbling on the stove. Supper's at four."

In the eight years since Laura's death, Caleb had more or less kept to himself, but the patient persistence of friends like Edward and Caroline Rose made it impossible for him to remain an entirely solitary soul. He hadn't had a decent meal in weeks, and could almost taste Caroline's melt-in-your-mouth beef stew and flaky biscuits.

Winking, Edward climbed onto the wagon seat and chick-chicked the horses into action. "Caroline said if you brought your work shirts along, she'd wash 'em whilst we eat."

She'd been doing that, too, as often as she could arrange it. Since Laura's death, Caleb had sent regular prayers of thanks heavenward, for God had blessed him with good and caring friends. "See you at four, then," he said, tipping an imaginary hat.

"Don't be late. You know how Caroline lives by the clock." With that, Edward's wagon rolled forward and quickly disappeared among the horses, carriages, and buckboards that filled the busy street.

Caleb, hands in his trousers pockets, walked toward the Freeland general store, where by now Gus would have loaded supplies onto his creaking old wagon. How many more times would

he be able to pay cash for what he needed, Caleb wondered, as he had today? Twice, his careful calculations told him, at best. And then he'd have to start selling the livestock to buy necessities.

"And gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field," he silently recited Isaiah 16:10, *"and in the vineyards there shall be no singing..."* Admittedly, Caleb had little to sing about, for there wasn't a plentiful field on all of Dorseys' Search.

If the weather had been even the slightest bit cooperative, he would be planning a harvest now, instead of worrying where he'd get the money to buy next year's seed. *"...Lift up thy face...yea, thou shalt be steadfast, and shalt not fear."* Though Caleb's faith had always been strong and sure, it was a tall order to look across those dusty, blistered fields and not be afraid, because there would be no corn or pasture grass to harvest this year, that much was certain.

That morning, he'd carried his tin mug of hot, black coffee onto the front porch and stood, leaning against the rail, surveying his fields. He should have seen supple green plants ruffling in the early summer breeze. Instead, he saw brown stalks and dry, yellow leaves. He could almost hear them crackling, crisp and dry. Even the weeds ceased trying to survive in the dusty fields, parched by the long drought.

Caleb's farm sat on high ground, too flat to terrace and too sloped to plow without topsoil erosion. It was fertile enough soil, but sandy, and poorly suited to hold moisture through a long drought.

The Hanson farm was another matter...pure bottom land with loamy soil to hug the moisture from the nearby Gunpowder River that formed the east border of Morning Choice. In addition, his friend Edward, the plantation's overseer, had access to funds that allowed him to build intricate irrigation systems that provided supplemental water to the greedy plants. A passerby's eyes could drink in acre upon acre of strong, verdant plant life. Amazing, and humbling, too, that although Caleb's farm formed

the Morning Choice west border, that same passerby's eyes would see no evidence of thriving growth there, for Caleb did not have access to the nourishing Gunpowder liquid so plentiful across the boundary line.

The rich get richer, he thought dismally, pulling himself up into the wagon.

But Briannah Hanson, proprietress of Morning Choice, would reap no benefits, financial or otherwise, from this year's crops, for she had perished with hundreds of fellow passengers when her cruise ship went down in the North Atlantic.

Caleb thought of Priscilla, Briannah's lovely granddaughter, who would own the grand old place...if she agreed to bend to the old woman's written demands. If Edward was right, the young woman would turn her back on Morning Choice rather than do as Briannah's will dictated, and the farm would fall into the hands of strangers instead of blood kin.

What I'd give to have a farm like that! Caleb thought, grinning sardonically. He took the reins from where he'd wrapped them around the brake stick and whistled. "Let's go, Bessie," he said to the big black mare.

As he headed for Dorseys' Search, Caleb was reminded that he wasn't the only farmer suffering from this drought. As he passed the Wilson place, he saw row after row of dead cornstalks. And the Thompsons' milo had long ago withered and died. The only productive land for miles was Morning Choice. *Now, if I had control of those fields...*

If I had control of... Caleb's heart pounded as an idea began forming in his mind.

He'd been a farmer since...why, he was still in diapers when he first toddled into the fields! All his life, it seemed, he'd carried the good earth under his fingernails. He was proud to work side by side with his father, to turn that dirt into potatoes, beans, corn, and wheat. And when Jacob's poor health kept him confined to his bed, Caleb

was just as proud to turn the soil and furrow the rows alone. Long after his father's death, Caleb was still out-producing his neighbors. They worked hard, each and every one of them, but he worked harder, longer, smarter; with his marginal land, he didn't have a choice. And at his mother's passing, Dorseys' Search had become his own.

If I had control of those fields, he repeated, there'd be no doubt about how I'd pay for next season's seeds.

If Briannah had left the land to Priscilla straight out, with no strings attached, he could simply suggest that she hire him to run the place. Edward had been doing an outstanding job, Lord knew, but he was getting old and tired and deserved to work a little less hard in his golden years. Unfortunately, Briannah hadn't left the land to Priscilla straight out. Instead, she'd put stipulations and restrictions on the young woman and, if Edward's prediction was right, she'd stubbornly let the place go to seed before bending to her willful grandmother's demands.

There was another way, though, and if he phrased it just right, perhaps it would make as much sense to Priscilla as it did to him. Caleb, inspired by the prospect of saving Dorseys' Search, slapped the reins against Bessie's rump. "C'mon, girl," he said excitedly, "let's get on home. We have important plans to make."



Priscilla couldn't believe her ears. Had Molly really said that another message was delivered as she tended patients? Yes, there was a note on the small desk outside the children's ward and, yes, it had her name written on it. A quick glance at the ornate clock on the wall told her she would be off duty in half an hour. Priscilla tucked the envelope into her apron pocket. *I'll read it at home, in private, she told herself, because there's no telling what this message is all about...or who it's from.*

She stopped at the bakery on her way home and bought a loaf of day-old bread. Stopped at the grocer's, too, and purchased

cheese and two ripe tomatoes. She hated store-bought food. But what else could she do? Her two rooms above the dress shop did not have a cook stove, the icebox was barely large enough for a plate of meat, and the tiny cupboard had space for eating utensils for only one.

No matter. In a year or so, when she would be promoted and given a dandy raise in salary, Priscilla would have a kitchen, complete with a huge stove and an icebox the size of a coffin. That seemed a suitable size, for when she had a home of her own, Priscilla wanted an icebox large enough to hold a whole dead cow! She would have a yard, too, with a garden out back where she could grow her own vegetables. Until then, these daily visits to the neighborhood stores would simply have to do.

The air was hot above the dress shop. A sticky breeze lifted the filmy curtains at the windows, doing little more than stirring the sticky summer air. Priscilla hung her nurse's cape on the hook behind her front door and pumped herself a panful of water. She'd started the day in a starched white uniform, but now it bagged like a flour sack. Priscilla removed it, wrapped herself in a lightweight cotton kimono, and put her uniform into the tub of water. She would wash it later, after a refreshing sponge bath and light meal.

But first...first she'd read that note.

As she snuggled into the big rocker, Priscilla broke the envelope's seal. She didn't recognize the strong and masculine handwriting, and she glanced to the bottom of the page to see who had signed the brief message. *Caleb Dorsey*, the bold black scrawl said.

Priscilla had met him on several occasions. Well, she hadn't actually met him...*saw* him was more accurate. Once, when they'd both been invited to the same wedding, and once when she delivered liniment to big John at the livery stable. She couldn't imagine why the strapping, dark-haired farmer would write to her.

She took a deep breath and read his words:

My dear Miss Hanson,

I would very much like to discuss a matter of great importance with you. If you would be so kind as to meet me at Dora's this afternoon at two, I will outline the plan that is sure to help us both out of dire straits.

Priscilla re-read the manly signature as her father's mantle clock chimed twelve times. If she decided to meet Mister Dorsey at two, she'd need a bath and a change of clothes. Then, grinning, she rephrased her thought. *If* she would meet him? Of course she would! How else would she learn from what "dire straits" he intended to rescue them both!



Priscilla recognized Caleb the moment she entered the restaurant. He was sitting at a table for two near the door. He rose when he saw her, smiled, and beckoned her to join him. Priscilla couldn't help but notice that he wore creased black trousers and a black string tie at the collar of his starched white shirt. She smiled a bit, for it seemed he'd gone to as much trouble to dress for their meeting as she had. She wondered if he looked at her and knew that she'd stood in front of her chifferobe nearly thirty minutes before deciding to wear the pale blue dress, or that she'd carefully piled her thick curls atop her head and fastened them with a white eyelet ribbon that matched the collar and cuffs of her feminine gown.

"I'm glad you could make it," he said, pulling out a chair for her.

As she sat, Priscilla smiled up at him. "How could I not? Your note definitely piqued my curiosity!"

Caleb laughed softly and sat across from her. "You know, I don't believe we've ever been properly introduced." He extended his hand. "Caleb Dorsey. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Priscilla Hanson," she replied and blushed when he kissed her hand.

Dora stopped beside their table and eyed them warily. "You two a couple now, are you?"

Caleb's eyes never left Priscilla's as he answered the restaurant owner's question. "No. We are not a couple, Dora. At least...not yet."

Priscilla's flush deepened. "We are not a couple," she echoed, emphasizing the third word as she focused on the café owner's wide, round face.

Dora planted a fist on each chubby hip, "Well, what can I get the pair of you this fine afternoon?"

"We'll have two lemonades," Caleb said, "Ice cold, please, and two slices of your famous, deep-dish apple pie. With a slab of cheese on top of each." He paused and, with a quirk of his left brow, added, "Is that all right with you, Miss Hanson?"

"That'll be fine," she answered, licking her lips. He had the longest, darkest lashes she had ever seen on a man. "Just fine."

"Back in a jiffy," Dora said, then left them alone.

Caleb took a deep breath. "I thought she'd never leave!" Putting both elbows on the table, he leaned forward. "You look lovely today, Miss Hanson."

His compliment inspired another blush. "Please, call me Priscilla," she said. "Miss Hanson sounds...sounds so..."

"Stuffy?"

She liked his smile and the crinkles that formed at the corners of his dark eyes. She liked his voice, too, and the way his muscular arms filled out the sleeves of his shirt. "Stuffy. Yes," she murmured, gathering her dignity as she sat up straighter. "Besides, Priscilla is, well, plain friendlier."

"Edward calls you Prissy."

She grinned, "Yes, but no one else had better! He's been like a father to me since my own pa passed on."

From the suddenly serious expression that clouded his face, he had no doubt heard about the accident that took her parents' lives nearly eight years ago. He no doubt had heard, too, that between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, she'd lived in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania, with her mother's ma and pa. And if he'd learned these things from Caroline, Caleb also no doubt knew that after completing her nurse's training and acquiring the job at the hospital, Priscilla had left Pennsylvania and rented two rooms above the dress shop down on Sycamore Street.

"Edward tells me your grandmother's will has an interesting stipulation in it."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. "Edward? But how could he possibly know...?" How like her grandmother to share such personal information. But then, in all fairness, it did make sense that Edward understand the stipulations of Briannah's will; as overseer of Morning Choice, his future, too, would be directly impacted by Priscilla's decision.

Her father's father, Maurice Hanson, had passed on long before Priscilla was born and, since Briannah spent most of her time traipsing around the globe, Priscilla had adopted the Roses as her family even before her own parents died. Edward taught her how to make her very own fishing pole; taught her to use it, too. And without Caroline's patient instruction, Priscilla would never have learned to knit or sew or crochet. At Edward's knee, she'd memorized most of the songs she sang at the New Freedom Church, and thanks to Caroline, she could cook like a fancy French chef...when a proper stove was available.

But what was it Caleb had said about her Grandmother Hanson's will? She sighed. "You might call it 'interesting.' I call it humiliating that she felt it necessary to build a stipulation into her will that guaranteed her plain and ordinary granddaughter would not become an old maid."

Caleb's dark eyes glimmered with a caring that made no sense to her, given the short time he'd known her. "If anyone ought to feel shame," he said simply, "it's Briannah, not you."

Priscilla thought she could look into those huge brown eyes for days and never get bored. She took another deep breath, then heard herself exhale dreamily...and quickly caught herself up short. *Why, you're no better than Molly,* she scolded herself, *getting all sidetracked and forgetting the reason you're here. But...why had Caleb summoned her to Dora's?* she wondered. Priscilla leaned forward, too.

"So tell me, Mister Dorsey..."

"Please, call me Caleb. It's—"

"Less stuffy," they said simultaneously, and laughed together.

Priscilla waited as Dora delivered their drinks and pie. When the woman was gone, she lifted her fork and daintily speared a chunk of cinnamon apple. "So tell me, Caleb, exactly what 'dire straits' will your plan save us from?" Popping the fruit into her mouth, Priscilla closed her eyes and savored the delicious flavor. Only Caroline could make pie like that; could Dora have stolen her friend's recipe?

There you go again, behaving like Molly! Priscilla forced her attention back to the matter at hand.

"But before you tell me how your plan will get us out of dire straits, perhaps you'll be so kind as to tell me what dire straits we're both in."

Chuckling softly, Caleb took a swallow of his lemonade. After releasing a long, satisfied "Ahhh," he leaned back and slumped in the chair, then pocketed his hands. "Well, it's like this. The drought has all but ruined me. Last year, a potato blight cost me half the money I might've made from Dorseys' Search. Year before that, we had too much rain and things drowned." Shaking his head, Caleb frowned. "I've just about run out of patience." He met her eyes. "And I've plumb run out of money."

She studied the handsome face before her. His brows were drawn together, making him look even more serious than his carefully chosen words made him sound. His cheeks flamed with shame that, for the third year in a row, he hadn't been able to make a go of his once-productive farm.

Priscilla had heard plenty about Caleb Dorsey. She knew that his young wife died nearly eight years earlier...a few months before her own parents died. Shortly before her sixteenth birthday, her mother told her the sad story of Caleb and his pretty wife....

After her death, Caleb fought in the Civil War. Wounded at the battle of Gettysburg back in 1863, he was sent home. His recovery was slow, and by the time he'd recovered enough to return to the troops, the War had ended. The years of neglect had taken their toll on his farm, and the land was exhausted.

"I'm very sorry to hear of your misfortunes," she told Caleb, aware that the genuineness of her meaning could never be conveyed with mere words.

His frown intensified. "Didn't come here looking for pity."

His cold, matter-of-fact tone startled her. "Then perhaps you'll be so kind as to tell me what you *are* looking for." Priscilla nodded toward the clock on the wall across the room. "It's quarter past two; I have errands to run and—"

He held up both hands in mock surrender. "Hold on there, now," he said, sitting upright again. "Don't get your neck hairs a-bristling. I apologize for my tone. And for wasting your time, as well. I just thought it best to get to the point of this meeting after we'd finished." With a wave of his hand, he indicated their plates.

She'd all but forgotten that a generous wedge of apple pie sat before each of them on the white-clothed table. Priscilla made a solemn vow never to poke fun—even in her own mind—at Molly again, for three times since arriving at Dora's, she had allowed herself to be sidetracked and distracted by this disarming, charming man. To hide her nervousness, she lifted the lemonade glass to

her lips and took a long, slow sip. "I do believe," she said, putting it down, "that Dora has somehow gotten hold of Caroline's pie recipe."

"You know, I was sitting here thinking the very same thing," he agreed, slapping his thigh. He paused, stabbed a slice of apple, and stuck it into his mouth. "So tell me. What's it like, being a nurse? Doesn't the sight of all that blood make you want to vomit?"

A giggle popped from her mouth. Feigning shock at his remark, Priscilla said, "Caleb. Really?" And then, because she'd grown up around farmers and knew they meant no harm when they spoke so frankly about things like birth and death and everything that came in between, she added, "There's not really all that much blood involved. Mostly, I change dressings and see to patients' comfort."

"Like a mama for hire."

She never thought of it quite that way before. "You could say that. Yes, I suppose what I do is rather motherly, at that."

As the pie slowly disappeared, he continued to coax information from her. "What inspired you to become a nurse?"

"I had a kitten once, when I was a small girl. A little black thing with white paws. It wandered far from the house one day and got tangled up with a wild dog." She closed her eyes. Even all these years later, memory of it was painful. "I'd never seen so much blood nor heard a more pitiful sound. But I was helpless, utterly helpless to save its life." She lifted her chin to say, "I decided then and there to learn whatever I could to prevent a thing like that from ever happening again."

Priscilla absently shoved the last bit of apple around on her plate with the side of her fork, then met his eyes. "It seems our pie has all but vanished, Caleb. Now, about those dire straits...?"

Both corners of his mouth turned down and the sparkle in his dark eyes dimmed, making Priscilla believe, for the first time since reading his note, that the two of them actually did face something quite dreadful.

"Well, it's like this," he said again, "I'm going to lose Dorseys' Search if I don't find a way to make good on my loan down at the bank." He'd practiced and practiced what he would say, and telling her that he'd borrowed money to buy this year's seeds wasn't in the script. What he wanted to say was right there, banging around inside his head but, for the life of him, Caleb couldn't get the words past his lips. He'd given the matter a lot of thought, plenty of prayer. *It's a good idea*, he reminded himself. *It's the only way out, for either of us.*

He watched her, sitting there so ladylike, hands folded primly on top of the table, blinking those long-lashed pale eyes at him as her delicately arched brows drew together in confusion. *You're scaring her with your hemming and hawing. Just spit it out, and be done with it.* "Your grandmother's will says she'll leave Morning Choice to some fancy arts colony if you don't do things her way."

Fury flashed in those bright blue eyes and one blond curl bobbed in the center of her forehead when Priscilla nodded glumly. "Yes, that's what it says, all right."

"You don't want to keep grazing your cattle and horses on prime bottom land. We'll let my place go fallow for that. It hasn't been grade-A for crops of late, but it'd be good land for grazing." Almost as an afterthought, he said, "Seems a real shame to let strangers get hold of all that beauty, when you've got a man with dirt in his blood so close at hand."

"Edward? Why, I'd sooner cut off an arm than put him off that farm. But I'll—"

"I was referring to me," Caleb corrected, his voice quiet and deep.

"But...but what would Edward do if you took over?"

"Whatever he had a mind to, that's what. Fishing. Hunting. Why, I expect he'd jump at the chance to tend those fancy posies of his. He's worked hard his whole life long. He deserves—"

"My grandmother's stipulation, if you'll recall," she interrupted, "requires that I marry before Morning Choice can become mine." Lifting her chin, Priscilla huffed, "No doubt she thought I was incapable of running the place without a husband's wise guidance."

"There's not a doubt in my mind that you could oversee the place blindfolded. And with both hands tied behind your back," Caleb said. But what he believed didn't matter. What she believed didn't matter—though it certainly should have. "We can't escape the ugly facts, Priscilla," he began. "If you want to keep the farm in the family, and ensure Edward and Caroline will always have a home, you've got to do as she says, like it or not."

He didn't think he'd ever seen a person's eyes open wider, and he wondered, for a moment, what kept them from falling clean out of her pretty head. And the way her lovely pink lips parted as she began to understand that he meant to propose.

She gasped softly and pressed one dainty hand against her chest. "You can't mean...?"

"I do." He cleared his throat at the sound of those two simple yet permanent words. He set his mouth firm and square. "Priscilla, I think you ought to marry me."