

Lone
Wolf

Lone
Wolf

LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

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

LONE WOLF

Loree Lough
www.loreelough.com

ISBN: 978-1-60374-723-3
eBook ISBN: 978-1-60374-724-0
Printed in the United States of America
© 1999, 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)

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical—including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system—without permission in writing from the publisher. Please direct your inquiries to permissionseditor@whitakerhouse.com.

Prologue

Dodge City, Kansas, 1840

Kent McCoy walked slowly, carefully backward as his attackers advanced. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, hands high in the air. “I never laid a hand on her, I tell you!”

“You’re a liar, boy, just like your daddy,” growled Jed Barlow. Blue eyes narrowed to mere slits, the sheriff’s upper lip curled with disgust.

Without warning, Barlow’s big hand shot out, like a bullet fired from a six-shooter, and he filled it with Kent’s shirt collar. “I’ve seen the girl with my own two eyes,” he steamed, twisting the material tight, “you lowdown, no-good polecat.”

Kent’s stomach churned and his ears grew hot, just thinking about what had been done to her. “I’m powerful sorry to hear that someone has harmed Tiffany,” Kent said, “but I tell you, Sheriff, that ‘someone’ wasn’t me.”

“Then explain how *you* got all cut up and bruised.”

He'd been so distracted by their threats and charges that he'd all but forgotten his aching hands and fingers. Earlier that day, as he'd ridden across a grassy field, his horse stepped into a gopher hole. The trip-up threw Kent from the saddle...and trapped the filly's foreleg. It had taken the better part of an hour to free her, talking calmly, soothingly, as he dug with his bare hands to widen the hole. Then a rabbit skittered past and she'd panicked, pinning Kent's hands between the hard-packed dirt and her well-muscled leg. He'd wriggled free, but her bony shin had left its mark. He tried explaining that to the men, but they weren't buying his story.

"Shut your pie hole," Deputy Thornton commanded. "She says you did it. Why would the girl lie?"

And then it came to him.

Last evening, as he walked her home from the church social, Tiffany had started making plans for their wedding. He tried to reason with her, pointing out how they'd only met a few weeks earlier. "And besides," he tacked on for good measure, "just 'cause everyone else in town thinks eighteen is the age to take a spouse doesn't mean the two of us have to follow like sheep!"

Which made Tiffany madder than a wet hen. She'd ordered him from her mama's porch. "You'll pay for this, Kent McCoy," she shrieked as he hot-footed it down the front walk. "Just you wait and see. *Nobody* humiliates Tiffany LaSalle and gets away with it!"

"He don't have an answer for that," the deputy repeated, smirking.

By now, Kent had run out of floor. Back pressed against the rough-hewn wall, he was careful to keep his hands in the air. "She all but asked me to marry her," he began, "and when I set her straight, she said I'd pay for humiliating—"

"Well, don't you just beat all." The sheriff jammed a hard forefinger into Kent's chest. "Why, I've shot rattlers that weren't as low-down as you, McCoy," he snarled. Then he turned on his heel and stomped toward the door. "Get him out of my sight," he told the deputy.

“Take him on over to the jailhouse, before I beat him worse than he beat that poor li’l gal.”

Barlow glared over his shoulder as Thornton slapped a pair of rusty manacles on Kent’s wrists. “Leave him in the chains after you lock him up,” he added from the doorway. “Let him get a taste of his own medicine.”

Did that mean Tiffany had said he tied her up *and* beat her?

He’d recognized early in life that, since he stood head and shoulders taller than most young’uns in Dodge, it wasn’t fair to rough-house with boys smaller than himself. To use his size against a *girl*? Why the very idea that the lawmen thought him capable of such a thing made his cheeks burn with shame!

Something told Kent, as Thornton half-dragged, half-shoved him through the dusty streets of Dodge City, that he didn’t stand a chance of proving Tiffany a liar. Barlow was her widowed mama’s brother, and Thornton her mama’s cousin. And her grandpa—a district court judge. What chance did a no-account like Kent McCoy, son of the town drunk, have against all of that!

If telling a girl he wasn’t interested in marrying her was a hanging offense, well...

Hanging offense?

A cold chill fingered down his spine, despite the searing noon-day heat. What punishment *would* her family mete out for the young man accused of abusing the delicate Miss Tiffany LaSalle? Time in the Dodge jail? Prison? The gallows?

Deputy Thornton gave him a rough shove into the cell. The iron bars clanged shut, and the jangling keys harmonized eerily with Kent’s gloomy mental song as Thornton searched for the one that would lock Kent up, good and tight. When at last he found it, the key grated in the big lock, causing the hairs on Kent’s neck to bristle.

“Judge gets into town day after tomorrow,” Thornton said, hanging the key ring on a peg. He dropped unceremoniously onto the squeaking seat of the sheriff’s desk chair, propped his boots on

the blotter, and clasped both hands behind his head. Smirking, he added, "'Til the trial, you'll get one meal a day and a mug of coffee...if I'm so inclined." A snicker punctuated his statement.

Whether it was the mocking laughter or the contemptuous glint in the deputy's eyes, Kent didn't know, but he had more than a sneaking suspicion that Thornton would not be so inclined. Furthermore, Kent believed if he stupidly repeated his version of the truth, he might not live long enough to make it to trial.

He looked away from the deputy's cold stare as fear swirled in his gut: He might not live that long, even if he didn't repeat his version of the truth.



The gavel fell with a resounding thump.

"I hereby sentence you to twenty years' hard labor in the Dodge Prison Camp," thundered Judge LaSalle. He grinned evilly, then added, "Ten years...provided your good behavior warrants it."

Kent didn't recall a time in all his eighteen years when his heart had beat this hard. He couldn't help wondering if everyone else in the packed courtroom could hear it, too.

His father walked up behind him, stinking of rot-gut whiskey. "Yer on yer own now, boy," he slurred. "Ain't got no use for a man who'd do such a thing to a defenseless woman. Thought I raised you better than that." And scowling, he stumbled and shuffled out the back door.

He'd been a sorry excuse for a father—hadn't been much of a husband, either—but he was all the family Kent had left. The humiliation of being disowned in the middle of a crowded courtroom didn't hurt near as much as being totally alone in the world.

He heard Tiffany's pompous snort, but Kent refused to look at her. She had made good on her threat by accusing him of beating and raping her; he didn't need to see that his father's last words were like icing on her cake.

Besides, he'd made the mistake of glancing her way right after she took her seat in the front row, smack-dab in the middle of the proceedings, where everyone could see the mess he had allegedly made of her face. When Judge LaSalle called her to the witness stand, she leaned on a mahogany cane, trembling and sniffing and wincing with every limping step.

She'd used a lace-edged hanky to dab at her eyes from time to time as she told her story: After he walked her home from the church social, Kent McCoy tried to sweet-talk her into celebrating their wedding night a little early; and when she refused ("He hadn't even asked for my hand in marriage yet!" she'd sobbed), Kent forced himself on her.

For the first time in his life, Kent wished he wasn't such a loner; if folks knew him better, they'd realize he couldn't have raised a hand to Tiffany. Kent squeezed his eyes shut, and remembered the last time he'd seen a face as battered and bruised as Tiffany's.

He answered the door when the barkeep down at Smitty's Saloon dragged his pa home that cold, rainy night so long ago. "Lester an' Gil said they caught him cheatin' at poker.." was how old Moe explained the contusions and abrasions on Kent's father's unconscious body. It took two full-grown furious drunks to do that kind of damage, and Tiffany looked almost as bad!

Could she really have done this...to herself?

Kent sighed inwardly and shook his head. He'd witnessed enough huffing and puffing, enough pouting and crying to know the answer to that. Not that it made any difference, when a few minutes from now the guard—who'd been standing against the wall clasping thick leg- and wrist-irons—would load him into the steel-barred wagon and deliver him to the prison camp. Once there, he'd turn boulders into dust, maybe for the rest of his days.

He could only hope that someone else had seen the self-satisfied smirk that lifted the corners of Tiffany's swollen, black-and-blue lips...evidence that she hadn't only orchestrated this whole

ordeal; she was pleased with herself for having accomplished what she'd set out to do!

Kent took a long, slow breath as a Scripture came to mind. Before her death, Kent's mother had made him promise never to allow his temper to take control of him, the way it so often took control of his father. He'd been true to his word for every one of the six years since she'd gone on to paradise.

"He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty," Kent recited mentally, eyes closed and head bowed, *"and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."*

Kent wasn't particularly thankful that his mama had made him memorize all those Bible verses when he was a little boy, but now he had a feeling he'd be thanking her a lot in the years to come...

One

Richmond, Virginia, 1850

*A*t twenty-eight, Kent McCoy felt like an old man.

Not physically, for ten years' hard labor had hardened his muscles, broadened his shoulders, thickened his chest. No...it was his heart that had turned old in the Kansas penitentiary.

His mind, too, had aged beyond its years, because—although he'd tried to fight it—bitterness seeped into his head through those thick prison walls. Bitterness borne of the knowledge that he'd spent years behind bars for a crime he did not commit.

It was small comfort to him, but a comfort nonetheless, to recite a verse from Galatians: "*He that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be.*" Kent hoped every word of it was true, for if it was, Tiffany LaSalle would pay dearly for the lies and deception that put him behind bars!

With the exception of his mother, Kent hadn't met a woman yet who didn't use her feminine wiles to abuse the men folk in her life.

Experience had taught him that with the exception of his mother, women were born liars, from Eve right on down to Tiffany LaSalle!

The decision to mistrust females hadn't happened overnight. As the days became weeks and the weeks turned into months, Kent's malevolent thoughts had become his motto: a man is better off living alone, rather than trying to figure out what his woman is up to next. That's why he didn't for the life of him understand the feelings roiling in his gut right now.

"Hello," said the young woman on the wide, covered porch. She wiped her hands on the hem of a white-ruffled apron. "You here about the foreman's job?"

Kent nodded and gripped his rain-soaked hat brim. "Yes'm, I'm—"

"Don't you dare take off that hat!"

The no-nonsense tone gave an edge to her soft, southern drawl... and made him grin a bit. "Beg pardon?"

Smiling, she said "No sense getting your head soaked just to prove you were raised good and proper. And speaking of good manners, I interrupted you just now. You were saying?"

His grin became a smile. "I'm supposed to see a Mister Trevor Nelson. About the foreman's job?"

"He set out at first light to check the fences along the river and won't be back 'til sundown." When she tilted her head, a cascade of auburn hair spilled over one shoulder. "Here's an idea: why don't you take your horse to the barn, get her unsaddled and fed," she nodded toward the barn, "and wait for Trevor inside, out of this downpour."

To this point, he'd figured she must be the cook here at Wildwood Plantation. Now, Kent wasn't so sure, because would the help call the boss by his first name? "Thank you kindly, ma'am, I think I'll take you up on—"

"Ma'am?" she interrupted with a good-natured laugh. "Why, you make me sound like a dotty old crone!" She held out one hand. "Call me Abby."

He had a notion to wipe the trail grit from his palm onto the seat of his trousers, but since he'd been traveling for nearly a month, his pants were likely more dusty than his hand. "Name's McCoy," he said, hesitantly grasping the tiny, offered hand. For such a little thing, he thought, she sure had a firm grip. Kent liked that.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. McCoy."

Sparrows had made a nest in a craggy scrub pine outside his jail cell window; for a plain little bird, the sparrow had a mighty pretty voice, he'd often thought. But not as pretty as this li'l gal's.... He turned her hand loose and grinned. "By the same token, 'Mr. McCoy' was what folks called my daddy. Please. The name's Kent."

The screen door creaked as Abby yanked it open, and Kent made a mental note to oil it. If he got the foreman's job, that is.

"All right then, Kent, when you're through in the barn, come right on in; kitchen's at the far end of the hall."

When the door banged shut behind her, he felt as gray as the day. Frowning, he led his palomino to the barn, a bright-white building that was bigger and grander than any he'd ever seen.

Unsaddled and well-brushed now, Kent's horse nibbled at a mound of hay near its forelegs. "Eat your fill, ole girl," Kent whispered, giving Pally's withers an affectionate pat-pat-pat, "'cause if Mr. Nelson doesn't hire me, there's no tellin' when you'll get your next meal."

As if in agreement, the animal snorted and bobbed her shaggy gold-maned head.

Kent bolted the stall gate, then closed the barn's double doors behind him. Collar up and hat low, he shoved both hands deep into his pockets and made his way back to the manor house.

The plantation—at least, what he'd seen of it so far—was an impressive spread. He'd heard in Richmond day before yesterday that 3,500 acres made up Wildwood. But the men who told him about the job opening hadn't said anything about a barn more fancy than a hotel, or a house that was more a mansion than—

He was about to knock on the door when something stopped him. Leaning closer, he strained his ears. She spoke a dozen words to him, give or take, but he'd have recognized that angelic voice anywhere. Abby was singing—"Amazing Grace," if he wasn't mistaken—and oh, what beautiful music she made!

Not wanting it to stop, Kent opened the door slowly, wincing when it squealed, and stepped quietly inside. He stood stock-still in the dimly lit foyer for a moment, listening past the hollow tick-tocks of the grandfather clock for the sweet sound of her voice. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and smiled.

Being in an enclosed space never set well with him—a condition that had only worsened, thanks to years spent in a cramped prison cell. Right here, right now, he didn't mind being surrounded by four walls at all.

It dawned on him suddenly that, at any moment, someone could walk in here and catch him woolgathering. And how would he explain why he'd been standing there, hat in his hands and both ears aimed at the kitchen like some gap-toothed boy, smitten with his schoolmarm?

Scowling, Kent straightened his spine and stomped down the long narrow hall. He made more noise than necessary, because, much as he hated putting an end to the beautiful music, he hated the idea of startling Abby even more.

She was slicing ham when he reached the kitchen doorway. As it turned out, he needn't have worried about startling her; Abby seemed to have sensed his presence, and the proof was the way her wonderful tune went silent.

"Are you hungry?" she asked without looking up. "I have a slab of ham left over from breakfast and—"

In answer to her question, Kent's stomach growled loudly, inspiring a lilting giggle to spill from her lips. Using the tip of her carving knife as a pointer, she indicated the table. "Have a seat, and maybe I can put a stop to that peculiar noise."

After hanging his hat on a hook just inside the door, Kent pulled out a ladder-back chair and dropped onto its caned seat. His gaze followed her movements around the tidy kitchen, and he couldn't help but notice that she walked with a slight limp.

She put a steaming mug of coffee in front of him and continued about her business with quiet efficiency, cracking a pale-brown hen's egg, then another, into the puddle of butter sputtering in the big black skillet.

He couldn't help but wonder what caused her limp, either.

"I can see that you're too polite to ask," she said matter-of-factly, "so I'm going to tell you..."

He swallowed, hard. She'd had her back to him the whole time; how could she know he'd been staring?

"Tell me what?"

She shot a mischievous grin his way, then gave the ham a poke with a long-handled fork. "I took a nasty fall from an unbroken mare about six years back," she began, sprinkling pepper on the eggs. "Spent a year flat on my back, and another hobbling around on crutches."

In one smooth move, Abby hiked up the front of her skirt, just enough so he could see the gnarled, angry scars that crisscrossed the fair skin above her tiny black boot.

"And now, as you can plainly see, I hobble around just fine without any help at all." She laughed softly, then added, "No need for pity. It isn't nearly as bad as it looks." She dropped the hem back to the floor and playfully wiggled her eyebrows. "Besides, ever since it healed up, I can tell a storm's blowing in even before the weather vane points it out!"

Chuckling, Kent shook his head. Abby was petite and pretty, smart and funny, and seemingly at ease with hard work. Plus, there didn't seem to be a trace of self-pity in her.

She was too good to be true.

Remembering his motto, Kent's smile faded. *If something looks too good to be true, it more than likely is.*

Her soft southern drawl intensified slightly when she said “I apologize.”

“Apologize? For what?”

Bobbing her head left and right, Abby shrugged. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” She scooped the ham and eggs onto a plate, and, sliding the meal in front of him, handed him a fork and a neatly folded napkin. “I just can’t stand havin’ folks feel sorry for me. I’ve found it’s best to tell ’em right up front how I got this limp.” Her hands disappeared into the deep pockets of her apron. “Keeps them from wondering.”

She was smiling, he noted, but there was tension straining at the corners of her mouth. He wondered why. Wondered, too, if she limped because walking was painful, or because the damage to her leg was that severe.

“What happened was an accident, plain and simple,” she stated. “Wasn’t anybody’s fault but my own, so I see no reason to let it get in the way of...of anything.” She lifted her chin a notch. “Now, eat,” she said, grinning, “because there are few things worse-tasting than cold eggs.”

His mama used to set a table like this. Used to season his breakfast this way, and—

“So tell me, Kent McCoy,” she began, sitting across from him, “is that a Texas accent I hear in your voice?”

He speared a bite of ham. Careful what you say; no sense telling more than necessary...not if you want this job.

And he wanted—no, he *needed*—this job.

Shaking his head, Kent answered her question with one word: “Kansas.”

“Kansas City? Wichita?”

“Dodge.”

Eyes wide, Abby gasped. “Where all the gunfighters are from?” She clasped her hands. “How exciting! Heath has dozens of dime novels in his room, and more than one is set in Dodge City.”

Heath?

Abby propped both elbows on the table and rested her chin in a cupped palm. "Been away from Dodge a long time?"

Technically, if he counted the years he was in prison, he was gone from Dodge going on eleven years. "Awhile, I reckon..."

"Any family back home?"

Involuntarily, his eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. "Dodge hasn't been home to me in a long, long time."

In response to his quick retort, her left eyebrow rose slightly. Until that moment, Kent hadn't noticed how thick her lashes were. Hadn't noticed that her eyes were pale green, either. His gaze slid a mite lower. The sight of her lips, full and pink, inspired him to lick his own. Would they feel as soft as they looked?

"Didn't mean to pry," Abby said, interrupting his thoughts. Her cheeks had reddened slightly and she shrugged one shoulder. "It's only fair to warn you—before you talk to Pa about the foreman's job—that I've always been a 'talk first, think later' kind of gal. It's just one of the reasons for this limp of mine." The other shoulder rose a bit. "If you and Pa strike a deal, I want you to feel free to tell me to mind my own business any time you think I'm stepping out of line." And winking, she added on a giggle. "Trust me, you wouldn't be the first person to do that!"

If he was any kind of gentleman, he'd say he was sorry; maybe her questions were a sight more personal than he would have liked, but that was no reason to bite her head off.

"No offense taken," he muttered. "But there's no family, back home or anywhere else."

But wait. Had Abby just called Trevor Nelson *Pa*? Before he could formulate an answer to that question, something akin to compassion warmed her expression.

"Oh, Kent," she sighed, "I'm so sorry." She sandwiched his left hand between hers. "You're all alone?"

Heat had begun to creep into his cheeks when he realized he might have hurt her feelings; now Kent worried what Abby would

think when she got an eyeful of his blood-red ears. Usually, he wore his hair a little longer than need be, so it would hide this sure-fire sign of embarrassment. But, thinking to make a better impression on Trevor Nelson by showing up clean-shaven and well-trimmed, he'd had it cut. Not knowing what else to say, he said, "I've been on my own long enough that it doesn't bother me much anymore."

She patted his hand. "Well, if Pa hires you..." She leaned nearer, looking left and right, as if the two of them were conspirators in some great, secret plot. "...and I have a feeling he will. If he hires you, *we'll* be your family, Pa and Heath and Ma and me."

Kent had just shoved a huge forkful of ham into his mouth, and stopped chewing when she leaned back, looking pleased as punch with her suggestion.

Heath again, he thought, frowning slightly. Her husband? Fiancé? Kent's heart thundered with dread at the thought—though he didn't for the life of him understand why—and he hoped she couldn't hear it over there on her side of the table.

Just then, she glanced at the carriage clock atop the china cupboard. "Goodness gracious sakes alive," she exclaimed, standing, "It's nearly three. I'd better get supper started, or there are going to be some very unhappy farm hands around the dining room table tonight!"

Kent quickly cleaned up his plate as Abby clattered pots and pans and mixing bowls in preparation for the evening meal. "How many hands does your father have?" he asked, sopping the last of the egg yolk with a bite of bread.

"Just the two he was born with, praise God!" She punctuated her little joke with a gale of merry laughter.

Kent shook his head. Man can hardly help but like a li'l gal who laughs at her own jokes, he thought, grinning around the last of his meal.

As if she'd heard his thoughts, she volunteered, "It's because I'm forever saying ridiculous things like that that Heath calls me

'Abbi-silly.'" Her grin diminished some when she added, "And to answer your question, we have six hired hands. 'Course, that's not counting Pa and Heath. And me," she tacked on, almost as an afterthought. Counting on her fingers, she listed them: "There's Zeke and Drew, Adam and Bert, Frank and Carl."

"Why didn't one of them want the foreman's job?"

Abby shook her head. "Because they've all been farming long enough to know the foreman's job is the hardest of all." She shrugged one shoulder. "Guess they decided it wasn't worth the pitiful salary Pa pays!"

She blanched and hung her fingertips on her bottom teeth, as if attempting to stuff her last words back in. "Oh my. I don't mean to say—"

Kent held a hand aloft, cutting off her explanation. "My daddy used to have a saying: 'Three hots and a cot, and money enough to get my boots polished from time to time, and I'm a happy man.'" He smiled. "If the rest of the meals are as good as this one, you'll get no complaints from me, no matter how paltry the pay."

Turning, she pumped water into a stewpot. "Bert's been with us the longest; he's like a grandpa to me." Despite the limp, Abby hoisted the half-filled kettle and crossed the kitchen, setting the pot on the cook stove with a metallic thud. Grinning, one brow high on her forehead, she faced Kent to add "Unlike some people whom I won't mention, I don't mind answering questions."

He met her steady, green-eyed gaze. "But...I only asked one question." *Not even that, technically...*

The instant of silence that followed his statement was broken by Abby's musical laughter. But even as he good-naturedly joined in the merriment, Kent groaned inwardly. Because if he did get the job, how on earth was he supposed to eat two meals a day at her table—looking into that lovely, big-eyed face, listening to that lively, lilting voice—and keep his life motto intact?



After scrubbing and rinsing Kent's plate, Abby began tackling the rest of the breakfast dishes. When they were all washed and dry, she would stack them in the glass-doored hutch, but until then, she had more than enough to keep her busy, which was most definitely a good thing, because she'd hardly been able to keep her mind off the tall stranger with the Texas accent all morning.

Correction, Abby told herself, he's from Kansas!

Well, he might as well be a Texan, she thought, picturing him. From his pointy-toed boots to his wide-brimmed pale-gray hat, he dressed almost exactly like the pen-and-ink heroes on the covers of Heath's dime novels.

Almost, but not quite.

There was no gun belt slung low on his narrow hips, no leather-holstered six-shooter pressed to the side of his muscular thigh.

Head and shoulders taller than Abby, Kent was by far the biggest man she'd ever met. Something told her that even if she never saw him again, she'd be able to describe him, based solely on their brief conversation—eyes as round and brown as a fawn's, high cheekbones, lantern jaw, and a dimple in each tanned cheek that showed only when he smiled...which was rare.

If Pa hires him—Abby wiggled her eyebrows—and I hope he does, we need someone besides Pa looking after things around here. I'm going to make it my business to get that man to smile more often. "Seems a shame to waste such a gorgeous smile!" she said aloud.

"What's that?"

Abby whirled in response to the sudden intrusion. "Good grief, Abigail, you're white as a bed sheet!"

One hand at her throat, the other over her chest, Abby exhaled loudly. "Only because you scared me out of my boots. I declare, Bert, one of these days I'm going to tie a bell around your neck!"

Grinning, the elderly man leaned in and dropped a soft peck onto her cheek. "So veddy sorry," he said in a fake British accent. "Didn't mean to frighten you, m'dear. You will forgive me, won't you?"

Her fear forgotten, Abby laughed softly. "All right. You're forgiven. But only if you skedaddle, right now, and let me get back to work."

"Ah, yes," Bert sighed. "Work. The very reason I popped in to see you." He extended one arm so that she could see that he'd lost a button. "Would you mind terribly sewing it back on? I'd hate to spend all day watchin' it flap in the breeze."

She sent him a tolerant grin. "There are plenty of clean shirts in your bureau drawer. Put on one of those and add that one to the things in my sewing basket."

"Will do, dah-ling!" Another noisy kiss popped against her cheek. "Thanks, Abby. You're a sweetheart." And with that, he disappeared from the room.

The water in her dishpan was growing colder by the minute. Between actual distractions like Bert, and mental distractions—like images of Kent McCoy—it was a wonder she'd accomplished anything at all this afternoon. *Keep your mind on your work*, she scolded as she dried the blade of her bread knife, *or you're likely to cut off something you'll miss!*

Work.

There was plenty of that to keep her busy.

For one thing, her father's birthday was less than a week off, and she hadn't finished sewing his gift yet. For months now, he'd been hinting that his riding jacket had seen better days. And so one day, while he was in the fields, Abby slipped it out of his room and used it as a pattern for a brand new coat. By the light of a whale-oil lamp, she'd hand-stitched the thing together while everyone else at Wildwood slept.

She hadn't bathed her bedridden mother yet today, nor changed the poor woman's nightdress and sheets.

And if you don't get those windows washed soon, nobody will be able to see through the glass!

Abby grabbed her egg basket and headed for the henhouse. "Only fifteen eggs, girls?" she asked, once inside. Shaking a forefinger at the strutting, quietly cackling birds, she warned, "Better make yourselves more useful than this, or you might just end up the main course on the supper table!"

As though they understood the threat, the hens fluttered their useless wings and clucked up a ruckus.

"Now, now," she soothed, "you'll have nothing to worry about—if I find twenty eggs tomorrow morning!" With that, she latched the coop gate.

Back in the kitchen, as she stood the half-filled basket on the pantry shelf, Abby wondered if the hens' production would increase. She wouldn't have felt that way a year ago, but a year ago, everything around Wildwood had been fairly predictable.

Not so any longer!

The first of many changes began, appropriately, on New Year's Day, when, as the family kept Abby's mother company in her sick room, Abby's twenty-one-year-old brother announced that he intended to become a doctor.

Her parents stared in stunned disbelief as Heath pulled a fat brown envelope from his breast pocket and fanned its contents across his mother's blankets. "We need a doctor around here, Pa," Heath said as his father examined the envelope's contents.

"But, son," his mother protested, reading over her husband's shoulder, "It says here that the school is in—"

"Yes, Mother," Heath interrupted, "Boston."

There was a long discussion about why Heath couldn't attend medical college right there in their home state, and he pointed out that, since he'd saved his money for years and could afford it, why not attend the best school in the country!

In the end, Heath got his way. Abby felt a little guilty that she was one of the main reasons he'd won his case. "Think of it, Pa," her younger brother had said, the muscles in his jaw bulging, "if there had been a doctor around when Abby got bucked by that stallion, maybe she wouldn't be a cripple today, and maybe Ma wouldn't be confined to her bed, either!"

Abby scrubbed the skillet harder still as she recalled the stormy expression that had darkened her father's face: his graying brows dipped low in the center of his forehead. He'd said nothing in the tense moments that passed after Heath's outburst, but only sat rigid in the chair beside his wife's bed, staring hard at the registration papers. Decisions like these had always been difficult for him to make; he would have preferred that life not ask anything of him.

The argument had been a persuasive one, though. Since the cancer had started its invasion of Melissa's body all those years ago, he'd more or less come to grips with the fact that, someday, the disease would take her. There hadn't been a thing anyone could have done to prevent her illness, but Abby's accident had been another matter entirely.

And since her fall, Trevor had been determined to treat his daughter exactly as he had before, and had been insistent that everyone else do likewise. That way, he could pretend that the accident had never happened. Abby had expected him to scold Heath soundly for his thoughtless comment, and immediately started working on a defense for her brother. Heath hadn't meant to hurt anyone's feelings, after all...

"Son, when you're right, you're right," Trevor had said instead, surprising everyone. "We'll fill out these forms first thing in the morning. If we don't dillydally, perhaps you can begin classes this spring."

"You mean it, Pa? I can go?"

Now, as Abby stood in the doorway to Heath's room, she battled tears. Her brother had been away such a short time, but she missed him so, and oh, how she loved him!

His letters spelled out that he'd been working hard, inspiring Trevor to predict that if Heath kept up this pace, he might just graduate in half the usual time. There wasn't a doubt in Abby's mind that if Heath had set his heart on graduating early, he'd do exactly that.

Before Abby's near-fatal fall, Heath had never been a very good student. His arithmetic skills, in particular, were quite weak. Abby never quite understood why, but after it became evident that she would survive, Heath's attitude toward school changed dramatically, and he went from being the boy who earned mediocre grades to a young man who out-performed every student in the schoolhouse.

She hadn't understood what inspired the change back then, but she understood now that he'd decided to be a doctor way back then. The knowledge filled her with such pride and love that she wondered what kept her heart from bursting. For the first time in her life, Abby believed what her mother always said, "No matter how full of love the human heart seems, there will always be room for more."

Abby stood looking at the narrow view of Wildwood visible through the kitchen window, and thanked God for her life.

She'd been barely two years old when Melissa and Trevor Nelson adopted her, and she remembered nothing of the mother and father who had given her life. These kind and generous people had made a home for her, a home filled with warmth and comfort and all the love a child deserved.

Abby wished she'd never discovered the truth about her parentage, because until she stumbled upon the papers that legalized her position in the Nelson family, being a loving, dutiful daughter had been as natural and normal, like breathing in and breathing out. Since that awful day six long years ago, Abby found that devotion was something she had to work at now, like sewing on buttons and gathering eggs.

Abby had barely completed the guilty thought when she saw Kent exit the barn. She followed his serious gaze toward the end of the lane, where her father and several of the hands were heading toward the house, their horses' hoofbeats kicking up tiny clouds of dust. Even from this distance, she could see the way Kent's powerful jaw tensed at the sight of the man who had the power to hire him... or not.

As she'd sat across the kitchen table from him earlier, she'd seen something in the handsome stranger's eyes, something that assured her that he was a good and decent man. But she'd seen a sadness in those dark eyes, too, a sadness that seemed to have taken root in his very soul.

And Abby couldn't help but wonder what—or whom—had put it there.