

HEART
ON
THE *Line*

KAREN
WITEMEYER



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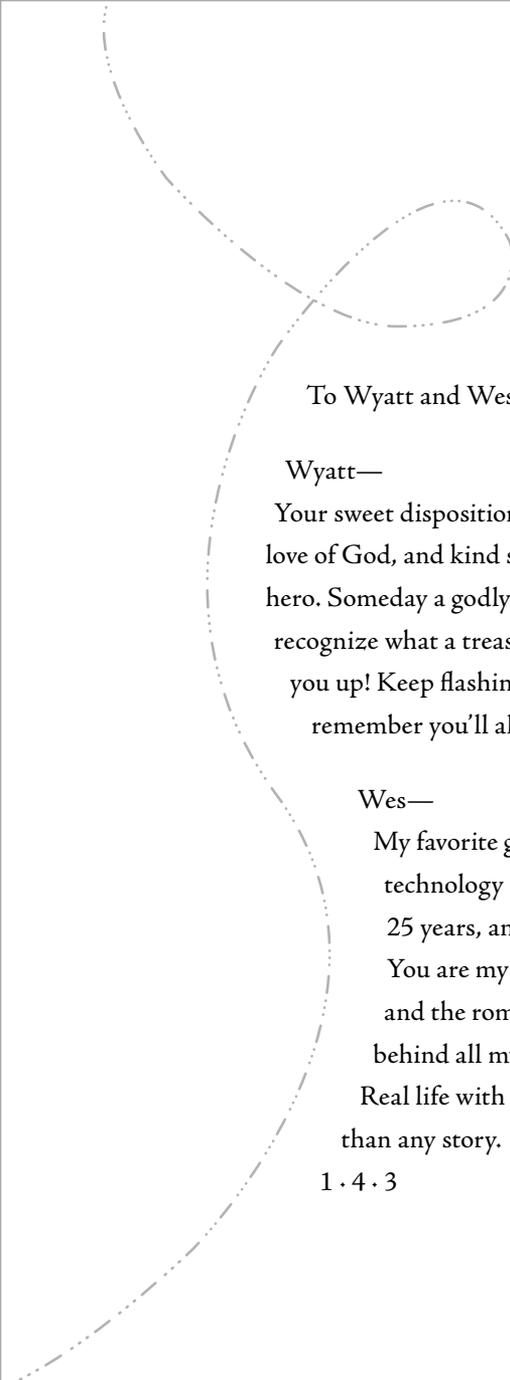
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To Wyatt and Wes.

Wyatt—

Your sweet disposition, punny sense of humor,
love of God, and kind spirit inspired this latest
hero. Someday a godly woman is going to
recognize what a treasure you are and snatch
you up! Keep flashing those dimples, and
remember you'll always be your mama's hero.

Wes—

My favorite glasses-wearing, bicycle-riding,
technology nerd.

25 years, and we're still going strong.

You are my rock, my best friend,

and the romantic inspiration

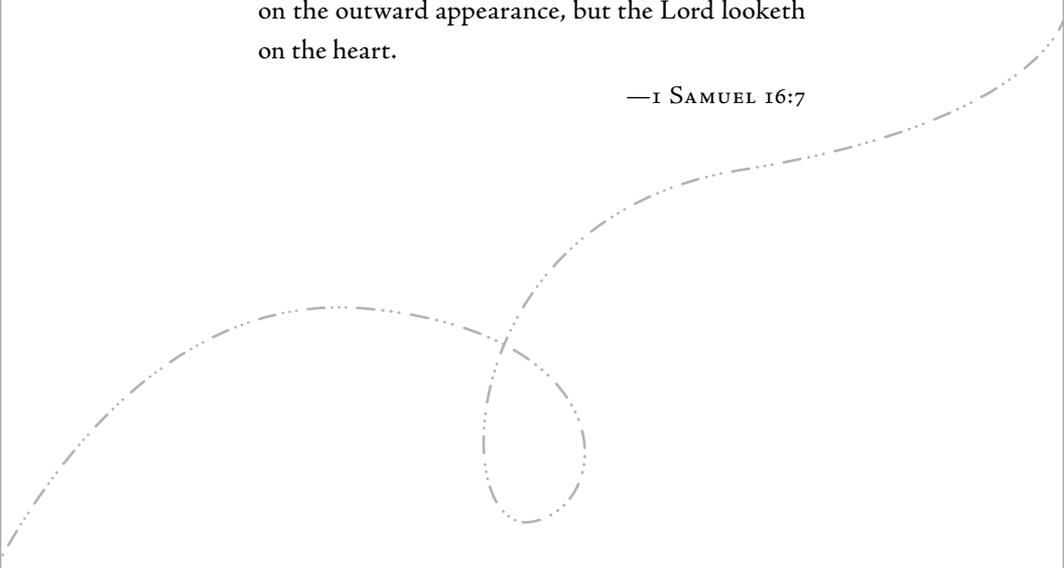
behind all my fictional heroes.

Real life with you is better
than any story.

1 · 4 · 3

The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh
on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh
on the heart.

—1 SAMUEL 16:7



PROLOGUE

JANUARY 1894
DENVER, CO

The cheerful tinkle of a bell alerted Grace Mallory to the arrival of a guest. Immediately setting aside the ladies' magazine she'd been perusing, she rose gracefully to her feet, smoothed the front of her bodice, then put on a welcoming smile. It wouldn't do for a patron of the Oxford Hotel to be kept waiting.

It had been hard enough to get this job in the first place. Her father had to call in a favor with one of the investors to get her on staff, and she wasn't about to give her supervisor any excuse to let her go. Thankfully, the predominately male clientele of Denver's most progressive hotel seemed to enjoy conducting business with a young female telegraph operator once they deemed her skill satisfactory.

But this man didn't have the look of her usual client. He was still wrapped in a snow-dusted overcoat, scarf, and hat, as if he'd come in off the street rather than from one of the guest rooms.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said to his back. He'd yet to turn around. "How can the Western Union office serve you today?"

He closed the door and turned the lock.

Grace's throat pinched and her heart thundered in her chest. "What are you do—?"

The words, along with her fear, died away when the customer turned. A pair of familiar brown eyes gazed at her from above the striped blue scarf that covered half his face.

"Daddy?"

He grabbed at the scarf with frantic hands as if it were choking him. "Have to send a wire. Now. The rumors are true. All true."

"Calm down." Grace rushed around the counter to help her father unwind the scarf and brush the snow off the shoulders of his coat. "What rumors?"

"The Haversham estate. There's another heir," he said as he pushed away her helping hands and marched up to the counter. "A child by the first wife. A girl." He pulled his fogged-over spectacles from his eyes and rubbed the lenses clean with the edge of his scarf. "She's the rightful owner of Haversham House. Not the son."

Grace gasped. There'd been talk of another heir ever since Tremont Haversham died three months ago. Whispers, innuendo, but no name, no proof. Grace had assumed the rumors were built on wishful thinking by the miners' families.

When his father's health declined a year ago, Chaucer Haversham had taken over the running of the Silver Serpent Mine in Willow Creek only to have it plunge into ruin after President Cleveland repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and the bottom fell out of the silver market. Whether it was stubborn pride, blind ambition, or even a noble desire to keep his father's company in operation, Chaucer refused to close the mine. Instead, he demanded longer work hours from his miners with no additional compensation as he switched from mining silver to the more commonplace minerals of lead and zinc. Conditions were said to be deplorable, but with so many out-of-work miners, no one dared complain for fear they'd be replaced by one of their neighbors.

“Quit your woolgathering, Gracie.”

Grace dashed back around the counter and grabbed a telegraph blank. Herschel Mallory was a scholar by nature. Quiet. Kind. A bit absentminded. She couldn't recall the last time she'd seen him so worked up.

“Who do you want to wire?” she asked, pencil poised.

“The Pinkertons.”

Grace hesitated. “But doesn't Chaucer Haversham have a pair of Pinkertons on his payroll to keep the miners in line and prevent strikes? Wouldn't they support his claim, no matter what proof you've uncovered?”

“I want you to wire the Philadelphia office. A Detective Whitmore in particular.”

She jotted the name down on her form, needing no further explanation. Tremont Haversham had grown up in Philadelphia and married his first wife there—a woman of whom his wealthy family did not approve. At least that was the version of the tale Grace had heard. The woman died in childbirth. The baby, too, or so it had been believed. Brokenhearted, Haversham returned to his family and within a year took a second wife, a woman of means and social standing this time. One who knew how to push her husband into a position of power, leadership, and great financial triumph. One who had given him a son.

“Found your report to Tremont Haversham dated October 12, 1892.” Her father slung his satchel up onto the counter as he dictated his message. The bag thumped against the wooden shelf with the sound of heavy books. “If female still alive, she is rightful heir to Haversham fortune. I have documents to prove her claim. Need to dispatch to you immediately. Please advise. Herschel Mallory.”

Grace finished scribbling the message then looked into her father's frantic eyes. “What did you find, Daddy?”

As a scholar and professor of literature at the University of

Denver, Herschel Mallory had been hired by Chaucer Haversham to catalog his father's extensive library in the family's Denver mansion. A mansion Chaucer had inherited but never visited. From what Grace had heard, he avoided Denver altogether, preferring the estate in Boston where his mother maintained a residence.

Tremont and Caroline Haversham had lived apart for the last decade, Caroline seeing to the raising and education of their son while Tremont oversaw the mining operations. Apparently the situation suited both parties, a state Grace had always considered rather sad. She'd never met Chaucer Haversham, but she couldn't help feeling a little sorry for the young man who'd been separated from his father during the very years he was coming of age. She would have been lost without her own father. He meant the world to her—his love and acceptance never in question.

Grace's mother had been her mentor, teaching her to pick out the dots and dashes of Morse code as a child in her telegraph office, then guiding her in the ways of womanhood and domestic responsibilities. But when she died two years ago, the shared grief of that loss had bonded Grace and her father as tightly as if the broken halves of their hearts had been melted down, reshaped, and forged into an unbreakable, interlocking design.

It was that closeness that had her senses on full alert when her father fiddled with his satchel strap instead of answering her question.

She reached out and covered his fidgeting gloved hand with her bare one. "Tell me, Daddy. What did you find?"

"Proof, Gracie." His gaze met hers, and the mix of dread and determination in his eyes set her stomach to cramping. "Proof that Haversham's first child didn't die with her mother. Proof that Haversham tried to find her. Proof that the odd wording of his will makes his daughter an heiress and his son simply a business owner."

"You found this proof in the library at Haversham House?"

Her father nodded.

“But if the documents are Mr. Haversham’s property, what can you possibly do about it?”

He dropped his gaze.

“Daddy?”

He jerked his hand away from her touch and paced away from the counter. “The documents were *Tremont* Haversham’s property, and he’s dead. If Chaucer’s not the true heir of the Denver mansion and its contents, then the documents don’t really belong to him, do they?”

The knots in Grace’s stomach twisted. “What did you do?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself about. I just borrowed a couple books from the collection. Chaucer plans to sell them off anyway. It’s what he did with the art—had an appraiser come in a week after his father’s funeral, then sold the finer pieces at auction by month’s end. He has no respect for his father beyond the price to be fetched from his belongings.” Herschel paced back toward the counter. “The books I took were ordinary editions. Nothing of monetary value. He won’t miss them.”

Suddenly, the full satchel on her counter held a whole new significance. “You can’t just take them!”

Her father’s face hardened. “I can’t stand by while an injustice is perpetrated, either. Tremont Haversham was my friend, Gracie. More than a friend. If it hadn’t been for his influence, the university would have let me go during that dark time after your mother passed.”

Grace dropped her head. She remembered that time. Both of them steeped in grief. She’d been young with no real responsibilities, and her father hadn’t noticed or cared if the house went uncleaned or if dinner had burnt. But the melancholia had brought Herschel Mallory to the brink of unemployment. Papers and exams had gone ungraded for weeks. His clouded mind turned his organized lectures into meandering, meaningless forays. Students had stopped

attending. Parents had complained. Board members had threatened. Only Tremont Haversham had spoken on her father's behalf. Had taken him aside and reminded him of his responsibilities, made him see that destroying himself would only dishonor his wife's memory. He had to pull himself together for his daughter's sake.

She glanced around her tidy little office with its elegant oak furnishings and carpeted floor. Her stomach swirled. She owed Tremont Haversham a debt, as well. He was the investor responsible for hiring her. The hotel manager had insisted on a male operator even though she'd proven more skillful than the other applicants—until Mr. Haversham had convinced him to reconsider.

Grace's father reached across the counter and captured her hand. "Tremont Haversham had a daughter. One stolen from him. One he desperately tried to find before his death. One, I believe, he loved very much." His eyes softened as he looked at Grace. "I know what it is to have a daughter. And if anything ever separated her from me, I'd move heaven and earth to get her back."

Moisture gathered behind Grace's eyes.

"She needs to know her father loved her, Gracie. To have something to remember him by. I owe him that much at least." He paused, then released her hand to pat the top of the leather satchel. "There are letters, too. Love letters between Tremont and his first wife. Chaucer would burn them if he knew of their existence. I can't let that happen. The daughter deserves a chance to know her parents."

Grace stared down at the telegraph blank, legal technicalities warring with moral responsibility.

"Send the wire, Gracie," her father urged, his voice gentle.

She met his gaze a final time. The love in his eyes melted away the last slivers of icy indecision. She nodded, sat down at the key, and started tapping.



Two days later they waited in a rented, second-floor room in a nondescript boardinghouse. Across the street stood the café where her father was scheduled to meet the agent Detective Whitmore had sent to collect the documents. Whitmore had warned them not to trust anyone else with the evidence. Not even the postal system. Several parcels delivered to him over the last few months had shown evidence of tampering, and he had yet to discover the culprit. Best not to risk such valuable information falling into the wrong hands.

“Are you sure we can’t just turn the documents over to the marshal?” Grace clutched her father’s suit coat to her chest, the coat she was supposed to be helping him into.

Her father shook his head and glanced over his shoulder at her. “As far as the local law is concerned, the books are Chaucer’s property. They have no obligation to investigate whatever may have been found inside. They’d simply return the items, and Chaucer would destroy them.

“Detective Whitmore is right. We can’t trust anyone else. I’ll not hand the books over to anyone other than Whitmore or the man who carries his recommendation.” He attempted to smile, but the sad twisting of his lips did nothing to reassure her. “Come, Gracie. Help me on with my coat.”

Grace obeyed, sliding the wool sleeves of the slightly ruffled sack suit jacket over his arms and up onto his shoulders. She stepped around him and tugged on his lapels until the coat hung evenly on his slender frame, then smoothed them flat against his chest.

“Everything will work out for the best,” he said. “You’ll see. The only people who know about this meeting are Detective Whitmore and the Pinkerton agent he sent.”

And the telegraph operator who received our message as well as any others listening in on the line. Grace kept that disquieting thought to herself. Telegraph operators signed contracts of confidentiality,

after all, vowing only to reveal message contents to intended parties. But operators were human. Susceptible to bribes or threats.

As were Pinkertons. She still didn't like the fact that they had confided in the same agency that had men working for the Silver Serpent mine. Chaucer Haversham's pockets were deep. All it would take was the quiet promise of a payday spread by the agents already in his employ to convince someone in the Philadelphia office to pass on any suspicious information.

But none of that could be helped. Her father was too noble to abandon a quest once begun. He was going to see this through, come what may. So she would see *him* through.

"You're a good man, Daddy." Grace glanced up from buttoning the top button on his vest. He always had something on his person coming undone—buttons climbing out of their holes, watch chains tangling, scraps of paper falling out of his pockets. She forced a smile to her lips. "Be careful."

He smiled back, then leaned in and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I will, pet." He winked at her then stepped over to the chest of drawers near the door to fetch his satchel. He lifted the leather strap over his head and fit the bag against his right hip, tucking it close to his belly. Then he settled his dark gray fedora on his head and straightened his posture. "Be watching for my signal."

Grace nodded. "Forehead, you'll bring him here. Glasses, I'm to take the box and head for the carriage."

He grinned. "That's my girl." He reached for the door handle and let himself into the hall.

Grace moved to close the door behind him, but he stuck his head back through the opening. "Whatever happens, Gracie," he said, "God will see us through."

Her throat grew tight.

"I love you, girl." His gaze held hers for a heartbeat, then he spun away and marched down the hall.

"I love you, too, Daddy," she whispered as she closed the door

with a quiet click. It would take him a few minutes to descend the boardinghouse stairs and exit to the street, but Grace rushed to the window anyway, her gaze darting between the street below and the café window across the way. Pedestrians meandered along the boardwalks, a few dashing between wagons and men on horseback to cross to the other side. The bustling scene matched that of any other Thursday morning, but Grace's pulse throbbed a ragged rhythm anyway.

Please watch over him, Lord.

As determined as Herschel Mallory was to turn the documents over to the Pinkertons, he was still approaching this meeting with caution by not taking the actual books with him. His satchel carried old literature tomes from his personal library. The Haversham books rested in a pink-and-white hatbox pilfered from Grace's closet, a disguise they'd decided most men would overlook.

Her father had reserved a table next to the large plate-glass window at the front of the café. If the agent showed adequate proof that he'd been sent by Whitmore, her father would remove his hat and use his handkerchief to wipe his forehead, signaling Grace that all was well. If, on the other hand, the agent roused suspicion, her father would instead use his handkerchief to clean the lenses of his glasses. That was the signal for Grace to collect the bags they'd packed that morning along with the all-important hatbox and exit through the alley, where they'd paid a driver to hold a carriage for them. She was to purchase a train ticket to Colorado Springs and wait for her father there.

Movement beneath her window caught her eye. A man approached the street, his fedora as familiar as the gray sack suit covering his shoulders. Grace touched her fingers to the chilled glass, wishing she was there beside him, holding his hand.

He paused, waiting for a freight wagon to pass by, carefully avoiding the brown, snowy slush that splattered the edge of the

boardwalk, then started across the street. At the midway point, a grubby young boy dashed directly in front of her father, causing him to pull up short to avoid a collision. Her father's hand instinctively dropped down to protect his satchel from the likely pickpocket, but it wasn't the satchel he should have guarded. In that same moment, a shot rang out. From where, Grace didn't know, but the muffled *pop* sliced through her heart like the sharpest blade.

"Daddy!" She jumped to her feet, her palms pressing desperately against the window. She pounded the glass. "Daddy!"

He pivoted toward her as he fell, his gaze meeting hers for one brief moment.

"No!" Her horrified scream echoed through the room as the man she loved more than any other crumpled to the ground, a dark stain spreading across his vest.

Amid the chaos of people screaming and running for cover, the grubby urchin returned to her father's side, not to help but to snatch the satchel from around his neck. The little devil!

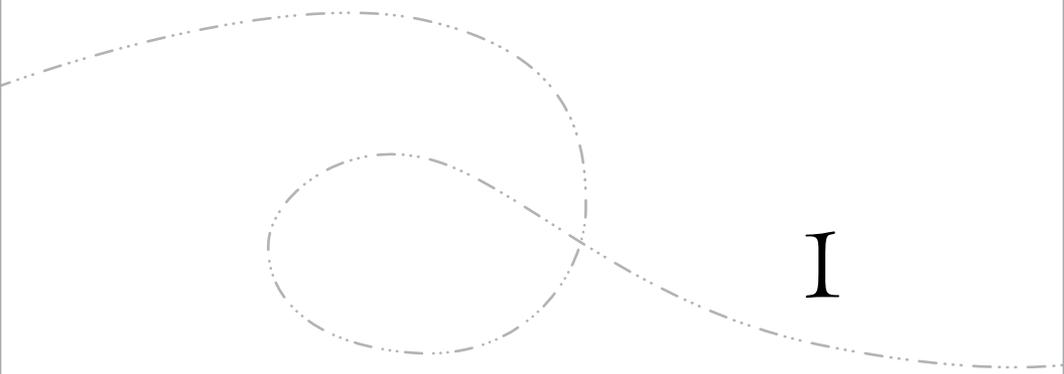
Grace pushed away from the window. She had to get to her father. But a movement caught her eye before she turned away. Daddy was reaching for something.

She plastered herself back against the window, needing to understand whatever he was trying to tell her. His awkward movements brought tears to her eyes, but he finally managed to bring his arm up high enough to pull his spectacles from his face.

Grace's tears fell in earnest now. She shook her head in silent denial, even as comprehension settled over her. He didn't have a handkerchief, but with his last breath, Herschel Mallory rubbed one lens of his spectacles, leaving a red smear across the glass.

The signal was clear.

Run!



I

LATE AUTUMN 1894
DENISON, TX

Amos Bledsoe! Get out of the street before you run someone over with that infernal contraption!”

It took a great deal of mental fortitude, but Amos managed not to roll his eyes at the pretty debutante holding court on the boardwalk outside the dressmaker’s shop. His mama had drilled manners into him at an early age, so he chose instead to release the steering handle with one hand and doff his hat to her as he politely slowed his pace.

“Miss Dexter.” He even offered a smile, though the effort did nothing to soften the indignation on the face of the lady in question. He nodded to her ever-present companions as well. “Miss Berryhill. Miss Watts.”

“I declare.” Harriet scrunched her nose as she waved a gloved hand in his direction. “If God had meant for mankind to ride upon two-wheeled devices, he wouldn’t have created horses. Just look at you wobbling about. Anyone with half a brain knows that for a vehicle to be sturdy it needs *four* wheels.”

“What about a pony cart, Harriet?” Miss Berryhill ventured,

her forehead crinkling. “My Aunt Bea rides in one all the time and never has any trouble.”

“That’s because it’s attached to a *pony*. A creature with *four* legs,” Harriet huffed. “The animal keeps the cart steady.”

Amos had to admit she’d been quick with that rejoinder. As much as he disliked her for so actively disliking *him*, he couldn’t discount her intelligence. He just wished she’d use it for something other than belittling him in public. It seemed her favorite pastime.

“Bicycles are quite safe, I assure you,” Amos countered, determined to continue on the path of higher ground. “Even young women ride them. They’re quite the rage back east. Haven’t you seen the pictures in *Harper’s Bazar*?” All right, so perhaps he’d hit a divot in his higher-ground travels. He couldn’t resist prodding her a little. “My sister said a bicycle costume from Paris was featured on *Harper’s* cover back in April.” He nodded toward the dressmaker’s shop. “I’m sure if you haven’t seen it, Mrs. Ludlow could let you peruse her copy.”

He’d never thought it would come in handy to have a sister dedicated to keeping up with the latest fashion trends, but seeing Harriet Dexter flounder for a reply suddenly made all the dull evenings spent in Mother’s parlor, listening to female dither about fabric and patterns, well worth the torture.

“Really, Amos!” Harriet sputtered. “How vulgar you are to speak of . . . of split skirts and . . . bloomers in mixed company. Why, I’m appalled. Simply appalled.” She sniffed and immediately set off down the boardwalk in the opposite direction. “Come, girls. I see a gentleman more worthy of our time. Oh, Roy!”

She waved, and a cowboy standing outside Yeidel’s Beer Hall touched the brim of his hat. Right before spitting a juicy wad of tobacco over the railing to mix with the mud of the street.

Definitely a fine specimen of gentleman-hood. How could Amos possibly hope to compete?

Taking refuge in mental sarcasm usually removed the worst of rejection's sting, but a prick or two remained. It always did. Even after years of practice.

Amos shrugged and remounted his bicycle. He pedaled with more vigor than usual, eager to increase the distance between himself and his latest female failure. Today's episode shouldn't bother him. After all, it wasn't as if he *wanted* Harriet Dexter's attention. The woman was a shrew of the first order. It was a matter of pride, he supposed. No one liked to be perceived as lacking. Or constantly passed over in favor of a version of manhood he'd never achieve.

A block past Main and Austin, traffic lessened considerably. Shops gave way to schools, churches, and finally dwellings. Lucy's home was another three blocks down on Morton Street, which gave him far too much time to ponder the vagaries of the feminine mind before dinner.

If these were still prehistoric times, when the breadth of a man's shoulders directly corresponded to one's likelihood of survival, he could understand a woman preferring a cowpuncher like Roy Edmundson over him, despite the man's tobacco habit and bent toward liquor. But this was the modern age, a time of scientific discovery and industrial advancement. Yet women still flocked toward the largest muscles and deepest bank accounts available, completely overlooking the benefits of intellect and integrity.

All right, not *all* women. There were a few out there with sense enough to see past a fellow's appearance and status. Lucy. His mother. Amos shifted his grip on the handlebars as he maneuvered around a particularly bumpy section of road. Surely there were others. He pictured the ladies at church who were always ready with a smile for him and a kind word. Gems, every one. Of course, they were all over fifty.

Amos quirked his mouth into a wry grin. Apparently it took a

certain level of maturity and wisdom to appreciate his masculine attributes.

His smile faded. Surely Miss G didn't fall into that category. Not that she wasn't mature or wise. She seemed to be everything a man of intellect would want in a woman. Unless she were old enough to be his mother.

That utterly depressing thought brought Amos up short, and he nearly rode into the shade tree outside his sister's house. He corrected at the last second to avoid the collision and vigorously applied the brakes.

How many months had he pinned his hopes for future happiness on the mysterious Miss G? The lady of sparkle and wit who entertained him with stories of outlaw attacks, quilting fiascos, and a budding romance between a reluctant shop owner and the freighter who carted her goods. He'd been following that tale with particular interest, his own hopes lifting at the prospect of a man's persistence paying dividends in winning a maiden's heart. But what if the delightful Miss G was a matronly, grandmotherly figure and not the young woman he'd always pictured? Such a turn of events would be devastating, for he was already more than a little in love with the operator from Harper's Station.

That was the peril of being a telegraph operator: one could strike up a conversation or a friendship—or something more—with someone dozens of miles away, a person one had never seen. How easy it would be for this person to misrepresent themselves, to claim to be a young, unmarried beauty when in fact she was a middle-aged mother of five with poor hygiene and a twisted sense of humor. He'd even heard tales of male operators impersonating females to play pranks on their comrades. Amos had worried about falling victim to just such a joke when he'd first stumbled upon Miss G on the lines after hours a few months ago. She'd been so sweetly reluctant to start up a conversation with him, however, that he couldn't cast her in the role of malevolent trickster.

He *had* done some investigating, however. Her station abbreviation, Hs, stood for Harper's Station, a town he'd never heard of. This initially raised his suspicions, until he put his best sleuth on the case—his mother. She had relatives and gossip contacts all over the state. Within a week, he'd learned that Harper's Station was some sort of women's colony started up by a lady banker and her maiden aunts. Which assured him of Miss G's gender, at least.

Her age remained a mystery since he'd never be so gauche as to ask. He'd gathered hints, however. For example, she hadn't mentioned a husband during the course of their conversations, nor children. The only reference to family he could recall was that her mother had taught her telegraphy when she was a child, which left the impression that she was still a young woman. And though she'd never specified, he inferred from her omissions as well as her choice to dwell in a women's colony that her parents were no longer part of her life. Dead, perhaps, or estranged? He could only speculate.

The one thing he knew for sure was that she was possessed of a superbly pleasant nature and made him feel as if she looked forward to conversing with him as much as he did with her. Which was a considerable amount. So considerable, in fact, that he spent nearly every evening listening to her tapping on the sounder and responding in kind. Never had he enjoyed another's company so much.

But what if Miss G was nothing like the image he had built up in his mind? He didn't expect a great beauty, didn't really even want one. Just a woman of somewhat youthful age and passable features, but who could brighten a man's world with her smile. Whose quiet demeanor would soothe a man's spirit at the end of a long day. Whose witty observations of life would entertain and banish boredom. She'd already proven to be proficient at the latter two qualities. It was fear of her failing on the former two that kept him from pursuing a personal meeting.

Reality rarely bore up well when compared to a beloved fantasy. On the other hand, one couldn't make a life with an idealized figment.

"You planning on loitering out here until the sun goes down," a familiar female voice prodded, "or are you going to come join us for dinner?"

"Bossy as ever, I see," Amos teased. His sister might be three years younger, but she'd never shied from ordering him around. He grinned, stepped over his bicycle's crossbar, and pushed the vehicle up to Lucy's front porch. "I don't know how Robert puts up with you."

"Same way you do," she sassed, tossing the dish towel she held at his head.

He dodged with a chuckle and snagged the cloth out of the air. She was right. Both he and Robert loved her to distraction. Amos never would have given Robert permission to marry her if he didn't.

"Mama's already inside," Lucy announced as Amos ascended the front steps, snapping the dish towel at her skirt. She gave a little squeal and grabbed for the towel. "You beast. Stop that."

He let her take it from him then swooped in to kiss her cheek. "What's for dinner?"

"Fish entrails and monkey brains."

Amos faced the open door and breathed deeply. "Mmm. Amazing how such exotic fare smells just like sausage and onions."

Lucy pushed at his shoulder. The effort was easy enough to withstand, thanks to the balance and fitness he'd gained from cycling, but he made a show of staggering sideways to please her.

"It's not as if you would notice what we're eating anyway, as far as your mind was from here a few minutes ago. You should just go see her, you know, instead of tormenting yourself with questions you can't answer."

Amos glared at her. "Mother should never have told you about

my inquiry into Harper's Station." His sister was far too clever and too much of a matchmaker to let a juicy tidbit like his friendship with a mysterious female telegraph operator go unexplored.

Lucy shrugged. "I had most of it figured out already. You spending less and less time here after dinner, always needing to swing by the office on your way home. I never expected it to last this long, though." She elbowed him in the ribs as they walked into the front hall. "Something tells me you're smitten, big brother."

A denial rose to Amos's lips as warmth crawled up his neck. Thankfully, his nephew saved him from telling a bald-faced lie.

"Unca 'Mus! Unca 'Mus!" The two-year-old boy ran like a runaway train straight for him, arms outstretched, grin wide.

Amos's heart surged with love as he bent down to scoop up the rascal. "Harry! My goodness, but you're getting heavy." Pretending to struggle in lifting the tiny sprout off the ground, Amos grunted and groaned. They ran through this routine every night, and it never got old. How could one resist such an enthusiastic welcome?

Harry, of course, went straight for the glasses as soon as Amos settled him in his arms. Amos had given up trying to avoid the inevitable about six weeks ago and now just let it happen. It was easier that way. Lucy would scold and pry the spectacles out of Harry's slobbery fingers. Amos would blow a buzz of air against Harry's neck until the boy giggled uncontrollably and squirmed to get down. Once the little monster ran off, Lucy would hand Amos the glasses. He'd unbend the wire frames, rub the lenses clean, then join the rest of the family in the dining room.

Tonight, however, his sister held his spectacles for ransom after her son ran off to pester his grandmother. When Amos raised a brow at her, she simply looked at him, all teasing gone from her face.

"You'd make a great father, you know."

"Lucy . . ." Amos shook his head. He didn't need this tonight. Not after facing down Harriet Dexter and her maids-in-waiting.

His sister meant well, but nagging him to marry only made things worse. It wasn't like he was *trying* to stay single.

She touched his arm. "She's out there, Amos. The right lady for you. And she'll be a better match than you can even imagine. God will see to that. All you have to do is find her."

Amos blew out a breath, a sarcastic laugh escaping with the air. "She's hiding awfully well, sis."

She patted his back then held out his glasses. "Maybe you've been looking in the wrong places." She strolled ahead a few steps before swiveling for one last parting shot. "You might try Harper's Station. I hear there's a surplus of females there." Her mouth curved into a smirk. "Might increase your chances with less competition around. I'm sure your *friend* at the telegraph office could make some recommendations."

"Why, you . . ." Amos lurched forward, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Lucy shrieked and ran off, no doubt straight into her husband's arms. The perfect refuge for such a disgustingly happy married woman.

Yet her words lingered, urging Amos to take a risk—to attempt to turn a fantasy into something real and lasting. What was the worst that could happen?