

A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a teal patterned dress with white lace trim, stands in a rural setting. In the background, a woman in a purple dress stands near a horse and a covered wagon. The scene is framed by green leaves and yellow flowers at the top.

The Seeds of Change

*Leah's Garden * 1*

LAURAINÉ
SNELLING

with Kiersti Giron

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Seeds
of
Change*

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I dedicate *The Seeds of Change*,
and the rest of the LEAH'S GARDEN series,
with great love and admiration,

to Wendy Lawton,

agent extraordinaire, deep friend, sister in Christ.
She has made my life richer on so many levels.
Another of God's gifts to me.



Forsythia

Because it flowers in late winter or early spring,
forsythia stands for spring sun and anticipation.
After the cold of winter, we are all longing for the sun,
and the bright gold of first-blooming forsythia
cheers us beyond measure.

Forsythia is a shrub, and branches can be easily forced
by cutting them on the diagonal,
placing them in a tall vase or bucket of water,
and checking them daily.

Nothing says spring is almost here
like the bright, cheerful forsythia.

1

LINKSBURG, OHIO
MAY 1865

I truly hate that man.”

“Lark, you know Ma said we should never hate anybody.” Larkspur’s sister Forsythia, third of the Nielsen daughters, spoke out of the side of her mouth, the way they had learned so as not to be heard by anybody else. Especially in church. Forsythia had spent a good part of her young life trying to keep her older sister out of trouble.

Larkspur refocused her attention forward, clenching her fingers in her lap to keep from leaping out of the pew.

Deacon Wiesel raised his Bible, the pages rippling from the force of his shaking. His voice nearly tore the hinges from the doors. “Women, if you are indeed following God’s Word . . .”

Larkspur watched the red of his face deepen. Perhaps a heart attack? A stroke?

“You are ordered to submit to your husband’s every utterance. God says so, right here.” The words thundered, and spittle spattered the pulpit. “If you are not married, your father is in charge. For too many of you, your mouth is your biggest sin.”

Little pig eyes slit nearly shut, he stared right at Larkspur as if daring her to speak.

Lark returned stare for stare, knowing she was aggravating the deacon but no longer caring. According to him, women should never raise their eyes—only a downcast posture was proper.

Forsythia laid a gentle hand on Larkspur's shaking knee, and Lark felt an elbow digging into her left side. Her sister Delphinium was only reminding her that were their mother here, she would be mortified by the actions of her eldest daughter. Surely she had taught her daughters better than to let their emotions show like this in church. But then, Ma had never met Deacon Wiesel or watched him drive their dear Pastor Earling to his deathbed. At least, Lark sure found it suspicious that the two men had gone for a buggy ride and only the deacon returned alive, lamenting that their pastor had died in an accident. But how had Wiesel survived a runaway horse and Pastor Earling hadn't? And if their mother could see how the weasel took out his furies on his wife . . .

Lark glanced at Climie Wiesel, cowering in a forward pew. Bruised, bones broken, terrified he would one day abuse their dreamed-of children, Climie made excuses for her husband whenever she and Larkspur talked. But they all knew that Climie had lost that last baby and those before because the deacon beat her so badly. When Wiesel got liquored up, there was no stopping him. They all knew that, but their mother had gone on to heaven before Climie started taking refuge with the Nielsens when her husband went deep in his cups. Sadly, often not soon enough.

Something had to be done. After the accident, Deacon Wiesel had taken over, ignoring all efforts of the other church leaders to find a new pastor. Larkspur tried to shut down her mind by running through multiplication tables. It didn't help. She tried

adding columns of three numbers. Nothing helped. She raised her head when she no longer heard the weasel haranguing them with the Bible verses.

But he was staring right at her. “Women, obey your husbands, for that is the word of the Lord.”

For Forsythia’s sake, Larkspur stared down at her clenched hands. She was shaking so hard the entire pew shuddered. *Thank heaven I am not married, and if all men are like you, I never will be.*

At a faint thud from the front of the church, Larkspur looked up.

Climie had slumped over in the pew where she sat. Fainted from the sheer force of her husband’s hypocrisy?

Lark half rose to go to her.

“Young woman,” Deacon Wiesel fairly roared, “sit down!”

“Your wife, sir.” Lark shook off Forsythia’s restraining hand and stood to her full stature, taller than the deacon himself if he hadn’t been in the pulpit. “She’s fainted.”

“She has merely fallen asleep. You should concern yourself with hearing the word of the Lord and leave my family to me.”

Mrs. Smutly, the woman on the piano bench who thought Deacon Wiesel ordered the sun to rise in the morning, gave a firm nod and cast a disapproving glance at the slender woman collapsed in the front pew.

Lark once again matched Wiesel glare for glare, then pushed past her two sisters and strode up the outside aisle toward the exit as if she were stomping ants. She ignored the scowls she could feel stabbing her and let the outside door click shut behind her. Shaking her head, Larkspur sucked in a deep breath, pausing at the top step to inhale the clean, quiet air.

“Onward, Christian soldiers . . .” The closing hymn floated out through the walls and windows, giving no hint of what had gone on inside.

Or what was going on inside of her.

She had to get away before the congregation was released from the evening service. Deacon Wiesel would make his way up the aisle to stand at the door and greet everyone, and she didn't want to be here when that happened.

Starting down the walk to the street, she heard her siblings exiting behind her.

"You've done it now." Her brother Anders, the eldest of the Nielsen clan, joined her. "I'm going back to the store. You're welcome to join me. Dealing with numbers always calms you down."

Larkspur shook her head. "If someone came in, I might bite their head off."

"Why can't you just ignore him? Or stop going to church?"

"That would really do it. Both Pa and Ma would be shuddering in their graves."

"Wait, Lark," Delphinium, next in age below Larkspur, called from behind them. "Let's walk together."

"I don't think you want to hear or even feel what I am thinking, Del."

"We know what you're thinking, but it doesn't do any good."

"Look, several of us from the board have written to the head church office requesting that they send us a new pastor," Anders said. "Till then, we'll have to ignore him."

"Ignore when his poor abused wife keels over in the front pew?" Lark demanded.

Anders stopped at the wooden porch of Nielsen Mercantile, which had been started by their father. "So what are you going to do, then?"

"I'm going home, that's what I'm doing." Larkspur turned to her sisters. "You can go back there and make nice with everybody, but I'm finished." She stomped ahead of them, the other three trailing behind.

"What are we going to do?" Delphinium whispered. "When she gets like this, she won't back down."

On the corner of the next block, rowdy piano music poured out of the swinging door of a saloon, inviting passersby to come on in. The sisters automatically stepped off the boardwalk to move to the other side of the street.

“Deacon Wiesel already blames Lark for all his problems. He thinks she influenced Climie and turned her against him. Now he’s going to come after us, and if he doesn’t do that, he’ll at least tell everybody else how horrible we are, and there go our reputations right down the drain.” That was Lilac, the youngest of the sisters at nineteen.

“Reputation isn’t the most important thing here,” Forsythia’s gentle voice cut in. She caught up to Larkspur and put her hand through her sister’s arm. Forsythia said nothing more, just walked quietly with her for a few moments.

A measure of peace seeped into Lark’s bones bit by bit, radiating from her sister’s spirit. She lowered her stiff shoulders with a sigh. “I just couldn’t sit there anymore.”

“I know.”

“When I saw Climie crumple . . . Isn’t there anything else we can do?”

Before Forsythia could respond, someone burst through the saloon doors and charged across the street in the waning light, nearly running into them.

“You gotta help me! I’m in bad trouble.” Their baby brother, seventeen-year-old Jonah, grabbed Larkspur’s hand and tried to drag her across the street.

“Jonah George Nielsen!” Larkspur jerked her hand free. “What in the world do you think you’re doing?”

He fell to his knees, clutching her skirt. “He’s a new man in town, and he’s got all our money, and Bernie gave him a deed, and he’s got that too and . . .” His words tripped over each other, tumbling into a cacophony of sound.

Shaking her head, Lark pulled him back to his feet. “How

many times have you promised me you would stay out of that place?”

“Just this once! All I ask is that you come help me. You know cards. We were just playing for a good time, but I think he’s cheating.” He sucked in a deep breath. “You could stop him.”

Lark sighed. “The stupidest thing I ever did was teach you to play cards.”

“He would have learned from someone else.” Delphinium had caught up and rolled her eyes. “Come on, Jonah, just come home with us, and—”

“I can’t. Jasper lost his horse and saddle, and Bernie bet his land.”

“And lost it. Won’t you fellows ever learn?” Del asked.

“He’s cheating, I know he is.”

“Makes no never mind. Had you stayed out of the saloon, you wouldn’t be in this mess.” Larkspur stared at her youngest brother. Were those tears in his eyes? Was he that afraid? She noticed details no one else did, and that tended to help her win at cards, but she’d promised herself not to help him again.

But since, according to Deacon Wiesel, she was a fallen woman anyway—and worthless, at that—she straightened her spine and sucked in a deep breath. Maybe giving someone their comeuppance would be a relief to her feelings right now.

Turning to her sisters, she said gently, “You go on home, and I’ll bring Jonah in a little while.”

“Larkspur, surely you’re not going to—”

“Just go on home and put on the coffeepot. This won’t take long.”

“Oh, dear Lord, protect us.” Lilac glared at the youngest of the family. “You, Jonah George Nielsen, are nothing but trouble. Have been since the day you were born.”

Jonah swallowed and nodded, penitence dripping from his

eyes. “I know, but this is the end. Just get me out of this, Larkspur, and I promise I’ll never gamble again.”

“We’ve heard that before,” Del said.

Larkspur tucked her arm in Jonah’s and gave a tug. “Let’s get this over with.”

2

As they entered the saloon, Larkspur thought of the two dollars in her reticule. Surely that would be enough to get in the game. She knew she would have to lose some before she could clean the floor with the varmint. That would teach him to come into their little town and destroy some of the boys who should have been men by now.

Cigar smoke cast a silvered haze across the room. The piano player stopped playing when he saw Larkspur but picked up again at the bartender's barked order.

"Well, well, look who's here." Bonnie Belle, the hostess, greeted them. Her look at Larkspur was questioning, but she kept her smile in place. "Welcome."

"Thank you. I just came to see what Jonah has been raving about." Lark patted his arm and batted her eyes.

Demure, simpering, and with her smile sweeter than sugar and her voice the low contralto of a siren, she let Jonah lead her to the card table where a fine-looking gentleman, puffing his cigar, rocked his chair back on two legs.

"Hey, boy, you brought a lady in here. What will your mama say?" the man teased.

Larkspur held her handkerchief up to her nose. “I’m just curious as to what Jonah finds so fascinating here. Do you mind if I sit and watch?”

If only Deacon Wiesel could see her now. That thought lent wings to her charade. At least she might prompt some justice in one place today.

“Ah, sweet lady, house rules say that observers can’t sit at the table. Players only. You ever played poker before?” The stranger’s dark eyes studied her through the smoke ring he blew.

She nodded. “Jonah has been trying to teach us. It’s a good parlor game during the winter.”

“Well, you just sit down and make yourself at home.” The stranger glanced around the table. “Anyone else want to play awhile longer?”

Larkspur nodded for Jonah to pull out her chair. She smiled at the other players.

The visiting gentleman had the manners to stand and remove the cigar from his mouth. “Jonah, would you introduce me to this lovely lady?”

“I, um . . .” Jonah gave a jerky nod. “Miss Nielsen, I’d like you to meet Mr. Ringwald.”

“My friends call me Slate,” the stranger added.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ringwald.” Larkspur tipped her head and cast him a gracious smile. Considering the situation, she wasn’t sure she wanted him to know her name, but manners were manners.

“So.” Ringwald sat back down and rubbed his hands together. “Who else still wants to play?”

Jonah’s best friend, Bernie, closed his eyes as if in prayer. He had been in and out of the Nielsen house ever since the boys started school. “Not at all,” he murmured. After all, she’d taught him the game too. He glanced up at the dealer as if asking permission, since he’d just lost his last dime.

An old guy who'd given up sometime earlier tossed a couple of dollars in front of Bernie. "You can pay me back."

Larkspur studied the gambler from under her eyelashes as she fumbled in her reticule, seeming to search for her money. A black cutaway coat of fine wool, pleated white shirt with cuff links at the wrist, a ring that held a rather obtrusive shimmery stone. Not a working man by any means, at least not at what she would call *working*.

"Ah, there." She carefully smoothed out the two dollars she laid on the table, then looked up with a timid smile.

"That'll get you started," Ringwald said before looking around. "Anyone else?"

"Come on, Art, you still got some cash in those deep pockets of yours." Bonnie Belle patted the top of Mr. Holt's bald head. "Just play a hand or two, give these young sprouts a chance to learn from a master."

Mr. Holt wagged his head. "Ah, why not?" And pulled his chair back up to the table.

Larkspur smiled sweetly at this friend of her late father's who was still a good friend to their remaining family. "Good to see you, Mr. Holt."

"I'm rather surprised to see you here," he said in a low voice, glancing at Jonah and then back to her.

"And I you." She tipped her head to the side. "I just wanted to see what Jonah finds so intriguing here."

"I'm only here tryin' to keep an eye on him." Mr. Holt shook his head, keeping his tone low. "Not that I've been much good."

"If no one else wants to join us, let's begin." Ringwald shuffled the cards, then ran them again through cupped, manicured hands. Once more, and he set the deck in front of Jonah, who cut the cards and nodded. While Ringwald dealt four cards to each player, Bonnie Belle exchanged the money laid on the table for chips.

“Two card poker. Everybody take a look and make your choices.” The gambler leaned back in his chair and lifted the edges of his cards, examining his hand, then discarding two.

Larkspur watched Ringwald carefully. Far as she could see, he'd not cheated on that hand. Probably figured he didn't need to. She'd be an easy mark. “Sir, may I ask a question?”

He removed his cigar from the corner of his mouth. “Why, of course, Miss Nielsen. Ask away.”

“That means I can only keep two cards, correct? And I can't draw any?”

“That's right, young lady.” His smile showed off a gold tooth.

They went around the table discarding until it came to her. She fingered one card, then another as if trying to decide. She chewed her bottom lip, then discarded two, including one of her best.

“Bets.”

The other older fellow folded and laid his cards on the table.

Lark could feel all eyes on her. Fumbling, she pushed one chip into the growing pile.

“I'll raise you one.” Ringwald slid two more chips into the center of the table.

Jonah did the same. Holt followed suit. Bernie dropped his cards on the table, shaking his head. So it was Lark's turn again. She moved her chips around, twitched her nose, and pushed in two more chips. Ringwald upped it to three this time. Jonah folded. Mr. Holt pushed his chips in, keeping an eye on Larkspur. When she gave him a rather pathetic questioning look, he slightly nodded.

“I'll take pity on the lady,” Ringwald said. “Only one more this time.”

Holt stayed in, Lark dithered, finally shook her head, and laid down her cards. Shame to waste what could have been an excellent hand had she kept that original king.

Holt called on the next round, and everyone laid their cards face up on the table. Even so, Lark had the winning hand, but since she'd folded, she got a tsk-tsk from Mr. Ringwald. Holt won.

"What a pity, miss."

"Silly me." She didn't dare look at Jonah full on, but when she shot him a glance, he shook his head as if disgusted with her.

Good. Let's play the part. She managed to look totally confused. On the next hand, she folded without betting. It would have been a good hand to truly gamble on, but she needed to convince them she hadn't dared play on it.

Ringwald laid down a worthless hand and gave her a look of pity. Had she pushed further, she might have taken him. Was he cheating? He hadn't used it to his advantage yet if so.

"Maybe I'm not cut out for this," she said on the next round. "It's so different from playing at home in the parlor. I thought I knew how to play." *Don't overdo it*, she cautioned herself.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, miss. It takes time and practice. Plus a little something that, well . . . some have and some don't." Ringwald cut her another smile.

Was he flirting with her? Could she use that to her advantage? A frisson of danger tickled Lark's spine. *Careful . . .*

Another round, and time to discard. She kept her best cards and ordered herself to keep a straight face. Perhaps a tiny frown. Appearing to study her own cards, she watched Mr. Ringwald.

While the other men kept their focus on their hands, he kept an eye on the other players. His gaze followed when they picked up their cards, when they discarded. But why?

His dark eyes caught hers. Lark flashed a coy smile and ducked her gaze back to her hand. She ran her thumb over the edge of her cards, both spades. A good hand. But was that a slight dent in the corner of the ace? Her scalp prickled. It was. A dent as if from a fingernail. She'd heard of gamblers marking cards that way. And this was Ringwald's deck, wasn't it?

Her mind spinning, she focused back on the table. The pile of chips in the center grew. Holt, Ringwald, and Lark were still in. Holt called and laid out his cards. The gambler did the same. Lark flinched and laid hers down. A queen and a ten.

“Does this mean I won?” She injected a note of astonishment into her voice. Holt pushed the pile of chips toward her. “Oh, good, now I can keep playing.” She stacked them carefully to the side and sent Ringwald a delighted smile.

He nodded, though his eyes studied her.

Careful, he'll be on to you. Or know you're on to him.

She lost the next hand and better than half her stash. “Maybe I better quit. I hate to slow you all down.”

“Ah, miss, that’s just part of the game,” Ringwald said. “Perhaps your luck will turn.”

She heaved a sigh and nodded. “I s’pose.” She glanced at Jonah, who shrugged, sticking to his part.

“All right.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I sure hope my big brother doesn’t come in here and drag me out.”

The words rang partly true. She’d lost all track of time during the game, but night had fallen outside the saloon windows. Bonnie Belle lit the lamps inside. Holt coughed and pulled out a handkerchief to blow his nose.

“Anyone for changing the game?” Ringwald shuffled the cards while he looked around the table.

“To what?” she asked.

“Oh, let’s say five-card draw?”

“But you don’t have to draw five each time, right?”

“That’s right, miss. We just have five cards in our hand instead of two.”

She won the first hand and beamed at the gambler. “Thank you. I like this game better.”

“Glad to be of service, my lady.” Ringwald dealt the next hand.

She watched the pile of chips in the center of the table grow,

monitoring her hand but watching Ringwald more, her certainty increasing that he had marked the cards. She caught several more in her hand with fingernail scores, so tiny others probably wouldn't notice.

The fourth time around the table, Bernie laid his cards down. Jonah only had two chips left, so he shook his head. "Good luck, sis."

Holt met the raise and stared at Ringwald. Lark pretended to count her chips, then did the same.

The three of them laid their cards down. Ringwald won with a straight.

Bernie slapped the table and muttered something Lark pretended not to hear.

"What luck." Mr. Holt's voice rang faintly ironic.

On the next round, Lark watched Ringwald so closely that she didn't pay much attention to her own hand and discarded one she shouldn't have. But the gambler seemed to be able to tell when other players were bluffing, and she even thought she saw a tiny ink mark on the back of a couple of the cards. If she was right, no wonder he could tell what other players would do.

"I raise ya two." Holt threw in his chips and laid his cards face down.

Both Lark and Slate complied.

Holt fanned out his cards. Two pairs.

"Tough luck, Holt." Ringwald blew another smoke ring and laid his cards out. A straight flush.

He shouldn't have gotten that, not after winning the last round with a straight. The odds were too high. Lark spread her cards, three of a kind. A decent hand, but not good enough. Not against a cheat.

"Well, perhaps we should call it a night." His grin flashing with its gold tooth, Ringwald raked in his winnings. "Bonnie Belle, change these chips to cash for me, please?"

“Excuse me, sir, but I don’t think I’m ready to quit.” Lark straightened her shoulders and met the gambler’s surprised gaze. “I’m just beginning to understand the finer points of this game. And isn’t it only polite to let the rest of us try to recoup?”

Ringwald chuckled without humor. “Bit late for a proper lady like yourself to be out, isn’t it?”

She turned to Jonah with pleading eyes, inwardly urging him to go along with her charade. “You don’t think Anders will come after me just yet, do you?”

Jonah hesitated. “Guess not.”

Ringwald grunted. “Fine.” He grabbed for the cards. “Let’s get to it, then.”

This time she needed to let Ringwald know she knew he was cheating. Not too obviously, though, or he’d be humiliated and thrown out of the saloon—and that wouldn’t end well for any of them. She could feel tremors beginning in the pit of her stomach.

She turned to Bonnie Belle. “Could I please have something to drink?”

“Of course. What can I get you? Perhaps a sarsaparilla?”

Lark glanced at her brother, who nodded.

“Don’t you worry, miss, it can’t hurt ya none,” Bonnie assured her. “Coming right up.”

“Thank you.” Lark glanced at Ringwald in time to catch a slight smirk just before he downed the glass by his hand. It seemed to her he’d had a number of drinks, since Bonnie Belle kept his glass full. Might that work in her favor?

“Can we get back to our game?”

Lark picked up the sarcasm that sugared the gambler’s words. He wasn’t flirting now. “Oh, of course. I’m sorry to cause a problem.” She fluttered her hands some as she settled herself back in the chair and sent him an apologetic glance. “Please, go ahead.” She wished she dared ask him to put out his cigar in the ashtray by his hand.

Ringwald dealt the cards, his movements faster now, as if he couldn't wait to get the game over with.

The round went quickly this time, and Ringwald kept his bets low. No doubt wanting to protect his winnings. Soon they all spread their cards on the table. Holt won.

"Well, that's more like it." With a relieved grin, Holt gathered the modest pile of chips.

Ringwald would want to quit before losing any more. If she was going to make her move, it had to be now.

Lark bumped her glass of sarsaparilla with her elbow. The bubbly brown liquid sloshed over the table, ruining many of the still-scattered cards.

Ringwald swore, shoving his chair back out of the way of the spill. "What in tarnation?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Lark pressed her hand to her mouth. "How clumsy of me. We'll have to get new cards." She lifted her gaze to Ringwald's, narrowing her eyes below her fluttered lashes.

He stared at her. Red crept up his neck, though it might only be noticed by someone watching him carefully.

Good, he got her point. Or *was* that a good thing?

"Not to worry, Miss Nielsen." His voice calmer, the gambler flicked a drop from his sleeve with exaggerated coolness and reached in his coat pocket. "I have another deck."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to risk your cards around a butterfingers like me again." Lark fluttered her hands as the hostess cleaned up the mess. "Bonnie Belle, doesn't the saloon have a deck we could use?"

The hostess hesitated, then nodded. "I'll get it, miss."

Mr. Holt and Bernie exchanged glances. Jonah jiggled his foot. Mr. Ringwald withdrew his hand from his pocket, the red of his face turning deeper.

Everyone knew now. Lark avoided Jonah's gaze, her heart beating fast while she kept the innocent look firm on her face.

Had she made a mistake? But the gambler needed to be stopped somehow.

“Here you are, Slate.” Bonnie Belle laid a fresh deck in front of the gambler.

“Fine.” Ringwald snatched up the deck. “Let’s speed this up a mite. Haven’t got all night.” He shuffled, some cards slipping through his fingers in his haste, then dealt, the cards flying toward the players so hard that a couple landed on the floor.

Jonah bent to pick them up and used the chance to whisper to Lark. “You’ve made him mad.”

She knew that. But maybe he would slip up.

Ringwald started the betting so high that Lark swallowed.

“Your turn, Miss Nielsen.”

The knives in the gambler’s voice tightened Lark’s chest. She counted out the required number of chips and glanced at Jonah. Both he and Bernie shook their heads. She figured neither one had enough left to meet the bet. She slid her chips into the center and waited for Mr. Holt. Surely it wouldn’t be just her and this scoundrel.

Ringwald took a long draw on his cigar, puffing an eye-stinging cloud of smoke in her face. “Raise you five.”

Lark and Holt both complied.

“Think you can go five more?” Ringwald stared at Lark, his gaze daring her. A muscle in his jaw jumped.

She half shrugged and slid the required amount to the center. Her stomach clenched, but she made sure her face didn’t show it. She had a good hand, but everything rested on Ringwald being too thrown off by losing his deck to be careful. Her mind kept muttering, *Please, God. Please, God.* Never in her life had she prayed for such a thing as this.

“I raise ya two.” Holt threw in his chips and laid his cards face down.

Both Lark and Slate complied. The gambler threw his chips in

the center of the table and took another swig from his glass. His dark eyes watched her—unreadable—but his fingers twitched on the table.

Mr. Holt laid out his hand. Three of a kind.

Ringwald slapped his down. A high card, but that was it.

Lark laid out hers. A flush.

“Well, I’ll be.” Holt chuckled. “That’s it for me.”

“Another round.” It was not a question. Ringwald gathered the cards while Lark did the same with the chips she’d just won.

She made sure she didn’t look at Jonah or Bernie. She’d never seen this much money at one time in her life. She straightened her back, wanting nothing more than to go home and crawl into bed. Reaching into her reticule, she withdrew her fan, spread it, and fanned herself gently as if she’d not a care in the world.

This time Ringwald’s hands visibly shook as he dealt the cards for the final round. A vein pulsed in his neck.

Lord, what have I done?

“How many?” Venom laced the words.

Lark studied the cards in her hand. Three of a kind already. How could he have dealt her a hand like this? “One, please.” She laid one card down and slid the new one into her hand. Another six, giving her a pair. *Thank you, Lord God.* She nodded.

When her turn came again, Lark laid out her cards—a full house—as did Ringwald—two pairs.

Jonah knocked his chair over leaping to his feet, Bernie right along with him.

“Congratulations, Miss Nielsen. I’ve never seen anything quite like this.” Holt stayed in his chair, watching the gambler, whose ears seemed about to emit steam.

“Thank you, Mr. Ringwald. Especially for your encouragement when I was about to stop.” Larkspur waited, sensing his gaze on her, while Bonnie Belle exchanged the chips for cash.

The phrase “only by the grace of God” swam through the clamor in Lark’s mind.

“Never seen a lady play like that.” Ringwald bit out the words around the cigar in his mouth. “Might think you knew what you were doing all along.”

“Now, how could I do that?” Lark stood from the table and lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “But since I won, I’ll thank you to release the title to the land I hear this young gentleman bet.” She gestured to Bernie. “I’ll pay whatever recompense is needed from these winnings. And the horse and saddle you lifted off some other young player too.”

The gambler lunged to his feet, his chair crashing over.

“Why, you little—” Muttering something vile under his breath, Ringwald snatched the deed from inside his coat and threw it on the table. “Fine. You can have your land back.” He glared at the cowering Bernie. “And that other numskull can have his horse and saddle, for all I care.”

“Please allow me to reimburse you, Mr. Ringwald.” Larkspur held her voice steady.

“I won’t take money from a woman. Even a shameless hussy like you.” The gambler stepped near, so close she could smell his breath and see the glint of his gold tooth. “But don’t think I’ll forget you, Miss Nielsen. You’d do best to steer clear of me, or you’ll have more than your sniveling brother and his friends to worry about.”