

Chapter One

*Medicine Bow Mountains, Wyoming Territory
November, 1868*

Katherine Fleming looked away from the sheriff carrying Miss Howard's battered trunk toward the long, black carriage. The train lurched, rolled forward. She blinked the tears from her eyes and jiggled the crying, squirming infant in her arms. Poor baby. Two months old and all alone. Did he sense it? Was that why he was crying so hard?

"Shh...shh...don't be afraid, little one. Everything will be all right. I'll take care of you." Her stomach knotted. How could she keep that promise? She knew nothing of caring for an infant, and there was no one to ask. The last of the other women passengers had left the train here at Laramie. Panic struck. How far was it to Whisper Creek? That had been the destination on Susan Howard's ticket. Was she making a mistake? Would it be better for the baby if she turned him over to the sheriff in spite of her pledge to take him to his new father?

She looked back out the window, torn by indecision. It wasn't a mere pledge she'd made; it was a deathbed promise. Of course, she hadn't known at the time it would be impossible to keep. Miss Howard had begged her, muttered something incoherent about a letter with her last breath. The dying woman had been frantic about what would happen to her child, and so she'd made the promise to give her peace. But she had not found a letter among Miss Howard's sparse possessions. How could she take the baby to a man when she knew nothing about him—not even his name?

She frowned, watched the sheriff shove the trunk into the black carriage. And she didn't know Susan Howard; she'd never met the woman before she'd boarded the train. Surely that freed her from her promise. Oh, what did it matter? She held a helpless little piece of humanity in her arms. She couldn't abandon him. Her stomach churned. The thought of the baby being put in an orphan home made her ill. So many young babies died. She would simply have to do her best for him.

The wheels clacked against the rails. The train picked up speed. Her breath came easier. It was too late to turn the baby over now. He stiffened and let out a wail. She lifted him to her shoulder and patted his back the way his mother had instructed her to do.

"I'm sorry I'm not better at caring for you, little one. But I've had no experience at this sort of thing." She cooed the words, patted and rubbed the baby's tiny back, feeling completely inadequate.

The infant burped, then fell asleep on her shoulder, his downy hair brushing her cheek, his breath a feathery warmth against her neck. Her heart swelled. She held Susan Howard's son close, allowed herself to pretend for a moment that Richard hadn't disappeared at sea—that they had married as planned and this was their child.

"Almighty God, please let Richard be alive and well. Please bring him home." Her whispered words were automatic. Only the smallest trace of her former faith remained after having repeated the prayer hundreds of times. It had been almost five years since the devastating loss of her lifelong love. It was a long time to hold on to hope. Still, she refused to let go of her last remaining strands of trust that God, in His mercy, would bring Richard home and fill the gaping hole his disappearance had left in her heart.

The passenger car jolted, swayed. She grabbed for the wobbling empty baby bottle and tucked it back into the baby's valise where it would be safe until she could clean it. Her fingertips touched paper. The baby's birth papers? Hope rose that it might be so. It wouldn't help her in her quest for his new father, but at least she would learn the baby's name. She pulled the valise closer, grasped the exposed corner of the paper and pulled it from beneath the baby clothes and diapers. It was a letter. Perhaps the one Susan Howard had been mumbling about. Her pulse sped. She pushed the valise to the end of the seat, slid close to the window and held the letter up to the fingers of sunlight that poked through clean spots in the film of soot.

My Dear Miss Howard,

I received your letter yesterday and am setting pen to paper this evening to tell you I am willing to accept your infant boy and raise him as my own. My acceptance of your infant was the last obstacle in the way of our proposed marriage arrangement. That detail is now settled.

Time is growing short. I am enclosing the train ticket you will need for your journey here to Whisper Creek. I am also enclosing money sufficient to meet any expenses you may incur.

All things necessary to carry out our arrangement will be in place upon your arrival.

With sincere gratitude,

Mr. Trace Warren

Katherine read the letter again, annoyed by the formal tone. A marriage *arrangement*? How emotionless. There was not a single word of warmth or kindness in the missive. How desperate Miss Howard must have been to have agreed to marry this cold man. And now Mr. Warren would be the guardian of this helpless little baby. If he still accepted the child.

She sat bolt upright, staring at the letter. What if he didn't? What if Mr. Warren refused to accept the baby to raise without the mother? Her excuse of keeping the infant to deliver him to his new father would be gone. Would she have to turn the baby over to the authorities? Her stomach flopped. What sort of legal situation had she gotten herself into? Well, there was no help for it now. And she would do the same thing again. Susan Howard had been desperately ill, and it wasn't in her to ignore the distress of a woman too sick to care for her baby. It had been the morally upright thing to do.

She folded the letter, reached down to tuck it back in the valise and spotted faint, shaky writing on the back. She held the letter back up to the window.

My name is Miss Susan Howard. I am ill, and without hope of recovery. I have an infant son, born out of wedlock, whom his father has disavowed, and whom Mr. Trace Warren of Whisper Creek, Wyoming Territory, has accepted to raise as his own child in this letter. I, therefore, give Mr. Trace Warren full custody of my baby, this day, the 19th of November, 1868, and ask only that he care for him with love.

Miss Susan Howard

The letter trembled in her hand. Tears blurred her vision. A sob caught at her throat. That answered her question. The baby was now Mr. Trace Warren's son. She hugged the infant closer, her heart aching for the young mother who had written the note giving her baby into the hands of a stranger. *She* couldn't bear the thought that the helpless baby might be unloved or mistreated. What agony Miss Howard must have suffered when she wrote those words.

She started to put the letter in the valise, decided it was too valuable to take a chance, that it might become lost or damaged, and tucked it in her purse instead. The baby whimpered. She placed her cheek against his soft, silky hair, lifted her free hand and cuddled him closer. "Shh... Don't worry, little one. Everything will be all right...shh...shh..."

The baby quieted, made tiny little sucking noises. She tucked his blanket closer around his little feet, felt the soft booties knitted by his mother. Tears stung her eyes. *I'll keep my promise, Miss Howard. I'll find Mr. Warren, and I'll make sure he will take good care of your baby boy, or—* Her thoughts froze.

She stared out the sooty window and rocked the baby to and fro with the sway of the train, thinking about that small word. *Or*. It had come unbidden from her conscience and her heart. What was she to do about it? Keep the baby? How? She had sold her home. Could she take the baby with her to visit her sister at Fort Bridger? Judith and her husband were still childless after six years of marriage. Perhaps they would want to keep the baby for their own.

Follow that still, small voice inside you, Katherine. The Lord will lead you.

Her pulse steadied. It was the advice her mother always gave when she went to her with a problem. Oh, how much easier this would be if she had the strength of her mother's faith to lean on. Her own faith had become tattered and frail. She sighed, leaned back against the seat, listened to the rhythmic clack of the wheels against the rails and tried to relax. A solution would present itself. At least she now knew the name of the man she was looking for.

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Trace Warren halted the horse, climbed from the runabout and looped the reins over the hitching rail. Two quick blasts of the whistle on the approaching train rent the air. The mare stomped her front hoofs and snorted. He reached out and patted her neck. "It's all right, girl. It's only a noise. Nothing is going to hurt you. Or me."

He glanced at the train, focusing on the passenger car trailing behind the locomotive and tender. Bitterness surged. If he was supposed to have a wife and child, why couldn't it have been his own? Why were they lying in a grave in New York, while he was about to enter a sham of a marriage with a woman he didn't know and a baby he didn't want to care about?

He set his jaw, tugged his jacket into place and climbed the steps to the station platform. At least Miss Howard had agreed that they would live their lives as separate as possible while sharing the same dwelling. Thankfully, he'd built a large house! There would be no reason for accidental meetings.

The beam of light from the locomotive widened, swept over the depot then narrowed again as the engine rolled by and came to a stop. Steam puffed into the air, turning the station oil lamps into a momentary blur. He moved through the quickly dissipating vapor to stand at the bottom of the passenger-car steps and look up at the small platform. The porter opened the door then lit the oil lamp beside it. A young woman holding a swaddled baby and carrying a small valise stepped out onto the platform. His stomach knotted. He squared his shoulders, removed his hat and took a step forward. "Miss Howard?"

The woman started, gazed down at him. Her eyes looked like they were made from the petals of violets—petals picked on a frosty day. She shook her head. "No. I'm not Miss Howard."

"I beg your pardon." He glanced at the man coming out of the door behind her, made a small, polite bow and stepped back to clear their way to the station.

"Wait!" The woman descended, raking an assessing gaze over him. "Are you Mr. Warren?"

He gave a curt nod, his attention focused on the passengers exiting the car behind her—all men. He glanced back at the woman, more than a little put off by her cool tone. Her words clicked into his awareness. "How do you know my name?"

She lifted her hand holding the valise and braced the baby with her arm. "Is there somewhere we can sit down and talk, Mr. Warren? I am not Susan Howard, but I *am* the woman you are seeking."

He stared at her a moment, puzzling over her statement, then looked down at the bundle in her arms and nodded. "There is a bench on the platform out of the wind. If you'll permit me to assist you..." He took the valise, grasped her elbow with his free hand and guided her to the bench against the wall of the depot. "Now, if you would please explain, Miss..."

"Fleming. I am Miss Katherine Fleming from New York."

He touched the brim of his hat, dipped his head. "Forgive me for being blunt, Miss Fleming, but I don't understand, how—"

"I met Miss Susan Howard on the train. This is her baby." Katherine Fleming took an unsteady breath, looked down at the tiny bundle then raised her gaze to meet his.

"And why do you have Miss Howard's child?" He glanced at the passenger car, irritated by this woman's interference. "Where is Miss Howard?"

"She passed away early this morning, Mr. Warren. They—they took her and her possessions from the train at the Laramie Station."

"*She's passed away!*" He jerked his gaze back to Katherine Fleming. Suspicion reared. Was this some sort of blackmail scheme? "Perhaps you would be good enough to explain the circumstances, Miss Fleming."

Her shoulders stiffened. "That's why I'm here, Mr. Warren." The baby whimpered. She patted its back and swayed. "When I boarded the train, Miss Howard was very ill. I tended the baby and cared for Miss Howard as best I could, but her condition deteriorated. She—" Pink flowed into Katherine Fleming's cheeks. She took a breath and looked full into his eyes. "When she knew her health was failing, Miss Howard told me the...conditions...of her baby's birth, and that she was on her way to marry you because you had agreed to raise the baby as your own. She begged me to bring her baby to you. I promised to do so." She took another breath and opened the purse dangling from her wrist. "I found this letter in the baby's valise." She held it up to him.

He took the letter, went taut. It was his last letter to Miss Howard.

"There is a note on the back."

Miss Fleming's voice broke. He glanced at her, saw the lamplight reflected by the shimmer of tears in her eyes and turned his letter over.

My name is Miss Susan Howard. I am ill, and without hope of recovery. The words struck the pit of his stomach like a hard-driven fist, froze the air in his lungs. He forced himself to read on, made himself concentrate on the details to calm the pulse pounding through his veins and roaring in his ears. He was the guardian of the child of a woman he'd never met! He folded the letter and slid it in his pocket to gain time to gather his shattered thoughts. Being an ex-doctor, he was accustomed to handling emergencies in a calm, deliberate manner, but this...this was beyond belief! He had a shop to run! What was he to do with an infant without a mother in a town where there was no woman available to hire as a nurse? Was this God's retribution

for his turning away from his faith when his wife and unborn child died? Was the agony of his loss coupled with his guilt at being unable to save them not enough punishment?