

Chapter One

Medicine Bow Mountains, Wyoming Territory
August, 1868

“Next stop, Whisper Creek!”

Audrey Prescott caught her breath. They were almost there! A sharp spasm in her stomach pulled her gaze from the mountains she'd been watching outside the soot-filmed window. More than a few of the soldiers sharing the passenger car on this last leg of her long journey from New York were staring at her with open admiration. Heat crawled into her cheeks. She locked her gaze on the lanky conductor standing just inside the door, his legs splayed against the rocking of the train.

“We'll be stopping at Whisper Creek long enough to take on water and coal. You're all welcome to get out and stretch your legs if you're of a mind to, but we won't be more than twenty minutes at most, so don't wander off. The town's raw and there's no food available—and no drink. Town's dry.” The conductor's piercing gaze slid her direction; a smile warmed his face. “I'll be unloading your trunks for you, Miss Prescott.” He stepped back outside onto a small platform and closed the door.

Her trunks. Another spasm struck her stomach. What would Blake Latherop think when he saw her standing beside them at the station? The rhythmic clack of the train's wheels against the rails, the rocking of the car as they rolled down the tracks were suddenly a comfort she did not want to stop. The train swayed around a mountain wall, blasted its whistle, then chugged through a growth of tall pines and entered a long, broad valley. She stared out the window at the vast field of grasses bisected by steel rails, her stomach roiling.

What had she been thinking, coming to Whisper Creek in Linda's place? Her plan was foolishness—pure foolishness. She winced, opened her purse and withdrew Blake Latherop's last letter to her sister. The paper shook. She frowned at the display of nerves and scanned the words she'd read so often she knew them by heart.

My Beloved,

At last! My dearest Linda, it is with great joy I write to tell you the construction of my store is finished. The first of the goods and supplies I have ordered came on Tuesday's train, and I stocked the shelves this very evening. Tomorrow morning, I will hang the Open sign on the door.

My beloved, there is nothing to stand between us now. Our living quarters upstairs over the store are also completed. It is my hope that the furniture I've purchased comes in time for me to have it in place for your arrival.

My dearest Linda, hurry to me. As I told you when I asked for your hand before I came West, the contract I had to sign in order to receive the free land and building lumber in this new town states that I must marry within thirty days of opening my business or I lose the store and all I have invested in it to Mr. Ferndale, the town's founder. That investment, dearest, is the total of the inheritance I received from my mother that I told you of. But do not fret. Once the town grows, I am confident the store will provide us a comfortable, even prosperous living.

I am enclosing the railroad ticket for your journey to Whisper Creek, as well as money enough to cover any expenses you may incur. Don't waste a moment, my dearest. Our future depends on you. And I am emboldened, as your betrothed, to tell you I am eager to again look upon your beautiful face and form and to hold you in my arms and pledge to you my undying

love.

Until you arrive, I remain your impatiently waiting, always faithful,
Blake

The train's whistle blew again. Audrey closed her eyes, fighting a rush of panic. What was she doing here? How could she ever have thought of such an insane scheme? The clacking of the wheels slowed. It was a matter of minutes now. The knots in her stomach twisted tighter. She opened her eyes and stared down at the letter fluttering in her hand, guilt swarming. She should never have answered Blake's letters when Linda asked her. But she'd wanted to believe her sister had changed, that Linda really did intend to marry Blake. And when Linda had gone off on her month-long visit with friends, what else could she do with Blake so far away and anxiously awaiting a response from his betrothed?

She refolded the letter and ran her fingertip along the crease. Blake wrote beautiful letters full of plans and hope for the future. They deserved a respectful reply, not a careless dismissal! Still, she should have warned Blake that Linda liked to string a beau along until someone new took her fancy. But she'd hated the thought of hurting him—and of being disloyal to Linda. Oh, if only she'd known about the contract Blake had signed on the strength of Linda's pledge of marriage!

Our future depends on you. Her face tightened. The guilt that had driven her to board the train for Whisper Creek surged. She drew a deep breath and pressed her hand against her stomach, hoping she wouldn't be sick—though it was no more than she deserved. *Dear Lord, I know it's foolishness, but please let my plan work. Please help me to make amends for writing those letters. I didn't know the true situation, and—*

The train jerked, jerked again and came to a stop. Her oft-repeated prayer blurred into an unarticulated plea from her heart. She peered out the window at a long, plain building shadowed by two huge tubs sitting high on splayed legs and attempted to gather her courage. The engineer and fireman hopped from the train, trotted to the second tub and swung its black-stained chute into place above the coal car. The fireman pulled a cord and coal tumbled down the chute, black dust puffing against the rose-streaked dusk sky. She shifted her gaze to the wood sign hanging from the deep eaves of the depot's roof—Whisper Creek Station, Union Pacific Railroad.

If you're so worried about Blake, Audrey, you go marry him!

Bile crept into her throat. Challenging Linda to do the right thing and keep her promise to marry Blake had only made her sister more determined to have her way. Nothing interfered with Linda's "fun." Certainly not a little thing like a promise! Audrey swallowed hard and slipped the letter back into her purse. She never should have picked it up when Linda threw it at her and flounced from the room. But it was too late to think of that now. It was too late for anything but clinging to the foolish mission that had brought her here.

Movement caught her attention. The soldiers were standing, waiting for her to detrain first. She dipped her head to acknowledge their politeness, lifted her satchel off the seat beside her and walked to the door. *Blake!* She froze, stared at her sister's fiancé hurrying toward the steps the conductor had shoved into place. The strength left her legs. She grabbed for the edge of the door and turned back, but her way into the passenger car was blocked by the line of soldiers behind her.

"Linda, dar—*Audrey!*" Blake stared up at her, blinked then made a visible effort to collect himself. "I didn't know that you were—I mean— How nice to see you again, Audrey." Blake stumbled over the polite words, reached up to take her satchel.

"And you, Blake." She took a steadying breath, placed her hand in his proffered one and stepped down. He peered behind her, and the eager joy in his expression died. His gaze lifted to the soldier who followed her from the train, raised to the next, then came back and fastened on her. She forced herself to look into his eyes and answer the question that hovered there. "Linda's not on the train, Blake. She's not coming."

"Not com—" His face paled. "Is she *ill*? Or—"

She shook her head, pushed at the unruly curls on her forehead and wished she hadn't come either. How could her plan ever have seemed *sensible*? "No, Linda's not ill. It's—" She glanced at the soldiers milling about, took another breath to squelch her nerves and looked back at Blake. Worry shadowed the handsome face she remembered so well. "It's...complicated. Is there someplace we can go to talk?"

"My store." He took hold of her elbow and led her toward the steps.

"Wait! My trunks..." She stopped, glanced over her shoulder at the two trunks sitting on the platform close to the tracks.

"*Trunks?*" His gaze bored into hers.

“It’s a long journey.” She winced inwardly at the lame response, but she couldn’t just blurt out the truth. She needed time to prepare him for that. She did her best not to squirm beneath his long, measuring look.

“They’ll be safe here at the station. Fortunately, an eastbound train arrives in about an hour.” He frowned and urged her forward. “Forgive me, Audrey. I don’t mean to sound rude or unwelcoming. But there is no place in town for you to overnight.”

“But, I’m—” She bit off the words and nodded. “All right. If you’re certain they will be safe.”

He gave a curt nod, ushered her down the steps, then released her elbow. A sound of hammering vied with the whisper of coal sliding down the chute and dropping into the tender car. She lifted the hems of her green gown above the trodden dirt and walked forward eyeing the new buildings framed on either side by the skeletons of more buildings under construction at the end of the road. Behind the raw, unpainted structures, a waterfall gushed from a mountain to splash and dance down a massive rock face to where dark pines sprawled in dwarfed splendor. A creek shimmered its way between the trees and flowed away down the length of the broad valley. The cluster of buildings looked puny against the towering mountains. She stopped and tilted her head back to look up at the snowcapped peaks. “I’ve never seen anything like these mountains. They’re breathtakingly beautiful but...frightening. I—I feel so...small.”

“They take you like that at first.”

Blake’s tone didn’t invite any more casual comments. She walked on beside him, looking at the beginning of Whisper Creek village. Would the new town become her home for a while? She glanced at Blake through her lowered lashes. He looked distressed, concerned. Would he even listen to her plan after he learned—

“Here we are.” He shifted her satchel to his left hand, helped her up the steps, then crossed the deep porch and opened the door.

She moved forward into his store and inhaled the scent of newness, then waited for Blake to lead her to where he intended for them to talk.

He closed the door, set her satchel on the floor and faced her. “Again, I don’t mean to be rude, Audrey. But where is Linda? We’re supposed to be married today. If she’s not ill, why is she not here? What has happened to her?”

The strain in Blake’s voice brought the guilt washing over her. She clenched her fingers around the cord on her purse and wished it was her sister’s pretty neck. “I don’t know where Linda is, Blake. She...married two weeks ago and left town. I’ve not heard from her since. Of course, I’ve been traveling the last—”

“Linda is *wed* to another?”

She couldn’t tell if his harsh, choked tone was caused by pain or anger—probably both. “Yes.” She rushed to push out words to ease the shock of the news. “I’m sorry—”

“*Sorry!* My *betrotted* has given herself to another, and you’re *sorry?*”

The words exploded from him. She flinched, then pressed her lips together against the useless words of sympathy. There was nothing she could say. It was too late. She should have warned him of Linda’s flirtatious nature when he first started courting her—though he wouldn’t have listened. None of Linda’s conquests did. They were all too blinded by her blond beauty, too smitten by her womanly charms and coquettish manner. Still, she should have tried. The guilt held her mute.

Blake strode away from her toward the interior of the store and stopped. He sucked in a sharp, ragged breath. “I *believed* her. I built this store—our home upstairs—on the strength of my faith in our love. How could I have been so *wrong*? Her letters were so full of love and caring...”

My letters. The guilt bit deeper. There was no mistaking the agony in Blake’s voice. She glanced at the door wanting to leave, to not have to witness the pain Linda’s selfish behavior had caused, but Blake’s situation was dire and time was short—and she was his solution. *Dear Lord, give me strength.* She braced herself for his reaction to her absurd plan. “That’s why I’ve come, Blake. Because of the store.”

He turned, stared and raked his fingers through his hair. “Forgive me, Audrey, I forgot that you were here. I—What?”

“I said that I’m aware of your situation, and I’ve come because I believe there is a way you can keep your store.” *Please, Lord, let it be so.*

“Keep my store?” Awareness flickered through the shock in his eyes. His face went taut. “No. That’s impossible now. There are only four days remaining before—” He clamped his lips shut, turned away.

“Before you must marry.” How cruel that sounded.

Blake stiffened, spun back around and walked to her, anger in every line of his body. “I appreciate you coming all this way to deliver the news of Linda’s betrayal in person, Audrey. But, as you’ve experienced

betrayal yourself, I'm sure you'll understand that I'm in no mood for polite commiseration—no matter how sincere.” A muscle along his jaw twitched. His hands clenched. “As I said earlier, a train headed east comes through in about an hour. It's the last one today. As there is as yet no restaurant in town where you can wait in comfort, I'm afraid the bench at the station will have to do. I have to go tell Pastor Karl there will be no wedding. He will have heard the train arrive and will be expecting—” Pain flashed in his eyes. His lips clamped tight again. He bent and picked up her satchel. “I'll walk you back to the depot.”

She shook her head, his reference to her ex-beau John Barker bringing the pain of being a second-best castoff surging forth, and strengthening her resolve to spare Blake as much pain as possible. “I'm not going home, Blake. At least, not unless you tell me to.” He jerked away from the door and stared at her. She looked at his tight mouth, at the pulsing vein at his left temple and blurted out her plan before he dragged her out the door. “I came to marry you.”