

THE SHEPHERD'S HEART



BOOK ONE

Rocky Mountain OASIS

LYNNETTE BONNER

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THE SHEPHERD'S HEART



Rocky Mountain Oasis

BOOK ONE

High Desert Haven

BOOK TWO

Fair Valley Refuge

BOOK THREE



Rocky Mountain Oasis is an intriguing tale with the perfect blend of suspense, drama, and romance—told with rich description and deep characterization. I didn't have to read far into the story to know this book belongs on my keeper shelf.

Best keep your eyes on Lynnette Bonner. She's a gifted storyteller.

—**SHARLENE MACLAREN**, Author
Through Every Storm, Long Journey Home
Little Hickman Creek Series
The Daughters of Jacob Kane Series

Prologue

Pierce City, Idaho Territory
June 1885

“**H**e cheat us. We get to Lewiston to buy flour and we discover these.” Louise gestured to the buckskin bag and its spilled contents.

David Fraser’s stomach knotted into a tight ball of dread at the words. He fingered the pea-sized rocks on the counter absently, his eyes darting over the interior of his store as he consciously avoided the eyes of the woman before him.

The mercantile was dim despite the sunlight filtering in from the open doorway. Particles of dust danced in the shaft of light, spinning crazily in the dry breeze. His blue eyes flitted nervously to the barrel by the door, filled with picks, shovels, and sundry other tools used in the profession of mining, then darted on to the casks and barrels lining the walls of the small square room. These contained various food stuffs—flour, sugar, coffee, beans, and molasses among them—and scented the room with a heady, pungent aroma. He paced towards the small window to the right of the door, which displayed such luxuries as a coal-oil lamp, a small clock, a gold pocket watch, and even a phonograph which had been sitting there since the opening of the store in the 1860s, but did not pause to dust the phonograph as he usually did each time he passed it.

What could Chang be thinking?

Fraser rubbed the back of his neck and turned to stare at the back wall of the store, where a doorway led to his sleeping quarters. The cascade of multicolored beads that curtained off this entryway blurred as he paced towards it without seeing, mulling over the news he’d just

heard. He ran his hand through the strings of beads and they made a soothing clatter that could be heard all over the small room.

Spinning back around, he let his eyes rest for the briefest of seconds on the lady awaiting his reply and then turned once again to peruse his store. He wasn't yet ready to answer her.

Trying to ignore the cramping in his stomach he glanced at the shelves behind his counter and sighed as he noticed the two bolts of cloth that rested there. One was a functional black denim, the other a frivolous, creamy peach calico. His face softened, for even in his present state of mind he remembered the day his wife had insisted on buying the material. That was during the boomtown years when feminine presence was not so scarce in this country. Since then she had passed on, and not even his daughter, Alice, lived in the area anymore to make use of the material, so it sat collecting dust on the shelf.

When the gold had petered out, many of the citizens of Pierce City had moved on, taking with them wives and daughters, and leaving the area almost uninhabited by the feminine side of society. Some hearty women, however, stayed with their husbands or lived in the hills surrounding the city—all of them either Chinese or Indian.

Fraser could not ignore Louise, the diminutive Nez Perce woman at his counter any longer. He didn't want to ignore her any longer. *But what can I do?*

Pacing back towards her, he leaned his elbows on the counter and looked at her. She stood in soft, colorfully beaded buckskins, the fringe rattling softly each time she moved. Her dark hair hung in one long braid down her back. In her arms she held her friend Jane's sleeping baby. His sweet pink mouth moved in a sucking motion, his chin keeping rhythm with his lips. Fraser smiled at him for a moment before his gaze dropped to the counter between them, becoming serious. "You're telling me that Lee Chang gave you these in trade for your produce last month?"

Louise looked at him with solemn brown eyes for several seconds. Then she nodded once, her eyes never leaving his. Bouncing the baby softly, she waited for his response to her dilemma.

Fraser reached up with his left hand to rub the back of his neck. Sweat, not entirely a result of the heat, trickled down his forehead in

glistening rivulets. He raised a forearm and swiped it across his brow, glancing outside with a frown. The hot afternoon sun beat down on the dirt road in front of his mercantile and a billow of dust drifted in as a wagon filled with mining equipment trundled by. His stomach clenched with dread. Lee Chang was the last person in town he wanted to deal with. He glanced back at Louise, fingering the gold-covered rocks that sat on the rough wooden counter between them. "You are sure this came from Chang?" He lifted her small buckskin bag, emptying the rest of its contents into his palm, and raised one eyebrow, glancing at her.

She solemnly nodded again. Pulling out another small leather pouch, she tossed it on the counter in front of him. "This he give to Running Fawn." Another bag followed. "This to Jane."

The women she mentioned all grew gardens in the woods near their homes on the North Fork of the Clearwater River, several miles from town. In the summer months they brought produce to town on a weekly basis for sale or trade. They worked on an honor system and were paid at the end of the month by the owners of the stores with whom they traded. It appeared that Lee Chang, owner of the mercantile down the street, had cheated the women out of last month's dues. When they had taken their gold to Lewiston to get some things they needed, they discovered that the grain-sized nuggets were not precious metal at all, but merely tiny rocks that had been carefully dipped in gold. The women had narrowly escaped being thrown into jail but managed to convince the authorities that they themselves had been deceived.

"Can they verify this?"

"I speak truth."

His gaze softened as he looked at her. "No, what I mean is, are Running Fawn and Jane willing to come to town and affirm what you have just told me?"

She glanced down at the baby for a moment, then met his eyes again. "They no want come. Not want lose Chinese business."

Fraser nodded his understanding, frowning as he looked back outside. The women feared that if they spoke out against Lee Chang, a highly respected businessman in the county—although Fraser always

had a hard time figuring out why—the many other Chinese would boycott their business. Since the Chinese in the area outnumbered the whites by more than twenty to one, they would certainly be out of business if the Chinese refused to buy from them. The loss of business would devastate them. *Still, what can I do about it?* He shrugged one shoulder. “If they won’t come and testify, there is nothing I can do to make this right.”

“You make sure happen no more.”

“You want me to talk to Chang?” He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat at the mere thought.

“You wise man. You good, kind man.” At this she looked at the ground shyly. Then she continued softly, glancing back into his blue eyes, “You talk, make better.”

Fraser sighed his frustration, rubbing the back of his neck. He liked the Indians, who were good, hard-working people, and knew that he would have tried to help even if Louise had not asked him to. Lately, he had found himself watching impatiently for Louise each Friday when she came to town. He didn’t know what he could do, but for the beautiful woman before him he would have faced down an angry she-bear ready to protect her cubs. He shook his head. “Look, I can’t promise that my talking to Lee will make him change his ways.”

She merely stared at him with trusting eyes.

He sighed again, rubbing a hand over his balding head. “But I will try. I’ll talk to him and see what I can do.” He smiled.

The slightest trace of a smile graced her mouth. She nodded once and glanced at the floor, satisfaction written on her face. She turned, and with head held high, walked gracefully out into the sunlight. Fraser watched her go, elbows on the counter, the bogus gold still held in his hand. *If I were a younger man...*

He was still leaning on the counter when Jason Jordan, his packer, came in the back door of the store. “Hey boss. The trip went well except for that cussed fog. I almost lost a mule comin’ up the ridge from Greer’s ferry this morning, but other than that, there were no mishaps. Price of grain is back up, though. I could only get about 90 percent of what you wanted. Even for that much I had to fight tooth and nail.”

He paused, glancing at Fraser as he slapped his hat against his pants

and a cloud of dust rose around him. When Fraser didn't look his way but merely kept staring out the door toward the street, Jason said, "Hey, you listenin' to me?"

Fraser turned, still lost in thought. "Hmmm? Yeah, the price of grain went up. I have to go talk to Lee Chang for a few minutes. Watch the store, will you?"



Jason's brow furrowed in puzzled speculation as he watched his boss put on his black bowler and step out onto Main Street. "Fraser talking to Chang?" he muttered. "Now what could that be about?"



Fraser took off his hat with a trembling hand as he entered Chang's store, only to find that the man he sought was not there.

Chang's wife squeezed out from behind the counter at the back of the store and extended her plump hand with a huge smile. "Mista Frasya—" she bowed—"a pleasya to see you here. You have come to buy me out of picks and shovels?" A twinkle glinted in her eye as she gestured to some barrels full of mining equipment.

Fraser chuckled. He liked Jenny Chang and had often wondered what she saw in her husband, whom she clearly adored. She always wore her black hair pulled back tightly from her plump face, accentuating the slant of her eyes. A smile inevitably danced in her gaze and played at the edges of her generous mouth.

"No, Mrs. Chang, I have plenty of picks and shovels. Actually, I was looking for Mr. Chang. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

"Lee is at the Joss house. He be back afta while."

"Thank you, Mrs. Chang, I think I will just go and see him there." He replaced his bowler, touched the brim, and walked out into the shimmering heat waves that danced along the street.

The Joss house, a two-story building on the south end of Main Street, served the Chinese as a combined saloon, gambling hall, boarding house, and temple. The bottom floor consisted of a kitchen, a

living-dining room, two bedrooms, and the large gambling room. The upper portion of the building housed the Chinese temple. Fraser didn't know any white man who had ever been permitted to enter the temple area.

As he walked down the street, clouds of dust puffing up with each step he took, Fraser thought about Lee Chang. Contrary to the fact that he had always liked Jenny, Fraser had never liked Chang. The man made him nervous. He was a pompous, overbearing egotist. Two small, stubby legs carried his large torso so that when he walked he looked rather like a fat round beetle walking upright on its back legs. He kept his long, greasy, black hair tied back with a bright red scarf, the ends of which trailed down his back. His upper lip was covered with an equally greasy, pencil-thin mustache, which draped until it touched the beginnings of a sparse, scraggly, black goatee that hung down a good ten inches from his double chin. Invariably protruding from his mouth was a clay pipe that spewed forth the sickly sweet smell of opium. His eyes were always glassy red, and a scar from an old knife fight trailed from the corner of his left eye down across his cheek, puckering it with a thin chalky trail.

Fraser had never trusted the man. Nevertheless, the Chinese of the community looked up to him. Despite the fact that he sold their children opium and made them his slaves when they could no longer afford to pay for the addiction that he himself had fostered, he had made something of himself.

Fraser knew several Chinese miners. Lee Chang collected all their gold. Their wages? The opium powder they so craved. Several white men Fraser had known also became addicted to Lee's opium. Their lives were never the same after that. They became enslaved and would do anything to get their hands on another dose. Women had turned to prostitution to support their habit. Men and women both had attempted robbery and even murder to fill the void that each new dose of powder seemed to leave in their souls. The irony was that the bigger the void, the more powder they seemed to think they needed, and the more they needed the bigger the hole got. A vicious, never-ending circle. Fraser had never understood how anyone could respect a man like Chang. Maybe it wasn't respect. Maybe it was pure fear that made

people fawn and grovel at his feet.

It wasn't fear that made Fraser clear his throat nervously as he pushed open the door of the rough-hewn log building that served as the Joss house. It was revulsion—a desire to stay as far from the man as possible. *Only for you, Louise.* He stepped inside.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior of the room. As he entered, every eye turned to stare at him. He nodded to an apron-clad, pig-tailed boy who was wiping down the bar and said plainly, "I am looking for Lee Chang." The boy's eyes shifted from Fraser to the back of the room where, in a dark corner, he could make out Chang's overstuffed form.

Chang watched with undisguised interest as Fraser walked across the dark room to his table. He removed the smoldering pipe from his mouth, gestured with the stem to a chair across the table, and replaced the pipe all in one fluid motion.

"I would like to talk to you for a moment if I may." Nodding towards the door, Fraser crossed his arms and ignored the proffered chair.

"We can talk here." Chang's English had always been excellent.

"It's a matter that might prove—" Fraser searched for the right word—"embarrassing to you. We should talk in private."

Chang laughed around the stem of his pipe, a sinister laugh that sent chills up and down Fraser's spine. "Nothing ever proves embarrassing to me, Mr. Fraser. You may speak freely."

Fraser pursed his lips, resigned. He didn't want to speak about this in front of everyone. On the other hand, he had given his word to Louise that he would talk to Chang. He pressed on. "Louise came to see me this morning." He watched Chang closely. Maybe he would change his mind and wish to talk privately. He had to know now where this conversation would lead.

Chang laughed again. A deep belly laugh. "She found my little surprise, did she? I wondered how long it would take them to discover it. They should have been able to figure it out from the weight alone." He squinted up at Fraser through the haze that surrounded his head. "Not very bright, those Indian women." He spat the word *Indian* as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Fraser's anger, which had slowly been building since his conversation with Louise, suddenly threatened to erupt. Not only did this man before him show no remorse over having cheated hard-working women out of duly earned wages, he openly showed his contempt for them and their race.

"You know Chang," Fraser said, "I would think you have experienced enough bigotry in your life to teach you how ugly it is. Instead, I see you not only failed to learn that lesson, but you yourself turn and discriminate against others. You cheated those women out of what was due them. Don't let it happen again, or you will have to deal with me." He spun as if to leave but turned back. "What are you going to do about making it right?"

"I paid those women. They accepted and took the payment. My part of the bargain is fulfilled."

Fraser's anger boiled over the top. He grabbed the edge of the table and shoved it into Chang's protruding belly. The man let out a surprised, "Ooof!" as the air left his lungs. Immediately, four men, each roughly the size of a bull moose, arose from a table nearby, but Chang raised his hand, palm outward, and they stopped where they stood.

Fraser leaned over the table, his face only inches from Chang's foul-smelling breath, and spoke in a low whisper. "You haven't heard the last of me." He pivoted on his heel, crossed the room, and slammed out into the bright sunlight before he did anything he would later regret.

One

*Pierce City, Idaho Territory
August 1885*

Evening shadows stretched long as Sky placed the last of the supplies onto his pack mule. The leather of the packs creaked as he settled them into place, cinching them down and making sure everything was in proper order. He stood in front of Fraser's Mercantile for a moment, scratching the mule behind its long gray ears, surveying Main Street.

A lone pine tree stood in the middle of the dusty street at the south end of town, its shadow falling due east. Summer crickets chirped lustily from the bushes nearby, and he could hear the occasional tink of bottle on shot glass emanating from Roo's Saloon across the street.

From an upper-story window in the Joss house, a Chinese woman emptied a pail of water onto the street, splattering mud on Gaffney's Pioneer Hotel next door and leaving a small muddy patch in the alley between the buildings.

"Sky! You comin' in here? Food's gonna be cold 'fore you ever set down to table!" A rough gravelly voice interrupted his perusal of the town. He glanced up at the friendly, round face of Jed Swanson, who leaned over the rail in front of his boarding house. "Food ain't gonna be fit for hogs if'n you don't get in here," Jed complained, rubbing a plump hand down the front of his greasy, apron-clad belly.

A smile lit Sky's face. Jed's food always fell somewhere between cardboard and leather, but Jed invariably claimed that was because it had been left sitting too long.

"Your food? Fit for Hogs?" Sky asked sarcastically, unable to pass up the opportunity to tease his old friend.

“Hmmp!” Jed shook his wooden spoon at Sky and continued, “Mind your manners or you won’t be gettin’ any o’ my fine fixins.” He turned away, slamming the door as he went inside.

Giving the mule a friendly slap on the neck, and leaving him tied to the rail, Sky made his way up the steps to Jed’s boarding house, the building next door to Fraser’s Mercantile.

The rough wooden door opened on squeaking hinges as Sky entered, hanging his black Stetson on a peg in the wall. He ran his hands through blond curly hair as he scanned the room.

The light in the gloomy confines of the rugged log building emanated from a small oil lamp set in the middle of the dining table and a brightly burning fire in the fire place on the back wall. The stone and mortar hearth, stacked high with logs on one side, held the wrought-iron hook by which the coffee pot could be swung into the heat of the fire. Off to the left, on the back wall, he could see the dark shadow of the doorway that led to the rooms Jed rented out. As Sky turned to the right he could see several men already seated around the coarse plank table, shoveling food into their mouths as though it might disappear before their eyes, their forks clanking loudly against tin plates. Sky’s dark brown eyes glinted as he noticed his cousin, Jason, sitting in the dim light at the end of the table, his back to the wall. Jason looked as surly as ever.

Sauntering casually to an empty chair Sky sat down, his back to the room, and began to serve his plate, listening to the conversation around him.

Fraser was speaking. “This boy is a lunatic, I tell you, and he wants to court my Alice. She’s only fifteen and I sent her down to Lewiston to get an education, not to court boys. So I just told him straight out when I was down to Lewiston last that he had better stay away from her. Now, with her being over seventy-five miles from here, that in itself wouldn’t give me a whole lot of comfort, since I wouldn’t trust that boy as far as I could throw him. But I also told Judge Rand that the boy was not to come around anymore and if anyone will make sure he don’t, it’ll be the judge.”

Sky’s mind wandered to the face of Sharyah, his blonde little sister back home. He wondered if the boys were coming to call on her

already. She was just about the same age as Alice Fraser. Sky smiled to himself. Knowing Sharyah and her beautiful sunny smile, the boys were lined up for a mile outside of the little white farmhouse back in Shilo. *Sharyah's had me wound around her little finger for years. What would be different with the boys her own age? I'll have to write Dad to keep a special eye on her for me.*

Coming out of his reverie he tuned into the conversation around him, realizing that Fraser had moved on to a new subject.

“So I went to Chang and confronted him about this bogus gold.” He paused to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, chewing for a moment. He glanced around the table, knife and fork held vertically by his plate in suspended animation. “Do you know he had the gall to admit to the whole thing? No remorse whatsoever.” He shrugged, speaking around the food in his mouth. “I just don’t know what else I can do.” He looked back down at his plate and continued to saw through the black slab that passed as a piece of meat.

Sky listened thoughtfully as he ate. He knew Lee Chang. His character was questionable at best and downright despicable at worst.

“Hmmp,” growled Jed, “that there Chinese is one man this here town could do ’thout. He shorly is a cussed buzzard, that’n.”

A low snort came from the other side of the table and Sky looked down to the shadows at the end. The sound had come from his cousin Jason, a large man with unwashed blond curls covering his round head. A large belly, the result of his love of beer, protruded over his huge silver belt buckle, bumping the table. He belched loudly, then spoke. “This town would be better off if we got rid of all the Chinks. I tell you, I’ve never met a respectable Celestial. Not one. Always sneakin’ and spyin’. Lazy cusses, too.” He swiped his greasy mouth on his shoulder, the stain there proof that he did so often.

Max, the miner sitting next to him, made no sound but nodded emphatically as he shoved a huge forkful of potatoes into his mouth.

“This town wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for the Chinese, Jason.” Sky’s voice was nonchalant. He picked up his glass and took a drink of water, his dark eyes looking over the rim fixed on his burly cousin.

Jason snorted again, blowing through his nose. “You always were too partial to them Celestials, Sky. If you had any sense you’d realize

the type of scum they really are.”

Sky changed the subject. “How have you been, Jason? Haven’t seen you for awhile.” His tone was friendly but Jason glared at him.

“You been pinin’ away for information on your beloved cousin?” he asked, his expression caustic.

Sky, accustomed to his cousin’s recent foul moods, shrugged and turned back to his food, praying silently that one day his relationship with Jason would be restored.



Jed looked back and forth between Sky and Jason. He had known both men for a number of years and still couldn’t see how they could possibly be related. Jason was slovenly and rude, always ill-tempered and crass, but Jed had never known Sky to be any of those things. Sky had moved into the area five years ago and had been coming to Jed’s place faithfully ever since. Jed’s mind wandered back to the first time he met Sky.

While out hunting, he had shot and wounded a large cow elk. The cow had run off and Jed had followed the trail for several miles before he lost it. He was wandering about in the brush trying to recover the trail when he looked up and saw Sky standing before him. Never in all his born days had he been so surprised. Jed prided himself on being a woodsman with ears as keen as a fox, but he hadn’t heard Sky’s approach.

Clean shaven, Sky wore buckskin pants, soft leather moccasins and a beaded rawhide vest over a white, open-collared shirt. In one hand he held a long-barreled rifle. The hilt of a large knife protruded from a leather sheath at his hips, its polished deer horn handle glimmering in the sunlight.

Sky grinned and tipped his black Stetson back on his head, revealing clean-cut curly blond hair. His dark, twinkling eyes scanned Jed for a moment before he spoke. “Lost it, huh?” Switching the rifle to his left hand, he held out his right in Jed’s direction. “Name’s Skyler Jordan.”

Jed took his hand. “Jed Swanson.” Gesturing to the brush, he said,

“She bled for quite a ways, but now,” he shook his head glancing around, “cain’t seem to pick up the trail.”

Sky nodded, settling his hat back on his head. “Heard your shot. I was coming to lend a hand with the packing. Mind if I have a look around?”

Jed shook his head, his hand sweeping the area around them. “She’s all yours.” He figured Sky wouldn’t find anything, but he had been wrong. Within an hour they had gutted and skinned the cow and were headed back to town. Each of them packed a quarter of the animal with the other half strapped to Jed’s mule.

Jed shook his head at the memory. He had never met as skilled a woodsman as Skyler Jordan.

Bringing his mind back to the present, Jed fixed his eyes on Jason. “Ain’t you gonna tell ol’ Sky here about yer plans?” he asked sweetly, knowing full well that Jason didn’t want Sky to know what he was talking about.



The venomous look Jason sent Jed piqued Sky’s interest. A smile twitched the corner of Jed’s mouth as Sky looked at his cantankerous cousin, one blond eyebrow raised in question.

Jason ignored him and went back to shoveling food into his mouth.

Sky turned his questioning eyes on Jed, continuing to eat calmly.

Jed spoke around a mouthful of meat. “Your cousin is soon gonna be married. Or so he’s been boastin’ all over town.”

Sky’s fork stopped halfway to his mouth and he turned his brown eyes back to his cousin. *What woman in her right mind would marry Jason?*

Jason growled, throwing his fork onto his plate with a clatter. “Jed, someday I’ll teach you to keep yer yap shut.” He turned belligerent eyes on Sky. “That’s right. I got me a mail-order sweetheart comin’ in on tomorrow’s stage to Greer’s Ferry. I’m going to have me a pretty little wife to cook for me...and keep me warm at night.” He jabbed his elbow into Max’s ribs, a dissolute leer on his face.

Sky set his fork down quietly, wiping his mouth with the back of

his hand. Pushing away from the table, he stood and walked over to the blackened coffee pot set near the fire, pouring himself a cup, his movements deliberate and casual. His heart went out to the poor girl. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so surprised.

"You got a picture of this woman?" His voice was nonchalant. He hooked a thumb through his belt loop and watched Jason through the steam drifting up from his mug as he took a sip of coffee.

Jason gave his habitual snort. "Like I'd show it to the likes o' you. Pretty little thing, though. And young, too. Means she probably ain't never been had before." The lewd grin was back for a moment before he stuffed a large piece of meat into his cheek.

"Well, let me be the first to offer you my congratulations." Sky lifted his coffee mug in a toast. "To the happy groom." No one in the room responded; he had not expected them to. Turning back he looked into the fire, its reflection dancing in his dark eyes. The silence in the room was palpable; only the crackling of the fire and the clatter of silverware disturbed the stillness.

Quietly Sky prayed. *Lord, what should I do? I wouldn't give a dog I liked to Jason. You know I care for him, Lord, but...* He tried to think of a solution. Nothing came to mind. Remembering that he still had to travel home tonight, he set his cup down.

Turning to Jed, he placed a hand on his stomach and grinned. "Best hog swill I've had in a long time, Jed."

Jed glared at him, waving his fork in dismissal.

To Fraser, he said, "Been a pleasure, Fraser. See you again soon."

Fraser turned to him with a friendly smile as he wiped the corners of his mouth with long slender fingers. "Sky, always good doing business with you." Sky nodded and Fraser's eyes held Sky's for a moment, questioning what he was going to do about the situation before he turned back to his food.

Sky spoke to the rest of the men at the table. "Good night, gentlemen." He pulled his hat from the peg by the door and pushed it back on his head as he exited onto the now-darkened street.

His boots making no sound in the soft dust of the road bed, he walked over to the rail in front of Fraser's Mercantile and untied his mule, leading it further down the street toward the livery. Retrieving

his stallion, he mounted up and cantered the horse out of town, leading the mule behind.

Two

Lewiston, Idaho Territory

August 1885

In the shadow cast by the telegraph office Percival Hunter stood with his head bent low over a telegram. He leaned one shoulder into the building as a sardonic smile twisted his lips and he read the message again.

It's in the back room STOP Come at your convenience STOP Have men in place STOP

L C

Pierce City

Percival rubbed his hand across his chin, still staring at the paper before him. His first two fingers paused on his chin and he tapped it slowly twice as he thought. The news was good, but an evil thought crossed his mind. So many plans still had to be made. He looked both ways up and down the street. Although the street teemed with traffic, no one seemed to be looking his way, so he slipped back around the corner and into the telegraph office.

The operator was just heading out the door. Startled, he glanced up, pulling his round spectacles to his eyes by the rim. "Oh, hello again—" he smiled nervously, his eyes darting across the room to a board with several wanted posters pinned to it—"did you forget something?"

"I need to reply to this message." Percival made sure his tone and face emanated calm.

The operator quickly returned to his side of the counter and took

up a pen. With a shaking hand, he dipped it into the inkwell before him and glanced up expectantly.

Percival dictated slowly, "Will be in Pierce City in two days. STOP. Wait for my arrival."

Percival glanced at his watch. *11:59 a.m.* As the operator reached to send the message, Percival leaned across the counter and firmly gripped his shoulder. Jumping, the operator turned towards him with a frightened look, but Percival only said, "Wait" and paced across the room to look over the wanted posters.

Slowly the second hand ticked around until the time read 12:05 p.m. Percival nodded at the operator, who was now sweating profusely. "I will wait until you have sent the message."

With shaking fingers the operator tapped out the message to Pierce City.

Once the message had been sent, Percival allowed his face to soften. He smiled at the operator and thanked him politely for his help and patience.

Mopping his sweat-covered brow with a white handkerchief, the operator smiled his relief and nodded, his face calming as Percival turned to leave.

Then, suddenly changing his course of direction and not bothering to use the gate, Percival placed his hand on the counter and, in one smooth motion, leaped across it to the side where the once-again terrified operator sat. Grabbing the trembling telegrapher by his collar, Percival dragged him into a small room he could see at the back of the office. Percival pressed the trembling man against the wall, forearm to his throat, and pulled a knife from his sheath under his jacket.

He turned the blade, watching as the light glanced off it and made pleasant patterns on the operator's sweaty, plump face. "Be a shame if somethin' were to happen to your missus," he said softly.

The little man clutched at the arm pressed to his neck and nodded vigorously.

"Funny thing about those wanted posters. They seem to pop up all over the place. A man just can't get any peace."

This time the telegrapher shook his head. "I have never seen you, I swear."

Chuckling softly Percival pressed the tip of his blade to the soft skin under his captive's eye. The man scrunched his eyes tight.

Percival grinned. *As though that will protect them from my blade.*

"P-Please. I won't say a w-word."

Percival chuckled again and let the knife point bite the flesh just enough to draw blood. "Just see that you don't. I've seen your missus and I wouldn't mind indulgin' myself awhile, if you catch my meanin'." With one last surge of pressure, Percival pushed away from the shuddering man. "And take the poster down. It's really an awful likeness. It makes me look as though I'm some unkempt hooligan."

The operator nodded and, as Percival turned to leave, sank down to the floor. Percival smirked and sheathed his blade.

A few moments later he stepped out onto the boardwalk. He raised his hands and smoothed the front of his coat, squinting into the sunshine. Turning, he walked up the street toward the stage that waited for boarding passengers. Tipping his hat, he smiled at a woman with a small child in tow.



Pierce City

12:03 p.m.

Lee Chang lumbered slowly up the street towards the small telegraph office. Opening the door he eased himself into the small dusty room. The office was no longer in service, although the telegraph was still operational. The office had been shut down several years ago, there being no longer enough people in town to warrant its use. An occasional message still came through, though, and if someone who could read Morse code happened to be passing by on the street to hear it, it sometimes even got to the person for whom it was meant.

On this day, however, Lee knew a message would be coming through and he didn't want to chance someone walking by on the street and hearing the clatter of the code. Especially not David Fraser, who understood Morse code.

Leaning out the door he looked up and down the street to be sure

no one was near. Finally, satisfied he was alone, he turned towards the dusty desk in the darkened corner of the room. He had just eased the door shut behind him when the telegraph began to click and tap out its message. He scrambled for a pencil and paper and began to write.



Lewiston
12:15 p.m.

Brooke Marie Baker, eighteen, placed both hands beside her on the seat to help keep her balance as the stage careened around corners and over bumps, heading toward Greer's Ferry, and tried to ignore the chatter coming from the man opposite her. She brushed a stray curl of strawberry blonde hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind one small ear. Leaning forward, she peered out the window at the passing scenery as she tried to swallow the lump of nervousness in her throat.

She had arrived in Lewiston yesterday along with several other mail-order brides from back east. Watching, as all except herself took their vows, she had been very thankful that her turn would not come until today. Most of the women had taken time to "doll up" before the ceremonies, performed one after another in quick succession by the minister who had been waiting on the scene. But, although she could see that the men had tried to clean up, all, without exception, had appeared unkempt and greasy. Lustful looks had danced in their eyes as they led their brides away from the altar toward the hotel a few yards away, and Brooke shuddered at the memory.

Wondering what the man she was to marry would be like, she found herself wishing that Uncle Jackson had not sent her away. *I could have gone to work and helped support him. Even living with Uncle Jackson is preferable to being married to a man like the ones I saw yesterday.* But his cutting words still rang in her ears. "You good for nothing little tramp. I should have sent you off the moment I became your guardian." His laugh had been cruel as he continued, "At least I am getting fifty dollars for the trouble you have been to me. Congratulations on your upcoming marriage, my dear." She shuddered,

giving herself a little shake to dispel his laughing face from her memory, bringing her mind back to the present.

Two other passengers had gotten on the stage with Brooke and the minister who traveled with her to perform the marriage ceremony at the trail's end. One, a burly mountain man who looked just as she had always imagined a mountain man would look, had a long, tangled gray beard. It evidenced the fact that often when he spit tobacco juice, he didn't really spit at all but merely let the juice dribble out the corner of his mouth...a most disgusting phenomenon Brooke had witnessed more than once on the trip. When he'd hauled his considerable girth onto the stage, he'd grunted a greeting, let his eyes rove over her petite form and then slouched in his seat with his muddied boots stretched out as far in front of him as they would go. Giving Brooke another appreciative look, he leaned his head against the side of the coach and fell fast asleep. His snores would have been enough to harry a hen laying eggs, but any hens in the vicinity had probably already been disturbed by the second personality who'd joined them on the stage.

This man had not been quiet for more than five consecutive seconds since his foot first touched the floor of the stage. His blond, frizzy hair poked from his head in unruly abandon, giving him a rather wild look. He wore a pair of round spectacles that invariably slipped down his nose and he constantly pushed them back up with a long forefinger. He would just cease to expound on one topic and Brooke would sigh in relief, thinking that there couldn't possibly be anything more to say on the subject, when he would take a deep breath and begin anew. As annoying as she found the talkative man across from her, Brooke did find that she learned a lot about the area that they drove through.

"There are really some fascinatin' rock formations in this area." He gestured out the window with long slender fingers, so heavily laden with gaudy gold rings that Brooke wondered how his slender hand supported the weight. "Take that one down there across the river, do you see it?" Even before Brooke nodded he continued, "The Ant and the Yellow Jacket."

Brooke looked at him quizzically, slender eyebrows raised.

He nodded, pushing his round spectacles up on his nose with a

bony forefinger, and continued, “Yep, the Nez Perce say that the ants and the yellow jackets lived peaceably together until one day their chiefs got into an argument. The yellow jacket—of course the Indians just call them ‘Ant’ and ‘Yellow Jacket,’ like that was their names or somethin’,” he chuckled. “Anyway, the yellow jacket chief, he had found this piece of dried salmon and was eating it on a rock. The ant chief comes along and he is hungry, see? So he gets jealous of the yellow jacket and starts hollerin’ at him that he should have asked permission to eat on that rock. The yellow jacket responds, ‘I don’t have to ask your permission for anythin’,’ and they raise up on their back legs and start fightin’. Well the old coyote, who the Nez Perce believe is very wise, comes along. He sees the piece of salmon and those two just a whalin’ on each other. He’s across the river, see, so he hollers at them, ‘Hey, you two, quit your fightin’!’ but they pay no attention. So the magic coyote turned them into those rocks you see over there just like that—” He snapped his fingers. “The coyote crossed the river and ate the salmon, and to this day the ants and the yellow jackets are feudin’ among themselves.

“Yep, sure is some interesting country you have come to Miss... Hey, I haven’t introduced myself. I am Percival Hunter.” He bowed from the waist, as good a bow as one can give from a sitting position, removing his bowler hat. “And you are?”

Brooke smiled; she was beginning to like this talkative man before her. “Brooke Baker. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She extended a slim hand, which he took and raised to his lips.

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you.”

Brooke pulled her hand away and looked down into her lap, not wanting to give him the wrong impression. She was, after all, on the way to her wedding.

Percival cleared his throat, giving her a nod of understanding. “Yes, well as I was sayin’, this sure is interesting country that you have chosen to come visit, Miss Baker.” He continued without pause or Brooke would have informed him that she was not here by her own choice. “Take the ferry that we will use to cross the Clearwater, for instance. Did you know that the Greer Ferry, as it is called, was constructed in 1861 by two enterprisin’ souls who saw a sure-fire way

to make some money off of the gold strike up in Pierce?”

Brooke shook her head and as he continued with his dialogue she sighed, resigned to listening to his prattle for the rest of the trip.

“They built the ferry to aid the miners in crossin’ the river on their way to Pierce City where gold had been found. As I see it, their venture was a lot more profitable than goin’ on up the mountain to dig for gold. There are even sleepin’ quarters where we will stay tonight.”

The minister leaned over, resting his forearms on his knees, and added, “The first ferry and sleeping quarters were burnt to the ground in the Indian war of 1877 when the Nez Perce used it to cross the river and get away from the army that was chasing them. They crossed the river on the ferry and then torched it and the cabin so that the army would have a harder time following them.”

Percival nodded in agreement. “Yes, that’s right. After the war, though, a new ferry and cabin were built and those are the ones we will see this evenin’.”

“I’m amazed at how much you know about this country, Mr. Hunter,” Brooke said.

He grinned and shrugged, indicating it was no big deal. Then, after only a short silence, he went on to tell how the Nez Perce Indians made their camp on the Camas Prairie each fall in order to collect the Camas bulbs that grew there in wild abandon. “All the bands of the Nez Perce come together and place their Teepees in six camps over a two-mile radius. It is quite a sight to see.”

He told of many men, who in the winter of 1861, while making their way to the gold camps, were blinded by the brilliant, glistening snow and were never found until the spring thaw. Brooke shivered, but if Percival noticed, it only inspired him.

On and on the stories went, and when suddenly the stage came to a jerking halt Brooke was quite amazed to find that the day had ebbed away. They had come to the place where they would cross the river. But as she looked out the window she was surprised to see that the river still lay below them a good 1500 feet.

“Now comes the fun part,” Percival said.

“What are we doing now?” Brooke questioned.

Her answer came in the form of the stage driver, who poked his

head in the door, “Ya’ll can get out and stretch a mite if ya want to. We’ll be here a few minutes while we hitch up the tree drag.”

Brooke wondered what in the world a “tree drag” was, but, as she stepped down from the stage, she saw that it was just what it sounded like. The stage driver and the man who had been riding shotgun were hitching a large tree trunk to the back of the stage. As she gazed down at the precipitous pitch of the trail that led to the river, suddenly everything made sense.

“We are going to drive down *that?*” she questioned unbelievably.

“Yep,” Percival answered with glee.

“Well, if I die, at least I won’t have to get married,” she said under her breath, as she gazed at the steep track before her.

Soon they all climbed back into the stage except for the mountain man, who had never gotten off. He was awake now, though, and took the opportunity to stuff another wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. He looked wolfishly at Brooke. “Best hold on tight,” he told her, winking boldly.

With a shouted, “Gidd’up!” the driver cracked his whip in the air and the horses lurched into the descent. Brooke gripped the edge of her seat and wondered whether she wanted to look out the window or close her eyes as tight as she could. Deciding that if she was going to die she wanted to see it coming, she opened her eyes and watched the scenery fly by.

It appeared that nervousness made Percival quiet. *Thank goodness!*

It was soon apparent that the log hooked to the back of the stage was what saved them at each corner from launching over the edge of the trail into open space. The horses dug their heels in until they almost sat. Still, the stage careened down the steep incline.

Dust boiled up, whirling into the coach in a suffocating cloud. Choking and coughing Brooke closed her eyes against the grit. Waving a hand in front of her face did nothing but stir the thick roiling cloud. Feeling something pressed against her face, she realized that the minister was offering her his handkerchief. Gratefully, she grasped it, tears streaming from her eyes as she tried to see what was happening outside.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the death-defying ride was over.

She slumped back in relief. The river meandered placidly just beyond the coach window. They had made it down and she was still alive.

It couldn't have taken more than a few minutes to plunge down the side of the mountain, but to Brooke it had seemed like an eternity. The coachman pulled the snorting horses to a stop and stepped down to unhitch the tree drag.

Brooke glanced down. Her dark blue dress was literally brown with dust. She touched a hand to her face and patted her hair. *I must look a mess!*

The ferry waited for them on the near side of the blue-green river, a smiling, kind-looking man standing on the landing. Brooke eyed the little raft tied to the bank dubiously. *Ferry* was really too grand a term for the wooden contraption floating on the water, she thought. *Will that even float with the stage on it?* She swallowed as the horses walked onto the wooden platform with the loud clatter of hooves and her stomach lurched as they pushed off into the river. She glanced out the window, looking back at the path of their descent in utter disbelief. *Well, the descent from that ridge didn't kill me; maybe I'll drown crossing the river.*

Oh, Uncle Jackson, I hate you for this! Her stomach felt like it was tied in knots. The man she was to marry would be waiting for her just across the river at the landing. *My dress! I can't get married looking like I've been wallowing in a mound of dirt! Oh, what will the man think when he first lays eyes on me? So much for first impressions.*

She did her best to beat some of the dust from the skirt of her dress but saw that it was no use. He would just have to accept her the way she was. It was his own fault, after all, for not wanting to come to Lewiston to meet her. He had paid the minister an extra five dollars to escort her to Greer's Ferry and perform the ceremony there.

The swaying of the ferry stopped. Her hands, fisted in her lap, were white-knuckled, but she lifted her chin. *You're strong, Brooke. You can deal with this!* Hadn't she survived Uncle Jackson all these years? If she could survive his beatings, then she could survive the abuses of any man. Hadn't she proved that with Hank? Moving out of Uncle Jackson's house to move in with Hank had been like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. She still had nightmares about Hank,

but she was alive. *You can do this, Brooke*, she repeated to herself. *Be strong!*

But she could taste fear at the back of her mouth.

These past two months, traveling west, she had not been beaten or abused once. Could she truly put herself back into such an environment? *There is no doubt that life here will be the same as back in St. Louis. All men are the same: Father, Uncle Jackson, Hank...* She quickly shut her mind off from that line of thinking. She would not dwell on the past; she needed all of her strength to face the future....

For more of the story, read on...

THE SHEPHERD'S HEART
BOOK ONE

Rocky Mountain OASIS

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High Desert Haven

The Shepherd's Heart

BOOK TWO

When her husband is killed in a strange riding accident, Nicki Trent is left with a toddler and a run-down ranch. Determined to bring her ranch back from the brink of death, Nicki hires handsome Jason Jordan as a ranch manager. But when her neighbor, William, starts pressing for her hand in marriage, the bank calls in a loan she didn't even know about, bullets start flying, and a burlap dummy with a knife in its chest shows up on her doorstep, Nicki wonders if this ranch is really worth all the trouble.

To make matters worse, terrible things keep happening to her neighbors. When her friend's homestead is burned to the ground and William lays the blame at Jason's feet, Nicki wonders how well she knows her new hand.

Where is the God who promised to be a comfort in the Valley of Death? Does he even remember that Nicki exists? And can she believe Jason's assurances that he had nothing to do with the fire?

For more info: www.lynnettebonner.com

A SNEAK PEEK

High Desert Haven



Prologue

California
July 1883

As Dominique Noel Vasquez methodically scrubbed clothes in the tub of soapy water, she listened to the quiet, strained tones of her parents who sat against the shady side of the house.

Scorching afternoon sun shone on the hard-packed, earth yard of the small adobe hut. Heat waves, radiating from every sun-baked surface, turned the landscape into a shimmering sepia blur. Dead brown land lay in every direction; the only hint of green life was the scraggly plot of corn that would hopefully feed the family for the year to come. Even the wheat struggling to grow added to the dull brown vista. A solitary chicken, scratching for a meager meal, sent puffs of dust filtering across the yard and a lonely cow, the children's only source of milk, rested her head on top of her split-rail fence letting out a low bellow.

In this heat everyone should have been down for a *siesta*, but on this day only the smallest children of the household were resting.

Tension rode the heat waves.

Dominique plunged harder and glared at the clothes as anger surged through her. The creditors had come again this morning. Last year Papa had been forced to borrow money for seed and now for the second season in a row the rains had failed them. There were no crops;

they were down to their last chicken; the one cow's milk was needed by the children; and the creditors were howling for their money.

Nicki found herself praying angrily. "Lord, where are You when we need You?" Sweat trickled down her temple and she rubbed it roughly across one shoulder as she shook out a little skirt with more vigor than necessary and tossed it across the line. Gentle conviction washed over her. She was throwing a bigger temper tantrum than two-year-old Coreena did when Papa told her "No."

Nicki smiled and her anger eased. "Forgive me, Lord. You alone know and care about our plight. But if there were anything I could do to help Mama and Papa, You know I would do it." She paused in her prayer, thinking, and then continued, "What is there to do, Lord? Show me what I can do to help."

Mama called across the yard, interrupting her prayer. "Nicki, you work too hard. Sit! Rest! We will finish the washing when it is cooler."

"Almost done, Mama. Then I will rest."

"That girl!" Mama turned to Papa but the rest of her words were drowned in a dry, hot breeze. Nicki smiled again. Mama often castigated her for working too hard. But Nicki knew she appreciated the help. With twelve children, nine of whom were still at home to feed and clothe, Mama needed all the help she could get.

Silence reigned for a time, the only sounds filling the afternoon air, the soft swish, plunge, and gurgle of Nicki's washing and the giggling of her two younger sisters splashing each other with cool water by the well. Nicki gave the last small shirt a snap and deftly flipped it onto the line where the laundry was drying. Dumping the soapy water in front of the door, which helped keep the dust down, Nicki hung the wooden bucket on its nail and moved to carefully empty the contents of the rinse bucket on the one small rose bush at the corner of the hut.

"Girls, please!" Juanita Vasquez called from the shadow of the house to Rosa and Juna, who were getting a little wild and loud with their splashing game. "I have just gotten Manuel to sleep. Quiet!"

This sent the girls into another gale of giggles. Their mother's voice had been twice as loud as theirs. But when Papa tipped his sombrero back and glared at his two wayward offspring the giggles ceased immediately.

Nicki smiled fondly at her sisters' wayward ways and sank to the ground next to Mama, suppressing a groan of satisfaction as she leaned back against the cool adobe wall. She was tired. All morning she had helped Papa haul water from the well to carefully water their acre of wheat and corn. A large enough plot to hopefully get them through another year. Later they would repeat the process, because watering with buckets did not soak the ground like a good rain would and the crops needed plenty of water if they were to produce well.

Nicki closed her eyes and tried to ignore Mama and Papa's furtive conversation.

"The chicken, Carlos?"

"Mama, the chicken will not bring in enough to get us through one day, much less pay the money we owe."

"Yes. You are right, of course, and it has stopped laying, so we don't even have the eggs from it anymore." Mama sighed. "Ahhh, maybe we should have chicken tonight, *Si?*"

Papa sighed and did not smile at Mama's little joke. "We could sell the cow."

"Papa, she is the only milk for the children. I would like to keep her if we could."

Nicki felt hot tears press the back of her eyes. What were they to do? Papa would be taken to jail if he didn't come up with the money by next week and then they would all die for sure. The creditors would come and take their meager crops to recoup as much of their money as they could. They would not care that they would be leaving a woman and her nine children to starve to death. Where was Juan when they needed him? Were he here, he would think of some way for them to make the money they so desperately needed.

A soft breeze rustled the dried grasses and Nicki pulled her skirt up around her knees, not caring that Mama would chastise her for such an unladylike action. The small breath of fresh air was worth it. Reaching up, she brushed at the long wisps of black hair that had escaped her braid and rubbed the perspiration from her upper lip. She suddenly wanted a drink of water but felt almost too tired to get up and get it. But the thought of the cold water eventually won out. She shifted forward. Mama and Papa could surely use a drink as well.

“Child, you don’t sit still for even a minute! What are you heading to do now?”

Nicki smiled lovingly at her. “A drink, Mama. Would you like one as well?” She pushed herself up from the wall, moving to pull up a bucket of cool refreshment from the deep well.

Mama’s tone turned suddenly tender. “What would I do without you, child?”

Nicki chuckled. She was hardly the child her mother kept insisting she was. At seventeen she more than carried her weight, but Mama didn’t like to see her children grow up. Nicki remembered Mama calling Roberto “my little man” on the day of his wedding! The memory brought a fond smile to Nicki’s face as she walked to the well. Those had been happier times. The rains had been good in those years and debt had not hung over the little adobe hut and its occupants.

Nicki slowly cranked the lever that would pull the bucket up from the depths of the well, letting her eyes scan the horizon. She stiffened. There was movement on the trail; someone was coming.

“Papa.” Her tone held a soft warning.

Papa rose and came to stand by her side. Nicki pulled the bucket towards her, filling the dipper with cool water. If the creditors had come to take her papa away, he would go having just drunk his fill from the chilled water of his own well. She handed the dipper to her father. He drank slowly but never took his eyes off the rider heading their way. He handed the dipper back. Nicki filled it and moved towards her mother, who still sat in the shade, tears now filling her eyes.

“They said not until next week.” Mama’s words stabbed a knife of pain through Nicki’s heart. Whatever happened, Nicki knew Mama would die a slow death once Papa was taken. Not from starvation, but because the love of her life would be gone.

Fierce determination filled her as she turned with the empty dipper and marched back towards the well. Anger snapped in her eyes as she tossed back a gulp of water and turned, wiping water from her chin, to face the man coming into the yard.

She froze. He was not the man who worked for the bank.

“Howdy.” The man tipped back his dusty, white hat and smiled down at Carlos. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. His gaze flicked

past Papa and came to rest on Nicki. Considerable interest flamed in their depths. He nodded to her, the smile now reaching his eyes, and touched the brim of his hat in a one-fingered salute. "Ma'am." He ignored Papa and spoke directly to her. "I was just thinking how nice a cool drink of water would be. I'd sure be appreciating it if I could light a spell."

Carlos spoke as he stepped between Nicki and the newcomer, effectively blocking his view. "Draw fresh water, Dominique." He stretched his hand towards the man, indicating he could dismount. "Welcome," he said.

But Nicki could hear an edge in his voice. This man could mean trouble.

"Obliged." He nodded and swung from his saddle.

The man was tall, had graying hair, steely blue eyes, and a wad of chewing tobacco stuffed in his cheek. He stretched his hand towards Carlos as Nicki pulled up a fresh bucket. "Name's John Trent."

Papa took his hand. "Carlos Vasquez."

Mr. Trent looked at her over the dipper as he drank his fill. Nicki averted her eyes but held the bucket for his next dipperful. She had received more than her share of such looks and knew what he was thinking. For although this man would say nothing to her in front of her father, the men down at the cantina showed no such qualms whenever Mama found it necessary to send her there. The thought of their suggestive remarks burned a blush across her cheeks. John Trent, who was just lifting the dipper, raised his eyebrows. His smile held amusement.

Papa made small talk about the long hot spell as Nicki pulled buckets of water from the well for the man's horse, but Nicki didn't miss the looks John Trent kept throwing her way.

When he mounted up to ride out, Mama, still seated in the shade, gave an audible sigh of relief. And Nicki couldn't deny that she felt plenty relieved as well.

Just as he arrived at the crest of the trail the man paused and Nicki stiffened. John Trent rubbed a hand across his face and said something to himself, then swung his horse once again towards their adobe.

His eyes raked her more boldly this time as he pulled to a stop in

their sun-baked yard. Leaning his arms casually on the horn of his saddle, he spat a stream of tobacco into the dust and, turning toward Papa, brazenly asked, "How much for the girl?"

Nicki and Mama gasped in unison.

The bucket in Nicki's hands crashed to the ground, splashing water over her feet. Quickly she bent and picked it up. Spinning on her heel she marched towards the well to return the bucket to its hook. *The audacity!*

Papa spoke with authority. "The *señorita* is *not* for sale."

John Trent grinned and let his eyes scan the small house and the scraggly fields just beyond. His eyes traveled pointedly to seven of Nicki's brothers and sisters who had gathered in a little clump to watch the goings-on and then looked into Carlos' face before spitting another stream of brown sludge. "I think everything's for sale as long as the price is right."

"My daughter is *not* for sale, *Señor*. I have to ask you to leave us now."

Ignoring him, John reached into the pocket of his vest and pulled out a coin. He tossed it to the ground near Carlos' feet.

A twenty-dollar gold piece!

Nicki had not seen Mama move, but the audible click of a cocking shotgun cracked into the afternoon stillness and all eyes turned towards the door of the house to see her there, the gun aimed squarely at John Trent's chest.

Nicki's eyes dropped to the money on the ground. That little piece of gold could save Papa's life. It would get him out of debt and even give them enough to start over somewhere. Remembering her earlier prayer she started to step forward, but Papa beat her to it.

Picking up the offensive gold, Papa threw it towards John as if it was too hot to touch. "She is not for sale!"

John deftly caught the coin, pulled two more pieces just like it from his pocket, and tossed all three on the ground. "I want that girl. Now, I am trying to go about this in a civilized manner, but if I have to I will take her by force." He sat up straight and casually rested a hand on his thigh near his gun.

Nicki felt dizzy from the sheer shock of this proposition. Her eyes

flashed from Mama, bravely holding an unloaded gun on the man insulting her daughter, to Papa again stooping to pick up the offensive coins, to the hand of John Trent inching slowly towards his holster, and she surprised even herself by what happened next.

“Papa wait!” She stepped forward. *Sixty dollars!* “I will go with him.”

“Nicki, NO!” Mama screamed.

“Mama, *por favor!* The money! You will be free from all this trouble! I will be all right. God, He will go with me, *Si?*”

“Dominique, don’t do this.” Papa’s words were thick with restrained emotion. “We will work something out with the bank. You take too much on yourself for one so young.”

“Papa.” Nicki stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You are the one who taught me to be strong, *Si?* Take care of Mama and make Rosa help her now.” Nicki pulled back, looking deep into his dark eyes so much like her own. She rested one hand on his stubbly cheek. “She would have died without you, Papa.”

She spun towards her mother, throwing herself into her arms, before the threatening tears could overflow. “Mama, *te amo!*” The choked words were all she could squeeze past her constricting throat as she wondered if she would ever see her beloved mama again.

Nicki hugged her brothers and sisters in turn, giving them each a piece of advice on how to be helpful to Mama and Papa, drying their tears with her skirt and promising that she would see them again someday. Going into the house, she ran her fingers across the baby soft cheek of little Manuel, the only member of the household still sleeping through all the commotion. And then, head held high, she walked out into the searing sun and allowed herself to be pulled up onto the horse behind John Trent’s saddle.

“Wait!” Mama called, running towards her, carrying something. It was the family Bible. She pressed it into Nicki’s hands, making the sign of the cross and blessing her daughter one more time, as she had done every day since her birth.

Nicki didn’t let her family see her cry, but as she rode away from the only home she had ever known, she allowed herself the small luxury of quiet tears.



They rode north for several days. Nicki was thankful that John Trent seemed to be a kind man. A justice of the peace married them in his dusty office in a small, one-street town that Nicki didn't even know the name of. By evening they were moving north again.

They had been traveling for more than two weeks, making mostly dry camps at night, when Nicki heard her husband utter an oath of awe. It was midafternoon and Nicki, her forehead pressed into John's back, was almost asleep when she heard his exclamation. Lifting her head she blinked into the sunlight, almost unable to believe the sight before her.

A long, lush valley stretched before them. A small creek meandered through its center, merging with the Deschutes River at one end. The Deschutes was normally inaccessible due to its steep canyon walls, but here the descent to the river was simply a long, smooth slope. Here and there a cluster of evergreen trees could be seen, but the verdant meadow was what had drawn John's eye. It was like a vivid oasis dropped in the middle of the high-desert sagebrush they had been traveling through for the last week. The swaying grass was belly high to a good-sized horse.

Nicki knew she was looking at her new home. The valley was a rancher's paradise, and John had talked of nothing else since their journey began. He wanted to become a rancher. A rich rancher. And this was where he would make his start.

They made camp early and Nicki sighed in satisfaction as she waded into the creek for her first bath in a week. She rolled her head from side to side, rubbing her neck, working out the kinks of knotted muscle. John waded in as well and she stiffened as he slid his arms around her waist from behind, pressing a kiss to her neck.

Apparently sensing her tension, he sighed. "I'm gonna make you a fine husband, you'll see, Dominique. We're gonna have one fine spread across this valley. One day you'll wake up and realize what a good life we've had and you'll no longer regret the day you first met me."

Nicki bit her lower lip, hoping that he was right. She didn't think

she'd be able to live with this dreadful despair all her life. She closed her eyes, missing Mama and the family. Willing herself not to cry, she stepped out of his arms and turned to give him a tentative smile, but her heart did not lighten.

They found the soddy later that evening. There was also a run-down barn, a partially erected bunkhouse, and a corral all clustered on the lee side of a knoll just tall enough for the soddy. But the spread had long since been abandoned. The windowless house was dark, and when they lit John's lantern Nicki saw the spiders scurrying to escape the light. She shivered and went in search of some brush to use as a broom. Soon the room was cobweb free and they made a bed on the floor for the night.

It was still dark the next morning when she heard John saddling the horse. She roused herself and set about making coffee. He only took the time for one cup, before he rode out with a terse, "I'll be back soon as I can."

He was gone for two weeks. When he came back he informed her they would be staying.

One

Shilo, Oregon, in the Willamette Valley
January, 1886

The tepid January sun struggled to warm the day, but this winter had been one of the Northwest's worst in a number of years and the temperatures barely reached the teens.

At the knock on the door, Brooke Jordan rose from scrubbing the kitchen floor and dried her hands on a towel. Pressing a hand to her aching lower back and resting one hand protectively on her rounded belly, she moved to the door.

"Who do you suppose would be knocking on our door at this time of day?" she asked the unborn child. It had become her practice to talk to the baby during the day to ease the loneliness of Sky's absence. Since they had moved back to Sky's childhood home from the Idaho territory where they had met, Sky had gone to work as a deputy sheriff for his father and was gone most of the day. She missed him terribly, but couldn't bring herself to tell him, knowing how much he loved his new job, even though it kept him away from home for hours at a time.

Swinging the door wide, Brooke gasped. "Jason!" She pulled the blond man before her, almost the spitting image of her husband, into her cumbersome embrace. "Come in! Sky and I were just talking about you last night, wondering where you might have gotten to."

Jason smiled as his eyes dropped to her midsection, "I see I have missed some news of my own while I've been gone."

Brooke's grin broadened. "This isn't the only news you've missed. Just let me send the neighbor boy to call Sky, and I'll be right in. Make yourself at home." Brooke waved him inside and headed for the house next door.

Jason entered the little house, noting the bucket on the kitchen floor and the line delineating the clean side from the dirty. Hanging his black Stetson on the back of a chair, he bent down and took over where Brooke had left off.

“Oh, Jason,” Brooke said as she came back into the house, “get up off that floor and sit down!”

He grinned at her. “Not on your life. You just plant yourself in that chair right there,” he pointed towards the dining table, “and start filling me in on all the news I’ve missed.”

Brooke sank into the indicated chair. “First I want to know all about what you’ve been doing. My, you’ve lost a lot of weight.”

Jason flushed. “Most of my weight was due to the fact that I drank too much. Now that I’ve given that up, I can’t seem to keep the pounds on.”

Brooke smiled tenderly. “We are so proud of you, Jason.”

He nodded but did not look up. His life had changed because of his relationship with the Lord, not because he was so great a person. There was no reason for Brooke to be proud of him, but knowing that she had not really meant the words exactly as they sounded, he kept this thought to himself.

“So tell me what you’ve been up to,” she prodded.

“Oh, not much. I’ve punched a few cows here and there, but I thought it was time that I came home to see how all the family was doing. I’ve really missed Marquis,” he said of his sister. “I would have stopped by there first, but your house was on the way so I thought I would stop and say hello.”

“Well, we’re all doing just fine. As you can see—”

She was interrupted by the front door opening.

“Jason!” Sky strode in. “Where’ve you been? Brooke and I were just talking about you last night.”

Jason and Brooke exchanged smiles.

“Sky.” Jason extended his wet, soapy hand, but Sky pulled him into a manly embrace. Then the cousins stepped back and eyed one another.

“How are things?” Sky asked.

“Fine.” Jason grinned. It was good to be home.

“I mean with your relationship with the Lord,” said Sky. He was

never one to beat around the bush.

Jason grinned at Brooke again. “He sure knows how to get to the point, doesn’t he?”

Brooke smiled in response but Jason could see that her eyes held the same question.

Jason swallowed and fiddled with the scrub brush. “I’m doing good, Sky. I’ve had my struggles, especially giving up the bottle, but I haven’t given in so far. God has given me the strength I needed every time.”

“Praise God! We haven’t given up praying for you even for a minute.”

“Thanks.” The one word could never express his deep gratitude. He tapped the scrub brush against his palm. “Brooke told me that I have missed a bunch of news.”

Sky grinned, sitting down next to his wife and taking her hand. “Have you ever.”

Jason bent to continue scrubbing the floor, curiosity filling him. “Well?” he asked, waiting.

“Well, let’s see. First you can see that Brooke is expecting. We’ll have an addition to the family sometime around the end of this month.”

“Hopefully closer to the middle,” Brooke said, reaching one hand to her lower back and causing both men to smile.

Sky continued, “Then there is Sharyah—she has finished her schooling and plans to find a teaching position for this fall.”

Jason sat back on the balls of his feet, letting the scrub brush hang between his knees. “Sharyah. Wow, I seem to only remember her as the little pig-tailed beauty that drove all the boys at the church picnics crazy ’cause she only had eyes for Cade Bennett.”

Sky smiled. “Well she still drives all the boys crazy, but I don’t know about her having eyes for Cade Bennett anymore. He’s been seeing a lot of Jenny Cartwright.”

“Oh honey!” Brooke voiced exasperation. Then turning back to Jason she rolled her eyes. “Men are so blind! Of course she’s still in love with Cade, but he just doesn’t have a brain in his head where Sharyah is concerned. If he had a thimbleful of wisdom, he would have snapped Sharyah up a long time ago!”

Sky grinned at Jason. "As you can see, Brooke and my family don't get along very well."

Giving a mock frown Jason agreed, "Yes, I can see that."

Sky went on, "Rocky is still a deputy in town. He, Dad, and I keep the town running criminal-free." He tossed another grin in Jason's direction as a twinkle leapt into his eyes. "And I guess that's about all that's new."

Brooke spun, wide-eyed, in Sky's direction and then stopped and grinned lovingly into his eyes. Jason smiled, surmising that Sky had been teasing her and the largest piece of news would soon be forthcoming. He swiped his cheek against his shoulder and concentrated on the last section of the kitchen floor. *Someday, Lord, if You're willing, I would like to have someone to love that way.*

After giving Sky a friendly punch, Brooke turned back to Jason. "Your cousin is deliberately withholding information from you, but maybe we shouldn't ruin her surprise. You had better go visit Marquis right away, though. She would be terribly disappointed if you heard the news from anyone else."

"Marquis? Is she all right?" Jason asked, tension crawling through his chest.

"She is just fine," Sky assured.

Jason's shoulders relaxed and he took an easy breath. But a niggling worry still clung to the back of his mind. "Well, maybe I'll just mosey on over that way." He stood and picked up the scrub water. "Can I empty this for you somewhere, Brooke?"

"Oh, just to one side out the back door is fine." Brooke waved him through the kitchen.

As he made his way back to the front of the house, Jason grabbed his hat trying not to let his worry over his sister's news show on his face. He had always been a little overprotective of her, since a childhood illness had robbed her of her sight. He had been gone for several years when he headed to the Idaho Territory to exact revenge on a man that he blamed for their Mother's death. But he had known that since she was living with his grandmother she was in good hands. Since his return to the Lord, finding work had forced him away from his family, but he had faithfully sent Marquis money every month.

Now he was back, and wondered what news Marquis could have that she would not have told him in her last letter.

“I’ll just head on over to Gram’s then. It’s good to see you both and congratulations.”

Brooke embraced him once more. “Thank you for stopping by. On Sunday everyone is getting together at our place for lunch, so come on by and join us.”

“I’ll do that.” Jason settled his Stetson and headed down the street to Gram’s house, which sat on the edge of the snow-bound little town.



The Prineville bank was stuffy and hot. The teller had forgotten to turn down the damper on the wood stove. The heat had felt nice to Tom Roland for a few minutes after coming in from the single digit temperature outside. Now, sitting behind his desk, he mopped his sweaty brow and tossed an occasional irritated glance at the teller.

William Harpster, sitting across from the banker, wore a frown of his own. But he was not glaring at the teller. His eyes were fixed solely on the short, paunchy, balding Roland seated across from him. “I told you it would take some time.”

“It’s been over two years!” The words were forceful but voiced low so as not to reach the ears of the clerk. “The Association is going to be running *us* off if we don’t come up on the good side of this deal. We guaranteed them we’d have the small-timers gone by next month. You said you could get the job done!”

William’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think I don’t know that? You’re the one that said he was the perfect man for our plan! It’s not my fault he’s welching on his end.” His voice became a little too loud and drew a look from the curious teller.

But at that moment a patron entered the building, taking the man’s interest off their conversation. When it was once again safe to resume, Tom said, “Keep it down, would you? This is not my fault. First,” the banker held up one short finger, “his wife isn’t nearly as timid and withdrawn as you said. She’s made friends with over half the country, for goodness’ sake! Second, he’s no longer willing to go along with our

plan. And now,” a third finger joined the first two, “you’re telling me you think he might have a herd of horses back in those hills that could pay off his loan?”

William rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. Things just don’t add up.... He’s been making his payments?”

“Right on time, every time.”

William sighed. There was only one way to insure that their plan would work. A casual smile began to form on his lips. “We know what The Association thinks. But how badly do you want your share of that land?”

Tom Roland didn’t say anything. His eyes flickered to the teller in an irritated frown as he dabbed at his glistening pate with a handkerchief. Then, leaning back, he lit a cigar and blew a ring of smoke in William’s direction, a slow smile spreading across his face. He wanted that land. The original owner had given up on ranching and moved back to Chicago, leaving the land up for sale. Tom had been tempted to buy the land himself, but then John Trent had walked into his bank. The only reason he’d loaned John the money was that he was almost assured the gambler wouldn’t be able to come up with his payments and the land would revert to the bank where he could discretely snap it up at a lower price. That, and the fact that the Stockman’s Association had needed a scapegoat for their dirty work. But then John had developed a conscience on them. And on top of that he hadn’t missed one payment.

Tom sighed and ran his handkerchief across the back of his neck. Five thousand acres of the finest range land in central Oregon and half of it was to be his. Well, maybe more than half, but he was careful to keep that thought off his face. Yes. He wanted that land very much. But a couple of things bothered him. “What about his wife?”

William smiled sardonically, “Let me worry about the little woman. Once John is out of the way she will give up. There’s no way she will be able to make a go of it. They’ve only got two hands.”

Tom’s eyes hardened momentarily. “The Stockman’s Association will break loose with all the fury of Hades if this doesn’t pan out. They were plenty upset that I let him buy that land in the first place. And if things don’t work out for me, you know they certainly aren’t going to

work out for you, right?"

"Things couldn't be clearer. Have I ever let you down before?"

Roland blew another ring, a twinkle in his pale blue eyes. "No, William. No, you haven't. But let's make sure this isn't the first."

William's eyes hardened. "Tom, this better be the last time you need my services. A man's patience can only be stretched so far."

"You just do your job, William. You just do your job, and let the future take care of itself." The men glared at each other across the desk, neither one wanting to be the first to look away. Finally Tom looked down at his desk, pulling in a deep drag on his cigar. "Now, back to the job at hand. I think we both know there is only one way to solve this little problem."

The two men's eyes locked and silent understanding passed between them.

William stood, straightened his cowhide vest with a tug and placed his hat carefully on his head. He shook Tom's hand and said loud enough for the teller to hear, "Thanks. You won't regret making me this loan, Mr. Roland." With that he moved towards the door, stepping out into the cold. He took a cleansing breath of the refreshing cool air and headed towards the livery. He had a job to do back home....

About the Author



LYNNETTE BONNER, the daughter of missionaries, was born and raised in Malawi, Africa. After graduating high school from Rift Valley Academy, a boarding school in Kenya, she attended Northwest University in Kirkland, Washington, where she met her husband, Marty. They married in 1992 and moved to Pierce, Idaho, a few years later.

During the time they lived in Idaho, while studying the history of their little town, Lynnette was inspired to begin The

Shepherd's Heart Series with *Rocky Mountain Oasis*.

Marty and Lynnette have four children and currently live in Washington, where Marty pastors a church.

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