



Mail ORDER BRIDE

A
VALENTINE'S
SORROW

Emma Ashwood

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Chapter 1

New York, February 1867

She paid the toll at the booth and walked onto Brooklyn Bridge with the wind slicing through her threadbare coat. It was Valentine's Day and although it was a day of love, today would be her last in this life.

Fear crept up her spine, but she took a deep breath to quickly force it back down again. She had no choice; if she did, she wouldn't be climbing the railings of the bridge. She held on tightly, the wind whipping as her breath expelled in white little puffs. She glanced down at the inky black water below and knew it would be freezing.

But the water didn't frighten her. It might be freezing and drag her under within seconds, but it would also bring an end to this life of misery and misfortune. Clinging to the railings, she closed her eyes and thought back on all that had brought her to this moment.

It isn't every girl who feels blessed to be married at the age of seventeen, but that had been the way Mary Beth Collins had felt.

After her mother had passed when Mary was just a little girl, Mary Beth had spent most of her childhood looking out for her alcoholic father. When her father announced that she was to marry Arthur Everston, Mary Beth had been abhorred at first. Arthur Everston was her father's bookie and she knew that her marriage to Arthur was a way for her father to pay off his debt.

She had been desperate to find a way out of the wedding but living in the slums of New York in 1867 didn't really give Mary Beth much of an option. She had cried on her wedding day but soon learned that marrying Arthur Everston might have been the best thing that could ever have happened to her.

Not only did Arthur treat her with respect and kindness, but he treated her like the daughter he never had. At the age of fifty-four, Arthur wasn't looking for a romantic relationship but rather a companion to share his life in his large mansion.

Arthur paid her father handsomely never to contact Mary Beth again, which provided a reprieve from the horrible life Mary Beth had known. He had bought her the finest dresses, the most beautiful jewelry and had taken her to balls she had only ever dreamed of ever attending.

The fact that Arthur was a bookie didn't bother Mary Beth in the least. His business dealings were none of her business and if a few dodgy-looking men happened to stop by their large brownstone now and then, she pretended not to see. They were living in tough times and, seen from a certain perspective, Arthur was doing nothing wrong. He was simply offering short term loans to help those who wouldn't get relief elsewhere. If he took a few bets on the side, at least he paid the winners their dues.

Mary Beth's father passed a year after her wedding to Arthur. She attended the funeral alone, with only herself and the priest in attendance. It had been a dreary day, but Mary Beth couldn't help but feel relieved. Her father had finally been released from a life of misery and debt, and the disease that had destroyed his lungs over the last few years.

Arthur had supported her throughout that horrible time and suggested she take some lessons to help her take her mind off her problems. She had expected Arthur to instruct her on what lessons she was to take, but even there he had given her a choice.

Mary Beth had opted for sewing lessons, having never had a mother to teach her the coveted skill. Soon she knew how to sew her own undergarments, and with time she even learned to make shirts and dresses. Mary Beth was finally feeling as if life was no longer throwing lemons at her.

Until the day the doctor had come in early January. Arthur was sick with an ailment that could not be cured with any form of medication. This ailment was of the type that would rob him of his life.

Consumption.

He hadn't noticed the disease until it rendered him bedridden. The prognosis wasn't good and little by little Arthur's business began falling apart. The hounds were knocking at the door even as

Mary Beth was praying for Arthur to be healed. She had come to love the kind older man and knew that without him her future would be bleak.

On Valentine's Day, she had sat by his bedside and told him for the first time that she loved him and that she appreciated everything he had done for her. Arthur had lapsed into a minor coughing fit and then declared having fallen in love with her and how their future would now be stolen from them.

The revelation had startled Mary Beth. If she had known sooner, her relationship with Arthur could have meant so much more.

Arthur died on the evening of Valentine's day when his lungs could finally not draw breath for even another moment. Mary Beth had cried over his body and knew that she would never love again. Arthur might have been old enough to be her father, but he had shown her the meaning of patience, love, and kindness.

One by one the debt collectors had come to claim their due. Arthur who had been very affluent was soon stripped of almost everything but the house.

Then the bank had made an appearance.

Mary Beth had left the home she had shared with Arthur carrying nothing but a carpetbag and the pearl pendant he had gifted her the year before. Destitute, she headed back to the slums where she used a little of the pittance she had inherited to secure a room in a tenement building. For a woman who had lived a life of luxury, Mary Beth couldn't believe she was once again poor with no prospects of change in sight for the future.

She opened her eyes and again glanced down at the water, feeling a tear slip over her cheek. She had no real choice other than to jump. It had been a year since Arthur had drawn his last breath, a year of struggling by with the small inheritance he had left her.

Mary Beth barely had enough to pay for another's month's rent and with the economy being what it was, there weren't very many job opportunities available in the slums. Over the last few months, Mary Beth had applied for every available position she knew about. Everything from a cleaner, to a nurse right down to the lady sitting in the toll booth on the bridge.

No one wanted her.

No one cared.

All that was left for her was to put an end to her life. She had thought this over a few times and knew drowning would be a better way to go than to starve on the streets.

Mary Beth looked down at the water and felt her breath catch in her throat even as sobs began racking her shoulders. Was this to be the culmination of her life? Drowning herself in the Hudson on Valentine's Day?

There simply was no other option. She glanced up at the cold cloudless sky and shook her head. "Lord, if You had other plans for my life, now would be a good plan to reveal them. I'm destitute, hungry and I know there is nothing in store for me but more heartache. I know You don't approve of what I'm about to do but I pray that You will understand. That You will see I have no choice." Her breath caught when her foot slipped off the railing. She quickly regained her balance, her heart racing in her chest.

In the darkness, she heard a voice. Or was it in her mind? Mary Beth wasn't completely sure, but the voice was as clear as if the speaker was standing right beside her.

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

A frown creased her brow as she brushed away the tears with one hand, almost losing her balance again. That wasn't a voice; that was a verse, she realized, remembering the verse from the bible. Jeremiah 29:11.

A warm blanket of relief folded over Mary Beth. She wasn't going crazy after all; God had simply answered her prayers. She carefully stepped down from the railing, away from the inky black waters rushing below and took a deep breath.

She might not know what that future held or when the plans might come to fruition, but at least she knew that tonight wasn't the night she would end her life, because God still had plans for her future.

Chapter 2

Mary Beth walked home with her coat wrapped tightly around her waist. The night was cold and dark and have her no feeling of hope, but the words of the Lord remained with her. She might not understand what plans God had in store for her, but now at least she could look forward to a future that one day it would no longer resemble the life she was currently living.

She walked past men making fires on the side of the road, drunkards being lewd in front of the taverns, and soiled doves offering their promiscuous services. When she reached the lower slums she was just about to turn the corner onto the street in which her tenement home was located, when she saw a man on the corner waving a newspaper.

"Matrimonial Times, get your copy today. Handsome bachelors looking for wives all over the country. Special price for tonight only."

Mary Beth frowned, shaking her head. The matrimonial times was not sold on street corners. This was a chancer trying to make a quick buck. She crossed over to walk on the other side of the road in the hopes of avoiding the opportunist looking for a quick buck to pay for his next drink. She kept her head low, hoping he wouldn't notice her, but once again her luck was out.

The man rushed through the muddy thoroughfare towards her. He stopped right in front of her with a toothless smile, smelling of alcohol and tobacco. "Looking for a husband, Miss?"

Mary Beth quickly shook her head trying to get away. "No, thank you. I best get home." She tried to maneuver around him, but he was quick on his feet and with a few steps stood in front of her again.

"Come on, Miss, just think about it. You can pick a husband like you would a dress with this newspaper. They're only printed every

second week, and this is the latest copy. Just a few quid, ma'am."

Her heart began to race, wondering if this wasn't an ambush. Could it be that five other men were waiting for their chance to jump her at any moment? Were they going to rob her or hurt her?

"Miss, you can pick a husband that will bring you happiness, joy and possibly even prosperity. Think of the future, ma'am."

Mary Beth was about to run when something caused her to stop and frown. How was it possible that the man had just promised her the very words that had come to her on the bridge? Wasn't this a sign? Wasn't this God's way of leading her to the plans that would prosper her and not harm her?

She shook her head, certain that she was just imagining things through her desperation and her destitute state. Then she remembered what Arthur had once told her. *You can't complain about the future if you don't try to create it for yourself. Always think ahead, Mary Beth.*

Mary Beth reached into her pocket for a few coins, hoping beyond all reason that she was making the right decision. The toothless hawker's smile split his face in two as he handed her the newspaper. "Thank you, ma'am, I hope you find a good one."

He shoved the newspaper into Mary Beth's hand and quickly rushed across the street to the tavern. The newspaper was wet, with traces of mud here and there, but she tucked it under her arm and headed home.

On the way, she couldn't help but think about all the stories she had heard about women heading out West to find love. Surely it couldn't be that easy. She had heard of girls falling in love with handsome cowboys, others finding love with successful proprietors of shops in gold rush towns. It sounded too good to be true and probably was, but as Mary Beth glanced around her at the horrible state of the slums, she couldn't help but admit that anywhere would be better than New York right now.

She unlocked her one-roomed tenement home and stepped inside. She placed the newspaper on the small table and made herself a cup of tea, glancing at it every now and then as if it would jump up and bite her if she was not careful. After the first sip of tea, she felt the cold slowly melt from her body, having spent so long outside at the mercy of the winter elements. It was Valentine's evening and instead of jumping off the bridge, she had bought a copy of the Matri-

monial Times. An ironic laugh bubbled from her throat. If that wasn't pathetic, she didn't know what was, but that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that she needed to find that future, promised to her by God on the bridge.

After stoking the coals in the fireplace Mary Beth finally gathered enough courage and collected the newspaper before sitting down by the fireside. She shook her head, unable to believe that she was even considering becoming a mail-order bride, but soon found herself enthralled.

There were men from all over the country seeking wives for different reasons. Some for companionship, some needed care for their children and others were simply seeking love. The advertisements gave little information about the men, but enough to raise curiosity.

Some advertisements were overly embellished, promising handsome children and a humble life sweetened with love. Mary Beth wasn't foolish enough to fall for any of them, but there was one advertisement that caught her attention.

Handsome Rancher searching for a wife

Thomas Hickok is a gentleman of good breeding searching for a wife who will brighten his days even more than the Californian sun. Tall, dark-haired and handsome; Thomas is searching for true love. If you think that you can be a rancher's wife, enjoy hard work along with great rewards, then Thomas Hickok is the man you have been looking for.

With a large ranch in sunny California, only a day's ride from Gambler's Creek, Thomas can offer a wife the best of both worlds. Life on a ranch with the comforts of town only a short ride away. With ample grazing for his large herd, this rancher is looking forward to becoming one of the biggest ranchers in California, but he would like a wife at his side to help him celebrate this future victory. A stream lush with gold runs through his property and Thomas also enjoys prospecting at times.

Tired of having no prospects? Thomas Hickok can give you the prosperous future you have always dreamed of. All you have to do is to write to him with your intentions, age, height, and estimated weight and Thomas will answer your letter swiftly.

Don't hesitate; grab this opportunity to find love, change and a chance to become the wife of the coveted Thomas Hickok.

A smile tugged at the corners of Mary Beth's mouth. The advertisement was completely absurd. Thomas Hickok was advertising himself as if he was a prize bull on a county auction, and yet it intrigued her. It was clear he had a good sense of humor, and perhaps a little humor was what Mary Beth needed.

She shoved the thought aside, thinking it was as ridiculous as putting herself on auction. But Thomas's advertisement kept mulling over in her mind. She couldn't stop thinking of the prosperous future Thomas promised. By the time midnight rolled around Mary Beth couldn't help but admit that without prospects for the future, perhaps Thomas Hickok was the future that God had promised her on the bridge.

After searching for paper and pen, Mary Beth sat down with a lamp and began writing a letter she never imagined ever penning. She told Thomas about her marriage to Arthur and his subsequent death, along with his hopes for the future. She didn't know much about California but made it clear that she would enjoy a more temperate climate than that she had come to know in New York. It had taken her nearly thirty minutes of writing and rewriting before she finally folded the letter and placed it in an envelope to post to Thomas Hickok.

Dawn had barely broken when Mary Beth rushed out of her tenement home to post the letter before she had any chance to change her mind. By the time she returned she was both exhausted and excited. Thomas promised to write back swiftly, but Mary Beth couldn't help but wonder how soon she might hear from him.

She shook her head, baffled at the prospect of becoming a rancher's wife, and wondered how big his ranch could be. If he was close to becoming the biggest rancher in California, Mary Beth could imagine him to be quite wealthy. Would his home be a log cabin or a more solid structure? She had heard so many stories about the West that she wasn't completely sure what was true and what was fabricated for the sake of the telling. Of one thing she was certain, though, and that was that life on a ranch was hard work.

Mary Beth had never been afraid of hard work, especially not if it brought the great rewards Thomas mentioned in his advertisement.

She closed her eyes and prayed that God would bless her letter and that Thomas would write back to her soon.

Chapter 3

For months the letters had passed back and forth between Gambler's Creek and New York. Mary Beth found a job at a tailor which enabled her to pay the rent for her tenement apartment. On some months she received correspondence from Thomas twice or even three times, while on others, she might get only one letter.

She had learned a great deal about Thomas during their months of correspondence. Although he was a rancher, he was currently more focused on prospecting, believing it to be where his fortune lay. Mary Beth couldn't help but be a little reticent to jump on a train and join him in California with hundreds if not thousands of prospectors already there also believing their future to be lying in a stream somewhere.

Wealth wasn't guaranteed for any prospector, but then neither was Mary Beth's future in New York. The inheritance she had received from Arthur was dwindling and soon Mary Beth would have nothing to fall back on. Her wages from the tailor shop were not nearly enough to survive on.

Every week she looked forward to hearing from Thomas and on those weeks when she didn't, she couldn't help but fear a mishap of some kind had befallen him in the wilderness. She heard such awful stories about bear attacks and brutal savages that she had come to fear that her future with Thomas might come to an end before it even started.

With Christmas came snow. Mary Beth stood outside in the early morning to admire the pristine white blanket that covered New York, knowing that within hours it would become no more than a nuisance and a muddy mess.

She spent Christmas Eve on her own wondering if she would be spending her next Christmas with Thomas. When the New Year dawned, Mary Beth was eager to be in contact with him again. She received a letter from him on the 2nd of January. The letter was short, but it held the promise Mary Beth had been waiting for over the many months.

My dearest Mary Beth

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I have good news. After months of scouring the creek, I finally found the nugget of gold I have been praying for. I write to you now a wealthy man with a prospecting deed. There are numerous mining companies interested in gaining a claim for my property, but these are all decisions I'd like to discuss with you. In-person, if possible.

Mary Beth, I've come to know you as a kind and caring woman, one that no doubt has suffered somewhat in her life. I'd like to ask you for your hand in marriage. Come to California, come to Gambler's Creek and be my wife. Together we will make the decisions that will affect our future. Together we will build a life on the ranch and we will grow our herd.

I look forward to hearing your answer.

Yours truly,

Thomas Hickok

Finally, she was ready to bid farewell to her life in New York and set off on a new adventure in California. Thomas needed her and she couldn't wait to help him make the decisions that would affect their lives. For a moment a signal sounded in her mind, and she had to consider whether this was really the right thing to do.

Mary Beth shoved the thought aside to face reality. In California, she had Thomas waiting for her. Perhaps nothing would come of the nugget of gold or the mining companies offering to buy his claim, but the chance was good that she might finally find the peace and love she had been in search of for most of her life.

Nothing in life was certain, but Mary Beth knew that if she stayed in New York, she was certain of a bleak future. Without an affluent father, she wouldn't find a match. As for love, when people were uncertain of their next meal, they didn't care too much about

finding love. New York had become home to immigrants and the engine of the new world. All who found themselves here were merely battling to stay in the race. Many fell out, Mary Beth had almost fallen behind on the side of the road on many occasions, but Thomas was giving her a way out.

She resigned from her job at the tailor and packed her carpetbag before using the last of her money to buy a ticket to California. She boarded the train on a rainy morning. Through the fog and the rain, she bid New York farewell and looked westward, to where her new home awaited her.

She was both anxious and excited to meet Thomas. Through his letters, he sounded like a nice man and Mary Beth didn't doubt that they would get along. As for love, she hadn't given that much thought. She believed that in time she would come to love and appreciate Thomas just as she had grown to love and appreciate Arthur.

It was a week's journey west and the train carried other passengers comprised of families and mail order brides, but Mary Beth kept to herself. She spent her time on the train trying to imagine her new life. After a week onboard, the train descended through the hills into California, and Mary Beth was eager to meet her new husband.

Chapter 4

Gambler's Creek, California, 8 January 1868

Mary Beth arrived in Gambler's Creek during the late afternoon. Although it was cool, the weather was nothing like the brutal chill of January in New York. She said her goodbyes to her fellow travelers before she disembarked from the train.

The town of Gambler's Creek was small, about the size of a three-city block in New York. The road was just dirt and dust and the people gathered on the platform looked just as dusty and wind-blown as the platform itself.

Her heart was racing in her chest as she collected her carpetbag and watched the train pull out of the station. For a moment bile rose in her throat and her tummy tightened into a ball of nerves wondering if she had just made the biggest mistake of her life. What if Thomas didn't arrive to collect her, what if she didn't like him? What if he was old, fat and bald and was just looking for someone to clean his house and cook for him.

The doubts began to multiply as Mary Beth turned and looked around the platform. Thomas had described himself as a tall man with broad shoulders, but Mary Beth could see only a few wiry wranglers standing nearby, and a few men outside the tavern in the distance. Her heart jumped into her throat. Had Thomas forgotten she would be arriving today?

She had written to confirm the date of her arrival, but the letter may well have been lost in the mail. Mary Beth took a few deep breaths to calm her racing heart while she watched as all the passengers on the platform were met by family and friends awaiting their arrival. Everyone left except for Mary Beth.

She found a seat and finally gave in to the tears that had threatened to fall for the last two hours. What if Thomas had run into problems and he couldn't be there to fetch her? Surely there had to be a reason for his tardiness.

When she heard footsteps on the platform behind her, Mary Beth turned hopefully, wishing it to be Thomas, but it was the sheriff. A frown creased her brow as she assessed the scowl on the man's face. He was tall, at least five inches taller than Mary Beth. His hair was black; almost the color of soot, but it was his eyes that caught her interest. They were almost the same color as his hair, dark and foreboding.

A shiver traveled up Mary Beth's spine as he stopped before her. "Can I help you, ma'am? I have been watchin' you all afternoon and it seems no one's comin' to get ya?"

His voice was deep, making the hair on the back of Mary Beth's neck stand on end. Although she was in no way on the wrong side of the law, she couldn't help but feel intimidated by the man standing over her. Mary Beth stood and straightened her skirt before tilting her neck to look the sheriff in the eye.

"My name is Mary Beth Collins. I have traveled from New York and arrived on the afternoon train. My betrothed, Thomas Hickok, was supposed to meet me. I'm sure he's just running late."

A frown creased the sheriff's brow as he let out a low whistle.

Mary Beth wasn't sure of the intention behind the whistle but waited for the sheriff to explain. When he finally turned to meet her gaze again it was with an expression of apology. "My name is Eric Colt. I'm the sheriff here in Gambler's Creek. Have been for the last four years. Unfortunately, I have bad news to impart to you."

Mary Beth's heart skipped a beat. Had something happened to Thomas, was that why he hadn't been here to meet her train?

"Thomas?"

"I think we'd better sit down. There's a bench over there by the ticket booth," Sheriff Colt said with a kind smile as he reached for Mary Beth's carpetbag. He lifted it as if it weighed nothing at all, whereas it had taken all Mary Beth's strength just to haul it from the train onto the platform. She followed him to the bench and took a seat, waiting for him to impart his bad news. She couldn't help but feel that she shouldn't even be surprised. All her life things had a

way of falling apart, why did she expect this would've been any different?

"Miss Collins, can I call you Mary Beth?" Sheriff Colt asked gently as if Mary Beth was an injured animal.

A frown creased her brow as she felt her temper start to rise. "You can call me whatever you like, Sheriff, as long as you tell me why Thomas Hickok didn't arrive to meet me."

"I will," Sheriff Colt said as he removed his hat. His hair fell over his forehead, clean and freshly washed in contrast to the rest of Gambler's Creek that looked dirty and dusty. "A week ago the man who called himself Thomas Hickok was arrested. He is being transported to Bodie to stand trial."

Mary Beth shook her head. "What do you mean the man who called himself Thomas Hickok? Where is the real Thomas Hickok?"

"Murdered, I'm afraid. I know this will come as a shock to you so I'll try to explain it as best I can. I recently discovered that there was a gang of outlaws in California posting advertisements in the Matrimonial Times in order to lure young innocent women out West. I, along with a few other marshals, began investigating and soon learned that the gang was operated by a man in Gambler's Creek. You see, the women they lured out west were never intended to become their wives." Sheriff Colt cleared his throat awkwardly. "They were to become soiled doves in some of the area's ill-reputed establishments."

A gasp escaped Mary Beth at the thought of that being her fate. "No!"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's exactly what they did. However, last week we managed to track down the leader of this gang. Turns out Thomas Hickok, a prosperous rancher around these parts was attacked on his ranch and the gang leader had assumed his identity."

"So Thomas is dead? The real Thomas?" Mary Beth asked in total confusion. None of this made sense.

"Yes. I'm afraid you've been corresponding with an outlaw who lured you here under false pretenses," Sheriff Colt said bluntly.

Mary Beth felt her hopes dashed. As if to further punctuate her misfortune, the wind picked up and ripped her hat from her head. Sheriff Colt's hand flew out in response, and he very quickly caught it and handed it back to Mary Beth. She shook her head as tears be-

gan streaming down her face. She had just left New York and all she knew to start a new life in Gambler's Creek.

It had been a gamble, but not one that had paid off. Now she was sitting on a train platform with only her carpetbag and the last few dollars she owned, learning how the man who had promised to take care of her had been an outlaw trying to lure her into a life of sin.

Her shoulders began to shake with the sobs, from feeling destitute and hopeless. Beside her, the sheriff cleared his throat. "Are you alright?"

Mary Beth shook her head before she sniffed and met his gaze. "No, I'm not alright. I have nothing and no one and now I'm in the middle of nowhere... I thought this was my chance at a new life, but it's proved to be just another cliff I managed to step off of."

She let the tears come, without so much as a care about her appearance. She had nothing left to live for. She should have jumped from the bridge that night, at least then she wouldn't die of starvation in a strange town out West.

She felt the sheriff awkwardly patting her shoulder and glanced up to notice that his eyes weren't just black. They showed hints of violet as well. Almost as if they were the darkest shade of blue that Mary Beth had ever seen.

She knew that he was not at fault for all that had happened to her, but she couldn't help but hope that he would find a way to help her out of the mess she had managed to entangle herself in. After all, he had arrested the man who was meant to have collected her from the station.

Mary Beth knew she was being foolish, but for the moment she didn't care. She felt as if the whole world was against her and that she had no chance of surviving the latest storm life had thrown her into the path of.

Chapter 5

Eric Colt could not decide which was worse. That the girl at his side might have become the next big attraction in the town's pleasure house, or that she was now destitute and without prospects in his town. His heart ached for her, but he couldn't regret arresting Joey the Brute. For months the local marshals had been combing California in search of the mastermind behind the horrific hoax that had mail order brides lured out west for ill-reputable reasons. When he finally found the one responsible hiding right beneath his nose, he had taken pleasure in arresting him.

For a moment he was taken back to his years as marshal. Sleeping under the stars and riding until he could barely walk, with the aim of clearing the West of highwaymen, robbers, and murderers. He still couldn't believe that he had finally taken a steady position as sheriff of a small town. Eric would never be sure whether the last Mexican invasion had cured him of life as a lawman on the range or whether it had been the small piece of land that came with the position of small-town sheriff. He wasn't a rancher by any means, but the dozen steers he now owned along with a few horses and some poultry did bring him joy at the end of a long hard day.

As for taking a wife with whom to share his life, that wasn't a notion he had ever given any thought to. Taking a wife would mean responsibility and, although he was doing well for himself right now, Eric would be the first to admit that one's situation could very well change without notice. When and if his situation ever did change, he didn't want that responsibility on his shoulders. He might not spend his days on horseback chasing outlaws anymore but that didn't mean Eric was eager to be tied down.

He glanced at the woman sitting beside him and his heart ached for her. He could see that she was crestfallen and disappointed. He understood that feeling, but shouldn't she be grateful that he had saved her from an even worse fate? Eric waited until her tears subsided and she had taken a deep breath before he turned to her again.

For a moment his breath caught in his throat. Living in the West, Eric didn't see many women from the city, but he'd passed through some of the biggest towns during his time as a marshal. He couldn't remember ever coming across a prettier girl during all his travels. Her hair wasn't just brown; it was the color of bark after a soft rain. Here and there lighter hints were evidence of the sun having kissed her head. Her skin was the color of cream; obviously, she hadn't spent much time in the California sun up to now. But it was her eyes that made Eric's heart skip a beat. They were the palest blue he had ever come across. Almost as if they were translucent with just a touch of cerulean.

Right now they were red-rimmed from crying and looking at Eric as if he had the answers to all the questions in her mind.

"What do I do now, Sheriff? I barely have money, definitely not enough for the train fare back to New York. Besides that, I have nowhere to stay." A wry laugh escaped her, she was apparently becoming either hysterical or finding the humor in her situation. "I don't even have money for food, although starvation is sounding pretty good in the scheme of things."

Eric let out a sigh knowing she had just hit the nail on the head with her summary. Two other women who had arrived over the last week in search of Thomas Hickok had very quickly made arrangements to return home, but it was clear that Mary Beth had no one back home, much less enough funds to arrange her own return to New York.

Thunder roared overhead and Eric suddenly realized that they'd been sitting on the platform so long without noticing the clouds drawing together above them or the sky darkening. Judging by the skies Eric guessed it would be ten to thirty minutes before the heavens would open to pour down on them.

He glanced towards the boarding house and turned to Mary Beth. "Let's get to the boarding house and then we'll make a plan. It's bound to start raining very soon, and I'm sure the last thing you want now is to be wet"

She didn't answer but followed him as he carried her carpetbag and headed through the thoroughfare. The boarding house was by no means luxurious, but it was a better option than the saloon. Since Eric had helped the proprietor with boisterous guests in the past, he hoped he would be open to negotiation.

He stopped outside the boarding house as thunder clapped overhead again. "Miss, before we go inside I need to know what I'm working with. How much money do you have left?"

Mary Beth gasped at the direct question, but Eric had no time for courtesy right now. "Look, I can try to negotiate with the proprietor on your behalf but there's no use in negotiating outside of what you can afford."

Eric cocked a brow and waited for her answer. She mentioned an amount that would barely get her a week's boarding and then she reached into her pocket and held out an exquisite pearl pendant. "And I have this."

Eric let out a low whistle. "That's some trinket you have there. Good thing the proprietor has an eye for such things and likes to trade." Eric picked up the carpetbag before turning back to Mary Beth. "Come on, let's go find out how much time that trinket can buy you. Don't mention having money just yet."

Eric found Lincoln Elm at the front desk and forced a smile. "Mr. Elm, seems a storm is moving in."

Lincoln nodded with a toothless smile. After falling down the stairs a few years back, he'd had the doc pull his broken teeth. "Seems to be. Can't say I'm complaining, a little rain won't hurt. Will mean more boarders for tonight, hopefully."

Eric nodded. "I'm sure it will. This is Mary Beth Collins. Just come in on the afternoon train. Seems she was lured here by Joey the Brute and his gang. Unfortunately, Miss Collins can't afford to return to New York and so she's here to make you a very generous business proposition."

Eric turned to Mary Beth who was looking at him in confusion. He smiled and winked at her before turning back to Lincoln. "Go on, Mary Beth..."

Mary Beth opened her mouth to speak but only managed a stutter. Exactly as Eric had hoped.

"What Miss Collins is trying to say is that she'll exchange a family heirloom for a few months in your boarding house."

Lincoln frowned and held up his hands. "I'm sorry, Sheriff, I can't go doing no business if there's no cash involved."

"Are you sure about that, Mr. Elm? The heirloom in question is one of a kind. Exquisite pearl and Mayan silver." Eric held out his hand and Mary Beth handed him the pendant.

Lincoln almost crawled over the front desk to take a better look when Eric snatched it away. "It's worth plenty, Mr. Elm. The question is how many months' boarding is it worth?"

Mr. Elm frowned and let out a sigh, "Maybe two, perhaps even three?"

Eric shrugged and turned to Mary Beth. "Does three months sound fair to you?"

She looked at him with a stunned expression and Eric smiled before turning back to Lincoln. "Three months it is. I don't want you going back on this deal, Mr. Elm, ya hear me?"

Lincoln nodded eagerly as he held his hand out for the pendant. Mary Beth handed it over and Lincoln handed her a key. Glad that a deal could be made, Eric waited until Lincoln scurried to his office to secure the pendant before turning to Mary Beth. "Welcome to Gambler's Creek."

Mary Beth shook her head, "I'm not sure that pendant is worth all that much."

"Some things are worth double in the West and others are worth nothing. Lucky for you, exquisite pearl jewelry is worth a man's ranch in the right circles. If you need anything else, Miss Collins, you can find me at the Sheriff's office. I'm sure you'd like to wash up and rest after your long journey."

Mary Beth nodded but didn't move. For a moment Eric considered inviting her to dinner but quickly pushed the thought aside. He didn't know her and wasn't responsible for her.

But that didn't explain why he already felt as if he wanted to protect her.

Chapter 6

Gambler's Creek, California, 15 January 1868

Mary Beth wasn't enjoying the prosperous future she had envisioned she would have in Gambler's Creek, but she was enjoying it more than she enjoyed the slums of New York. Apart from the weather that was less dreary and miserable than in New York, the people of Gambler's Creek were kind, if a little rough.

After the sheriff had been kind enough to arrange for her to stay at the boarding house, Mary Beth no longer had to worry about a roof over her head for the coming months. She spent her days wandering up and down the streets of the town, getting to know some of the shop owners. She bought only what she needed, since having no source of income required her to keep her money for as long as possible.

Mr. Elm was kind enough to include breakfast in her board although she had to arrange for her own dinners. On most nights she dined on bread or biscuits paired with a glass of fresh milk. Milk was surprisingly affordable in Gambler's Creek. It took only a week in Gambler's Creek for Mary Beth to become restless. She wasn't looking for a husband, but she could not tolerate not doing anything. She had asked Mr. Elm if he needed help at the boarding house and he had eagerly accepted her offer only to reveal that he was not able to pay her.

Over the previous two mornings, Mary Beth helped with the morning cleaning merely to keep herself busy, having the rest of the day to herself. It was a beautiful day regardless of the winter season, and Mary Beth found herself wandering the thoroughfare yet again. She walked past the saloon where soiled doves were crooning on the

balcony for weary travelers to come inside and indulge a little. A chill ran down her spine thinking she might have ended up there had Sheriff Colt not arrested Joey the Brute and his gang.

She glanced up at the cloudless sky and wondered what God had in store for her. Surely He wouldn't have her come all the way out West if it hadn't been part of His plan. She reminded herself to thank the sheriff for rescuing her from a fate worse than death, and then turned around and bumped into a solid obstacle.

A gasp escaped her even as two strong hands closed over her arms to prevent her from falling over. "Miss Collins, better watch where you're going."

She glanced up into the sheriff's handsome face and her heart skipped a beat even as a blush colored her cheeks. She couldn't remember ever being as attracted to a man and had to blink repeatedly to gain her composure. "Sheriff Colt, I'm so sorry for my clumsiness."

"It's not a problem. Gambler's Creek been treatin' you well?"

Mary Beth nodded with a hint of a smile. "Very well, actually I was just thinking that I hadn't thanked you yet. The day I arrived was such a confusion that I didn't even stop to thank you for stepping in to help. Thank you, Sheriff, your kindness is truly appreciated."

The sheriff withdrew his hat and ran a hand through his thick black hair. "You can thank me by not callin' me Sheriff. No one else does. It's just Eric."

Mary Beth felt her smile widen. His name suited his character: strong and definitive. "Eric, thank you."

"My pleasure. Mr. Elm treating you well?" Eric asked, replacing his hat.

"Yes, he is. The boarding house is lovely." Mary Beth wouldn't reveal that she had come from the slums of New York and that her tenement room had smelt of mold even in summer. "I'm just becoming a little restless having nothing to do."

Eric nodded, "Are you plannin' on staying or are you saving up to leave Gambler's Creek?"

Mary Beth frowned. She hadn't really given it much thought as yet but glancing up and down the thoroughfare, she couldn't help a smile form on her face. Her coming to Gambler's Creek might have been a mistake, but she didn't regard being here as a mistake. She

thought of New York and all she had lost there and the meager wages she had earned for unreasonably long hours of needlework and couldn't imagine ever going back. "I don't think I'll be returning to New York, although that means I'll have to find a way to stay in Gambler's Creek."

"Best start hunting for employment then," Eric said with a wink.

Mary Beth's heart skipped a beat. Was Eric even aware of how handsome he was when he flashed that smile and paired it with a wink? "Employment?" she asked, mulling over the idea in her mind. "I asked Mr. Elm, but he can't afford to hire help at the moment."

Eric leaned closer and whispered in a conspiring tone, "Mr. Elm's isn't the only business in Gambler's Creek. Why, we have the merchant store, the tailor, the newspaper and we even have the livery. Although I'm not sure if a livery is the place for a lady."

A blush colored Mary Beth's cheeks; no one had ever called her a lady except for Arthur. "You're right, if I'm going to stay I had best start asking around."

Eric tipped his hat and smiled. "I'll look forward to seeing you around, then."

Eric walked away and Mary Beth immediately saw Gambler's Creek through new eyes. No longer was it a symbol of yet another disappointment in her life. Suddenly it was a symbol of her future. She glanced at the various shops and businesses of which there were many along the thoroughfare. Although Gambler's Creek wasn't as big as Bodie or the other booming towns in the west, it offered quite a selection. At least fifteen were evident from her immediate vantage point.

Instead of wandering without purpose, Mary Beth took a deep breath and took her first step towards a future she could secure for herself. Without giving it a second thought, she crossed the dirt road towards the tailor. She had worked as a seamstress before and was confident in her sewing skills; all she need do was convince the proprietor of her skills.

She turned and caught sight of Eric stepping into the Sheriff's office across the road and couldn't help but smile. He didn't have to be kind to her, but he was. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and Mary Beth knew that when she returned to the boarding house later that afternoon she would allow herself to think over the way her heart had skipped a beat at his smile.

The feeling had been so unexpected, so unfamiliar, that it had caught her off guard, but Mary Beth would be prepared should it happen again. Although she wasn't sure she would ever be prepared for the way in which her heart had swelled in her chest when his gaze had met hers. Something about the sheriff made her wonder whether her happily ever after was possibly right here in Gambler's Creek.

She opened the door to the tailor and knew she would never know if she didn't start taking that future into her own hands.

Chapter 7

Gambler's Creek, California, 27 February 1868

Mary Beth arrived at the tailor a little after eight in the morning. She only started working at nine in the mornings, but she was eager to finish the dress shirt she had started altering the day before.

The aroma of coffee and fried grit hung in the air, bringing a smile to her face as she walked through the shop towards the small kitchen and backroom which formed part of the proprietor's residence.

She had walked into the tailor more than a month before and had been slightly intimidated by Peter Maddock. He was probably the oldest man Mary Beth had ever encountered. He had large protruding ears, and his skin was marred with deep grooves from years in the California sun. But once he started talking, Mary Beth realized that Peter Maddock was a kind, old man. He offered her a position as a seamstress, and she considered herself fortunate that he had been on the look-out for a capable seamstress for many months.

On her first day, she hadn't been sure what she was allowed to do and what Peter preferred to do himself, but by the third day, they fell into an easy rhythm. Peter saw to the customers while Mary Beth worked on the alterations. The arrangement suited her perfectly because she was still a little overwhelmed by some of the rough cowboys who frequented Gambler's Creek. Peter had set up a station for her in the back of the shop where she enjoyed working with the sunlight streaming in through the window.

Her days were spent making good use of her talent and training while her evenings were spent pondering what the future might hold for her.

Mary Beth still couldn't believe how close she had come to an unspeakable future. Had it not been for Eric, as she now referred to him, heaven only knows what would have become of her. A sigh escaped her as she took her seat at the table and threaded a needle to begin working. It was hard to believe all that had happened to her over the last few years.

First, her marriage to Arthur, then losing Arthur. Mourning Arthur and considering suicide before grasping at a lifeline that would quite possibly have proven worse than suicide. She glanced up at the clouds in the Californian sky and shook her head. Her angels were working overtime.

She had no idea what the future held but she couldn't help but believe that God would hold true on His promise. Her future would be prosperous and happy, it was just a matter of time before things began falling into place. They had to, she thought to herself.

But this time she wasn't going to wait, she was taking matters into her own hands. She had found herself a job and was done looking for love or a husband. With the wages Peter was paying her she could save to pay for her room and board in advance. Mary Beth was done waiting for a prince on a white horse to sweep her off her feet. She believed there was such a thing as true love, but right now that wasn't on the cards for her.

"There you are," Peter said appearing at her side. "I didn't even hear ya come in."

Mary Beth shrugged. "I tried not to bother you since I was early."

"Nonsense. You're not a bother. You could have joined me for breakfast."

Mary Beth smiled up at him in response to the kind offer. "Maybe I will."

The door opened and the copper bells jingled from it announcing a customer. "Another day, another alteration," Peter chuckled as he moved towards the door.

Mary Beth focused on her sewing, making sure all the stitches were straight and uniform in size when Peter called to her. "Mary Beth, Sheriff's here to see ya."

A frown creased her brow as she put aside her sewing and headed to the front of the shop. "Sheriff?"

Eric smiled broadly and tipped his hat. "Mary Beth. I just wanted to make a turn to see if you've settled in."

She felt a blush color her cheeks as she nodded. "I am. Peter was kind enough to offer me the position of a seamstress."

Peter nodded, "She won't be causin' you no trouble, Sheriff. Isn't that right, Mary Beth?"

Mary Beth smiled, "I promise I won't."

Eric chuckled softly, "Walk me out?"

For a moment Mary Beth felt flustered. Why would the sheriff want her to walk him out? She glanced at Peter who was frowning while gesturing to her with a shooing motion.

They walked from the shop and stood on the small porch outside, and Mary Beth couldn't help but feel nervous. Was something wrong? Is that why the sheriff wanted to talk to her. "Sheriff, if I've done anything..." Mary Beth started.

Eric shook his head. "I thought we had established that you're going to call me Eric. You have done nothing wrong. I just wanted to find out how you're settling in. Peter can be a tyrant, but he's actually got a very big heart."

Mary Beth nodded in agreement, "He's very kind." Although Mary Beth had seen Eric in town a few times, this was their first time conversing since her arrival in Gambler's Creek. She searched his dark brown eyes and couldn't fathom why he made her heart flutter in her chest.

"Still no plans to leave?" Eric asked with a grin.

Mary Beth glanced up and down the thoroughfare before she shook her head. "I've been in Gambler's Creek for a little over a month and I'm confident that I won't be leaving unless something changes, and I have to."

"I'm sure that won't happen. Mr. Elm mentions you're such a great help at the boarding house as well."

"I help where I can." Mary Beth shrugged. Helping to cook dinner was more helping herself than Mr. Elm; whatever his cook cooked up in that kitchen was inedible most of the time.

"Well, if you need anything, you be sure to holler." Eric flashed her a beaming smile that made her heart skip a beat before he tipped his hat and headed back to the Sheriff's office. She watched him walk away and wondered if he checked in on all the new residents of Gambler's Creek. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth; she had a feeling he didn't.

She wasn't looking for love, she'd already been burned twice, but she couldn't help but wonder if Eric Colt had a sweetheart. Mary Beth quickly shoved the thought aside and headed back into the tailor.

"You know the sheriff?" Peter asked almost as soon as she closed the door behind her.

"I met him when I arrived in Gambler's Creek; he helped me secure my room at the boarding house."

Peter nodded but his brow was furrowed. "Seems to me the sheriff is taking very good care of Gambler's Creek newest resident."

Mary Beth couldn't help but smile. "He's a good man." She headed back to her workstation and picked up the shirt and the needle, but as she sewed she couldn't stop thinking about the sheriff with ink-black hair and chocolate brown eyes.

Chapter 8

Gambler's Creek, California, 4 July 1868

Mary Beth could hear the celebrations that had started up during the early morning at the saloon. In New York, the 4th of July was celebrated with fireworks and parades through the streets of the city but in Gambler's Creek, it was celebrated by gunshots, racing horses through the thoroughfare and an influx of travelers and cowboys, all eager to celebrate the day.

But over at the tailor, Mary Beth was grateful to not be outside. Although she had become accustomed to the rough crowd that sometimes frequented the saloon, she couldn't help but feel intimidated by them on such days as this.

She glanced out the window hoping to see Eric, but he was nowhere in sight. She had no doubt that he was probably over at the saloon trying to calm the rowdy mob. In the six months she'd been a resident of Gambler's Creek she had slowly started making a life for herself here.

She had a good job and felt honored to have a few friends. Peter had become like a father to her and Mr. Elm, her landlord, filled the position of a brother. Although he had run the boarding house for years with success, Mary Beth couldn't imagine how. Perhaps the expectations of his guests in the West weren't that high to begin with but with Mary Beth's help, he had raised the bar. After her three months of negotiated stay was up, Mary Beth continued to help around the boarding house in lieu of a discount on her board and lodging.

The boarding house that had once been dusty and offered less than edible food now had a full-time cleaner and, under Mary Beth's tutoring, the cook had even upped his culinary skills.

It was only the sheriff she had yet to place in a category. She wouldn't exactly call Eric a friend, although he stopped by the tailor a few times a week to check on her. She would also not classify him as brotherly, regardless of Mary Beth not having had a brother, she knew that a brother wouldn't have caused her heart to skip a beat whenever she saw him.

Eric ran Gambler's Creek with a firm hand and soft words. Not once during the last six months had Mary Beth ever heard him raise his voice. But a few curt, softly spoken words timeously spoken, quickly calmed the heated heels of even the meanest cowboy.

A smile curved the corners of her mouth as she checked the time on her watch. It was almost noon and regardless of the celebrations that were underway, she was going to look at a small one-bedroomed cabin today. The owner, an elderly woman who had lost her husband a few months ago, was heading back to Missouri to be with her family. She didn't want to sell the cabin she and her husband had built from scratch, but she was willing to discuss leasing terms.

Mary Beth didn't know if she could afford to lease the cabin, but she prayed that God would help her find a way to make it happen. Although she felt welcome at the boarding house, she was tired of drunk men clambering up the stairs at all hours of the day and night. She wanted a kitchen in which she could cook her own meals, and a chair by the window which she wouldn't have to vacate whenever Mr. Elm cocked a brow for her to give the other guests a chance.

She put away her sewing and went in search of Peter who she found dusting off a coat in the front of the shop. "I promise I won't be long."

Peter stopped his dusting and turned to her with a concerned look. "I don't think it's right for you to live in a house all on your own. A woman should live with a husband."

Mary Beth chuckled at his reasoning. "I've tried the husband thing twice, and it didn't work out. It's time I took care of myself, Peter. Besides, it's not like I'm going to live on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. It's just a block away from the shop and I could even invite you over to dinner."

Peter nodded, although he was looking out the window rather than at Mary Beth. "Perhaps you should reconsider the whole husband thing. I know you've had a bad run of it, but you're young, and so is he."

Mary Beth frowned as she followed Peter's gaze and was surprised to see Eric crossing the thoroughfare. "No, thank you. The sheriff isn't interested in courting me."

"Suit yerself. But I have eyes in me head and I know what they see. That man's been coming by this shop more frequently in the last six months than he has in the last five years. He's not coming for the wares I offer, Mary Beth, he comes to see you."

"He's just being kind to a newcomer, is all," Mary Beth quickly said, although her heart was racing a mile a minute. She liked Eric but she never imagined he might have the same feelings for her.

"How about the other newcomers? We've got the Smith family from Texas who just moved onto the ranch on the other side of town. There's a new fella working at the saloon, and that isn't even to mention the man who took over the newspaper. The sheriff's got a special interest in you, perhaps you should hold off with leasing the cabin for the moment yet."

Mary Beth fixed a smile on her face, not wanting Peter to see how his suggestion had struck her. "I'll be fine and, as I said, I'm done waiting for Prince Charming."

She picked up her satchel and headed outside. As soon as she stepped out of the shop, Eric approached. "Mary Beth, headin' somewhere?"

"Yes. I'm going to look at the cabin that's available for leasing," Mary Beth said clutching her satchel even tighter. Whenever she saw Eric Colt, he somehow appeared even more attractive than before. What was it about him that put her nerves on edge and her heart develop arrhythmia?

"Care for company? Might be good to have a man take a look at the cabin to make sure it's still livable."

A laugh escaped her even as she wondered if Peter was right. Did Eric offer to accompany all the newcomers who were considering leasing a cabin? "That won't be necessary. I'm sure you have plenty of other things to do."

Eric shrugged. "Probably, but I'd rather go with you."

Their eyes met and for a moment everything else disappeared. The thoroughfare, the noise, even the bouquet of summer that hung in the air. Her thoughts and emotions centered entirely on Eric's proximity. He had the scent of the range and hard work, and his dark eyes were searching hers. Her heart swelled in her chest, startling her with the intensity. She quickly stepped back and tried to summon a smile.

"If you're sure."

He didn't answer but fell into step beside her instead. While they walked, Eric told her of the ruckus at the saloon that morning when two rival gangs of bandits arrived at the same time. After much debate, Eric had asked both gangs to leave, despite the saloon owner's protests.

"I know he would have made a few bucks today, but the safety of Gambler's Creek comes first."

"The inhabitants of Gambler's Creek appreciate your service," Mary Beth said as they approached the cabin.

Excitement pulsed through her veins when she imagined herself calling it home. They were welcomed by the widow who offered Mary Beth a quick tour while Eric inspected the external structure.

It was small but quite big enough for Mary Beth. It boasted a large fireplace in which she could make a fire during winter, while during the summers she could open the windows and allow the breeze to blow through as it was now. It also had one bedroom and a small kitchen adjacent to a sitting area. When Mary Beth turned and noticed the chair beside the window a smile broke across her face. "I'll take it!"

"We haven't spoken of terms yet?" the widow asked, dumbfounded.

"Whatever your terms, I'll try and make it work. This is perfect."

Eric chuckled and Mary Beth realized she hadn't even noticed that he had stepped inside.

The widow shrugged and started naming her terms and how the postal order for the money should be sent to Missouri every month. Mary Beth wholeheartedly agreed to it all. Since the sheriff was there as witness, a deal was immediately struck.

The widow would be on the next train to Missouri and Mary Beth would start packing to finally move into a place of her own. She was brimming with excitement like a cup running over. All her life

she had depended on men to make her life easier, and for the first time, she was the one to make it happen. That sense of achievement and independence brought her more satisfaction than anything else ever had.

They headed back to the tailor together and Eric chuckled under his breath. "You'd swear you just won the gamble of your life."

Mary Beth laughed. "I did and finally it feels like I have a future to look forward to."

Eric held her gaze and cleared his throat, "I feel the same way."

Every now and then he would say something that caught her off guard. She could never be sure if he was trying to tell her something or if he was just being nice. But right now Mary Beth wondered if he was looking forward to the future because she was staying in Gambler's Creek for good.

Chapter 9

Gambler's Creek, California, 2 September 1868

It was Mary Beth's first dinner party as hostess, and she couldn't help but be anxious. She knew her friends wouldn't judge her, but she couldn't help but want everything to be perfect. The table had been a gift from Peter on the day she moved in and tonight she would be using it to serve a simple meal of meat and biscuits to her friends.

She had been considering hosting a dinner party since her first night in her new home but had held back because she wanted to save up to make the evening special. So even as autumn blew summer far from the Californian plains, Mary Beth was removing the biscuits from the oven.

A fire was happily crackling in the hearth and the scented orange rinds she had bought from the oriental in town gave her home a welcoming scent. For a brief moment, she wondered what Eric was doing. More and more over the last few months, she had looked forward to seeing him. He still stopped by the tailor on most days and regardless of Peter's teasing, Mary Beth was certain he was just being friendly.

But at night when she came to her cabin and dined alone she couldn't help but wish for his company. She had come to know Eric as a kind man with the heart of a lion. She had learned somewhat about his past as a marshal and couldn't help but be grateful that he had survived those years of his life. Mary Beth was no longer a young girl with stars in her eyes, but she knew that the way her heart danced in Eric's presence indicated more than just friendly affection. She liked Eric but she wouldn't place all her hopes and

dreams on a man ever again. They could let you down; if they didn't let you down, they could die.

She still missed Arthur at times, but not once since her arrival in Gambler's Creek had she missed New York. Gambler's Creek was so much smaller, and the people were kinder. In New York, almost everyone had looked down their noses at Mary Beth. A girl from a poor home would have never fit into the high-class social circles of New York. But in the West, distinctive classes were not evident. Of course, you could tell breeding from the manner in which the women spoke or dressed, but that didn't keep women from different backgrounds from becoming friends.

Mary Beth took a seat by the window and waited for her friends to arrive. Her friends were a good combination of misfits, ruffians and classy. Shelly was the schoolteacher, born and raised in Boston. She spoke with perfect diction and always looked as if she had just stepped out of a New York brownstone.

Rowena was a ruffian. Born and raised in a wagon on the range, she was now one of the best trappers in California. Every man in Gambler's Creek knew that Rowena's aim was as sharp as her tongue and took care not to bother her in any way. She spent most of her time out trapping but whenever she came to town, she and Mary Beth would catch up.

Then there was Liza. Liza had been orphaned at a young age and had been raised in a pleasure house. After finding the Lord, a preacher had helped her start a new life. She was now working with the preacher at the church in town. Liza had the sort of understated beauty that lured you in, her soft demeanor and warm brown eyes exuded serenity.

Rowena arrived first. "My, my, Mary Beth, you got yerself one heck of a place here. Next time I might just forego the boarding house and bunk here."

Mary Beth laughed. "Thank you, Rowena, although I do have only the one bedroom."

"I don't mind a sofa, or the floor for that matter, as long as I got a roof over me head," Rowena laughed rambunctiously.

No sooner had Mary Beth offered Rowena coffee than there was a knock at the door. Mary Beth opened the door and welcomed Shelly inside. "Mary Beth, what a lovely cabin you have. Did you make the window dressings yourself?"

"I did. Welcome, Shelly. How are you?"

"Grateful it's summer," Shelley laughed. "We only have one or two hours of class every day before the children head home to help their parents. I must admit, I feel a little like a lost hat in a strong breeze with not having them around the whole day."

Liza was the last to arrive and, as always, she was a little shy around the other women. One by one they took their seats at the table and Mary Beth served the dinner. Liza breathed a contented sigh as she took a bite of her biscuit. "Mary Beth, you should have become a cook."

Mary Beth laughed at the compliment. "Thank you, although biscuits and meat are about the best I can offer as a cook."

"Well, I'd best make sure I come again before I leave."

"Where ya off to?" Rowena asked as she attacked her slice of meat as if it was still alive.

Liza's eyes widened with surprise at Rowena's appetite. "I... uh... a mission."

"A mission?" Shelly asked, perplexed. "But you work for the church?"

Liza nodded, "I'm going to be a missionary down south. There are so many who have lost their way who need to be drawn back into God's embrace. The preacher and I will be leaving in a few days."

"Sounds like quite the adventure." Mary Beth smiled although she was going to be sad to see Liza leave.

"I have news," Shelley suddenly announced. "I'm having dinner with Mr. Elm this Friday evening."

Three pairs of eyes settled on Shelly, all wide with surprise.

"You're being courted by Mr. Elm?" Mary Beth asked, startled.

Shelly nodded. "He's a kind man, if a bit older than I am. But I think it's time I start thinking of finding a husband and settling down. I'd like a family...."

Rowena chuckled. "Why? So you can just take care of them for the rest of your life?" Rowena had never made a secret of her indifference to love and relationships.

"If you think that Mr. Elm is the person with whom you want to share a future, then I'm happy for you," Mary Beth offered.

"I agree. Age doesn't matter and he can provide for you," Liza added her opinion softly.

"How about you, Mary Beth, any romantic interests we should know about?" Shelly asked, hopefully. Mary Beth knew she was just trying to deflect the attention from her.

"In Gambler's Creek? I'd say all the good ones are taken, but it wouldn't be true. All of them are taken."

Shelly frowned, shaking her head. "And the sheriff? He's not taken?"

"That's right, Mary Beth, Sheriff's not taken. I hear he's been going to the tailor shop so often he probably has an entirely new wardrobe," Rowena added with a cocked brow.

Mary Beth felt a blush color her cheeks. "Don't be dilly, the sheriff and I are just friends. There's no romantic interest between us."

Liza sighed and shook her head. "Mary Beth, life is too short not to clutch at every chance at happiness that comes along. Are you afraid of getting married?"

Mary Beth shook her head and took a deep breath before telling the story of her first marriage and how she'd come to be in Gambler's Creek. "So, as you can understand, I'm not all that eager to entrust my entire future on a man again."

"But Eric Colt isn't just any man," Shelly said in a teasing voice. "If I thought I'd stood a chance I would've had my eye on him instead of Mr. Elm. But it's clear he's more interested in you than even keeping law and order in Gambler's Creek."

Mary Beth frowned. She couldn't believe what Shelly was saying. Was it possible that Eric liked her? She had been so focused on making a home for herself that she hadn't even considered falling in love again.

Suddenly she thought back to all the times he had looked at her in the way that made her heart skip a beat. The way she looked forward to seeing him and how she missed him when she didn't see him. She wasn't looking for love, but for some reason, Mary Beth remembered the words on the bridge that life-defining night. Was it possible that God had love in store for her? Mary Beth was quiet for the remainder of the evening. She spoke when spoken to, but when her friends finally left she couldn't help but be relieved.

She hadn't once considered that Eric might like her as more than just a newcomer to town, but now it was no longer only Peter who was teasing her. Now her friends were doing so as well. Could it be possible that Eric did like her? If he did, how would she know if he

didn't tell her? He hadn't once asked her out to dinner or made any reference whatsoever to their friendship being any more than just that.

After cleaning the kitchen, she headed to her room and knelt beside her bed. Claspng her hands in prayer, Mary Beth closed her eyes and began to pray.

Dear Lord, thank You for all the blessings You have given me. Thank You for this town, my friends and thank You for Peter and his kindness, dear Lord. Please bless them all with good health and prosperity. Lord, I don't know what Your plans are for my future but please help me understand the feelings I have for Eric. Is this the second chance I was hoping for or am I only going to get hurt again? Please, Lord, guide me on the path You have chosen for me, guide me and protect me from more heartache. Please go with Eric, Lord. If he does like me, please give him the courage to tell me. I've been so badly hurt in the past and I've suffered such loss; please protect me against it in future.

I ask this not because I deserve it, God, but because I believe in Your mercy and love. Amen.

Chapter 10

Gambler's Creek, California, 18 September 1868

Mary Beth was hanging out the laundry on a cool Saturday morning. Although there was a chill in the air she didn't think it would rain. Working at the tailor from Monday through Friday meant weekends were for cleaning and catching up on the chores around the house.

Living alone meant not too many chores to be done, but Mary Beth enjoyed doing the laundry and cleaning her cabin. Some days when the weather was nice she would even venture into the fields just outside of town to pick flowers for the kitchen.

She had just hung the last sheet on the line she had spun with twine when she noticed someone coming around the side of the house.

Eric smiled at her even as he dipped his hat. Mary Beth's heart did a flip at the sight of him. Ever since her friends had made it perfectly clear to her that they believed Eric was romantically interested in her, Mary Beth couldn't help but start to acknowledge the attraction she felt for the handsome sheriff.

Whenever he stopped by the tailor shop over the last two weeks, she found herself wondering if they had been right. Surely if Eric had been interested in her he would have asked her out or somehow have made his intentions clear? She pushed the wayward thoughts aside as she moved towards him.

"Good morning, Eric. What brings you about this early?"

"It's mid-morn, wouldn't call it early as such. Busy day?" Eric asked, glancing at the laundry.

A blush colored Mary Beth's cheeks and she was grateful that she had the common sense to hang her undergarments in her room to

dry. "Something like that. No highwaymen to chase down today?"

The conversation felt a little stilted, not like other days when they just spoke about anything and everything without even a second thought.

"Not today, no." Eric scuffed his boot in the dirt before meeting Mary Beth's gaze again. Was that anxiousness in his deep brown eyes, she wondered.

"Mary Beth, I was wonderin'..." Eric chuckled and shook his head. "I don't do this often so excuse my clumsiness. Would you happen to be free later this afternoon?"

Mary Beth frowned. She didn't want to get her hopes up, but she had to admit to being unsure of what he was asking of her. "I might be, depends on what's going to happen."

"I ah... I was hopin' you'd like to join me on my wagon. Thought we might drive down to the creek?"

"Gambler's Creek?" Mary Beth asked excitedly. She had yet to see the creek after which the town was named, despite having lived in town for so long. "I thought it had run dry and didn't even exist even more."

"Where do you think the water wagon gets its water?" Eric asked with a teasing grin.

"Right." Mary Beth said, feeling foolish. "I'd love to see it, Eric."

"Great, I'll pick you up at about one?"

Mary Beth nodded and before she could say another word, Eric had walked away. She was left staring after him, unsure whether they were going on a date or whether he was simply going to show her the creek.

She finished her chores in record time and by the time Eric arrived she was dressed in one of the pretty dresses Arthur had bought for her, donning a hat for the occasion.

Eric had cleaned up a little. He was clean-shaven and without his characteristic stubble, his hair was washed and, apart from the sheriff badge he always wore she had never seen him in such a neat pair of trousers or a crisp white shirt. He looked both handsome and dependable. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as he helped her into the wagon. Mary Beth couldn't remember ever riding in a wagon before. In New York, she had walked, and she had taken the train out West. The experience was a happy one. The wagon jostled

over the rocky dirt road down to the stream. When she could hear water bubbling by, her face lit up with a smile. "I can hear it."

Eric laughed. "Yep, you can. Wait till you see it."

When the shrubs and bushes cleared to expose a small spot by the river, Mary Beth's breath simply caught. It was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. Without a cabin or another wagon as far as the eye could see, it was only them and the cheerful sound of bird-song that complemented the rushing water. She shook her head, her mind blown by the beauty of nature as she turned to Eric.

"Eric, this is... spectacular. I've never seen such a beautiful sight in my whole life."

Eric didn't look at the river, he was searching Mary Beth's gaze when he answered. "Neither have I."

Mary Beth forgot about Gambler's Creek and the beauty of it as her heart skipped a beat. Neither looked away for a few moments until Mary Beth finally cleared her throat. She felt as if she had a connection with Eric, as if without saying a word he understood what she wanted to say. Was this what love felt like, or was she perhaps falling in love? Mary Beth pondered it while Eric jumped off and moved around the wagon to help her down. He placed both hands on her waist and lifted her off the wagon as if she weighed no more than a baby bird. When both her feet touched the ground she looked up into his dark brown eyes and felt her heart swell with hope. Perhaps she might find that Prince Charming after all.

Eric didn't let go of her waist just yet; instead, he searched her eyes before speaking in barely more than a whisper. "I like you, Mary Beth. More than I've ever liked a girl before."

Her heart raced at the words as a smile slowly spread on her mouth. She could hear from the hesitation in his voice that he wasn't used to declaring such tender words. "I like you, too, Eric."

He stepped back, letting his hands drop to his sides as a charming grin formed on his mouth. "That's good to hear, or it would've been an awkward afternoon by the creek."

Just like that Mary Beth knew that her friends had been right. The sheriff of Gambler's Creek wasn't just taking an interest in a newcomer; he was taking an interest in Mary Beth as a woman. He had taken his time, but Mary Beth didn't mind being patient, especially if the reward could be falling in love with Eric Colt.

Chapter 11

Gambler's Creek, California, 25 December 1868

Over the last three months, Mary Beth had learned more about life than she had ever expected. She had learned that a real man didn't need alcohol to exert his authority, or money to earn the respect of others. Eric had neither and yet the entire population of Gambler's Creek abided by him.

After their first day beside the creek, they had kept their budding romance a secret for almost two months, until the Christmas tree ceremony at the beginning of December.

Rowena had been the one to call them out, and not just anywhere, but in front of all the townsfolk as they watched the children decorate the tree. Mary Beth had expected Eric to shy away from the situation, but he surprised her by proudly announcing that he was falling in love with the wonderful woman the outlaws had dropped right on his doorstep.

Laughter and congratulations were heard, but all the while Mary Beth couldn't help but realize how right he was. Had she not fallen for Thomas Hickok's letters, she would never have traveled to Gambler's Creek. Shelly, who was newly engaged to Mr. Elm, had asked if she didn't regret Eric taking his time to finally make his intentions clear, but Mary Beth regretted nothing.

She enjoyed spending a year finding herself and building her new life in the absence of a man. This time she had fallen in love with her whole heart. This time it wasn't an arrangement or a way to pay off debt. Eric liked her for who she was and spent time with her because he enjoyed her company, just as much as she enjoyed his company.

It was Christmas Eve and she had invited Eric over for dinner. Although they both had strong feelings, neither had made any declarations of love just yet. Mary Beth knew her reticence was as a result of her marriage to Arthur and her slip with Thomas Hickok, but she was yet to find out why Eric sometimes had shadows bloom in his eyes on which he often appeared to drift away.

After a hearty meal, they settled by the fire with coffee, a new brew the Orientals had somehow procured. It was rich and the aroma filled the entire cabin. Mary Beth held her cup but glanced at Eric through her peripheral vision. Eric had those shadows in his eyes as he stared into the flames that were crackling in the hearth.

Mary Beth had often wondered about Eric's past and didn't want to hound him with questions, but at times like this, she couldn't help but feel concerned. What had happened for a man of Eric's stature to still be alone? He was thirty-one years old; surely he should have loved someone before Mary Beth.

She took a sip of her coffee and finally asked him the question. "Eric, when you drift away like that, where do you go to?"

Eric blinked before he turned and met her questioning gaze. "I'm just thinking how lucky I am, and how different things could have been."

"What things?" Mary Beth asked with a frown. She knew very little about Eric's life before he came to be the sheriff of Gambler's Creek.

Eric let out a sigh and turned to Mary Beth, the shadows still lurking. "I was in the confederate army during the Mexican invasion; I lost a good many friends. Afterward, I remember wondering why I survived. I lost so many comrades, men with wives and families, and yet I was spared. I became a marshal after that for about five years. I lived on the range and hunted down outlaws and had a few more close calls there. When I finally settled as sheriff in Gambler's Creek, I thought I would be bored and soon return to being a marshal."

Mary Beth's heart jumped into her throat. "Is that what you're thinking of now? Becoming a marshal again?"

Eric shook his head. "No, I finally figured out why I was spared during the Mexican invasion. I was spared because I still had a future ahead of me. After the battle, I remembered a verse that came to mind, Jeremiah: 29, 11. For I have plans to prosper you and not to

harm you..." As Eric trailed off Mary Beth's eyes widened. It was the same verse as God had given her that night on the bridge. Was Eric the reason God had talked her down from the ledge of the Brooklyn Bridge?

"I didn't believe it back then, but since meeting you I realize that perhaps my future will be prosperous. Perhaps not with conventional wealth like money, but with personal wealth like love." Eric's gaze met hers and Mary Beth felt her heart swell in her chest. "Mary Beth, for so long I've just survived. I finally want to start living and I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend my life with than you."

Mary Beth smiled, a warm blanket of love enveloping her entire body, but she had another question she wanted him to answer first. "Has there ever been anyone else?"

Eric chuckled wryly. "Like I said, I was trying to survive... there's never been anyone I loved, Mary Beth. No one that I looked at the way I look at you."

Mary Beth's heart skipped a beat as Eric reached for her hand. She couldn't ever imagine spending a more perfect Christmas. She was sitting with the man she had fallen in love with, in front of a crackling fire with a future ahead of them.

Some women might have been impatient for a proposal, but Mary Beth was in no hurry. She had wasted so much time chasing happiness that she was prepared to wait for it to come to her this time. God had already brought her Eric and she trusted that in time He would bring them that future as well.

"I never looked at my husband the way I look at you." The admission from Mary Beth was quiet, barely more than a whisper, but when she looked at Eric this time the shadows had disappeared, and his gaze was filled with love instead.

"Then we'll keep our eyes on each other and see where this goes," Eric said, squeezing her hand.

Mary Beth smiled before a contented sigh escaped her. Perhaps next year she would be a married woman, sitting by the fire with the man she loved.

"I know you haven't come out to the ranch yet, but perhaps tomorrow... perhaps we could spend Christmas on my ranch tomorrow."

Mary Beth's eyes widened at the suggestion. Eric had been nothing but the perfect gentleman ever since they had met, and she had

accepted that she would never visit his ranch. It wasn't acceptable for a single woman to travel to a man's ranch unchaperoned. A smile curved her mouth as she remembered that this was not New York and that she could spend the day on Eric's ranch because she knew he would do nothing dishonorable.

Chapter 12

Gambler's Creek, California, 14 February 1869

Everyone was celebrating Valentine's Day except for Mary Beth. Although she had a budding romance with the handsome town sheriff, she couldn't help but be reminded of all she had lost on Valentine's Day.

She had loved Arthur and had mourned him after his death. A year ago today she had stood on the Brooklyn Bridge determined to end her own life. God had sent her a message, but for some reason, she had woken up with doubts this morning.

What if she fell even deeper in love with Eric and his feelings weren't the same? What if she was to lose everything again? What if he only fell in love with her because he had felt sorry for her? The doubts kept piling up in her mind as she worked, so much so that by lunchtime Peter stopped beside her with concern etching his brow.

"You not one for hearts and whatnots?" Peter asked gently.

Mary Beth shook her head. "I'm one that knows that true love is hard to find, and even then it can be ripped away from you." She sounded like a bitter old spinster, but she didn't care. Perhaps that was the reason for her sullen mood. Perhaps she was afraid of opening her heart to Eric and loving him deeper than she had ever loved before, only to lose him.

If she had been devastated by losing Arthur, losing Eric would ruin her. Peter touched her shoulder. "Sometimes we have to just cherish the moment and not worry about the future."

The bells jingled on the door and Peter chuckled. "I'd say what you should cherish is about to come for a visit."

Peter was right as she watched as Eric approached her. After greeting him, Peter quickly excused himself.

"Howdy, ma'am," Eric said in his characteristically chivalrous manner before leaning his hip against her table. "I was wonderin' if I might tempt you to dinner tonight? I'd invite you to the ranch, but I know you wouldn't feel comfortable spending the night, so how about I invite myself over to your cabin for dinner?"

Mary Beth set down her sewing and shook her head. She had been surprised to see Eric's beautiful ranch and the effort he had put into fencing off a few paddocks. His steers and horses were just as impressive. Regardless of how much she liked his ranch, she couldn't go, not tonight. She didn't even want him to come over to visit her tonight, because she knew her mood would only sully the evening for them both. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to say no. It's been a long day and I'm feeling a little under the weather, to be honest."

It was a lie, but one Mary Beth hoped he would believe. Eric frowned and narrowed his gaze. "The oriental medicine woman has some herbs that the mayor swears by. Would you like me to get you some?"

"No," Mary Beth said quickly. "I think rest should do the trick. But enjoy your evening." As if dismissing him, she picked up her sewing and continued to work. He waited a moment before leaving.

Mary Beth knew she had probably just been rude, but she had to work through the demons in her own mind. Either she was going to put the doubts and the fears aside, or she should end things with Eric before they got more serious.

As the day progressed she came closer to a decision. By the time she left the tailor shop, she was almost certain that it would be best to end things with Eric and spare them both the heartache later. She knew it was cowardly of her to be afraid to love, but after spending a year rebuilding her life, she couldn't stand the thought of losing it all again. If she fell in love with Eric, it would mean giving up her independence, and if something happened to him...

The next time she might not be lucky enough to start over and to land on her feet again. She couldn't help but remember the disaster that would have befallen her had Eric not arrested Joey the Brute. Mary Beth turned the corner only to hear gunshots ringing out from

the thoroughfare. A frown creased her brow but just as she was about to continue home, something stopped her.

It wasn't strange to hear gunshots, especially with highway gangs traveling through Gambler's Creek. Today seemed to have seen more than was usual at one time. People started rushing past her, fleeing something unknown to her. Instead of following them, Mary Beth turned and headed for the thoroughfare.

"Mary Beth, run! It's crazy out there. The Brook brothers have just ridden into town. They caused a ruckus and now the sheriff's involved in a shootout," Shelly called as she hastened her charges to safety.

Mary Beth's legs moved faster than they ever had before. A few moments before, she had been adamant about ending things with Eric and now she couldn't seem to get to him fast enough. She arrived at the thoroughfare and took shelter beside the barbershop as she watched the showdown.

Eric was standing on one side and the Brook brothers and their cronies on the other.

"I ain't lookin' for trouble but the folks in this town expect me to keep the peace. If you're going to be shootin' off, it'd be best for you all to leave," Eric said in that calm, controlled tone of voice.

One of the Brook brothers laughed, his teeth rotten and his face dirty. "Ain't no sheriff gonna tell me what I can do. This is a free country and me and my friends here are going to frequent your saloon now, ya hear?"

Eric shook his head, but Mary Beth didn't miss the fact that his hand was already on his weapon. She drew in a sharp breath as Eric stepped forward. "I'm afraid that ain't gonna happen. There's 'nother town about half a day's ride from here. Best get on if you want to reach it before midnight."

"We aint' ridin' nowhere!" the outlaw cried out before again shooting a few rounds into the air. He then aimed directly at the sheriff. "If you're goin' to be causin' us problems, we'll hafta make sure you don't, Sheriff."

Eric didn't step back at the warning and a staredown ensued between the six armed men on the one side and Eric alone on the other.

"Eric, no, please..." Mary Beth muttered under her breath.

The outlaw pulled the trigger, and the bullet, fortunately, missed Eric. Eric flung his pistol and began firing. One of the outlaws fell

from his horse and dust soon filled the air as the others rode off out of town. Mary Beth released a relieved breath as she glanced at Eric, who was still standing. A frown creased her brow as the commotion intensified. She was already moving towards Eric when she noticed that he was a little unsteady.

Moving closer she saw the dark red stain spreading across his back. She rushed towards him just as he fell to the ground. "Sucker got me," he mumbled before his eyes fluttered closed.

Mary Beth didn't realize the cry was hers when the agonized sound filled the air. She screamed for help, for the doctor, for anyone who could help her save Eric's life. She wasn't sure who she had been fooling all day because she was undoubtedly already head over heels in love with Eric Colt.

And now she was about to lose him as well.

Chapter 13

The pain seared through his body, his vision blurring even as he fell to the dirt ground. He could hear Mary Beth talking over him, but he could no longer focus on her, the pain was too overwhelming. He tried to focus on his breathing, feeling his shirt grow wetter by the second.

Eric could hear the commotion around him, people screaming in fear, others voicing concern for his well-being, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was the soft hand resting over his. He took a deep breath and pushed through the pain to focus on Mary Beth's voice.

"Come on, Eric, open your eyes. Open your eyes, Eric!" Her voice was desperate, urging him with an anxiousness Eric wanted with all his might to ease away.

His eyes fluttered open and for a moment he thought he was in heaven. Her angelic face searched his eyes with concern. With the sun at her back, she looked like an angel sent from heaven to accompany him to the pearly gates. Eric blinked a few times, but the image didn't fade. Mary Beth was still there when he opened his eyes again.

"How bad is it?" he asked when his body began to turn cold. He could feel the shivers start to cause tremors through his body as he waited for her answer.

Mary Beth shook her head. "It's not bad." She tried for a smile but failed. Eric knew she was lying; he could feel the blood pooling beneath him; he could feel the life flow out of him with every breath.

Using the last of his strength, he reached up and cupped her face. "Mary Beth, there is so much I still wanted to tell you, so much I wanted to ask you."

Mary Beth leaned into his hand, her skin soft and warm beneath his calloused hand. "Hush."

"No, I have to say this. I wanted...." Eric gasped for breath and tried to push the fatigue and pain away. "It's Valentine's Day; I wanted to ask you to marry me tonight."

Tears spilled from her blue eyes as she shook her head. "And I didn't want to see you. Oh, Eric, I'm so sorry."

"Didn't think today was going to be the day I meet my maker. But seems I don't got no choice...." Eric trailed off. He was battling for every breath and was being lured under by sleep. He was tired, he couldn't remember ever being this tired.

"Eric! Eric, don't! Please fight, Eric, I need you..." Mary Beth cried out, but Eric was too weak to answer. The darkness lured him under, promising relief from the pain and the cold. His eyes drifted closed and he blew out a breath before he was dragged into the dark abyss.

Mary Beth swallowed back the tears and knew that Eric needed her now more than ever. She couldn't afford to fall to pieces, not while his chest was still steadily rising and falling. She glanced around and noticed Shelly standing close by. "Call the doc, Shelly! Now!"

Shelly shook her head but when Mary Beth shouted again, she took off at a run. Mary Beth turned to see the town's proprietors standing around, as well as the mayor.

"Come, quick. I need you to take him to my cabin," Mary Beth said, taking control of the situation. She couldn't lose Eric, not now. Not when they had both found love after all this time. The men took turns looking at each other while Mary Beth pushed herself up from the dirt and walked up to the Mayor. "He would have done this for you. Help him, please, let me help him. I just need your help to get him to my cabin."

The mayor drew in a deep breath before turning to the other men. "Grab a wagon and blankets and make it quick!"

Before the men had returned with the wagon, Shelly returned with the doctor in tow.

"He's still breathing," Mary Beth began rambling. "I don't know what to do. Just please help him."

The doctor knelt beside Eric and gently rolled him onto his side. "The bullet seems to have gone through, but the exit wound is

a mess. He's losing a great deal of blood."

"We've got the wagon," the mayor called out, moving closer.

Mary Beth glanced at the doctor before turning to the mayor. "Take him to my cabin. Doc, can you follow us? You can treat him there. I've got clean water and blankets."

The doctor nodded as he stood and grabbed hold of his bag. He stepped closer to Mary Beth as the men loaded Eric onto the wagon and spoke in a soft voice. "There isn't much hope..."

Mary Beth refused to lose hope. She shook her head fiercely. "While he's breathing, there is hope. There has to be."

Doc shrugged but he followed Mary Beth and the other men to her cabin. Mary Beth scrubbed the kitchen table before the men laid Eric on it. The doctor then invited the men to leave. Mary Beth was ordered to boil water while the doctor began cutting away Eric's shirt. She tried to avert her gaze from the wound on Eric's back, but a single glance made her feel faint.

She headed outside quickly, leaving Doc to do his job in peace. Tears began flowing over her cheeks in rivulets. As long as he was breathing, there was hope, she repeated over and over again. But after seeing the wound, Mary Beth knew that hope was more than just a long shot. Eric was badly wounded and there was a very good chance that he would not recover. She didn't know much about bullet wounds, but from her vantage point, the bullet seemed to have gone through his lungs. Her heart clenched in her chest as she shook her head. She couldn't bury another man; she couldn't stand to lose Eric before their life together had even started. Just this morning she had been afraid of this, and now she was faced with losing him even before she had a chance to tell him that she cared for him.

Chapter 14

Gambler's Creek, California, 17 February 1869

The fire was crackling in the hearth, and the moon was high in the starry sky. It was a beautiful evening in Gambler's Creek, and while some made use of the opportunity to stargaze in the meadows around town, Mary Beth did not.

She sat by the fire with her legs tucked under her, regardless of it being way past her bedtime. She wasn't about to move. In fact, she hadn't moved from her spot beside the fire for three days. She hadn't slept in her bed or left her cabin since the Mayor and his men had carried Eric inside on Valentine's day. Instead of sharing a romantic dinner with Eric as he had hoped, she had spent the evening in prayer on the porch while Doc worked on saving Eric.

The bullet had gone straight through his shoulder, but the exit wound had left a hole the size of a big man's fist. The blood loss was severe, and Doc had mentioned something about Eric going into shock, but Mary Beth hadn't given up.

She had moved outside from where she could nonetheless still see the flicker of the flames. Gunpowder was used for years to cauterize wounds, but the smell of Eric's burning flesh would remain with her for the rest of her life. She expected to hear his screams, but she heard nothing except Doc muttering as he worked.

It was after midnight when he stepped out onto the porch with a grave expression. "All you can do now is pray. I've done everything I could, Mary Beth, but he's in bad shape."

Mary Beth had simply nodded, afraid to say something because she knew she would only break down in tears. She went back inside to find that the doctor had somehow managed to lay Eric out on the

sofa near the fireside. Although he was a middle-aged man, he clearly had some strength left in him.

She had moved towards the sofa and covered Eric with every blanket she could find. Then she stoked the coals in the fireplace and added more logs before continuing to pray for the man she loved. By the time the sun began its ascent in the east, Peter had been around to see how the patient was doing. He had insisted Mary Beth sleep for a few hours while he took care of Eric, but after only two hours Mary Beth couldn't stand being in her room any longer.

She had thanked Peter for giving her the opportunity to rest, although she did not divulge not having closed her eyes for even a second. Mary Beth had spent three days at Eric's side, and she refused to give up on him. The fact that he had yet to wake up or take a drink of water or even make a sound in his sleep was quite evident to her, but she only focused on the fact that he was still breathing.

She couldn't stop thinking about the words he had said to her after he had been shot. He would have asked her to marry him and she had turned down his invitation to Valentine's Day dinner. How was it possible that she had allowed the past to determine her future? Arthur was gone, her father was gone, and all that was left was the life she had built for herself in Gambler's Creek. Was she a fool for not wanting to accept her feelings for Eric?

If she had learned anything over the last three days it was that love didn't come easily, and when it did, you had to grab it with both hands. If, no, she corrected herself, when Eric woke up, she would tell him how much she loved him.

Mary Beth might have doubted her feelings three days ago, but there was no doubt in her mind right now. She loved this man and even whether she had a month, a year or the rest of her life with him, she wanted to cherish every moment.

She glanced at his sleeping form, soothing herself that his chest was still moving. She was tired, so tired that her eyes burned, but she wouldn't sleep. The fear was clawing at her even as she fought off sleep. If she closed her eyes for only a few minutes she might lose him.

Mary Beth moved to the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of coffee, praying again. *"Dear Lord, please heal him. Please heal the wounds that man inflicted and let him come back to me. I'll never forget to cherish the moment ever again, God. I'll tell him how I feel, I'll declare my love. Please*

Lord, just heal him so I can do just that. Your grace is all that can save him now. Amen."

When she heard a voice, Mary Beth dropped her cup and flung herself around, ready to protect herself. She glanced around the cabin and saw that she was all alone there. Her heart was racing in her chest. Since the Brook Brothers had ridden through town, she couldn't help but be startled by every sound, fearing they would come back to finish the job they had started.

"Mary Beth?" the voice spoke again, and this time she knew exactly where it had come from.

Dropping the cup had spilled coffee over her shoes and the floor, but she didn't care as she rushed for the sofa. She kneeled and through the tears blurring her vision she could see Eric was awake. "You're back..." she trailed off reaching for his hand.

Eric attempted to smile but flinched. "It hurts..."

"It will hurt. Don't try to move. Doc had to cut away the flesh that was damaged. You've got a big wound, Eric, very big." Mary Beth pushed away the memory of his wound, smiling and brushing away her tears. "I prayed, Eric, oh, I prayed you would wake up, but I wasn't sure...."

"Haven't slept like that in years," Eric said faintly. "Where am I?"

His eyes darted around before a smile finally tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I'm in your cabin?"

Mary Beth nodded. "Yes, you're in my cabin. Would you like water, broth, or..."

Eric shook his head. "Later, right now I just want to look at you. I can't believe I almost lost you."

Another tear escaped her, and Mary Beth shook her head. "We didn't. You're alright; you're going to be alright. You should just rest so the wound can heal."

Mary Beth was fighting an internal battle. She wanted to sit with him and tell him how much she loved him, but she knew that he needed food and water. Finally, she retrieved her hand. "I'm going to fetch you some broth, just a little. You need to keep your strength up."

Eric nodded. "That sounds good."

Mary Beth served him a cup of broth and poured him a glass of water and then rushed back to the sofa. She fed him by the spoonful, grateful for every mouthful of broth he managed to keep down.

When he finished the entire bowl she could feel the fear begin to ease. He was going to recover; she was sure of it.

"Sleep now, you need all the sleep you can get," Mary Beth said, tucking the blankets around him.

Eric was about to argue when a yawn escaped him. "I guess you're right. Just a little."

His eyes drifted closed and Mary Beth sighed with relief. She couldn't wait to get word to the doc that he'd woken up, but that could wait until morning. Right now she just wanted to sit by his side, knowing that he was alright.

For the first time in three days, she gave into her burning eyes and rested her head on his good shoulder. Within minutes she was fast asleep. She was sitting on the plank floor, with her head resting against Eric's shoulder. Regardless of the discomfort, she was exactly where she wanted to be.

She slept fitfully; a sleep filled with dreams that coaxed her to hope even more. Dreams of living on the ranch with Eric. Dreams of being his wife and having his children. Having a herd to rival most, even as they planted a vegetable garden in the summer. A smile curved her mouth in her sleep as she murmured the words she struggled to say when she was awake. "I love you, Eric, don't leave me."

Chapter 15

Gambler's Creek, California, 18 February 1869

Eric woke up, thirsty and hot. He tried to shift only to notice Mary Beth's head on his good shoulder. He didn't want to wake her, but he needed to throw off some of the blankets. His injured shoulder was burning like an inferno and the bedroll she had placed beneath his head was soaking wet. A frown marred his brow as he tried to figure out what had happened.

He reached for the blanket and had barely shifted beneath her when Mary Beth jumped up with a startled expression. "What time is it?" she asked, confused by sleep.

Eric smiled through the heat and pain. "I don't know. I'm feeling hot."

When Mary Beth spoke again, Eric couldn't help but be confused to see white puffs escape her mouth. Why was he so hot when it was so cold?

"I can't believe I fell asleep. Do you need anything?"

Eric shook his head as he began tossing the blankets off of himself. "No, I'm just so hot."

A frown creased her forehead as she laid a hand over his brow. "You're burning up." Her voice was tinged with concern. "I need to see your wound. The doc said if you get a fever it means the wound is infected."

Eric couldn't stand the thought of moving over on his side. He was tired, in a lot of pain and really didn't look forward to Mary Beth prodding his wound. "Maybe later. Can I just have some water perhaps?"

Mary Beth nodded and stood up, running her fingers through her brown hair that had fallen loose during the night. With the morning sun shining in through the windows, Eric's breath simply caught. He couldn't remember ever seeing such a beautiful sight in his entire life. Her skin was pale, but her cheeks were rosy, her eyes were still filled with remnants of sleep, but still retained that spark he had first noticed when he had met her on the train platform.

As she moved towards the small kitchen area, Eric tried to sit up, but the pain seared through his shoulder and his legs became weak. His vision began to blur. He lay back, dragging in a ragged breath that caused a sharp stab to render him numb. Closing his eyes, he lay back, but it felt as if something was pounding against his skull from the inside.

Mary Beth was at his side, helping him drink a glass of water before looking at him with concern. "Your head is aching, isn't it?"

"As if a wagon trampled it," Eric conceded weakly. "I'm just going to close my eyes for a little while."

He felt her hand rest on his forehead again but couldn't summon the energy to look at her. Even as his mind began to clear, Eric realized something was wrong. This wasn't like the pain after the gunshot, this was different. Heavier, somehow. It was dragging him, and Eric couldn't help but feel that he wouldn't wake up again if he fell asleep this time.

He tried to open his eyes, to look at Mary Beth one last time. To tell her he loved her, to tell her that she had changed his life when she had arrived in Gambler's Creek, but he couldn't summon the energy to say the words. He swallowed past the dryness in his throat and let out a heavy breath. The pain, the headache, and the fatigue dragged him under again. This time, it was a dreamless sleep, where he felt as if he was in an ice pond one moment and at the gates of hell the next.

His last thought was that he couldn't stand to lose Mary Beth.

Mary Beth lay a cold wet rag on Eric's forehead. Within an hour it was hot and drenched in sweat. She touched his shoulder, wanting to give him water, but Eric didn't stir.

"Eric? Wake up," Mary Beth coaxed desperately but there was no response. Fear seared her heart like a branding iron even as she tried again.

Trying to calm down, she poured herself a glass of water and stoked the fire before sitting down. It was a frigid morning and nothing Mary Beth seemed to do helped to dispel the cold that managed to sneak into the cabin through the slats in the wood. Across from her, Eric was sweating as if it was mid-summer. Every now and then he would shiver, and Mary Beth would rush over to cover him with blankets, only to remove them a short while later when she could see he was too hot.

She stayed by his side until noon before she decided that she could no longer sit by and watch as the fever stole him from her. She changed her clothes and donned a hat before she collected her tin of savings and headed to Doc. A man with a bad cough was waiting for Doc to see him, but Mary Beth didn't let a queue deter her from this emergency. She fisted her hand against the door, forgetting all manner of propriety and respectability. "Doc, open up. It's an emergency!" she shouted desperately.

She could hear him mutter inside before she heard his footsteps move through the cabin towards the door. Doc opened the door looking as if he could do with a good night's rest.

"Mary Beth, what's all this shouting about?"

Mary Beth shook her head, trying her best to push back the fear and the tears. "He's got a fever, Doc, a bad one."

Doc sighed heavily and shook his head. "I warned you. I warned you this might happen. There's nothing for it. A wound that big... it's best if you just keep him comfortable."

"You've got to come, Doc. You've got to come and do something," Mary Beth begged in desperation.

Doc glanced behind him and turned back to Mary Beth. "I've got a woman with a breech birth. If I leave her now, I'll lose both. Like I said, there's nothing for that fever except keeping him comfortable. I'm sorry, Mary Beth, truly I am." Doc closed the door before Mary Beth could ask him again. She collapsed on the porch, letting her head fall into her hands and the sobs to wrack her body.

"Miss?" the sick man said beside her. "Miss?"

Mary Beth sniffed, not wanting to talk right now. Doc had just sentenced Eric to death. After taking care of him and knowing that she loved him, she couldn't just let him die.

"Miss, 'scuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear," the man persisted from beside her. "Fever, you say?"

Mary Beth nodded. "You heard the doc, there's nothing to be done."

The man shook his head. "Look, I respect the doc and all that, but he isn't the only one with good medicine in Gambler's Creek. Only reason I'm here is for some laudanum. Consumption.... It helps for the pain."

Mary Beth turned and looked directly at the man, noticing for the first time the dark circles beneath his eyes and the gaunt look on his face. "I'm sorry to hear that."

The man shrugged. "It's life. Just trying to make me-self suffer a little less till the end." He glanced up at the doc's door before meeting Mary Beth's gaze again. "Do you know where the Orientals live?"

"Orientals?" Mary Beth asked, confused. Over the last few months, more and more Orientals had started arriving in Gambler's Creek. Some were working the mines and others were selling their oriental wares. The only contact Mary Beth had ever had with the Orientals since arriving in Gambler's Creek was when she visited their small shop on the wrong side of the thoroughfare where they sold everything from trinkets to incense.

"Yep, ma'am. Don't tell nobody I told you this, but the one Oriental, an elderly lady, is akin to a medicine woman. All the Orientals go to her for treatment. Some of the folks in town don't like her methods, that's why it's not common knowledge, but it sure works. I heard a friend of mine got a fever after an altercation with a bear, and she made that fever disappear within days."

"Do you know what she uses?" Mary Beth asked. She was a Christian woman and had heard about the Orientals and their strange ways and their strange gods. She didn't want to get involved in something she'd regret, but if the Oriental woman could help her, then she was heading there right away.

Mary Beth clutched her tin of money to her chest as she headed for the Oriental corner of town. It had come by that name since most of the residents of Gambler's Creek avoided it all cost. They had pig pens there, between their homes, and the stench was horrible. Although Mary Beth knew that the pigs, chickens and even the few goats they kept were their source of livelihood, she couldn't help but dread moving through it. She finally stopped at a small shanty that best met the description given to her by the man at Doc's office. She

knocked and a young boy of about seventeen opened the door. "Yes?"

His English was stilted, and his expression was one of irritation, but Mary Beth pushed ahead. "I've come to see the medicine lady."

His brows rose before he called something over his shoulder in Chinese. "She coming. You stay here."

Mary Beth nodded and waited while the old Chinese woman made her way towards the door. She rambled in Chinese to the boy who Mary Beth presumed to be her grandson before the boy turned to Mary Beth.

"What you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Fever," Mary Beth said quickly. "The sheriff was shot and now he has a bad fever. Doc says he can't help but maybe she can." Mary Beth glanced at the graying Chinese woman with slits for eyes and prayed she had made the right choice by coming here.

The boy relayed the information to his grandmother, acting as a translator before turning to Mary Beth again. "You wait here."

The door was slammed closed in Mary Beth's face. A pig was roaming free close by and Mary Beth stepped closer to the door fearing it might maul her at any moment. The door was suddenly opened again, and she fell against the young boy. "I'm sorry, the pig..."

"No mind," he said in his stilted English. "You give him this now, and again four hours until he's better." He held up four fingers and handed Mary Beth a small bag of white powder.

Mary Beth accepted it and frowned. "What is it?"

"Gan Lu Xiao Du Dan. Don't matter; it will help. Just a little, tip of spoon," he said when Mary Beth looked perplexed. "You make him tea too. Drink lots of it."

He pushed a bag with tea leaves at Mary Beth. She nodded, not sure if the herbs and funny powder in the bag would do anything but accepting nonetheless that it might well be her last hope.

"How much?" Mary Beth asked not bothering with full sentences since it was clear the boy's understanding of English was too basic to appreciate the courtesy.

The older lady held up her hands and shook her head. "No charge," the boy said before turning to acknowledge his grandmother who was speaking rapidly. "Just go now and give him this. Remember every four hour."

Mary Beth nodded as tears sprung to her eyes. Everyone in Gambler's Creek avoided the Orientals, but no one had even been so kind as to offer her medicine for free. "Thank you, thank you."

She turned and rushed home, not even bothering to steer clear of the free-roaming pig. She had a medicine that might work, she had no idea what it was or if it would work, but she would pray. Surely God wouldn't have let him survive the last three days only to take him now.

When she arrived home she immediately set about working methodically. She wiped Eric's chest and brow down with a damp cloth to cool him before she placed the cold rag over his forehead. She coaxed him to open his mouth enough to feed him the white powder before she fed him the tea with a spoon. It smelt like peppermint and cayenne pepper, but Mary Beth didn't care about the smell, she only cared about getting it into Eric.

She finished medicating him and set about cleaning the cabin, needing to keep busy. After four hours, she repeated the routine, this time trying to give him a little more tea than before.

When the sun set in the west, Mary Beth was no more hopeful than she had been that morning. She fed him more medicine before taking her seat by the fire. She would guard and pray over him for the rest of the night because she had a feeling it might be the last night she would have that privilege.

Chapter 16

Gambler's Creek, California, 19 February 1869

Mary Beth woke up before dawn, but she didn't dare move. She glanced across the room to the sofa, where Eric was still fast asleep. She couldn't summon the courage to check whether he was still breathing. Tears burned her eyes as she clutched the blanket closer around her. She knew that she had to give him more medicine, or at least check that he was still breathing, but as long as she was sitting in her chair, she could pretend he was just sleeping.

She closed her eyes and began praying harder than she had ever prayed before. *"Lord, please heal him. Please let the fever leave his body, let his body heal, Lord. Please, Lord, I know You can heal him; I need him, Lord, more than I've ever needed anyone before. I can go on without him, I know that now, but I don't want to. I want to spend my life with him by my side. I want to have his children and build a life with him right here in Gambler's Creek. Please, dear Lord, let me have a chance to tell him that. Amen."*

As soon as Mary Beth opened her eyes and looked in his direction, she found Eric smiling back at her. She blinked a few times, hoping she hadn't imagined it. When she opened her eyes again, he was still smiling at her.

"You want to spend the rest of your life with me?" Eric asked with a weak smile that made Mary Beth's heart skip a beat.

"Eric!" Mary Beth said on a chuckle. "You're awake. For a moment, I thought...."

Eric smiled. "I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. It's cold in here," he said, glancing at the fire. After suffering from a fever for the last

two days, Mary Beth couldn't help but laugh. "I needed to cool you down."

"I'm cool," Eric said, tugging the blankets around him. "What's wrong?"

Mary Beth shook her head. "You had a fever, a terrible fever. Doc said... he couldn't do anything. I gave you medicine that I got from the Orientals..." she trailed off, wondering if he would be angry at her for giving him Oriental medicine.

"The powder. I remember you giving me powder..." Eric trailed off.

Mary Beth nodded as she stood up and walked towards him. She laid a hand on his forehead and found it blissfully cool. At some time during the night, the fever had broken. She knew he wasn't out of the woods yet. He still had the wound on his back, but now that the fever was gone there was hope. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been shot," Eric said with a wry grin. "How are you feeling? You look tired..."

Mary Beth smiled as she nodded. "I've had better days. I was worried..."

Eric chuckled, which made him flinch, and then met her gaze. "Did you mean what you just said? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?"

"I do. I'm so sorry, Eric, that I turned you down on Valentine's Day. It's just with everything that has happened on previous Valentine's Days, it holds bad memories for me."

"Now it holds another one, of me being shot."

Mary Beth shook her head. "I've realized none of that matters. Not the bad memories, the past or even the reason why I came to Gambler's Creek in the first place. I was so afraid of falling in love and losing someone again. Afraid of having to start over again... I let my fear get in the way of my dreams. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don't know if you remember, but after you were shot... you said you were going to ask me to marry you. I'm not waiting for you to ask me again, Eric. Will you marry me?"

Eric's smile broadened as he sat up. He was far from recovered but the light she had seen in his eyes on that first day was back. He shrugged with a grin before he nodded slowly. "I might be inclined to spend my life with you. I never wanted this either, Mary Beth, I was happy spending my life as a lone ranger and then I met you and

I just knew that I wanted to protect you. I always thought love was for weak men. I realize now it's weak men who never dare to love because they're too weak to open their hearts."

Mary Beth laughed, shaking her head. "So, we're engaged?"

Eric chuckled. "Sounds like we're engaged. I love you, Mary Beth."

"I love you, Eric." Mary Beth said flummoxed after having proposed to a man. It was so unorthodox, so completely out of the ordinary. But if Mary Beth had learned anything since coming to Gambler's Creek it was that nothing in the West was ordinary.

She brushed away the happy tears that slipped over her cheeks. "I had best go get your medicine."

"But I'm better," Eric argued.

Mary Beth shook her head. "You'll take your medicine. I'm not taking any chances. I've also buried you a dozen times over the last few nights in my mind. Until I'm certain you've got both feet on the right side of that grave, you'll do as you're told."

Eric grinned at her. "Barely engaged and the nagging already begins."

Mary Beth laughed as she moved to the kitchen to fetch him a serving of broth and the Oriental medicine. "Better get used to it because I plan on nagging you for the rest of my life."

Eric muttered under his breath, but she could hear the teasing tone in his voice. "I would choose that over being a lone ranger any day of the week."

When she returned to his side, the fear had finally eased its grip on her heart. It would take a while for him to heal and to regain his strength, but until then Mary Beth would take care of him.

Epilogue

Gambler's Creek, California, 14 February 1873

The ranch was bustling with people. Everyone had come out for the Valentine's Day picnic on the Colt Ranch. Although Mary Beth had been making biscuits and beans since the day before, she didn't mind the trouble.

Ever since their first Valentine's Day as a married couple, Eric insisted the day be used to make good memories for Mary Beth. Their first Valentine's Picnic had lured out only Eric's two new deputies and Peter, but last year the turnout had more than doubled. Today it seemed as if the entire Gambler's Creek had shut down for the day to come out to the Colt Ranch.

Shelly and Mr. Elm, as Mary Beth still thought of the proprietor of the boarding house, were sitting in the shade of an old oak tree with their second child cooing beside them, while keeping an eye over their one-year-old who was trying to master the art of walking.

Beside the barn, Rowena sat waxing her saddle. She'd be heading out on a trapping expedition in the morning, and this time she aimed to take on the Canadian Wilds. Although Mary Beth would be sad to see her friend leave and be gone for six months or longer, she was grateful to have her here today.

Liza and the preacher had returned from their mission into Mexico and had managed to convince the mayor to renovate the small church building to accommodate the large number of inhabitants that now called Gambler's Creek their home.

With a jug of sun tea in her hand, Mary Beth headed towards the trestle tables Eric and his deputies had set up as a refreshment table. Her eye caught the large willow by the creek and her heart swelled

in her chest. Peter had succumbed to flu during the previous winter and Mary Beth still missed him every day. On the day she wed Eric, it was Peter who had walked her down the aisle. Peter had given her a job when she had no refuge and had become like a father to her. When he passed away no one had been more surprised than Mary Beth to learn that she was to inherit everything he owned, including the tailor shop.

A smile bloomed on her face knowing she would always cherish the memories she had of the kind old tailor. He had been the first one to predict that she and Eric would be together. At the time Mary Beth hadn't even considered finding love again, but she was glad that Eric and Peter had proved her wrong.

She turned when a hand touched her shoulder. "Come, take a walk with me," Eric said with a warm smile. His dark brown eyes still made her heart skip a beat even after three years of being his wife. Mary Beth shook her head with a smile. "We've got guests; I can't go traipsing through the paddock with you now."

Eric shrugged. "Of course you can, it's our ranch we can do whatever we want. Besides, it's Valentine's Day. Don't I deserve a little time with my Valentine?"

Mary Beth was about to say no, but she nodded in agreement, knowing it was what she wanted to do. Eric was right; the day was about more than just a picnic. For her and Eric, Valentine's day had become a symbol of their love. A reminder of what they had gone through before they could be together.

She slipped her hand into Eric's and together they walked towards the paddock. It was a cool afternoon, but it didn't bother Mary Beth in the least. The fresh chill in the air made her feel alive and after almost losing Eric, she cherished every breath she could take with him by her side.

As they walked, she couldn't help but think back to the night she had stood on the Brooklyn Bridge. If God hadn't stopped her, she would never have met a wonderful man like Eric, she would have never made friends with three vastly different but wonderful women, and most of all she wouldn't have a belly swollen with life that had been born from their love.

Eric turned to her when the voices and the cheerful sounds from the picnic faded into the background. "How are you feeling?"

Mary Beth smiled and touched a hand to her belly. "Good, I'm feeling very good. I can't believe this little one is almost here."

Eric glanced at her belly. "A week, maybe two more?"

Letting out a sigh, Mary Beth nodded. "Yes. Did you see Ma Lee came out today?"

Eric turned to look at the small group of Orientals sitting in the shade beside the barn. After Ma Lee had saved Eric's life with her herbs and teas, both Eric and Mary Beth had made it their priority to help the inhabitants of Gambler's Creek accept their foreign neighbors. Ma Lee was no longer giving out medicine for free; she now had a small shop in the thoroughfare from which she treated everything from whooping cough to fatigue. Some folks were still reticent to try her Chinese herbs, but many trusted in her healing gift just as they trusted Doc when he was in town.

"You've brought an entire town together, Mary Beth, do you know how proud I am of you?" Eric asked, brushing his lips tenderly over her cheek.

Mary Beth smiled up at her husband and nodded. "Do you know how blessed I am to have found you? Just four years ago I was ready to end it all. Never in a million years would I have imagined that God had this in store for me."

Eric smiled. "For I have plans for the future for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you..."

Before Eric could continue Mary Beth let out a sharp cry. "Maybe tomorrow, today he plans to harm me."

Eric searched her gaze in concern when another pain clenched Mary Beth's abdomen.

"The baby, Eric, the baby is coming!" Mary Beth said, exasperated that he had not understood.

Eric's eyes widened with surprise. "But it's too early."

Mary Beth chuckled before the pain stole her breath. "You try telling it to stay put for two more weeks. It's coming!"

Eric nodded as Mary Beth clutched his arm at the next contraction. "Good thing we've got the doc and Ma Lee out here today."

"Eric, stop making jokes, it hurts."

Eric smiled as he took her hand and slowly led her towards their cabin, the home they had made together for the family they intended to be a part of.

“Love hurts, Mary Beth; I still remember how much it hurt when you told me you wouldn’t join me for dinner on Valentine’s Day.”

Mary Beth knew he was trying to take her mind off the pain, but she couldn’t help but tease him back. “It hurt even more when you were shot later that day, in an attempt to just spend the evening with me.”

Mary Beth shared a teasing smile with her husband. The pain might be unbearable, but tomorrow this time she would be holding a baby in her arms and she already knew that God had plans to prosper her baby, just like he had given her the happily ever after she had never dreamed she would have.