



◆ FOUNTAIN CREEK

CHRONICLES | BOOK ONE ◆

REKINDLED

TAMERA ALEXANDER

Rekindled by Tamera Alexander is an amazing story of love lost and found and of trust and faith rediscovered. I loved it!

—Colleen Coble, author of *Alaska Twilight*, a
Women of Faith novel

Heartbreaking and hopeful, *Rekindled* is a love story that will keep you turning pages late into the night, longing for Larson and Kathryn to find their way back to each other. Ms. Alexander grabs the reader's heart and doesn't let go until the very end. I look forward to the next book in the FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES.

—Robin Lee Hatcher, bestselling author of
The Victory Club and Diamond Place

Excellent characters and a unique storyline combine to create a novel that will burn in your memory for a long time to come.

—Randy Ingermanson, Christy
Award-winning author

In the truest sense of the word, this novel rekindles an everlasting love between two remarkable characters. Tamera Alexander has created a rare love story between a husband and wife as their growing understanding of God and one another reveals just how deep love can be. Well done!

—Maureen Lang, author of *Pieces of Silver*
from Kregel Publications

Tamera Alexander pens a compelling novel of God's grace and the hope of love rekindled. I was hooked from the first and sorry when the story was over.

—Tracie Peterson, award-winning author of
the bestselling HEIRS OF MONTANA series
and *What She Left For Me*

Tamera Alexander has given us a beautiful story of redemption and hope peopled with unforgettable characters and a setting so vivid I felt I'd traveled back in time. I can't wait for the next book in the FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES series.

—Deborah Raney, author of *Over the Waters*
and *A Vow to Cherish*

Books by
Tamera Alexander

FROM BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES

Rekindled

Revealed

Remembered

Fountain Creek Chronicles (3 in 1)

TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS

From a Distance

Beyond This Moment

Within My Heart

TAMERA ALEXANDER

FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES | BOOK ONE

REKINDLED



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
www.bakerpublishinggroup.com

Ebook edition created 2010

Ebook corrections 02.14.2013

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ISBN 978-1-5855-8888-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

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Cover design by Studio Gearbox

Cover photograph by Steve Gardner, PixelWorks Studios, Inc.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Doug and June Gattis

Growing up beneath the shelter of your love
shaped me for eternity, and I'm forever grateful.
That love spilled over into me and gave me wings.
It still does. Thank you for continually pointing me
to the Cross and for being "Jesus with skin" in my life.

To my mother-in-law, Claudette Harris Alexander

You first started me on this writing journey by sharing with me
just how *softly His love comes*. I trust you can now see
where your gift has led me. We miss you every day.
Scout out the best hiking trails. We'll be Home soon.

Do not consider his appearance or his height,
for I have rejected him.

The Lord does not look at the things man looks at.
Man looks at the outward appearance,
but the Lord looks at the heart.

1 SAMUEL 16:7 NIV

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Colorado Territory, 1868
In the shadow of Pikes Peak

LARSON JENNINGS HAD LIVED this moment a thousand times over, and it still sent a chill through him. Shifting in the saddle, he stared ahead at the winding trail of dirt and rock that had been the haunt and haven of his dreams, both waking and sleeping, for the past five months. Along with his anticipation at returning home, there mingled a foreboding that crowded out any sense of festivity.

He carefully tugged off the leather gloves and looked at his misshapen hands. Gently flexing his fingers, he winced at the unpleasant sensation shooting up his right arm. The skin was nearly healed but was stretched taut over the back of his hand, much like it was over half of his body. Scenes from that fateful night flashed again in his mind. Blinding white light, unbearable heat.

He closed his eyes. His breath quickened, his flesh tingled, remembering. He may have denied death's victory, but death had certainly claimed a bit of him in the struggle.

What would Kathryn's reaction be at seeing him like this? And what had the past months been like for her, not knowing where he was? To think she might have already given him up for dead touched a wound so deep inside him, Larson couldn't bear to give the thought further lead. Kathryn would be there. . . . *She would.*

Maybe if he'd been a better husband to her, a better provider, or perhaps if he had been able to give her what she truly wanted, he'd feel differently about coming back. But their inability to have a child had carved a canyon between them years ago, and the truth of their marriage was as undeniable to him as the scars marring his body. And the fault of it rested mostly with him—he knew that now.

He rode on past the grove of aspen that skirted the north boundary of their property, then crossed a shallow point in Fountain Creek. Distant memories, happier memories, tugged at the edge of his misgivings, and Larson welcomed them. Kathryn had been twenty years old when he'd first brought her to this territory. Their journey from Boston had been hard, but she'd never complained. Not once. He'd sensed her silent fear expanding with each distancing mile. He remembered a particular night they'd spent together inside the wagon during a storm. Wind and rain had slashed across the prairie in torrents, and though a quiver had layered her voice, Kathryn swore to be enjoying the adventure. As they lay together through the night, he'd loved her and sworn to protect and care for her. And he still intended to keep that promise—however modest their reality might have turned out in comparison to his dreams.

Kathryn meant more to him than anything now. She was more than his wife, his lover. She completed him, in areas he'd never known he was lacking. He regretted that it had taken an intimate brush with death for him to see the truth. Now if he could only help her see past the outside, to the man he'd become.

His pulse picked up a notch when he rounded the bend and the familiar scene came into view. Nestled in stands of newly leafed aspen and willow trees, crouched in the shadow of the rugged mountains that would always be his home, the scenery around their cabin still took his breath away.

Larson's stomach clenched tight as he watched for movement from the homestead. As he rode closer, a breeze swept down from the mountain, whistling through the branches overhead. The door to the cabin creaked open. His eyes shot up. A rush of adrenaline caused every nerve to tingle.

“Kathryn?” he rasped, his voice resembling a music box whose innards had been scraped and charred.

He eased off his horse and glanced back at the barn. Eerily quiet.

It took him a minute to gain his balance and get the feeling back in his limbs. His right leg ached and he was tempted to reach for his staff tied to his saddle, but he resisted, not wanting Kathryn’s first image of him to be that of a cripple. Vulnerability flooded his heart, erasing all pleas but one.

God, let her still want me.

He gently pushed open the cabin door and stepped inside. “Kathryn?”

He scanned the room. Deserted. The door to their bedroom was closed, and he crossed the room and jerked the latch free. The room was empty but for the bed they’d shared. Scenes flashed in his mind of being here with Kathryn that last night. Disbelief and concern churned his gut.

He searched the barn, calling her name, but his voice was lost in the wind stirring among the trees. Chest heaving, he ignored the pain and swung back up on his mount.

Later that afternoon, exhausted from the hard ride back to Willow Springs, Larson urged his horse down a less crowded side street, wishing now that he’d chosen to search for Kathryn here first. But he’d held out such hope that she’d been able to keep the ranch. He gave his horse the lead and searched the places he thought Kathryn might be. Nearing the edge of town, he reined in his thoughts as his gaze went to a small gathering beside the church.

Two men worked together to lower a coffin suspended by ropes into a hole in the ground. Three other people looked on in silence—a woman dressed all in black and two men beside her. Watching the sparse gathering as he passed, Larson suddenly felt sorry for the departed soul and wondered what kind of life the person had led that would draw so few well-wishers. Then the woman turned her head to speak to one of the men beside her. It couldn’t be . . .

A stab of pain in his chest sucked Larson’s breath away.

Kathryn.

He dismounted and started to go to her, but something held him back.

Kathryn walked to the pile of loose dirt and scooped up a handful. She stepped forward and hesitating for a moment, finally let it sift through her fingers. Larson was close enough to hear the hollow sound of dirt and pebbles striking the coffin below. He was certain he saw her shudder. Her movements were slow and deliberate.

She looked different to him somehow, but still, he drank her in. He felt the scattered pieces of his life coming back together.

His thoughts raced to imagine who could be inside that coffin. He swiftly settled on one. Bradley Duncan. He remembered the afternoon he’d found the young man at the cabin visiting Kathryn. Despite past months of pleading with God to quell his jealous nature and for the chance to make things right with his wife, a bitter spark rekindled deep inside him.

Larson bowed his head. Would he ever possess the strength to put aside his old nature? At that moment, Kathryn turned toward him, and he knew the answer was no.

He didn’t want to believe it. He knew his wife’s body as well as his own, from vivid memory as well as from his dreams, and the gentle bulge beneath her skirts left little question in his mind. Larson’s legs felt like they might buckle beneath him.

Matthew Taylor, his foreman and supposed friend, stood close beside Kathryn. Taylor slipped a

arm around her shoulders and drew her close. Liquid fire shot through Larson's veins. He'd trusted Matthew Taylor with the two most important things in the world to him—his ranch and his wife. It would seem that Taylor had failed him on both counts. And in the process, had given Kathryn what Larson never could.

With Taylor's hand beneath her arm, Kathryn turned away from the grave. He whispered something to her. She smiled back, and Larson's heart turned to stone. They walked past him as though he weren't there. He suddenly felt invisible, and for the first time in his life, he wasn't bothered by the complete lack of recognition. Defeat and fury warred inside him as he watched Kathryn and Taylor walk back toward town.

When the preacher had returned to the church and the cemetery workers finished their task and left, Larson walked to the edge of the grave. He took in the makeshift headstone, then felt the air squeeze from his lungs. Reading the name carved into the splintered piece of old wood sent him to his knees. His world shifted full tilt.

Just below the dates 1828–1868 was the name—

LARSON ROBERT JENNINGS

CHAPTER ONE

Five months earlier

December 24, 1867

LARSON JENNINGS PEERED inside the frosted window of the snow-drifted cabin. Sleet and snow pelted his face, but he was oblivious to winter's biting chill. A slow-burning heat started in his belly and his hot breath fogged the icy pane as he watched the two of them together.

His wife's smile, her laughter, wholly focused on another man, ignited a painful memory and acted like a knife to his heart. It was all he could do not to break down the door when he entered the cabin.

Kathryn stood immediately, stark surprise shadowing her brown eyes. "Larson, I'm so glad you're home." But her look conveyed something altogether different. She set down her cup and moved away from her seat next to Bradley Duncan at the kitchen table. "Bradley's home from university and dropped by . . . unexpectedly." Lowering her gaze, she added more softly, "To talk. . . ."

Bradley Duncan came to his feet, nearly knocking over his cup. Larson turned and glared down at the smooth-faced, educated boy, not really a man yet, even at twenty-three. Not in Larson's estimation anyway. Larson stood at least a half-foot taller and held a sixty-pound, lean-muscle advantage. He despised weakness, and Duncan exuded it. Having learned from a young age to use his stature to intimidate, Larson was tempted now to simply break this kid in two.

He turned to examine Kathryn's face for a hint of deceit. Her guarded expression didn't lessen his anger. Trusting had never been easy for him, and when it came to his wife and other men, he found it especially hard. He'd seen the way men openly admired her and could well imagine the thoughts lingering beneath the surface.

"Mr. J-Jennings." Duncan's eyes darted to Kathryn and then back again. "I just stopped by to share these books with Kathryn. I purchased them in Boston."

Larson didn't like the sound of his wife's name on this boy's lips.

"I thought she might enjoy reading them. She loves to read, you know," Duncan added, as though Larson didn't know his wife of ten years. "Books don't come cheaply. And with your ranch not faring too well these days, I thought . . ."

Almost imperceptibly, Kathryn's expression changed. Duncan fell silent. Larson felt a silent warning pass from his wife to the boy now shifting from foot to foot before him.

The rage inside him exploded. A solid blow to Duncan's jaw sent the boy reeling backward.

Kathryn gasped, her face drained of color. "Larson—"

His look silenced her. He hauled Duncan up by his starched collar and silk vest and dragged him to his fancy mount tied outside. Once Duncan was astride, Larson smacked the Thoroughbred on the rump and it took off.

Kathryn waited at the door, her shawl clutched about her shoulders, her eyes dark with disapproval. "Larson, you had no right to act in such a manner. Bradley Duncan is a boy, and an honorable one at that."

Larson slammed the door behind him. "I saw the way he looked at you."

She gave a disbelieving laugh. "Bradley thinks of me as an older sister."

Larson moved to within inches of her and stared down hard. She stiffened, but to her credit she didn't draw back. She never had. "I don't have siblings, Kathryn, but take it from me, that's not the

way a man looks at his sister.”

Kathryn sighed, and a knowing look softened her expression. “Larson, I have never looked at another man since I met you. Ever,” she whispered, slowly lifting a hand to his cheek. Her eyes shimmered. “The life I chose is still the life I want. What other men think is of no concern to me. I want you, only you. When will you take that to heart?”

He wanted to brush away her hand, but the feelings she stirred inside him were more powerful than his need to be in control. He pulled her against him and kissed her, wanting to believe her when she said she didn’t ever want for another man, another life.

“I love you,” she whispered against his mouth.

He drew back and looked into her eyes, wishing he could answer. But he couldn’t. Something deep inside him was locked tight. He didn’t even know what it was, really, but he’d learned young that it was safer to keep it hidden, tucked away.

A smile touched Kathryn’s lips, as though she were able to read his thoughts.

Larson pulled her to him and kissed her again, more gently this time, and a soft sigh rose from his throat. Kathryn possessed a hold over him that frightened him at times. He wondered if she even knew. She deserved so much more than what he’d given her. He should be the one buying her books and things—not some half-smitten youth. He wanted to surround Kathryn with wealth that equaled that of her Boston upbringing and to see pride in her eyes when she looked at him.

A look he hadn’t seen in a long, long time.

The familiar taste of failure suddenly tinged his wife’s sweetness, and Larson loosened his embrace. He carefully unbraided his fingers from her thick blond hair. Her eyes were still closed, her breathing staggered. Her cheeks were flushed.

He gently traced her lips with his thumb. Despite ten years spent carving out a life in this rugged territory, her beauty had only deepened. No wonder he caught ranch hands staring.

She slowly opened her eyes, and he searched their depths.

Kathryn said she’d never wanted another man, that she was satisfied with their meager life. And the way she responded to him and looked at him now almost made him believe his suspicions were unfounded. But there was one thing that Kathryn wanted with all her heart, something he hadn’t been able to give her. No matter how he’d tried and prayed, his efforts to satisfy her desire for a child had proven fruitless.

In that moment something inside him, a presence dark and familiar, goaded his feelings of inadequacy. He heeded the inaudible voice, and flints of doubt ignited within him. It wouldn’t be the first time Kathryn had lied.

He set her back from him and turned. “I’ve got work to do in the barn. I’ll be back in a while.”

Preferring the familiar bite of Colorado Territory’s December to the wounded disappointment he saw in his wife’s eyes, Larson slammed the door behind him.

Kathryn Jennings stared at the door, its jarring shudder reverberating in her chest. It was a sound she was used to hearing from her husband, in so many ways. Though Larson’s emotional withdrawal never took her by surprise anymore, it always took a tiny piece of her heart. She pressed a hand to her mouth, thinking of his kiss.

Shutting her eyes briefly, she wished—not for the first time—that Larson would desire *her*—the whole of who she was—as much as he desired her affection. Would there ever come a time when he

would let her inside? When he would fully share whatever tormented him, the demons he wrestled with in his sleep?

She looked down at her hands clasped tightly at her waist. Many a night she'd held him as he wakened half asleep, half crazed. As he moaned in guttural whispers about his mother long dead and buried.

But not forgotten, nor forgiven.

Knowing he would be back soon and anticipating his mood, Kathryn set about finishing dinner. She added a dollop of butter to the potatoes, basted the ham, and let the pages of her memory flutter back to happier days—to the first day she saw Larson. Even then, she'd sensed a part of him that was hidden, locked away. Being young and idealistic, though, she considered his brooding sullenness a mystery and intrigue and felt certain she held the key to unlocking its mysteries. Time had eroded that certainty.

She drew two china plates from the dining hutch, ones she used only on the most special occasions. Though their cabin lay draped in winter at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, miles from their nearest neighbors and half a day's ride to the town of Willow Springs, she managed to keep track of the holidays. And this was the most special.

A half hour later, they sat across from one another at the table, hardly touching the carefully prepared meal, and with not a hint of the festive mood Kathryn had hoped for that morning.

“What did you tell Duncan this afternoon?” Larson broke the silence, his voice oddly quiet.

Kathryn looked up, her frown an unspoken question.

He studied her for a moment, then turned his attention back to his plate. “Did you tell him about the ranch?”

She shook her head and swallowed, only then gaining his meaning. “No, I didn't,” she said softly, knowing her answer would hurt him. No doubt Duncan had heard from others, which meant things must be worse than she thought.

Larson pushed his chair back from the table and stood. An unseen weight pressed down on his broad shoulders, giving him an older appearance. “I'll sell some of the horses in order to see us through. And if we make it to market this spring, if winter holds steady, we should make it another year.”

Kathryn nodded and looked away, sobered by the news. Feeling her husband's eyes on her, she looked back and smiled, hoping it appeared genuine. “I know we'll be fine.”

Larson walked to the door and shrugged into his coat. Hand on the latch, he didn't look back when he spoke. “Dinner was good tonight, Kathryn. Real good.” He sighed. “I've got some work to do. You go on to bed.”

She cleared the table and washed the dishes. Drying off the china plates, she ran a finger around the gold-rimmed edge. A present from her mother four years back. Only two had arrived unbroken. Because they were the last gift Elizabeth Cummings had given her before she died, and knowing her mother had touched this very dish made Kathryn feel a bit closer to her somehow. Her mind went to the two letters she'd written her father since her mother's passing. Though the letters hadn't been returned unopened, neither had William Cummings answered. His apparent disinterest in her life—though new to Kathryn—still tore at old wounds.

Refusing to dwell on what she couldn't change, Kathryn slipped the plates back into the hutch. Her hand hit against a small wooden crate wedged carefully in the back, and a muffled chime sounded from within, followed by another single stuttered tone. Glancing over her shoulder to the door, she pulled the small box from its hiding place.

Kathryn opened the lid and, thinking of what lay within, a warm reminiscence shivered up her spine. A smile curved her mouth despite the caution edging her anticipation. It had been months since she'd allowed herself to take it out, though she'd thought about it countless times in recent weeks. Especially with the harsh winter they were having. What would happen if the rest of the winter was equally cruel?

A lone wrapped item lay nestled within the box. She carefully began unfolding the crumpled edge of a *Boston Herald* social page dated December 24, 1857. The irony of the date on the newspaper made her smile again. Exactly ten years had blurred past since she'd fled the confines of her youth for a new, more promising life with the man who'd captured her heart.

And who held it still, despite how different life was from how she'd imagined.

She lifted the music box from the paper and ran her fingers over the smooth lacquered finish. It was the last birthday music box she'd received from her parents and her favorite. The one commemorating her seventeenth birthday. Each had been diminutive in size and exquisite in design and melody. So many years ago she'd parted with all of them, save this one.

She glanced behind her to the frost-crusted window half obscured by snow, then back to the box in her hands. Sometimes she missed the sheltered world of affluence. Not that she would trade her life with Larson. She only wished their ranch had been more successful. For his sake as well as hers.

Gently turning the key on the bottom, she took care not to overwind it. Lifting the lid, her breath caught at the familiar melody. Crafted of polished mahogany and inlaid with gold leaf, this was by far the most beautiful of the collection and worth more than all the others. It would bring a handsome sum.

Kathryn felt a check in her spirit at the thought, but gently pushed it aside. She believed in her husband's dream as much as he did and would do everything in her power to help him succeed. But if they ran into hard times again, at least they had some security to fall back on.

Lost in the lilting melody, she stood and walked closer to the lamp on the fireplace mantel. She held the box at an angle to the light so she could read the familiar inscription engraved on the gold underside of the lid. Tilting it up, she could almost read the words. . . .

A sudden movement caught her eye and she turned.

Larson stood close behind her, hurt and doubt darkening his face. "Planning on selling that one too?"

Heart pounding, she rushed to explain. "I wasn't planning on selling it. I was only—"

Kathryn felt the music box slip from her hands. She grabbed for it but couldn't gain a hold. A crack threaded her lips as the box splintered into pieces on the wooden floor. A staccato of clangs and dissonant tings sounded as the intricate musical workings scattered beneath the table and hutch. She crouched there, though seeking safe refuge.

Her throat closed tight and she found it hard to breathe. How could she have been so foolish? Her tears trailed down her cheeks.

"You bartered the other ones," he said, accusation edging his tone. "I bet you could've gotten a good price for this one too." His voice sloped to a whisper then, and his eyes glazed with unexpected emotion.

Speaking past the hurt in her throat, she looked up at him. "I was happy to sell those."

"And that's why you kept it from me?"

“I didn’t tell you at first because I didn’t want you to think that—”

“That I couldn’t provide for my own wife? That I’m not capable of giving you the things you need? The things you want?”

The look he gave her cut to the heart, and Kathryn realized, again, what a costly mistake she’d made in not being honest with him from the start. They’d never spoken of it since that day, but that well-intentioned deception had tentacled itself around their marriage.

She blinked against a blur of tears as her memory rippled back in time. “Half our herd died this winter. We needed money for food, for supplies.” She reached out to touch his chest.

He caught hold of her wrist and took a step closer, his face inches from hers. “I would’ve gotten the money somehow, Kathryn. I’m capable of taking care of you.”

“I’ve never questioned that.” But her words sounded hollow and unconvincing, even to her. Were her misgivings written so clearly in her eyes?

A knowing look moved over Larson’s face. “Exactly how long was Duncan here this afternoon?”

Kathryn frowned and searched the blue eyes glinting now like tempered steel. He couldn’t have hurt her more if he’d struck her across the face. Her voice came out a whisper. “What are you asking me?”

“Did you let him touch you?”

She stared, unbelieving. Part of her wanted to laugh at the absurdity of his accusation, while the rest of her knew why he asked, and it tore at her heart. “Have we been together so long . . . and still you don’t know?”

The accusation in his eyes lessened, but the set of his jaw stayed rigid.

“I am your wife, Larson Jennings. I pledged myself, *all* of myself to you. I am a woman of my word, and—”

His focus raked to the shattered box strewn across the floor. When he looked at her again, the question in his eyes was clear. His grip tightened around her wrist but not enough to hurt.

Kathryn could clearly see the comparison he was drawing in his mind. She’d faced it before and weariness moved through her at its recurring theme. Would they ever move past this?

“Larson, I am not like your mother. I am not a woman who would give herself to men for the pleasure.” She intentionally softened her tone. “I’ve given myself to only one man . . . to you. And I will never share that part of myself with another man. Not ever.”

He didn’t answer immediately but let her wrist slip free. “How can I be certain of that?”

Nestled in his question Kathryn heard the echoing cry of a young boy, and she swallowed hard at the answer forming in her throat, realizing it applied as much to her as it did to him. She offered up prayer that God would somehow teach both of their stubborn hearts. That he would lead Larson past the seeds of faithlessness bred in his youth, and for herself . . .

She looked down at the broken shards of wood and glass and searched her heart. All she’d ever wanted was to be one with her husband in every way. Was she at fault for that? She felt an answer stirring inside her. It was almost within her grasp. But then it slipped away, like a whisper on the wind.

She steadied her voice. “The answer lies in trust, Larson. You’re going to have to learn to trust me.”

One side of his mouth tipped in a smile, but it felt more like a challenge. “And does that trust go both ways, Kathryn?”

Again, she felt that same tug in her spirit. “Yes, it does. It goes both ways.”

She thought she'd been the one in this marriage to have already opened her heart fully. But she been wrong. She hadn't surrendered everything, not yet.

Later that night as they readied for bed, Kathryn felt Larson watching her. Despite the wall of silence between them, she felt a blush sweep through her at his close attention.

The air in the cabin was chilly. She quickly shed her clothes and put on her gown, then slid between the icy sheets. She pulled the layers of covers up to her chin, shivering, and anticipated Larson's warmth beside her. When no movement sounded from his side of the bedroom, she turned back.

He stood watching her. A single lamp on the dresser cast only a flickering orange glow in the darkness, but it was enough for her to recognize the look in her husband's eyes. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then looked away.

Larson moved the lamp to the nightstand and stripped off his shirt. Kathryn knew the lines of her husband's face, was familiar with his physique. She knew all of this and yet so little of the man beneath the exterior.

She had been attracted to him from the start. Everything about him had spoken of determination and dreams, and a passion that ran so deep she feared she might drown in it. When first seeing Larson clad in leather, his brown hair brushing his shoulders, her mother had labeled him a mountain man. A ghost of a smile had passed across her mother's features before she hastily masked her reaction. She cautioned Kathryn about the cost of following her heart. William Cummings branded him a rogue, and though not forbidding Kathryn from seeing him again, her father's cool aloofness toward the subject was answer enough. As it had been in most other areas of her life. And that was the final nudge Kathryn had stepped closer and closer to the river's edge until it finally swept her away.

As Larson sat on his side of the bed, Kathryn found her gaze drawn to his back. Spaced at random intervals over his muscular back and shoulders were circular bumps of scarred flesh. She always cringed when thinking about the type of person who would inflict such pain on a little boy. Instinctively, she reached out to touch him, willing his deep inward wounds to heal as the outward had been done.

Larson flinched at her touch, but didn't turn.

For a moment he stilled, his head bowed, then he leaned over to turn down the lamp. The yellow burnish of the oiled wick dwindled to smoldering, leaving the room shrouded in shadow.

Kathryn shivered against the sudden draft from the rise and fall of the covers when Larson lay down beside her. She half expected him to touch her, but he didn't. Warmth sprang to her eyes. Would it always be this way between them?

They lay side by side, barely touching, tense and silent. The loneliness inside her deepened until she finally turned onto her side, away from him. She laid a hand over her latent womb, wondering if the sacredness of life would ever dwell within that silent, secret place. A full moon gleaming off the fresh layer of snow cast a pale pewter light through the single window of their bedroom. Kathryn stared at the silvery beams until she felt a stirring beside her.

"I'm sorry, Kat."

His deep voice sliced the stillness of the bedroom, and Kathryn closed her eyes, imagining what his whispered admission had cost him and cherishing the sound of the special name he sometimes used for her. A name she hadn't heard in too long.

She slowly turned back over and was met with his profile. He was looking at the ceiling, and she couldn't help but wonder what unearthed treasures lay in the heart of the man beside her. She reached

out and ran her fingers through his hair, then along his stubbled jawline. Not once in all the years of knowing him had he worn a full beard. And she'd never wished for it; she loved the strong lines of his face.

When he didn't respond, Kathryn finally turned back and curled onto her side.

After a long moment, Larson gently pulled her against him. The heat from his chest seeped through her nightgown, warming her back. This was his language. He was telling her he loved her without words. Like when he kept ample firewood stacked by the door or made certain her coat and gloves were still winter worthy.

But she longed for more.

Kathryn felt a tightening in her throat and covered his hand over her chest. She nudged closer to him, answering his unspoken question.

When Larson rose up onto his elbow, he waited for her to look at him, then gently cupped her face with his hand. She looked into his eyes and knew that it didn't matter if he ever opened his heart completely to her or not—her heart was already his forever. She had promised before God to love this man, for better or worse, and it was a promise she wanted, and fully intended, to keep. As their breath mingled and he drew her closer, she begged God to help her see and love her husband for who he was, not for who she wanted him to be.

CHAPTER TWO

LARSON AWAKENED BEFORE light the next morning, his mind in a thick fog. He lay perfectly still and tried to decipher dream from reality. As the haze of sleep lifted, he felt Kathryn shudder close beside him. Then he heard her soft intakes of breath. Her hidden tears tore right through him, yet he found he couldn't move.

Before his mind had faded into exhaustion hours earlier, Kathryn had whispered, "*Merry Christmas Larson.*" Only then had he realized the injury his self-centeredness the evening before had caused.

He wished he could reach over and pull her to him, but the cause of her tears stopped him cold. He strongly doubted whether his holding her would bring the comfort she sought. He thought he'd loved her thoroughly last night, holding her afterward, stroking her hair until her breathing was feather soft against his chest.

He lay there in the stillness until her breathing evened again. Reliving the disappointment he'd seen in her eyes the night before was almost more than he could bear. His thoughts turned to the request he'd received earlier that week. Still tucked inside his coat pocket, the envelope contained an invitation from a company bearing the name of Berklyn Stockholders, Inc. He'd been invited to attend a meeting to be held in Denver three days from now. He hadn't told Kathryn about the business opportunity. No need to build her hopes up only to dash them again. He'd done that often enough in recent years.

From the darkness enveloping the room, Larson guessed that dawn could not be far off. And in that moment, the decision became clear. This new venture could give him the leverage he needed to make his ranch a success. But even more, he would be a success in Kathryn's eyes.

Within minutes, he dressed and slipped noiselessly from the bedroom. He could make Denver in two days tops, even with the snow. He would conduct his business and return.

Not wanting to alarm Kathryn, yet not wanting to give her false hope, Larson scribbled a brief note and left it on the mantel. He made certain the fire in the hearth was stoked and that ample wood was stacked in the bin.

He opened the door and a bitter cold wind hit him hard in his face, nearly taking his breath away. More snow had fallen than he'd expected, and by the time he made a path to the barn and saddled his mount, faint hues of pink and purple tinged the eastern horizon. Larson took one last look at the cabin and pictured his wife inside, cocooned in the warmth of sleep.

As tempting as it was to go back and share it with her, the hope of her renewed admiration and the chance to give her the life she deserved drove him forward.

By noon, Larson reached the outskirts of Willow Springs. Having once boasted the best route to the South Park mining camps, Willow Springs' population had declined in recent years when alternate roads were built by neighboring towns. Regardless, Pikes Peak still stood like a proud stony sentinel over the waning township nestled at its base, its rocky ascent soaring upward until the highest peaks were lost in a fluffy mesh of gray and white cloud against the brilliant blue of sky. Fountain Creek cascaded down the narrow canyon off Larson's right toward the heart of town—*Fontaine qui Bouillit* or Boiling Fountain, as the French traders dubbed it—slipping past icy boulders and frosted winter brush lodged frozen in rocky crevices.

When he and Kathryn first arrived, they'd frequented some of the many bubbling pools of mineral water near their cabin, enjoying each other and the warm springs that rose from deep within the earth.

Larson tried remembering the last time they'd gone there together recently, and couldn't.

Sunshine reflected off the freshly fallen snow and shone like diamonds for miles around him, and he wished Kathryn were here to see it. He thought of the trips to Willow Springs they made together twice a year. Kathryn looked forward to the trip for weeks and savored every minute. He endured and couldn't wait to return home. He liked the solitary life he and Kathryn lived, busy with ranching and working the homestead. He felt uneasy when he was around too many people.

Larson rode through town, passing Flanagan & King Feed and Flour, Faulkner's Dry Goods and Post Office, Speck's Groceries, and the St. James Hotel. A two-story frame building with a sign that read *Tappan General Store* towered over a smaller bakery to its right. Most of the buildings were constructed of logs or hewed wood, but some were fashioned of quarried stone from the nearby hills. He saw the deserted streets and closed shops and, again, his selfishness hit him square in the gut. The snatches of holly and brightly colored red bows affixed to every storefront and lamppost only accentuated his guilt. He should have written something in his note to Kathryn at least acknowledging what day it was. But in his haste and excitement, he'd forgotten.

Doubting any shop would be open on Christmas Day, Larson still found himself scanning the businesses and reading the shingles hanging above the doors. Despite the darkened windows, he had the uncomfortable feeling of being watched, and he'd learned long ago to trust that inner voice. It had saved his life on more than one occasion. Plodding his mount northward, he scanned the town around him.

By the time he reached the white-steeped church perched at the edge of town, he figured fatigue was swaying his instincts—and that his prospects of finding a gift for Kathryn were doomed. Passing by the cemetery, its headstones shrouded in snow, he suddenly remembered the scores of shops in Denver and his spirits lightened. Surely he would find something suitable for Kathryn there.

Travel proved slower than Larson would have liked. By mid-afternoon a steady wind blew hard from the north and the grayishblue clouds hooding the mountains to the west held the certain promise of more snow. Accustomed to Colorado's winter, he had worn several layers of clothes and was warm enough but knew a fire and shelter would be needed by nightfall.

Topping a gentle rise of land, his gaze was drawn east. He made out what looked to be a wagon, half blanketed in snow, one side tilted precariously toward the ground. Slowing his pace, Larson hesitated, watching for any sign of life.

Then he spotted it. A man crouched waist deep in the drift, shoveling snow from around the wagon. The man must have sensed his presence because he turned at that moment. He straightened and began waving furiously.

An hour later Larson had the wagon dug completely free of the drift and the wheel mended enough to get the old peddler into town. He loaded the cargo back into the bed of the wagon, marveling at the old man's odd collection of mostly junk amid a few nicer furniture items.

The man's eyes were bright and attentive. "Name's Callum Roberts. I'm just movin' to Willow Springs, and if all the folks is as kind as you, I'll be makin' my home there for sure."

Taking hold of Callum Roberts' surprisingly strong grip, Larson offered his name. "I was glad to be of help, sir." Even if he hadn't planned on the delay. He eyed the sun as it touched the tips of the highest peaks, then gauged the bitter wind and knew he needed to make his destination before nightfall.

"I thank you for stoppin' to help me, son." Roberts worked his right shoulder and gave it a ru

“Don’t think these old bones coulda stood a night out here.”

Larson pointed back to town. “Follow my tracks straight over that rise and then due south for about three miles. You should make Willow Springs a bit after dark. Jake at the livery should be able to help you.”

Larson was astride his horse when he looked down to see the ancient hawker rummaging through his wagon bed. Anticipating Roberts’ intentions and eager to be on his way, Larson spoke up. “You don’t owe me a thing for this. I said I was glad to do it.”

Callum Roberts kept digging through the piles of wooden crates. “Are you married, son?” he asked over his shoulder. “I have some mighty fine personal items for the little woman.” He pulled out an ornate brush and mirror set that looked anything but new, much less clean.

“Really. I don’t need anything.” Larson shook his head. Then he stopped and reconsidered his statement. On the off chance Roberts did have something of value, Larson much preferred to pay him rather than a mercantile in Denver. The old codger could obviously use it.

Roberts turned, and a smile lit his face as he handed something up to Larson. “Now this, this something worthy of the kindness you’ve shown me.”

Larson almost hated to look inside the small burlap-wrapped package. Seeing the excitement in the old peddler’s eyes, he determined that whatever it was, he would purchase it. Larson pulled back the burlap and felt a jolt run through him at seeing the metal box, hardly big enough to fill his glove hand. He ran his thumb over the smooth top and around the edges. Larson sensed the man’s curious stare and looked down at him.

“It’s a music box, son. Made it myself. Well, most of it anyhow. When I got the thing it wouldn’t even play. But I fixed it all up. Now it plays a Christmas tune. Here, let me show you.” He took the box and wound a simple key on the side. “And see in here.” Roberts tilted the box up. “I left a place where you can put your own words inside, where you can make it your own.”

Larson couldn’t help but smile when the music box started playing a familiar Christmas melody. But it was the man’s enjoyment that deepened his grin. “I’ll take it, sir. And my wife will be all the more pleased when I tell her how I came by it.”

Roberts fairly leapt with pleasure. He refused the money Larson held out to him, but finally took it at Larson’s insistence. Larson tucked the box inside his coat pocket and waited for the man to climb up before he started off in the opposite direction.

With each minute, the sun dipped lower behind the mountains, taking its scant warmth with it. After an hour of riding farther north, Larson topped a hill and spotted the vague outline of what he’d been watching for.

Ahead was a thin ridge of land extending eastward from the mighty Rockies. Jutting upward from the prairie, the ridge resembled an arthritic finger, twisted and bent. On the southern side of the crest was a sparse outcropping of scrub oak and boulders. Larson had camped there before. It would serve well to shelter him through the night.

Darkness had descended by the time he reached the ridge. The moon’s silvery sheen reflected off the snow and provided enough light for him to make out his surroundings. He soon had a fire crackling and a parcel of earth cleared of snow where he could bed down for the night. Jerky and tack biscuits filled his belly. Coffee warmed his insides, even if it wasn’t as good as Kathryn’s.

He imagined what she was doing right then and wondered if she was thinking of him.

Reminded of the music box, he took it from his coat pocket and examined it more closely. It didn’t

begin to compare with any in the collection Kathryn once had. Regret over yesterday passed through him again. The look of loss on her face when the box had shattered into pieces haunted him.

Simple as it was, this box—in his estimation anyway—possessed a quality the others had lacked. It spoke of something more lasting. Something beyond what money could buy.

He laughed out loud at the thought, and the sound of his laughter surprised him. Here he was setting out for a business opportunity he hoped would bring him wealth, and he'd bought Kathryn something that bespoke the opposite.

As he turned the box over in his hands, the lid fell open. He looked at the scratched and tarnished metal plate that Roberts had affixed inside. What had the old guy said this was for? He nodded, remembering. "*Where you can make it your own.*"

An idea struck him. Larson pulled his knife from his boot and moved closer to the fire. He situated the music box on a rock and pressed the tip of his knife into the plate. He smiled when it made a slight indentation. Not the highest quality of metal, but that served his purpose at the moment.

Larson lost track of time as he knelt by the fire, making the gift his own. Making it Kathryn's. He hoped she would be pleased and felt somehow that she might be. Even if the value of this gift wasn't as impressive as his gifts one day would be, Kathryn had a soft spot for the elderly and would be pleased that he'd stopped to help the newcomer.

When he finished, he put his knife back into its sheath and slid the music box into the inside pocket of his winter coat. The coat Kathryn had bought for him. He ran a hand along the sleeve and remembered their first Christmas together. Before giving it to him, she'd sewn their cattle brand into the inner lining along with his initials, *making it mine*, he thought with a smile. Not for the first time he wished he'd done better by her. She deserved so much more than—

A sudden whinny from his horse brought Larson's head up.

He remained crouched by the fire and scanned his surroundings. The spot he'd chosen far into the ravine provided shelter from the wind. Frozen scrub oak and snow-covered boulders bordered him on all sides but one. He squinted and focused on the night sounds around him. A rustle sounded off to his left, but that could be a rabbit or a squirrel.

His heart kicked up a notch when it happened again. He reached for his rifle propped on a rock beside him. He cocked the chamber slowly, deliberately, giving warning.

"Hello, the camp!" a voice sounded to his right.

Larson turned to see a man step from behind a boulder into the shadowed flicker of the campfire.

The stranger extended his hands palm up, showing he wasn't armed. "Can I share your fire, friend?"

Eyeing him, Larson felt his pulse slow a mite. "Sure, come on in." He kept his rifle within easy reach.

At first glance, the man appeared to be about his age. He wore no gloves, and when he stretched his bare hands over the fire, Larson noticed a tiny tremor in them. He wondered if it was from the chill of the night or if the stranger had another need.

"My horse went lame on me a couple miles back. I been walkin' since dark." The man's pants were caked in snow and ice, and his boots were worn through on one side.

Larson motioned to the coffeepot set on a rock among the glowing white embers. At the man's nod, he tossed the remnants from his cup and poured a fresh one. He rose to hand it to the stranger and heard a horse whinny some distance behind him, on the other side of the ravine.

Too late, Larson realized the man's intent.

The sight of the revolver pointing at his chest sent white-hot emotion pouring through Larson's body. Instinctively, he tossed the hot coffee at the man's face and dove for his rifle. He hit the ground as a thunderclap exploded in his ears. Searing heat tore through his upper right thigh. Sickening warmth and weakness pulsed in his right leg, then spread the length of his body.

Everything swirled in a fog around him. He fought to remain conscious.

When Larson opened his eyes he saw only a dark blanket of sky pierced with specks of light dancing in a nauseating rhythm. He blinked twice to clear his mind.

The night air suddenly felt like an icy blanket hugging him from all sides, and he soon realized why. His coat, boots, and gloves were gone.

He tried to sit up, but a solid kick to his ribcage brought him down. The freezing snow against his face helped keep him conscious. He gulped for air.

Be still.

Larson felt the urging more than heard it. But he didn't want to be still. Everything within him wanted to fight.

He heard movement in the camp and slowly opened one eye. The stranger now wore his coat and boots and was rummaging through his saddlebags. Larson raised himself slowly till he was sitting. He silently reached for the weapon beside him and took aim dead center on the man's back. He cocked the rifle. "Hold it right—"

The man turned, his gun holstered.

The explosion was deafening. But it hadn't come from Larson's rifle.

A look of utter surprise and disbelief contorted the man's features before he fell headlong into the snow. Larson's heart ricocheted off his ribs as he struggled to his knees. He searched the darkness around him. The night grew eerily quiet. Knowing he provided an excellent target in his current position, he gripped his rifle and limped to an outcropping of boulders.

Sinking to the ground, he clamped a hand over the pulsing wound in his right thigh and pressed back against the icy stone. A rifle blast split the silence. A flash of light glinted off the boulder, inches from his head. He fell to his belly and started crawling through the snow and scrub brush, away from the light of the campfire.

Another gunshot sounded, hitting only a few feet to the side of him.

Larson took quick breaths through clenched teeth. His skin suddenly grew clammy even as the wound pulsed hot. Trying to ignore the pain, he prayed like he hadn't done in years. Larson knew the Almighty had no reason to listen to him. Not after he'd ignored Him all these years. Even so, he prayed, with an urgency he didn't know he had in him.

Figuring he'd crawled about twenty yards, he stopped to catch his breath. His throat burned from the cold. He looked down at his right leg and saw the snow staining crimson. His feet and legs were going numb. His fingers ached.

"I know you're in there, mister. Might as well come out and get it over with."

The words were spoken in a singsong tone, lending a macabre feel to the already perilous situation. Larson lay perfectly still, listening to the crunch of the man's boots on frozen snow. He gauged the man to be ten yards south. And moving straight for him.

His options limited, Larson pushed ahead on his stomach through the brush and across a narrow

gully. He edged his way up the side of the ravine until he heard the unmistakable *tink* of metal against metal. Loading chambers. At the cock of the rifle, the night went dead quiet.

He waited for the inevitable. But no gunshot came.

Instead, he heard humming. *Humming*. And the sound of it— high-pitched, carefree, something a person might hear at a picnic— made him go stock-still.

“Mighty cold out here tonight, and expectin’ a heap more snow. You can die slow or fast, mister. Don’t make no matter to me. But I hear freezin’ to death ain’t no way to go.”

The night air pulsed with the absurdity of the voice. Death threats mingled with the weather. Larson pressed back into the brush.

Snatches of prayers Kathryn had whispered at night while he lay silent in bed beside her came back to him. Larson repeated them over and over in his mind as he crawled farther into the dark bramble and brush. When he finally looked up, he thought the night’s silver shadows were playing a trick on him.

A wooden shack stood like a sentinel against the rocky wall of the ravine. If he could make it inside, maybe he would stand half a chance. He fired a shot in the direction he’d last heard his assailant. Slowed by his injured right leg, he barely reached the door before another shot rang out behind him.

Larson dove inside and kicked the door shut. Panting, he crawled to the wall farthest from the single window by the door. The cramped space inside the shack was stagnant and musty. A sharp tanginess he couldn’t define punctuated the frigid air.

His eyes soon adjusted to the dim light slanting through the window. What looked to be stacks of barrels occupied the wall beside him. A pile of blankets and other items littered the wooden floor.

Another shot fired and blasted out the window. At the same time, Larson heard something shatter beside him. Liquid sprayed his face and neck, and the floor beneath him grew wet. The pungent odor became more pronounced.

A rapid fire of gun blasts punctured the cloak of night, and the shack ignited in blinding white light and flames. Intense heat engulfed the small space as a putrid stench filled his nostrils. Larson knew that moment that he would die, and that his death would be deservedly painful. He only hoped it would be swift.

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