



TRUTH
A NOVEL
BE TOLD

CAROL COX

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To Dave and Katie:
Your unceasing inspiration and encouragement
keep me going.
Without you, this writing adventure would
never have been possible.

To Kevin and Samantha,
Emmalee, Madilyn, Wyatt, and Benjamin:
as you begin a new adventure of your own.

“If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

John 8:31b-32 (NASB)



CHAPTER I



GRANITE SPRINGS, ARIZONA TERRITORY

MAY 1893

Amelia Wagner stepped down onto the platform of the Granite Springs train depot and drew in a deep breath of clean mountain air. She closed her eyes to sort out the different scents tingling her nostrils—the sharp tang of pine trees growing on the nearby slopes, the pungent odors of fresh-cut lumber wafting from Martin Gilbreth’s sawmill, and the fragrance of the creosote bushes that dotted the hillsides of Arizona’s high desert. The scents mingled together to form a fragrance more pleasing than the costliest perfume any Denver emporium had to offer.

Amelia took in another deep breath, savoring the fragrance of home.

“Welcome back!”

Amelia’s eyes flew open, and she spotted Thomas Rafferty, station agent for the Prescott–Phoenix Railroad. Prior to that, he had served as the stagecoach depot agent for the local line and had been a fixture in Granite Springs for as long as Amelia

could remember. He nodded a cheery greeting as he rolled a hand truck laden with wooden crates into the depot.

She grinned back at him. “Where are my peppermints?”

Mr. Rafferty set the hand truck upright and patted his pockets. A slight flush tinted his weathered cheeks. “I’m afraid you caught me unprepared. I didn’t realize you were arriving today, or I’d have stocked up.” He tilted his head and chuckled. “Besides, I expected you outgrew that sweet tooth of yours.”

Amelia brushed his apology aside with a laugh. “No need to worry. Standing here on the platform just brought back a host of memories. Getting a peppermint drop from you whenever I came home is one of my favorites.”

The flush on the station agent’s cheeks deepened as he tipped the hand truck back and wheeled it toward the doors. “It was always a special day when you arrived. It’s good to have you here again, and I know your dad will be glad to see you, too.”

As Amelia watched Mr. Rafferty disappear inside the depot, out of the corner of her eye she saw someone approaching on her right. She swiveled around to see a lanky cowboy striding along the platform.

He swaggered up to her and tipped his hat. “Afternoon, Miss. I’ve always thought Granite Springs was a right pretty place, but the scenery got a whole lot nicer the moment you stepped off the train.”

Amelia straightened her shoulders and looked the brash young rider straight in the eye. “Thank you for the compliment, but you seem to be under a misapprehension. I’m not a stranger here—I was raised in Granite Springs. I’m not some Eastern debutante ready to swoon at the sight of her first cowboy.”

A dark red flush rose from the man’s shirt collar to his

hairline. “Beg your pardon,” he mumbled. “I didn’t mean any offense.” Ducking his head, he trotted down the steps to the street below and hurried on his way.

From her position on the station platform, Amelia turned her attention back to the bustle surrounding her. A smile curved her lips. Though small compared to Denver, the town had grown since her last visit.

An incredulous gasp from the street caught her attention. Two matrons stood engrossed in conversation just below where Amelia stood. The taller one drew back and pressed her fingers to her lips. “You can’t mean it! The bank is going to foreclose?”

Her companion nodded vigorously, setting the long black feathers on her hat into a bobbing dance. “I heard it straight from Bart McCaffrey’s wife. My husband says it’s due to poor business management, but . . .” Her voice trailed off when her eyes strayed up to the platform and focused on Amelia. Nudging her friend with her elbow, she gave a sniff, and the two women moved several yards away, out of earshot.

Foreclosure? On McCaffrey’s property? Amelia forgot her embarrassment at being caught eavesdropping in her eagerness to make a note of what she’d heard.

Why, oh why, had she packed her notebook in her trunk? She scrambled in her reticule and pulled out a scrap of paper and a pencil. One of the first things her father ever taught her about journalism was the need to jot down details while they were still fresh in her memory. With the information she provided, he or Homer Crenshaw, his able helper, would be able to track down the rest of the story.

Or . . . She caught her breath. Maybe she could persuade her father to let her chase down the facts and write the story

herself. What a wonderful way to begin this summer's visit to Granite Springs! Her heart quickened at the thought.

She scribbled a quick note, then looked up to see a tow-headed boy about six years old rolling a hoop along the street in front of the platform. The hoop suddenly appeared to take on a will of its own and veered from its path straight toward the spot where the two matrons stood.

Neither woman seemed to notice the hoop until it struck the taller one from the rear. She let out an indignant yelp and turned to locate her assailant. Her face tightened when her eyes lit on the boy.

"Come here, you young scalawag!" She reached out as though to snag him by the ear, but the youngster evaded her fingers with ease.

Snatching up his hoop, he called out a quick apology and scampered off. Seeing the impish grin on his face, Amelia doubted that the incident was entirely accidental.

She pressed her lips together to hold back a smile at his antics and scanned the street, hoping to catch sight of her father. It wasn't like him to miss her arrival. Where could he be?

There had to be a good reason. Being the editor and publisher of the *Granite Springs Gazette*—as well as its chief reporter—filled nearly all his waking hours. Perhaps he'd gotten wind of a good story and lost track of the time.

The office of the *Gazette* was only a few blocks away. Amelia glanced over at her luggage. Her trunk would be safe under Mr. Rafferty's watchful eye. Her valise was heavy, but she could manage to carry it that short distance.

Hefting the small bag, she made her way down the steps and walked briskly up First Street, studying the false-fronted

buildings along the way. The land agent's office sported a fresh coat of creamy yellow paint instead of the graying wood she'd seen on her last visit. A steady stream of people flowed in and out of Kingston's General Store, and a neatly painted sign reading *Bon-Ton Café* hung over the building where the Coffeepot Café used to be. Amelia felt her stomach rumble at the thought of food.

She scanned the street again, and her lips curved in a broad smile when she saw Homer Crenshaw making a beeline for the depot. That confirmed her earlier supposition—her father must be on the trail of an important story if he had to send his right-hand man to meet her.

She watched Homer's lanky form as he walked along with a purposeful stride, obviously a man on a mission. His bowler hat didn't completely hide the wisps of white hair sticking out in wild disarray atop a frame so spare that it seemed as though a mere puff of air might blow him into the next county. Anyone seeing that scarecrow-like form for the first time would never guess that Homer was not only a whiz at operating a printing press but a competent reporter in his own right. If her father was the captain of the *Gazette*, he couldn't have asked for a better first mate.

"Miss Wagner? Amelia!"

She looked over to see Emmett Kingston hailing her from the front steps of the general store, just beyond the café. She stopped and waited while he loped across the street.

His path and Homer's converged on her at the same instant. Homer came to a halt when he spotted her on the boardwalk in front of him.

Amelia bounced on her toes, scarcely able to contain herself as she waited for him to break into the glad smile of welcome

that always lit his face when she arrived. To her surprise, his expression remained solemn.

Emmett Kingston stepped up onto the walk beside them. “I thought that was you.” The merchant wiped his hand on the front of his storekeeper’s apron before extending it to her. “I’m sure glad to see you here. Tell your father I’ll be by to visit in the next day or so. It’s a shame . . .” Kingston’s voice trailed off as he focused on a point over Amelia’s shoulder. She turned in time to see Homer finishing a shake of his head.

“We’d best be on our way,” Homer said. “Good to see you, Emmett.” He reached for Amelia’s valise and set off at a rapid pace.

“We have a new eatery in town.” Homer pointed to the Bon-Ton on the other side of the street.

“I noticed that,” she panted, trotting to keep up with his long-legged stride.

“The food there is quite tasty,” he continued. “‘Blithe souls and lightsome hearts have we, feasting at the Cherry Tree!’”

Amelia laughed out loud. She had grown up hearing Homer quote snippets of poetry at odd moments. The lines from Wordsworth made her feel even more at home.

Homer’s mouth curved in a shadow of its usual smile, but the expression in his eyes remained bleak.

Something was wrong. Amelia felt sure of it, but she had no idea what the problem might be. Trying to keep her voice light, she asked, “Where’s Papa? Out chasing down a story?”

Homer’s lean face tightened even more, and his eyes took on a shuttered expression. “He wasn’t feeling up to it today. Didn’t he write to you about that?”

“He mentioned not feeling well, but that was last month. You mean he’s still ailing?”

Homer kept his eyes focused on the street ahead and drew a ragged breath. “He’s worse.”

He pulled off his hat and ran the fingers of one hand through his hair. White strands stood out in a billowy cloud around his head. “But he’s looking forward to seeing you. Let’s keep moving.”

Two blocks later, they reached the two-story, whitewashed board-and-batten building. A sense of belonging swept over Amelia at the sight of the sign hanging above the door, proudly emblazoned with the name *Granite Springs Gazette, A. J. Wagner, Proprietor*, and directly underneath it, a line that read *Job Printing*.

Homer swung the door open with his free hand, and she stepped inside. At first glance, nothing had changed since the last time she’d set foot in the newspaper office. The smells of ink and paper permeated the large room dominated by the sturdy Washington Press, her father’s pride and joy. On the far side of the type cabinets, she could see the smaller Peerless jobbing press. To the right of the stairs in the rear, the door to her father’s office stood open. From where she stood, Amelia could see one corner of his oak rolltop desk. At any other time, she would have headed straight to it to flesh out the notes she had taken at the station, but today concern for her father overshadowed her urge to get to work.

She walked to the back of the printing office, intending to climb the stairs that led to the second-floor living quarters, but Homer’s voice stopped her.

“No need for you to go up just yet. I’ll carry your valise to your room.” He skirted past her and started up the steps.

Amelia followed on his heels. “I don’t mind waiting to

unpack until after my trunk arrives, but I want to go up and see Papa first thing.”

Homer half turned to face her, but his gaze didn't quite meet her eyes. “He's been staying down here since he took sick. We fixed up that little storeroom near the back door when going up and down the stairs got to be too much for him.” He turned and went on up, leaving Amelia standing with one foot on the bottom step.

A wisp of apprehension wound its way up her spine and coiled around her heart. Until that moment, Homer's words hadn't fully struck home. Her father's recent letters had mentioned not feeling well, but they'd given no hint that anything serious might be going on.

Now she wondered whether he had been completely open with her. *If Papa can't manage the stairs, how sick is he?*



CHAPTER 2



Setting her reticule on a stool next to the nearest type cabinet, Amelia walked toward the storeroom. When she reached the closed door, she paused a moment to brace herself, then pushed it open and stepped inside.

In the dim light she could see that the shelves used for holding bundles of paper were gone, and a set of file cabinets had been pushed up against one wall. A bed took up the opposite side of the room, where smooth, white sheets and a matching pillowcase framed her father's tired face.

Amelia's breath caught in her throat at the sight. His hair, once as thick and dark brown as her own, was now gray and wispy. He looked so small beneath the bedclothes, almost shrunken—a mere shadow of the man she'd said farewell to at the end of her last visit. His eyes were closed, but his chest moved up and down in a steady, reassuring rhythm. Amelia crept closer to the bed. "Papa?"

His eyelids flickered open, and his thin lips parted in a smile of welcome. "You made it. How was your trip?"

Relief washed over Amelia when she heard his voice. Though his body appeared worn, the deep baritone still sounded like

her father. She closed the distance between them and reached out to brush a strand of hair back from his forehead. “The trip was very pleasant, especially the last part. The new road-bed they put in last year made the final stretch from Ash Fork much smoother. There isn’t much they can do to straighten out all those twists and turns, though. No wonder they call it the Peavine.” She smiled as she reached for his hand, and his fingers twined around hers.

“I’m glad you’re here, honey.”

“So am I. Spending time with you is always the high point of my year.”

“Mine too.” He patted her arm with his free hand. “We’ve had some grand times together, haven’t we?”

Amelia felt her throat constrict at the wistfulness in his tone, and she sought for some way to lighten the mood. “We’ll have more of them this summer, just as soon as you’re back on your feet again.”

“That would be nice.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “But if not, we can look forward to some great adventures when I meet you at the Eastern Gate.”

A flutter of panic rippled through her at his often-used reference to a reunion in heaven. “It will be a long time before that happens.”

His expression softened. “For you, certainly. But I—”

Homer bustled into the room, carrying a green glass bottle and a spoon. “Time for some of that medicine Doc Harwood left for you.” He poured out a spoonful as he spoke and held it out.

Her father swallowed the dose, then grimaced as he settled back against the pillow. “If a bad taste is any indication of curative properties, that concoction ought to work miracles.”

The bell to the outer door jangled, and a voice called, “Any-one here?”

Homer set the bottle and spoon on the small table beside the bed and hurried out to the printing office. “I’ll take care of it. You two enjoy your visit.”

Her father watched him leave, then turned back to Amelia. “This illness of mine has put a heavy burden on Homer. He’s an expert at keeping the presses running, and he has a way with words. But having to set the type, print the paper, and do all the writing, too—not to mention nursemaiding me on top of it all—is more load than any one man should have to shoulder.”

He scooted up higher on the bed, and Amelia hurried to arrange the pillows so he would be more comfortable. He gave her an appreciative smile. “Now that you’re here, you can take over most of the writing. If Homer only has to deal with the machinery, that will ease his burden considerably, especially since the Peerless has been a bit cranky lately.” A dry chuckle rattled in his chest. “It’s getting old and on its last legs—like me.”

As Amelia opened her mouth to protest, Homer darted back into the room. “That was Martin Gilbreth. He wanted to talk about his next advertisement, and he said to tell you—” He broke off when the outer door opened again and footsteps sounded on the pine plank floor.

He stepped toward the sickroom door and stiffened when he caught sight of their visitor. “It’s one of those fellows from Great Western. What can he want?” He walked back to the printing office, closing the door behind him this time.

Amelia heard the murmur of voices when Homer greeted

the new arrival. As she turned back to her father, Homer's voice grew louder. She couldn't make out the words through the closed door, but his agitation was evident.

The sight of her father's taut expression and the way his fingers picked at the bedcovers sent her hurrying out into the newspaper office, where she found Homer squaring off with a man she didn't recognize. She laid her hand on Homer's arm. "I'll tend to this. Why don't you go see if Papa needs anything?"

Homer's mouth worked as though he wanted to say more, but he settled for a dismissive shrug before stalking off toward the makeshift bedroom. "Nothing much to tend to," he muttered. "He was just leaving."

Amelia turned to the stranger, a tall man a few years older than her own twenty-three years. He stared after Homer, turning his hat in his hands. Amelia took advantage of the moment to study him more closely. Wavy, russet hair topped off a pleasant face and an athletic build. To her mind, he didn't appear threatening in the least, but Homer's obvious dislike and her father's reaction were enough to set warning bells clanging in her mind.

She addressed him in a cool tone. "Was there something you needed?"

He turned back to her, a puzzled look in his hazel eyes. "I'd like to speak with Mr. Wagner, please."

Amelia arched one eyebrow. "Are you a friend?"

He shook his head. "My name is Benjamin Stone. I'm on business for my company."

"And that would be . . . ?"

"The Great Western Investment Company."

The note of pride in his voice only served to set Amelia's

teeth on edge. Was that name supposed to mean something to her? “Did you wish to place an advertisement in the *Gazette*?”

“No.” His brow furrowed. “I wanted to talk to Mr. Wagner about some articles he’s written.”

Amelia nodded briskly. “Thank you, Mr. Stone. I’ll be sure to let my father know you were here.”

His eyes widened. “You’re his daughter? I didn’t realize—”

“I’m afraid he isn’t well,” Amelia continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “He can’t see anyone right now, other than close friends.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He took a step back toward the outer door. “I’ll come back when he’s feeling better.”

Amelia watched him leave, then pivoted and went back to her father’s room.

“I’m sorry about that.” Homer eyed her with a sheepish expression. “I didn’t mean to let my temper get the best of me.”

She pasted on a bright smile. “It’s all right. I was happy to take care of it.”

Deep furrows formed a groove between her father’s nose and his downturned lips. “Don’t let it bother you, Homer. A visit from Great Western is enough to upset anyone.”

Homer nodded his thanks. “I’ll go get supper started and do some more work on that piece about the two-headed calf that was born out at the Grinstead farm.”

“Brood of vipers,” her father muttered when Homer had gone.

“Who? The people at Great Western?” Amelia sat on the edge of his bed and took his hand in hers. “It’s a new company in town, isn’t it? I don’t remember hearing that name before. But we don’t need to talk about them if it’s going to upset you.”

He shook his head. “Probably just as well. Might help get some of it out of my system. They’re unhappy about a couple of stories I’ve written about their intention to start hydraulic mining in the area.”

Amelia tightened her grip on his hand. “That man said he wanted to talk to you about some articles.”

Her father grunted. “They’ve asked me not to print any more like that, warning the people of the impact it will have. In fact, they want me to print a retraction.”

“A *retraction*?” Amelia sprang to her feet. “Why would they ask for that, unless what you printed wasn’t true? And I know you too well for that.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Thank you, my dear. That’s why I chose John 8:32 for the *Gazette*’s motto.”

“‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’” Amelia quoted from memory, her eyes misting when she thought of the words that had appeared on the *Gazette*’s masthead for as long as she could remember.

Her father nodded. “That’s what we print, Amelia. It’s what I’ve always stood by, and what I hope this newspaper will always stand for.”

“That’s what Clayton Sloan says he admires most about you—your dedication to print the truth, no matter the cost. It’s what sets you apart from many other newspaper publishers.”

The tight lines of her father’s face softened into a smile. “How is Clay? He’s been a good friend, letting you help out at the *Denver Journal* from time to time.”

“He’s doing well. So is the paper. In fact, he’s let me write several stories lately. Nothing earth-shaking, but at least I’m getting to put the lessons I learned from you into practice. I

wouldn't want to let my writing skills get rusty between my trips to Arizona."

A chuckle shook her father's shoulders. "I can imagine how your mother must feel about you working for a newspaper—even on a casual basis. How is she, by the way?"

Amelia flinched at the change of subject. "Mother is . . . doing well." She tried to keep her tone neutral. From her father's expression, she knew she had failed.

"Still caught up in her social whirl?"

She nodded, hating to see the glimmer of pain that crossed his face, a pain she knew was due to something more than illness.

"Maybe I should have given in and gone back to Denver with her when she left, but I doubt it would have made any difference—except for seeing more of you, of course." His eyes took on a faraway look. "She wanted a better life for you, and I can't blame her for that. But her ideas of a 'better life' and mine couldn't be further apart. I never could fit in with that snobbish social set of hers . . . not that I ever tried very hard."

His breath came out in a long sigh. "I expect she's happier back in her old circle of friends, with her parents' money to keep her in the style she was accustomed to before she married me."

Amelia nodded again, wishing she could say something to take away the hurt in his voice. But he had only spoken the truth. Instead of encouraging her mother to return to her husband when she turned her back on their marriage ten years before, Amelia's grandparents had welcomed her back to Denver with open arms and no recriminations. They had not, however, encouraged divorce, so though living apart, her

parents were still man and wife. She wondered—not for the first time—how she could be so closely related to her mother’s side of the family and yet share so few of their interests.

She pressed her lips together, holding back the words she longed to say about her mother’s social life—and Thaddeus Grayson, who had spent the past few months flitting around her mother like a bee around a flower. She wasn’t sure which sickened her more, the sight of him acting that way with a married woman, or the fact that her mother—the married woman in question—didn’t make any effort to repulse his attentions.

With her grandparents giving tacit approval to that troubling situation, she had hoped to discuss the matter with her father and seek his counsel. But looking at his gaunt form, she couldn’t bring herself to do it now. She would have to wait until his health improved.

Her father hitched himself a little higher up against the pillows. “What are your plans when you return to Denver? Any young men I should know about?” His attempt at a smile didn’t quite come off.

“No, there isn’t anyone.” *Though not for lack of trying on Mother’s part.* Amelia leaned forward and stroked his head. “But let’s not talk about me going home. I just got here, after all. And I’m not leaving until you’re much better. I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

Homer stepped into the room, wiping his hands on an ink-stained rag. “Doc Harwood is here.”

Amelia felt her spirits lighten for the first time since setting foot in her father’s sickroom. Finally, someone she could press for answers about his condition!

She rose and patted his hand. “I’ll step out and give you

some privacy.” She nodded a greeting to the doctor, a tall, gray-haired man, who moved aside so she could exit before he closed the door.

Seeing that Homer’s attention was occupied in setting type for the *Gazette*’s upcoming issue, Amelia busied herself straightening loose papers and neatening some of the clutter that typically littered the printing office. From time to time, she darted a glance at her father’s door, but it remained stubbornly closed.

She looked around, needing something productive to do. Her eyes lit on the door to her father’s office, and she hurried to his desk. Pulling out a fresh sheet of paper, she reached for pen and ink and started jotting notes about the foreclosure she overheard the two women talking about at the station.

She had been scribbling only a few minutes when she heard the sickroom door open, and Dr. Harwood stepped out. Amelia scurried from the office to intercept him.

“I have some questions for you,” she began.

“Why don’t we talk in the office.” Without waiting for a response, he strode into the room she’d just vacated and waited for her to join him. He folded his arms and measured her with a long look. “I don’t know how much your father has told you about his condition.”

“He mentioned not feeling well several times in his most recent letters, but I didn’t realize he’d gotten as sick as this.”

The doctor nodded. “I thought that might be the case.”

“What’s wrong with him?” she demanded. “How long will it take him to recover?”

The doctor’s somber expression made her heart constrict, and her voice rose half an octave. “He *is* going to get better, isn’t he?”

Dr. Harwood reached out to lay one hand on her shoulder. “Your father has a malignant cancer. I’m afraid it’s well advanced by now. Frankly, I’m surprised he’s still with us. I think he’s been hanging on, just waiting to see you again. Now that you’re here—”

“What?” A clutch of dread seized Amelia’s throat, and she fought to squeeze the words out. “You’re not telling me . . .”

The doctor’s gaze softened, and he tightened his grip on her shoulder. “I know this is hard for you to hear, but he’s just hanging on by a thread. I’ll be surprised if he lasts the week.”

Amelia balled her hands into tight fists beneath her chin, trying to grasp the enormity of the doctor’s statement. A sob tore from her throat. “But it’s too soon! I’m not ready . . .” Her voice trailed off as she recognized the truth reflected in the doctor’s solemn gaze and realized the futility of her words. Ready or not, her emotions wouldn’t change the situation. Concern for her father—not for her own feelings—had to take precedence.

Lowering her hands to her sides, she squared her shoulders and tried to steady her voice. “What can I do for him? How can I help make him comfortable?”

A brief smile of approval flitted across the doctor’s lips. “Homer has some medicine I left that helps ease the pain. He’s been doing a fine job of staying on top of things. My advice would be to let him run the paper, and for you to spend as much time with your father as you can. That’s the best medicine you can offer him.”

He patted her shoulder and withdrew his hand. “I’ve done all I can do for him, but I’ll check back from time to time to see how you’re both getting along. And if there’s anything

you need, just send someone for me. I'll come as quickly as I can." With a final sympathetic look, he gave her a nod and left.

It took several minutes before she could compose herself enough to walk back to the sickroom. Pushing the door open, she stepped inside, trying to conceal her anguish. She took her time settling herself on the ladder-back chair beside the bed, noting her father's pallor and the waxy appearance of his skin. Despite his attempts to set her at ease, he was ill—desperately ill. Why hadn't she recognized the signs before?

The answer was simple enough. *I didn't see it because I didn't want to.*

Her father's lips twisted into a rueful smile. "He told you?"

She should have known he'd see right through her efforts to appear composed. Hadn't he always been able to know what was really going on inside her? Her carefully erected air of calm began to crumble, and she gripped his hand in both her own. "He must be mistaken. He *has* to be! You can't . . ." Her throat tightened, choking off her protest.

He reached up to stroke her cheek with his free hand. "I'm sorry, honey. I wouldn't have planned it this way, but it wasn't left up to me. We have to talk about the future—what we're going to do with the paper, what you're going to do. At least you won't be left completely on your own. You have a home to return to in Denver once this is over."

It isn't a home I want to go back to! Amelia clamped her lower lip between her teeth to keep from saying the words aloud.

"I'd like to keep the paper going as long as we can, so you can get the best price for it," her father went on. "We could ask Clay Sloan to put some feelers out. He might know someone who would be interested."

He laid his palm against her cheek. “I won’t ask you to stay indefinitely, but do you think you and Homer could run the *Gazette* until it’s sold? I want some of the proceeds to go to Homer. He’s been a good helper and a great friend over the years. The rest will be yours.”

A spasm crossed his face, and he pulled his hand away to press it against his side.

Amelia started to her feet, but he shook his head and tugged at her hand. “Don’t let just anybody have it, though,” he continued in a noticeably weaker voice. “I want it to go to someone who cares about the truth as much as you and I do. Something isn’t right about Great Western, something even worse than their plans for hydraulic mining, as bad as that is. I need to know whoever is at the helm of the *Gazette* will bring the truth to light.”

Amelia leaned forward and blinked back the tears that stung her eyes. “That’s enough for now, Papa. I don’t want you to wear yourself out.”

“Honey, if I rest now, I may never get another chance to tell you.” He drew a shaky breath, and his eyelids fluttered. “But I’ll admit, I’m pretty tuckered. I wouldn’t mind a chance to close my eyes for a bit.”

Amelia bent over to tuck the sheet around his shoulders and pressed her quivering lips against his forehead. “I love you, Papa. Always remember that.”

“I love you, too, honey.” His lips moved again, and she bent lower to catch the faint words. “Look for me at the Eastern Gate.”



Amelia knew she would always remember the next few days as some of the most precious in her life. Every brief scrap of

conversation with her father, every tender touch, every loving glance that passed between them, would be emblazoned on her memory forever.

True to his word, Dr. Harwood checked in several times. Pastor Edmonds was a frequent caller, as well, offering spiritual encouragement to them both and bolstering Amelia's flagging spirits by his repeated assurances that she was doing everything humanly possible to bring comfort to her father's final days.

Friends stopped by to say farewell, while Homer put all his efforts into making sure the *Gazette's* next issue went out on time. Though he looked worn to a frazzle, he insisted he could manage it alone, wanting to give Amelia and her father every possible minute together. Amelia suspected he spent his rare snippets of free time working on a tribute to her father to be printed whenever that day arrived, but she couldn't bring herself to ask if her supposition was correct.

She scarcely left the sickroom for more than a few moments, for fear she might not be there when her father needed her. When the end came, she sat quietly by his side, sandwiching his hand between hers. She watched his chest rise and fall, noting that each faint breath came slower than the one before. Finally she heard one last, gentle sigh . . . and he was gone.



CHAPTER 3



The funeral passed in a haze. With Homer beside her, Amelia sat on a hard pew at the front of the sanctuary of the Granite Springs Community Church. Her mind registered a number of mourners in attendance, though she took no note of individual faces. Pastor Edmonds stood behind the pulpit and spoke in a heartfelt tone, but not one word penetrated her consciousness. Her whole attention remained focused on the simple coffin in front of the minister.

Her head cleared somewhat when the congregation reached the cemetery, and she took her place beside the waiting coffin and the open grave. She scanned the faces around her, recognizing several who had come to pay their last respects.

Emmett Kingston, having closed the general store for the morning, stood beside Thomas Rafferty, the station agent. Both men's eyes were red-rimmed, and they made surreptitious swipes at their noses with pocket handkerchiefs.

Carl Olsen, owner of the livery stable, was there, along with Martin Gilbreth. On Martin's left stood a tall, angular woman Amelia hadn't seen before who kept one hand tucked into the crook of his elbow and patted his arm with the other.

Amelia turned her attention to a small group of men clustered a short distance from the other mourners, beneath the limbs of a solitary pine. None of their faces were familiar to her, so she let her gaze slide past, then jerked it back to the group again when she recognized Ben Stone.

She pressed closer to Homer and spoke in a low tone. “All these people must have known Papa, but some of them are new to me. That woman standing with Mr. Gilbreth, for instance. Did he marry recently?”

Homer snorted and glanced in the direction she indicated. “Martin Gilbreth is as much a confirmed bachelor as I am. That’s his older sister. She came out here a few months ago to keep house for him.”

Amelia took a second look at the woman and nodded. “Now that you mention it, I can see the family resemblance. What about those men over there?” She tilted her head toward the group by the pine tree.

Homer followed her gaze, and his features took on a stony expression. “It’s that bunch of scoundrels from Great Western. They have a lot of nerve, showing their faces here today.”

Before he could say more, Pastor Edmonds stepped forward and addressed the mourners. While he read from Psalm 23, Amelia studied the group from Great Western again—five men, wearing identical smug expressions . . . except for Ben Stone.

The disrespect they showed smote Amelia’s aching heart like the thrust of a dagger. What kind of men would intrude upon her grief on such a mournful day?

She snapped her attention back to the service when the pallbearers moved into position beside the coffin and carefully

lowered it into the grave. Pastor Edmonds said a closing prayer, then dismissed the group of mourners.

He moved closer to Amelia and clasped her hands in his. “Your father was a fine man, and we’re all going to miss him. Feel free to call on me if there’s anything I can do. And know that you’ll be in my prayers.”

Amelia nodded and watched him drift off to speak with some of the onlookers. She stooped to pick up a handful of the loose dirt at the grave’s edge, then straightened and sprinkled the moist soil onto her father’s coffin. “Good-bye, Papa,” she whispered.

A shadow fell across the grave, and she looked up to see one of the men from Great Western standing beside her. Her breath caught in her throat, and she took a quick step back.

“Good afternoon, Miss Wagner. I’m sorry for your loss.” The sentiments the stocky, dark-haired man expressed were conventional enough, but the sympathetic words didn’t match the coldness in his eyes.

Amelia bobbed her head. “Thank you.” She looked around for Homer, but he stood some distance away, talking to Emmett Kingston. When she turned to join him, the man at her side raised his hand.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Owen Merrick. I’m the vice president of the Great Western Investment Company. I know nothing can ease the pain of your loss, but I have an offer that might help lighten your burden somewhat.”

Amelia could only stare at first, then she finally found her voice. “I’m not sure I understand. . . .”

Mr. Merrick took a step closer. “Being a businessman myself, I understand how trying it can be to dispose of property. For

a woman who's alone and grieving . . ." He tilted his head in a show of solicitude and gave her an ingratiating smile. "I'd like to help, and so, on behalf of my company, I'm offering to purchase your newspaper—for a fair price, of course. That way you'll be free to turn your mind to other matters. If you would care to stop by my office tomorrow, we can discuss the terms."

Amelia lifted her chin and tried to keep her voice from wobbling. "This is hardly the time or the place for such an offer, Mr. Merrick. And at any rate, I'm afraid you've wasted your time. The *Gazette* is not for sale."

Not at the moment, at least. And even when she did put the paper on the market, she would never sell it to anyone who had caused her father such grief.

Owen Merrick chuckled. "My dear young lady, you can't intend to run it yourself? Better consider taking my offer while the paper still has some value. Let me know when you've changed your mind." He tipped his hat and joined the rest of the Great Western contingent, who had already started walking back toward town.

As the group moved off, Amelia saw Ben Stone look back over his shoulder. Their gazes met, and the compassion in his eyes tugged at her heart.

Other mourners filed by, murmuring words of comfort. Amelia accepted their condolences, trying to keep her mind focused on giving a polite response while Merrick's stinging words echoed in her mind. Finally she stood with Homer beside her, staring down into the lonely grave.

Homer put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a gentle hug. "Heaven's richer for his passing, but that doesn't make it any easier for those of us who have been left behind."

Amelia didn't respond. She pressed her lips together and swallowed, trying to hold back the tears. Despite her efforts, one slipped from her eye and traced a path down her cheek. With an angry sniff, she reached up to dash it away with the back of her hand.

Pastor Edmonds joined them and patted her on the arm. "Don't try to hold it in, my dear. God understands our broken hearts. Remember, Jesus wept after the death of his friend Lazarus."

Amelia looked up at the kindly minister. Keeping her tone even, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate everything you've done for my father and me." With one last glance at her father's final resting place, she straightened her shoulders and retraced her steps toward town with Homer trailing behind her.

Weeping could come later—she had a newspaper to run.

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