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Chapter One

On November 7, 1873, Denver City sat under a crystal blue dome. Ruth took a deep breath of crisp mountain air and fixed her gaze on the faultless sky. It was a truly remarkable day—beautiful in every way.

Sunshine warmed her shoulders as she listened to Glory and Jackson Montgomery repeat their marriage vows. Marrying outdoors was Jackson's idea. He was an outdoors man; he wanted to be as close to God as he and Glory could get when they became man and wife. The audible tremor this afternoon in the wagon master's otherwise strong voice amused Ruth, but she supposed the quiver was natural for a man accustomed to being on his own and about to commit the rest of his life to one woman.

Ruth cast a sideways glance at the man standing next to her. Marshall Dylan McCall stood stiff as a poker, his face

expressionless as he witnessed the ceremony. What could he be thinking? The egotistical man was surely commiserating with Jackson, thinking that he was glad it was the wagon master and not he about to be saddled for life.

Well, no matter. She was not like some women she'd noticed, inexplicably drawn to the marshall. Besides, it must be God's will that she never marry. True, her head still reeled and her heart ached from the unexpected news she received from the doctor yesterday—news that she would never be able to bear children. Perhaps it was just as well that the mail-order bride thing hadn't worked out for her. Wouldn't her new husband have been dismayed to learn that Ruth had no uterus. "A rare defect," the doctor had said, "but it does happen sometimes."

Ruth lifted her chin and glanced again at the handsome marshall with eyes as blue as the color of today's sky. If it was God's will that she never marry, then she would accept it as another one of life's injustices that God allowed for his own purposes. Getting married and having children wasn't the have-all-or-end-all of life. At least not for her. She'd make a good life for herself, especially now that Tom Wyatt's spiteful trick had been discovered.

Ruth understood why a man needed a wife who could give birth to children, someone to give him strapping heirs to help with the work. Knowing this didn't lessen her desire to be loved. But then most men were like Glory's Uncle Amos. They made promises they never intended to keep and blamed other folks for their own shortcomings. The chances of her

finding a man who would love her regardless of her barrenness were about as remote as her hitting the mother lode the local prospectors fantasized about. She had no such fantasies. Life was real, and sometimes hard, but it was the living of it in God's will that was important to Ruth, certainly not the finding of a husband.

With a mental sigh, Ruth shifted her gaze back to the happy couple. Glory was different. She loved Jackson and would give him a whole passel of kids. Ruth tried to imagine the feisty Glory as a mother. When the wagon train had first come across the homeless waif, they'd thought she was a boy—a young man *very* much in need of a good bath. It had taken several days for Glory to convince Lily, Patience, Harper, and Mary that Glory wasn't going to oblige. She was oblivious to her malodorous state, though how she missed them holding their noses Ruth would never know. The happy-go-lucky, will-o'-the-wisp Glory had no idea she wasn't socially fit. Finally the women took it upon themselves to throw her into the river, then determinedly waded in after her, wielding a bar of soap. Glory's squeals of outrage had not deterred them. When the boylike child had been scrubbed from head to toe, the transformation was amazing.

A smile hovered at the corners of Ruth's mouth. During those days on the trail Glory had become like a sister, and Ruth wished her nothing but happiness. Still, it was hard to imagine Glory married, nursing a child—Ruth's thoughts cut off and she forced down a tinge of remorse. She could accept God's will for her life; she really could.

The preacher concluded the ceremony. As Jackson swept his bride into his arms and kissed her breathless, the small crowd clapped and whistled. There wasn't a doubt in Ruth's mind that the two were made for each other, although for a brief and unreasonable time Ruth herself had suffered her own attraction to the handsome wagon master. She enjoyed Jackson's friendship, but Glory truly had his love and that was only right. Ruth felt not a twinge of regret about the match.

Everyone had helped to prepare the after-wedding festivities. Tables covered in lace tablecloths and adorned with bouquets of dried fall flowers had been set up in front of the church. A large wedding cake festooned with a tiny bride and groom stood amidst the decorations. An air of festivity blanketed Denver City as fiddlers tuned up.

Well-wishers descended on the happy couple as Ruth drifted away from the confusion. She'd be back to extend her best to the new Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery when things settled down a bit.

Oscar Fleming caught her eye, and she smiled back distantly. For the last few days the crusty widower had been on her trail. There had to be fifty years' difference in their ages if there was a day, but that hadn't stopped Oscar. He smiled, winked, and showed a set of brown teeth worn to the gum every time he could catch her attention.

Ruth stiffened as the old codger sprinted in her direction. "Afternoon, Ruthie!" he called.

Ruth mustered a polite smile, her eyes darting to the marshall, who was watching the exchange with a self-

satisfied grin. “Good afternoon, Oscar. Lovely ceremony.” She tried to sidestep the old coot.

“Hit was, hit was.” Grinning, he blocked her path. “Thought maybe I’d have me th’ first dance.”

“Oh,” she said, her gaze swinging toward Patience and Mary, but they were both helping a group of women set food on the tables. They were too busy to pay heed to her silent plea for help.

Oscar held out his scrawny arms. “How ’bout it, Ruthie? You and me cut a jig?”

Jig, indeed. Ruth swallowed, drawing her wrap tighter as she tried to manufacture a plausible excuse. She glanced up when a hand wrapped around her left arm and Dylan McCall politely interrupted. “Now, Ruthie, I believe you promised *me* the first dance.”

Though weak with relief, Ruth seethed. *Ruthie.* How dare he call her that! Still, it was a chance to escape. She stiffly accepted his proffered arm and mustered a friendly smile. Anything was better than dancing with the old miner. “Why, I believe I did, Marshall.” She smiled her regrets to Oscar. “Will you excuse us?”

Oscar’s grin deflated, his chin sinking down to his chest. “Maybe later?”

“Of course,” she conceded. *Much, much later.*

As the couple strolled off, Ruth pinched Dylan. Hard. Though he winced, the marshall kept a pleasant smile on his lips . . . and pinched her back.

“Ouch!” She jerked free of his grasp and flounced ahead,

pretending to ignore him. The very *nerve* of Dylan McCall acting as her rescuer!

His masculine laugh only irritated her more. “Admit it, Ruthie,” he called. “You welcomed the interruption!”

Ruth’s face burned. “Not by the likes of you!”

He paused, chuckling as she marched to the punch bowl. She swooped up a cup, dunked it into the bowl, then quickly drank, dribbling red liquid down the front of her best dress in the process. She dropped the cup and swiped at her bodice, then felt punch oozing through her right slipper.

Her temper soared. It was Dylan’s fault. He made her so mad she couldn’t think straight. From the corner of her eye she saw Dylan politely tip his hat and ease into the crowd.

“Ooooooph!” Ruth sank into a nearby chair, steam virtually rolling from the top of her head. How that man infuriated her. If only he weren’t so handsome and charming at times as well. . . .



Forever. Whew. The vows the newlyweds had exchanged lingered in Dylan’s mind as he threaded his way through the guests. He paused to speak to the ladies. Lily and Harper bloomed under his attention, but his mind was on the ceremony.

Forever. The word made a man break out in a cold sweat—at least a man who liked women but didn’t care to tie himself down to any particular one, only one, for the rest of his life. Not unless he was planning to die tomorrow.

He'd been accused of breaking women's hearts, and he supposed he had broken his fair share. They could be as pretty as ice on a winter pond or ugly as a mud wasp, and he'd allow them a second glance. Dylan didn't judge a woman by the way she looked on the outside. He'd learned long ago that the outside didn't mean much. He'd told someone once that when he met the right woman he'd marry her, but deep down he knew he'd never see the day. There wasn't a *right* woman. Not for him. There were just . . . women. All softness and pretty curves, but inside they weren't worth a plug nickel. Sara Dunnigan had taught him that. Women were out to use men, use them up for their own purposes. Well, he had *his* own purposes, and they weren't to share with any woman.

The married women turned to watch him walk away; Lily and Harper tittered. Dylan neither welcomed nor resented the attention. A woman's naïve notice made him feel in control. He could always walk away, and he intended to always be able to do just that.

The receiving line had begun to thin as he approached the newlyweds. He shook hands with Jackson. "You're a lucky man."

The sincerity in his tone wasn't entirely contrived. Jackson *was* lucky. Glory was the one woman who could tame the wagon master, and Dylan wished them well. Jackson grinned down at his bride. If ever there was a happy man, Montgomery fit the bill today.

"It's your turn next, McCall!"

“Don’t hold your breath, Montgomery.”

Dylan leaned in and kissed the bride lightly on the cheek. Glory blushed, edging closer to Jackson. Beaming, Jackson drew her close.

“That’s my girl. Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

Dylan lifted an eyebrow. “Me? A wolf?”

“The worst,” Jackson confirmed with a sly wink. “Knew that about you right off.”

The two men laughed.

The new Mrs. Montgomery frowned. “Jackson—”

Throwing the marshal a knowing wink, Jackson took his wife’s arm and steered her toward another cluster of well-wishers.

Dylan milled about for a while, exchanging expected pleasantries and hoping he could leave soon. Events like this weren’t his cup of tea. He spent the majority of his time alone, which he preferred. He was eager to get going to Utah. He would have left last week, but Jackson and Glory had talked him into attending the wedding. Jackson needed a best man, he said, and Dylan had reluctantly agreed, feeling torn between friendship and duty to his job.

Dylan spotted Ruth with Mayor Hopkins, her cheeks flushed, blue eyes aglow, thick, shiny, coal black hair hanging to her waist, laughing up at him. She’d never looked at Dylan that way . . . but then he supposed a woman like Ruth wouldn’t. Men like him were loners. They had to be. Keeping the law was a dangerous business. Ruth, even with

her independent streak a mile wide, would avoid a man like him, as well she should.

Dylan had stepped onto the sidewalk when Pastor Siddons threaded his way through the crowd toward him. “Marshall McCall! They’ll be cutting the wedding cake soon. You won’t want to miss that.” The pastor beamed. “Etta Katsky makes the best pastries this side of paradise.”

Smiling, the marshall acknowledged the invitation. The whole town was friendlier than a six-week-old pup. It was a good place for Ruth and the other girls to settle.

The two men stood side by side, watching the festivities. Arthur Siddons’ pleasant face beamed. “Nothing like a wedding to make you feel like a young man again.”

Dylan refused to comment. His gaze followed Ruth as she moved through the crowd. He’d never seen her smile like that, laugh like that, so happy and carefree.

Arthur looked up at him, a sly grin hovering at the corner of his mouth. “Right pretty sight, wouldn’t you say?”

Dylan had to agree. “Ruth’s a fine-looking woman. All the girls are.”

The pastor nodded. “Mother was just saying how nice it is to have young blood in the town. Tom Wyatt and his boys are low-down polecats. The whole town’s known that for years, but I have to say the devil was taken by surprise this time. Had it not been for you and Jackson, those six young women would be working the mines right now, without a hope for the future.”

Dylan bristled at the thought. “The Wyatts ought to be strung up by their heels.”

“Yes, many agree, but Wyatt’s not done anything he can be legally prosecuted for. We know he promised the women husbands, but in a court of law he’d say the women, the orphanage, and Montgomery misunderstood. He would eventually set them free, once they worked off their debt to him. But considering the wages he’d pay, that would take a mighty long time. It isn’t the first time he’s used deceit to gain mine workers. Brought eight women out last year, and one by one they escaped. Found one this spring.” The reverend shook his head. “Poor woman didn’t make it.”

A shadow crossed the marshall’s features. “I thought once that Jackson and Glory had met the same fate.”

“Yes, Jackson and Glory were fortunate to survive that blizzard.” The pastor beamed. “Wouldn’t have, without Glory’s common sense.”

“No.” Dylan watched the laughing bride and groom. “She’s quite a woman.”

Arthur nodded. “Colorado’s rough territory. A man can freeze to death in no time.”

Sobering, the minister’s gaze rested on Mary, who was smiling up at Mayor Hopkins. The couple seemed to be enjoying each other’s company.

“Now, there’s the one I worry about. The poor thing coughs until she chokes. Won’t be many men who’d want to take on such a responsibility.”

Dylan agreed. Mary’s asthma would make it difficult for

her to find a husband. He looked at Harper and Lily, who were busy setting out platters of golden brown fried chicken. Harper was so independent and quick-tongued it would take a strong man to handle her. Lily would do okay for herself, and Patience wouldn't have any trouble finding a husband. She was the looker of the bunch.

His gaze moved back to Ruth. She was now conversing with a tall, lanky man who looked to be somewhere in his late twenties. The couple made a striking pair. The young man's carrot-colored hair and mahogany eyes complemented Ruth's black tresses and wide blue eyes. But Ruth was going to be trouble for any man who took her on. She was as prickly as a porcupine—and as quick to raise her defenses. Made a man wonder what was inside her.

Not him, of course, but some man—some good man looking to settle down.

Patting his round belly, the pastor chuckled softly as he followed Dylan's gaze to the couple. "They make a fine-looking pair, don't they? Conner lost his wife a couple years back. Fine man, Conner Justice, so young to lose a mate. Lost Jenny in childbirth . . . baby was stillborn. His wife's death was mighty hard on him. Conner is only now coming back to community socials."

Dylan's gaze narrowed. It appeared to him that Conner Justice was recovering quite nicely. He was standing a bit too close to Ruth for manners. The sound of Ruth's lilting laughter floated to him, a sound he hadn't heard often. She was enjoying herself for the first time since he'd met her.

Well, good for Ruthie. Maybe Conner Justice needed a new challenge, and the saucy brunette would certainly provide him one.

The pastor patted his belly again. “Well, the bride and groom will be cutting the cake soon.” He stuck his hand out to Dylan. “Guess you’ll be moving on?”

“I have to be in Utah by the end of the month.”

“Worst time of the year to travel.”

“I’m used to it.”

Dylan preferred to travel in better weather. But when he’d decided to help Jackson deliver the brides to Denver City, he knew he’d be delaying his trip to Utah and would probably face bad weather. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d been inconvenienced, nor would it be the last.

“Take care of yourself,” Pastor Siddons said.

Dylan smiled. His eyes involuntarily returned to Ruth and Conner, while the pastor wandered toward the cake table. Ruth looked like she was having a fine time.

“Well, I am, too,” he told himself, but right now he couldn’t have proved it.