

LORI
COPELAND



the Drifter



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CHAPTER 1

Kansas, November 1868

“Shoo! Shooeee! Get out of here you—you. Shoo! Shooee! Get out of here! You—you miserable . . . ungrateful . . . ham hock!”

Charity Burk was determined to show no pity as she swatted the old sow across her fat rump and herded her back out the front door. It was a sad day when a woman couldn't step outside to hang the wash without being invaded by pigs!

She slammed the heavy wooden door and leaned against it to catch her breath. She had to do something about getting the fence back up.

Her husband, Ferrand, had died in the war four years ago, and since his death Charity had been on her own. Not that she wanted to be—far from it. She wasn't equipped to homestead in this desolate land, nor had she ever entertained the least desire to do so, but shortly after they'd married, her husband had decided to take advantage of the federal government's Homestead Act, signed into law in May of '62.

She could still remember how excited he had been the day he'd come home, swung her into his arms, and announced they were moving to Kansas. "A hundred and sixty acres, Charity. Think of it! They'll give us a hundred and sixty acres of whatever land we stake out."

Kansas? For a girl who'd spent all of her life in Virginia, Kansas sounded like the end of the earth. Charity had paced the parlor of her ancestral home, wondering aloud why Ferrand would want to run off to some foreign land when they had a perfectly good home right here with her parents.

Her husband had been patient, reminding her that Kansas wasn't a foreign land. But to a woman accustomed to nannies and servants who attended to her every whim without a moment's hesitation, the idea had seemed foreign enough. Certainly Kansas was not a place she wanted to live.

Ferrand Burk came from an old, aristocratic line in Virginia. His father could have well afforded to buy any amount of land his son desired. Why, even her own pa had offered to purchase Ferrand a plantation on their wedding day. They didn't need to travel hundreds of miles to acquire a mere hundred and sixty acres.

But Ferrand wanted land of his own, not something her father or his had provided. The Homestead Act was the answer, as far as he was concerned. All a person had to do was begin improvements on the land within six months of the time he filed for application and then stay there for five years, and the land became his, free and clear.

Charity filled a bucket with the wash water and carried it outside, emptying it away from the path. The cold November sky threatened rain or snow. Folks in town were predicting an

early winter. The wooly worms were completely black this year, which meant bad weather and lots of it. She'd cut open a persimmon seed back in October and found a spoon. A sure sign of a lot of snow, according to Laughing Waters and Little Fawn, two Kaw Indians who had chosen her for a friend.

The Kaws were a friendly tribe and had often dropped by the homestead before they broke camp and moved away, leaving Laughing Waters and Little Fawn behind. The two women came and went whenever they chose. They'd never been known to knock, and sometimes they drove her to distraction, but they had taught her about herbs and native plants, and she had learned to accept their unexpected visits.

Charity leaned against the tumbledown fence and thought about the way Ferrand had held her close and kissed her, promising an adventure. Well, he had surely delivered on that. She'd had about all the adventure she could stand.

Sometimes she hadn't understood her husband.

She had loved him, and her papa always said a man was the undisputed head of his household, but still . . . given her choice, she would have stayed in Virginia. Charity carried the bucket back to the wash kettle, remembering how Ferrand had also promised her life wouldn't change much. There would be plenty of people looking for jobs in Kansas, and she could hire all the help she'd need to do the work. Turned out there had been virtually no one looking for a job. Everyone had enough to do trying to survive life on the frontier.

She straightened and rubbed her aching back. She'd had to learn to cook and clean, do all the things someone else had done for her. At first she had missed Mama and Papa and Jenny and Sue, her sisters. Ferrand had promised her family could

come visit when they'd got settled on their homestead, but that hadn't worked out either. To tell the truth, she was sort of relieved Papa had never seen how she lived. Kansas was different from Virginia in more ways than one.

She'd worried about the war too, afraid her husband might have to leave any day. Her husband had laughed and said they'd worry about that when the time came. Well, the time had come a lot sooner than Charity had planned.

They hadn't lived on their new settlement for more than a few months when Ferrand decided it was his duty to join the fight for the Confederacy. She'd been left to face the bewildered looks of her neighbors when they found out he'd decided his loyalties still belonged to the South.

She emptied the last of the rinse water and propped the washtub against the side of the house to drain. Kansas was hundreds of miles away, and her family hadn't been able to make the long trip to visit. After they'd learned of Ferrand's death, they had written, urging her to come home. When she had informed them she was staying on to claim the land, Mama had begged her to reconsider.

Charity brushed her hair out of her eyes and stared out over the unrelenting landscape. She was a stubborn woman, too stubborn for her own good, she suspected. She was determined to stay in Kansas, though at times she hated every waking hour in this wild, uncivilized land, where the winds were fierce and the winters long and unbearably cold. The heat could be suffocating and the droughts endless. There were tornadoes and grasshoppers and Indians. And wolves. She hated the wolves, too. They prowled around her log cabin at night, snapping at her dogs, Gabriel and Job, while she huddled in a corner grasping

Ferrand's old rifle and praying they wouldn't break through the door.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to relinquish her right to the homestead. In a strange, inexplicable way, she felt a certain pride to think she owned the land—or would, if she could hold on one more year.

Then maybe she'd go home. The thought was mighty tempting. There hadn't been any servants or nannies out here to take care of her. In truth, she'd barely been able to manage.

She felt herself smiling, something she rarely did anymore, when she thought of how poor Ferrand had struggled to mold her into a pioneer woman. He'd been good to her. He'd seen her through her crying spells and days of loneliness. Sometimes weeks would pass before they'd see another human being, and at times she thought she couldn't bear the solitude.

But she'd survived. When the news of her husband's death had reached her, she'd had a good long cry, but by then she'd begun to adjust to the harsh realities of the world. Oh, she'd been furious at him for getting himself killed in that foolish war and leaving her all alone to care for a miserable chunk of worthless land. But the feeling had passed, and she'd started remembering what a really good man her husband had been, and then Kansas didn't seem all that bad. It was home now, her home, so she guessed she'd best make do and quit feeling sorry for herself.

A hawk hovered against the overcast sky before dropping like the weight on a plumb line, straight down. The hawk would devour some helpless rodent. Life was hard out here and not likely to get easier. She sighed and turned back to look at her home. Not fancy compared to what she'd left in Virginia, but what she and Ferrand had shared had been special. Despite all

her domestic failings, she knew she had to do this one last thing for him. He had worked too hard in the brief time they'd been granted together for her to be fainthearted now. She'd see this thing through. Though she had to admit, she couldn't understand how she was going to do it.

From a purely practical standpoint, she needed a man. She'd have to make improvements on the land to keep her claim, but she simply didn't have the knowledge, the strength, or the necessary skill.

Thanks to Grandmother Pendergrass's personal tutelage, Charity knew how to piece a pretty quilt and bake a tasty blackberry pie, but she didn't know how to build a barn or plow a field. Oh, she'd tried. Her hands, once lily-white and soft as rose petals, were now calloused and beet red.

When it had come to setting posts and planting wheat, she'd done an embarrassing job. Ashamed for anyone to see the way her fence posts leaned westward when they were supposed to stand straight, she had ripped them out and cried herself to sleep that night.

A man was her only answer.

But a man was a rare commodity around these parts. It was unlikely that anyone would walk up and knock on her door and say, "Well, hello! I hear you're looking for a husband, Mrs. Burk. Take me." She laughed out loud at the notion.

Though the town of Cherry Grove wasn't far from her land, she rarely socialized. Once a month she made the trek into town to purchase staples and yard goods from Miller's Mercantile, but suitable marriage prospects weren't plentiful. Oh, there were the usual cattle drovers who came through town, bringing their longhorns up from Texas to ship them out by railroads. Of

course, the travel-worn herders were always looking for female companionship, but Charity despised their slovenly ways and drunken antics. They carried on like the devil himself. Their cattle brought them a good price back East, but she wanted nothing to do with such men. They were rovers and drifters, and she needed a man who'd stick around for a spell.

She sighed in despair and turned her face heavenward, as she increasingly did these days. "Well, it's up to you, Lord. I'm at the end of my row."



Beau Claxton slowed his horse beside the stream and paused to let the animal drink his fill. Unkempt and dirty with a heavy beard covering the lower half of his face, he felt older than his twenty-eight years. He slumped in the saddle, body aching with fatigue. A light drizzle had been falling for the last half hour and his beard was caked in ice.

He'd been on the trail long enough for the sun to cook his skin and the wind and weather to lash him into a blank acceptance of a life that no longer held purpose.

He knew he looked bad but he couldn't seem to care.

He didn't eat the way he should. He was at least forty pounds lighter than he had been a year ago. During that time, he'd rambled down one winding road after another, going wherever the next one took him. He'd tried to get through one day and then the next and then the next. Sometimes he'd noticed when he crossed a state line, but if anyone had asked him where

he was, he wouldn't have known or cared. Life was one long day after the other.

Betsy had been gone a year now, or close to it. Beau didn't know what month it was, but summer and fall had come and gone so he'd guess it was November now.

The memory of his wife brought a smile. Their baby would've been over a year old by now. Boy or girl? Suddenly, he realized he'd never let himself ask that question. Well, he guessed it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

He slid from his horse and knelt on the bank to break the ice, then reached into the stream, cupping his hands for a drink of freezing-cold water. When he finished, he splashed a handful of icy wetness down his neck to wash away the stench.

He had straightened and prepared to mount when his horse shied nervously. "Whoa, girl, easy." Beau gripped the reins and pulled himself into the saddle as the mare whinnied and side-stepped. "Easy . . . easy . . ." He glanced toward the surrounding woods, wary now.

"What's the matter, girl?" His eyes scanned the area and his stomach tightened. Standing not twenty feet away, partially hidden in the undergrowth, was one of the biggest timber wolves he'd ever seen.

The horse trumpeted and pranced in alarm. The wolf's lips curled back above its fangs. It growled a low, ominous warning. Its eyes had a bright, feverish sparkle to them; its back paw dangled limply.

Beau could see fresh blood dripping from the wound onto the frozen ground. Probably been caught in a trap. Slowly, he backed his horse out of the stream, taking pains not to make any sudden moves. The animal would be in no mood for socializing,

and neither was Beau. He could shoot it, but his draw would have to be lightning quick, and he didn't want to chance it.

Before he could choose his next move, the decision was out of his hands.

With a lunge the wolf sprang from its hiding place. The horse reared, pawing the air.

Beau reached for his gun at the same time the wolf charged. The air was alive with the screams of the crazed horse and snarls of the wild animal locked in a life-or-death struggle. Beau managed to pull his gun from his holster, but the wolf fell, regained its footing, and sprang again, clamping its teeth on his leg. Beau tumbled out of the saddle and landed in the water, trying to shield himself from the animal's sharp teeth.

He fought to get away. The wolf repeatedly slashed at his unprotected body.



Charity stopped kneading bread and cocked her ear toward the open window. The dogs were setting up a howl on the front step, and in the distance she could hear what sounded like animals in some sort of fight.

She wiped flour from her hands. *Pesky coyotes*, she thought irritably, reaching for the rifle. They'd probably attacked a stray dog or calf. The noise increased as she stepped out of the cabin and started toward the stream.

She'd be forever grateful to Ferrand for choosing this particular piece of land. In this part of Kansas, a shortage of rain,

coupled with high winds and low humidity, sometimes left a pioneer at a serious disadvantage. But the Burk home was built near an underground spring that provided a stream of cool, clear water year-round.

A shrill squeal rent the air, and her footsteps quickened. Good heavens! Something had attacked a horse! Her feet faltered as she entered the clearing, her eyes taking in the appalling sight. A large timber wolf was ripping a man apart as his horse danced about him in terror.

Charity hefted the rifle to her shoulder and took careful aim. A loud crack sliced the air, and the wolf toppled off the man. The gunfire spooked the horse. The animal bolted into the thicket, and Charity waded into the stream, flinching when she edged past the fallen wolf. The gaping bullet hole in the center of its chest assured her that her aim had been true. Her husband had taught her how to be a deadly, accurate shot. She'd learned her lesson well.

She knelt beside the wounded man and cautiously rolled him on his side in the shallow water, cringing when he moaned in agony. He was so bloody she could barely make out the severity of his wounds, but she knew he was near death.

"Shhhh . . . lie still. I'm going to help you," she soothed, though she was afraid he could neither see nor hear her. His eyes were swollen shut from the lacerations on his face. As she watched, he slumped into unconsciousness.

She hesitated, not sure whether to hitch Myrtle and Nell to drag him out of the water. He was a tall man, but pitifully thin. Though she was small and slight, she was a lot stronger than when she'd first come to Kansas. She decided she wouldn't need the oxen to move him.

It took several tries to get him out of the water. He wasn't as light as he looked. She tugged and heaved inch by inch, pausing periodically to murmur soothing words of encouragement when he groaned. Though she handled him carefully, his injuries were so great she was sure he suffered unspeakable pain.

Once she had hauled him onto the bank, she hurriedly tore off a small portion of her petticoat and set to work cleaning his wounds. He fought when her hands touched torn flesh.

"Please, you must let me help you!" she urged.

She was accustomed to patching wounds on her stock, but she grew faint looking at this man's injuries. But she shook off her queasiness and looked after his needs.

As her hands worked, she studied him, recoiling not only at his injuries but at his general condition. He was so unkempt, so dirty, so . . . slovenly. She wasn't used to that. Ferrand had always kept himself clean and neat. No doubt this man was a drifter, or perhaps one of those drovers. He certainly hadn't had a bath in months—maybe even years—and he was in need of a shave and haircut.

She peeled away the torn shirt and washed the blood from his broad chest. She could count his ribs. Obviously, he hadn't had a square meal in months. With more meat on his bones he'd be a very large man . . . powerful . . . strong . . .

Strong enough to build a barn and set fence and work behind a team of oxen all day. . . . Her hands momentarily stilled.

A man. Here was a *man*—barely alive perhaps, but a man all the same. He could be the answer to her problems. Her hands flew feverishly about their work. She had to save him! Not that she wouldn't have tried her best anyway, but now, no matter what it took, she'd see to it that this man survived!

As far as men went, he wasn't much . . . disgusting, actually, but she reminded herself she wasn't in a position to be picky. She'd nurse him back to health, and once she got him on his feet, she'd trick him into marrying her. No, she amended, she wouldn't trick him . . . she'd ask him first, and if that didn't work, *then* she'd trick him.

But what if he has a wife? an inner voice asked.

Don't bother me with technicalities, she thought. *I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.*

Her hands worked faster, a new sense of confidence filling her now. He *would* live. She knew he would. The good Lord wouldn't send such a gift and then snatch it back. Would He?

The man moaned, and Charity lifted his head and placed it possessively in her lap.

He was a gift from God.

She was certain of that now. Who else would so unselfishly drop this complete stranger at her door?

Charity gazed down at her unexpected gift and smiled, lifting her face heavenward.

She would be able to claim her land.

In her most reverent tone, she humbly asked for the Lord's help in making this man strong and healthy again, at least strong enough to drive a good, sturdy fence post.

She closed her petition with heartfelt sincerity. "He's a little . . . well, rough looking, Father, but I'm not complaining." She bit her lower lip and studied the ragged, dirty, bloody man lying in her lap. With a little soap and water, he'd be tolerable. She shrugged, and a grin spread across her face. "I suppose if this is the best You have to offer, Lord, then I am surely beholden to You."