

TAMERA ALEXANDER

→ FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES | BOOK ONE ←



REKINDLED



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Rekindled

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Colorado Territory, 1868
In the shadow of Pikes Peak

L ARSON 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 its 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 on 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 at 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 an 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 her 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 was 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 an 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. But 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 not 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 edges 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. Six 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 cry 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 as though seeking safe refuge.

Her throat closed tight and she found it hard to breathe. How could she have been so foolish? Hot 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 that 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 their 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 a 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'd 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 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.