

TAMERA ALEXANDER

➤ FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES | BOOK TWO ◀

A decorative border of small flowers and leaves surrounds the central text. The border is composed of a repeating pattern of small, light-colored flowers and green leaves, creating a delicate and elegant frame.

REVEALED



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Revealed

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Colorado Territory, May 14, 1870
In the shadow of the Rockies

ANNABELLE GRAYSON MCCUTCHEMS stared at the dying man beside her and wished, as she had the day she married him, that she loved her husband more. Loved him with the same desire he felt for her. Given all the men she'd known in her past, how was it that now, after meeting a truly good man who loved her despite what she had done and been, her whole heart wouldn't open fully to him? No matter how she tried.

Jonathan tried to pull in a deep breath. Sitting beside him, Annabelle cringed as she heard the air thread its way down his throat, barely lifting his barrel chest. The shallow movement of air rattled dull against the fluid in his lungs.

An ache started deep inside her. How could this solid mountain of a man have been brought low so swiftly? The chest pains had started without warning. But the fatigue and coughing fits Jonathan had experienced in recent weeks had taken on a deeper, more ominous meaning in past days. How could the heart of a man beat so strong and steady in one sense and yet be fading so quickly in another?

A breeze whipped the wagon canopy and drew Annabelle's focus upward toward a languid summer sun, hanging half masked behind the highest Rocky Mountain peaks. A burnt-orange glow bathed the

vast eastern plains in promise of the coming twilight. The group they'd set out with from Denver nearly a week ago had waited with them a day, as was the agreement from the outset in such circumstances, in order to see if Jonathan would gain strength. But when Jonathan's pain worsened and the prospect of recovery dimmed of all hope, Jack Brennan reluctantly explained the group had to push on. They needed to make up for a late departure due to unaccustomed spring rains in order to reach the Idaho Territory before the first snowfall.

After several minutes Jonathan's breathing evened. His eyes were closed, and Annabelle wondered if he'd slipped back into sleep.

"You're as pretty as I've ever imagined a woman could be, Annabelle." His voice came gentle. He lifted a hand and brushed his fingers across her brow and down her cheek.

She gave a bleak laugh and shook her head at his foolishness. "Yes, I'm quite the catch. I'm glad you got me when you did, 'cause I had others waiting in line, you know." Seeing his mouth tip on one side, Annabelle smiled.

She'd been pretty when younger, but beauty was a trait that time—and choices she'd made—had erased from her features, and she knew it. A thin, puckered scar marred the top of her right cheekbone, etching its jagged flesh-colored path up her temple and into her hairline. She'd lived with it for the past fifteen years, and it served as a tangible memory of her first lesson in what some men who had visited the brothel termed pleasure.

"What do you think you're doin', Annie girl?"

Only then did Annabelle become aware of how she was tugging her hair down on that side of her face. Quickly dropping her hand, she laughed in hopes of covering her self-consciousness. The sound came out flat and unconvincing. "I'm just thinking about how you must find scars attractive, Jonathan McCutchens."

With accustomed gentleness, he caressed her cheek. "I find *you* attractive, Mrs. McCutchens. Only you."

His tenderness silenced the ready quip on her tongue, and the ache inside her rose to a steady thrum. She cared more for this man than she had any person in her life, so why couldn't she coerce her feelings to mirror his? For as far back as she could remember, she'd

known that feelings in themselves couldn't be trusted. Emotions lived for a moment, then faded, and they even turned traitorous, given time. So she'd learned not to give them much heed. She'd simply expected things to be different between them as husband and wife.

She'd asked God many times to increase her desire for Jonathan. But apparently God didn't listen to prayers of that sort. Or maybe He just didn't listen to hers.

"Thank you for havin' me as your husband, Annie. I had such plans for us . . . for our child." He moved his hand, and she guided it to rest over the place where their son or daughter was nestled deep inside. Jonathan softly caressed her flat belly as though trying to comfort the tiny babe within.

His hand moved in slow circles over their child, and she shut her eyes tight as an unwelcome memory fought its way to the surface. She sat there, defenseless and mute, as years-old guilt and shame crept over her again. Pregnancies in brothels were common, but so were aloes and cathartic powders to terminate them, often leaving the girls who took them damaged beyond repair.

That she was carrying Jonathan's child was a blessing. That she was pregnant again . . . was a miracle.

"I'm so sorry to be leavin' you like this, Annie. It's not—" His deep voice broke with emotion. "It's not turning out like I planned. I'm sorry. . . ."

She shook her head and leaned close, bringing her face to within inches of his. "Don't you dare say that to me, Jonathan McCutchens," she whispered, laying a cool hand to his forehead. A sigh left him at her touch. "It's me who needs to be saying it to you. I . . ." Her mouth moved but the words wouldn't come. Knowing the path her life had taken, most people wouldn't understand, but intimacy of this nature still felt so foreign. "I'm sorry for not being the kind of woman you deserved. You're the—" She pushed the words past the uncomfortable knot in her throat. "You're the finest man I've ever known, Jonathan. And I thank you for . . . for taking me as your wife."

He sighed again, his gaze moving over her face slowly, as though seeing her for the first time. Or maybe the last. Then with a shaky hand, he motioned behind his head, toward the front of the wagon.

“There’s something in my pack there. Something I wrote this mornin’.”

Annabelle glanced over her shoulder, then back at him. Without asking, she guessed what it was. She gave him a knowing smile, attempting to draw out the truth.

Jonathan’s focus remained steady.

His desire to provide for her was noble, but the loathing in his younger brother’s eyes the last time they’d seen him in Willow Springs remained vivid in her memory. Eight long years had passed since the two brothers had last seen one another before that ill-fated reunion last fall. And Matthew Taylor’s reaction that October night seven months ago made her certain that what Jonathan’s letter likely proposed would prove impossible.

Remembering how the two men had argued, and having been the cause, Annabelle still felt the sting of it. Born of the same woman but to different fathers, the brothers bore little resemblance in stature or mannerisms. Or, it would seem, in disposition.

Matthew didn’t know she carried his older brother’s child, but that wouldn’t change his feelings about her, or what she had been—what she would always be in his eyes.

With a small sigh, she shifted in the cramped quarters to retrieve the letter from Jonathan’s pack. She didn’t open the letter but laid it on her lap, then took Jonathan’s hand and leaned close to whisper, “You know I can’t do this, Jonathan. Even if we knew where he was, I couldn’t ask Matthew for—”

His feeble grip tightened. “It’s not for Matthew. The letter’s . . . for the pastor.” A fit of coughing ripped through his body, and he fought for breath, clutching his chest until it passed. “I wrote it all down—everything. The pastor will know what to do . . . how to help you.”

Annabelle smoothed her hand over his, wondering how much time they had left together. One of the women in their group familiar with heart ailments had told her he would only live a day or two at the most.

Annabelle looked into her husband’s face and glimpsed again what she’d seen that afternoon last summer when they first met in the front parlor of the pastor’s home. Jonathan McCutchens was the most honest man she’d ever known. Not that she’d known many

honest men in her life. Kind, with a gentleness that belied his solid six-foot-two-inch frame, and loyal no matter the cost, he'd made his own share of mistakes and was wise to the ways of the world, and to what she had been. He claimed to have loved her from the moment he saw her, and though she didn't understand how that could be, she cherished the notion that it might be true.

Studying him in the gathering shadows of the wagon, Annabelle wished she could see herself, just once, as Jonathan saw her. But she knew herself too well to ever imagine seeing anything other than a sullied and tainted woman when she looked in the mirror.

Something flickered behind Jonathan's eyes, and she coaxed her tone to resemble more of a statement than the question lingering in her mind. "So the letter's for Pastor Carlson, then."

He gave a slow nod. "I listed out everything. The ranch land waiting for you in Idaho, the bank where our money is."

Annabelle smiled. She'd brought nothing of material value into this marriage, yet he always referred to it as *our* money.

"There should be enough left for you to live on, after the pastor hires a guide to get you there. The ranch is still young, Annie, but it should do well. Carlson can—" His breath caught, and he choked.

Annabelle could hear the sickness filling his lungs as he coughed. She rolled another blanket and stuffed it beneath his head and shoulders in hopes of helping him breathe. "Shhh . . . I'll be okay, Jonathan. Don't you worry about me. I'll find my way," she assured him, wanting to believe it herself.

Jonathan's breathing came raspy and labored. His look grew determined. "Carlson can hire a trustworthy man to help you meet up with another group headin' north. The pastor'll take care of you. I'm sure of it."

His tongue flicked over chapped lips, and Annabelle moistened them again with a damp cloth. Though Jonathan harbored no ill feelings toward his brother—forgiving others seemed the same as drawing breath to him—she knew the wound from the broken relationship had left a scar. She wondered if Matthew realized how deeply Jonathan loved him, and therefore how deeply the rift had hurt him.

"I want you to have all that's mine, Annie. All that I wanted to

share with you. Just take Pastor Carlson the letter . . . please.”

Dabbing his fevered brow, she finally nodded.

She could tell he wasn't convinced. She'd never tried to deceive him—except for that once. But when he'd looked into her eyes that night, he'd known.

With effort, Jonathan raised his head. “Annabelle, give me your word you'll go back to Willow Springs and do as I've asked.”

After all you've done for me, Jonathan. After all you've sacrificed . . . She managed a smile. “I give you my word, Jonathan.”

He eased back onto the pallet, the strain in his features lessening.

“Would you like more broth? Or more toddy for your cough? I left it warming on the fire.”

He nodded without indicating a choice. She knew which would help more and rose to get it. Climbing back into the wagon, Annabelle settled herself beside him and lifted spoonfuls of the warm honey-and-whiskey mixture to his lips. He raised a hand after several swallows, and she put the toddy aside.

Not a minute later, his eyes were closed. He was resting. For now.

She let her gaze move over his brow and temple, then along his bearded jaw. By outward standards, he was a plain man, not one who would turn a woman's head as he walked down the street. But thinking back on the more handsome men she'd known in her life, she realized that none of them matched the goodness of the man with her now.

She took his large work-roughened hand in hers. He didn't stir. *How I wish I desired you the way a wife should desire her husband, Jonathan McCutchens.* On their wedding night Jonathan had loved her as though she were a fresh young girl, untried and unspoiled. She'd sought to give him what she thought he wanted, fast and sure like she'd been taught, but she hadn't counted on his patience or his earnestness in seeking her pleasure. Never had she counted on that. And there, too, she'd disappointed him.

Though she'd only meant to spare him hurt, that was the first—and last—time she'd ever tried to deceive him.

She slowly let out the breath she'd been holding.

His hand tightened around her fingers, and only then did

Annabelle realize he'd been watching her. The depth of his obvious devotion, so thoroughly undeserved, sliced through her heart.

“Will you lie down beside me, Annie?”

A soft breeze flapped the wagon canvas. “Are you cold? Do you want another blanket?” She half rose to get it from a crate near the front.

He gently held her wrist and urged her down beside him. “No. . . . I just want to feel my wife beside me, for you to be with me for a while.”

For a while.

The naked supplication of his simple request only deepened the thrumming inside her. *Until the end, is what you mean.* She lifted the cotton blanket and tucked herself against him. Careful not to put her weight on his chest, Annabelle pressed close, aware that he wanted to feel her body next to his. She strained to hear the beat of his heart, to memorize its rhythm.

“I need to say some things to you, Annie, and I—” Pausing midsentence, he held his right arm against his chest for a moment, taking in shallow breaths, before finally relaxing again. “And I know you’re not keen on this kind of talk.” His voice came gentle in the encroaching darkness, resonating through the wall of his chest in her ear. “My brother’s young. He didn’t have the best of chances when he was a boy, like I told you before. The hurt he took on then, bein’ so young, stayed with him and went deep. I was older, so I think I bore it better than he did. He still has a lot to learn, but he will. You and me, Annie, we—” He gave an unexpected chuckle, and Annabelle remembered her reaction the first time she’d ever heard him laugh. Like a sudden rain shower on a dusty summer day, the sound shimmered through her and eased the burden of the moment. “You and me, we got an advantage over Matthew in a way. At least that’s how I see it.”

“Advantage?” She huffed a laugh. “Oh yes, I can see what an advantage a man like you and a wh—” His arm tightened around her. Annabelle caught herself and pressed her lips together. So often Jonathan could quiet a sharp reply with the slightest look or touch.

Jonathan was no saint and neither was she, but Matthew Taylor struck her as being an upstanding citizen, well liked and respected—despite his opinion of her. The few times she’d seen

Matthew when he was helping Kathryn Jennings, he'd been outwardly cordial, but she'd read the truth in his eyes, reminding her of how far she'd fallen. What advantage they had over a man like him, she couldn't imagine.

As though reading her thoughts, Jonathan cradled her head with his hand. "We've both been forgiven so much, and we know it. We've seen who we are without Jesus, what we look like with all our stains coverin' us. Until a person realizes that, I don't think they can be near as grateful as they should be. They can't give other people the mercy they need because they haven't seen their own need yet."

Nestling into his embrace, she let the truth of his words seep into her. The pastor's wife back in Willow Springs had said much the same thing to her the morning Larson and Kathryn Jennings remarried a year and a half ago. Annabelle could still remember the chill of snow stinging her cheeks the day of their wedding, after Larson Jennings had, in essence, returned to his wife from the grave.

"Someone who has been forgiven much, loves much." Wisdom shown in Hannah Carlson's eyes as they watched the happy couple. "Take Larson there. He was so filled with jealousy and distrust that it nearly blinded him a second time to the woman God had chosen for him. But now his love for her is greater than it ever was because he's seen his own weaknesses, as well as Kathryn's. They love each other in spite of those weaknesses. Actually more, because of them—if that makes any sense." Hannah's gaze had moved to settle on her husband. "A couple can't really love each other like they're called to until they truly know each other, and a love like that takes a while to happen. Most times it takes a lifetime, coming slowly. Then at other times, the swift power of it can take your breath away."

Annabelle envied the love shared by Larson and Kathryn Jennings—the couple who first started her down this new road leading away from who she'd been to who she was now.

Someone who has been forgiven much loves much.

Hannah had eventually shown her the passage of Scripture where that thought came from, and Annabelle had tucked a hair ribbon between the pages to mark the spot. It was still there. She considered getting up to retrieve her Bible, but she didn't want to

leave Jonathan's side. She remained quiet beside him, carefully tracking the slow rise and fall of his chest.

She reached up and fingered the thick brown hair at his temples, brushing it back with soft strokes. He turned his head into her touch, and she marveled again at the depth of his feeling for her. "You redeemed me, Jonathan," she whispered, not knowing if he could hear her or not. "You saw past what I was, who I've been." *Who you'll always be*, came a familiar whisper. But as Hannah had taught her, Annabelle pushed it aside. "You ransomed me in a way, Jonathan. I would've died in that brothel without you."

Then it struck her, and the irony of the moment crowded the silence of the wagon bed. Here they were, abandoned and alone on the prairie. She, finally ransomed and free of her old life, and Jonathan—the one who'd paid the price for her freedom—facing death. Life simply wasn't fair.

"I didn't ransom you, Annie girl. Jesus had already done that." He brushed her cheeks with roughened fingers. "All I did was love you, and that was the easy part."

As he cradled her clenched jaw in his palm, Annabelle fought the emotion rising like a vast tide from somewhere deep inside her. Tears were foreign to her. Traitorous in a way. She'd spent so many years hiding her emotions, masking what she felt in order to survive. But now the tears forced their way out, as if there were no more room inside to contain the pain. Or perhaps no reason left to hide them.

"You were exactly what I wanted, Annie, no matter that you might see me in a different way. You were honest with me from the start. I knew how you felt about me. But you see . . . a person can't give what they haven't got." His voice went low, his tone harboring not a trace of bitterness. "A person can't love someone else until they've learned to love themselves first. God dug that truth deep into me a long time ago. You have the seed to love inside you, Annie. It just needs some time to take root, is all. Guess I figured that"—he gave a slight shrug—"til that time came, I loved enough for the both of us."

Annabelle closed her eyes for a moment and let his words wash over her. Grateful for the kindness in them, she also felt a quickening inside her and couldn't explain the ache in her chest. Nor could

she deny that part of what he implied might be true.

That she didn't know how to love . . .

"A *person can't give what they haven't got.*" That's what he'd said, and how she wished she could change that, especially in light of how undemanding, patient, and giving he had been. Her relationship with him was so different from her experiences with other men.

As she tried to sift through his meaning, something buried deep inside her began to unfurl—like a wood shaving tossed into the flame, seconds before it's consumed. The response was unexpected, and unnerving. Knowing she might not get another chance to say it, she slowly rose on one elbow and looked into his face, hoping she could put into words what was inside her. "I've never done anything in my life that would warrant your affection, Jonathan." She rested a trembling hand on his chest and watched his eyes narrow ever so slightly. "But if I could, I want you to know . . . I'd spend the rest of it learning to love you the way I wish I could right now in this moment."

She blinked and a tear slipped down her cheek.

Jonathan's expression clouded. He stared at her, and then gradually the lines of his forehead smoothed, and he smiled. "There it is, Annie girl." He brushed away the tear, laughing softly. "I can see the start of it now . . . in your eyes."

Wishing that could be true, Annabelle leaned down and kissed his mouth, tasting the lingering honeyed whiskey on his lips. Despite her former profession, this kind of intimacy was foreign to her as well. She brushed her lips against her husband's again, seeing how much it meant to him, and silently conceding that he was probably right. About one thing anyway—she did have a lot to learn about love. How did one go about learning to love themselves? Especially someone like her. And didn't a person have to be worthy *first*, before they could be loved?

She tucked herself back against him, and for a while neither of them spoke. Then Jonathan sighed slow and long. The effort seemed to come from somewhere so deep within that Annabelle rose slightly to make sure he was still with her. Death was a familiar stranger. She knew the works of his hands, and though she'd never seen his face close up, she sensed his coming.

Twilight descended, and on its heels came darkness, but she could tell Jonathan was watching her.

“I love you, Annabelle McCutchens, and where I’m going . . . I’ll go on lovin’ you.”

Rising up for a second time, she leaned close and placed a feather-soft kiss on his brow, her throat threatening to close. “I love you too, Jonathan.” And she did, in her own way. “I’m grateful you made me your wife, and I’m privileged to be carrying your child. Be assured I’ll make certain our baby knows what a fine man his father was.”

Jonathan took a quick breath. “Or *her* father. I’d’ve been happy with either.”

She smiled, then hesitated, sensing him drifting from her in a way she couldn’t explain. An old fear rose up inside. “Are you afraid at all?” she whispered.

He looked over at her, his brow knit together. “Of dyin’?”

She gave a slow nod.

He answered after a minute, shaking his head. “No. But bein’ this close to it makes me wish I’d lived more of my days with this particular one in mind.” He grimaced, then let out a breath and grew relaxed once again. “I think maybe I would’ve done a better job at life that way.”

They both fell silent.

Wishing she could do more for him, Annabelle lay back down and stared out the back of the wagon into the night sky. Stars like tiny pinpricks sprinkled the heavens, and the softest whisper of wind blew across their bodies. Though Jonathan *had* redeemed her in so many ways, her salvation wasn’t found in the arms of the man who held her now, or in his love, however much that had rescued her. It was in another man, a man she’d never really met—not face-to-face, anyway—but she knew He was real.

She huddled closer to Jonathan and his arm tightened around her.

“You cold?”

She shrugged slightly. “Only a bit.” Even now, he thought of her. What she wanted from Jonathan, what she needed before he died, was not the warmth from his body but the flame that flickered within him steady and strong. That made a man like him look twice

at a woman like her. That made her want to be a better person just by being with him.

Annabelle awakened sometime later in the night with a feeling she couldn't quite place. A cool May wind whipped the wagon's arched canopy in the darkness and she lay still for a while, listening to the steady patter of raindrops pelting the canopy overhead.

She reached up to check on Jonathan. And then she knew.

Just as quietly as he'd come into her life, Jonathan McCutchens had slipped away.

Through the night, Annabelle lay fully awake, silent and unmoving, but with her body no longer touching Jonathan's. As the faintest purple haze of dawn hovered over the Colorado plains, she pulled the blanket up closer around her and curled onto her side away from him, unable to drive away the chill.

Night rains scented the cool morning air with an unaccustomed sweetness, yet it couldn't stave off the loneliness crouching in the world that waited beyond the confines of the wagon.

With the rhythmic beating of Jonathan's heart now silenced, she shamefully wished she could join him in death. At the same time, she could almost hear him telling her to press on, to not give up. But the imagined voice paled against the fear swelling inside her.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to focus on what lay beyond the cocooned silence of the wagon, to the wakening life outside—the skittering of some small animal rustling in the sparse prairie grass, a gentle breeze flapping the tented covering, and the distant lowing of their milk cow, followed by a dissonant clang of the bell looped around the animal's neck. She had tethered the milk cow to the wagon late yesterday afternoon, but the animal's stubborn persistence had apparently won out. Again. Jonathan had been right—her square knot did need some practice.

Thinking of how he'd often poked fun with her on that point, Annabelle slowly drew herself to a sitting position and turned. With a most tentative touch she smoothed a hand over her husband's stilled chest, not allowing her hand to linger overlong.

She rose slightly to peer into his face. Peaceful, serene. And gone.

Her voice came out a whisper. "What will I do without you in

this new world, Jonathan? How will I find my way?”

Truth was, she didn't want to. Not without him to guide her.

A dull ache running the length of her spine spurred her to shift positions, and she heard something crinkle.

The letter.

Holding the folded sheet of paper up to the early morning light, she made out the barest trace of Jonathan's script showing through the page. She could almost read the words. . . .

It wasn't sealed. No envelope.

She squinted for a second, then slowly looked away from the page. She lowered the letter, folded the piece of paper yet again, and tucked it inside her shirtwaist. Along with the spoken promise to deliver the missive addressed to Pastor Carlson, she'd made an unspoken one of trust as well, and that vow to her husband was as binding in death as it had been in life.

ANNABELLE PUSHED HARD ON the southern route back to Pikes Peak, stopping in Denver only long enough to have Jonathan's body prepared for burial. She reached the edge of Willow Springs shortly before sundown on the seventh day after Jonathan's passing. Relief, mingled with sadness, settled in her chest upon seeing the familiar town again. She thought she'd left this place for good. The sight nudged her memory, and she recalled something Jonathan had said to her as they prepared to make their move to Denver last fall.

"You're a new woman now, Annabelle McCutchens. The people in Denver don't know us." He always spoke as though she'd been his equal, something she'd never gotten used to. "They'll assume you are what you look like on the outside, and they'll be right." He ran his hand lightly over her dark hair washed clean of the fraudulent scarlet dye and cradled her face, her blue eyes absent of smudged kohl. "They'll see what I see . . . a lady. A beautiful young wife comin' to town with her handsome catch of a husband."

Annabelle warmed at the memory and the playful wink he'd given her. In his final hours, Jonathan had made it clear that he wanted to be laid to rest here in Willow Springs. Driving on through town, toward the pastor's home, she couldn't help but think of how they'd met, courted, and married here near the banks

of Fountain Creek. She was glad to bring her husband back to their first home, after all he'd done for her. But in her heart, she knew with certainty that Jonathan McCutchens was already Home.

She pictured the fine pinewood dresser he had fashioned as a wedding present now sitting abandoned on the plains, along with other items they'd been forced to leave behind. The afternoon Jonathan's chest pains had worsened, only days out of Denver, men from Jack Brennan's group had helped remove the piece of furniture from the cramped wagon so he could rest inside, sheltered from the heat of the day. With the load of provisions they carried, there still had barely been enough room for Jonathan. If he were here, he would tell her not to worry about the furniture, that it was foolishness to dwell on what she couldn't change. On what wouldn't last. And he would be right, of course. And yet . . .

She guided the wagon down a side street and, while still some distance away, spotted Pastor Carlson. He was chopping wood by the side of the white-framed house.

He turned and briefly glanced in her direction before refocusing on his task. Then he went absolutely still. His head came back around a second time. The ax in his hand slipped to the earth.

He met her at the wagon and helped her down, his expression mirroring question and concern. Patrick Carlson looked past her toward the wagon bed. Annabelle watched his face as the shock over hearing about Jonathan's death mingled with disbelief, then gradually gave way to grieved acceptance.

He took the letter from her hand, and as he read, his shoulders took on an invisible weight. "When did Jonathan write this?"

"The day he died. He made me promise to bring it back here to you." Accepting help, especially from men, had never been easy for Annabelle. Not that the pastor was any threat in that regard, but seeing the earnestness in his eyes, she almost wished she'd read the letter before giving it to him. "I hope Jonathan's request doesn't put a hardship on you, Pastor. Whatever he's asking, I'm sure he never meant it to be that."

"So you haven't read this?"

She shook her head and looked down at her hands clenched at her waist. "Jonathan never said I couldn't read it . . . exactly. He only said that he wrote it for you, so I figured I'd better not. . . ." At

the touch on her arm, she lifted her chin.

“All this letter says, Annabelle, is that Jonathan loved you very much, and that he wanted to provide for you—” a soft question lit his eyes, followed by the faintest sparkle—“and for his unborn child.”

Annabelle acknowledged the silent question with a nod. “We found out just before we left Denver. He was real happy over it.”

“Hannah will be heartbroken to hear about Jonathan but will warm to sharing your news, Annabelle.” He motioned toward the footpath leading to the house. “Are you . . . *farin* well?”

She walked beside him, hearing his unspoken question. “For the most part. I’d hardly know anything was different but for the tiredness and the queasy spells that have come in the past couple of weeks.”

“Hannah will commiserate with that, no doubt. And she’ll have far more advice than I’m able to offer on the subject.” His tone grew somber. “I’m assuming Jack Brennan and his group moved on north?”

“After they waited a day with us. Jack Brennan’s a fine man, and they did all they could.” She told him about her trip back through Denver and how the undertaker had prepared Jonathan’s body for burial, fashioning a coffin for him. “We can’t wait much longer to bury him.”

Patrick glanced back at the wagon. “I’m willing to take care of the details, if you’re in agreement.” At her nod, he took her arm and guided her up the porch stairs, then called out Hannah’s name. He turned to her. “I’m sorry about Jonathan, Annabelle. Before either you or Jonathan knew of his fate, God’s heart broke for you both. I hope you understand that.”

Though she didn’t, Annabelle nodded, hoping her lack of understanding didn’t cancel out what little trust she did have. Until recently, she and God had never really been on good speaking terms, and even now, it felt as though she were the only one doing any talking these days.

The hinges on the front door squeaked, and she turned.

Hannah walked from the house, and the smile lighting her face gave Annabelle an unexpected sense of coming home. When Annabelle whispered the reason for her return, Hannah’s arms

came around her in a rush, drawing her close.

The safety of another woman's embrace—the wordless language it spoke—comforted Annabelle so deeply that the façade of strength she'd carefully constructed since Jonathan's death swiftly gave way.

Late that night under cover of dark, Annabelle left the Carlsons' house and skirted down the familiar back alleys of Willow Springs to the opposite side of town. When she rounded the corner and the brothel came into view, she paused. Seeing it again, especially at night, hearing the raucous laughter and tinny notes being pounded out on the parlor piano, gave her a strange sense of being out of place and time. The red-curtained windows spaced at even intervals along the second floor were dimly lit, but she knew the rooms weren't empty.

Not at this time of night.

Her gaze trailed to the third window from the back and she waited, watching. How many nights since leaving Willow Springs had she lain awake and worried about Sadie—the young girl whose past too closely resembled her own. Jonathan had purposed to buy Sadie from the brothel too, after Annabelle had asked him, but the madam wouldn't negotiate with Jonathan on that one. Fifteen years old, with waist-length jet black hair, smooth brown skin, and dark almond eyes, Sadie's youth and exotic beauty made her one of the most requested girls in the house. Annabelle didn't think she would ever understand the nature of some men and why they desired one so young.

The same gnawing ache that she experienced each time she pictured Sadie still trapped there started knotting her stomach, then slowly clawed its way to her chest. How could she have ever left that child behind? She'd protected Sadie—or tried to—since the girl arrived at the brothel almost four years ago.

Annabelle headed for the darkened back porch, determined not to make the same mistake again. The door wasn't locked.

Memories crouching just inside sprang full force when Annabelle stepped into the kitchen. Stale cigar smoke and the stench of soured whiskey seemed to ooze from the wood-planked floor and walls. An overly sweet bouquet of lilac, reminiscent of perfume the girls wore, hung in the stagnant air, but it couldn't

quench the mingled scent of days-old sweat and humanity.

The place looked different to her—shabbier, older, more dismal than she remembered. Yet a quickening inside told her it wasn't the building that had changed.

“Betsy will be mighty glad to see you again. And mighty angry.”

Recognizing the familiar voice, Annabelle turned to see Flora lounging in a kitchen chair, lace-stockinged legs propped on the edge of the table, cigarette in hand. The harsh-looking blonde smiled, but the smile held no welcome.

“Hello, Flora. Has Betsy missed me that much?”

Flora blew out a thin trail of smoke. Her eyes narrowed. “So where did you take her? Betsy had Gillam check every parlor house between here and Denver.”

Annabelle frowned, not following.

Flora laughed as she stood, snubbing out her cigarette. “You always were a good liar, Annie. I'll give you that. Betsy cussed a blue streak when she found out she was gone.”

“Found out who was gone?”

“Drop the act, Annabelle. We all know you did it with the help of that man you left with.” She raised a brow. “We just couldn't figure out how you did it or where you hid her.”

Uneasiness crept through Annabelle. She glanced toward the door leading up to the rooms. “What are you talking about, Flora?”

The suspicion weighing Flora's expression lessened. She pinned Annabelle with a look, then cursed softly. “You really don't know what I'm talking about, do you?” The hardness in her face melted away. “Sadie disappeared nearly four months ago. We all woke up one morning last January and found . . .” She hesitated, firming her lips. “We found blood on her pillow, Annabelle. Sadie was gone.”