



The
HEART'S
CHOICE

TRACIE PETERSON
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



THE JEWELS OF KALISPELL + 1



Books by Tracie Peterson and Kimberley Woodhouse

All Things Hidden

Beyond the Silence

The Heart's Choice

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In the Shadow of Denali

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To our friend Becca Whitham

Becca, you have given me much to smile about and I so appreciate your spirit and offer of prayers when things have been difficult. Thank you for being a friend.

—Tracie

Becca, what a ride we've been on, my friend! When we met twelve-plus years ago, I don't think either one of us could have ever imagined what God had planned for our families. It is a joy to share story and writing with you. The ups and downs of life have brought us closer together—thank you for being my friend. And now, we are family.

—Kimberley

Dear Reader,

We are so excited to start this new series with you. Tracie and I both have a love for Kalispell and when we lived in Montana less than two miles apart from each other, we spent lots of time brainstorming these stories and traveling to the locations. My husband and I moved east several months ago, but last fall, Tracie and I went back to the series locations together and did a ton of research. Check out my blog for fun pictures and historic tidbits: Kimberleywoodhouse.com/blog

This series will feature three beautiful historic landmarks in Kalispell. First, the Carnegie Library, which is now the Hockaday Museum of Art. Then the Great Northern Railway Depot, which is now the Chamber of Commerce. And finally the grand McIntosh Opera House, which is above what is now Western Outdoor on Main Street.

Though based on real locations and, at times, real people, this book is a work of fiction. We'd like to thank the Nineteenth-Century Club—a women's organization—that established the very first circulating library in the town in 1894 through their group the Ladies Library Association.

We thought it would be fun to have our heroine in *The Heart's Choice* be a trailblazer in her field, so we needed our

hero to be chosen for the prestigious librarian position at the new Carnegie Library.

But with our fictional story, we wanted to give you some history. Since the 1930s, female librarians have been the majority. In fact, male librarians in 1930 made up only 8 percent. Prior to this time, however, male librarians were the norm. It wouldn't be difficult to see Mark vying for the position.

But in reality, Florence Madison served as the first librarian in Kalispell, followed by author Katherine Berry Judson, and then Janet Nunn. We don't wish to take away from what these women accomplished and did.

Since literature and reading is such a focal point of this story, we used several famous books as our characters' favorites, but the mysteries that our heroine, Rebecca, loves most are all made up in our minds.

Thank you again for reading *The Heart's Choice*.

We love to hear from our readers!

—Kimberley and Tracie

Prologue

JUNE 1890—ALONG FLATHEAD LAKE, MONTANA

A sharp jab to his ribcage jolted Mark Andrews out of the story world he'd been immersed in and back to the bumpy seat on the wagon. The fifteen-year-old frowned at the interruption and lifted his book higher.

Another elbow to his side made him grunt as he closed the book and narrowed his gaze at the offender—his older sister, Kate. She was always bossing him around, practically since the day he'd been born. “What? You were the one who said you wanted to drive the wagon. And now you won't let me read in peace?”

Couldn't she let him read for a bit more? *Around the World in Eighty Days* was the most exciting book he'd ever read.

Her huff preceded a giggle. “I was simply attempting to get your attention. For someone who's always loved mountains and water, it's ironic that your nose is stuck in a book when *this* is the view.” A lift of her chin accentuated her

teasing words. “But far be it from me to interrupt your reading. Won’t happen again.” The wagon rumbled along.

Wait. What did she say? His gaze snapped forward. He’d been so perturbed at her—and so absorbed in the story—that he hadn’t taken the moment to even look at his surroundings. Once again, she’d gotten the better of him. Of course, she would say that’s what big sisters were for, right?

“Wow.” The panorama before him was . . . awe-inspiring. Deep blue water edged by a line of mountains with peaks touched with the hint of winter snow stretched as far as his eye could see. “Where are we?”

“Flathead Lake.” She released a sigh. “See? You wouldn’t want to miss this because your nose was buried in a book, now would you?”

“You’re right.”

Another jab. A smile lifted Kate’s lips, but she didn’t say the dreaded words, “*I told you so.*”

“The lake is much larger than I imagined.” When Dad had told them about it, he hadn’t mentioned the massive size, had he? Or maybe Mark hadn’t been listening.

“The mountains are taller than I thought they’d be too.” Kate slowed the horses a bit and shifted on the wagon seat. “I wonder if they’re as tall as Pikes Peak?”

As gorgeous as the blue sky was, it paled in comparison to the deep shade of the water. “I don’t think they could be that tall.” The long line of carved, jagged mountains stretched north. “By the way, thanks for the bruises.”

She didn’t turn to look at him, but the side of her mouth turned up. “I am happy to take any opportunity to inflict pain.” Relaxing her hands, she leaned back. The reins dipped in a slack line. “Now I understand why Dad chose this area.

It makes my heart happy just to sit and look at all of God's handiwork. The winters will no doubt be tough, but we've dealt with that before."

"No doubt." Though he didn't relish wrangling cattle through snowdrifts. The look on his sister's face told a different story. She'd always loved every last bit of ranching, no matter how dirty she got, how uncooperative the weather became, or how frustrating the work was. "You're excited about this new ranch, aren't you?"

She turned to him, light shining in her light blue eyes. Her smile grew. "Yes. Aren't you?"

He propped a foot up on the toeboard in front of him and shrugged. "Doesn't really matter to me. I wouldn't want to deny Dad his dreams. And you love it too, so that's good."

"One of these days, you're going to appreciate all the work we'll put into this new ranch. Once you're the proud owner." Her know-it-all glance nudged him as much as her elbow, but he didn't miss the half-second of uncertainty that she blinked away. Was that about her future or his lack of enthusiasm?

"Dad won't be handing anything over for a long time." Not for a couple decades, anyway. After all, in a few years, Mark hoped to go to college. He would prove to his father that there was a world of possibilities beyond ranching. Even if it took him a lifetime. But he couldn't let Kate know his thoughts for now. He shook his head. "I better finish my book before we get there. Dad will be along soon enough with the cattle." He craned his neck to look over his shoulder. The herd stretched out, dotting the green grass behind him in a wave of black lumps.

"Neither one of us will hear the end of it if we don't get

there in good time.” Kate slapped the reins to urge the horses into a faster rhythm again.

Opening his book back to where he'd stopped, Mark tried to shake off what his sister's words had done to his heart. Was it wrong that he didn't love ranching like they did? Was it wrong to have other hopes and dreams for his future?

In Dad's mind, yes. Kate's too.

The few times he'd broached the subject at the dinner table, he'd been met with adamant declarations that he would have a different perspective soon enough. The responsibility and pride of ownership and hard work would be *his*. Owning land and cattle—ranching—was in his blood.

So they'd told him all his fifteen years of life.

But even gazing at the beautiful scene before him . . .

He wasn't convinced.



AUGUST 1890—CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The throngs of people moving around her made ten-year-old Rebecca Whitman sway and shift as the crowd settled in for the parade. She squeezed her little sister's hand. Why did people get so pushy? Couldn't they follow the rules and have manners? Maybe they didn't know the rules or how to have manners.

Which was a little bit more likely, now that she thought about it. No wonder her mother was so insistent that she and her siblings learn those things, so *they* wouldn't be like the “uncouth of society” and would be able to make their way in this world. Whatever that meant.

Tipping her head back, Rebecca stared up at Momma,

whose new hat and dress had been a gift from Papa for her birthday. In her favorite color. Yellow. The woven hat with a wide brim boasted sunflowers and yellow ribbons. The dress was a simple material but boasted brocade cuffs. How Momma had oohed and aahed over those! And oh goodness, did she look pretty.

Rebecca sighed. Whatever *brocade* was, it was soft to touch and obviously meant something very good.

Maybe one day she would be as beautiful as her mother. Momma held her head high and had the best of posture and, of course, the best manners.

She straightened herself and pushed her shoulders back. When the man next to her bumped into her, she spoke in a clear voice. "Excuse me."

The man turned and grinned down at her. He tipped his bowler hat at her. "I am so sorry to have knocked you, miss. Please excuse *me*."

She smiled back. So this was how it felt to be grown-up. It was nice.

Momma squeezed her shoulder. "Stay close now and help me keep an eye on the younger ones. Keep using those good manners." She winked and then clapped her hands together along with the crowd.

Rebecca tried to do everything exactly like her mother. She clapped her gloved hands together too but stepped closer to Momma. Ebba and Kristina held onto Momma's skirts.

The crowd pressed in as it grew.

Parades were Rebecca's favorite, especially on Lake Street. The view was the prettiest here. When she was little, Papa used to place her on his shoulders, and she could see

everything as it came down the street. She was too big for that now, but she still loved watching the parade up close. It was fun to get dressed up and see all the people, floats, and exciting new contraptions.

Papa stepped up to Momma's other side with Rebecca's younger brother Peter in tow. Papa shared a whispered conversation with Momma, and her cheeks tinged a lovely pink. The way they smiled at one another made Rebecca's heart sing.

"John and Lars are helping Mr. Littleton with his float." Her father grinned. "Who knows, maybe they will even get to ride on it."

Oh! To get to ride on a float in the parade! Wouldn't that be the best thing ever? One day—when she was older—maybe she could help with the floats too. The very thought gave her a shiver.

A giant float pulled behind six horses captured everyone's attention, but it was for the men's club and didn't have any flowers. Rebecca let out a huff. The only ones worth looking at were covered in flowers.

While the crowd cheered for the float, she glanced at the alley next to them. Who was moving over there? Oh, it was just a couple men. *Horsing around* as Papa would say.

She turned back, but then a shout pierced her senses. That wasn't a cheer. That sounded like someone in trouble. Where had the shout come from? Oh, if only the crowd would be more quiet—

Wait. There, in the alley. She peeked through the gap of arms and shoulders around her and frowned. What was going on? And why didn't anyone else seem to see it?

A well-dressed man clung to a black bag and shook his

head at a larger man who had his hands on the bag and tugged.

The big man punched the smaller man, but the smaller man held on.

Another punch.

Rebecca tried to cry out, but her voice caught in her throat.

The bigger man kept hitting and kicking the smaller man until he fell to his knees. Then with a horrible, final blow, the well-dressed man fell over and the big man kicked him one more time. Then he took off with the bag.

Tears stung Rebecca's eyes as she tugged at Momma's dress. *Someone* needed to help the man! But with all the chaos, her mother didn't acknowledge her.

With another tug at Momma's dress, she raised her voice. "We need to help him!"

Her mother turned toward her. "What's going on?"

Papa was at her side in an instant.

"I saw a big man hurt someone in the alley. We need to help him."

"Show me what you saw, my dear." Papa grabbed her hand and steered her through the crowd.

Darting her gaze back to the alley, Rebecca spied another man coming to the fallen man's rescue. She let out a long sigh, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Was the man on the ground all right?

Before Rebecca and her family could reach the alley, police officers ran in, blowing their whistles.

They grabbed the man bending over the fallen man.

"No!" Rebecca shook her head. "He's not the bad guy!"

The terror in the hero's eyes as he was dragged away

was enough to make her yank out of Papa's grasp and run forward. "He didn't do it!"

But the policemen didn't listen to her. Hadn't they heard her? She saw what happened!

The man on the ground wasn't moving.

More policemen moved in.

Pushing and shoving through the people who now swarmed the scene seemed to take forever, until she reached the alley.

She pointed. "That man didn't do it!"

But no one listened. They hauled the good man away.

While a pool of blood spread under the man on the ground.



JANUARY 12, 1904—KALISPELL, MONTANA

The downright icy air around him burned his lungs as he inhaled, but it couldn't take away the sense of euphoria that filled him. After all these years of hard work, he'd gained the position of a lifetime!

The head of the brand-new Carnegie Library.

He, Mark Andrews, was the head of the Carnegie Library!

Of course, his father probably wouldn't be excited. Or impressed. Angus Andrews wanted Mark to love ranching. Plain and simple. But being a librarian had been Mark's dream. He'd gone after it and obtained it. Not only was he the librarian, but he was in charge of the whole place.

In the darkness of the early morning, he stared up at the large Second Renaissance Revival-style building in front of him. The deep, bracketed eaves above the pilastered entry made the dome above stand out.

From the domed, octagonal entry to the gray sandstone

from the Columbus quarries making up the base to the deep red of the brick exterior, the structure was beautiful.

“There’s the cowboy.”

Mark turned at the voice breaking the silence of the morning to hold out a hand to Judge Milton Ashbury. “Good morning, Judge.”

No surprise that the man used his childhood nickname. Though he’d left the ranch, people around here would probably always call him Cowboy.

“Ready for the big ceremony? I know you haven’t had much time to get settled.”

True enough. Mark had arrived four days prior and had spent every waking hour with the books. “I’m looking forward to today, sir. Thank you.”

A high-pitched *yip* diverted his attention downward.

“And who’s this?” Mark crouched down to pet the white ball of fur.

The older man let out a long sigh. “Marvella’s newest passion. His name is Sir Theophilus.”

Mark raised his eyebrows, working hard to keep his amusement to himself.

It didn’t work. A snicker escaped.

The little thing couldn’t weigh more than a few pounds and seemed all fur. It bounced around on its tiny little paws, stabbing at the dirt and snow in the street, and then at the judge’s pants.

Mark cleared his throat and gave his best effort to swipe the mirth off his face. “My apologies. It’s a gallant name.”

“Don’t apologize. I think it’s ridiculous as well, but you know my wife. Her group of church ladies named him. Apparently they are now working through the book of Luke,

and it seemed apropos.” The man’s bushy white eyebrows, mustache, and beard all wiggled as he rolled his eyes. “And since my loving wife thinks I need more exercise, I’ve been declared the one to walk him in the mornings instead of ‘pacing the halls,’ as she puts it.” With a shake of his head, he peered down at the little dog. “As long as no one thinks he belongs to me, I don’t mind. I have a reputation to uphold, you know.”

Mark chuckled. “Well, it is barely six a.m., sir. I think you’re safe.” He glanced around. “There aren’t too many folks out at this time of day.”

“Which is a godsend.” The judge straightened his coat with the hand not holding the leash. “I wouldn’t want to be seen with this little fluff ball too often.”

And yet despite the man’s gruff words, there was no denying the twinkle in Ashbury’s eyes. If Mark wasn’t mistaken, the good judge liked the little dog but wouldn’t ever admit it. “He certainly is cute. How much will he grow?”

One bushy, wild eyebrow shot up. “This is it, young man. He’s full grown, or so my wife informs me.”

“Oh.” Mark grinned. Maybe it was best to change the subject. “How are things with you? I know you were voted in as the district judge while I was in college. Are you enjoying the position?”

“Very much. All except for the travel. It’s a large district to cover, and while most of the larger cases are transferred here to Kalispell, I still need to travel out to the other areas.” He stuffed his left hand into his coat pocket. “At my age, it’s beginning to be wearisome.”

“I can imagine.” Montana was a rugged land and not

always easily accessible. “Can you request that all cases be brought here?”

“As our great state keeps growing and more districts are added, yes, eventually. Until then, I’m afraid I will have to travel, which is much easier when the snow is no longer on the ground.” Another yip from Sir Theophilus made the judge check his pocket watch. “I better head back, Marvella will be waiting.”

“Please give her my love, sir.”

Judge Ashbury laid a hand on Mark’s shoulder and stepped a few inches closer. “We’re all proud of you. It’s wonderful to have you back home doing what you love—what you were called to do. I know things have been difficult with your father over the years but remember that he loves you. Marvella and I have been praying for the Lord’s will to be done. You’re family to us, and we’re glad you’re home.” The man’s eyes filled with a sheen of tears. He dipped his chin and cleared his throat. “I’ll be back for the dedication ceremony later.”

“Thank you, sir.” Mark struggled to clear his own throat. He blinked several times as he watched the man and his tiny dog walk back toward the Ashbury mansion.

The judge and his wife understood Mark like no one else. They’d been like a doting aunt and uncle, filling the aching hole left in his life when his mother died. Mark had been a mere five years old. The Ashburys had poured into Mark from the time his family arrived in Kalispell to now. They clearly saw the passion in Mark for intellectual pursuits. They’d encouraged him and cheered him on. The judge had even lent Mark book after book from his own prized collection.

Mark straightened. Had he ever let the couple know how much they meant to him? How much he appreciated their belief in him?

The judge's words just now conveyed a lot. Soon Mark would make a point of sharing with them everything that was on his heart and mind, but it would need to wait until the library was up and running.

And after he had a long heart-to-heart with his father. Which was long overdue.

When Mark went out east for college a decade ago, Dad hadn't liked it but let him go. Probably hoped that time away from the ranch would prove Mark wrong—that he would miss the ranch and everything related to it. Instead it solidified Mark's love of words and books, his desire to earn the directorship of a large library, and his passion to share the love of books with people who hadn't had the chance to know the precious gift of reading. What doors reading could open. The dreams it could spark.

And yet . . .

Deep down, Mark sensed he'd failed. Oh, not his dreams or the Ashburys' hopes for him. However . . .

Had he failed his father? Dad's expectations had been high. Still were. And he and his father had let deep rifts develop in their relationship.

He could only pray that coming home and spending time with his father would allow mending to take place.

Enough. He needed to focus on the matters at hand. In the moonlight Mark glanced across Third Street and allowed the thrill of the coming day to take over. With swift strides, he crossed the road and walked up to the library's main entrance.

Andrew Carnegie, one of America's leading philanthropists, had given a generous donation of ten thousand dollars to the city for the library. The only provision was that the city had to provide the land and the funding to keep the library operating. So they purchased two lots here on the northeast corner of Third Street East and Second Avenue East.

Etched into the sandstone above the double doors was *CARNEGIE*, a testament to the wealthy man who didn't want to die rich. And in fact, Mark had heard that libraries were being built across the country thanks to Mr. Carnegie.

What an amazing thing to do.

Mark would be eternally grateful. Not just for the library, but for the opportunity of the job. He had high hopes and dreams for this place. For his home. To educate people. Help kids who, like Mark, wanted a life beyond ranching and farming. To have the opportunity for a college education.

Not that farming and ranching were bad. Not at all. But books and reading opened up doors to entire worlds beyond Kalispell.

It wasn't a bad town. No. In fact, he loved it here. That's one of the reasons he came back. But if he had the chance to impact the next generation, he wanted to take it. Especially with the age of machinery upon them. The world was changing at an alarming rate and their best option was to keep up with it the best they could.

They weren't living in the nineteenth century anymore.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, Mark smiled again. The entry was angled to the northeast corner of the block with the dome rising high in the pre-dawn sky. The tall wood doors welcomed him.

As he took the nine cement steps up to the front, his smile grew. Today was the day.

The dedication.

He slipped his key into the door, unlocked it, and opened it to the eight-sided entryway. The smell of lemon oil—which he'd used to detail and polish all the wood in the building—filled his nose.

The new construction was full of rich wood trim. From the hand-carved banisters on the multi-angled staircase that led to the daylight basement, to every window and door in the place, the craftsmanship was of the highest quality.

As he closed the door, he took a long slow breath and let the true aroma of the library take over.

The unmistakable smell of books.

Lots of books.

More than four thousand tomes filled the shelves. He'd cataloged, placed, and *knew* each one of them.

Breathing deep of the scents he loved and the satisfaction of a job well done, he filled his lungs and let his chest puff out. Just a bit. This moment was worth it. No one was around to see him anyway.

In a few hours, they would open the doors and hold the dedication ceremony. And in a couple weeks, the library would be open to the public. There were still furnishings and decorations to bring in and many little projects to do. Thankfully, he wasn't in charge of all that. The women of the Ladies Library Association were handling that side of things.

He strode toward the front circulation desk, where he would make his place every day. He turned on the light, then made a circle under the dome of the entry. Each window and door in the place had a beautiful, butted head casing

with a hand-carved rope pattern in it. They drew the eye upward to the dome and high ceilings—the visualization of knowledge and higher learning. The oak floors shone in the light. He could imagine hearing footsteps throughout the library of those eager to read and learn.

He made his way to his desk, shed his coat and hat, and hesitated.

Kate.

Would his sister come today? He'd sent a note out to the ranch, but he hadn't heard back. It had been quite a surprise to come home and find Kate married. To a fellow Mark had never heard of. The man wasn't even from Kalispell.

But Harvey Monroe must be a decent guy if Dad had agreed to the wedding.

Dad . . .

Mark let out a deep sigh. Things hadn't been great between them lately. If he was honest, things hadn't been all that good since Mark left for college. Especially since he hadn't come home to the ranch after his schooling. But he was back now. He could make amends. Spend time with his family. And hopefully prove to his father that what he did was important.

A knock on the front door drew his gaze. He checked his watch. Wasn't even seven yet. Who could that be?

Mark strode to the door and unlocked it, then opened it a few inches.

"Mr. Andrews." The gangly kid handed him an envelope through the space. "Your father asked me to bring this by."

Mark took the envelope. "Thank you."

But it was no use, the kid was already loping down the stairs.

With a tear to the envelope, Mark then pulled out a piece of his dad's ranch stationery.

Mark,

I am calling a family meeting this evening. It is imperative that you be in attendance. 6:00 p.m. sharp.

Dad

Mark walked back to his desk and set the missive down. Just like Dad to demand an audience. So much for hoping that his family would come to the dedication today. He hadn't seen them since he returned—even though he'd sent several messages out to the ranch. Perhaps Kate would come. Clearly, he wouldn't see his father there.

Shaking his head against the negative thoughts, he refocused his attention on the excitement of the day.

He could deal with his father later.



**RIVER VIEW RANCH—ANDREWS FAMILY RANCH—TEN
MILES NORTH OF KALISPELL**

“I’ve come to a decision.”

Angus Andrews placed his hands on the arms of his favorite leather wingback chair and narrowed his eyes. Even though they were clear and full of fire—as always—they couldn't hide the fact that Dad was aging. A lot.

More than Mark could have imagined.

He sent a glance to his sister. When Kate had answered the door, she'd hugged him tight and introduced him to

her husband, but Dad hadn't given him as much as a how-are-you before insisting they all sit for the family meeting.

The man hadn't changed a bit. Whatever he said was law.

Kate took her seat next to Harvey and sent Mark a sympathetic look.

"This is how things will go. Kate and Harvey will continue running the ranch like they have been. All the day-to-day, hands-on work. Mark will take over the books and the management side of things. With all his college education, he must have some good insight into how we can grow. Kate and Mark will be equals in this endeavor. This is your ranch now. I'm getting too old and haven't been feeling all that great. I need to hand everything over to you two." Dad thrummed his fingers on his knee.

Mark had been expecting this from his father in the years to come, but not so soon. He'd hoped for some time to settle in and have a chance to prove himself. How was he supposed to answer his father honestly and honor him at the same time? "I'm not sure I will have time for all that, Dad. My work at the library will keep me busy."

His father grimaced. He waved off Mark's words. "After a time, I'm sure you'll be back here permanently, otherwise you wouldn't have come home. Get the library going, and then come back where you belong."

The man never listened. Never. As much as Mark hated the temper he'd inherited from his Scottish father, he let it seep to the surface. "I came back home, yes, but my job is the director of the library." There. At least he didn't allow it to boil over.

"Your *job* is to do what your father says." Dad's right hand

pointed out the window. “I built all this for you. Don’t be ungrateful.”

Mark did a silent count to ten. “Kate is more than capable of running the business end and the physical end now that she has Harvey. You have plenty of hired ranch hands. She lives for this place. You know that.”

“This ranch is for *both* of you. Now stop arguing with me.” Red infused his father’s face.

Enough. The ordering had to stop. “Dad, I’m the director of the library.” Was he wrong to—in essence—tell his father no? Was he dishonoring the only parent he had left?

“Don’t be so contrary, young man.” His father pushed to his feet and shoved a finger at him.

Mark stood as well but kept his tone low. Forceful, but low. “You never listen. I thought after all these years things would be different.” He stepped toward his sister and leaned down to give her a hug. “Come see me soon?”

“Of course.” Unshed tears glistened in her eyes.

He turned his gaze to his new brother-in-law. “It was nice to meet you. I’m sorry for the circumstances, but perhaps we could chat at the library sometime?”

Harvey gave him a sympathetic smile. “Nice to meet you too. Next time I’m in town, I’ll look you up.”

Mark headed toward the door without another glance at his father. It was for the best.

“Don’t you walk out on me, Cowboy!”

The words halted his feet. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—look back. His face toward the door, he kept his words calm. “I’m not walking out, Dad. I’m giving us both some space so I don’t lose my temper and say things I will regret. My mind is made up. I never wanted to run the ranch. I appreciate

all you put into this place, I do. But you know I don't love it like Kate does."

"Always choosing books over your family, aren't you?"

As silly as the words were, they still stung. Mark spun around. "I'm not choosing *anything* over you, Dad. I thought you would be happy and *proud*. I've worked hard for this. I've been given an incredible opportunity. And I'm back home where I can spend time with all of you." As his gaze spanned the room, from Dad's fury to Kate's anguish to Harvey's discomfort, his heart twinged.

Dad fisted his hands. "Proud? When you've wasted ten years gallivanting around doing whatever you pleased. I allowed it, but now it's time to come home and do your duty. I didn't raise a quitter."

No. He would not let the words that sprang to mind have their entrance to his heart. Dad didn't mean it. The heat of the moment always brought out the worst in him and he said things for dramatic effect. How often had he and Kate joked about their father's bluster?

Kate held up a hand toward each of them. "I think we all need to sit back down. Perhaps have some dinner and cool our tempers."

Dad shook his head. "No. I'm not sitting down to dinner with him. Is that still your answer, Mark? You gonna tell me no again?"

Mark took a long breath and then exhaled. "I'm sorry, Dad. But my answer is no."

"*Fine!*" His father's roar echoed off the walls of the room. "Do whatever you want. Kate will inherit the ranch. From this day forward, you're disowned. You hear me?"

"I heard you. I'm guessing all of Kalispell heard you." As

much as Mark tried to keep his voice under control, the words burst out of his mouth in equal volume to his father's. He stomped out of the room.

Why had he ever come home?



He couldn't sleep. He kept getting up to pace the room while the events of the evening replayed in his mind. Why couldn't Dad see Kate's passion for the ranch and be grateful? Especially now that she was married to a husband who seemed to love the ranch too.

Mark pulled back the drapes and gazed out into the darkness. There was so little sunlight these days. Winter had brought its long, dark nights. At least the dedication ceremony had gone well. The people of Kalispell seemed more than pleased to have the new library in place. A crowd had waited outside in the cold, they'd been so excited. Two schoolteachers from the local high school even made arrangements to bring their classes over to learn about the Dewey decimal system.

He let the curtains fall into place and went back to the bed. Sat on the edge. Mark prayed. For wisdom. For healing. He didn't want to hurt his dad or dishonor him, but he'd made a commitment to the town—and to God—regarding the library.

“Lord, I need wisdom to deal with this matter. I love my father, but I love my work at the library as well. Since Dad paid for me to go to college, I thought he understood my passion and the plans I had for the future. Plans I feel certain are ones that You have ordained for me. If I'm in the wrong, please help me to see that and be willing to acknowledge it. Please show me what to do.”

Every last bit of anger he'd held onto from the evening dissipated. The whole ride home, he'd muttered under his breath about his father's outburst and how the older man was clearly in the wrong. What a waste of time and energy.

And what irony to accuse his father when he'd been equally wrong in his response.

"God, I'm ashamed of my behavior toward my dad, but he brings out the worst in me. Help me to bite my tongue when I need to. Which is probably a lot more than I think." He blew out his breath between his lips.

Why was his relationship with his father so full of conflict? Why couldn't they understand and accept each other? Was the only way to rectify that to give up everything he'd worked for—his hopes and dreams . . . ?

Mark's throat tightened. Could it be? He bowed his head, but his heart hurt as he prayed, "Is that what You want me to do, God?"