



DESIGNED *with* LOVE

TRACIE
PETERSON

THE HOPE *of* CHEYENNE

2



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For Rainy,
the most amazing of granddaughters.
You've faced many hard knocks and difficulties,
and defied doctors and medical prognoses
to prove God has something else in mind for you.
We are so blessed to have you in our lives.

Prologue

CHEYENNE, WYOMING TERRITORY—JULY 4, 1874

Emma Johnson, you must surely grieve your ma and pa.” The man who gripped Emma by the ear had started his rant at the park and continued as he practically dragged her several blocks. Once they stood in front of the jail, he seemed to have reached the end of his tirade.

“You’re hurting me, Mr. Gibbons!” Emma let out a howl of protest just as a uniformed police officer stepped from the building.

He eyed them with grave concern. “What’s going on?”

“She stole liquor from me,” Mr. Gibbons offered up, pushing Emma toward the man. “I want her dealt with.”

“Hank, she’s just a kid.”

“Edward Vogel, are you going to do your job or not?”

Emma watched as Mr. Vogel seemed to think about the question. She let out another wail and tried to break away from the older man. He had a firm grip on her ear, however, and she had no choice but to settle down. It already felt like he was about to rip her ear right off her head and take a handful of hair with it.

Mr. Vogel reached out and took hold of Emma's arm. "I've got her now, Hank. Just let her go."

"You'd better have a firm grip. She's a wildcat."

"I've got her." He tightened his hold on Emma's upper arm. "Now, Emma, tell me what's going on. Did you steal from Mr. Gibbons?"

Emma knew better than to lie. "I didn't want to. It wasn't for me."

"That doesn't answer my question, Emma. Did you steal liquor from Mr. Gibbons?"

"It was whiskey," Mr. Gibbons said. "Two of my best bottles."

Mr. Vogel looked at her with the hint of a smile. He seemed to understand that she didn't really want to be bad, but her friends—well, really her brother's friends—had dared her to do it, and Emma was always up for a challenge.

"Did you steal them, Emma?"

She lowered her head and glanced up. She'd found this look quite effective. Giving what she hoped was her saddest, most regretful expression, she nodded.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't want them for myself."

Mr. Gibbons made a huffing sound. She wasn't sure what he meant by it. Could be his way of disapproving, or he may have just swallowed a fly. There sure were a lot of flies this Fourth of July.

"Well, let's go inside. Hank, you'll have to sign a formal complaint. Emma, I'm going to have to lock you up."

"In a cell?" All at once she was profoundly sorry for what she'd done. "I won't do it again. I swear!"

"I don't want her arrested, Deputy. I just want her folks to control her. If she'd gotten away with it, I'd be out ten dollars."

Mr. Vogel continued to hold her fast but tipped back his

hat with his free hand. “That’s some mighty expensive whiskey, Hank.”

“It was, at that. Fine Scottish whiskey. Old too. The longer it ages, the more expensive it is. Maybe just hold her and send for her parents. They need to know what she’s capable of.” The man turned to go. “I don’t mean to stir up a hornet’s nest, but young’uns like that need to be taken in hand.”

“Old coot,” Emma muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” the deputy asked.

She gave a sigh and gazed upward at the man once more. “Nothing. I’m just upset.”

“I’ll bet you are.” He chuckled, only serving to further Emma’s frustration.

To make matters worse, Connor Caffrey, her brother’s best friend, happened to walk by just then. Emma silently wished the earth would swallow her whole.

“Emma Johnson, as I live and breathe,” the young man declared, sounding more than a little bit sarcastic.

“Connor, I need you to do me a favor.” Edward Vogel’s grip remained firm.

“Anything at all, Officer. I’m always happy to help the law.”

“Yeah, I can imagine you are. Emma, where are your folks?”

“At the picnic. They were visiting with the Aldrich and Taylor families by the bandstand.”

“Connor, go tell the Johnsons that I need to speak with them right away.”

“Sure thing!”

He sounded more than a little eager to get Emma in trouble, and she threw him a glare that she hoped gave him a pang of conscience. After all, he would have been first to sample the wares had she gotten away with her thievery.

“Oh, and don’t make it a public ordeal. Understand? Just tell them in private and ask them to come see me at the jail.”

“I understand.”

Connor’s tone was rather deflated, but Emma had no doubt he’d enjoy his duties. Connor and her brother, James, were seventeen and loved nothing more than seeing her in trouble. And if not her, then someone else. Just as long as it wasn’t one of them.

“Get to it, then, Connor.” Mr. Vogel turned, pulling Emma along with him into the jailhouse.

Emma couldn’t help but gawk around the place. She’d never been in the jail before, although she had heard terrible tales from her brother and his friends about it. James had never been taken to jail. In fact, as far as Emma knew, no one in her family had ever been in trouble with the law.

Leave it to me to be the first.

She regretted the honor, if it could be called that. Consequences were usually far less pleasurable than the hoped-for rewards when nefarious deeds were done.

“I want you to sit in that chair and not move. Do you understand me?” Mr. Vogel said, pointing to a round-backed, wooden chair. “I don’t want to have to put you in a cell.”

Emma swallowed the dry lump in her throat and nodded. Now that her folks had been sent for, there was no getting out of whatever punishment was headed her way.

She plopped into the chair in a most unladylike fashion and stared at Mr. Vogel as he took a seat behind a small wooden desk opposite her.

“Why’d you want to go and ruin such a great day by doing something like stealing liquor?”

Emma shrugged. “I get talked into a lot of things, and it didn’t seem like it would be all that hard. Mr. Gibbons was busy with his customers, and I’m not so big as to be noticed.”

“Big enough, apparently.”

Emma gave a sad nod. “It would seem so. I really don’t set out to be bad.”

“Oh, Emma, you aren’t bad. You just make bad choices sometimes.”

She heard sympathy and kindness in his tone and knew she could use it to her advantage. She continued to nod. “I do. It’s true. I try to be good. I really do.”

He chuckled. “I was a boy once. I remember very well how hard it was to behave. I was probably twice as rowdy as you. I will say, however, I’ve never had to take a young lady into custody. I expect this kind of behavior from the boys, but honestly, it comes as a surprise to hear that a girl like you was stealing whiskey.”

Emma lowered her head in a dejected manner. Putting her hand up to cover her face, she poked a finger into her eye to create tears. It had been most effective a few months earlier when the cook caught her stealing cookies. She felt her eyes water sufficiently and glanced up with a sniff. “I’m just as sorry as I can be.”

Mr. Vogel smiled. “Well, don’t get too riled up. Your folks seem like decent people, and once they realize that you were encouraged to do it, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Emma dabbed at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “They are good people. It’s not their fault that I do bad things.”

That was probably the first time she’d really spoken the truth that day. Her folks didn’t deserve the blame for her actions. Emma had always been a wild card. She was born the day after the War between the States started. Her father had once joked that she started her own kind of war as well.

But how could the fault be assigned to her? If she had been out of control since coming into the world, wasn’t that more or less the fault of someone else? She couldn’t help it if she was easily bored and fixed on the idea of having a good time. She liked to take a dare and thrilled at the excitement that followed. It was just how she was created. How was that her fault?

She sniffed again for good effect and waited a few more minutes in silence. Down the street, she could hear the band playing a march. How she wished she were at the picnic instead of sitting in the jail. In fact, she wished she could be just about any place else but here, waiting for her parents to come and show their disappointment in her once again.

It wasn't that she didn't want to be good. She had tried, but it grieved her. There was no fun to be had in being good, and she wanted to have fun. A lot of fun. Mama said it was unnatural the way she was constantly looking for a good time.

"Life is full of responsibilities and tasks that must be done," her mother often said. *"Good times are the reward for the hard times of work."*

Emma recalled just a few weeks back when her mother had declared that once again, and Emma's response had perfectly summed up her thoughts. *"I don't want to have responsibilities and tasks that must be done. I can hire someone to see to that. I just want to enjoy my life and the good times."*

Mother had just shaken her head. *"That would be nice, I suppose, but not at all in the plan for us. Since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, we have been tasked with hard work. Even before that, Adam was given the job of seeing to the animals and garden. And now we have responsibilities to see to our various roles of work. Believe me when I say it makes the rewards all the more enjoyable."*

But Emma didn't see it that way at all.

She heard footsteps on the boardwalk outside, and the door opened to admit her parents. She glanced up and saw her mother's reproofing glance while her father looked to Mr. Vogel.

"Edward, good to see you again. Sorry for the circumstances."

They shook hands, and only then did Papa turn and look at Emma. "What'd she get caught doing?"

“Stealing whiskey.”

“What!” Mama’s tone was one of complete shock. Emma felt bad for having upset her. Genuinely bad. She didn’t want to hurt either one of them.

“Emma, why don’t you explain yourself? Why were you trying to steal anything, much less whiskey?”

“Papa, I couldn’t very well buy it,” she began. “And James and the others . . . well, they kind of encouraged me to sneak over and take it.”

Papa rolled his gaze toward the ceiling. “James. Somehow that figures. I’ll thrash that boy when I get ahold of him. He knows better than to put his little sister up to such a task.”

Emma gave her most contrite expression and nodded. From the side, however, she could see that her mother was unconvinced. Mama always knew whether Emma was innocent or guilty. She had a special gift that way. She called it discernment, but Emma called it very inconvenient. It seemed impossible to fool her mother.

“Emma has a mind of her own, Rich. She’s fully capable of saying no when it pleases her to do so.” Mama gave her a look that dared Emma to deny it. She knew better, however, and remained silent.

“What do we need to do to make this right, Edward?”

“Hank Gibbons doesn’t want to press charges. He just wanted to make sure you knew what she’d done. He was more upset that she’d gotten a hand on his good stuff.” Mr. Vogel smiled, and her father actually laughed.

“Emma’s always had expensive taste.”

“Yeah, well, she’s all yours to deal with. We’ve got no hold on her.”

“Then let’s just go home,” Mama declared. “I’m in no mood to continue with a celebration.”

Emma started to protest. She wanted to see the fireworks that had been promised. She wanted to have freshly churned

ice cream and maybe get a chance to dance at her first grown-up party. But she knew the consequences of her actions had not yet been dealt, and to argue with her mother would only add to the punishment. So, in silence, she followed her parents outside and down the boardwalk.

The sun was hot, as it was most July days, and for once there didn't seem to be much of a breeze. It was like the world was holding its breath . . . watching, waiting, for Emma's punishment.

Mama didn't say another word to her until nearly five hours later. Emma was washed and dressed for bed before her mother came to speak with her. What was most startling was that Emma could see from her reddened eyes that Mama had spent a good part of the time crying. And those tears were Emma's fault. It made her feel a little sick, like the time she'd been walking on the top rail of the fence and lost her footing. She'd hit her stomach hard on the rail, knocking the wind out of her and leaving her wanting to retch.

"Emma, I don't know why you have to do the things you do. I can understand wanting to have fun, even wanting to run a little wild. But for sure, stealing is beyond the pale." Her mother's Irish roots were showing, as they often did when she became emotional. "It oversteps the bounds of wanting to have fun and takes you into breaking not only man's law but God's."

Emma knew that this was more egregious to her mother than anything else she'd ever done.

"You know how your father and I feel about obeying God's laws. I know you can recite the Ten Commandments by heart. I've heard you do it."

"Yes, ma'am. I can recite them again, if you like."

"What I'd like is if you'd live by them. You call yourself a Christian, Emma, but you don't live as one."

Emma had given this some long and serious consider-

ation. “I don’t think I want to be a Christian anymore. Not if it means never having any fun, and Christians don’t have fun.” Emma’s words spilled out, not considering her mother’s feelings. “Seems to me that Christians just worry about all the ‘don’ts’ in life. Don’t do this, and don’t do that. They hardly ever smile. I don’t want to be like that.”

“Oh, Emma.” Mama’s eyes filled with tears. “Being a Christian has so much more to do with love than rules. As people, we’re given easily to sin. Doing the wrong thing comes far more naturally. But sin only leads to sorrow, and it forever separates us from God.”

“But if heaven is like church, then I don’t wanna go.” She was surprised by her own declaration. But now that it was said, she could hardly take it back. It was the truth of how she felt. What good was an eternity of sitting around singing mournful hymns that spoke of how terrible she was for her sins?

Mama shook her head, and a single tear slipped down her cheek. “Emma, I wish you could understand the goodness of God. The love He has for each of us. He loves us so much that He sent Jesus to die in our place. Our sins are worthy of death, but Jesus took the debt and paid it with His life. He’s giving you a free gift—a chance to be forgiven—and all you have to do is accept Him as Lord.”

“And stop having fun, right?” Emma shrugged. “Doesn’t sound like much of a gift to me.”

Emma regretted her words. She saw the pain she’d caused her mother and almost took them back. Almost.

She really had tried her best to understand and believe the things her folks believed, but it was just too hard. God wanted too much from her.

1



DALLAS, TEXAS—JANUARY 31, 1889

It was a surprisingly warm day for the end of January in Texas. Emma stood dressed in her expensive white Worth wedding gown and waited for the minister to declare that she and Tommy Benton were husband and wife.

Tommy grinned at her, then made a face of boredom, and Emma nearly laughed out loud. At twenty-seven, she supposed that they should take their wedding day with a degree more seriousness. But that wasn't her nature. Life should be one good time followed by another. At least, that was how she'd always seen it—and lived it.

Nine years ago, when the chance to leave Cheyenne for her married sister's ranch in Texas came up, Emma had jumped at it. Some folks in Cheyenne weren't overly fond of her. There were quite a few who'd had their toes stepped on by Emma, and some who bore worse than that. Leaving the area was the perfect solution after breaking her engagement to a local boy in order to take up with another man—a man who soon afterward deserted her. It gave her an easy way to avoid all the folks who thought her worthless and difficult.

Besides, her sister, Clara, wasn't overly demanding. She

needed help with her children, and the children enjoyed having fun. Emma was just the right person for rowdy games and horse races. As the children grew up and attended school, Emma had more free time. This allowed her to escape the boredom of the ranch and do what she wanted to do. Clara was usually far too busy with her responsibilities to worry about monitoring her little sister's actions.

Emma did just enough to satisfy Clara and give her the relief she needed, and in turn Clara kept her mouth shut when Emma took off on one of her escapades. It was a good arrangement, one that had allowed her to meet Thomas Benton, the youngest of four wealthy Benton brothers, the previous January.

Tommy was sweet—more boy than man. He loved having fun just as much as Emma. He agreed with her philosophy of there being plenty of time to focus on religion when old age was upon them. Youth was supposed to be spent exploring options and opportunities. It was no wonder most adults were sullen and serious all the time. And many were still all bound up by religious rules from the minute they struck out on their own. Emma considered herself lucky to have figured out that such things were a waste of time.

She glanced sideways and saw her father and stepmother. They didn't look all that happy. Goodness, she'd maintained her purity and given them a church wedding, they should be delighted, especially after years of worrying about her moral standings. Her father and mother had never accounted for Emma having her own standards—standards that she had refused to yield on no matter how persuasive Tommy had been. That was the reason for the wedding. Emma might love a life free of rules and regulations, but when it came to the physical aspects of love, she was quite guarded. She'd heard far too many horror stories about women who allowed themselves to be com-

promised. Then, too, she had to look no further than her sister to see what a life of marriage and motherhood did to a woman's spirit. Clara said she was happy, but, goodness, she never got to do much of anything but see to household duties and child care. Frankly, Emma hoped she never had children.

Tommy didn't care about having them either. He said maybe later, in another ten years or so. Maybe by then Emma would be ready for them as well. Still, being married would put them at risk of that coming sooner rather than later. It was the only real reason Emma had hesitated when Tommy begged her to marry him.

Tommy was saying something, so Emma turned her attention back to the wedding. With the heat, she just wished they'd conclude with the ceremony. Worth gowns were beautiful creations, and this one was no exception, but it was hot, and a simple cotton dress would have suited her better.

Tommy took hold of her hand. "With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship. With all my worldly goods, I thee endow. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Tommy slipped the ring on her finger.

Emma was impressed with the ring they'd chosen. Tommy had insisted on sparing no expense, and given that he'd inherited a hefty sum of money the previous year, he could afford the best. Diamonds and sapphires set against gold. She'd never owned anything like it, and Tommy had given her plenty of jewelry. One thing about Tommy, he was more than generous with his money. Emma glanced up and met his gaze. This marriage was going to be a happy one. They were good at finding things to do, and marriage would open up even more doors to good times.

The minister, an ancient old man who headed up a church Emma and Tommy didn't attend but had given a large tithe

to, pronounced them husband and wife. Tommy pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

“Well, I’m glad to know that you can keep your word to someone,” a feminine voice called out.

Tommy pulled away, and Emma turned to see who was speaking. A woman gowned in black with a heavy veil moved down the aisle toward them. Emma looked at Tommy, who had gone as white as a ghost.

The woman lifted her veil and smiled. “I don’t suppose you expected to see me today, did you now, Tommy?”

“Stella.” He barely whispered her name.

“That’s right. Stella.” The petite blond woman looked at him for a long moment, then turned to Emma. “Did he tell you he’d love you forever? Sweet talk you into doing things you swore you’d never do? Did you lose your innocence to him and then find yourself in a bad way?”

“Young woman, this is the House of God,” the minister protested.

“Well, that’s why I’m here.” She turned back to Tommy. “You took my innocence, all while promising to marry me. Now I’m carrying your baby, and you’ve married another.”

Emma wanted to do something . . . anything, but found herself frozen in place. Tommy turned back to her with a sad look of regret.

“It’d be best for all concerned if we just ended this family here and now.”

Confused by Stella’s statement, Emma looked back to her. Somehow, the young woman had produced a revolver and now aimed it at Tommy’s head.

When the gun went off and Tommy crumpled to the ground beside her, Emma still couldn’t move. She watched as Stella turned the gun on herself as several men rushed her. There was a scuffle, and the gun went off a second time before someone managed to get the piece away from her.

A woman screamed, and Emma turned to see that it was Rosie Benton. Tommy's younger sister. Poor girl. Emma's own family was pointing and starting to cry.

Several people rushed forward to where Tommy had fallen at Emma's feet. For the first time she looked down and could see for herself that Stella's aim had been true. The bullet had pierced Tommy's left temple. Blood pooled around his head. His eyes were still open.

It was only as she studied her husband's lifeless body that she saw the spread of red across the waist of her white wedding gown. For a moment it seemed unreal. Where had the blood come from?

Emma touched her stomach and realized a hot pain spread across her abdomen. The second bullet had struck her. She looked up to see her father rushing forward. Tommy's brother Colton was right behind him. The men took hold of each of her arms as her knees gave out and the room went black.

It would seem Stella had claimed more than one victim.



“Emma, can you hear me? Emma, please wake up, darlin’.”

It was her father's voice. Emma knew it well, and for just a moment she was back home on the ranch outside of Cheyenne. It was early morning, and Papa was urging her to get up.

He was always so cheerful as he called her and Clara. “*Rise and shine, my darlins.*”

Mama would be downstairs fixing breakfast and would send Papa up to wake Emma and her brother and sister. Of course, Papa had been up since before dawn, getting a start on the ranch chores. In the early years, he didn't keep a staff, and Mama didn't have any help with the house or meals. It was just the family, and they all pitched in to help.

“Emma, please wake up.”

Fighting against the blackness, Emma struggled to open her eyes. Instead of finding her childhood bedroom, she found herself stretched out on a desk in a small office. Papa held her hand. His expression was grave. Another man seemed quite intent on cutting away her wedding gown.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Papa smiled down at her. “I feared I’d lost you.”

“What . . . happened?”

She saw her sister crying into a handkerchief while their stepmother embraced her.

“You were shot, Em. The doctor isn’t sure how bad it is, but you’re losing blood.”

Her father’s words made no sense. Shot? Then the memory of the wedding flooded back in such a rush that Emma tried to sit up.

“Tommy!”

“Stay still, Mrs. Benton.” This from the man who had destroyed her wedding gown. Well, she supposed the bullet had actually done that deed.

“I want to see Emma!” a woman all but screamed from somewhere outside the small room. “Emma!”

“Rosie.” Emma had grown quite close to the younger woman. “Let her come to me.”

Her father shook his head. “The doctor needs to stop you from bleeding to death. It would just upset her all the more to see you like this. I’ll go speak to her.”

Emma nodded at her father. “Please tell her I’m all right. Tell her I’ll see her very soon.”

“I will, Em. I will. You just stay still and let the doctor do what he needs to do.”

“I’d like to get her over to the hospital and into surgery. Better lighting and equipment.”

Lucille, Emma's stepmother, spoke up. "You think this will require surgery?"

The doctor straightened. "I can't tell just yet. I've got the wound covered, and I've slowed the bleeding."

"The pastor sent for an ambulance." This came from Clara, who moved to Emma's side. "Oh, Emma, I'm so sorry this happened."

Emma closed her eyes as the pain became more evident. She supposed the shock of everything had kept her from feeling it too much, and she couldn't help but moan.

"As soon as we get to the hospital, I'll give you something for the pain." The doctor pressed the bandages tight to her body.

It was all too much. Emma could hear the pandemonium and shouts of someone in the other room. Once again, her vision began to blur, and rather than fight it, she gave in. She could hear the doctor telling someone that she was losing consciousness from the loss of blood. After that, nothing more.



When Emma woke up the second time, she was tucked away in a hospital bed. She felt her waistline. A thick layer of bandages was beneath the overly large white cotton nightgown she wore. Her vision was somewhat hazy from whatever medicine they'd given her.

"Emma?"

Was that her sister? "Clara?"

"It's me, Em." Her sister took hold of her hand. "The doctor said you're going to be just fine. The bullet sliced across your abdomen. A little deep where it entered. He had to put in quite a few stitches but said if you'd been standing straight on instead of sideways, you would be dead."

“Tommy?”

Clara’s brow scrunched together. “Don’t you remember?”

Emma had a vague recollection, but she hoped she was wrong. “She shot him in the head.”

“Yes.” Her sister’s tone was so matter-of-fact. “I’m so sorry, Emma. He’s dead.”

The finality of the words hit Emma harder than she’d expected. Tommy was dead. His life was over. Just like that. In the blink of an eye. Blink of an eye . . . Why did that phrase ring in her ears? Oh, it was like a twinkling of an eye. She had once asked her father about the phrase after he’d read a passage in Corinthians, and he had told her a twinkling was like a blink. Just that fast. Why had that stayed in her memories?

“I know he’s dead. I saw him.” She heard herself say the words, but still they made no sense. “Did someone take care of him?”

“Yes. Colton and his brothers arranged to have him taken to the funeral home.”

“Who was that woman?”

Clara patted her arm. “It’s not important now. Rosie wants to see you. She’s beside herself.”

Emma nodded. “Please let her come to me.”

Her sister left, and Emma closed her eyes. How could so much have changed so quickly? In a blink . . . a twinkling. She was being kissed, and then Tommy was dead. Why didn’t the thought bring tears? She cared for him deeply . . . even loved him in her own way. So why couldn’t she cry over him?

The door opened, and Rose Benton rushed in. For all her twenty-three years, she was in so many ways so innocent of life. How this must have devastated her. She adored Tommy. She was even set to come live with Emma and Tommy after they returned from their wedding trip.

“Oh, Emma, I’m so glad you’re alive.” Rosie bent over and kissed Emma’s cheek. “Colton said that Tommy probably

didn't even know what hit him, so he didn't have any pain. But now he's dead." Tears came to her eyes. "She shot him dead." She began to sob.

"I know. I'm . . . so . . . sorry."

Rosie stifled her tears. "Oh, Emma, what are we going to do?" She didn't wait for an answer but hurried on. "Does your stomach hurt? I saw the blood on your dress. Your beautiful dress was ruined."

Emma forced a smile. "It's going to be all right, Rosie. It was just a dress. As for the pain, they gave me medicine. I'm sure I'll be fine."

"I was so scared that you had died too. I prayed and asked Jesus to save you, and He did. I would have prayed for Tommy, but Colton said God doesn't bring people back from the dead anymore. I was one of the last ones. But I'll keep praying for you." She sniffed and wiped her face on the back of her sleeve.

"Thank you." For once, the words pierced Emma's heart. Mama had told her so many times that she was praying for Emma to yield her life to God. Clara had sometimes mentioned in passing that she was praying for Emma to learn the truth before it was too late.

Was it too late?

A wave of guilty conscience washed over her. Tommy knew about Jesus. They had scoffed at religion and the rules that God laid out for man. Emma had agreed with Tommy that the Bible wasn't for them. Maybe they'd reconsider when they were old and close to death. Now he was dead.

"Emma?" Rosie stroked Emma's cheek with her slender fingers. "Are you scared?"

"I was. I was so scared I couldn't move." Visions of what had happened began to trickle back to mind. The young blond-haired woman all dressed in black—like someone attending a funeral instead of a wedding. A specter of death.

“I screamed. I couldn’t help it.”

Emma saw the fear in Rosie’s eyes. “It’s over now, and you’re safe.”

“I didn’t care if I was safe. I was scared for you and Tommy. I love you so much, Emma.” Rosie bent over her once again and pressed her cheek to the top of Emma’s head.

“Come along, Rose,” Clara said, taking hold of her. “Emma needs to sleep now.”

“I’ll come back with Colton. He promised we could see you when you’re better. He said I could help take care of you.”

Emma nodded and gave a wave. The pain was starting to feel more pronounced. Once Rosie had gone from the room, she turned to Clara. “I’m hurting.”

“I’ll tell the nurse. They said they would give you something when you needed it.”

With Clara gone, the room seemed so very silent. Emma couldn’t help but think back to Tommy lying dead on the floor. She had been pronounced a wife, and just as quickly, it was taken from her.

“Emma?” Her father peeked at her from the open door.

“Come in, Papa.”

He smiled and crossed the room in two long strides. “I’m so thankful to see you awake. Clara said you were in pain, so I won’t stay long. Lucille wanted me to make sure you had everything you needed. Can I bring you anything from Clara’s?”

She had moved most of her things from the ranch to the Benton house. She and Tommy planned to get their own place soon, but for the time being, they were moving Emma in to share Tommy’s room. Rosie had been so excited.

“I don’t know what I need.” She moaned and pressed her hands to her stomach.

“Doc says you’re very lucky. I told him you were blessed, since we don’t believe in luck.”

“I know. I’d be dead if I’d taken the bullet while facing the gun.” She could still see the hopelessness in the expression of the young woman who’d shot them. “What happened to her?”

Her father immediately understood. “They took her to the jail. She’s there now. Won’t say another word. Just sobs.” He moved closer to the bed. “Did you know . . . I mean, was it a shock to learn that . . . well . . .”

“That Tommy had another woman?” Emma had avoided thinking about that revelation. “Tommy never told me.”

“He betrayed you.”

“I suppose that’s true. I don’t know what to make of it all. I can’t really even think clearly.” She rubbed her eyes and tried to eliminate the image of the woman who’d ruined her wedding.

“I’m so sorry, Emmy.” It had been a long time since anyone had called her by her childhood name. “This was supposed to be your happiest day.”

Emma nodded, but in her heart, she couldn’t help but wonder if justice had been served. They’d made vows to God without either of them meaning a word. They’d even laughed after the rehearsal. Tommy had said he’d never expect her to stay with him if times were bad, and although the thought had troubled Emma for a moment, she’d assured him that she felt the same way.

Clara had known Emma and Tommy’s feelings on the matter. She’d asked Emma why they bothered with a wedding, then.

“Because everyone expects it. You can’t go setting up house together or travel together and such without a ring and piece of paper to say it’s legal.”

That had been Emma’s answer. Now as the words came

back to her, she was stunned by the coldness and heartlessness of them. What was wrong with her? Why had she ever agreed to marry Tommy that way?

Nearly dying was awakening feelings and thoughts that Emma had fought for years to bury deep inside.

The nurse came in just then carrying a small bottle of medicine. "I've brought something to help you sleep and numb the pain."

Numb the pain. Hadn't that been what Emma had been doing all of her life? Perhaps *pain* was the wrong word. It was more of a void. Her life had always seemed so empty, and yet no matter how she tried, she couldn't find a way to fill that abyss. She was always sure that one day she would find something out there in the world that would make her feel whole and happy.

"Here you go." The nurse handed her a shot glass with a reddish-brown liquid.

Emma lifted her head and reached out for the glass. She instantly regretted her actions and grabbed her waist. "Oh, the pain is so bad."

"Just drink this and you'll feel better in a couple of minutes," the nurse insisted, helping Emma to put the glass to her lips.

The medicine tasted foul, but Emma swallowed it and eased her head back against the pillow. Once the nurse was gone again, Papa stepped forward and took hold of Emma's hand. The look on his face betrayed his own pain.

"I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm so sorry, Papa. This day wasn't what any of us wanted or expected."

"I am sorry about your husband. It's hard enough to lose someone to death, but to have that kind of treachery exposed . . . it's a lot to bear."

“He wasn’t treacherous. Tommy just enjoyed life to the fullest. He’d tell you that he had no regrets.”

“I wonder if he still feels that way.” Her father shook his head. “I know neither of you had much use for God, but maybe now you can see where that gets you. Emma, you have another chance to make things right with God, but that young man of yours . . . well, he made a bad choice, Emma. I’m hoping you won’t make the same one.”

The medicine was starting to take effect, and Emma could feel herself drifting away. She looked at her father, unable to tell him that his words pierced her heart. Without Jesus, Tommy would go to hell. If she died now, she would go there too. She didn’t want that . . . not for either of them.

It’s too late for Tommy.

Too late.