

A close-up, profile view of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a light-colored bonnet with a dark floral detail. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with a decorative border.

A
Promise
FOR *Breanna*

A NOVEL



AL LACY

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This book is a work of fiction. With the exception of recognized historical figures, the characters in this novel are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

I was born and raised in the Rocky Mountain West, and developed an interest in the history of my part of America at an early age. History books that told the romantic stories of the great migration westward seized and held my attention...and still do today.

In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson purchased what was known as the Louisiana Territory from France. Some Americans saw this as a gross extension of his authority as president, and though there was a great deal of controversy over the purchase amongst politicians in Washington, D. C., it did serve to turn America's eyes westward.

In 1804 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out on their expedition to explore the newly purchased land. They made maps and recorded information about the trees, plants, and animals of the vast territory. Returning to the East in 1807, they told of the many Indian tribes they had met and of bountiful plains, mountains, lakes, and rivers in what had been named "Oregon Territory."

Their stories aroused the interest of fur trappers, hunters, dreamers, and adventurers alike, and in the minds of government leaders, strengthened America's claim to the land.

In 1818 a treaty was signed between the United States and Great Britain fixing the northern border of the vast Oregon Territory at the 49th parallel from Lake of the Woods in Minnesota to the Rocky Mountains. The treaty provided for the joint occupation of the Territory and allowed for settlement and existence of fur trading companies of both nations.

In 1819 the Adams-Onis Treaty was signed between the United States and Spain setting the 42nd parallel as the southern

boundary between the Oregon Territory and Mexico. Spain thus gave up her claim to any part of the region.

In 1824 the northern boundary was set when Russia agreed to the 54-40 parallel as Alaska's southern border, thus giving up her claim to the Oregon Territory. Only the United States and Great Britain still held claim to the area. Then in 1846 the British bowed out, and the vast region was left to the United States. Two years later the borders that today make up Oregon proper were set, and Oregon became an official United States Territory.

The Oregon Territory story was in all the Eastern newspapers, sparking interest in what kind of land lay at the other end of the continent. However, only fur traders and explorers ventured that direction. The now-famous mountain men such as Tom Fitzpatrick, Bill Sublette, Jed Smith, and Jim Bridger headed west in 1824. They blazed a trail toward Oregon, traversed South Pass in the rugged Rocky Mountains of southwestern Wyoming Territory, and made their way to Oregon, marking out a trail for others to follow.

In 1827, many easterners who wanted to go west and start new lives decided to aim for something closer than Oregon. They would go to New Mexico Territory. Independence, Missouri, became the jumping off place for those who would venture westward on what became known as the Santa Fe Trail.

Word began to spread about the trail blazed by Jim Bridger and his companions, kindling more interest in Oregon and California. By 1830 supply wagons were using Independence as their jumping off place to carry goods to the fur trappers and explorers. The wagons followed the Santa Fe Trail for a few days, then split northwestward toward the Platte River. In 1832, Captain Ben Bonneville led a small wagon train of men, using the same trail as the supply wagons, and headed toward Oregon.

Thus along with the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail had its roots at Independence, Missouri.

In 1836 two preachers, Dr. Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding, headed west with their wives to take the gospel to the Cayuse and Nez Perce Indians in Oregon. Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding became the first white women to cross the South Pass in Wyoming. During the next four years, other missionaries followed the Whitmans and Spaldings to Oregon.

In 1841 the first bona fide emigrant wagon train pulled out of Independence with people who planned to settle and make their homes in the West. They followed the Oregon Trail across Nebraska and Wyoming into Idaho, then at the base of Bear Mountain, the company split. Half of the wagons veered off toward California, while the other half proceeded on to Oregon. Thus was born the "California Trail" in Idaho's southeastern corner.

In 1842 Kit Carson led Lieutenant John C. Fremont's expedition toward Oregon. In 1845, Fremont went to Washington, D. C., and provided Congress a wealth of geographic information and presented them a topographical map of the trail from Missouri to Oregon.

In the mid 1840s, emigrants began moving westward. There was only a trickle of wagons at first, then the trickle turned into a steady stream. By the mid-1850s, it became a torrent. From that time through the 1870s, between 350,000 and 400,000 hardy pioneers followed the Oregon and California Trails to the "promised land."

As early as 1842, an Eastern newspaper columnist named Horace Greeley wrote, "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country." The Oregon and California Trails drew easterners like some giant magnet toward adventure, romance, excitement, and an opportunity to start a new life on their own land.

In 1849 came the California Gold Rush, which offered another opportunity—sudden riches. The California Trail led directly over the high Sierras into the Sacramento-San Francisco area, and in those rugged mountains were abundant gold veins.

Though the number of wagon trains dwindled in the 1880s and 1890s, thousands of people migrated westward, populating Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas, and Utah.

One reason the emigrants banded together in wagon trains was the Indian threat. Though a few tribes showed themselves friendly to the white intruders, most did not. By traveling together, the pioneers found relative safety in numbers. Indians were more hesitant to attack large trains than when they found only three or four wagons in a group.

Surprisingly, during the first five years of emigration (1840-1844), no deaths due to Indians were reported on the overland routes. Things changed in 1845. From that year through 1853, there were 227 reported deaths due to Indian attacks on the Oregon and California Trails. In the next six years (1854-1859), somewhere between 150 and 200 emigrants were killed by hostile tribes.

With the Indian Wars of the 1860s came more bloodshed for people who ventured west. The Indian threat remained severe in the early 1870s, and eased somewhat in the late 1870s and 1880s because of the forts that were built and occupied by cavalry units along the trails.

An even greater threat than the hostile Indians were accidents and disease. Many children died when they fell from wagons and were run over by the wheels or trampled by the draft animals. There were many reports of people killed by accidental gunshots and by drownings. Many women lost their lives giving birth. But the greatest killers were cholera, typhoid, dysentery, small pox,

and a variety of unnamed fevers.

Unless there happened to be a medically trained person in a wagon train, little was known about sanitation. Opportunities for bathing and laundering were severely limited. Water supplies were often in close proximity to human and animal wastes, spoiled food and garbage, and putrefied animal carcasses. In some long stretches between water holes or streams, pure drinking water grew scarce, and people drank whatever water was available. Often, typhoid broke out in the trains shortly thereafter.

Historians estimate that from the early 1840s through the mid-1880s, some twenty-five thousand people died on the trails.

The ink of history, while faded some, is still legible along the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe Trails. Some of the grave markers are still there today.

Though fewer men than women kept diaries on the journeys, their diaries are different in simple and subtle ways. When women wrote of the decision to leave their homes in the East, it was almost always with anguish—a note conspicuously absent from the diaries of men.

Men wrote of excitement and adventure. They wrote in explicit detail of fighting Indians, hunting game, and of the challenge of the journey. The westward move became a test of manhood. Traveling the overland passages was a breaking away from the old life in the East, a chance to improve themselves and the status of their families in the West.

The women saw no adventure to their long, hard journeys. One in five women was in some stage of pregnancy when she rode away from the banks of the Missouri River. The majority of women who traveled the trails were under thirty-five, and most of those traveled with small children.

Their diaries are filled with the distress and heartache of

having to bury their children and husbands alongside the trails. It was especially hard when a woman was widowed on the trail. She wanted to go back east to family and friends, but was forced to keep moving west. The only wagons traveling east were supply wagons going back to fill up and return, and the drivers were reluctant to take on passengers, especially women and children.

Women's diaries are filled with the heartbreak of disease, accidents, deaths, and burials. As wives and mothers, their job was to care for the sick and the dying along the way. They were the actuaries of the trail, noting the cost of the westward movement in human life, tallying the miles with the lives that were lost. They recounted the mishaps, recording every accident, illness, and Indian atrocity that befell them on the journey. They wrote of the rainstorms, hailstorms, and duststorms. They wrote of the weariness, the sleepless nights, the poisonous snakes, the pesky mosquitoes, the mud, the heat, and the cold—and they recorded the births and deaths.

However bravely those gallant women started their westward journeys, however they mustered the courage and strength to meet the demands of each day, however they reached deep within themselves to appreciate the splendors of the scenery, they were intimately affected by the journey's dreadful toll.

I want to tell you the story of one such journey.

If you have read any or all of the first three books in my *Journeys of the Stranger* series, you are acquainted with the compassionate but plucky young nurse, Breanna Baylor. Blond, blue-eyed Breanna has captured the hearts of readers all across America, and even in foreign countries where the *Stranger* books have gone.

I have received letters and phone calls and have had face-to-face conversations with readers—male and female, young and old—who not only are intrigued by John Stranger, but have

fallen in love with Breanna. So great has been the response that my publisher and I now give you Breanna in a new series of her own, the Angel of Mercy series.

1



THE SOFT SUMMER BREEZE kissed the finely chiseled features of her face and toyed with her blond locks as the westerling sun hovered over the jagged peaks of the towering Colorado Rockies.

Centuries before, the mighty hand of God had smoothed out the plains and rounded off the hills. He had compressed and arched the rock mantle of the earth, thrusting great masses of stone upward to altitudes twelve, thirteen, fourteen thousand feet above the level of the sea.

The sun shone into the thick forest of Ponderosa pine, blue spruce, and white-barked aspen, slanting lengthy shadows across the porch of the cabin where Breanna Baylor stood, looking toward the east. The hills that lined the open meadows to the east were dotted with clumps of small pines that thinned out as they touched the gentler slopes and hollows that made up the grassy meadow. Daisies and other wild flowers of various colors grew in the grass that carpeted the open fields.

The day Breanna had prayed for had finally come. After many long months of agony of soul, she was going to meet with John face to face and tell him how much she loved him. Her eyes searched the low, rolling hills, yearning to see horse and rider coming toward her.

Breanna had tried to form the exact words she would say, but the harder she tried to put them together, the more difficult it became. Practicing would not help. She would just have to let the words flow on their own. The main thing was to tell this man what a horrible mistake she had made in sending him out of her life...and to impress upon him that she loved him with every fiber of her being.

Because John had proven his love for her over and over again, she had no fear of rejection. He had agreed to meet her at the cabin, and she knew he would forgive her for that awful day in Wichita when she so foolishly sent him away.

Breanna reached into the pocket of her printed cotton dress and took out the note. She had probably read it a dozen times, but she wanted to read it again.

Dearest Breanna,

As you well know, whenever I have come to Denver, I have made contact with Dr. Goodwin to learn your whereabouts. When I arrived in town today, I was told by Chief U. S. Marshal Solomon Duvall that he had seen you earlier at the doctor's office. He told me that you had left a written message for Dr. Goodwin to give me next time I contacted him.

I waited until you had left the office for the day, then went in with my heart thundering, hoping that the message was that you had changed your mind since that day in Wichita, and wanted me back in your life.

Oh, how I have prayed that our Lord would give you back to me. I love you, Breanna, more than mortal words can ever express. Just give this stranger from a far land the opportunity, and I will shower you with so

much love you'll be hunting for someplace to put it!

I will meet you tomorrow, as you requested, at Dr. Goodwin's cabin in the foothills an hour before sundown.

With abounding and unending love,
John

Breanna's lips quivered as she returned the note to her pocket. She took a hanky from the other pocket and dabbed the tears from her cheeks.

"Thank You, Lord," she breathed. "Thank You for giving me a man like John. The way he came into my life, there is no way I could doubt that You purposely crossed our paths."

Breanna's mind drifted back to the day it all started. Almost since the day she had earned her certificate as a Certified Medical Nurse, she had been doing the work of a "visiting nurse," moving about wherever assigned by her sponsoring physician, Wichita's Dr. Myron Hunter. After nursing Kansas farmer Will Scott back to health from a bad fall, she bid him and his wife Althea good-bye, then climbed into her buggy. She was about to leave when she heard the rumble of distant thunder. Across the Kansas plains to the northwest, dark thunderheads were gathering.

"Maybe you shouldn't go till the storm passes," Althea said.

"I'll be all right," she smiled. "If I put Nellie to a trot, we should beat the storm to Wichita."

"Well, on your way, then," Althea said. "If the storm catches you, pull into a farm house and wait it out."

"I will. Good-bye."

Breanna had been on the narrow, rutted road for an hour

when she topped a gentle rise and spotted a huge herd of cattle about a mile ahead of her. The herd was being driven south to the railhead at Wichita by a crew of shouting, whistling drovers.

The angry storm was closing in behind her. The sun had vanished moments before behind dark, rolling clouds, and lightning crackled in the north, followed by the rumble of thunder.

Breanna looked for a ranch or farm where she could go for shelter, but there was nothing in sight. She remembered a small community maybe three or four miles ahead. If she could get the drovers to clear a path for her through the herd, she could probably beat the heavy part of the storm to shelter.

Breanna put Nellie to a gallop and shortly drew up to the rear of the noisy herd. A pair of young cowpokes saw the buggy and rode up. "Howdy, ma'am," one of them said. "Were you needin' to get through?"

"Yes! That storm looks plenty mean. I need to get through as fast as possible."

"All right, follow us!"

Nellie showed nervousness as she pulled the buggy amid the milling, bawling cattle. Breanna noted the long, pointed horns that clattered as the steers jostled each other. She couldn't get past them fast enough. It took some ten minutes to bring the buggy out in front of the herd, but it seemed more like ten hours to Breanna. She thanked the drovers and put Nellie into a steady trot.

The entire sky was now black, and the wind was getting stronger. Breanna had gone another mile or so when lightning split the sky above her. Nellie whinnied and tossed her head, slowing down.

"No, Nellie!" shouted Breanna, snapping the reins. "Go, girl, go!"

Thunder clapped like a thousand cannons all around, and the frightened horse bolted, heading straight south on the road. The buggy bounced and fishtailed. Breanna screamed at Nellie to slow down and pulled back on the reins with all her might. Suddenly the crazed animal veered off the road and plunged down a grassy slope. There was a two-foot-deep ditch some eight-feet wide at the bottom of the slope. Breanna saw the ditch yawning at her and braced herself for the impact.

The buggy hit the ditch full-force and came to a sudden stop against the far bank, sending Breanna headlong into a patch of long, thick grass. Nellie bounded across the field dragging reins, harness, and singletree behind. The buggy was dug into the bank, with both front wheels broken.

Breanna scrambled to her feet, her heart pounding and her breath coming in short gasps. She was a bit dizzy and bruised, but the soft bed of grass had saved her from serious injury.

Breanna made her way back to the road. Rain began to fall, driven by the fierce wind. All she could do was keep going south and hope to find shelter.

As Breanna stumbled along the road, the rain pelting her face, she heard something different than wind, lightning, and thunder. It took her a few seconds to place its source, but when she looked behind her, she found it. It was the sound of rushing hooves. The lightning had frightened the cattle, and they were stampeding straight toward her. There was nowhere to run. An overpowering helplessness took possession of her, a foreboding of death.

The herd was no more than two hundred yards away. Breanna thought of the ditch at the side of the road, but the solid wall of wild-eyed cattle told her it could offer no protection.

Frozen with terror, Breanna steeled herself for what was

coming. Then something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. It looked at first like some kind of apparition speeding toward her, but it quickly crystallized into a horse and rider. The horse was jet-black, and the man in the saddle was dressed in black.

The cattle and the rider were closing in fast. The front line of steers was so close, Breanna could see the whites of their bulging eyes. Horror and panic stabbed her heart. She could scarcely breathe.

The herd was no more than fifty yards away when the horse drew near. The rider leaned from the saddle and snatched her off the ground, holding her tight against him as they veered to the right and headed south.

The black gelding quickly put space between itself and the deathly horns and hooves. The space widened the more as the gallant horse carried its master and Breanna Baylor on a beeline south, outrunning the danger. When the horse settled into a smooth lope, the rider shouted above the sounds of the storm and herd, "Get a good hold around my neck, ma'am! I'll swing you up behind me!"

Breanna had been clutching the arm that held her. Letting go one hand at a time, she reached up and wrapped her arms around the man's neck. He twisted in the saddle and swung her up behind him. Breanna clung to him with one hand and used the other to adjust her skirt, then wrapped both arms around his waist. Breanna looked behind to see the herd losing ground. The big black was pulling farther and farther ahead.

"You all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, thanks to you!"

Rain continued to pour down from the heavy sky. Horse,

rider, and passenger were soaked. Water from his hatbrim sprayed Breanna in the face, but she didn't care. The Lord had sent this man from out of nowhere to save her. Silently she thanked Him.

"We're safe, now," the rider told her over his shoulder.

"Yes, thank the Lord!"

"That's right! Thank the Lord!"

"And thank you!"

"No need to thank me. I was just doing my job. We'll be in Wichita shortly. Ebony can run like this for hours."

"How do you know I want to go to Wichita?" Breanna asked, blinking against the spray in her eyes.

"That's where you live, isn't it?"

"So you're from Wichita, too?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then how do you know I live there?"

The man in black did not reply.

They passed through the small community where Breanna had intended to seek shelter. Everyone was inside, out of the storm.

"So your horse's name is Ebony?"

"Yes. Fits him, don't you think?"

"Perfectly! He's as black as any ebony wood I've ever seen." She paused a moment, then asked, "Could he really run like this for hours with my extra weight on board?"

The stranger laughed. "You're lighter than a feather, ma'am. He doesn't even notice you!"

Some time later Wichita came into view. Lightning bolts

were still chasing each other across the sky, and the deep-throated thunder continued to rumble. When they reached the edge of town, the rider slowed his horse and trotted him onto Broadway. There was little traffic on Broadway or any of the side streets.

“I live on Kellogg Street, west of Broadway a block and a half,” Breanna said, freeing a hand to wipe rain from her eyes.

Breanna cast a glance at the Arkansas River off to her right. It was swollen and muddy. Her mind went to Nellie. She loved the horse and hoped Nellie was all right. Her heart felt heavy at losing her. There was no way of knowing how far she had run, or which direction she might have gone after Breanna last saw her.

And then there was her medical bag. It might still be intact, unless the steers had slammed into the wagon. She was sure Dr. Hunter would understand and replenish her supplies without charge, but it would be up to her to purchase a new bag. She was thankful that the Scotts had paid her generously.

Breanna had not noticed when they turned onto Kellogg Street, but she did notice when the man who had saved her life hauled up in front of the boarding house where she lived, and dismounted. “Well, here you are, ma’am. Safe and sound. Wet...but safe and sound.”

Breanna had not realized how tall he was until he eased her down beside him. She was four inches over five feet, and it was evident that he stood more than a foot taller. She noticed twin jagged scars on his right cheek. His eyes were silver-gray and seemed to penetrate to the center of her soul. He had coal-black hair and wore his sideburns to the middle of his ears. His dark temples showed a few flecks of gray, and he was clean-shaven except for a well-trimmed mustache. She estimated him to be somewhere around forty, maybe even a little younger...some nine or ten years older than she. The stranger’s craggy, angular

features were handsome in their own way.

Breanna wanted to ask him how he knew where she lived, but could not work up the courage. Instead, she thanked him for saving her life, then told him her name and that she was a visiting nurse. But something inside told her he already knew all that. She had never met a man like him.

There was still no movement on the rolling hills east of the cabin. Breanna turned and looked at the sun. It would touch the tips of the tallest peaks in another twenty minutes or so.

She let her mind return to that day in Wichita when the strange man accepted her invitation to come back the next evening for supper. When she mentioned that he had not told her his name, he said in his deep, soft voice, "You can call me John."

John did not volunteer his last name to her at all that day, nor did he reveal what it was as they spent more and more time together. It was some time later when she learned that people who knew him called him John Stranger.

She smiled to herself as she recalled how John showed up for supper that next night with Nellie, a new buggy, and her medical bag.

Breanna thought of all the times she and John had spent together in the next few months, and of how his presence was both comforting and disconcerting. There was a gentleness in him she had never seen in a man, yet a mysterious aura kept her off balance. That, however, began to fade as they became better acquainted, and she recalled the expression in his iron-gray eyes that drew her like a magnet.

The more time they spent together, the weaker she found her resistance to him. John was making his feelings known to her, and it was apparent that he was falling in love.

Breanna began to struggle with her own feelings. Her heart had been deeply wounded by a man named Frank Miller, and the scars were still there. After a sweet courtship of many months, Frank had proposed marriage, and Breanna had invested her love and all her hopes for the future on him. Shortly after the engagement, she had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and opened her heart to Him. As a new Christian, she desired Frank to be saved also, but her Christian friends advised her to be “wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove” in her approach to him. Coming on too strong too soon could drive him away.

Breanna prayed daily that God would give her wisdom, and she dropped “a word fitly spoken” now and then, relating to Frank the joy and peace she knew since opening her heart to Jesus. He listened as if he were interested, and Breanna had hopes of seeing Frank become a Christian before the wedding.

And then her whole world fell apart. Out of the blue, Frank sat Breanna down and calmly announced that he was going to marry another woman. He gave no reason, only that he had fallen in love with someone else. Frank Miller walked out of her life, never to return.

After the pain eased and Breanna picked up the pieces of her life, she vowed to never again let such a thing happen to her. No man would ever hurt her again. She would bury herself in her medical work and never be involved romantically with another man.

John Stranger was a wonderful man, she knew, but he was still a man. If she let herself, she would fall in love with him. *But she would never let it happen.*

As time passed, Breanna realized she was letting her guard down a little at a time. Each time she and John were together, she found it harder to let him go. Finally, she told herself the only thing to do was to break it off. It wasn't fair to him to string him along in a relationship that would lead nowhere.

Breanna let her mind return to that cold, bleak November day just four months after John Stranger had saved her from the stampede.

The sky was heavy and the wind brisk when John Stranger came to the boarding house to see Breanna after being gone for a couple of weeks. She steeled herself for what she must do and explained that she would have to be at Dr. Hunter's office in about an hour. They could walk down by the river, but from there she would have to head for the doctor's office. John understood and decided to take Ebony along.

They chatted about Breanna's latest nursing jobs while John led his horse along the streets. When they reached the east bank of the river, Breanna's stomach was in knots. She swallowed hard, knowing this was the moment she would do what she had to do. She cleared her throat nervously, then looked John in the eye. "John, I...I have to tell you something."

"All right," he nodded.

"I...John, this is very difficult for me, but...I've come to a decision."

"About what?"

"John, you saved my life, and I'll always be grateful. You've been so kind and good to me, and I could never thank you enough. But...I'm asking you not to come and see me anymore."

“You mean...never?”

“Never, John. I...I find myself growing more attracted to you than I should. I can never trust my heart to another man. Please try to understand.”

“I’m not sure I will ever understand, Breanna,” John said with obvious hurt in his eyes.

“Please try,” she said in a choked, half-whisper. “This is the way it has to be. Please don’t make it any more difficult for me than it already is.”

She had told him of Frank Miller, but Stranger had hoped she would not let the scars from that wound keep her from falling in love with him. His words came out in a solemn monotone. “All right, Breanna. If that’s the way you want it, I’ll move on. I’m sorry for what Frank did, but his jilting you for that other woman doesn’t mean all men are like him.”

He turned to his horse and swung into the saddle, then looked down at her through misty eyes. “Good-bye, lovely lady. I will be out of your life, but you will never be out of my heart. From time to time, I may be looking at you, but you’ll never know I’m near. I’ll respect your request.”

With that, John Stranger wheeled Ebony about and trotted toward the center of town.

Tears welled up in Breanna’s eyes as she watched horse and rider diminish in size. They were not yet out of sight when she realized she had made a horrible mistake. She was not on the verge of falling in love with John, she already had! His name was on her lips over and over again as she reached toward him. Then he vanished from her sight.

Breanna wept as she walked toward town. “Oh, dear God,” she sobbed, “what a fool I am. John loves me. I know he does.”

And I love him, with all my heart! And now I've sent him out of my life forever!"

She struggled to control her emotions as she walked slowly toward the doctor's office. She would not want Dr. Hunter or his staff to know she had been crying. Arriving at the office, Breanna approached the receptionist's desk.

"Hello, Breanna," Rachel Franklin said cheerfully. "You're just in time. I have the list made up for you."

"Johnny-on-the-spot, aren't you?" Breanna smiled as Rachel placed an envelope in her hand.

"I try to be. From that list, it looks like you'll be plenty busy."

"Good. I need to keep busy."

Rachel cocked her head and squinted. "Breanna, are you all right?"

"Why, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you just seem a bit melancholy or something."

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking, though."

"Oh! Wait a minute," Rachel exclaimed, pushing aside a stack of papers on her desk. "This is for you."

Rachel picked up a white handkerchief that was folded around something about the size of a silver dollar. Extending it to Breanna, she said, "A tall, dark-haired man came in here a few minutes ago and asked me to give you this."

"Oh. Thank you."

When she was back on the street, Breanna paused and unfolded the handkerchief. The object was exactly the size of a silver dollar and was made of pure silver. It was a medallion. Emblazoned in its center was a five-point star, and around the edge were the words: *THE STRANGER THAT SHALL COME*

FROM A FAR LAND—Deuteronomy 29:22.

Breanna was crying again. People stared as they passed by her on the street, but no one stopped.

“John, what does this mean?” she said, voice quivering. “Where are you from? Oh, I’ve made such a horrible mistake! I love you, John! I love you!”

Movement on the rolling hills to the east captured Breanna Baylor’s attention. The sun was halfway behind the Rockies, throwing its golden hue on the land. She kept her eyes on the tiny speck in the distance while pulling a silver medallion from one of her dress pockets. She read its inscription for the thousandth time.

Breanna had more than a half-dozen of the medallions. John Stranger had kept his promise to look in on her while keeping himself from her sight. Twice he had saved her from certain death, and several other times he had rescued her from danger. On each occasion, he had left behind one of the silver medallions, just to let her know he had been there.

Breanna raised her eyes and focused on the object moving fast toward her. A few more seconds and she could tell it was a rider on a huge black horse.

It was John. He was coming as fast as Ebony could carry him!

Breanna’s heart drummed her ribs. A sweet warmth welled up within her. The long-awaited moment had finally arrived. “Thank You, Lord,” she whispered, thumbing away tears. “Thank You for bringing John back to me. Please...help me to say just the right words.”

Horse and rider were now less than a hundred yards from the cabin. John was dressed in his black flat-crowned hat, white shirt with string tie, black pants, and shiny black boots. She knew his Bible would be in a saddlebag and the Colt .45 would still ride his hip in a tied-down holster.

Suddenly Breanna could hear the birds singing in the trees overhead. The smell of the pine on the warm breeze was sweeter than it had ever been before. The whole world seemed brighter. The man she loved was coming to her. Soon she would be in his arms.

Ebony nickered as he carried the tall man closer. The horse's hoofbeats seemed to pound in rhythm with Breanna's heart. Stranger smiled as he reined in. Breanna smiled back and stepped off the porch. For a brief moment, Stranger looked down at her from the saddle, his expressive gray eyes conveying the love that was in his heart for the woman who stood below him, tears spilling down her cheeks.

John slowly dismounted and looked into her eyes. She took three faltering steps, and they were within arm's reach of each other.

John reached a hand toward her. "Breanna..." He said her name softly, waiting for her to meet his hand.

She reached out to him. Their fingers touched. They stood there for a moment, hands touching, looking into each other's eyes. It seemed to be happening in a silent, far-away world out of the realm of time.

John squeezed her hand and pulled her close. She relinquished herself to his arms, and the dam within her burst. Her words came in sobs.

"Oh, John, my darling John! I love you! I made such a horrible

mistake that day I sent you out of my life. Please forgive me, John! I've been so—”

John's forefinger was on her lips. “Shh,” he said. “You don't have to do this. All that matters is that I know you love me as I love you...that we can have each other. There's nothing to forgive.”

Breanna pushed back gently so as to look into his eyes. “Oh, but there is! I did you wrong! I hurt you deeply! I knew it by the look in your eyes. Oh, John...you weren't even out of sight yet when I realized what a fool I was. I called to you, but you didn't hear me. Then when I went to the office and Rachel gave me the medallion—”

“Don't punish yourself, Breanna,” John said softly. “You don't have to think about it anymore, and you don't have to say anymore.”

“Oh, but I do! You've been so good to me...over and over again. Nobody could blame you if you just up and washed your hands of me.”

“But I couldn't do that, Breanna. I love you with everything that's in me. When I told you that even though I would be out of your life, you would never be out of my heart, I meant it.”

“Yes, John, and you have proven it repeatedly.” Breanna reached up and touched his cheek, then said in a half-whisper, “And I love you, my darling. If you gave me what I deserve and sent me away forever, I would still love you. I will always love you.”

John leaned down, and Breanna closed her eyes as his arms tightened around her once again. Tenderly, he kissed her eyelids, then her lips.

Suddenly there was a loud banging noise behind her. It sounded as if someone was pounding on the cabin door.



Breanna sat bolt upright in bed. There was darkness all around her. The pounding continued, this time punctuated by a male voice.

“Miss Breanna! Miss Breanna! It’s Deputy Wally Frye, ma’am! Marshal Stone sent me to get you! We have an emergency!”

“All right!” she called toward the hotel room door. “I’ll be with you in a moment!”

“Thank you,” came the deputy’s relieved voice. “I’ll wait right here!”

“Fine!” Breanna called.

She threw back the covers and sat up, rubbing her eyes. She fumbled for a match on the bedstand, scratched it into life, and lit the kerosene lantern. The ticking clock next to the lantern told her it was two-thirty in the morning.

Five minutes later, Breanna was dressed, heading for the door, medical bag in hand. Her dream still haunted her. She could almost smell John’s masculine scent, feel his arms around her, taste the sweetness of his lips on her own.

She turned the skeleton key and opened the door. “What’s the emergency, Wally?”

“A wagon train pulled into town a few minutes ago, Miss Breanna. There’s a woman in the train about to give birth to a baby, but she’s having some problems. Her husband is beside himself with worry.”

“Where is she?”

“They’re carryin’ her to your office right now.”