



The Star of All Valleys

Vicki H. Cutler

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Chapter 1

The thermostat needle was nearing the red zone as the pickup labored up yet another long mountain pass. Finally reaching the summit, Willy heaved a sigh of relief and pulled the camper to the side of the road into a broad gravel view area. These mountains were magnificent. Through a gap to the north she took in the vista of the valley she had driven so far to reach. She reached for her camera to get some pictures from this view. The magazine may like to use them for her article. Grateful that the kids were still asleep in the back, she had a minute to look around and snap some pictures both of the mountain pass and the valley opening below.

"I hope this is all worth it," she thought. "Most of our savings is tied up in this little venture. I hope I can get the pictures and information I need and sell the article for more than this trip cost." She was so sick of worrying about money. Ever since Ryan died, it had been one headache after another. At least the kids were still small enough to be mostly unaware of financial matters.

"Are we there yet?" a small voice from the overhead bed called.

"Almost. I just stopped to take pictures. It's beautiful here," Willy answered. "Come down and see."

Both kids slid off the bed and put their shoes on. Willy went around the back to open the door. She lowered the steps and the kids jumped out, blinking in the strong afternoon sunshine.

"It's cool here," Allison said, spreading her arms wide. She climbed a little way up the hillside and surveyed the area. "Look at those high mountains! Can we climb them?"

Jeffy pointed too, his eyes wide. Then he caught sight of a deer halfway up the hill, running between the trees. He made little squealing noises and jumped up and down, beside himself with excitement. Willy lifted him in her arms so he could see better and they all watched until the deer disappeared over the ridge. The kids jumped down and ran around exploring the area while she went to the camper to wake up her sister, Aggie.

"Come on, sis, wake up! Look at this view!" Willy called. "It's only a few miles to the campground."

Aggie hopped out of the truck clumsily, not quite awake, but immediately became alert when she saw the beauty surrounding them. It looked a bit different from back home, but she loved seeing all the new places her sister brought her.

Anxious to reach the valley ahead, they squeezed into the cab and Willy drove slowly down the steep grades to the mouth of Salt River Canyon. There spread out before them was a long, narrow valley, surrounded by foothills rising to higher ranges. It was mostly farmland with small, older homes and decrepit, unpainted barns. "Help me find the sign to Cottonwood Campground," Willy said, but they had reached Smoot without seeing anything.

"We'll have to stop and ask directions, I guess," said Willy. "We must have missed it." She stopped at the only place of business in sight and went inside. Returning after a few minutes, she turned the truck around and drove half a mile back up the road. The sign was very small and brown and it was no wonder they had missed it.

"The man said it is seven miles on a dirt road to the campground," she said. "I hope this old truck can get over the ruts." She drove carefully for what seemed like twenty miles over a winding and very narrow road and was despairing of ever getting there when they finally spotted a sign announcing that they had arrived. They followed the road around a sharp curve and there, partly shaded by the surrounding mountains, was the lake. It was small and deep green and the kids noticed a little waterfall at one end which emptied into the creek they had been following all the way up the canyon. They wanted to get out right there, but Willy insisted that they find a campsite first and get settled in.

She drove through the whole area with first one then the other claiming that this site or that site was the best one of all. They finally agreed on one with no close neighbors and a restroom just a short walk away. Willy inexpertly backed the truck into their spot then started to level the camper with the jacks while the kids explored the area. It was a hard job for a woman, but she was used to it after a couple of weeks on the road. She was building some strength gradually.

That done, she picked up a water jug and went to find the closest pump. Not knowing what to look for, she walked right by it. After she had passed three or four camp sites, she started wondering if she had chosen a primitive area.

Willy kept walking for a little way and then her heart leaped into her throat. "It's only a dog," she told herself, but felt the old panic rising as she watched it catch her scent and raise its

head. It was a big dog of nondescript coloring with a waving plume of tail. Woofing in a friendly way, it trotted straight for her. Her control vanished, and letting out a scream she ran for the nearest tree. She scrambled up the lower limbs and then couldn't reach any more. Terrified, she looked down and saw that the dog thought it was a game and had jumped up on the trunk to bark at her.

"Breathe deep, hang on, calm down," she thought as she tried to steady herself. After trying to slow down the thud of her heart, she looked around for help. She saw it coming in the form of a tall, green-uniformed forest ranger. Her fear turned to embarrassment when she saw the amused look on his face.

"From the color of the hair, I'd say you have a cougar treed, Suzy," he drawled, looking up at the tawny mane framing her face. "Are you okay, Ma'am?" he asked when he saw the terror in her eyes. "Susy wouldn't hurt a fly. I'm right sorry she scared you so bad." He grabbed the dog's collar and told her to sit and be quiet. "Here, let me help you out of there," he smiled up at Willy.

She looked down into the deepest brown eyes she'd ever seen. Her heart did a little jump but she told herself it was still fear of the dog. She reached her hands down to meet his, but he said, apparently still amused, "Nope, not a cougar! It's just a scared kitten." She climbed down a few branches until she could put her hands on his broad shoulders and he reached for her waist. She jumped from the limb and he guided her gently to the ground. Instead of releasing her from his grasp, he looked at her white face and terrified eyes and drew her close to his chest. "Are you all right?" he asked softly. "You look like you've been treed by a bear."

Shakily, Willy forced herself to push away from his broad, comforting chest. "I just have a phobia about dogs," she explained. "One knocked me down and bit me pretty badly when I was little and I've never been able to shake the fear." She started to thank him, her eyes on Suzy, sitting obediently nearby, but the adrenalin high was suddenly gone and her knees buckled. He caught her again in his strong arms and swung her up against his chest.

"Are you camping here?" he asked. "I think I'll just carry you home, if you don't mind." He turned to the dog. "Go back to the station, Suzy. Go! Go back!" The dog turned and loped off in the direction they had come.

"We're at Campsite Number Seventeen," she said. "I can walk. I'm fine. Just let me sit down and I'll be all right in a minute."

"Oh, no," he said, teasingly, reassured by the returning color in her cheeks. "It's not every day I get to rescue a damsel in distress. I'm going to take full advantage of your weakness."

A different fear appeared in her eyes and she stiffened in his arms. He saw it and immediately set her on her feet. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you again, Ma'am," he said humbly. "I would like to be sure you get to camp safely since I caused all this trouble." He bent and picked up the water jug. "Is something wrong with the hydrant in your camp area?" he asked.

"Uh, I haven't found one yet," she answered. She was both relieved and sorry to be out of his arms. She had felt something stir during their closeness that she hadn't felt for a very long time. His dark hair and eyes were so much different than Ryan's blond ones, but his strength and height were similar. Those eyes were so kind and gentle looking.

He pointed to a hydrant in the next site and said, "They kind of blend in when you don't know what to look for."

Embarrassed, she took the jug and said, "Thanks. The kids will laugh when they find out I've walked all this way for nothing."

"Kids? You have kids?" He sounded surprised, then his voice changed to a wry note. "Your husband will have a lot to say, too, I suppose."

"Oh, no, my husband is ...," she stopped as she remembered that she always had to be careful around men. She was trim and attractive and had endured too many experiences with nice, gentle-looking guys who took every advantage they could when they thought she was defenseless. "I'm--uh--sure he won't say anything," she said lamely. "We're here to enjoy Wyoming and to do some research on the intermitting spring. We happened to hear about it from some friends and it sounded interesting and unusual," she rushed on. "Maybe you can tell me whom to contact to get directions and information about it."

"Research?" he asked. "Is your husband a geologist?"

"Oh, no. Actually, I'm the one doing the research," she said. "I want to do an article to sell to some travel magazines. We spend vacations travelling in different states and I write articles and do picture features about the things we see to sell to the tourism bureaus. It's a fun way to make a little money." She waited for him to ask what her husband did, but he just picked up the jug she had dropped again in her agitation.

"You must like the great outdoors as much as I do," he observed. "I've got to go back to the station and get the guys lined up for tomorrow's work, but you're welcome to come over any

time. I'm sure whoever is there will give you directions and tell you what they know. That spring is an amazing phenomenon," he said. "Are you feeling strong enough now to make it back to your campsite? It's a ways."

"Yes, yes, I'm fine now that the dog's gone. I've got to get over that stupid phobia," she assured him. "Thank you so much for rescuing me." As he turned to go, she caught her breath at the wide expanse of his shoulders, the trim, strong legs, and the darkness of the hair under his ranger's hat. Then, suddenly realizing that she didn't have an idea which way Campsite Number Seventeen was, she called, "Oh, sir!"

He turned at her call, a questioning look in his eyes. "I guess I lost my sense of direction when I ran from the dog. Which way is Number Seventeen?" she asked in an embarrassed voice.

He pointed, then said with a reassuring smile, "The name's Bell, Ma'am. Max Bell. That reminds me--why don't you give me your name so I can make my report? I have to report all unusual occurrences."

Aghast that her behavior had to be made part of the public record, she pleaded, "Surely you don't have to report this nonsense? I acted like a silly schoolgirl. Please, can't you just forget it?"

"Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts," he teased her. "Nobody ever reads my reports anyway, so you're safe. Just give me your name or I'll have to describe you as, let's see, 'A tree-climbing woman with cougar-colored hair and a piercing scream.'"

"Willy," she replied hastily. "Well, actually, Willa. Willa Milton."

She was surprised to see a distant look come into his eyes. "Willa," he repeated softly. "That's a name you don't hear often anymore. It was my grandmother's name."

Muttering words of thanks, Willy turned to go and felt his eyes on her as she walked self-consciously down the road. She hurried faster when she realized that she had left the kids alone for quite a while. Thank goodness Aggie was responsible. Remembering the jug that was still empty, she kept an eye out for a water tap. She found one by Number Twenty-three and filled it. Walking with one arm out to balance the weight, she staggered into camp. A look of annoyance passed over her face as she saw Aggie and the kids clustered around a hydrant just past their table. They were throwing water and squealing in delight. "I carried this water all that way and we have one right here?" she asked herself. "How did I miss it? I could have saved myself a lot of grief." Then she remembered that if she hadn't been looking for water, she wouldn't have

gotten treed, and rescued. Her eyes turned dreamy for a minute then she shook her head to clear it and set to work.

She got towels to dry everyone off. The water was ice cold and they were shivering in spite of the warm August afternoon sunshine. She sent them off to gather wood and soon everyone was warmed and hungry. She finally got a fire started in the firepit and they roasted hot dogs and "smashmallows" as Jeffy called them. After they cleaned up, they sat around the fire while darkness settled in. There was such peace here. She looked at her children gazing into the fire and felt such love and joy.

Her own lonesome heart longed for strong arms to hold her and her thoughts stole back to earlier this afternoon when she had been held by a pair of just such arms. How warm they had been. She shivered with remembered feelings. Max. That was a strong, capable name, she thought. She daydreamed a little about a broad chest and dark brown eyes, then mentally shook herself. "He thinks you're married, sweetie," she thought. "Plus, widows with little kids don't usually get a second glance."

Chapter 2

The kids were up early, ready to explore. Willy let them go to the rest room with Aggie. They were full of news when they got back. "Mommy, there's all this gross stinky stuff in their toilets," Allison complained. "Why don't they ever flush?" Aggie hooted at that and Willy explained the finer points of campground plumbing.

"Just be glad we don't have to use the bushes. At least we have someplace to sit and a little privacy," she said.

"Boys don't need to sit all the time," boasted Jeffy, always ready to find something to be proud of. "Grandpa says it's okay for us men to water trees in the woods," he snickered.

"Grandpa had better quit teaching you disgusting things," said Aggie. "If I see you watering a tree, I'll barf!"

"Clean up your mouths and wash your hands," interrupted Willy. "Breakfast is almost ready."

Over their breakfast of pancakes and bacon, they planned the day. "Let's just stay around here today and enjoy the mountains," Willy said. "I'd love to take a lot of pictures. There is a beautiful view in every direction." Aggie, Allison and Jeffy all agreed wholeheartedly.

"We need to explore all the trails," Aggie mused. "Let's go over to the ranger station and get a map. Maybe we can see some wildlife." Aggie was a budding naturalist and wanted to go into some field dealing with any aspect of nature when she got older. At thirteen she had many dreams and aspirations, but remaining at the top of the list was her love of all things natural.

"Good idea," Willy agreed. "Let's get this camp set up so it's like home first, then we can go out exploring."

Allison and Jeffy were just happy to be done travelling for a while and enthusiastic about whatever happened. They were willing to go along with whatever their mother and aunt decided as long as it involved plenty of play time.

They spent the morning putting up a canopy over the picnic table, making their area homey, and gathering wildflowers. Willy had gotten out a colorful table cloth and Allison and Jeffy brought pretty rocks they found to put around the edges to hold it down in the breeze. She

sent the kids to look around camp for flowers to make a centerpiece and found a cup they could fill with water to put them in.

When all looked pretty and homey, they started out on their exploring journey. The first stop was at the ranger station on the edge of the lake. They were greeted by a friendly young lady ranger who pointed out the rack of maps and forest information and told them more about the area. After spreading the map and consulting, they decided to hike along the road at the edge of Cottonwood Lake and see the sights in that direction.

They hadn't gone far when Aggie, ever watchful for wildlife, directed their attention across the lake and they watched a moose come out of the trees and feed in the willows at the edge. They watched until it moved deeper into the willows out of sight and then they went on their way. They passed a whole mountainside of loose, tumbled rocks and caught sight of a family of marmots busy with their winter preparations in and out of holes between them. Jeffy wondered why the rocks didn't fall on them. Willy answered all his questions patiently but was glad when he found a stick and went charging off to try to capture some wildlife. Three year old boys were so inquisitive and full of curiosity.

They decided to try wading in the lake in the hot afternoon, but one dip of their bare feet in the water and they gave up on that idea. They had seen some banks of snow left under the protecting trees on their hike and now they understood why the water was so cold. Aggie was disappointed. She loved to swim and wanted to see how deep the lake was. Willy promised her that they would try to find a swimming pool when they went to town tomorrow. Their attention was diverted when Allison found some tiny sea shells at the edge of the lake. Willy got a shot or two of the pretty little things and gave Allison and Jeffy each a plastic bag to collect as many as they could carry.

They watched a group of people pump up and launch two rubber rafts, then climb aboard and paddle toward the far end of the lake. They were friendly folks and worked and played with much humor and noise. One young mother told Willy that she and her siblings met here at Cottonwood Lake every summer for a family reunion. "We miss our parents. They used to love it up here too. They would tell us about the big dance floor that was built here in their younger days. All the young people would travel in their wagons and by horse to come to the dances."

The sun was to the tops of the western hills when Willy put away her camera. She had gotten some beautiful shots of the lake and surrounding areas. She had a knack for photography

and sometimes the pictures brought in more money than the articles. She was getting quite good at picking out interesting angles and color combinations.

Several times during the day, Willy had found herself daydreaming about yesterday and the tall ranger with strong arms. She had kind of looked for him as they hiked around. When they had stopped in at the ranger station to get a map of the area, she had entered with a little nervousness that he would mention something about their encounter yesterday, but he hadn't been there. The young, very pretty woman at the counter had helped them with maps and answered her questions. She found herself feeling a faint stab of jealousy and was surprised at her reaction. "He certainly has nothing to do with me," she told herself.

Returning to the camp, they all spread out and went in search of firewood. Aggie hit pay dirt when she happened across a nice stack in another campsite. "Nobody is there," she said. "Who cares if we use it?" They all trooped over and carried back armfuls to pile by their own fire ring.

They built another fire and sat around it after supper. It grew very chilly after the sun went down. Willy pulled out warm jackets for them all since the fire only kept one side of them warm at a time. Faint singing could be heard from the large family group camping down the road. They listened and then joined in with their own voices when it was a song they knew. "I wish that Grandma was here," sighed Allison. "She knows so many songs."

When Jeffy's head grew heavy against her arm, Willy stood and picked up the flashlight. "One last trip to the bathroom," she said. "Let's all go together and then we'll turn in for the night."

Teeth brushed and prayers said, they settled down in their beds and listened to the night sounds. An owl hooted from somewhere nearby and an answering hoot came from farther away. They could see the stars shining brightly in the windows and the moon rising over the mountains. Willy lay awake until she heard the deep, even breathing of the children then her eyes closed in peaceful sleep also.

Chapter 3

Jeffy cried in the night and Willy crawled out of bed to comfort him. He had the same nightmare quite often. He told her it was about his daddy touching something and getting burned. "When will Daddy come back home, Mama?" He always asked the same question. Once again she patiently explained that he had gone to live in heaven and they couldn't see him again until it was time for them to go there, too. Jeffy had only been two and had only vague memories of his dad, but Willy had tried to make sure he knew all about him. She didn't know who had told such a little boy that his daddy had been burned. It wasn't a pleasant thought for such a young child to have to carry around.

"I know that he still loves us and is watching us from up there," she said. "Remember the song about the stars being the windows of Heaven? Maybe he is looking down watching you sleep right now."

"Will you sing it to me, Mama?" Jeffy pleaded.

"Sure, just shut your eyes and think about Daddy," Willy told him. She kissed him softly, tucked the blankets around him more securely and began to sing. Her clear, quiet voice calmed him and soon his eyes closed and he fell asleep. She looked at his sweet face that so closely resembled Ryan's and felt so much loneliness. She had to go back outside and look at the stars herself.

She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and quietly stepped out the door. The air was quite chilly and still and the sky was filled with more stars than she had ever seen. She sat at the picnic table, leaned back and gazed above her, humming quietly to herself. A twig snapped and startled her upright. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the form of a man standing in the roadway. "Who is it?" she quavered, struggling to stand up from the table.

"It's just me, Mrs. Milton. Max Bell, the forest ranger," came the quiet reply. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to check to make sure everything was all right. I left Suzy back at the station." He came closer so that she could see him in the dim glow of the firelight.

"Oh, we're fine, thank you," she replied, her heart still thudding from the fright he had given her. "You didn't need to come all the way over here. You keep pretty late hours, don't you?"

"I usually take a walk through the campground before I go off duty, just to check that everything is okay. I like being out at night," he answered. After a little hesitation, he cleared his throat and said, "That was a right pretty lullaby you sang. I enjoyed it."

"Oh," she laughed self-consciously. "My son woke up from a bad dream. He's back to sleep now." She wondered why he had been close enough to hear her sing through the camper walls. The windows were open and maybe sound carried further at night.

Another hesitation, then he said quietly, "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, Ma'am, but I'm sorry about your husband. How long has he been...have you been...?"

This time she rescued him. "Just over a year." Willy tried to sound normal, but the loneliness she was feeling crept into her tone. "He was a power company lineman and was killed in an accident. We didn't think the kids should see him at the funeral and they still don't understand that he is really gone." A sob choked her momentarily. "It's been hard for them."

Max moved softly toward her and tentatively lay a hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to stir you up. Please forgive me." When she didn't pull away, he circled her shoulders with his arm. It felt so warm and comforting that she relaxed for a minute against him. Unexplainably, tears began running down her face and she started sobbing. Soon a gentle hand was wiping her face with a big handkerchief. "Cry all you want. I've got awful big shoulders," he whispered softly against her ear as he gathered her to him.

To her amazement and utter embarrassment, the closer he held her, the more she cried. She had hardly cried since Ryan died. There had always been the kids to think about. She couldn't let go in front of them. She had to be so strong. And now.... She turned her face into his chest and sobbed her heart out. How long they stood there, she didn't know. He never loosened his arms and his hands made little patting motions on her back.

Finally, she came to herself and realized the craziness of what she had done. She felt that she should say something. Her cheeks burned and she was glad he couldn't see her tear-stained face. She must look terrible. Pushing back a little from him, she looked up. "I'm so sorry," she stammered, mortified. "I can't imagine what came over me."

"No need to be uncomfortable with me, Ma'am. I just happened to come along at the right time. You've needed to get that off your chest for a while." He stroked her hair. The comforting feeling of a male hand on her head almost started her off again, but she controlled the urge to cry. "Here," he said, bending over. "Let me put this blanket back around you. You must be freezing. Nights get cold in August here."

How odd, she thought. I didn't even feel it slip off. I wasn't at all cold.

Missing his touch, but knowing it couldn't last forever, she stepped back away from him. Reaching out a hand for the blanket, she felt her leg hit something and then she was falling backward. She thumped down hard and her breath was knocked out a little. She was thankful for the darkness that

covered her red face. What he must think of her! She heard him move and then felt herself being lifted in those strong arms for the second time.

"Wobbly as a new calf," he said, then asked, "Are you hurt?"

"No, I tripped over the water jug." Her voice was full of mortification. She tried to sound light-hearted about it, but her embarrassment was acute. "I'm sorry. Please put me down. I'm fine."

"I feel safer with you here. You're a little accident-prone, wouldn't you say?" His deep voice was so pleasant and he wasn't laughing at her at all.

"I'll go inside and back to bed. Nothing can happen there," she said, a little shakily. She could feel the beat of his heart and it was oddly disturbing to her. It did strange things to her stomach.

He set her lightly on her feet but kept his hands on her shoulders. "You've got a big load to carry on those little shoulders." She could feel his breath touch her lips and then, ever so gently, his lips met hers. She felt herself melting, her knees wobbling and her head spinning. If he hadn't been holding her, she would have fallen. Abruptly, he stepped back, his hands still steadying her. "I'm so sorry! Now it's my turn to apologize," he said. "I had no right to do that."

"I guess it's fair payment for all the rescuing and comforting you've done for me today," she murmured softly. "Thank you again. For everything." she added. Taking a shaky breath, she dared to tell him, "I'm looking forward to talking to you about the intermitting spring tomorrow. Are you on duty?"

"It's my day off...", her heart sank until he continued, "so I'm free to show you around in person, if you don't object. There are so many back roads and canyons that you're sure to get lost by yourself." Her heart rose up again, nearly cutting off her breath.

"I'd love to have a tour guide," she said. "Are you sure it wouldn't inconvenience you? I hate to tie up your Saturday."

"No problem. I haven't been up to the Spring all summer. It should be intermitting by now and you can do all the research you want. What time do you want to get started?"

After working out the details, he strode off down the road in the direction of the ranger station and Willy watched him out of sight, not believing her boldness. She climbed back in the camper and locked up then crawled into her bed. All the peace of the night was gone. She was wide awake and getting more shocked by the minute at her behavior. Whatever had come over her to cry like that? And then falling down. And then letting him kiss her!

Her fingers lightly touched her lips. Her stomach did its flip-flop again. She hugged the blanket to herself and remembered those strong arms holding her so close. A long sigh escaped her. Her eyes grew heavy and she slept, a tiny smile on her face.

Chapter 4

Long before sunlight hit the windows Willy was awake. She looked out at the green, rocky hillside close by and listened to the morning birds welcoming the new day. It took a few minutes for her thoughts to collect themselves and her mind to awake from a pleasant dream. Then she sat bolt upright, bumping her head on the low ceiling. Max! He was coming to take them to the intermitting spring today.

"You crazy woman!" she shouted in her thoughts. "What have you done? How can you subject your kids and your sister to a total stranger?" Well, not exactly total, she amended, smiling in remembrance of last night. He has nice arms--and lips. She climbed down from the bed, cheeks again bright red. "I can't face him in the daylight. I just can't! What must he think of me?"

She immediately began trying to think up some excuses to put him off. She didn't know a thing about him. Her instincts told her he was reliable, but, remembering where her instincts had gotten her a few weeks ago when she had gone to her first and only dance after Ryan had died, she didn't have much faith in them. The man who had invited her to go out for ice cream after the dance had scared her badly. He had looked so normal and nice and clean cut. She had hesitantly gone with him at the urging of her friend who knew him.

They had eaten their ice cream and then he had driven her back to her car. The parking lot was deserted by then and he wanted to talk some more. She knew she was in trouble when he noticed she had kicked off her heels and he began trying to persuade her to let him kiss her toes. She cringed again at the very thought. When polite talking and even a flat refusal hadn't worked, she was starting to feel a little afraid. Finally she had escaped his clutching hands by smacking his face hard and jumping barefoot out the door. Luckily, it had only been a short run back to her car and she had jumped in and driven off. He hadn't followed her and she had never seen him again. All she lost that night was a pair of shoes. After that, she decided being alone wasn't so bad. Until now.

Pushing all thoughts of strong arms and brown eyes out of her head, she dressed. The kids were stirring. Aggie sat up and smiled. "I think I'm going to love it here," she said. They made their trip to the facilities down the road then ate breakfast. Willy had been thinking all the time what she could say to Max when he came. No really plausible excuse came to mind but she was feeling worried that she had let it go this far. Maybe she could just have him point out the way on her map and then get rid of him. Politely, of course. Willy was always polite to a fault.

Distractedly packing a picnic lunch, she realized a way out. Of course! There wasn't room for all of them in the cab. She would ask if he would just show her on the map where to go and they would not put him to the trouble of guiding them. The sound of a vehicle approaching sent the butterflies fluttering in her stomach and she jumped when his knock sounded on the door. She opened it and looked down into his eyes and hardened herself to tell him of the change in plans.

"Morning, Ma'am," he said. Allison and Jeffy crowded around her at the camper door and looked at the tall stranger. He didn't look like a ranger at all today. He was dressed in jeans, a plaid shirt over a tee shirt with a light jacket on top, and cowboy boots. He had topped it off with a big hat.

"Who's that, Mommy?" Jeffy whispered shyly, clinging to his mother's leg. Allison had hidden behind Aggie.

"This is Mr. Bell. He is a forest ranger and knows all about that special spring I came to write about," Willy explained. She introduced the kids to him. "These are my children, Allison and Jefferson. And this is my sister, Agatha."

Aggie rolled her eyes at the use of her full name and Jeffy piped up, "He doesn't look like a forest ranger. He looks like a cowboy." Then as the possibilities filled his little mind, he asked in awe, "Do we get to ride horses?"

"Mr. Bell," Willy broke in, grabbing the map from the table and stepping down from the camper. She ignored Jeffy's question. "I've been thinking that I really don't want to impose on your day off and have you spend your free time showing us around. If you'll just draw the route on a map I'm sure I can find it just fine." She spread the map on the picnic table. "I believe we're here," she said, pointing. "Where do we go after we get back on the main road?" she asked. "I haven't been able to locate the spring on the map."

"It's much too hard to find by yourselves," he grinned. "And I wouldn't have offered to take you if I had other plans. I can give you a first rate tour, free of charge or other obligation." He turned to Jeffy and said, "And yes, horse riding can be arranged!"

Willy knew when she was defeated as the kids jumped up and down squealing in glee at this unexpected news, but she bravely played her trump. "We can't possibly all fit in the cab. Just draw the route on the map and we'll be fine."

"Oh, I planned that we could take my car. The roads are rough and there's plenty of room for four passengers," he said.

Blowing her cheeks out and torn between reluctance and glee herself, Willy stared into his eyes a moment and then made the choice to trust him. What could possibly happen with the whole group

there? She handed out jackets for everyone and picked up the cooler. "I brought a picnic," she explained. Max took the cooler from her and put it behind the back seat in his jeep.

He opened the doors. "Oh boy!" the little ones shouted, piling in. "We never rode in this kind of a car before." Aggie still looked a little confused, but said nothing. Soon they were all belted into the seats. She sat with Allison and Jeffy in back and Willy sat in the front.

The jeep had soft sides and zippered windows but Max suggested they open everything up so they could see and smell the fresh mountain fragrances. He started the motor and turned into the roadway around the campground.

"I'll need to learn all about you," Max called over the sound of the motor. "How old are you, Agatha?" he asked, looking in the rear view mirror.

"It's Aggie. I'm thirteen," she replied shortly.

"Oh, sorry. Where are you from in Washington?" he persisted.

"Portland." Aggie's voice was sullen and she rolled her eyes.

"Oh, I see. From your plates, I assumed you were all from Washington," Max observed.

"Aggie lives with our parents in Portland and spends part of the summer with me to help with the kids while we're travelling doing my research and writing," explained Willy. "The kids and I live south of Seattle in Kent."

"All right," said Max. "And Allison, let me guess. You're five, am I right?"

Allison giggled and nodded, still shy but warming up fast. "How can you tell?" she asked in her soft voice.

"It's easy," laughed the big man in the front seat. "You've got 'Kindergartener' written all over your face!"

Allison put up her hands and felt her face. She turned to Aggie with big eyes and asked, "Will it come off?" The tension broke as everyone laughed. Allison ducked her curly blond head, not understanding the laughter, but not offended.

Then Jeffy, unable to stand being confined any longer, and eager for his turn, unbuckled his belt and pulled himself up behind the stranger. "Big hat!" he said, awe in his little voice. Max grinned.

"You like my hat? Today I'm a Wyoming cowboy," he exclaimed. "Do you want one like it?"

Jeffy nodded vigorously, then remembering his purpose in standing up, he yelled, "I'm free, Mr. Rangerbell!"

"Free? Oh, three!" Max caught on just in time. "You're a big boy for being three. Are you the man of the family?"

"No, we don't got no mans," Jeffy shook his head. "Daddy got burnded," he said, his eyes big and blue and clouded just now. "He's in heaven and watches us through the stars. Where are the stars today, Mama?"

Willy ruffled his hair and told him how the sun is so bright it keeps us from seeing the stars but they are still there all the time.

"How about getting back in your seat belt, little man?" Max called over the wind. "This road is bumpy and you could fly into the trees."

Jeffy sat back down and let Aggie buckle him in. "He called me 'little man'," he giggled in an undervoice to her.

They watched the scenery go by and soon were out of the canyon and heading north on the main highway. All across the valley were the silver arcs of sprinkler systems bringing water to the green fields.

"What are the crops around here?" Willy wanted to know.

"Mostly alfalfa. A little barley. It's so dry this time of year the season is about over," Max answered. "They have to share out the water now because the creeks and river get so low. That's when the Spring works best, though. It doesn't intermit when the water is high in early summer."

After a few miles they slowed and drove into the small town of Afton. "What's that?" asked Allison as they passed under a huge arch in the middle of town.

"Those are elk horns," Max explained as he pulled into an empty parking spot on the street. "Do you want to take a closer look?" They all piled out. Willy caught herself thinking how nice it was to have someone else lift the children out of the car. Max swung Jeffy up in his arms and held Allison's hand when she shyly offered it. They walked over to the arch and touched the bony horns.

"There are hundreds of them," marvelled Aggie, coming out of her silence. "Why did they have to kill all those elk just to make an arch? How disgusting!" The budding ecologist in her was incensed.

Max quickly disabused her mind of the picture of hundreds of dying elk having their antlers chopped off. "Elk lose their antlers every winter after the mating season. There is a big feeding area about thirty miles north of here and the Boy Scouts just picked most of these up off the ground from there."

"Can we go see the elk, Mr. Bell? What is an elk?" asked Allison, all shyness gone. Something about the man gave her a sense of safety and she held on tightly to his hand.

Max explained that they looked like big deer but that they were up in the high mountains at this time of year and just came down to the feeding grounds when the winter snows were too deep for them

to find food. When they were through looking at the arch, instead of returning to the jeep, Max led them into a variety store and headed for the hat counter.

"You can't be a Wyoming cowboy without the proper hat," he said. He picked one out that was Jeffy's size and tried it on him. The delighted little boy bounced around with joy. There was even a pink one for Allison and her eyes lit up with surprise. "How about you, Aggie? The sun is pretty hot up there. Here's one your size."

"Gross!" she retorted, pulling a face. "I brought my Laker's hat." She remembered her manners just in time and said, "Thanks anyway."

"Mrs. Milton?" Max asked, holding up a feminine version of his own large hat.

"Sorry, I can't stand to wear hats, hot sun or not," she replied, thinking how much all this was going to cost. She needn't have worried, though, because Max insisted it was included in the tour and paid not only for both hats but also for matching official cowboy scarves which he tied around the necks of both kids, explaining the many uses real cowboys found for them. Glowing with pleasure, the kids skipped back up the street and they all climbed into the jeep.

Max pulled out and drove a short distance past more stores. He took a right turn on the street that was marked, Swift Creek Canyon. They passed through a pretty residential section of town and Allison spotted a familiar sign. "Garage Sale!" she shouted, pointing.

"Do you read already before you even start school?" Max was impressed and winked at Allison in the rear view mirror.

"No. She's just seen a lot of them," Willy answered for her, her face growing pink again. "We're not stopping at garage sales today, Allison." Willy was momentarily embarrassed, but she had found the great economic advantage of doing a lot of their shopping for clothes and other things at garage sales. She saved huge amounts of money that way but knew that her parents and Aggie in particular abhorred the practice. They were of the opinion that used goods were somehow tainted and none of them would be caught dead wearing something someone else had worn previously.

Willy smiled to herself when she reflected that Aggie would have a fit if she knew that the Laker's hat that she cherished as a prized possession had come from a garage sale. Willy had been thrilled to find it and only had to part with fifty cents for it. It had been a wonderful birthday present, but she knew it would be garbage if Aggie discovered its origins. Luckily, Willy had found it when the kids had been playing at a neighbor's so they didn't know its history and couldn't blab.

Her wandering thoughts were snapped back to the present when Max called out, "I see a star!"

"Where? Where?" shouted the children together.

"Right up there on the mountain," said Max, pointing. High on the face of the nearest foothill was a painted white star.

"How did it get there?"

"What is it up there for?"

The questions buzzed and Max laughed and explained that in Wyoming like most towns in the west, every community with a hill of any size close by would paint a letter or symbol of some kind up high to show school spirit for the local high school. Here, he told them, they always put torches around the star on the night before the big homecoming football game and had a pep rally downtown.

"Why don't they have an A for Afton, then?" asked Aggie.

"There are a lot of little towns all around the two valleys here so the whole area is called Star Valley," Max answered. "One of the early settlers called it 'The Star of all Valleys' and that's where it got its name." Chuckling, he continued, "A lot of the old-timers joke that its real name was 'Starve Alley' because of the cold, hard winters we have here. For many years, the settlers were snowed in the valley for most of the winter and I guess it wasn't the easiest place to live."

"Has your family been in the valley long?" Willy asked.

"Yes," he answered. "My great grandmother rode into the valley in a wagon one day and delivered a baby the next. They had to camp out in their wagon for most of the summer until they could get a house built. It must have taken a lot of guts to live a life like that."

Chapter 5

The canyon road that led to the spring was winding and rough in places. They bumped along for several miles, enjoying the mountains and the clear creek that danced in the sunshine. Finally, the jeep lurched to a stop and Max said, "This is the end of the road. We'll have to hike from here. It's another half mile or so."

They piled out, the younger ones giggling and squealing. Max had brought a canteen that he said they could fill from the pure water of the spring. "Best water in the world," he claimed. "Ice cold and naturally soft."

As they hiked along, the trail sloped gradually uphill but was easy walking, even for Jeffy, who resisted all offers for help. Max pointed out some wild raspberries that grew along the roadway. They had a wonderful time picking and eating as many as they could find. The little ones got poked from the thorny stems but soon grew more careful. He also showed them where tiny wild strawberries could be found and soon they were searching for those and the tart wild grapes under the bushes and in the clearings. It was slow progress but everyone was enjoying themselves.

They came to a pathway that branched off the trail they were following. Max pointed to a high, sheer rock wall in the direction that the path led. "The Spring is at the base of that wall right up there," he said. "Some of it is a steep and rocky climb, but we can all make it if we stick together and help each other. There's a trail by the edge of the creek bed. Stay off the mossy rocks, though. They are slippery and it's cold water."

Willy set up her camera and took pictures of the sloping creek bed. Only a small dribble of water was in the creek. "Does the town take all the water?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he answered. "It's intermitting now and is in its off cycle. Maybe by the time we get there it will turn on again. It cycles every 20 minutes or so, depending on the season."

There was a big old wooden pipe half buried in it. Max explained that it was the old water pipe the town of Afton had used for years to bring the city water down from the mountain. They had installed a new pipeline underground that tapped directly into the Spring several years ago, but hadn't bothered to remove the old one.

They labored upward for several minutes. Willy, out of shape from her many hours writing at the computer, was soon panting. "This altitude is a little higher than Kent," she gasped, sinking down onto a big boulder. "I'm used to sea level. Just how high up are we?"

"The elevation of Afton is about 6400 feet," Max told her, "and we've been climbing steadily all the way."

"Mommy's tired," jeered Allison as she and Aggie skipped up the steep trail. Jeffy came to stand by his mother and lend her moral support.

"Shall I hold your hand, Mama?" he asked, concern in his eyes.

Max helped Allison over some of the steepest places then came back to put Jeffy on his shoulders and offer his hand to Willy. She still felt shy around him but his steady helping hand made the going a lot easier. As they came right up against a corner where two sheer walls of towering rock met, they heard a whooshing noise as if air was being sucked into giant lungs. "What's that noise, Mr. Rangerbell?" Jeffy wondered.

"Around here, this is called 'The Spring that Breathes'," explained Max. "It's taking a big deep breath now so it can blow out the water again. It breathes in for a while and then the water flows for about fifteen or twenty minutes."

"What makes it do that?" wondered Aggie, fascinated.

"Nobody knows for sure, although geologists and scientists have been studying it for years. It is some kind of a siphon effect like when you drink from a soda pop bottle. You have to let air into the bottle before any liquid can come out. It rushes in between swallows," he said.

"Wow! Some pop bottle!" said Aggie, looking at the huge walls surrounding them.

They all climbed onto the big, flat cement slab that had been positioned over the open spring mouth to keep dirt and rocks from falling in. There was a pipe with a U-shaped top where the noise was coming from as air was being sucked into the spring. Max told them to hold their hands over the opening of the pipe. Each one in turn did it and marvelled at the power of the suction. "It's like a huge vacuum cleaner," said Aggie.

Soon the noise died down and was replaced by a gurgling they heard deep in the earth. "Watch, now. The water is rising and will soon start to flow out," said Max. They scrambled out of the stream bed, slipping on the mossy rocks. A little trickle of water started pooling between the rocks and then gradually it turned into a rushing, white water torrent. Willy snapped pictures from many angles while the others watched in wonder. Max leaned over and held his canteen in a small waterfall, filling it with the pure, sweet water. They passed it around and drank deeply. Finally the cascade began to diminish until there was just a trickle again and then it stopped altogether leaving just the wet rocks as evidence that any water had been there.

"Where did the water go?" asked Jeffy, climbing back into the recently filled stream bed and trying to peer into the hole under the cement slab. He lost his footing and splashed into a remaining

puddle. He hopped up quickly, his breath lost at the shock of the icy water. Willy helped him to the bank and dried him off with his new scarf. His pants were pretty wet, but would dry soon in the warm air. She moved her tripod and camera to the other side of the spring and took some shots from that angle, then aimed at the rock walls high above them. Something landed on her lens and then she could feel bugs crawling in her hair and on her back. Yelling, she scrambled back across the cement slab, abandoning her camera as she swatted and flailed her arms.

"I should have warned you about the June bugs," Max laughed, shooing them off her and picking some particularly sticky ones out of her hair. "They are thick up here for some reason and drive people crazy, but they don't bite."

After watching the Spring breathe for one more cycle, the kids were ready to go back down the mountain and eat lunch. Aggie climbed agilely down the trail, helping the little ones over the steep, rocky places. Max offered his hand to Willy, commenting that he remembered how accident-prone she was. She blushed at the memory of falling so ungracefully last night and was glad it was dark at the time. At one turn in the trail, the kids were temporarily out of sight. Max pulled her around to face him. "You've got nice kids," he said. "I have enjoyed bringing all of you here today."

"I don't know how to thank you," she said, meeting his eyes in sincerity.

"I can think of a way," he answered, looking deeply into her hazel eyes. "You have the sweetest lips I've ever tasted. I'm going to try another sip if you don't object." His breath was warm and his arms closed around her gently. For all of his size, he was always so gentle. Before she could think what to say or do, he had captured her mouth with his own. Again she went limp against him. It just felt so GOOD to be held again. Inevitably, though, she came to herself and stiffened.

At her first sign of distress, he loosened his grip and slid his hands down her arms, taking her hands again. "I won't apologize this time, Willy," he whispered, his eyes dark and tender. "I've been wanting to do that all day."

Speechless, her mind in a turmoil, she let him guide her down the trail, hand in hand. They could see Aggie and the children playing hide and seek among the willows by the path. Before they reached them, Willy had retrieved her hand and nonchalantly called everyone together. They hiked back along the trail until the jeep came into view. "I'm starving!" Allison cried. "Let's eat!"

The necessity of clearing her mind and taking care of the business of getting lunch brought Willy's emotions under control. Opening the cooler full of food, they found a flat boulder close by and spread a cloth on top for their picnic table. The attention of the children was drawn to a couple of chipmunks darting around the area. Max put small pieces of bread and grapes on a stump a few feet away and they all munched on sandwiches and quietly waited to see what would happen.

Jeffy squealed with delight when the chipmunks finally overcame their fear and stole some crumbs. When the food was all gone both from the cooler and the stump, the little ones dragged Aggie off to help them collect some snail shells they had spotted earlier. They went happily off, their voices echoing against the canyon walls. Willy called after them to stay close so they could hear her call them when she was through putting away the lunch things.

"We don't need to stay longer," she said to Max. "I'm sure you've got lots of things to do on a Saturday. We won't take up any more of your time."

"Well, personally, I always like a nap after a hike and a good meal," he told her. "There's a cool patch of shade over here I've got my eye on."

He got an old blanket from the back of the jeep and spread it in the shade of a big pine tree. He stretched out and placed his hat over his face, contentedly sighing.

Willy put away all the lunch things and looked longingly at the blanket. She would have enjoyed a nap herself after her exertions of the morning, but there was no way she would go share a blanket with her big new friend. He was entirely too free with kisses. She looked around for some other spot to rest then changed her mind and walked down the road in the direction of the children's voices. She loved the sweet peace of the canyon and the smells of pine and mountain flowers wafting down on the breeze.

Her mind wandered to other summers and other canyons. She and Ryan had been so happy. They had been high school sweethearts and married as soon as Ryan got done with his training and found a job with the power company. Neither one had any desire to go to college much to Willy's parents' dismay. Willy had always loved reading books and tried her hand at writing short stories and articles. To her amazement, she actually sold a few and reveled in being paid for doing what she loved. Ryan laughed at her small income but insisted that she not work outside the home when Allison was on the way. That was just fine with her. She loved homemaking and filled her hours with the domestic little tasks necessary to keep their small apartment cozy and clean.

Ryan's work was demanding and he was gone a lot, but he enjoyed what time he did get to spend with his family. She remembered his delight when each of the kids were born. He had loved them so tenderly and worked extra shifts to be sure they were provided for.

They had shared a love of the out of doors and spent most of their free time in the mountains and rural areas. Washington is such a beautiful state and filled with a huge variety of scenery and destinations. They found that the kids traveled well so they invested in an old camper. It had been comfortable and served them well on their jaunts. Life had been so good. How much she had loved him!

Then she remembered where she was and who she was with. "You are so disloyal!" she berated herself. "I wonder what Ryan is thinking if he's watching your behavior now? You didn't even try to keep that man from kissing you! And he did it TWICE!"

Chapter 6

Willy sat on a fallen log by the trail and felt the old familiar pain twist at her heart. She remembered the day Ryan had left for work for the last time. She had been packing his lunch when he came down and announced that as soon as he got home, they were going to go trade in the old pick-up and camper on brand new ones. Aghast that he wanted to add such a large debt to their already strained finances, she had reminded him of their situation and they had argued. They had only recently moved into a small house and paying the mortgage was a burden they hadn't quite expected.

Willy had tried to economize but she was young and inexperienced. She was so busy caring for the two children that she hadn't much time for writing to bring in any income herself. Some of their bills didn't get paid and Ryan was feeling the strain also. Willy didn't know how he could justify such a huge expenditure and suggested that they put it off for a while until they got caught up a little. Ryan had left for work in a bad mood. He did not like the feeling of being controlled. If he wanted a new camper, he was going to get a new camper. They'd work it out!

The sound of their raised voices and the slam of the back door had wakened the children and Willy had swallowed her tears and gone to get them up. It was only a few hours later when the squad car had driven up and she was given the news about his accident.

Willy's face clouded when she thought of that day. It was all still so clear in her mind. The policeman had been somber and polite and told her all he knew. He said they weren't sure about Ryan's condition but he had been taken to the hospital in an ambulance. After he left, Willy was filled with shock and confusion and fear. She ran next door and disjointedly explained to one of her new neighbors who had been friendly since they moved in what had happened and asked her to watch the kids. Before she left, she remembered to call Ryan's parents and blurted the story out to them and told them which hospital he was in. Then she jumped in the car and raced the few miles to the hospital.

The emergency room had been busy that day and she had trouble getting through the crowded waiting room to find someone who knew where Ryan was. Finally, Ryan's partner, who had been with him when the accident happened, saw her struggles and came to take her to the intensive care room.

There her husband lay, surrounded by white coated doctors, nurses, and machinery, but they parted when she walked fearfully to the bedside. He was swathed in bandages about his head and arms, with tubes running in and a respirator pumping. No one would meet her eyes and the postures of the medical people told her the situation was very grave.

Willy had tried to find a place to touch him, to let him know she was there. She finally had just leaned over his face and sobbed out a plea for him to wake up--to live. He wasn't conscious and there was no response. Tears streaming from her eyes, she felt the hands of their own family physician, Dr. Corra, turn her from the bed and help her to a chair in the waiting room. "What happened?" she had asked in despair. "How bad are his injuries?"

"They tell me that he was handling a supposedly dead wire when someone down the line must have turned on a large generator and fed electricity into the line. It knocked him out of the crane basket and he fell about 30 feet. He was burned severely, which is bad enough, but he fell on his head and that is worse. We've had to start his heart three times," he had told her gently.

Willy looked into his eyes searching for comfort and hope, but what she saw there started the tears coming. The doctor touched her hands and said reluctantly, "Willy, we just got the results from the EEG. There is no sign of brain activity."

Willy had gazed at him in confusion. "No brain activity? What does that mean?" she asked, terrified.

He went on to explain the technical medical terms, but she didn't hear until his last words, said quietly but firmly. "He's only being kept alive by the machines. You need to think about what comes next. In my opinion, it would be best to turn them off soon."

Screaming her anguish, Willy remembered how she had lost control, crumpled against his chest and sobbed, asking if there was nothing they could do. When the doctor assured her that they had done everything possible already, she raised her wet face and cried, "It can't be true! He can't be dying! I didn't even get to say good-bye! I've got to say good-bye!" She jumped up and started in a stumbling run back to the room, tears blurring her vision. "Please let me see him," she said to the nurse by the bed.

The doctor followed her in then nodded and asked the others to leave. Alone by the bedside, Willy, no longer afraid to touch an injured part of his still form, hugged his body and whispered an agonized apology that their last words had been unhappy. She told him of her love and hugged and kissed him. Then again the shock overcame her and she broke down in sobs to

pound her fists on the bed and berate him for leaving her, for taking such a dangerous job, for deserting his young family.

After several minutes the piercing shock diminished and she felt the beginnings of resignation and grief. She bent once more over the still and bandaged form on the bed and made a promise. "I will be the best mother for our children," she whispered. "I won't let them forget you. I promise you that no one will ever replace you in my heart."

It hadn't been easy to get through the ordeal of the next few hours. Ryan's parents lived nearby and came to the hospital as soon as they could. After hours of exhausting all the medical opinions they could find, they all had reluctantly agreed that there was no longer hope and the plugs needed to be pulled. It was done late that night with the three of them present.

The terrible finality of the decision was very hard to bear and when the steady sounds of the pumping machines had stopped, Willy had still strained to listen for any breathing that might miraculously begin spontaneously. Of course there was none and the room was still and silent except for the quiet weeping of three heartbroken people.

Willy was so distraught that Ryan's mom and dad offered to stay with her and the children overnight. When she went to pick up the kids, the neighbor said they were sound asleep and offered to keep them overnight so they wouldn't be disturbed quite yet. Willy agreed, knowing that she needed to gain some control over her own emotions before having to break the news to such young children. She couldn't imagine how to tell them or what to do to ease it for them.

Willy had called her parents from the hospital and they had arrived the next morning from Portland. The four grandparents helped her break the news to Allison and Jeffy. Allison had been close to her daddy and was confused and broken-hearted. Jeffy was too young to understand but he picked up on the general atmosphere of grief and became quiet and subdued.

Both sets of parents helped her through the worst of the arrangements and the funeral. It was the only way she would have made it. Sharing the burden had been easier on all of them. Their grief was just as deep and they needed comfort and support also.

After the funeral she and the children had gone to Portland for a few days to get away from the house with so many memories. Her parents had been soothing and let her handle her grief in her own way. They cared for the children but didn't push or try to manage her life and

had given her much good advice. Finally after several weeks, she, Allison and Jeffy had returned to their own home and had begun the work of taking up their lives again.

Settling into a home without Ryan had been extremely hard. She found that she needed to spend much more time with the children to be sure they didn't feel alone and neglected. She tried to keep them involved in different activities and busy so there wasn't much time to spend feeling sad. The first thing that really hit her, though, was the pile of bills that was stacking up.

The deeper she delved into their accounts and debts, the more alarm she felt. She knew they had struggled to meet their bills and had to juggle payments and put off creditors sometimes, but she saw from all the papers strewn through the desk that their situation had for a long time been teetering on the brink of financial disaster. She finally confided in an accountant friend who offered to organize everything for her and see what could be done. Luckily, the electric company that employed Ryan had provided a generous life insurance policy and that had saved her.

She eventually knew she had to sell everything she wouldn't be using so she found buyers for Ryan's gun collection, the boat, the motorcycle and the two all-terrain vehicles. She kept only a few other things she thought the children might like to remember him by when they were older. She had been advised to pay off as much of the home loan and the remaining loans on the truck and camper and her small car. And of course the credit cards. Thank goodness they hadn't traded up to a bigger truck and sunk even deeper in debt. She kept the cameras since she had already started writing her travel articles to try to help with the finances. There was just enough money to tide her over until the checks from her feature articles and the sales of her photography had started coming in.

Now that Allison would be starting school, though, Willy would be forced to cut down her travel to just the summer months and maybe holidays and would have to find another way to do her research. She hoped that the articles she would write about the places they had visited during this trip would bring in enough income from various sources to last them through the winter. They had been able to travel to several states and had been on the road for most of the summer since Aggie had gotten out of school.

Surfacing from her reveries, Willy's heard the kids and Aggie coming back from their snail expedition and her mind came back to the present. She rose from the log where she had

rested but turned and wiped her eyes. Remembering always made her cry. When would that ever end, she wondered. Taking a deep breath, she called out and went to meet them.

They showed her all their treasures--empty snail shells, wild flowers, and bleached bones from some unfortunate woods creature. By the time they reached the jeep, Max had finished his nap, the blanket was folded and all that remained to do was to stow all the booty in the back. Noticing the long, red-tipped flowers among the rest, Max gave them a lesson in botany and teasingly threatened to arrest them for picking the protected Indian Paint Brush that was Wyoming's state flower.

Allison and Jeffy looked up at him with big eyes and started to take them out of the bunch. Max just laughed, patted their heads, and said, "I don't think there's any harm in keeping them now that they are picked. Next time, though, just enjoy them where they are. That way, they are there for the next people that come along."

They took their places in the jeep and started back down the long road. The hot sun and motion of the vehicle soon put both kids and Aggie to sleep. Willy's eyes grew heavy, too, but she wouldn't let herself drop off.

She asked Max about the valley and the town, but she didn't try to delve into anything personal. On the other hand, he asked her about her family, her home, her work and seemed intensely interested in her past projects and her travels. Soon the last curve was rounded and the town spread out before them.

"Is it all right if we stop for ice cream before we head back up to Cottonwood?" he asked.

The word, 'ice cream', was enough to wake the two little ones and they shouted their approval. Willy shrugged and smiled. "Only if it's my treat this time," she agreed.

They pulled into the Whirl Inn Drive-in and found an empty picnic table outside. After the girl came to get their orders, Allison noticed that her mother's nose was getting red. "You're all sunburned, Mama," she said.

"Should have bought that hat," agreed Max. "You're really burned. The thin air at this high altitude does more than make you breathe harder. It has a tendency to make people burn easier, too."

Willy, self-conscious about her red nose, noticed that her arms were pretty pink, too, and decided to invest in some suntan lotion. She had seen a pharmacy in town and asked if they could stop for a few minutes on their way through. "I need to call Mrs. Danner in Kent and see if

everything is okay at home, too," she told the kids. "Let me see if my phone has any reception here in town," she said, pulling it out of her purse. "I won't talk long," she assured Max. "You must need to get home."

"No problem. I'm in no hurry. How about if we drive by my place on the way back to the canyon, too?" Max offered. "I live on a big ranch with horses and cows."

Enthusiastically, everyone agreed, but Willy felt some reservations. This big, friendly charmer was just getting too close. They would only be here for a week or two and she knew how quickly kids get attached to new friends. She had noticed that Allison especially liked being around men and seemed to make friends easier with them than with women. She supposed it was just her longing for a father-figure.

Willy looked at her little daughter's face, animated just now with interest as Max described the horses, sheep and cows on his ranch. He was telling about Smoky, the grey Appaloosa horse, and his dislike of being caught. Jeffy's eyes got big when he heard about the fences the horse would jump rather than let the group that was trying to catch him surround him.

"I wish I could ride a horse," Jeffy said wistfully.

"You'll have to come over while you're in town and see if my brother, Lloyd, has a gentle one for you to ride," Max offered.

The little boy's eyes lit up and he turned to his mother for immediate permission. "Not today, Jeffy," she said. "It's getting late and we need to get back to camp before dark. Maybe some other day."

"Tomorrow?" he asked hopefully. "I never rode a horse before."

Finally, to put him off, Willy said, "We'll see," and turned his attention to a ferris wheel in the distance. "Is there a carnival in town?" she asked Max.

"The Lincoln County Fair starts Monday," he informed her. "That would be a fun place to go. They have all sorts of shows and exhibits and livestock. And there is a rodeo every night. Have you ever been to a rodeo?" he asked.

They had heard of them, but never seen one. He entertained them with a detailed account of what goes on at these favorite activities of Wyoming towns.

"I didn't know there was so much to do in such a small town," Aggie commented. She had expected to come here and enjoy the scenery and not much more. "I hope we can come back to town and go to the rodeo sometime this week."

Willy assured them that they would make time for the fair and rodeo before they left for home. Max parked on Main Street and Willy sent Aggie into the drug store for sunscreen while she made her phone call in the car. Max took the kids on a short walk to window shop. Soon they were on their way again.

Max turned down a gravel lane not far out of town and drove a couple of miles to a beautiful ranch house. It was made of white brick and was set at an angle to the road. A circular drive with a wagon wheel at each end broke the monotony of a large, green lawn. He didn't pull in but kept going past and pointed out the barns and equipment and the fields. There were several fields covered with bales of hay with two crews of men out loading them up. It looked like a prosperous operation and Max had pride in his voice when he told how hard his father had worked to build it all up.

The trip back up the canyon to their campground was uneventful except when they rounded a bend and came across something fluttering in the road. Max pulled over and got out to investigate. "It's a baby bat," he called. "Come and see it."

They all jumped out and walked cautiously up to the fluttering animal. "Where's its mother?" Allison wanted to know.

"I don't know," Max answered. "It is very unusual for bats to be out at all during the day. I wonder what happened." He carefully cradled the small, quivering animal and placed it gently in the shade of a rock. "Maybe its parents will hear it calling tonight and come to rescue it. We'll get it out of the sun so it won't die."

When they reached camp, they unloaded the cooler and their jackets and treasures. Willy reminded the children to thank Max for the great day they'd had and then they hurried to the table with Aggie to spread out their acquisitions. Willy turned to thank Max again. "It was truly a wonderful day," she told him. "We all enjoyed it. I got so many pictures and so much information for my article. I've got to go write it all down before I forget."

"We can go again if you need more," he offered. "I enjoyed the day, too. I feel like I'm part of the family already."

Willy stiffened at that remark. A stab of guilt darkened her eyes as she remembered her vow to Ryan. She had promised that no one would replace him in her heart and now here was this man trying to worm his way into their family. She turned, flinging a curt 'good-bye' over her shoulder and went inside.

Hearing the engine roar into life, and the children calling their farewells, Willy peeked out the window and suppressed the jolt of her heart. She knew she was being disloyal to the memory of her husband to even entertain the faintest glimmer of interest in another man. She gave herself a stern mental lecture about keeping her mind on the business at hand and not letting it wander into forbidden territory.

By the time the kids were ready to come in for supper, Willy had herself under control and managed to spend an enjoyable evening playing games and singing with her children and sister. They were all tired out from their long hike and turned in early.

Willy lay, listening to the quiet forest sounds and the even breathing of her children and felt again the stirring of long-unacknowledged yearnings in her body. What was there about the warm hands and gentle lips of a man that had such power over her? She craved the affection that had been lacking for so long. Putting a mental clamp on her runaway thoughts, she started reciting poetry to herself until, exhausted, she fell asleep.

Chapter 7

The next day was Sunday and, following her habit when they traveled, Willy intended to go back into town and find a church to attend. They all needed baths so she started heating some water. There were two trees in their campground close enough together to put a sturdy stick between two branches that could hold the portable shower. She rigged up a rudimentary shelter with blankets to provide privacy and then got the kids up and showered them amid much complaining about the cold air.

She kept water heating for Aggie and held the towel and clothes while her sister hurried through a chilly shower. Finally it was her turn and she could climb in herself. It wasn't easy to maneuver in such a small confined area. There was no place to put the soap and shampoo, so she had Aggie stand outside to take her clothes when she removed them, hand her the supplies she needed and give her the clothing when she was done. It felt good to be clean.

Willy wished there was a bathroom in the camper. She had wanted one when they bought it, but Ryan hadn't seen the necessity. After all, he didn't need one and who took showers when they were camping, anyway? Those thoughts brought back the memories of their last argument. He had reminded her that the new motor home would be sure to have a bathroom and shower and that she wanted more comforts. "I'm doing it all for you!" he had shouted at her just before he slammed the door.

Wishing that only good memories remained, Willy wiped her face of water and tears and dressed quickly, shivering in the cold. It was still chilly in the early mornings because the mountains blocked the sun until much later.

Willy dressed the children in Sunday clothes and they drove into town. There were several choices of churches listed in the phonebook so they decided upon one of the Mormon congregations that fit their schedule. The services were inspiring and the children enjoyed the special classes for their age groups. There was even a young women's group which welcomed Aggie and she made a few new friends. Willy found an opportunity to introduce herself in the women's meeting after the regular services and explain her purpose in visiting the community. After the meeting, several women came up and talked with her. They were very warm and

friendly and one kind lady even invited them to Sunday dinner. Willy was touched but declined politely, not wanting to impose.

After gathering the children, she found a small cafe in town and treated them to lunch. It was very relaxing and restful and the kids were on their best behavior.

When they returned to camp, Willy put Jeffy down for a nap and then while Aggie and Allison played a game outside, she busied herself making notes of everything she could remember about all they had seen the previous day. She outlined her information and found where gaps existed in her data. She was just listing the things she still wanted to investigate and take pictures of when Jeffy awoke. Ready for a break, Willy invited Aggie and the little ones to go for a walk down the canyon.

She fixed a small backpack for each one with a drink and a bag of trail mix for a snack. They started off down the road, stopping whenever there was an especially beautiful tree or hillside to photograph. Willy expected that Jeffy would tire quickly, but he trudged along happy as a lark.

"He loves to be out in nature just like his dad," she thought, a twinge of grief touching her heart.

They took a short hike up a trail they came across and enjoyed their exertions as it wound steeply up the mountain. They had stopped to rest under some pines when they were startled by a nearby rifle shot. Allison screamed and dove for the protection of her mother. Jeffy, trying to be manly, moved to her side. Willy called out as loud as she could, "Watch out! There are people here!"

They heard rustling in the underbrush on the next ridge and saw a deer dash through a clearing. Its side was bleeding but it ran valiantly on.

"It isn't hunting season, is it?" asked Aggie. "They shouldn't be shooting this time of year."

Willy wasn't sure about the game laws in Wyoming, but didn't think that it made sense to allow hunting at the peak of the tourist season when so many people were camping in the national forests. "We should report this to the ranger station," she decided. "Let's go back down right now and do it."

"I hate it when people think they can just kill animals for no reason," Aggie commented, contempt in her tone.

They returned to their campground much faster than they had gone. There was no stopping for pictures this time as they hurried to the ranger station at the edge of the lake to report what they had seen. Willy wasn't good at estimating distances, but was able to give enough details about the location to send a ranger off in a jeep looking for evidence of the culprit.

They returned to their camper in a more somber mood, saddened by the few who show no respect for life or nature. Willy tried to answer Jeffy's inevitable questions and to throw in a little lesson about caring for our resources and animal life. She was more shaken by the close proximity of the rifle shot than by the law-breaking poacher. She decided that maybe they had better stick to the main road instead of the side trails in the future.

After Allison and Jeffy were in bed, the lullabies had been sung, and the kids were asleep, Aggie and Willy sat for a few minutes talking over the events of the day. "There were two girls from that church who gave me their addresses so I could write to them when I get home," she confided. "They are really nice." She also mentioned a couple of not-too-bad-looking boys who had caught her eye in church. "I hope we are still here next Sunday," she admitted. "I would like to have a chance to see them all again. It was a fun day--except for the shooting."

Before she went to bed, Willy went out one last time to check that all the food had been put away and the camp area was in order. She looked up at the stars and the beauty of the clear night and was transported in thought to the other night when her admiration of their light had ended in a long sob session and an interlude of utter peace in the strong, comforting arms of a friendly man. She wondered where he was and what he was doing.

Checking her runaway thoughts yet again, Willy tried to remember Ryan's face and features. Her memory of him was becoming dim and she chided herself that she could forget what he looked like. She always carried a picture of him on trips and had many on the walls at home, but unless she looked at a photo, she often forgot his face. "Ryan, Ryan," she called in her mind. "Why? Why did you have to leave us? What am I going to do without you?"

Shaking the sorrow-filled thoughts from her mind, she climbed back into the camper and prepared herself for the night. She forced herself to think of her tasks at hand and to plan the activities of the next day. Her willful mind, wandering from grief over someone lost to anticipation of the next encounter with a new friend, kept her awake long into the night. Finally she drifted off into a fitful sleep, her rest broken by dreams of first one man then the other.

A nightmare of a tense and horrible meeting between the two brought her fully awake. She dreamed they had been ready to fight over her and she had, in characteristic dream-fashion, run in slow motion from one to the other futilely trying to talk some sense into them. Just as they had come to blows, she had been jerked awake by the loud noise. As she sat up in bed, trying to clear her senses, she realized that the noise was real. Someone was pounding on the door.

"Who is it?" she called, her voice high and trembling as she scrambled out of the warm bed.

"Max Bell, Ma'am. Can I talk to you?"

Thinking it had something to do with the poacher the day before, she quickly drew a blanket around her and unlocked the door. "What is it?" she asked.

"Sorry if I woke you, Ma'am. It's after eight o'clock so I thought you'd be up. I have to go over to the Grey's River Ranger Station today and I wondered if you'd like to follow me and see the scenery over there. There is a crystal clear lake you might like to photograph and some beautiful country. You can see the other side of the range from where the Intermitting Spring is and get some pictures from that angle. Are you interested?"

Willy looked at the crisp uniform, the dark hair, and the hat in his hand. His smile lit up his eyes and there was the look of a little boy's enthusiasm in them. Shyness, uncertainty, hope, all filled their depths. In spite of herself and her determination to keep him at a distance, she smiled back. "The kids aren't awake yet and we don't want to hold you up. Maybe we can go another time," she said.

"Please yourself," he said, "but I won't be leaving for about an hour, so you would have time to get ready and have breakfast. I'll check back before I go to see what you've decided." He replaced his hat and strode off, leaving her to mull over what she wanted to do.

It would be fun to see some country she hadn't planned on and have a guide again so she wouldn't get lost. Why not? The things on her list could wait for tomorrow, she decided. It was best to take every opportunity she could to get more information and pictures. Not everyone was lucky enough as to have their own personal ranger to show them around.

She got the kids up. They had been awakened by the knocking and voices anyway so they dressed and ate and got ready for the day. When Max returned in just over an hour, they were waiting for him. Willy had wound up the camper jacks and had everything ready to leave. She didn't bother to take down the canopy or pack up the lawn chairs trusting that they would be fine

until they got back. She had paid the fee for a whole week in this spot and intended to return here.

In a cheerful and expectant mood, they climbed in the pick-up and followed the jeep down the canyon road. "Is this an adventure, Mama?" Allison wanted to know.

"Yes, this is an adventure!" Willy replied.

Chapter 8

As they followed Max through the campground and to the canyon road, Willy saw several other vehicles lined up off to the side. Waving his hand for them to follow, Max, followed by Willy, headed down the gravel road. The other drivers pulled into the caravan and Willy realized with relief that they weren't the only ones being taken on a tour. She wouldn't have to face any more intimate episodes with this man who had gotten entirely too close.

When they reached the main highway, Max turned toward the north instead of the south as she had expected and proceeded to the nearby gas station. He had already alerted the other drivers that there were no gas facilities anywhere along the hundred miles of the Grey's River road so they would do well to have full tanks when they started. This he explained to Willy as she waited in line with the others.

"Do you happen to have a working CB radio?" he asked.

"Yes, it works pretty well," she answered.

"I can talk to all of you on channel nineteen if you tune it in. That way, if there are any animals or logging trucks or special things I want to point out, we can communicate," he told her. He seemed a little cooler today and didn't look so deeply into her eyes as had been his habit in the past.

After everyone in the caravan who needed gas had filled their vehicles and were ready, they pulled out together and headed toward the south end of the valley. They climbed steadily through the canyon to the place where she and the kids had pulled off to enjoy the view a few days ago. The turnoff to Grey's River was there and they followed Max along another gravel road. This one was in better shape and smoother and they moved right along. It was dusty with all the tires kicking up the dry roadbed dust and Willy was glad she was among the first in line.

After a few miles, Max slowed and Willy heard him on the CB telling them that there was a spectacular view of the Upper Valley just ahead if they would like to stop and look. Of course all agreed, as she heard them answer, and she pulled off with the rest.

They left their vehicles and looked out over the miles and miles of beautiful vista before them. Willy set her camera on a tripod and snapped away. These pictures would adorn any guide book and she hoped that they turned out well enough to sell.

The hills were covered with sunflowers by the millions interspersed with purple lupine and dashes of bluebells and honeysuckle. The air was thick with the scent and Aggie began sneezing as the pollen irritated her nose. Allison and Jeffy were enchanted with it all. They ran to pick a few flowers and Willy noticed with amusement that they looked at but did not touch the red-tipped Indian Paint Brush. They had learned their lesson well from the authoritative advice of the ranger.

Soon they were on their way again. Willy, at the urging of two very persuasive children, had hurried and started the truck so they could be in line again right behind the leader. They waved at Max who looked frequently in his rear view mirror and waved back. Suddenly, he pointed at the roadway ahead and they saw two cow moose browsing at the edge of the road. They raised their heads but didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave their good forage.

"Meet my good friends, Gertrude and Matilda," Max intoned over the radio. "They seem to like people and are up near the road a lot when I come by."

After watching and taking pictures for a while, the convoy moved slowly past the two lazy moose who moved out of the road but didn't feel the need to head for the trees. Allison, echoed by Jeffy, called, "Goodbye, Matilda! Goodbye Gertrude!" as they rolled on their way.

They saw several deer and some other wildlife as they drove along. The kids were starting to lose interest when, after a long stretch of gravel road, the silence was broken by Max informing them all that Crystal Lake was just ahead. "There is no place to park close by the lake, but you can pull off the road in any flat area and walk up the road to the path. It is about a quarter of a mile along a trail toward the hill on your left," he told them. "I will be leaving you now. I have to go on to check on some reports of forest fires at the other station. If you want to keep going around the loop and come out in Alpine, just keep on the main road here. It will take you another five or six hours to go all the way around and back to the campground. Or you can turn around and go back to Cottonwood the way you came. See you later!"

He waited until all had found parking places then he pulled up by Willy's truck. "Don't fall in the lake!" he cautioned them. "It's deep and ice cold."

"We won't, Mr. Rangerbell," Jeffy assured him. "We'll be careful."

"Are you going to drive around the whole loop?" he asked Willy.

"No, it's too far. We'll just go back the way we came," she answered. The expense of burning all that gas on an unexpected side trip was a deterrent and she regretfully decided that this much of the beautiful canyon would have to be enough.

"I'll see you back at Cottonwood sometime, then," he called as he drove off.

They got out of the truck and joined the other hikers as they walked along the path to the lake. It was a rough trail with much undergrowth and long grass, making it difficult for the little ones. They gamely pushed their way through, though, and soon were rewarded by the very unusual sight of a perfectly clear pond right at the base of a mountain. Willy wouldn't call it a lake, but it was maybe fifty yards in diameter. It didn't look deep because the rocks at the bottom could be clearly seen. Some of the other children in the group began throwing rocks in the water and Willy was amazed to watch them float slowly to the bottom. It was much deeper than it looked.

Aggie was fascinated by the optical illusion of floating rocks and threw in one after another. Allison and Jeffy joined in with enthusiasm but soon grew tired of the sight and were ready to go back to the truck.

"Just a few more minutes," Willy told them. "I just got my camera set up for some good pictures. It won't take long."

The banks were steep and Willy asked Aggie to watch the children very carefully. There was a small, dirty, bank of snow in the shadow of the mountain so she knew the water would be extremely cold. It wouldn't be easy to rescue anyone who fell into that icy water.

After her roll of film was used up, Willy packed up her things and they started back to the camper. They struggled along the path and Willy found herself wishing they had a strong male hand to help them over the rough places. She tried to carry Jeffy but he was too heavy for her to manage along with the photographic equipment she was carrying. They just slowed down to his pace and before long they had reached the truck.

They ate their lunch under the trees and explored the area around them. The others in the group had all left after lunch to continue the long loop through the mountains and then back to Star Valley. Willy didn't mind being the only one to return the short way. The road was dry and it had been hard to travel in the dust thrown up by the caravan. She wanted to stop and photograph several areas that she had seen on the way here. She hadn't wanted to bother everyone by stopping so often so she had waited till the return trip.

They seemed to be the only ones on the road and took their time traveling back the way they had come. All progress suddenly came to a stop, though, when they rounded a bend and saw before them a big truck on its side in the middle of a bridge. It was a logging truck and the logs had broken loose and were strewn over the side and into the river. No one seemed to be around.

Willy stopped her truck and, cautioning the children to stay inside, walked up to the wreck. She looked in the cab fearfully, hoping that the driver was not badly injured and had gotten out. There was no sign of anyone and she called, in case he had been thrown out. She looked over the side of the bridge and walked around the area, but it looked like the driver had been picked up by someone else or had gone for help.

"Well, there is no way we can get around," she told the others when she returned to the camper. "We'll have to go back and see if there is another way back to the campground."

She turned the truck and started back. She remembered passing a signpost pointing to a side track, but hadn't paid much attention at the time. After a few miles, she saw the sign, but it informed her that the nearest town was fifty-two miles away and in the wrong direction. She contemplated going around the rest of the Grey's River Loop as the other travellers had done, but she remembered that it would be many more long hours of driving and the sun was already low in the sky.

"We'll just find a place to camp around here," she told Aggie. "Have you noticed any campgrounds anywhere?"

"No," said Aggie. "I hope we don't have to camp where there aren't any bathrooms. That would be GROSS!"

"I guess we don't have much choice," said Willy philosophically. "Let's go back near the wreck so we can see when they come to clear it away and we can get back across the bridge. Maybe they'll do it before dark and we won't have to stay here," she said hopefully. She didn't relish the thought of a night out in the wilds either.

They drove back within sight of the wrecked truck and found a flat turn-off where they could park the truck. They climbed out and the children ran around doing their usual exploring. They were in a wooded area with a lot of trees and low willows following the line of a small creek that meandered down to drain into the river.

Chapter 9

At suppertime, they ate and cleaned up and then prepared to stay for the night. Willy was glad they carried their home with them with all the food and supplies inside. She was relieved that they were in a protected camper and not outside in a tent on the ground. As much as she loved nature, she was frightened of wild animals, especially at night and in the mountains. She had heard all the usual stories of bears and cougars and wolves and was grateful that none of them were likely to bother them inside the camper. She was sure that with her phobia about dogs, any other wild and ferocious animals would cause even greater fear.

Not long after sundown, just as darkness was about to fall, they heard a vehicle coming down the road. They crowded to the windows to see if it was a truck to move the wreck. It was a jeep and as it drew nearer, they saw the familiar face of their favorite ranger.

He recognized their truck and stopped. "I wondered if you had gotten back before the accident happened," he said. "I tried to call you on the CB but I was behind several mountains and I guess the signal didn't get through. Is everything all right? I see you're planning to spend the night here. Do you have everything you need?" he asked.

"Everything except a bathroom," complained Aggie. "This is so stupid. Why can't they put more campgrounds with bathrooms up here?"

"It's a primitive area," he explained. "People who want to camp up here usually plan on roughing it. Besides, there are plenty of bushes," he teased.

"We'll survive," Willy said. "When will they come to move the truck?"

"It won't be until tomorrow for sure," he told them. "It will take a big tow truck to pull this rig back on its wheels. The logging company will have to bring in some equipment to load the logs on another truck, too. This one is probably too badly wrecked to carry a load."

"How are you going to get back home?" asked Allison.

"Why don't you stay here with us?" invited Jeffy.

"I think I will, if you don't mind," Max told them. "Sometimes we get some thieves that will strip a wreck like this if they have a chance so I might as well stay here and keep an eye on it. I always come prepared," he added, pulling a sleeping bag out of the back of his jeep.

Willy's heart did an unusual thump at this news and her mind was in a turmoil. She was glad that she wouldn't have to face the wilds of Wyoming alone, but she didn't want any more personal encounters with this man. She resolved to not let herself be alone with him and then remembered her manners. "Have you had something to eat?" she asked. "We have some taco salad left over if you'd like some."

"Why thank you, Ma'am," he replied. "I do have some dried food in my pack here, but I don't eat it unless there's nothing else available," he laughed. "Would you like me to start a fire out here after I eat?"

Before Willy could answer that they were just going to stay in the camper, the others had all noisily voiced their assent and volunteered to go find some wood. In no time a pit had been cleared, the wood brought and a cheerful fire blazed away. They found rocks or stumps to sit on and quieted their noisy chatter as they stared into the mesmerizing flames.

Aggie suggested that they sing some campfire songs and asked Max if he knew any. To Willy's surprise and pleasure, he started singing in a deep, very melodious voice, picking songs they were likely to know. They joined in together, mature voices blending with childish ones, dwarfed by the vastness of the mountains around them. After a while, Jeffy went to sit on Willy's lap and started nodding. Allison, noticing the myriads of stars above them, asked her mother, "Mommy, will you sing us that song about Daddy watching us from heaven?"

Willy knew the song she wanted, but remembering the events that happened after the last time she had sung it, wished she could refuse. Jeffy turned to face her and said, "Sing it, Mama. It always makes me so happy and sleepy."

Shyly, avoiding the quiet dark eyes that watched her from across the fire, she softly sang the beautiful lullaby. As the last notes left her lips, Max wiped something from his eye and stood. "Boys on the left, girls on the right," he announced, striding off into the night.

"What does he mean, Willy?" asked Aggie.

"Bathroom time, I suppose," she answered. "It's time for bed so let's get the toilet paper and use the bushes. We can take flashlights so we can see what we're doing."

The underbrush was thick and they had a hard time finding a place that was open enough to get through but protected enough from sight to do their business. After the others had finished, Willy sent them back to the camper with Aggie. She found a bushy clearing and relieved herself then started back. By the time she reached the camper, she was beginning to itch on her backside

and wondered what she had rubbed against. She ignored it as long as she could then decided that she must have gotten something in her underwear that was irritating her. She pulled the curtain around her bed and changed into clean ones and her pajamas, but the itching continued even worse than it had been before. She could feel many bumps on her backside that felt like hives.

Finally, in desperation, she decided to go ask Max, whom she could see still out by the fire, if there was poison ivy around here. "Wouldn't that just be great!" she thought. "Stuck all the way up here with poison ivy on my behind."

Taking a blanket to act as a robe, she climbed back out of the camper, wishing Aggie was still dressed so she could go with her. She didn't want to break her resolve to stay away from this man but knew she needed his help.

"Hi," he said warmly. "Are you going to enjoy the stars a little longer?"

"No," she answered, wondering how she could tell him her problem. "Uh, is there much poison ivy up here?" she finally blurted.

"None that I know of," he said thoughtfully. "The altitude is too high so we don't see much of it. Why?"

Surreptitiously scratching herself gently against the trunk of a tree, she hesitated. How could she tell him without embarrassing both of them? At last, unable to contain her discomfort any longer, she said, sighing, resigning herself to mortification, "I--uh--got into something in the bushes that is itching me to death. What could it be if it isn't poison ivy?"

Max threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, you've just gotten yourself a bad case of hives! There are a lot of stinging nettles around here." Chuckling, he told her that all she would have to do would be to wash herself off with soap and water or even just water and she would have a miraculous recovery in no time at all.

Totally embarrassed, but relieved that it was nothing worse, she vanished into the camper and administered to her flaming red, hive-covered backside. "If you have some calamine lotion or hydrocortisone to put on, it will feel better even faster," he called softly through the door, still chuckling. . "I think I have some for mosquito bites in my pack here if you don't."

Max saw to the fire, banking it so that it would stay warm through the night. Then he rolled out his sleeping bag close to the warmth and settled down for the night.

Willy awoke in the dark, alert and listening. She had heard some commotion outside, she thought. It was pitch black but she tried to see out the window. She reached for a flashlight and

shined it in the direction of the noise. Nothing was there but the trees and she had decided she had been dreaming when she saw another light coming back through the willows. She watched for a minute and then saw Max as he stepped into the camp area.

"What's wrong?" Willy asked quietly, opening the window a little.

Max came up close to whisper softly to her so as not to disturb the children. "There was a bear nosing around," he said. "I chased him off, though, so it's all right. No need to be afraid."

"Max!" she said, a sudden thrill of fear coursing through her and unaware that she had used his name. "It isn't safe for you to sleep out there on the ground." After a little quick argument in her mind, she added in a whisper, "Why don't you bring your sleeping bag in here? There is room on the floor. I'd hate to wake up in the morning and see your mangled and bloody body out there."

"Thanks," he chuckled. "I don't mind if I do. I don't want to alarm the children and I have a healthy respect for bears."

"I'll get up and unlock the door," Willy told him, then bit her lip, realizing that he might take offense at the fact that she had thought a lock was necessary against his possible intrusion.

When he had brought in his sleeping bag he looked up at her, an odd look in his eyes. "You were afraid I would bother you in the night so you locked your door?" he asked.

"Well, I don't have much trust in strange men," she defended herself. "I always lock doors, anyway," she said, softening the comment.

"I want you to know that you will never have anything to fear from me," he told her sincerely. "I know this puts you in a ticklish situation, and if you'd rather, I'll sleep in the cab of your truck."

Willy found herself assuring him that she would trust him this one time and that he should stay where he was. Max spread his sleeping bag in the narrow space left in the middle of the floor and they settled down, Willy wide awake and listening for stealthy animal noises outside. Unaccountably, she was not worried about stealthy human noises inside. She was just dozing off when she heard a quiet growl and the heavy breathing of a big animal outside. Her heart leaping, she got her flashlight and shined it out the window again. Maybe the beam would scare the bear or whatever it was away, she thought.

She gasped with fright when she saw the upright form of a bear in the light of her flashlight, its eyes illuminated by the beam. She stifled a scream with her hand and sat up in bed,

her eyes big as saucers. She turned at a sound near her side and felt a hand descend on her shoulder.

"It's all right. He won't bother us in here," Max said in a calm whisper. "Just turn the light off and he'll go away as soon as he's sure there isn't anything to eat."

With shaking hands, she flipped off the light. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, unconsciously grasping his hand. She was trembling with fear. "Are you sure he'll go away?"

"He's just curious and looking for something to eat," Max assured her. "I'm glad you let me stay in here, too. It is much safer for both of us."

He began to move away, but Willy didn't release his hand. "W-will you sit here for just a minute by me? Please," she begged, her voice shaking. "It's the first time I've seen a bear and I find that they scare me even worse than dogs."

Willy could feel herself hyperventilating with terror and was afraid she would give in to panic. Gone was all thought of her resolution to stay away from close contact with Max as she felt her control deserting her. She put both arms around him as he sat by her and held on for dear life. She was shaking from head to foot and sought comfort in his strength.

He obliged her and wrapped his own arms around her quivering shoulders. "It's all right," he whispered, gathering her to him. "You're safe with me."

She pushed her face into the hollow of his shoulder and gripped even tighter. She knew without doubt that she really was safe with him. As the trembling gradually diminished and her senses began to return to normal, she lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at his face. It was totally dark, but she knew he was looking down at her. She could feel his breath on her face. The rustling and grunting noises from outside had stopped and her breathing finally returned to its usual pattern.

Reluctant to leave the security of his arms and broad chest, she whispered a question, "Do you think he's gone now?"

"I don't hear him anymore, but maybe you'd better stay put until we're sure," he whispered back into her ear. She could hear a smile in his voice as he said it, but she didn't object and stayed still for a few more minutes. Finally, reluctantly, she released the grip of her arms and drew herself away. She felt the pressure of his arms slacken also. Then abruptly, she shivered again and he drew her back against his chest.

"Just stay here." His breath tickled her ear as she felt the rough texture of his unshaven cheek against hers. "I could hold you like this forever."

Chapter 10

Jerked awake by some nameless fear, Willy sat up in bed. Disoriented and panting, she looked around her. She saw the children still peacefully asleep and Max's head showing at the top his sleeping bag. It was just barely getting light and she thought of her last memory of the night. She must have fallen asleep in his arms and Max had put her back in her bed, covered her then crawled into his own bed. Warmth spread through her heart at his thoughtfulness. Try as she might, she just couldn't avoid the feelings she was beginning to have for him. She knew she could trust him with her life and she treasured the knowledge. He wouldn't take unfair advantage of her weakness as so many others would have done.

Settling back into her warm blankets, Willy remembered the fear she had felt just a few hours ago. She knew the kids would be upset that they had missed such an exciting event as having a bear in camp, but was glad they had been spared from witnessing her terror. It would have scared them immensely to see their mother so upset. Willy smiled as she thought what Aggie's reaction would have been. A lover of all animals, she would have wanted to pet the bear, no doubt.

As the sun arose and the new day began, first one then another sat up and looked around with sleep-filled eyes. Max was the first out of bed.

"What are you doing in here, Mr. Bell?" asked Allison. "Did you get too cold outside?"

"No, I didn't want to have to share my sleeping bag with a bear," he answered, smiling at her. "We had one visit us in the night. He must have been looking for marshmallows to roast."

His comments sparked immediate interest and he was bombarded with questions. When the whole story had been told, leaving out the part about their mother's panic attack and her valiant and warm-armed rescue by the resident ranger, they dressed and went out to find the bear tracks. There were several left in the dust of the road and around the fire pit. The children were thrilled. "Why didn't you wake us up so we could see it?" Jeffy wanted to know. "I always have to miss the best things."

"I didn't want to disturb you," Willy told him. "Let's make our trip to the bushes and get cleaned up. I'll fix some breakfast. I'm starved!" She was happy to realize that her backside was no longer burning and all the hive bumps seemed to be gone.

After they had eaten, Max got on his CB and called the ranger station. They told him that the trucks were on their way to clean up the wreckage. He asked about any fire spottings and was told that everything looked fine. He instructed them to call him if he was needed and then signed off.

From the back of his well-stocked jeep, Max pulled out a fishing pole and announced his intention to see if any fish were biting today. Inviting them to join him, he walked the short distance to the river and found a likely looking spot to throw in his hook. He soon had everyone turning over rocks to find some juicy bugs to use as bait. When they had collected several fine specimens, Max instructed them on the importance of being very quiet so the fish wouldn't hear them and be frightened away.

"Where are the fishes' ears?" Allison wanted to know.

"They mostly just feel the vibrations of our voices and our feet," Max told her. "They have really good eyesight also so they can watch us moving around. It's good if we can stand close to some bushes and hold very still so they can't spot us," he explained.

The kids were enthralled and jumped up and down with joy when he pulled a fish out of the water after only a few minutes. "I'm going to see if he has a brother in there," he whispered to Jeffy. Sure enough, another fish was hooked and joined the first one in the grass.

Max cut a forked willow stick and made a fish carrier. Gingerly, Allison picked it up. The fish suddenly wiggled and startled her. Squealing, she dropped them and ran to her mother. Willy was almost as squeamish, but Aggie picked up the stick.

"Mr. Bell," she said in an injured tone of voice, "these fish are still alive. Can't you put them out of their misery? That's so cruel to let them suffer like that."

"You're right, Aggie," he answered. He took the fish off the carrier and one by one hit their heads hard against a rock. They didn't move anymore.

"Gross!" cried Aggie, astonished at his offhanded cruelty, her hand over her mouth.

Jeffy and Allison were shocked and looked at Max with big, sad eyes. "Did you have to kill them like that?" Allison asked. "Those poor fish."

Max laughed at her. "Well, I don't know how anybody can eat fish that are still alive. It was either that or let them die slowly from drowning in the air."

He let Allison try fishing but she wasn't too enthusiastic. Jeffy was willing and anxious to try, but he spent most of his time winding the line back in that Max or Willy extracted from willows, tree branches, or tufts of grass where it got tangled. He finally gave up and let Aggie have a turn.

She managed to land the hook in a good spot and with lots of expert advice, actually reeled in a fair-sized fish. Willy wasn't much for fishing and didn't have a license anyway, so Max threw his line in a few more times. By the time they heard the rumble of an approaching truck, he had caught six more fish and invited himself for a fish fry lunch. He even volunteered to do the cooking.

Max cleaned the fish at the edge of the river to the accompaniment of many comments about blood and guts and other equally unappetizing things. Jeffy wanted to try using Max's cool Swiss army

knife, but his mother agreed with Max about the danger of such a sharp thing in little hands. Aggie ran back to the camper for a plastic bag and the fish were placed on ice in the cooler.

Meanwhile, a tow truck and another logging truck had arrived. Max joined the other men who began walking around the wreck looking it over and discussing the best way to get it back on its wheels. They could see that the logs would have to be moved out of the way first, so the next several hours were spent in winching them back from the river. They would be loaded when a log crane truck arrived later in the day.

Max took a break from helping the men when they stopped for lunch and, true to his word, cooked a most delicious pan full of tender trout for Willy's family. Those who had watched the killing and gutting of the fish were reluctant to taste any at first, but Max persuaded them to try just a morsel. Even Aggie loved it when she had been challenged to give it a taste. When every last bite was gone, Jeffy asked Max if he would live with them all the time and catch fish for supper every night. Everyone laughed, but Max answered in a serious voice, his eyes on the little boy but glancing at his mother.

"That would make me very happy, little man," he said. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

Dismayed and confused by the look in his deep eyes, Willy turned red and changed the subject, pointing to the tow truck operator who was just beginning to connect the cables to the tipped over truck. "Look," she said. "They're hooking it up to pull the big truck back over."

The rest of them went outside to watch the action. Max offered to stay and wash the dishes, but Willy shooed him out with the others. She needed a little time to get composed.

"Just what did he mean by that?" she asked herself. "How could he want to live with us all the time when he just met us three days ago? I couldn't tell from the look in his eyes whether he was kidding or not. He didn't sound like he was."

Willy thought about it for a long time. He couldn't have meant it like it sounded, she decided. She was disturbed by the continued impact the man kept having on her emotions. Searching through the drawers, she pulled out Ryan's picture and looked at it for a long time. "I won't break my promise," she said to the smiling face in the picture. "You'll never be replaced in my heart."

It wasn't long before she heard the grinding and straining of the winch on the tow truck. She looked out the door in time to see the big rig flip back over onto its wheels in a cloud of dust. The tractor had been hauled upright first and now the trailer was righted.

It took a while to move both out of the roadway. The men climbed under the bridge to check it for damage. It appeared to be sound and Max told Willy it was safe to drive over. "I have to leave now to take care of some business back at the Grey's Ranger Station. Are you going back to Cottonwood soon?"

"Yes, I've got a little straightening up to do so we'll leave in a while. I know the way," Willy assured him. She was relieved at his leaving. She had decided that the more distance there was between them, the less danger of her thoughts and emotions going places they didn't belong.

"Willy?" Max said her name softly. She looked up at him. "I really meant what I said about joining your family. I like being in your company." He reached out a hand toward her, but she turned, pretending not to notice. "Last night was really unique for me. I've never held a quivering woman in my arms quite so long before."

"How long did you have to stay up?" she asked, embarrassed. "You must have been cold. I'm sorry I'm such a nervous wreck around animals."

"Don't be sorry!" he insisted, "I enjoyed every minute of it. I would have been willing to sit there and hold you all night but your skin felt cold so I put you in your bed."

Dismayed by the look in his eyes and by the increased tempo of her own heart, Willy turned away again. She knew she owed him thanks but instead decided to be heartless and cold. "Well, I'm sure you've got things to do, so I won't keep you any longer." Turning back to him, she lifted her chin with determination and gave him the set-down he didn't deserve, but that she felt was her duty.

"Mr. Bell," she began, avoiding his eyes. "I don't want you to touch me anymore, please. Even if I'm scared, please just leave it. I'll be fine. It isn't right and I don't want to keep imposing on you. Now leave and go about your own business. I've got plenty to do and I can take care of myself. I'm grateful for your help, but just leave us alone from now on."

Finally lifting her eyes to his and firmly keeping them steady on his face for a few seconds, Willy turned on her heel so he couldn't see the sudden tears that had started to her eyes. She had seen the crestfallen and bewildered look in his eyes and it almost broke her heart. She knew it was unfair to be so mean, but she just couldn't afford the feelings he kept stirring inside her. It wasn't right for her, a wife who had promised a dying husband her complete fidelity, to encourage any advances from other men, attractive and good hearted though they might be.

Chapter 11

Willy walked around to the other side of the truck to gather her shattered emotions. Why did she always cry? Why couldn't she just get control of herself? Why couldn't she just let herself go and love him? NO! Cancel that last thought! "I've got to be true to Ryan!" she reaffirmed. "I promised."

Taking a shaky breath and wiping her tears away, she waited a moment to be sure her voice was steady and then walked toward the river, calling the children to come. "It's getting late and we still have a long way to drive. Let's go so we can get there before dark."

"Why didn't Mr. Bell wait for us?" asked Allison. "He came and told us goodbye and then he left."

Willy told them that he had been needed at the ranger station on Grey's River so he had to leave. She was worried about the close relationship that was developing between Max and her family. They would be leaving in a few days, after all.

The trip back to the campground was beautiful. They passed the two lazy moose in their regular place by the road and called a cheerful greeting to them. They found their camp as they had left it and jumped out, eager to see if all was well. The bottle of wildflowers had been knocked over by the wind or some animal and the flowers were all dried and dead. Allison persuaded Aggie to go with her to find some new ones for their centerpiece.

Jeffy had fallen asleep on the way and Willy let him sleep while she sorted out her cartons of film and made some notes about all that they had seen. She took stock of their supplies and decided that Tuesday needed to be spent in town buying groceries and doing laundry. Maybe they would make a day of it and spend some time at the county fair Max had told them about.

Max. Just the name sent shivers up her spine. Would the yearning for his arms around her never cease? "It's not his arms I want," she told herself firmly. "It's Ryan's arms. But his aren't available so I just latch on to the nearest ones. How despicable! Keep your mind on your work, Willa Milton! Get a grip!"

She decided that a walk would help clear her mind. Aggie agreed to stay with the kids for a while so Willy put a casserole in the little propane oven and figured she had about half an hour to walk the confusion out of her mind.

She headed in the direction of the ranger station with the intention of looking at their big wall map. She needed to get a better idea of the area they had travelled in yesterday. She didn't have to worry about Max being there since she knew he was still in Grey's River. The walk did her good. She checked the map and exchanged a few words with the ranger on duty then started back to camp.

She hadn't gone far before she heard hurrying footsteps behind her. She turned, jumpy because of animals, but it was the human variety that was trying to catch up to her. Max. Why did her heart leap just at his sight? Clamping her wayward heart shut and gritting her teeth, she turned to continue on her way.

"Mrs. Milton," he called. "Wait just a minute."

Unable to be rude, Willy waited in the trail, different emotions crashing through her being. "Just be polite and cool," she told herself.

When he came up to her, Max, in a business-like manner, stated his purpose in stopping her. "I just wanted to return your frying pan," he said. "Remember that I took it to rub the grease out with sand. I forgot to give it to you before you left."

Relieved that it was something commonplace, Willy thanked him with her eyes down and started to turn away. She couldn't meet his eyes but curiosity got the best of her. "What are you doing back already?"

"It's time for my shift at the station," he said. "I'll be there till closing time tonight."

"Oh," she said, embarrassed that she had showed any interest. "Well, I left supper in the oven so I've got to hurry. Bye!" Turning on her heel, she went on her way. Why did she wish he would follow her? Why did she want to invite him to dinner? Why did she want to turn and run into his arms?

Quickening her pace and chanting, "NO! NO! NO!" under her breath, she practically ran the rest of the way back to the camper. Aggie had the table set and Willy put the supper on the table.

After they ate, they talked about their plans for the next day. They spent the next hour cleaning out the camper. Dust from their travels had penetrated everywhere and the grit needed to be wiped away. They gathered all the dirty clothes, changed the beds, swept and washed the floor. They planned their menus for the next several days and listed all the supplies they needed. Water was heated for showers and that time-consuming activity was accomplished. The work

forced Willy to get her mind off her troubles and she was tired and ready for sleep when it was time for bed.

After the normal preparations and trips to the restroom and the reading of the bedtime story was done, they all settled in for the night. When the lights were out and everyone was comfortable, Aggie commented, "I hope that bear stays up there and doesn't bother us here."

"Will he, Mama?" quavered Allison?

"I want to see that bear!" Jeffy declared in his bravest voice.

"I don't think we need to worry about bears in this campground," she told him, not at all sure herself that her words were true. It was so dark. The loud hooting of an owl in a nearby tree brought them all up in their beds, Allison screaming. Jeffy joined in but Willy, with great self-control, swallowed her terror and tried to calm them. Even Aggie was nervous.

They heard running feet outside and the screams started in again. There was a banging at the door and Max's voice calling, "What is it? Are you all right? What happened? Let me in!" The door was locked again in Willy's usual careful habit or he would have wrenched it open.

The strong bass voice instantly relieved everyone and the clamor stopped. "We're scared of bears," quavered Jeffy in a small voice.

Willy started to call out that they were all right but Aggie was out of bed and opening the door before Willy could stop her. Max filled the doorway and found the light switch. He looked around at the big eyes and scared faces. "It sounded like you were being attacked," he said.

"What happened to scare you like that?"

"Aggie reminded us about the bear and we heard some noises," Allison said, her eyes big and scared. She crawled to the edge of the bed and held out her arms for the safe haven of Max's chest. "Is there a bear out there tonight?"

He drew her to him and wrapped a blanket around her. "There's no bear out there," he assured her, his voice calm and quiet. "I just walked all through the campground with my dog and she would have smelled any bears. They are pretty rare in this campground anyway, and rangers know these things."

"I still don't want to stay here anymore," Aggie said. She was not easily frightened, but the high current of emotion had badly shaken her. "Isn't there anywhere safe we can go where there aren't any bears?"

"I'm afraid!" piped Jeffy as he snuggled up to his mother.

"There is a campground just outside of Afton," Max told them. "There are street lights and lots of neighbors and the owners live right there. You wouldn't have to be afraid right in town."

"Oh come on, kids," Willy said, trying to be brave but badly frightened herself, remembering the terror of the night before. "We can last out the night here, can't we? Tomorrow we can move to Afton when it's light so we can see to load up the canopy and the other stuff we've got here."

"But it's a long time until tomorrow," Allison said, her voice quivering.

"I'm too scared," Jeffy admitted in a whisper.

"I'm off duty in a few minutes so I can bring my sleeping bag and sleep right outside if you want me to," Max offered. "I'll bring Suzy, my dog, and she'll let us know if even a squirrel wakes up in the night."

A chorus of agreement and relief greeted this proposition but Willy objected, saying that that would be two nights he had spent on a hard floor and they couldn't inflict that on him again. "Please don't worry," she told him. "We'll be all right. We're calm now and I'm sure every one will settle down."

"I don't mind at all," said Max. "I sleep out a lot under the stars and I'm used to it. Don't worry on my account."

Willy was determined not to get any more in his debt than she already was. "I can't let you do that," she insisted. "We'll be fine. Come on, where are all my brave warriors? Let's just talk a few minutes and get our minds on something more cheerful."

"Let's play 'I'm Thinking Of!'" volunteered little Allison, naming her favorite game. "That always makes me cheerful!"

Max played along with them and after a few minutes everyone was giggling and seemed to be much more calm. "What I would like to know is where the names Willy and Aggie came from," he said. "They are unusual in this day and age."

Aggie rolled her eyes and sighed. "You tell him, Willy. I don't even like to talk about it."

"Our father is an English teacher and loves literature. He decided to name all his children after famous authors so I am Willa for Willa Cather, our brother is Chaucer--Chaz for short, and Aggie is Agatha as in Christie. Our last name is, appropriately, Stevenson. When I met my husband, Dad immediately approved when he found out his last name was Milton."

"Dad always wanted to change his name to Lord Byron, but he had to stick to George instead," threw in Aggie. "There must be some authors named George."

"That explains it all," laughed Max. "I think that is great to be named after some famous people. It gives you something to reach for."

"I hate my name!" protested Aggie. "I've always been teased about it and when I get old enough I'm going to have it changed!"

"I used to hate my name, too, but I've gotten used to 'Willy' and I kind of like it now. It's not so bad."

"Tell us about you now, Mr. Bell," Allison asked. "Do you like your name? Why do you still live with your parents when you're all grown up?"

"Allison, some questions are not polite to ask," broke in Willy.

"No, that's okay," Max assured her. "I like to talk about myself. Let's see. Yes, I do like my name. My full name is Maxwell Huffington Bell, and I only live with my parents when they visit me in the summer. I own the house now and some of the land and my mother and father live in Arizona. They come up for a month or two every year because they love it here so much. My mother has arthritis and the cold winters in Star Valley are too hard on her. Arizona is a much warmer place so they moved there a few years ago. They decided to divide up their property while they are still alive because both Lloyd and I plan to live here in the valley."

Max stood up and stretched as well as he was able under the low ceiling of the camper. "Well, what's the plan? Do you want me to go get my sleeping bag or what?"

Aggie whispered in Willy's ear, "Can we ask him to sleep on the floor again? We'd all feel so much safer. Please, please, please?"

She could see that Willy was going to refuse so she took matters into her own hands and blurted out the invitation herself. "Mr. Bell, will you just sleep on the floor in here with us again tonight? Please?"

Max looked to Willy for approval and saw the doubtful look in her eyes. "Maybe you'd be more comfortable with me outside," he said.

The younger kids joined Aggie's request in a chorus of pleas. Willy was overruled and she finally said that it would probably be necessary if anyone was going to get any sleep. Max went out to finish his duties and close up the ranger station. He settled Suzy outside and got his sleeping bag and soon everyone was settled down for the night and asleep except Willy.

She couldn't fall asleep for a long time. She lay curled in her bed next to Jeffy and tried to sort out her feelings. If only they had chosen somewhere else to research this summer, then she would never have met this man who had brought so much turmoil into her life.

Still, she knew she would always treasure the way he made her feel. The strength and courage he had lent her when she had needed it would be remembered and appreciated. Then, just as sleep overtook her, she opened her heart a tiny crack and, looking inside, knew that what she felt for Max Bell was the beginnings of love. Real, true, love. Somehow, it didn't diminish the love she had known for Ryan, but it was as real. Willy accepted this new-found knowledge and, letting her heart and head rest in the peace it brought her, she slept.

Chapter 12

Morning came and the sun was high before anyone stirred. When Willy finally turned over and checked her watch, she saw that it was after nine o'clock. She sat up, not believing she had slept so late. Usually she was an early riser. Remembering their guest on the floor, she was careful to keep the blankets around herself. She needn't have bothered, though, because Max was gone. There was no sign that he had ever been there.

Willy got out of bed and dressed and by then the others were awake. They made their usual trip to the "John" as Aggie had christened it and had breakfast.

"Let's get everything taken down and packed away so we can move," Willy told them. They set to work and soon the campground looked as it had when they came. Aggie made sure that it was clean and they were leaving it better than they found it.

"We'll check out at the ranger station before we head for Afton," said Willy. They drove the short distance and everyone got out to say goodbye. Willy was hoping Max was there so she could see him again, and hoping he wasn't there because she was afraid he would read the feelings she had for him in her eyes.

He was there. When he saw them pull up, he came out. "Decided to move to less terrifying surroundings, did you?" he asked, a smile on his face.

"Mostly we need to be close to a laundromat and grocery store," countered Willy. "I've taken all the pictures I need of this area. We'll be leaving in a couple of days and there are some other views of the valley I would like to shoot."

"Leaving before you've canoed on Salt River or seen the buffalo herd in the Narrows or smelled the sulfur hot springs over in Auburn?" he asked. "Surely you can't make a complete article about Star Valley unless you've seen all it has to offer."

"We'll see all we can between now and when we start for home on Friday," Willy said decisively. "There's a lot to do to get ready for Allison to start school and we need to take Aggie back home."

"Well, I won't say goodbye yet," Max answered. "I come to town almost every day so I'll stop in and see you. Are you going to stay at the campground in Afton?"

"Does it have a swimming pool?" asked Aggie. She had gone over a week without a swim and was feeling deprived.

"No, but there is a nice public pool north of Afton you'd enjoy," he said. "It's even indoor so you won't get sunburned."

Willy told him she needed to go check out and entered the ranger station followed by the kids who wanted to say goodbye to the other rangers. Just as they walked in the door, Jeffy said in a loud voice, "Mr. Rangerbell, how did you get out of the camper this morning without waking us up?"

"Out of the camper?" asked the pretty, young female ranger on duty, her ears pricking up. "Are we required to protect the campers as part of our job now, Boss?" The irony in her voice sounded like she was affronted that Max had shown special attention to anyone else.

Willy looked around at her, surprised at her tone. Her wonder grew even greater when she saw Max walk around the counter and put an arm around the young lady's shoulders.

"No, you just tend to business here and I'll protect the campers. These particular ones saw a bear up Grey's River and were still spooked so I slept on the floor to put the kids at ease."

"The kids at ease, huh?" she said, her eyes swivelling around to study Willy. The look on her face clearly showed disbelief in his motives and Willy was shocked and nervous to find herself mixed up in what appeared to be an obvious lover's tiff. Wondering what it all meant, she completed the form, turned it in and, with a word of thanks over her shoulder, shooed the kids out the door. After all he had said and done, she had thought she herself was the current object of his gallantry. She shook her head in disbelief at her gullibility. And her envy.

"Boy, am I ever dumb," she told herself as they climbed in the truck. "It's good I haven't let him know how I feel. He must be laughing behind my back. He's obviously a pretty good charmer with all the ladies and I fell for it."

Her preoccupation with Max and his love life was quickly dispelled as she had to turn her attention fully to driving on the rough, winding road down the canyon. When at last they reached the main road, she had managed to get her mind on the tasks ahead and plan the activities of the day with the children.

They found the new campground just outside of Afton and backed into their assigned spot. It was a pleasant open area with grass and flowers. Upon exploring the place, they were pleased to see a small building with showers and even flushing toilets. No more dust, campfire

smoke or chilly, tiny showers. There were even washers and dryers available so they set about getting their laundry done. Between loads, Willy watched the children play on the playground and called her parents and her neighbor in Kent. All seemed to be fine. When the laundry was finished and folded, Aggie watched the kids while Willy walked to the store nearby and bought groceries.

They asked the campground operators about the county fair and found that it was open all day and there was a rodeo at night. They decided to walk over after supper and go on a few rides then watch the rodeo.

As the day passed, they explored the stores in town and enjoyed buying postcards and sending them to their friends back in Kent. Each one found a few souvenirs to buy and they returned to the camper in good spirits. They ate a quick supper then began to walk the few blocks to the fair grounds.

Their time at the carnival was wonderful. Allison and Jeffy hadn't been to one before and they stared with wonder at all the attractions. They rode all the rides they were tall enough for then wanted to ride them all again. Not having unlimited funds, Willy steered them away, bought them some cotton candy and said they needed to buy their tickets to the rodeo since it was almost time to start.

The amazement in all their hearts at the size of the bulls being ridden by the cowboys, the speed of the calves being chased by lariat-tossing men, and the antics of the clowns was only exceeded by the height of the falls taken by the ones riding bucking broncos. The longer it lasted, the bigger their eyes got and the more awe they felt. Willy had heard of rodeos and thought she knew what they were about, but it was a revelation to her to see the danger involved. A couple of men were carried off the arena on stretchers after bad falls. Bulls chased and would have severely gored more riders except for the wild gestures of the clowns whose job was calculated to draw the attention of the bulls until the riders could reach safety. The crowd shouted advice and were loud in their approval when anyone managed to stick on the back of a bucking animal for the required eight seconds.

Aggie was quite torn between what she thought was cruelty to animals and her admiration for the riding skills displayed. Her favorite event was the young girls and boys who competed in the barrel races. They rode superbly and their well-trained horses performed

flawlessly. The family cheered when all 3 barrels were circled and the riders whipped up their mounts for the gallop back across the finish line.

All of them greatly enjoyed the youngest riders in the barrel race. One little guy was only 3 years old, just Jeffy's age, and was riding a big white horse that was so well-trained and careful of his tiny rider that he barely moved. He knew his way around the one barrel required for this age group but it took forever for him to carefully plod around it and then gently walk to the finish line. It was so cute and Jeffy asked if he could do that someday.

When the finale came, they all rose to their feet with the rest of the crowd and applauded and cheered loud and long. As they moved slowly out of the grandstand, each one enthusiastically told about their favorite parts and relived the beauty and fear of the whole thing. A vendor, hoping to sell the last of her food, offered half price on yummy looking hot dogs on a stick that had been dipped in batter and deep fried that she called pronto pups. Willy gave in to her apparently starving family and they all enjoyed one. They finally reached the exit to the fair grounds and started down the street toward their camper. It had been a fun and exciting day.

The little ones were ready for bed as soon as they got there. It was such a luxury to have electricity and flush toilets. They soon got cleaned up and their teeth brushed and climbed into warm beds. The kids dropped off to sleep quickly and Willy and Aggie talked quietly as they changed into pajamas. Aggie told of her lifelong desire for a horse of her own. "I wonder if there is anyplace around here that we could rent horses and have a ride," she remarked.

"Maybe we could ask the lady in the campground office," Willy told her. "I'm sure she'll know. You need to have something fun to do. You have been such a lot of help to me this summer. I am really happy you came."

There was silence for a long time and Willy thought Aggie had fallen asleep. Then she heard her clear her throat and hesitantly say, "Willy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you like Max?"

Willy was quiet for a moment. "Why do you ask that?"

"He's so nice. And so good-looking. I was just wondering if you had noticed."

"I've noticed and I've appreciated all his help, but I think he's pretty well taken already. Little Miss Forest Ranger acted quite possessive today when he put his arm around her."

"Well, you could get him if you wanted to," decided Aggie. "I've seen the way he looks at you. It makes me shiver. He's got nice eyes."

"Yes, he has got nice eyes," agreed Willy. "He looked at that girl with them today and the look that passed between them told me a lot. There's not much chance for anyone else--even if I had the smallest desire to try to make him interested."

"You really aren't interested?" asked Aggie. "I wish I was a few years older. I'd sure be interested."

Willy laughed at her. "In ten years you'll be an old married lady with kids and a gorgeous husband. Whatever happened to that Norton kid? Shawn?"

"Oh, he decided Patty Nelson was cuter than me when she had a pool party at her house. She dumped him after three weeks and he called and asked me out again, but I wouldn't even look at him. Such a dweeb!"

"Well, there are bound to be lots of others. Are you glad to be going back to school so you can see all your friends?" Willy asked.

"Yes, I miss all the kids. I know another boy will come along. I've already got my eyes on a few. You always have to be ready in case someone comes along that looks good." She paused then said in a big-sisterly way, imitating Willy, "You need to keep your eyes open, too, and not let any opportunity slip by. Max is a big opportunity."

"It hasn't been long since Ryan died," answered Willy. "I'm not ready for any of that. Once you've loved someone, your heart is pretty well taken forever. It wouldn't be right for me to even think of loving anyone else."

Aggie seemed to accept her comment and soon Willy could hear her breathing deepen and knew she was asleep. Willy lay in her blankets and let her mind dwell for just a minute on a tall, dark-haired, broad-shouldered, capable, loving, sweet-kissing man. "I have found somebody I could have loved, but it's just not possible. I'm staying committed to keeping my promise to Ryan," she reaffirmed.

She turned over and recited the Preamble to the Constitution until finally she fell asleep. She didn't know that not too far away, there was another sleepless person whose thoughts were on her face and whose ears were hearing her laughter and whose lips felt again her soft ones.

Chapter 13

After arranging with Mrs. Woods, the campground owner, to save her spot for another night, Willy drove out of town after breakfast and headed for the hills that ringed the west of the valley. She had gotten instructions to reach a local trout farm and the sulfur springs that were supposed to be popular and interesting tourist attractions.

They smelled the sulfur springs long before they came in sight. There was an old building that had once housed a swimming pool but had fallen into ruin. Mrs. Woods had told them that she had taken swimming lessons there when she was a little girl. She said you got used to the smell after a while and the warm water was relaxing. You couldn't see anything underwater, though, because it was murky and greenish. The smell never would come out of her swimming suits.

Willy went to the small, broken down house nearby and knocked on the door, intending to ask for information about the area. She was greeted by an ornery old codger who ordered her off his property and almost brought her to tears by his hostile manner. Apologizing and trying to explain her purpose didn't do any good and she backed off quickly and drove away. "Well, I guess I won't get any pictures there," she said.

"It doesn't look like anything any tourist would want to see anyway," observed Aggie. "The smell is the only interesting thing and you can get that just by driving by."

They drove a few more miles down the road and found a sign pointing the way to the trout ranch. "I've heard of cattle ranches and sheep ranches, but I've never heard of a fish ranch," Aggie chuckled.

"They have a lot of fish farms in the Northwest," Willy told her. "They raise the fish commercially to sell to canneries and as fresh meat."

They pulled into a grassy parking area surrounded by willows. There was a small bridge over a stream but no buildings in sight. Walking over the bridge and following a path through the willows, they came upon several small ponds. "Look at all the fish!" squealed Jeffy. He ran to the edge of the nearest pond, absorbed in watching the huge trout swimming lazily in the water.

"Would you like to try catching some?" drawled a voice behind them. Turning, they saw a handsome teenager walk up with a big net and a couple of fishing poles. Willy heard Aggie's intake of breath at his appearance.

Unable to resist the impassioned pleas of her children, Willy relented and let them try their hand at fishing. Allison and Jeffy hooked fish after fish but they were so crafty and experienced at being

caught that before any could be netted, they spit out the hook and fell back into the water. Eventually, though, one unwary fish swallowed the hook and was successfully landed. It was great to have the boy do all the baiting and fish handling. Both Allison and Jeffy managed to catch big ones. The attendant measured them. Allison's was nineteen inches and was a Cutthroat trout and Jeffy's was a Rainbow at seventeen inches.

They watched the young man gut the fish in a very experienced and efficient manner. The highlight for Jeffy, although Willy and Allison nearly gagged, was when he took out the heart of one of the fish and placed it, still beating, in his palm. Aggie's eyes were riveted on the boy and she wasn't bothered by anything he did.

"Why does it still move when the fish is dead?" asked Jeffy, always fascinated by anything new. "What does it feel like? When will it stop beating? What do you do with all the insides?"

The boy answered all the questions while he worked. He seemed to enjoy his job and didn't mind being subjected to Willy's camera. Aggie whispered that she wanted some of these pictures.

Willy had gotten the little fishermen on film as well as the ponds and the fish. The whole area was very scenic and pretty. She told the operator about her writing project and he was so pleased to have his family's trout business included in her article with its potential for free advertising that he let her have the fish for half the normal price. That was fortunate because it would have cost a bundle and used up two days allotment of food money.

When the fish were wrapped and put in the cooler, they started on their way back toward town. "What else can we see around here?" asked Aggie then immediately squealed, "Look! There's a fox!"

They all crowded to the windows and Willy stopped as they watched the fox trot slowly through a pasture. The cows eyed it suspiciously, but the fox was intent on searching through the tall grass for rabbits or mice for its dinner. "I've never seen a real, wild fox before," Aggie said. "Look at the size of his tail. It's huge!"

They saw a few deer on the low hills as they wound their way back toward the main highway. This was such a beautiful valley. It lay peacefully in the sun, the clear air and bright sunshine lighting the even fields divided by fences.

They drove on the blacktopped road down the entire west side of the valley then crossed over to the main highway that followed the eastern hills. They noticed one of the foothills that was blackened partway across its front. It looked like a forest fire had burned there, except there were no trees.

Jeffy noticed the star up high on the hill above Afton and wished that he could climb up and see what it looked like up close. Willy told him that it looked too steep for little boys and that they didn't

have time to do everything there was to do anyway. He took offense at the idea that he was a little boy and reminded her that 'Mr. Rangerbell' had called him the man of the family.

"His name is Mr. Bell," corrected Aggie. "He is a forest ranger named Max Bell."

"I like him," chimed in Allison. "He was so nice to stay with us when we were scared."

"I liked it when he let me ride on his shoulders when we went up to that spring thing," commented Jeffy. "I could see everything from that high up."

"Yes, it was nice to meet him," agreed Willy, but told them, "We probably won't see him anymore, though. He has to work and we'll only be here one more day."

"But I like it here," said Allison. "I would like to live here all the time. There is so much to see and do."

"There is a lot to see and do because we've never seen it before," commented her mother. "It would get old and boring if we lived here all the time."

"Mr. Bell lives here all the time and he isn't bored," said Aggie.

"That's because he was born here. You never get tired of the place you were born," observed Willy.

They saw ahead the blackened and burned mountain. A sign pointed to a road into the canyon by the burned area. "'Dry Creek Canyon' it says. Let's explore up this road a little way," said Willy. "I want to see if the back of the mountain is burned, too."

She drove carefully around the tight curves and bends in the narrow dirt road. They saw that part of the burned area did indeed continue over the top of the mountain and down the back side. Right at the base of the hill was a house and some outbuildings. The blackened vegetation reached within a short distance of the house. It looked like a bulldozer had dug a shallow trench above the yard to protect the home from the fire.

"I think I'll stop and ask the people in that house what happened here," decided Willy. "I hope they are more friendly than that man by the sulfur springs."

She snapped a few pictures then left the kids in the truck and went to knock tentatively on the door of the house. An elderly woman answered and listened to Willy's explanation and questions about the fire. The woman was very happy to tell all she knew. She invited Willy to bring the children out so they could play in the yard then settled herself and Willy down in a long split log swing hanging on the porch. The woman went into great detail about the cause, excitement and repercussions of the forest fire.

"The fire was started by the Wylie boy down in Osmond," she began. "He was burning some dead bushes last year while he was out irrigating the east field and a wind came up. The fire got away

from him and he tried to beat it out with his shovel and to stomp it out, but it burned too fast. He couldn't get the tractor started to go for help so he had to run a whole mile home to get to a telephone. I can just picture him thumping across the fields in those big irrigating boots! By that time, somebody had seen it from their house and called the fire department so they were on their way, but there wasn't much they could do. The fire had been blown up the mountain by the wind. Everything is always so dry that time of year."

Pausing for breath, she went on, "The Forest Service was informed because this is all forest land and they sent a crew out to try to stop the fire. The hill is so steep they had a hard time climbing it and finally one man who happened to be out working on his bulldozer saw what was happening. Well, he headed right up the canyon here and started scraping up a trench around our place since it was headed this way. He went on up the ravine there," she said, pointing, "and started up the back of the mountain. He made it to the top all right because the back side here isn't as steep as the front."

By this time, Aggie and the children had drawn closer to hear what she was saying. Her gestures and the expression on her face intrigued them and they didn't want to miss anything.

"Are these all your kids?" the woman wanted to know.

"Yes, this is Allison and Jeffy and this is my sister Aggie. I am Willy Milton from Washington. I'm doing research on Star Valley so I try to find out anything interesting that I can tell about for an article I will write."

"What cute little ones," cooed the woman. "I just baked some cookies if it's all right for them to have some. Will you come in?" The natural hospitality of these friendly folks surfaced and she shepherded them all into her tiny living room. She brought them a plate of delicious cookies and glasses of milk. "Fresh this morning from my cow, Bessy," she told them.

Meanwhile, the woman's husband had noticed the strange vehicle parked out front and had left his chores in the barn to come and see who was visiting. Living in the canyon as they did, they didn't get too many visitors. He cleaned up a little in the kitchen, but still brought the odor of animals and farmwork with him as he entered the room.

He was as friendly and talkative as his wife. They repeatedly interrupted each other and finished each other's sentences as they told the rest of the story.

It seems that the bulldozer operator had paused at the top of the mountain, not intending to continue down its steep face. He saw that the efforts of the men on foot were not helping and could tell that the wind had picked up considerably. He figured that if the spread of the blaze was to be contained, he would have to do it with his bulldozer.

The elderly couple couldn't say enough in the praise of this man who risked so much to put out the fire. He had taken his life in his hands and steered his vehicle straight down the steep mountain. At one point, the fire was getting close to the path he was making and a gust of wind had carried burning material right on top of him. He had jumped from the dozer and ducked down close to its track to protect himself. The seat had caught fire so he threw handfuls of loose dirt on it to put it out. It was too hot to sit on after that, but he still managed to drive the machine standing up the rest of the way down the steep incline. When he reached the creek at the bottom, he was greeted by the farmer and his family and a few firemen who had contained the spread of the fire at the base of the mountain. All had watched his precarious descent down the mountain, holding their breath at his danger. They had sprayed the bulldozer to cool it off and it had sputtered and steamed for a long time, it was so hot. The man was regarded as a hero even though he didn't realize how great his bravery was until he received the accolades of everyone.

"Somebody asked him why he had risked his life and his own equipment and he just said it looked like somebody needed to do something and he had just done what he could," the old man told them. "He sure earned a lot of respect that day."

"Wow!" said Jeffy, his eyes big and fascinated. "I wish I could drive a bulldozer."

"Bulldozer!" corrected Aggie, laughing.

"Anyway," continued the woman, patting Jeffy's head, "that was the end of the fire. All the people went home. There were twenty or thirty forest people there and they all have to be paid for their time. It was going to cost that family a pretty penny to pay all their wages, but do you know what happened? That head ranger, Max Bell, tore up his time ticket in front of everyone and went home. All the rest of the men did the same. It was real nice of them. The Wylie's aren't rich folks and there were a lot of teary eyes that day, I'll tell you."

"What a beautiful story," commented Willy. "The people in this valley are so nice and friendly. They show a lot of neighborliness that you sure don't find much in a big city."

"You bet!" agreed the man. "We all have to watch out for each other in a small town. We're pretty close-knit and one man's problem is everyone's problem. There aren't too many things that can't be worked out together."

Willy rose and prepared to leave. "Thank you so much for the cookies and milk and information," she told them. "I intend to tell about this incident in my article, if you don't mind. Can I use your names and the pictures I've taken?"

"Of course, of course," they assured her, pleased that she thought enough of their narration to include it in her writing. "We'll look forward to seeing the magazine when it comes out." Willy took their name and address and promised to send them a copy when it was printed.

Willy and her family climbed back into the truck and continued for a short distance up the canyon. The scenery here was beautiful. The smell of the breeze wafting over the pine trees and flowers filled them with pleasure.

They stopped to look over a pretty meadow and get the full benefit of the fragrance around them. Allison caught sight of some wild raspberries by the side of the road and asked to get out and pick them. She drew in a great breath of the sweet aroma and let out a long sigh. "It's so pretty here. I just love it!"

"Why can't we camp up here on our last night in Star Valley?" asked Jeffy.

"Because there aren't any rest rooms and girls don't like to water bushes," said Willy, acidly. She was remembering her last encounter with undergrowth in the dark and the painful itching that had resulted. She still suffered a twinge of embarrassment every time she recalled her chagrin at having to ask Max for help. She cringed when she remembered his laughter at her predicament. At least he had had the decency to refrain from mentioning it again.

These unbidden memories opened up the storehouse of emotions she had been valiantly trying to suppress. Telling the others that she was going to take a little walk across the meadow, she turned and gave herself up to a moment of longing. How could these feelings have developed in such a short time? She had known Max less than a week. Normal people didn't fall in love so fast. Besides, she didn't know a thing about him. Except that he was helpful and friendly and courteous and kind. "It sounds like he's a Boy Scout!" Willy told herself.

What a sensitive and thoughtful gesture it had been for Max to lead his men in tearing up his time card so that the unfortunate family who were responsible for the forest fire wouldn't have such a financial burden. It just added one more reason to love this big, dark, handsome fellow.

"Wake up, Willy!" she told herself. "It looks like he's already spoken for so keep your silly thoughts to yourself. And you have that promise to Ryan to keep."

As she returned to the truck, she heard the kids laughing at something that was happening across the meadow. There was an old cabin nestled at the base of a wooded hill and as she watched, a deer, chased by a dog came running around the corner of the cabin. Right behind the dog chugged a stout woman yelling and waving a dishtowel. A man in what looked like red underwear topped with denim overalls stood in the doorway hollering at the procession and gesturing wildly. Willy couldn't

hear their words, but enjoyed the spectacle. “Look at that,” she laughed. “I wonder who will catch whom first!”

“That’s the third time they’ve been around the house,” giggled Aggie. “I can’t understand why the deer doesn’t just run up the mountain. Why does it keep going around and around the house?”

Just as she spoke, the deer took her advice and bolted straight up into the trees above the cabin. The dog kept chasing after the deer but the woman stopped and after a few more waves went inside the house.

They all got a good chuckle as they climbed back in the truck and headed home. They wondered at the pioneer spirit of these rural folks who would choose to live so far up a canyon in what looked like pretty primitive conditions.

Chapter 14

The ride back to their new campground was quiet. The children were all tired from a long and happy day. Willy was looking forward to a rest also. When she had pulled into their parking space again, she left the kids sleeping with Aggie in charge and walked to the rest room. On her way back, Mrs. Woods came hurrying out of the office waving to her.

"Mrs. Milton, there is a message here for you," she called, waving a piece of paper. "A man in a ranger uniform asked me to give it to you when you got back."

"Thank you," Willy said, taking the paper. She disappointed her interested messenger by returning to her camper before opening it.

It was from Max as she had expected. His masculine handwriting was hard to read, but she was able to decipher the note. It told her that he had checked with his brother and that he had some horses they could ride if they were interested. Max would come by at four o'clock to pick them up if they wanted to go.

Willy tried hard to be upset that he had so obviously ignored her instructions to leave them alone. He was a hard man to discourage. In fact, though, she was secretly pleased that he hadn't given up so easily. And anyway, how could she pass up this chance to let Aggie ride some horses? For free even. She had always enjoyed riding herself and knew that the kids had wished for such an opportunity. She decided to give in to the invitation but to keep cool and distant.

Aggie was ecstatic when she heard the news and Jeffy let out a squeal of delight. They were excited at this stroke of good luck. Allison was happy, too, but was a little apprehensive. "Mama, I don't know how to steer a horse," she said, a worried look in her eyes. "What if I can't do it?"

"I'll hold the reins so that you'll be all right," Willy assured her. "I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

They were ready and waiting when four o'clock came. Max was a few minutes late and Jeffy was sure he had forgotten and that they should go and look for him, but Willy calmed him. "He'll be here," she said.

Finally, a pickup drove in by the office. Max got out and looked around the small campground. It was easy to see their camper and he headed right over. He was met by three very

eager children, loud in their excitement at the coming event. Willy watched him closely to try to determine what he felt, but he seemed unchanged in any way. He just acted like he belonged. She went to lock the camper and grab jackets just in case it turned chilly then joined the group. Jeffy clutched his new cowboy hat to keep it safe.

Aggie asked if she and Allison could ride in the back of the pickup. Max looked at Willy for permission but she was all right with it. She had spent many a happy excursion riding in the back of pickups and knew they would be safe as long as they stayed seated. Max helped them in and got them settled while Willy buckled herself and Jeffy into the seat. It wasn't far to Max's home and soon they were pulling into the driveway. "Come on in and meet my parents," Max invited when they were out of the truck.

Shyly, they entered the warm, welcoming atmosphere of the home. Mrs. Bell hurried into the room, wiping her hands on a towel. "Hello! You must be Willy!" she bubbled. "Max told us all about you and your little family. My, look at these sweeties! What is your name, dear?" She stooped to look at Allison right on her level.

Warmed by such a grandmotherly interest, Allison forgot her timidity and smiled. "Allison," she said softly.

"You look just like your mother," said Mrs. Bell, ruffling her curly blonde hair. She turned her attention to Allison's brother. "And who have we here?" she asked him, smiling.

"I'm Jefferson Ryan Milton," that young man informed her. "I'm free!"

"I could tell you were three," Mrs. Bell said, correctly interpreting his childish talk. "You are quite a big boy."

She stood again and was introduced to Aggie. She gestured to the comfortable sofa. "Will you sit down? Charlie will be in soon, I think."

"No time for that, Mom," Max said, his arm around his mother's shoulders. These people have come to ride horses and they can't wait any longer. We'll meet Dad outside."

"All right," laughed his cheery mother. "But be sure to come back in when you're done. I'm baking cherry pies."

Willy was surprised at the invitation and began to refuse. She certainly didn't want to impose on Mrs. Bell.

"Now, I won't take no for an answer, Willy," Mrs. Bell exclaimed. "They are already in the oven and there's way too much for us. We need to get better acquainted. Max spoke so highly of you that we're anxious to have a nice visit."

That gave Willy some food for thought and she wondered what he had been saying about them. Her mind was whirling as they trooped through the fragrant kitchen and out the back door. They followed Max to the outbuildings behind the house. He headed for a corral with several horses inside. "Lloyd?" he called, his loud voice making the horses prick up their ears and move toward the fence, hoping for a hand-out.

"Be right there," called a voice from another building. Soon a man emerged through the door. He was not quite as tall as Max but looked very much like him. "These must be the Milton's," he commented, looking them over. "So you want to ride some horses, do you?" he asked, removing his hat and wiping sweat from his forehead.

Max introduced them all. They learned that Lloyd and his wife, Jean, had three children and lived in the smaller house across the road. "Jean would be over here riding, too, but she is expecting again and has to keep off the horses," he told them. "My daughter, Kelly, will be over any minute, I expect. She never misses an opportunity to get on a horse. She's about your age, Aggie."

With Max's help, Lloyd caught and saddled four horses. "Aren't you going to ride a horse with us, Mr. Rangerbell?" asked Jeffy, wistfully.

"Oh, yes," he replied with a grin. "Smoky is in the barn over here, though, because he jumped a fence again so we're keeping him penned up for a day or two. We're hoping that if he gets penned every time he jumps a fence, he will get the message that it isn't so bad to get caught and ridden. I'll go and saddle him right now."

When they were all mounted, Max leading Jeffy's horse and Willy holding the reins of Allison's, they started off across the field. The air was fragrant with the smell of freshly cut hay. The horses were well-trained and gentle and they proceeded at a walk until all felt confident and comfortable. Jeffy wanted to do his own guiding with his reins, but Max noticed his jumpy seat and kicking feet and held on to the leading rope. Allison got over her fear quickly and learned to turn her horse. Willy asked Max if he thought she would be all right if she was on her own.

"Old Jenny wouldn't run even if she had a chance," he told her. "I think Allison would do great on her own."

Aggie was over-confident at first but quickly learned to give clear directions to her horse after ending up going the wrong way a couple of times. She was frustrated that it wasn't as easy as she thought. Soon, though, she was able to keep her horse going the right direction and keep up with the others.

Willy had ridden several times before on hunting trips with her husband so she was comfortable around a horse. She didn't like to gallop much, but she did fine on slower rides.

"Here comes Kelly," called Max, pointing to a cloud of dust in the distance. They watched a young girl expertly ride a beautiful roan horse galloping full speed toward them.

"Wow," Aggie said in admiration.

Kelly pulled up her mount and walked the last few yards to meet them. "Hi, Uncle Max!" she greeted. "Are these your friends?"

After another round of introductions, Kelly joined the group on their way. They followed the barbed wire fence to the end of a field then found a path that ran along the side of a stream. "What's the name of this stream?" Willy wanted to know.

"This is the mighty Salt River," he told her. "It's the same river you followed coming into the south end of the valley. It continues all the way to Alpine where it runs into the Palisades Reservoir."

"People go canoeing on a stream this little?" she asked, remembering that he had told her that she shouldn't leave the valley until she had canoed on Salt River.

"Well, it gets deeper farther north where it goes through the Narrows into the Lower Valley," he chuckled. "It is a little small here for many water sports."

After they had ridden a while, Max pulled up and asked if they were getting stiff and sore yet. Willy was definitely beginning to feel uncomfortable from the width of her horse and the hard saddle. The others agreed. "Let's start back, then," he said. "You greenhorns can get off and walk if you don't think you can sit any longer."

They all thought they could tough it out until they got back to the corral. Willy guided her horse carefully through a ditch between fields, but her mare stumbled on the way out and started limping. "Kelly, why don't you take Jeffy's rope and you all keep on your way. I'll take a look at Grace's hoof and see if she's picked up a stone," Max suggested.

"Sure, Uncle Max," agreed Kelly. She had struck up a friendship with Aggie and they were talking about all their interests. Allison was doing well with her horse and wasn't about to

leave the comfort of his back. They kept going at a walk and soon were out of sight behind some trees.

Max had helped Willy out of the saddle and lifted the horse's hoof. "She's just got a rock in her shoe," he discovered. He took out a pocket knife and worked at extracting it.

"This has been so much fun," Willy began. "How can I thank you for all the time you have..." she broke off abruptly, having caught Max's eyes as he lifted them to hers. She saw in their humorous depths the memory of the last time she had asked him how she could thank him and the 'sip' he had taken of her lips in payment.

"Let me rephrase that," she said, her face turning red.

Max had finished his task and took Grace for a short walk to check for a limp. There was no sign of one. He tied a rein to a bush and walked toward Willy. She didn't know whether to run or stand her ground. The look in his eyes was sending thrills up her spine and she knew what was coming. Trying to stall him, she stammered, "Max, please, what would your little ranger friend think if she saw you with another woman?"

Max stopped, his head tilted to one side. "My little ranger friend?" he asked.

"The one you had your arm around in the ranger station when we were checking out," she enlightened him.

"Oh, Eva," he laughed, remembering. "She's nobody special to me, although sometimes she thinks she is. No, I'm between girlfriends right now. Footloose and fancy free!" He was close enough to put out his hand and touch her, but he refrained, perhaps because of the guarded look in Willy's eyes.

"Talk to me, Willy," he said, so softly she could hardly hear his words above the gentle breeze. "I don't want to do anything that you don't like. You're so warm one minute and cool the next. I know you're a widow and that you must have loved your husband. I think you're afraid that I am moving in on his territory. You're so lovely and inviting that..."

"Inviting?" demanded Willy, eyes flashing. "I've never invited you to kiss me!"

"No, not exactly. I guess I just assumed that your presence in my arms was permission enough," he laughed, still in a quiet voice.

"You caught me in some weak moments," she accused, excusing herself. "I never intended for you to be so...so pushy!"

"Just tell me how you feel," he asked, not taking offense at her belligerent attitude. "I could easily become very much more interested in you. I already love your kids." He reached out a hand now, and tousled her tawny hair. "I like short, curly hair. Your eyes make me want to stare into them until I drown. I can't breathe when I look at your delicious figure. What really sent me spinning, though, was the sound of your voice. Both times I've heard you sing about the windows of heaven, I've had to wipe tears away. Me! Tough-as-nails Max! I don't feel the need to shed tears very often, but your voice sounds like it comes from an angel."

Willy looked up at him. Her eyes had fallen before his intent gaze as he enumerated her charms, but the break in his voice surprised her. "I wondered why you were wiping your eyes that night around the campfire," she said, wonderingly. "I thought you got smoke in them."

"I don't want to rush you or scare you or drive you away," he told her. "I just want to be near you. I want to hold you in my arms. I want to feel your heart beat against me. I want to taste your lips. I want to...."

"Stop!" she cried, turning from him. "No! Just stop!"

She went to her horse and climbed rather ungracefully into the saddle. Wiping tears away with the back of her hand, she guided Grace back to the trail and kicked her flanks into a trot. She had to get away. This was intolerable. She couldn't let Max fall in love with her. She had made a vow to Ryan to never replace him in her heart. She couldn't break it. She just couldn't let herself break that promise!

Chapter 15

Grace, enjoying the chance to kick up her heels, reached a gallop before Willy noticed that she was shifting uncomfortably in the saddle and pulled back on the reins. She forced herself to think through the situation here. She couldn't go running off like that and cause a scene or have to answer a lot of questions from curious children. She didn't want to intrude on the hospitality of Max's parents by acting like a skittery teen age girl. She ought to at least gather her dignity and act like she was a mature twenty-six year old.

Pulling her horse back to a walk, she looked around to see where Max was. She was surprised to see him within a few yards. He must have jumped on his horse and followed her, distrustful of her skill. She looked at him to see what kind of mood he was in. His face showed no anger, only concern and a sheepish look of contrition. She turned her horse and walked back to him.

"I'm sorry I acted so stupid," she said, humbly. "I'm flattered that you find so many things to admire in me, but please, just forget it. We are leaving tomorrow and you'll never see me again, so what is the point?"

"The point is that I want to see you again. I want you to stay. I want you to get to know me better. I keep hoping that you will find something about me to admire."

"Oh, I know more about you than you think," she smiled. "I've talked to several people who have told me what an amazing fellow you are. I already have first-hand experience of your concern for damsels in distress. You are very free with your comfort and kindness."

"Whatever you've heard, I really am a nice man," he asserted.

"No doubt one of your fine qualities is humility, too," she teased.

"Humility and perseverance," he pointed out. "I'm the ranger who always gets his woman."

"Just how many notches do you have for the women you've gotten?" she wondered aloud, chin up and fire in her eyes.

"I can't help it if I'm so handsome and wonderful that they throw themselves at me in droves," he justified himself, a mocking grin on his face. "I don't keep track of such large numbers."

"Men are insufferable!" she exclaimed in disgust. "It isn't me you want at all. It is just another conquest. Well, you certainly won't miss my scalp in your collection. Go drown yourself in your droves of women!"

Willy, flushed with anger and berating herself for ever thinking she was falling in love with him, turned and continued on her way. Max followed behind her, chuckling. The snickering infuriated her even more than his arrogant attitude.

By the time they had reached the corrals, she had herself under control and was able to be courteous and say all the proper things. Charlie Bell, Max's father, was there to meet them and was as friendly and kind as the rest of the family. They helped with the grooming of the horses and then cleaned up. Willy insisted on having the pie served outside on a picnic table under a huge golden willow tree. She didn't want to have them mess up the clean house with horsehair and dirty shoes. There was plenty of room around the table and it was in the shade.

By the time they were finally ready to leave, Willy had much more to thank the Bell's for. Jeffy and Allison could hardly be pulled away. They had discovered the chickens in their coop and were allowed to gather eggs in a basket. Allison had used such care that she hadn't cracked any, but Jeffy didn't catch on to the fragile nature of an eggshell until he had broken two. Mrs. Bell patted his head as he looked up at her with a quivering chin and let him know it was a normal occurrence. She had him throw the broken ones into the coop and the chickens made short work of the feast, eating them shells and all. There were lots of other eggs, she told him kindly.

A batch of new kittens had been discovered in one of the empty stalls and each one had to be held and carefully petted. Allison might have prevailed on her mother to let her take one home with her, except that they were only three or four weeks old and still needed their mother. Even Jeffy learned to handle the tiny little creatures with gentleness and care.

Aggie had run across the street with Kelly to see her room and to exchange addresses. They were on their way to becoming fast friends and wanted to write to each other.

Mrs. Bell insisted on sending a bag of cookies with them when Willy told her they were leaving to start home Friday. "I'm surprised you're leaving so soon. I thought from what Max has told us about his plans for you that you would be here for at least a month," she confided.

"Max has plans for us?" Willy questioned.

"Oh, my, yes!" his mother declared. "Didn't he tell you? He must have wanted to surprise you and now I've let the cat out of the bag. I heard him asking Lloyd if his canoe was still leaking so they pulled it out last night and checked it over. He asked me to find out when the fish hatchery up Targhee was open so he could take the kids over there. He has talked a lot about you. I haven't seen him this excited about anyone for a long time."

Mrs. Bell lowered her voice and confided, "We're always glad when he finds someone to interest him. Lots of women are after him, but he just hasn't gotten attached to any of them. He says he's waiting for Miss Right to come along and it doesn't matter if he's almost thirty years old, he will wait for her forever if he has to," she laughed. "I certainly hope he doesn't wait that long! We don't have nearly enough grandchildren."

Willy was a little jolted by this news and awkwardly tried to pass it off. "He has taken a real interest in the kids. They have certainly gotten friendly with him, too," Willy admitted. She was surprised that Max was so enthused about her little family. Maybe she had misread his intentions after all and he was truly serious about his feelings. That really complicated her life if so and she would have to do a bit of thinking.

After they were loaded again into the cab and bed of Max's pickup, Willy and Max listened to Jeffy's enthusiastic retelling of his ride. He was very proud of himself for being a cowboy now. He had worn his hat the whole time and informed them that he would never take it off again. Willy was glad that his exuberance prevented any other conversation.

Max pulled into the campground and helped everyone out of the pickup. Allison couldn't quit talking about the horses and the kittens and wished that she could live there and see them every day. She begged for another chance to see them before they left to go home.

Aggie was full of descriptions of Kelly's room and the posters on her walls. She admired Kelly's riding skills and told them that Kelly had been one of the girls in the barrel race at the rodeo. Besides horseback riding, Kelly also loved basketball and had papered her room with pictures.

The sun had set and it was starting to get dark. "I don't suppose the big, nice, humble, wonderful Mr. Bell could invite himself for supper," Max suggested tentatively, looking at Willy.

Willy pulled a face and her mind raced over the contents of her cupboards. "We were just going to open a can of spaghetti," she said apologetically. "That's pretty poor fare for a hard-working man, but you're welcome to eat with us."

"Aggie, would you mind watching the kids if I took Willy and went for some steaks?" he asked. Noticing her widened eyes, he said, "I'm buying this time. I saw a charcoal grill over by the office that I'll bet they would let us use."

Aggie agreed promptly, her eyes gleaming at the prospect of steak. It was a rare treat around here.

Willy got her purse, but Max stopped her. "This is my treat," he reminded her. "It will be my going away present if you still insist on going so soon."

When they had climbed into the pickup and were driving away, Max cleared his throat. "I hate to keep bringing this up, Willy, but I have got to know before you leave. Do you have any feelings at all for me? Is there the remotest chance that sometime in the future you might be interested in another husband?" He caught sight of her face in the dim light. "Now don't get all mad again," he pleaded. "I'm just sending in my resume. I know better than to push you any more."

They had pulled into the grocery store parking lot and as he moved to open the door, Willy put a restraining hand on his arm. Her pulse quickened at the touch, but she had to get this over with. He looked expectantly at her.

"Max, I want you to know that I think a lot of you. You are a very nice and wonderful man and the things you've done for me and my kids are going to be remembered a very, very long time." She paused and took a deep breath. Her next words were hard because they were going to send him away from her, but they had to be said.

"I made a promise to my husband when he was lying there in the hospital unconscious and all wrapped up in bandages from his burns that he would never be replaced in my heart. I vowed to keep his memory fresh in the minds of our children. As much as I may admire you and enjoy your company, there is no point in letting you think it could turn into something more. I will keep my promise. We've known each other such a short time that I'm sure it won't take long for you to get interested in someone who is available."

Her words had been quiet but very firm. She had kept her eyes on her hands folded in her lap, but now she lifted them to his face. "Please understand that I don't want to hurt you. You have made our visit here so very pleasant and memorable. You are an easy man to like and you have charmed us all, but don't you see that it is out of the question for us to stay any longer?"

Aggie and Allison need to get back in time for school. I don't have unlimited money to spend on these trips. You have your job. How can you have gotten so attached to us in only a few days?"

Max reached for her hand and held it warmly between his own. "I've always been practical and unromantic before. My past girlfriends were always complaining that I only thought of myself and not what they might like. I had my life all in order and knew where I was going. I wasn't going to let anybody get in my way. Until about five o'clock last Friday. There I was, innocently walking my dog around the campground. Not a care in the world. I came around a corner to see what Suzy was barking at and there, up in a tree, was a wild-eyed creature with short, curly honey-colored hair. For the first time in my life, I lost my breath over a woman. I thought my heart had stopped beating. I have never felt that way before. I don't believe in love at first sight!"

"Then what happened to you to make you change?" Willy whispered, caught up in his story.

"You. Just you. When I put out my hands to help you down from the tree, and touched you, it felt like electricity. I swear I saw flashing lights and heard music. It was the most amazing feeling I've ever had!" Max shook his head, still disbelieving the feelings that he was describing.

Willy sat back on the seat. She had unconsciously leaned toward him as he talked, drawn to him by the tone of his voice and the ardent look in his eyes. Then she remembered that man after the dance not too long ago. He, too, had looked fervently at her and spoken words of admiration. He, too, had told her of the rush of passion that had overtaken him at his first sight of her. Then he had clumsily grabbed at her and groped her and tried to kiss her. Well, Max might not be awkward at hugging and kissing and he was very much the gentleman, but she was very wary of the look in his eyes. It may look like love, but, as she well knew, lust was a close imitator.

"I'm sorry, Max," she broke in, interrupting the recital of his feelings. "I had another man look at me just like you're doing at a church dance a few months ago. I ended up slapping him and running for my life. You may not be as crude as he was, but I don't have much trust in men. There just hasn't been enough time. Let's leave it. Right now, we're friends. We've enjoyed a few days of pleasant activities. Let's just get the food and go eat it and get on with our lives."

Max turned away, deeply hurt. They sat for a few moments in silence before he moved to open the door. Willy jumped out also. "Don't take it personally," she said, coming around to meet

him. "Let's just be friends spending an evening together." She flashed a forgiving and apologetic smile at him and headed for the entrance to the store.

Chapter 16

After the shopping and the grilling and the eating was over, Willy and Aggie gathered up the leftovers and put them away. They had eaten at the picnic table outside and while they cleaned up, Max had started the kids on a game of hide and tickle. The object was, of course, to be found and tickled mercilessly by the one who was It. Willy was not going to get caught up in a game like that. Max's touch on her flesh was too conducive to feelings she couldn't afford.

She and Aggie finished and then sat outside. The game had ended amid much boisterous giggling and Max, Allison and Jeffy had thrown themselves on the grass to cool off. "I need a walk," Max decided. "Do you want to join me for a walk up Main Street and down the other side? And then I'd better get going so you can get some rest."

They were all willing to accompany him for this in-town hike. Max held a hand of each child and Willy and Aggie followed behind. They looked over the farm equipment at the John Deere dealership. They peered in the windows of the stores which closed early keeping with small town tradition. They read the posters on display outside the movie theater.

Jeffy pressed his nose against the window of the motorcycle store and wished he could ride one. His attention was diverted by a display of western wear in another shop. Some real cowboy duds were arrayed on a mannequin just about his size. The outfit was complete down to the boots and matching belt. He just stood there, a big sigh escaping his little chest.

Willy felt a twinge of regret that she couldn't afford such expensive and impractical clothing for him, but only a twinge. She knew the fickle tastes of children and realized that his attention would quickly be turned to other interests.

Just as she had expected, Jeffy spied the ice cream store next with its bright lights and welcoming interior. "I'm hungry!" he announced. "I need a milk shake!"

"We just ate," Willy protested.

"Now, Mother," Max chided. "It's been over an hour since he ate. He's a growing boy and needs his strength. What flavor do you want, Jeff?"

"Mama, you have to call me Jeff, now," the little boy said, his eyes big and serious. "I'm too big for baby names." Then he shifted gears and yelled in his normal three-year-old voice that could be heard the length of the street, "Strawberry!"

The menu of flavors was repeated to them by the waitress at the counter while she and another girl waited on a line of customers. This was a popular place on a warm August night. There were no

seats available in the small cafe so they decided to sit outside on the curb and watch the traffic go by. Willy had stepped off preparing to sit down and Allison was beside her holding a cup carefully. They heard the thud of a dropped cup and, as Willy turned, she heard the gooey plop of spilled ice cream.

Resigning herself to the regular occurrence of cleaning up after inexpert little boys, Willy looked at Jeffy to see where the mess was. He stood there, holding a half-full cup, but there was no puddle at his feet. At the same time, she heard a gasp from a man nearby, also enjoying his ice cream outdoors. Her eyes turned in his direction and she was aghast to see what lay at the top of his balding head, beginning to drip down his face.

Spellbound for a second with utter amazement, she soon recovered and ran to offer napkins and words of apology. Max saw the misfortune as soon as she and helped to mop up the sticky-headed gentleman. Willy was horrified at such a bizarre accident. The man was stunned with surprise himself but took it all in good part. He submitted to their ministrations with good humor and laughed off their mortification.

"I have grandchildren," he told them, a lopsided smile on his face. "They do cause some rather interesting events on occasion. Never mind. I'll just go into the restroom and clean up and everything will be fine. Think nothing of it." He walked back into the store and Willy turned to go, her face bright red with embarrassment.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

As they turned and resumed their walk, there was silence. Jeffy knew he was in trouble and was keeping a low profile. He didn't even complain that half of his shake was missing. Allison was relieved that it hadn't been her problem. Aggie was fighting down the impulse to giggle. She looked at Max and then lost control. His lips were contorted and twitching as he tried to master his funny bone. As Aggie broke down in a peal of laughter, his mirth conquered him as he also saw the humor of the situation. Willy was too embarrassed to see anything funny about it at first, but as they laughed until they cried tears, she relaxed and realized that no harm had been done.

Between intervals of hysterical glee they discussed the mysterious forces of physics that had to have been at work to accomplish just the perfect trajectory to propel the perfect mass to the correct height to splat right on target. Allison and Jeffy laughed along with the others but didn't really understand the cause of such excessive merriment. Jeffy was just glad that he wasn't going to get in trouble.

By the time they had finished their walk and were nearing the camper, Max grew quieter. "I guess I'd better say good-bye to all of you," he said sadly. He looked at Willy, pleading in his eyes. "Are you sure you won't consider staying just a couple more days? I got a canoe ready for a trip down

Salt River. There is a fish hatchery in Auburn the kids would love to see. I have so much I want to do with you."

"We've been all through this before, Mister Bell," Willy said. She was alarmed that he would wave such tempting activities in front of the kids, knowing that she usually gave in to their desires.

"Willy," Aggie said, her hand on her sister's arm. "There would be no harm in staying a little longer. Even until Sunday. I really would like to see my new friends at that church one more time. Kelly told me how much fun it is to go canoeing. Why can't we just stay two extra days and do just those two things? Think of all the pictures you could get and how much better your article would be if you included a canoe trip in it? Please, Willy, please, please, please?"

"I'll take tomorrow off work and pick you up," Max offered, hope in his voice.

"No! Don't take time off work," said Willy. She took a big breath. She knew that the major reason she wanted to get away quickly was to avoid the constant battering of her resolve by Max. He wanted to love her so badly and she was afraid she would weaken if she didn't get away. "Just let me think about it for a minute," she finally said. "I'll be right back."

She left the others at the camper and walked a short way up a tree-lined street. The moon was up and the breeze was cooling away the heat of the day. She loved it here. It would be nice to stay longer. Her article would be more complete if she had more experiences to tell about. The only drawback was Max and his continual infatuation. Willy at length came to a decision. They would stay and she would even allow Max to escort them on a river trip, but she would make him agree to keep his distance and leave her alone.

Her mind made up, she returned to the rest and announced her plans. "We will stay until Monday morning," she told them, assembled at the picnic table. A chorus of joy and applause greeted her and she raised her hands. "I've got several things I would like to interview some residents about so I will do that tomorrow and the next day, then Saturday when Max is off work, we can take the canoe trip. Sunday, Aggie can see her new friends and say good-bye to Kelly and we can get all packed up and ready to go. Then we'll leave bright and early Monday morning."

The inordinate amount of delight exhibited at this announcement made her realize just how fond her sister and her children had become of this beautiful valley and its residents. She, too, was filled with happiness, but, intent on clearing up any false notions Max may be harboring, she asked Aggie to take the kids into the camper and get them ready for bed.

Max said his farewells and prepared to depart, but Willy followed him to his truck. "Can I have a word with you?" she asked.

"As many words as you want," he declared, opening his arms wide. "I'm all yours!"

"You're not all mine, and you're not going to be all mine," she told him, her voice firm. "There are some conditions to all this. My decision to stay was not to make you happy but to make my children and sister happy. I want you to know right now that I won't tolerate any more declarations of 'love at first sight' or anything else. If you are doing this in the hopes that you will get anything more from me, you can think again. If that is your only reason for your offer to take us on a canoe trip, then please back out now."

He listened to her carefully, but the smile never left his face. "I just want to be near you," he said, quietly. "I promise I won't touch you unless you're drowning on the canoe trip. I won't say anything to upset you. I'll just admire you from a distance and listen to your voice and fill my eyes with the sight of you."

"You're starting again!" she protested. "Now stop that!"

"Okay, okay. I can't help myself. You are so beautiful in the moonlight."

"Well, just get on your way then," she said, trying to put disgust into her tone of voice. This wasn't going to be easy, she realized.

"Does your no-touch policy start now or on Saturday?" Max asked, his lips close to her hair. "I wouldn't turn down payment for the services I've rendered today."

Willy punched his shoulder with her balled up fist. "You never give up, do you?"

"Never! And now you do owe me," he said seizing her in his arms. "You've broken your own rule and instigated body contact. Now you face the penalty!" He didn't kiss her, but he brought her to his chest and wrapped her in an enthusiastic bear hug. It was more brotherly than otherwise and Willy endured it. She didn't feel threatened or angry by his exuberance. He was acting like Jeffy did when he was given a great favor and wanted to show his appreciation. "Don't men ever grow up?" she asked out loud.

"My mother is constantly asking the same question," Max told her, still holding her in his clutches. He released her and held her at arms length. "She is quite taken with you--and the kids, of course. She's been trying to get me married off for years. Here I am, creeping up on thirty years old, and she has almost despaired of having any grandchildren from her second son. She thinks you may be the making of me."

"Max!" gasped Willy. "You can't get off that subject, can you? Listen to me one more time." She reached for his ears with her two hands and, holding his face inches from her own, she repeated her admonition. "You will refrain from touching me, talking about your feelings for me, and developing any deeper feelings. I am off limits. Why don't you just think of me as a sister and soon we will be gone and out of your hair?"

His sloppy grin at feeling her soft hands on his cheeks brought another flush of color to her cheeks. "I love your hands in my hair," he whispered.

He took her unawares and snatched a quick kiss before she jerked away from him. She turned on her heel and stalked off, and he called after her, "I love you when you're angry." She turned back to hiss a reprimand at him, but he was already climbing behind the steering wheel. "I'll stop by after work tomorrow so we can make our plans," he called as the truck roared to life.

Willy stood there watching him as he turned onto the highway and drove away. She knew she would spend a good part of the night punching and pummeling her emotions and her wayward heart back into her control.

Chapter 17

Willy woke early the next morning. She had expected to spend hours in the night tossing and turning. She had taken Ryan's picture to bed with her to remind herself of her promise to keep him in her heart. Instead she had fallen asleep quickly and slept dreamlessly. Even Jeffy hadn't had his usual nightmares or called for her for several nights now.

Pondering this fact and wondering about the unusual lightheartedness she felt, Willy gathered clean clothing and made her way to the shower building. Emerging later, she felt refreshed and ready for the day. Her mind was full of plans and ideas and her step was light. She woke up her sleepy sister and the kids and began to prepare breakfast.

The happy feeling seemed to be part of everyone this morning and there was none of the usual grouchiness and bickering of four people crowded into a small camper. They each had their own ideas for spending the day and sat down after the meal to plan their activities.

Aggie thought it would be better if she took the kids to the city park for the morning and let them play on the playground while Willy did some of her interviews. The park was in walking distance of the camper so they could come back and play games or read if they got tired.

Willy appreciated her sister's thoughtfulness. It would be difficult to talk to people with two lively children underfoot. She intended to talk to the mayor and someone in the Chamber of Commerce building she had seen. She wanted to find the library and newspaper office and spend some time browsing for articles and information about the area.

They separated at the corner of Main Street and Washington. Aggie and the children skipped off towards the park a block away and Willy headed for the city offices. She spent an interesting morning talking with various officials who were happy to discuss their beloved valley but had to be tracked down in their places of business or homes. Being a city officer in Afton was evidently not a full-time job.

Willy was referred to a very elderly woman who had lived in the valley all her life and was pleased to tell about its history. She remembered details about some of the early inhabitants that would add some homey touches to Willy's article.

Next, Willy was directed to the library which happened to be open and she spent some time learning about the scientific studies on the enigmatic Intermitting Spring. She wondered

why information on such an unusual natural wonder wasn't better publicized to promote more tourism. She put that question to the mayor when she saw him again on the street as she started on her way back to the campground.

"Well, that's a good question," he boomed, laughing at her. "We have tried to get the word out, but the forest people and the city don't want to spend the money to put a better road up there or some facilities. Tourists want something they can drive right to with no effort. They don't want to have to hike and use bushes for a bathroom. I guess until somebody gets hungry enough to spend the money to fix it up, it will just stay an obscure little spring. Meanwhile, it's the best kept secret in the state and we like that. Too many strangers littering up the woods and throwing debris into the spring would be a detriment anyway."

Willy continued on her way. There was a lot to be said for keeping areas as beautiful as this valley in their natural state. She had been to many places where the greed for money brought in by tourism overshadowed people's reason and they had turned their towns into crowded, expensive, counterfeit resorts. She would hate to see this quiet, pleasant place turned into a city thronged with hordes of tourists rushing to see the next attraction, leaving a trail of refuse and damage behind them.

Aggie and the children had gotten to the camper first. She could hear them inside noisily playing one of the many games they loved. She picked up a stick and scratched on the window with it, then giggled when they looked out to investigate. They welcomed her and told her all about their morning. After lunch, Willy read them a story and Jeffy slipped off to sleep. Aggie and Allison continued their game while Willy organized her notes. She took a camera out of its case and left them there playing. "I'm going to get some pictures around town," she told them. "I'll be back soon."

There were potential shots from every angle. Everything about this area was picturesque. Willy joined others who were standing on the median strip down the middle of Main Street to photograph the "World's Largest Elkhorn Arch". She snapped several views of the stores on Main Street and the mountains on both sides of the valley.

She wanted to go to the office of one of the few factories in town to see if she could take some pictures of their product. It was a small airplane factory that manufactured the little stunt planes that thrill people at airshows around the world. They had watched several of them being

tested in the air on their travels around the valley and Willy was glad that she had stayed longer to get some more information on them.

The factory administrator was very cooperative and helpful. He led her on a tour through the plant and showed her the different phases in the construction of the planes. She was fascinated by it all. Jeffy would have been thrilled by this tour, but she was glad he wasn't along. There were too many things a small boy could get into and doubted that they would have welcomed a three year old anyway. She was allowed to take pictures of many of the operations and finished filling her roll of film.

On her way back to the camper, she stopped at the small Chamber of Commerce building to talk to them about other attractions she had missed in the valley. They told her that she couldn't write a complete story about this region without including the cheese factory in Thayne. "It was a Swiss cheese company for years and years, but they went out of business. They were bought out by a company that makes mozzarella cheese to sell to all the pizza places now. They sell cheese in the restaurant they have there. You ought to go try one of their buffalo burgers. Good food!" the woman had enthusiastically told her.

Resolving to go there for supper, Willy returned to the camper. They got ready and started on their way to drive the fifteen or so miles to the cheese factory. It was a pleasant little trip. They followed the Salt River through the narrow canyon between the Upper and Lower Valleys and reached the large combined cheese factory and restaurant. This place was a popular tourist spot but they didn't have long to wait until a table was ready for them.

The buffalo burgers were delicious. "They just taste like regular hamburgers to me," Allison said.

"They do have a little different flavor," Aggie decided. "It's like beef, but with a stronger taste."

They sampled the different cheeses on display and bought a package of cheese curds which were soon gone. The mild, squeaky cheese melted in their mouths.

As they began their return trip, hearts light and stomachs full, the truck began to shake accompanied by a loud noise. Willy's heart sank. She hated to change flat tires. Pulling off to the side of the road, she climbed out. It was a rear tire on the passenger's side. "Great!" she complained.

The jack was stored under the hood of the truck and the spare tire was underneath the bed of the pickup. Both were hard to reach places and Willy was covered with oil and dirt by the time she had wrestled them out and to the back of the truck. She put the tire wrench on the lug nuts to loosen them and strained against it, but she couldn't get them to budge. "Aggie, can you come help me try to loosen these lug nuts?" she called, frustrated and hot.

Both of them using all of their strength finally got four of the resistant nuts loose but the fifth just wouldn't yield to their force. A few vehicles had passed by them without stopping. "We're going to have to ask for help," decided Willy. She climbed back into the cab and turned on the CB radio. After her meek plea for assistance, it wasn't long until two cars stopped. One was full of teen-aged boys who were eager to show their brawn and the other was an older gentleman who gave advice while the younger men did the work. Soon they were on their way again, having given profuse thanks for all the help.

Aggie was in raptures as usual at the great numbers of cute boys in this area. She couldn't wait to see Kelly and tell her about their adventure. Willy was just glad they had been able to summon some help.

It was dark when they arrived back at the campground. A familiar pick-up was parked by the office. As they pulled into their space, Max emerged from the building and walked over. "I was afraid you had deserted me after all," he told them, "but Mrs. Woods said you hadn't checked out yet. Where have you been?"

The whole story was told in a jumble of voices, each trying to be heard. He had great presence of mind sorting out the tales of cheese curds, cute boys and obnoxious lug nuts. "No wonder you look so ruffled," he heckled Willy. "I haven't seen you with a hair out of place before. You look kind of cute when you're dirty."

Willy gave him a scathing look and went to wash her hands and tidy up. They sat at the table in the moonlight and made their plans for the big canoe trip on Saturday. Max was very involved in the discussion and didn't make the least show of his feelings for Willy. He treated her just like one of the kids, to her relief.

The only time he relaxed his restraint was after he was in his truck to leave. He had taken Jeffy on his shoulders to his truck and handed him to his mother when he climbed in. She stood there with her son in her arms. Max reached out a big hand to shake hands with his little friend. "Shake hands with Mama, too," ordered Jeffy.

"Yes, sir!" agreed Max, offering her his hand. She took it and he enveloped her hand with both of his big ones, squeezing it gently. "I'm looking forward to Saturday," he said, his eyes on her face. "I'll be here by eight o'clock. Sleep well!"

Chapter 18

Bright and early Saturday morning, Willy had her family out of bed and fed and dressed for the day. There was an air of excitement at this new activity they were going to experience. Aggie was especially happy because Max had told her he would bring Kelly and her brother, Steve, along. There were too many of them for one canoe anyway, so they might as well fill up two of them. He had borrowed another one from a friend.

Allison and Jeffy were watching out the window and shouted with glee when they saw Max's pickup come into the driveway. Two canoes were mounted on the back. It had been decided that they would have to drive both vehicles. One of them would have to be left at the ending point of their cruise so they would have a way to get back to the beginning.

Aggie and Kelly rode with Max, and Steve was happy to ride in the back of the camper with Allison and Jeffy. He was a happy and helpful ten year old and entertained the younger ones all the way with his vast repertoire of jokes and silly songs. Willy found herself laughing at his antics.

They reached the launch point of their journey and unloaded the canoes. All the children wanted to stay and explore the area while Max and Willy went to leave his pickup at the end of their expedition. Warning Aggie and Kelly to watch the kids and not let them near the water, Willy followed Max several miles down the road to a place where they could retrieve the canoes when they finished paddling. After Max had parked and climbed into the cab with Willy, she turned back onto the highway.

"The kids are really excited about this adventure," she told him, her eyes happy. "You certainly have a lot of fun in this valley of yours."

"It's peculiar how you can live right among wonders and beauties and get too busy to enjoy them. Do you know, my dad was born here but he had never been up to the Intermitting Spring in his life until Floyd and Jean were going to be married. She is from out of town and wanted to see it, so the whole family went up there the day before the wedding."

"That's hard to believe," Willy commented. "I read that there are only three springs like it in the world and this is the biggest one. And yet I found that very few people I talked to had been up there more than once or twice."

"They need to improve the road and make some facilities up there so it is easier to get to. I've been trying to convince the Forest Service to do that for years. They don't want to damage the watershed or spend the money."

Willy laughed and told him about her encounter with the mayor. "He said the same thing. Nobody wants to spend the money. I wish I was rich so I could donate the funds to have it done privately."

"You'd still have to get past the old die-hards who don't want it done at all, though," Max said, shaking his head. "I can see both sides of the argument. If you improve a natural formation so it can be enjoyed by a lot of people, you also leave it open to vandals that deface it and destroy any improvements you have put in. I wish people would just be more responsible. We have so much to cherish here."

"That is my favorite word," Willy said, almost to herself.

"What word?"

"Cherish. It brings a feeling to my soul like the word 'murmur'," she said. "You can tell I'm a writer. I have strong feelings for words," Willy laughed at herself. "Well, here we are! There's our reception committee."

They looked at the children. They had lined themselves up, tallest to shortest and were in the attitude of royalty saying, "Welcome to my palace!" with arms outstretched. Laughing, Max and Willy got out of the truck and led the way to the canoes. The paddles and snacks were loaded, life jackets fastened on everyone, and they all climbed in, leaving the adults to push off and then jump in when they were floating. Kelly, Allison and Aggie were in Willy's canoe and Max, Steve and Jeffy were in the other. Jeffy was so proud to be one of the guys and sat in the middle with his cowboy hat on holding tightly to the sides of the boat.

The scenery around the first few bends of the river was missed because of the erratic progression of the second canoe. Willy was not a sailor and had never paddled any kind of a boat before. She had Kelly in the front to help paddle but since a canoe has to be steered from the back, she didn't have a clue how to guide it. Max gave her many instructions and tried to help her understand canoeing principles, but she was too much of a novice.

The current of the water was strong in some places and Willy got turned completely around. After many unsuccessful attempts to get it turned the right way, Max paddled over to try to help her. The current caught his boat while he was reaching with his paddle to push her canoe

around and the pointed end of his craft rammed into the middle of hers, tipping it over and immersing the occupants.

The water was shallow but very cold and Willy found her feet as quickly as she could. She swished through the water and grabbed Allison by her life jacket. That little girl was howling from fear and cold but unhurt. Kelly and Aggie had gotten to their feet and gripped the canoe before it could wash downstream.

Max was out of his canoe to help them. Jeffy, afraid that his canoe would tip also let out yelps of fear and stood up to reach the safety of Steve's arms. His small legs weren't steady on the uneven bottom of the canoe and he very nearly did upset them when he tried to climb over the cooler which had been set between him and Steve. The two bawling kids, the squeals of the cold and wet victims and the laughter over being caught in this predicament intruded upon the peace and serenity of the river.

Max told them to get to the bank so they could turn the canoe over easier. He grabbed both canoes and hauled them up the bank while the girls made their way splashing to the edge on their own. When everyone was on the shore, they sat down and took stock of themselves. The only dry ones were Steve and Jeffy. All the rest except Max were wet from head to foot and covered with mud from the silty river bottom. He was only wet to the waist but was dripping mud also. It was a warm day so they didn't mind being damp once they got out of the cold water. They washed the mud off as well as they could and waited to warm up and start to dry off.

Allison discovered that her shoes had come off in the excitement and must have floated away. Her hat had been securely tied on as was Jeffy's but she was barefoot and crying. Willy promised her they would stop at the store when they got back to town and buy her some more shoes. After a short rest from their exertions they climbed back into their respective canoes.

Before they proceeded any further, Max gave Willy a lesson in canoe steering, including much advice and teasing about her woeful lack of skill. She tormented him right back, accusing him of knocking them over on purpose and pointing out his own deficiencies in the art of steering a canoe. He argued hotly but with much good humor that the river current had been the culprit and not his lack of ability.

Soon both boats were paddling efficiently down the river. They stayed far enough apart to avoid any more accidents, but close enough to be able to shout back and forth. They scared up some water birds and enjoyed the quacking ducks and screeching cranes. Several deer were

spotted up on the hillsides as they slid quietly past. Their course went under two or three bridges and they waved at the people in cars going past above them.

At noon, they stopped to eat lunch in a grassy area surrounded by trees. Willy welcomed the break. Her shoulders and neck were getting very tired and stiff from the workout. They decided to spend an hour or so resting. After the food was packed back into the cooler, Max stretched out on the ground cloth where they had sat to eat their lunch. "It's nap-time for me," he said, putting his hat over his face in characteristic fashion.

Willy finished her soda pop. She, too, needed to lie down and rest. Observing that Max appeared to be asleep, she saw no reason not to lie down on the cloth and make herself comfortable also. As she rubbed her aching shoulders and settled back, she was startled to feel something pillowing her head. Turning quickly, Willy saw that it was Max's arm. His eyes were shut and he didn't appear to be aware that his arm had moved to provide a comfortable neck rest for her.

It felt too good to argue about so Willy just relaxed and enjoyed it. After all, with all the company they had, nothing was going to happen. The kids were looking for shells or snails or whatever kids can find to look for. They were following game trails or cow paths around the area and seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Willy dozed for a few minutes. She hadn't felt him move, but when she opened her eyes, Max had turned on his side and was watching her. She tried to sit up, but he reached out a hand to stop her. "There's no hurry. The kids are running around and you need all the rest you can get," he told her. "Paddling a canoe for five miles is no easy job for puny arms like yours."

Needing to change the subject and break away from his hypnotic gaze, she looked up at the sky above them and watched the clouds. "I have never seen the sky as dark blue as it is here. I wonder why that is."

"Maybe it's because we're so high in altitude that the air is thin and the black of outer space is closer," he answered, following her gaze. He turned his head back to look at her face. "I'd rather look at the view from this angle, though."

Willy blushed and sat up quickly. She was going to insist on avoiding anything remotely resembling flirting. She stiffly rose to her feet. "Well, let's get on with it. We're only halfway, aren't we?"

"Oh no," he said, encouragingly. "We only have about an hour until we get to the truck. The worst of your work is over. We're through the winding part of the river and the rest is straighter. The current will carry us along without doing anything but steering from now on."

"Hooray for that!" she sighed. "I won't be able to move my arms tomorrow. I guess I'd better get into an exercise class when I get home and whip this old body into shape."

"I think your shape is fine," Max said, ogling her as he walked slowly around.

"Come on, everybody!" Willy called, turning sharply and marching away from his gaze. It was disturbing at any time to be leered at but especially with such keen interest in the eyes of the beholder.

The kids came running from all directions. They were tired of exploring and wanted to get back to their trip. By the time the canoes were again loaded and they pushed off, everyone was dry and comfortable. The last of their journey was made without incident. They were all ready to get off the water and go back home.

Max and Willy loaded the canoes and tied them down. All the kids wanted to ride in back of the pickup on the way to the camper so Willy sat back there with them. She told Max she needed to be sure that no one fell out, but she knew she just didn't want to be alone with him even for a minute. The look in his eyes when she had woke up from her nap still filled her memory. The love she had seen there pouring out at her was almost tangible. She definitely needed to get away from him. Far, far away. He would be hard to forget, but she was determined to make her best effort.

Back at the campground, Max, Kelly and Steve climbed in the cab of his pickup and prepared to leave. Aggie stood on the passenger side talking to Kelly and Willy walked around to thank Max for the enjoyable day.

"I have to work tomorrow," he told her. "I'll be home about six, though, and I would like to come over and tell all of you goodbye."

"We'll be here," she said. "The kids are really going to miss you."

"Just the kids?" he asked quietly.

Avoiding the question, she backed away. "Thanks again!" she called and turning, walked to her door.

Chapter 19

The night was peaceful and calm. Willy woke once in the early hours in pain from her stiff and aching arms and shoulders. She got up quietly and took some aspirin. While waiting for the medicine to work, she lay in her bed trying to find a comfortable position and listening to the night sounds. She missed the hooting of owls and the wind whispering through the trees that they had enjoyed at the Cottonwood campground. Her heart warmed as she thought back over yesterday. Her favorite memory was the unexpected comfort of having an arm to rest her head on when they had napped after lunch. And then she saw again those love-filled eyes looking at her as she woke from her nap.

Willy turned into a more comfortable position and thought with both relief and regret that this would be their last day here. She was anxious to return to her home and get on with the business of everyday life. She looked forward to a short visit with her parents. She wanted to start writing her article and see how her pictures would turn out. She looked forward to the excitement of sending her first child off to school.

Willy reflected, though, that one more grief would be added to her already heavy heart. It would be like losing a loved one again to go away from the stimulation and contentment that she felt in the company of Max Bell. She would maintain her act of keeping him at a distance until the bitter end, but deep inside, if she had her heart's desire, she knew it would be to open her arms and heart to him. She wanted to feel his arms around her, taste the warmth of his breath and hear the beat of his heart. She wanted to watch the play of emotions in his eyes and smell the scent of his skin.

"I'd better get my mind off this subject," she decided. Tossing in her bed, trying to find a restful position, Willy repeated the words to a hymn in her mind and was able at length to get back to sleep.

Aggie woke her up early. "Come on, let's not be late to church. There are so many people I want to see. Kelly asked if we could go to her house this afternoon because she has something to give me. Wake up, Willy."

Stretching carefully to avoid too much pain, Willy flexed her stiff muscles. "I could just stay in bed all day," she complained. "Why did I have to paddle so far and get this stiff?" She dragged herself out of bed and went off for a hot shower.

Aggie had already finished hers and was starting to get out cereal bowls for breakfast. Allison and Jeffy were enthused about starting a new day and woke up with cheerful smiles. They ate then got

showered and dressed. There was much talk about all they had to do because this was their last day and they had to squeeze everything into it.

The church services were uplifting. Aggie got acquainted with even more new friends and it was hard to get her to leave the building. She spotted one of their tire-changing heroes from the cheese factory excursion and did all she could to get his attention without actually talking to him. When he finally did notice her and came over to say hello, she nearly lost her composure and dissolved in giggles. On the way to the truck, she sighed deeply and confided to Willy that she thought she was in love.

"Did you get his address, too, Aggie?" Willy wanted to know.

"No, but at least I know his name. Lynette, the girl with the red dress, will give me his address. She is going to write to me tomorrow so I'll have a letter waiting when I get home."

"I'm glad you met so many friends. Allison, did you find some new friends, too?"

"Yes, but I can't remember their names. Except one. Her name is Emily but I don't know her other name. I needed to have you write it down but you made me leave too soon." Allison dissolved in the tears that are always on the brink of falling for a five year old.

"Does Emily have curly hair and a yellow dress?" Aggie asked.

"Yes," sobbed Allison.

"Then she is Lynette's sister. I heard her call to her and tell her they were ready to go. So I have their address and I can help you write a letter!"

Allison hopped up and down and clapped her hands, giving her young aunt a big hug. "Thank you!" she breathed.

Jeffy was just glad to be leaving. He hated button shirts and long pants and wanted to get back into his comfortable tee shirt and shorts.

After lunch, they walked to a nearby market to buy what food they needed for the trip. They did some laundry and cleaned the camper. Willy called her parents to inform them of their plans.

When they had completed all their preparations, they drove to Kelly's house so Aggie could make her farewell visit. They were welcomed inside and invited to sit down. Jeffy kept whispering to his mother but she couldn't understand his words. He was finally induced to talk out loud and what he was asking for was another horsie ride.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Jean, Kelly's mother. "Lloyd took some people on an overnight trail ride and the horses are gone. The only one left over there is Max's big Smoky and I don't think we could even catch him. They put him out in the pasture again. Have you heard how he likes to jump fences?"

Jeffy was disappointed but soon remembered the chickens and kittens so the women took him and Allison across the road to the barns. They had a pleasant visit while the kids played with the kittens. Jeffy even was careful with the eggs and gathered them without breaking any.

They left without seeing Mr. or Mrs. Bell who had gone visiting some relatives for the day. On the way back to the campground, Allison reminded them that Max had said he would come to see them before they left. "I wish I had something to give him," she said. "He has been so nice to me."

"He looks like someone who would like raisin-filled cookies," said Willy. "We could make a few in our little oven to give to him." This necessitated another quick trip to the market for raisins and nuts and the rest of the afternoon was spent merrily mixing and baking.

While the cookies cooled, Allison found some paper and crayons and she and Jeffy drew pictures of their family to give to Max so he wouldn't forget them. They were busily engaged in this activity when he came and didn't even notice him standing outside the open door of the camper until he shouted "Boo!" at them.

Startled, they jumped squealing into his arms then ran to show him their artwork. He was touched and put the pictures on the seat of his truck right then so they wouldn't get wrinkled. "I'll hang these up on my wall so I can think of you every day," he told them. "I have a present for you, too."

He reached in the back of the pickup and brought out a box. From inside could be heard a mewling sound. Allison and Jeffy couldn't contain themselves. "Are they kittens?" Allison asked in a reverent voice.

"One for each of you," Max answered, opening the box to reveal the sweet faces of two lively kittens. They were older than the ones in his barn and he had thoughtfully brought some kitty litter and kitten food and even little bowls for their water and food. "Do you know how to take care of kittens?" he asked. He gave them a lesson in kitten holding, kitten feeding, the proper way to clean litter and then asked what their names were going to be.

Willy watched the proceedings with an indulgent expression. She suggested some good kitty names and then helped them decide where the box would be kept in the camper. They went through the whole routine of feeding, watering and petting the kittens until Max told them they had had enough to eat and maybe they needed a nap.

Max had brought Kelly with him. She hadn't wanted to miss an opportunity to see her new friend again. She and Aggie had their heads together talking about their fascinating interests. Max pulled Willy aside and asked if she would take a walk with him.

Distrusting her feelings, Willy was ready to refuse, but Aggie had heard the request and volunteered, "Kelly and I will watch the kids. Why don't you go ahead? We'll be okay here."

Setting off down the street, Willy kept a substantial space between her and Max. She knew that if they were to brush against one another, it might set him off on one of his monologues about his feelings for her. She needed to avoid any of that tonight. Her spirits were already about to shatter with the stress of keeping up an image of indifference.

Max respected her feelings, knowing that she was struggling to keep him at arm's length. He talked about inconsequential things, commenting on the weather, the length of her trip, the number of people in town. They walked the length of Main Street then turned to circle the block. Soon the swings and playground equipment of the city park came in sight. Max headed for a swing and sat down. He pushed himself back and started swinging.

Willy laughed and asked if he was sure the chains were strong enough to take the strain of his weight. "I'll bet I can get higher than you can," he challenged her.

She accepted the contest. They played on the swings in the darkness like a couple of kids. Their laughter rang out and Willy's low spirits left her as she exerted herself. Finally, she stopped her swing and sat, rubbing her stiff arms. "That's all I can stand," she said. "I am really stiff today."

"I can see we need to get this young lady into an exercise program. Too much time is spent with her nose to the grindstone," Max declared. He moved behind her and began a gentle massage of her neck and shoulders. She didn't object. She really was in a lot of discomfort and the massage felt good.

"Can I ask you what your plans are when you get back home? I don't want to upset you again, but I really care what happens to you and I can't let you go unless I know that you'll be all right. It may be none of my business, but I want to be sure that you're not going to starve if your article doesn't sell. Can you at least let me part way inside your citadel and tell me how you are?"

"We're just fine," she told him curtly. "You're right when you say it is none of your business."

"All right, let me rephrase it," he persevered. "You are like a sister to me and I am concerned for the welfare of you and your children. Come, on, Willy, talk to me."

"We have enough to get by. My house is paid for, I still have some savings from the life insurance settlement and I am a good manager. I have parents who will help if I need it. We really are just fine. Now get off the subject!"

"Will you listen for one minute more?" he implored. "Now don't interrupt! I just want to tell you that I will always be here. If there is ever anything you need or if you have any reason to call me, I've written my number and address down for you," he said, taking a card from his pocket and pressing it into her hand. "Will you give me your phone number and address so I can call sometimes and check on you? I really want to keep in touch."

"There is no need for your help," Willy told him coldly, standing and shaking off his hands. "If we need anything I have parents and friends who will be there for me. We don't need anything from you. There is no point in keeping in touch."

"The kids might miss me. At least let me send them a Christmas card or a birthday gift. Please don't shut them away from me. They would feel bad if they thought I didn't remember them." He knew he was grasping at straws in his desperation, but he couldn't face losing all contact with this woman. "How will I know how the kittens are doing?"

Willy was torn. She knew Allison and Jeffy had grown unusually fond of Max and they would love to have someone to write to and get letters from. Maybe there would be no harm in letting him keep up a correspondence with them. She admitted to herself that she would enjoy hearing from him also.

"All right," she relented. "You can write once in a while, but only rarely, and no phone calls. I want them to think of you only as a very distant summer friend. It is too hard to let children get attached to someone and then have to drag them away. They will forget you before long."

"Please don't say that!" Max pleaded. "I've got to tell you what this is doing to me! I feel like my heart has been yanked out of my chest. If you just stomp on it I don't think I can stand it. At least leave me with a little bit of hope that you'll remember me." He had taken her shoulders in his hands and turned her towards him. His eyes burned into her face, trying to photograph her features and emblazon them on his memory.

"Willy, give me one favor. Let me take you in my arms just once more. Leave me with that last thing to hold on to. Please?"

His voice was so tender, his hands so gentle on her that she moved toward him almost in a trance, her eyes on his face. He closed his eyes in ecstasy as he crushed her to him. His head bent and his face nestled in the sweet curve of her neck. She felt her own arms surround him. He didn't try to kiss her. They just stood there in close embrace until their breathing returned to normal and their hearts beat together.

Willy was the first to raise her head. "Even my husband didn't show so much feeling," she whispered. "Are you all right? Do you always get this carried away?"

"I've never been this carried away before. I didn't know I could have these kinds of feelings. I want to...."

Willy smothered his words of endearment with a quick kiss on his lips. "Now don't get started," she said, forcing her voice to take on a practical inflection. She pushed herself from his grasp and said, "Go home and take a cold shower and you'll be fine in no time."

She knew she was the stronger of the two right now and that she needed to get control of the situation. This was no time to break down. The feelings they had were temporary and volatile. They would soon be submerged by the return to normal routines and surroundings. Emotions that erupted so quickly would be just as quickly extinguished. At least she hoped they would.

Willy turned and walked to the sidewalk. She steeled herself with a deep breath. "Come on," she called to the tall form in the shadows. "Move it, cowboy! Let's get back to the kids."

Chapter 20

The truck seemed to be on automatic pilot as Willy mindlessly drove northward. She didn't notice the rain clouds gathering or the end of the storm. She drove past a herd of buffalo barely hearing the voices of her children calling her attention to them. She registered that the road was curving around a large lake to the left. It must be the Palisades Reservoir that Max had mentioned once. Her mind did engage long enough to read the road signs telling her whether to turn right to go to Jackson Hole or continue straight toward Idaho Falls. It wasn't until the road grew steep and winding that she brought her faculties back to reality with great reluctance. She needed to be more aware so she could drive safely.

Her chest felt like a cavern of emptiness where her heart should be. Ever since last night when Max had finally left them, Willy had been walking in a vacuum. His melancholy eyes haunted her thoughts. The last words he said to her echoed in her brain. "Don't forget, Willy. There is a man who loves you in Wyoming."

He hadn't kissed her. He hadn't even held her after they returned to the others. When he was ready to leave, he just shook her hand. With both his hands enclosing hers, she could feel the trembling of them all. It took all the willpower both of them possessed to break away and separate. Then he was gone. He had tucked the paper with her address into his shirt pocket. She had placed his in her purse and reached for it to be sure it was still there.

It wasn't until the city of Idaho Falls was in sight after 100 miles of driving that Willy was able to force herself to talk normally with the kids. The more she paid attention to her surroundings and the babble of their play, the more ordinary she felt. Soon the blackness of her mood was dispelled and the typical cheerfulness of her personality surfaced.

"I'll just keep him out of my mind," she promised herself. "Every time I think of him, I'll just sing a song." During the two day trip to Portland, she sang a lot of songs.

They arrived at the Stevenson home in the middle of the afternoon. Willy's mother was expecting them and welcomed them with open arms. Willy's father was still at the college finishing up one of the classes he taught.

They told about all their adventures and then had to repeat them when her father came home. The name of Max Bell figured prominently in much of the narration and it was only natural that Willy was quizzed about the man who seemed to have occupied so much of their time. She answered in as neutral a manner as she could but she saw her parents exchange furtive glances and knew that they

weren't fooled. She would have more explaining to do, no doubt. Aggie didn't help matters any by teasing about the walks the two grown-ups had taken together and the deep and meaningful looks they exchanged.

Not much was said about the possible budding romance until three days later when Willy was packing and preparing to leave the next morning for their home in Washington. Her mother came into the bedroom where Willy was laying out their clothes for the trip.

"Tell me about this man you spent so much time with in Wyoming," she requested. "What was his name now?"

"His name was Max Bell, Mom. He is a forest ranger who offered to be our guide to some of the sights I needed to see for my article. He got quite attached to the kids and we were glad for his company. He got us out of some tight spots and was very helpful."

"Um...and did he get quite attached to you, too?" her mother asked, unable to stop the natural curiosity and interest of a mother with an unmarried daughter.

Willy sat on the bed and took a deep breath. She had never been able to keep secrets from her mother and knew that she might as well get it all out in the open. Her mind was made up about her feelings and she would put a stop to all the speculation. "We both fell in love," she said, starkly.

As her mother's eyebrows moved upward, Willy added, "But I told him that I couldn't consider a serious relationship because I had made a promise to my husband on his deathbed that he would never be replaced. Either in my heart or the children's hearts. Max said he would always be there for me if I needed him but he didn't push. He just accepted it. So there you are."

"Willy, it has been long enough since Ryan's death that you can start thinking about another relationship. You need a man to take care of you and the kids need a father," her mother advised in a quiet voice.

"The kids have a father!" Willy insisted. "And I don't need a man to take care of me. I'm doing a lot better on my own than we ever did when Ryan was alive. I'm completely out of debt for the first time since we got married. I can handle the house and the vehicles and the taxes. I do have a brain! My income is rising and I will be able to support us when the insurance money is gone. I don't need anyone!"

"I didn't mean that you aren't a capable and strong woman, Willy. I just think that all children need two parents to help them grow up. It wouldn't be untrue to Ryan's memory to get married again. He wouldn't want his children to grow up without a dad. He loved them too much to deprive them of that."

"They aren't being neglected," Willy said. "I can love them enough for two."

Wisely, Willy's mother could see that no purpose would be served in pursuing this line of argument. "Well, I won't quarrel with you. I just want you to know that we are ready to accept any man of your choice if you ever decide that you want to get married again. It is certainly your life and you can live it the best way you know how."

The next morning, the goodbyes were said and Willy and the two little ones departed for their home. There was sadness at the parting, but Willy reminded Allison of all that they had to do to get ready for school.

Jeffy was indignant that he couldn't go to school and have new outfits and school supplies. Willy pacified him with promises of starting a little preschool at home with a group of his friends. She had done that when Allison was younger and it worked well. Each mother took a day a week and had all the kids in her home for two hours. They worked on little crafts or read stories or went for walks around the neighborhood. All the mothers appreciated some time alone and the kids enjoyed the opportunity for extra attention and a chance to play with their friends.

The trip to Kent took a long day's travel. They arrived at their home, tired but happy to be able to sleep in their own beds. The kids ran around the house touching and checking everything. They had to play with the toys they hadn't seen for weeks and watch TV to see if their favorite shows were still on.

It took several days to unpack and clean up and do laundry and get the mail and other services started after their absence. When they were settled in again, then came the shopping trips and consultations with the school about supplies and schedules. They lived too close to the school for Allison to ride a bus, but too far for her to walk by herself, so Willy talked to other parents about setting up a carpool or taking turns walking the children to and from school.

The days passed quickly and finally all the preparations were done. It was the day before school started when a package arrived in the mail. Inside there were two identical sets of markers and tablets of drawing paper. A note from Max instructed Allison and Jeffy to draw pictures of the school, their house, the neighborhood, their mother and each other and mail them to him so he would know if they had grown any and what they were doing. He also included a package of gummy worms to remind them of their fishing trip. There was nothing in the package for Willy. She was almost ashamed of the envy she felt.

The children were thrilled and set to work immediately. A happy afternoon was spent drawing everything they could think of that Max might be interested in seeing. Willy was warmed by his thoughtfulness but felt again a sharp stab of loneliness for him. She had managed to push him to the

very back of her mind most of the time as she had buried herself in the many tasks requiring her attention.

The first day of school, Willy and Jeffy walked Allison to her classroom then Willy took Jeffy to the home of his friend whose mother had the first session of preschool. She returned home in a happy mood. The tears she had shed when she left Allison at school were gone. It was practically a tradition that mothers cried when their kids went off to school for the first time.

Willy was looking forward to finally starting to write her article. The pictures were back from the developer and many of them had turned out well. She had sent the best ones off to be enlarged and prepared to be included in the package to the various publishers she had in mind. She had organized all her notes and gone through the information she had collected. The easiest part was the actual writing of the words that put it all in order.

She sat at her computer and began to type. She was well into the article when the doorbell rang. Willy opened it, expecting it to be a friend of Jeffy's who wanted to play, but a delivery girl stood there with a bouquet of helium balloons. "Mrs. Willy Milton?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Milton. Who are these from?" Willy wondered.

"There is a message on the card," the girl told her. "Enjoy them!" She handed them to Willy and with a cheerful wave returned to her van.

Willy brought the multicolored bouquet into the kitchen and tied them onto a heavy vase. She opened the envelop to read the card, wondering what the occasion was and who would have sent such a gift.

"Happy first day of school, Allison! Love, Max Bell," she read. "P.S. I know that you will share some of them with Jeff. And the one with the bunny is for your mother."

Willy looked at the bright balloons and saw one sporting a cute rabbit. It said, "Somebunny in Wyoming loves you." Unaccountably, she grabbed it and kissed it right on the bunny's nose. "And somebunny in Washington loves you!" she whispered.

The rest of the afternoon was a waste as far as working on her article. The only word she seemed to be able to type was MAX MAX MAX. She gave it up and left early to go pick up Jeffy from down the street. Maybe the walk would do her good.

When they walked in the door after picking Allison up from school, there were squeals of delight at the surprise that awaited them. Allison was so thrilled that she generously gave half of the balloons to Jeffy. She handed the bunny to her mother after the note was read. "He really does love us, doesn't he, to send us so many nice things. I love him too. Will you help me write a thank-you note to him, Mama?"

While she addressed the envelop and guided Allison's hand in forming the words of the thank-you message, Willy decided to include a note of her own. She told him about the joy the unexpected gifts had brought to the kids and that things were going well for them all. She kept it brief and formal but in her heart, she was pouring words of love all over the paper. When she was alone, she quickly planted a kiss on the sheet of paper then felt chagrin at the faint outline of lipstick that remained. She tried to rub it out so it wouldn't be noticeable. Surely he wouldn't know what the smudge was. She felt like a silly schoolgirl writing a love note.

Chapter 21

The long days of autumn passed by. Willy and her young family slipped easily into a routine of school, pre-school, writing, and all the normal activities of living. Halloween was eagerly anticipated and Willy spent time sewing costumes. Allison decided to be a pink bunny after much vacillation. Willy finally just took her to a fabric store and bought the material before Allison could change her mind again. Once the outfit was finished, there was no more uncertainty.

Jeffy always knew what he wanted to be--a cowboy. She made him a bright red Western shirt to go with his Levis and hat. He already had a toy holster and pistol set. He was upset for a while when Willy refused his request for fancy cowboy boots, but she finally won him over by reminding him that Mr. Bell had worn regular boots when he rode his big horse, Smoky.

After the flurry of Halloween activities and trick-or-treating was over, they next looked forward to Thanksgiving. They were planning a trip to Portland to visit the grandparents.

That visit was warm and fun and a nice change from their routine. They visited several of Willy's relatives and she took her kids to the school she had gone to when she was little. There were even some of her old teachers still in the area and they were thrilled when she paid them a visit and showed off her own family.

Allison was working hard in kindergarten and brought lots of holiday decorations home. By Christmas, the house was gaily decorated. They worked together to get ready for holiday visits from both sets of grandparents. Willy's parents were going to drive to Kent and spend Christmas Eve and the next week with them. Ryan's mother and father lived in California now and were flying in for a few days between Christmas and the New Year on their way back from visiting Ryan's sister in Montana.

Willy was hoping that they could all fit into the house together. The Milton's were planning on staying in a motel since they were very fussy about their sleeping arrangements. Willy knew better than to try to insist that they stay with her. They could certainly afford the motel and if it would make them more comfortable, she was happy to cut down on the stress of trying to find sleeping room in her already bulging house.

Allison had worked hard teaching some Christmas songs to Jeffy that she had learned in school. They were planning a program for Christmas Eve and had gotten the costumes ready that they would wear for their little nativity pageant.

The week before Christmas, a large package arrived from Max. He had been writing about twice a month but hadn't sent a package since school started. The kids were excited and wanted it opened right away. Willy cautiously opened the outer box to be sure that whatever was inside was wrapped. There were presents for each child and Willy and even one for Aggie.

Allison was worried that they hadn't sent anything but a Christmas card to Max. Willy was a little upset that he had kept in such close touch that his memory remained strong in Allison's and Jeffy's minds. She had hoped that they would have forgotten their summertime friend by now, but the letters had been eagerly read and saved and discussed. Willy was just as happy to get a letter from Max as her children, but it didn't help to ease the hurt in her heart. The yearning for his company was still there.

The packages were added to the others under the tree. Willy yielded to Allison's worried request that they hurry and get something to send to Max so he wouldn't think that they had forgotten him. They thought long and hard about something that they could send and finally Willy hit on just the thing. She had heard a radio announcement about a company that shipped frozen salmon for Christmas gifts. That would be an impersonal gift that would show they remembered. She phoned in the order and was assured that the package would be delivered on Christmas Eve day.

The little pageant turned out well. Grandparents are easy to please and enjoy any efforts of their grandchildren. It was fun to have them and Aggie share this special time. They all enjoyed the activities of Christmas Day together.

The phone rang in the middle of the afternoon. It woke Jeffy from a much needed nap. Willy had joined him since the kids had awakened the whole houseful of people at four-thirty in the morning so they could see if Santa had come yet. They were all exhausted by afternoon. Willy picked up the phone, still half asleep. "Hello," she said, groggily.

"Merry Christmas from Wyoming!" the cheerful voice at the other end cried. "You sound like you just woke up!"

"Max!" Willy instantly came awake at the familiar voice. Her heart leaped with joy.

"How was your Christmas?" he wanted to know.

She visited with him a little and thanked him for the exercise video he had given her, then asked if he wanted to talk to the kids. Allison was so excited to be able to thank Max for the stuffed horse he had given her. When it was Jeffy's turn, he told all about how he could drive the toy jeep over the hills he made with some rugs.

"I barbecued the salmon steaks today for Christmas dinner," Max told Willy. "They were delicious. My parents said to tell you hello and wish you a Merry Christmas from them."

After all the pleasantries were over and the children were happily back to playing with their new toys, Willy tried to get off the phone, but Max had something else he wanted to say. "Willy, can I ask you something?"

"Please, don't spoil everything by starting on that old subject again," she begged, thinking she knew what was coming.

"Well, that isn't the subject I was going to start on, but I do want you to know that I haven't changed my mind. I think about you every day."

"Max," Willy began to withdraw from him.

"Don't worry, this is something entirely different," he told her. "I just wanted to know when Allison and Jeff's birthdays are. I don't want to forget them on their birthdays."

Embarrassed by her unnecessary comments, she told him the birthdates, but added that she didn't want him to send any presents. "You've spent a lot on these Christmas gifts. A card is enough for their birthdays. It would probably be better if you just gradually stopped writing so they could forget you. It isn't likely that we'll ever see you again." She knew her words would hurt him, but she had to let him know that her mind hadn't changed either.

"Please don't make me do that, Willy," he asked. "I could no more forget you than I could forget my own family. You all mean a lot to me. I won't send presents if you insist, but let me keep writing to you. I won't even call any more if you say so. It's been wonderful to hear your voice."

Willy relented a little, "Yes, I'm glad you called. The kids loved to be able to talk to you and thank you for the nice presents. You must have spent a lot of time picking them out."

"You don't know how many times I've had the phone in my hand to call you. I really have exercised a lot of restraint. I just couldn't stand to let today go by without talking to you. I hope you're not upset."

"No, I'm not upset. I just don't see any future in it so I'm trying to let you know that it would be better for everyone if we broke the connection."

"Willy, I can't break the connection," Max said, anguish filling his voice. "I'll always hope that you'll change your mind and let me see you again. Don't push me away."

Knowing that this conversation was getting out of hand, Willy compelled herself to bring it to an end. After she had said goodbye and hung up the phone, she was startled to look up and see her father standing there, leaning against the doorframe.

"When you love someone, Willy, and they love you back, there will never be any peace for either of you as long as you stay apart. Do you love him enough to open your heart to him?"

"I can't let him in my heart, Dad," Willy cried. "I've got a husband!"

Her dad moved to her and pulled her to his chest. "Willy, your husband is dead. Why are you holding on to such a detrimental belief that you can never love again? It isn't a natural thing for a young woman to push love away. Talk to your daddy."

Willy rested her head against her father's shoulder. He had comforted her in just this way many times before. She knew he wouldn't give any advice that wasn't in her best interest. She lifted her head and tried to explain her feelings of obligation and the promise she had made to Ryan at his death.

After he had listened and let her talk herself out, he made an observation. "Willy, it appears to me that you are not entirely comfortable with the commitment you have made to be true to Ryan's memory. If it was what you really wanted to do, your heart would be at peace. I think that the unrest and unhappiness you feel is because, in your soul, you know that you need to love and be loved--by someone living. It is a rare person who can enjoy the blessing of having two great loves in one life."

Willy looked into her father's wise eyes and saw there the love and concern he had for her. His words struck a chord deep inside her and she knew that she would have to spend some time thinking through his words and trying to straighten everything out in her mind.

Chapter 22

It was well into January before a letter came from Max again. Willy surprised herself by being a little disappointed each day when the mail was delivered and there was nothing from him. She had been putting off the self-examination session she had promised her father she would have. She knew there would be some uncomfortable feelings brought up and some things to face she wasn't ready yet to face. She was trying to deal with her feelings by ignoring them and keeping busy with other things.

The envelope from Max was thick. It was addressed to all of them so Willy decided to wait until Allison got home from school so they could all open it together. She knew how much her children enjoyed getting letters from Max.

Several times during the afternoon, she glanced at the letter sitting on the table and had a strong urge to open it. She would pick it up and hold it close to her heart. She even smelled it to see if it had retained any of his scent. To her disappointment, it just smelled like paper.

Finally Allison got home but she came in the house in tears. A boy had thrown a stick at her on the way home and it had made a little cut on her cheek. Willy cleaned it and offered all the appropriate sympathy and hugs. It was some time later when she was getting supper that she noticed the letter still on the table. She left what she was doing and called the kids in for the grand opening.

Inside the big outer cover were three smaller envelopes each addressed to one of them. "Open mine first!" Jeffy demanded.

"Oh, please, can we open mine first since I got hurt?" Allison begged.

"I know what," said Willy, diplomatically. "We'll put three numbers in a bowl and draw them. Whoever gets number one is first, number two is second, and number three is third. Is that fair enough?"

The plan was agreed on and executed and Jeffy drew number one. He ripped a piece of his letter in his exuberance, but Willy managed to tape it back together so it would be readable.

Dear Jeff,

Today is my birthday and the best birthday present I could think of would be to write to my favorite kids. I think about all the fun we had together last summer and I wish I had taken

pictures so I could remember what you looked like when we were together. It was the best summer I've ever had.

For my birthday, my mother gave me a blue western shirt she had made for me. My dad gave me a new bridle for Smoky. The old one broke because he pulls so hard when he is tied up. Lloyd and his family gave me a new cowboy hat with a snakeskin band. It's pretty cool.

Smoky is getting easier to handle. He loves to go for a run in the snow every day. I ride him all around the field where we went for our ride last summer. You should see all the snow we have here. It would be over your head in some places. You should come visit me in the winter and we could build snow men and snow forts together and have a snowball battle. It would be fun.

I hope you are helping your mother and being nice to your sister. Draw some pictures for me when you write back.

Love, Max

Jeffy was in transports and wanted Willy to read it again, but she told him that it was Allison's turn because she got number two. Allison's letter was written in a very interesting way. The paper was cut into a big circle. Max had started writing at the very center of the circle and the letter spiraled around and around until it finished close to the outer edge. She was giggling as Willy turned it and tried to keep the lines in order as she read.

Dear Allison,

I wish you were here to help take care of all these cats. The babies that you saw last August are now almost grown up. The mother cat has had two more litters since then. The first time she had five kittens and the second time she had four. One kitten of the last batch was born with only three legs. He seems to be able to keep up with the others and gets his share of the milk. We'll have to see how he does when he gets bigger. They were born the week after Christmas so they are still quite little.

How is school going for you? Have you learned the sounds that all the letters make yet? I'll bet you are able to read a few words already, aren't you? I wish I could sit down with you and read you some stories. I used to love it when one of my parents would read to me.

I hope that you will write back and tell me what you are doing. I like to see the pictures that you draw and color. It helps me remember all the fun we had last summer. Help your mother and Jeff.

Love, Max

"Now read yours, Mama!" the children cried.

"After that last one I'm feeling kind of dizzy," Willy laughed. "I have never seen a letter written in a circle before. I wonder what he is going to say in my letter." She opened the envelope and drew out the letter it contained. To her relief, it appeared to be written in a normal manner, until she started reading it. It was typed and very official-looking.

Dear Mrs. Milton,

You have been chosen to complete the following survey. It will not take much of your time and it will be very valuable to me in my research into the activities of the average American household. Please complete the questionnaire and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

As a token of my thanks for the time you spend answering the following questions, you will be awarded a very special secret gift that will be sent when I receive the completed survey. Remember to completely answer every question to the best of your ability. Thank you.

- 1. Are you presently in good health?*
- 2. Are the other members of your family in good health? If not, please elaborate as to their condition.*
- 3. Is your car in good repair? Explain a negative answer.*
- 4. Is your house warm, comfortable, and cozy?*
- 5. Are the various appliances and machines contained within your home functioning as they should? Please explain any problems.*
- 6. What are your current writing projects?*
- 7. How is your leisure time spent? Please use back of page if necessary.*
- 8. What types of volunteer work are you engaged in?*
- 9. At this very moment, what clothing are you wearing? Include colors.*
- 10. Is your hair the same length as you wore it five months ago?*
- 11. What is your blood type?*
- 12. Do you have any current friends of the male gender?*
- 13. Are your parents in close touch with you?*
- 14. What are the current activities of your siblings? Elaborate on the back of this page.*
- 15. How often do you entertain guests in your home?*

16. *Do you ever think of Mr. Maxwell Bell? If so, please list some of the most recent thoughts that have occurred to you concerning this gentleman. (Use additional pages if necessary.)*

17. *Is it a frequent occurrence at your house to go on an outing with your children?*

18. *Is your female child progressing as expected in her schoolwork?*

19. *Is your male child keeping his mother busy and active?*

20. *Are you currently exercising with the aid of a video tape?*

21. *What is the condition of your emotions regarding male companionship?*

22. *Do you enjoy receiving letters from male friends?*

23. *What is your birth date?*

24. *Do you sing to your children on a regular basis?*

This is the final question. Please be completely honest and fair. Only one person will ever view your answer.

25. *Part A. Has there been any softening of your heart toward a male friend residing in Wyoming who still feels a great deal of love and concern for you and your family?*

Part B. Would it be agreeable to you to receive telephone calls from the above mentioned male friend?

You have now completed this survey. If there are any additional comments you would like to make about any of the questions or any other subject, I would be happy to read them and add them to my research. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Please return the completed survey in the postage paid envelope as soon as possible. Your secret gift will be sent shortly after I receive the questionnaire.

Willy had started reading the whole questionnaire out loud, but the kids soon lost interest and went about their own business so she finished in silence. She chuckled at some of the questions and thought about others. She wondered if she should really answer it and send it back or continue with her previous policy of short letters to accompany the artwork or letters of her children. She decided as she sat there that there would be no harm in playing along and answering. It would be fun. He had gone to a lot of trouble to write it and it shouldn't be wasted.

She got a pen and started filling in the sheet. She was elaborating on number five about her appliances when she was interrupted by a couple of hungry children. It was much later, after she put Allison and Jeffy to bed that she was able to return to it.

It was fun to fill in the answers. She found herself using the back of the page frequently and finally had to resort to using an additional sheet to explain her answers. Her current writing projects took several lines, but the answer to number seven about how she spent her leisure time made her laugh. There really wasn't much leisure time to speak of in her busy life.

Willy was wearing her nightgown and didn't feel comfortable describing it for question number nine so she told about what she had been wearing during the day instead. She was progressing well and enjoyed writing about her family members. Question sixteen gave her a few moments pause. She smiled at his optimistic directions to use additional pages. If only he knew how many thoughts a day she forced herself not to have about Mr. Maxwell Bell!

After a few moments thought, Willy decided to give the man a break and describe a few, very few, of the many thoughts about him that flooded her mind. She wrote about how much she appreciated the help he had given her on her visit, how handsome he had looked in his ranger uniform, and how she enjoyed the happy looks on the faces of her children when he sent a letter. She thought those were pretty safe thoughts to share.

Question twenty-one was hard to answer. She knew that Max was trying to discover whether she was relenting any about dating again and if she was getting over her aversion to having a close friend of the male persuasion. She decided to be honest and say that she did miss having a male friend and would welcome one to talk to and go places with. She thought that would be safe enough, since he was so far away.

The last question caused her to put her chin in her hand and give herself over to a long period of thinking. Part A was fairly easy to answer. She explained that her heart had always been soft toward anyone who had been so kind to her. She knew that was not quite what he meant, but she avoided the issue. Part B was a little harder. It would be very agreeable for her to hear his voice and be able to talk to him. Her only problem was that it would be so hard to hang up and know that they wouldn't be likely to see each other again. What would be the point of getting closer through live conversations?

Willy finally decided to just be honest as he had instructed and to say that it would be agreeable to receive telephone calls as long as they were short and infrequent. She knew her resolve was softening and that it would be most welcome to have him call her. Somehow, it didn't seem so important now to prevent contact from him. She gave in to her yearning a little and added a short note on the bottom of the page to the effect that of all the friends of the male

gender that she knew, he was one of the most treasured. She wrote that she hoped he had enjoyed his birthday and that all was well with him and his family.

As she sealed the envelope, Willy decided that now was a good time to have the long-procrastinated self-examination period that she had told herself she must have. She put on some soft music, wrapped herself in a warm blanket, settled down in her favorite chair and started to think.

Chapter 23

It was after one-thirty in the morning before Willy felt like climbing into bed. She had given her thoughts free reign and they had turned to the subject that had been quashed for so long--Max. For the first time, she let herself remember every encounter between them. Her thoughts skimmed over their first meeting, slowed as she recalled in great detail their first kiss, their second kiss, and his wonderful words of love the night before she had left Star Valley. She reviewed her feelings of having his arm placed under her head unexpectedly and the great comfort and security she had felt while they waited for the bear to leave their camp.

Willy allowed her mind to wander over the breadth of his shoulders and the cut of his hair. He had a dimple in his chin that was very attractive. She would never get the vision of his deep, brown eyes gazing into hers out of her mind. She appreciated the thoughtful gestures he had made and the sensitivity to her feelings he had shown.

She realized that the real healing of her grief for Ryan had started that night under the stars when Max had held her against his beating heart and let her sob out all the pent-up tears she had been holding inside for so long. He had kissed her so gently. She still remembered the sweet smell of his breath against her lips.

Willy hugged the blanket tightly, almost beside herself with longing for him. "I can't deny it any longer," she said out loud. "I love him. I think I've loved him since I first saw him. Being away from him has just made me love him more."

She was so agitated that she had to get out of the chair and pace around the room. "Dad was right. The promise I made to Ryan was not realistic or even sensible. I will always love Ryan, but there is nothing wrong with loving someone living. The kids love Max, too. Their memories of their dad are so dim that he hardly exists for them. What they need is a dad who is here. It isn't fair to deprive them of a living father just to try to keep the memory of a dead father alive. They need the affection and caring of a real person right now."

As the realities of her contemplation hit her and took hold in her mind, an unspeakable joy began filling her whole being. How stupid she had been to try to deprive herself and her children of the love that Max offered them! How right it all seemed now to welcome him into their hearts. Well, actually, he had always been in their hearts, but she had foolishly insisted on trying to keep him out. She had been pushing the door shut for no reason.

"I love him! I love him!" she cried to the still, dark walls.

Unable to contain herself, Willy threw off the warm blanket and whirled around the room. She wanted to touch Max right now. She wanted to tell him of her love. She yearned to beg his pardon for all the mean things she had said to him. She had a great desire to turn back the clock and relive their whole visit to Star Valley with the knowledge she now possessed. Why hadn't she seen it then? Why had it taken her so long to see things clearly?

"The reason it took so long," she told herself soberly, "is because I wasn't ready yet. The grief from Ryan's death was still too strong. My broken heart had to have time to heal itself before it could be ready to love again."

"And now I'm ready!" Willy ran to the phone and lifted it. Her eye caught the time displayed on the clock and she slowly lowered the phone again. "I guess it's a little too early in the morning to wake him up," she said, disappointed. "Besides, I can't really throw myself at him out of the blue. First I've got to gradually let him know that my mind has changed and he is welcome to call or write or even visit whenever he wants to. But I don't want to come on too strong. Maybe it will scare him away."

Remembering the pictures she had taken last summer, Willy ran to the album and searched for the best picture of Max she could find. She removed it carefully and carried it with her to bed. She giggled a little as she caught herself kissing it gently. It seemed like such a juvenile thing to do. "Love makes you do strange things," she thought. "It makes you feel sixteen again and you want to do the same things you did for your first love."

Willy propped the picture up next to the clock by her bed and snuggled down under the covers. Her arms were too empty so she reached for the extra pillow and hugged it to herself. Such an elation filled her heart that she smiled and clasped the pillow tightly. She fell asleep to dream of great meadows filled with flowers. In the distance she could see Max on a horse far away. She tried to call to him but he couldn't hear her. She went running across the field, waving her arms and shouting his name. When he finally saw her and started toward her, he startled her by calling, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Her surprise at his words made her stop in her dream tracks and then she woke up to the realization that it hadn't been Max's voice she had heard. Allison was standing by her bed, shaking her and calling her name. "Mommy, what's wrong? You woke me up with your yelling. Mommy! Mommy!"

"Allison!" Willy sat up in bed and gathered her wits. "What happened? Why are you up? Are you sick?"

"No, Mama, you were calling somebody so loud that it woke me up. Why were you yelling, Mama?"

"I must have been dreaming, Allison. I'm sorry I woke you up. Come on, let me put you back to bed." Willy put her arm around her daughter's shoulders and walked with her back to her bed. She tucked her in and smoothed her head, but Allison was still upset. Willy rubbed her back for a while and hummed a song softly and soon Allison fell asleep again.

Willy was exhausted but it took her a few minutes to drop off to sleep. She thought of Max and her great joy at discovering that it was going to be all right to let herself love him. Her last thoughts were to resolve that she would go to Ryan's grave and tell him of her decision to finally let him go. She knew he wasn't really there, but she wanted to say the words out loud. She had it straight in her mind now, finally, and everything made sense now.

In the morning, Willy awoke to find she had overslept. The kids were up watching TV but it was only a few minutes before the carpool driver would be here and Allison had to get ready for school. She rushed around getting her dressed and fed and finding her school bag. The car was honking outside and Willy sent Allison running out.

She collapsed at the kitchen table for a few minutes until it occurred to her that today was her day to do the pre-school group. She only had an hour to make all the preparations for that. With a sigh, Willy got up and went about the business of being a busy mother. There was no time to sit and moon over dreams now. That would all have to come at a later time.

She dressed, fed Jeffy and herself, made beds, cleaned up a little, cut out a bunch of snow man parts from construction paper for the art project, answered the phone several times and committed herself to a batch of cookies for the kindergarten program, agreed to man a booth at the school carnival in February, and visited with a bored neighbor. She finally excused herself from that one. The woman ought to follow her around for a day, then she wouldn't feel so sorry for herself. Nobody had to be bored. There was too much to do.

Willy was scraping glue off the table and floor after a very energetic morning with four pre-schoolers when Jeffy came in hungry. They ate and then she laid on Jeffy's bed with him while she read him a story. She hoped he felt like taking a nap today. She certainly needed one after the late night and exertions of the morning. She shut her eyes, hoping to catch a few minutes of much-needed rest.

The opening of the front door jerked Willy awake. Allison called and came running in when she answered. Jeffy had already awakened and was in with the TV again. Willy felt groggy. She hated to have long naps in the daytime. It always made her feel worse than going without sleep. She couldn't believe she had slept for over two hours.

Allison was asking for a school snack and wanting to show her what they had made in school that day. Willy got her head together and listened with interest to her daughter talk about her day. They

ate apples and peanut butter while they went over Allison's school work. Jeffy wanted to show his sister the completed snow man that was hung on the refrigerator.

There was a lot of work to do and the hours passed until bedtime again. "At least I got the letter mailed to Max today, if I didn't do anything else," Willy told herself. "Tomorrow while Jeffy is at pre-school, I will drive to the cemetery and have my little talk to Ryan's grave." She fell asleep thinking of what she would say. It was interesting that now that she had admitted to herself that she could love another man, she could remember Ryan in much more vivid detail.

For a long time, she had not been able to visualize his features in her mind and had been disturbed that her memory was fading of him. Now, she didn't even have to rely on having a picture to look at. His image was clear. "I guess there was such conflict in my mind that I was trying to block out the pain," she thought. "Now I feel at peace finally and can remember Ryan with love and no pain." She reviewed their life together in her thoughts. There had been unhappy times and some conflicts, but the good had much outweighed the bad. Willy fell asleep with a smile again. Life was good. Her dad was right. It was a very lucky person who could have two great loves in her life.

Chapter 24

Willy woke up next morning with a wonderful, light feeling. She smiled at herself in the mirror and even felt pleased at what she saw there. Here she was, a beautiful woman with curly golden hair and dark-fringed eyes. The beginnings of laugh lines accentuated her good looks. She dressed in her favorite nice slacks and sweater. She wanted to look special today. She felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

Her heart was light as she woke the kids and fixed breakfast. She sang at the sink and kissed the soft cheeks of her wondering children. They were used to a mother who wasn't exactly grouchy in the morning but was quiet and sleepy. This was a new attitude they hadn't seen many times before. Her mood affected them all and there were no clashes this morning. Allison went happily off to school and Jeffy got ready for pre-school in record time.

Willy dropped him off at the house down the street and drove in the direction of the cemetery. She decided to stop on the way and splurge on a bouquet of silk flowers to brighten up the headstone. She was amazed that there was no squeezing pain in her chest today. Always before when she had gone to the cemetery, it had been an ordeal to overcome her grief.

Today, she felt so light-hearted and happy. She pulled her coat tightly around her against the brisk wind and walked down the rows of headstones to the one engraved RYAN FISK MILTON, Beloved Husband and Father. Willy walked with a feeling of reverence to the gravestone and placed the flowers in the vase on top. Running her fingers over the cold granite, she traced the words written there.

"Ryan," she began soberly. "I have come to say goodbye today. I know that where you are is a wonderful place and that you are happy there. I'm so glad that we were able to be married and have children and spend some happy years together. I love you and I love our children. It's taken me a long time to learn that it is okay for me to be happy, too. You loved me so much while you were alive and you wouldn't want me to make myself unhappy for the rest of my life."

Willy stooped down to clear away some dead grass and dirt from the base of the headstone. She swept it clean with her gloved hands.

"I have met someone who has all your good features, Ryan," she said. "He is so strong and capable. He works hard and he loves the outdoors. Best of all, he loves me, and he loves Allison and Jeffy. He is so good with them and gives them the attention and affection they need. I know that I could be happy with him the rest of my life. I love him and I want him in our lives. I know you would

understand and want us to be happy. Thank you for our years together and for being a good husband and father."

Willy paused and looked all around her. The view from the cemetery was beautiful. She could see the city and the mountains covered with forests. This was a lovely final resting place. Now she could leave him here in peace. "Goodbye, Ryan," she whispered. "I love you! Goodbye!"

She almost skipped down to the car. She would always miss Ryan and remember the many happy times they had together. She would not let his memory be lost from the lives of her children, and she would tell them the stories about their father as sweet pieces of their heritage. She would not feel guilt anymore when they didn't talk about him every day.

Willy did some shopping and returned home in time to pick up Jeffy from the neighbor's house. She got lunch ready and kept busy the rest of the day. Her light spirits continued and the kids were happily surprised when she announced that they were going out for dinner to their favorite fast food place. She even let them have the kid's meal with the accompanying toy that they always coveted but rarely got.

After an unusually peaceful and happy evening together, Allison and Jeffy went off to bed and to sleep with no fuss or nagging. Willy searched through her drawer and found the card with Max's phone number and address. She went to the phone and, feeling shy and a little nervous, dialed his number. It rang and rang and then she heard his voice. Her heart flew up with joy at the sound until she realized that it was an answering machine and not him at all. When the beep sounded, Willy was caught off guard and stammered, "Hello, Max. This is Willy Milton. I just wanted to say hello. You'll be getting your survey back in a couple of days. It was fun to do. Well.. uh.. goodbye."

She hung up the phone, feeling foolish. She didn't like answering machines. She always got flustered trying to talk to them. She was disappointed that she had screwed up her courage for nothing. To calm her pounding heart, she sat and watched some silly TV show for a while before she went to bed.

It was about ten o'clock the next night when the phone rang. She was brushing her teeth and was tempted to let it go on ringing. Then she remembered her message of the night before and dropped her toothbrush. "Maybe it's Max calling back," she thought. Hurriedly rinsing her mouth, she ran to the phone, her heart starting its throbbing again. She grabbed the receiver. "Hello?" she cried.

"Willy, is that you? You sound like you are out of breath. Have you been exercising at night again? You know that's not good for you. You need to do it in the morning so you can get the benefit of your raised metabolism."

Willy listened to the droning of her neighbor until she paused for breath. "Hello, Candace. How are you?" she asked in a much different tone of voice.

Her friend had called to tell about what a bad day she had had and that she had called and called in the morning to talk and Willy hadn't been home. Where had she been? What had she been doing?

When Candace was told that Willy had been to the cemetery, she went into a tut-tutting spiel about how Willy shouldn't still be pining for her lost husband but should be going out and getting a life. "I have a cousin up in Seattle that you need to meet," she told Willy. She went on and on about his many fine points and his big income and his previous two wives. Willy had a hard time convincing her that she was definitely not interested in going out to dinner with him.

"Please don't fix me up with anyone," she begged. "I will do just fine on my own." When Candace heard her resistance, she had quickly turned back to her own affairs. She told about her newest aches and pains and the bad kids at school that were being mean to her little ones and how her kids drove her crazy and on and on.

Finally, Willy told her it was getting late and that she had to hang up. She shook her head when she got off the phone. It was after eleven. Max would never call this late. She remembered that he was an hour later than she was anyway so she couldn't call him either.

"Oh, well, I'll try again tomorrow night," she decided.

The next day was a flurry of activity. Willy spent the morning baking cookies and working on an article that had an upcoming deadline. The kindergarten program was after lunch. She took Jeffy with her and they enjoyed watching Allison and her friends perform. The afternoon went quickly with the usual chores and work.

After supper, Willy bundled the kids off to a neighbor's while she went to her class on photography. She had enrolled when she decided that she needed to be able to develop her own pictures and learn how to crop and enhance them in order to present them better with her articles. She had learned a great deal and enjoyed having a night out every week.

After the kids were in bed later that night, Willy settled down to do her homework. It was so interesting to learn new things. She was interrupted by the phone and answered it absently, her mind on developing chemicals.

"Willy?" Max's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Max!" Willy caught her breath at his deep voice.

"I got your message on my machine. Is there anything wrong? I was out of town and just got back."

"No, nothing is wrong. I just had an urge to call you. I guess I just wanted to hear your voice. How are you?" Willy was embarrassed by her babbling but now that he was on the phone, she couldn't think of anything to say to him.

"I'm fine. I've been visiting my folks in Arizona for a few days. I have to take my vacations in the winter when there isn't much going on here."

"How are they doing?" Willy asked, on firmer ground now.

"They're fine. They asked if I had heard from you. They kind of liked you," Max told her.

"Did you get your questionnaire back yet? I sent it a few days ago," Willy asked.

"Hold on a second and I'll check through my mail. I just came in the door, dropped my suitcase and listened to the messages. I haven't looked at the mail yet. Just a minute," Willy could hear him put down the telephone and shuffle through some papers. "It's here," he said, in a pleased tone of voice.

"You don't need to open it now," she said. "I don't want to run up your phone bill. Read it later when you have time."

"Did you really mean it when you said you wanted to hear my voice?" he asked.

"Well, it was so much fun to answer all those questions and I just missed you." Willy hesitated a little then went on. "I've been thinking a lot about you lately. I thought I would just forget you when I left, but you have a way of sticking in my mind. I miss you more, the longer I'm away from you." She couldn't believe what was coming out of her mouth. She felt daring letting out that much information about her feelings. It was hard saying what she felt over the phone. She wished he could be in the same room. When there was a prolonged silence on the other end, she thought maybe the connection had been broken. "Max?" she asked.

"I'm listening."

"I wish I could see you again." There, it was out. She held her breath while she waited for his reply.

"I can be there the day after tomorrow," he answered, his voice husky. "Do you really mean it?"

"I guess I really do," she said. "But there isn't any hurry. I can't ask you to drop everything and go on another trip when you've just walked in the door. It's just wishful thinking."

"You know how long I've been wishing for the same thing, don't you?" he asked. "I would love to come and see you. Why don't you give me a couple of days to get caught up on things here and then I'll drive out to see you. I still have some vacation time left."

"You'd really come to see us?" Willy was surprised at her joy. "The kids will go crazy when I tell them!"

"Hey, why don't we keep it a secret and I'll surprise them," Max suggested. "I could just pop up when they least expect it and catch them off guard. They'd love it."

Willy laughed delightedly at his playfulness. "Yes, they would. I can hear them squealing already," she said.

"I'll put your secret gift in the mail tomorrow, too, Willy," Max told her.

"What gift?" Willy had temporarily forgotten the questionnaire.

"Your gift for filling out the survey, of course. Did you forget that all respondents get a free gift?" he asked her, laughing.

"All respondents?" she asked. "How many people did you send it to, anyway?" Willy wondered.

"Oh, hundreds," he said, his voice mocking. "Yours is the first one back, however, so you get the prize for quickest response."

"How lovely," she said primly. "I will watch for the mail every day."

They listened to each other breathe for a minute while each one reflected on the outcome of their conversation. Willy could only imagine the feelings that were in Max's heart right now, but hers was bursting. She could hardly wait to get off the phone so she could shout for joy.

"Willy? You're awfully quiet all of a sudden. Are you still there?"

"I'm here."

"I love you, Willy. You've made me happier than you can know. I'm so glad you called."

Not wanting to burst into tears on the phone, Willy tried to lighten the mood. "Well, actually, you called me, don't you remember?"

"I love you, Willy," he replied.

"Hang up the phone, Max," she answered, laughing.

"I love you, Willy."

"Goodbye, Max. Goodnight!" As she hung up the phone, she could hear him repeat those words once again. She wondered if he would go on saying them all night.

"Why didn't I tell him I love him, too?" she asked herself. "I'll tell him when he gets here. Oh, I hope he comes soon!"

Willy was too keyed up to go back to her homework so she got up and danced around the room for a while. Then she went to the refrigerator and ate a piece of cake and was heading for the cookie jar when she brought herself up short. "If love makes you hungry, you'd better tape your mouth shut, sweetie!" she told herself. "Now calm down, have some hot milk and get your mind off him. You've got a lot of preparing to do before he comes."

She forced her hands to perform the simple tasks of warming milk, putting away her books, picking up the clutter of toys and papers around the house. She made a list of things she wanted to get done before he came and finally she was calm enough by bedtime to drift off to sleep and pleasant dreams.

Chapter 25

Willy still hadn't heard from Max three days later. She woke up with his name on her tongue as she had every morning since their phone conversation. He had said he would let her know his plans, though, and she knew he had a lot to do to catch up from his vacation. She would try to be patient a few more days.

Her mother called just after breakfast and wanted to know what she was doing. She asked an unusual number of odd questions. She wanted to know if Willy was going anywhere this afternoon and whose turn it was to pick up the kids from school. Willy patiently answered all her queries, but wondered what it was all about.

"Why all these questions, Mom?" she asked. "You seem kind of nervous. Is there something wrong?"

Her mother's adamant denial that anything was wrong made Willy suspicious. "Mother," she said firmly, "What is going on?"

"Nothing, Willa, nothing at all. We're just fine here. Your father just got home. Do you want to talk to him? Dear! Willa wants to talk to you!"

"Hi, Dad. What's wrong with Mom? She's acting funny today," Willy asked her father.

"She seemed normal when I left this morning. There's nothing wrong that I know of. At least anything new. She's always had her unusual moods, you know." His voice was soothing and droll. Willy could hear her mother in the background scolding him.

She hung up the phone after an amusing conversation with her father. She wondered about her mother's questions, but there didn't seem to be anything to worry about. She went on with her normal activities.

It was her day to drive the carpool so she bundled Jeffy into his warm coat and strapped him in his car seat. They picked up the group of children from school and delivered each one to their homes. When she drove into her own driveway, Willy noticed a very large box sitting on her front porch. "Look at that box," she told the kids. "I wonder what it is. It's so big. I haven't ordered anything from anywhere."

She pulled into the garage and they got out of the car to look the box over. It was a refrigerator carton. Willy thought maybe it had been delivered in error until she noticed her name and address printed in large letters on one side. The return address cleared up the mystery. It was from Max. This must be the free gift he had promised to send her.

Laughing, she explained to the kids what it was. "We'll have to get it in the house somehow," she said. "How will it fit through the door?"

"Mama, here is some more writing," Allison pointed out. "What does it say?"

"DO NOT MOVE BOX. REMOVE CONTENTS IMMEDIATELY," Willy read. "Well, then, let's go get something to cut the tape with."

They went inside and found a box cutter. Carefully, Willy cut the packaging tape that sealed the top. She opened the lid and exposed some wadded up newspapers. She reached in to pull them out when suddenly the contents of the box moved! Yelling, she jumped back.

"Ta Da!" Max himself burst out of the box. Allison and Jeffy had been startled by their mother's fright and now they all screamed at the top of their voices. Max's laughing face changed to dismay when he saw the reaction he had caused. They were looking at him with wide eyes and open mouths.

"Well, isn't anybody glad to see me?" he asked.

Recovering quickly, as children are apt to do, Allison and Jeffy began jumping up and down, their voices changing from frightened screaming to squeals of joy, "It's Mr. Bell!"

Willy couldn't say anything in her astonishment. Finally she managed to stammer, "What are you doing here?"

Max lifted the box up over his head. It had no bottom and he had been crouching uncomfortably inside waiting for them. "Boy, am I glad to get out of there!" he told them. "I thought you'd never get home."

Willy looked up and down the street at a few of her neighbors who were outside and had heard the squealing. They were very interested and watched curiously. She waved at them to show that everything was all right then said, "We'd better go inside."

Max collapsed the box and put it in the garage, then they all trooped indoors. He stooped and held out his arms and Allison and Jeffy ran into them. After he had hugged them and made much of how big they had grown, he turned his attention to their mother. He looked at her to try to gauge her feelings. He hadn't realized how his sudden entrance could be frightening and felt bad that she had been shaken. He didn't want to do anything that would be uncomfortable or distasteful to her. She solved his dilemma by simply opening her arms to him. She was as surprised by her action as he was.

He stood for a second, unable to believe his good fortune. Then with a laugh and sudden tears clouding his vision, he wrapped his big arms around her in a bear hug. He doubted that a passionate kiss would be appropriate in front of the kids so instead he lifted her off the floor and swung her around and around. Dizzy, they both collapsed on the sofa and the kids piled on top.

After a while, the frenzy finally contained, Max answered all their questions. "I got Aggie's number from Kelly then called and asked her if she could find out when you would be home for sure today," he told Willy. She said your mother was going to call and she'd have her find out for me."

"I thought she was unusually nosy," Willy laughed.

"My car is parked down the street. People thought I was crazy carrying a refrigerator box and newspapers. I waited until everyone was out of sight before I put it over my head."

"How did you get the newspapers on your head?" Jeffy asked.

"It wasn't easy," Max laughed. "I got inside the box all bent over and then I crumpled up the papers and stuffed them around me. I was afraid that I wouldn't be covered and you would see who it was when you opened the box. I wanted to jump out and surprise you."

"Well, you certainly did that," Willy said. "I nearly had a heart attack when the papers started moving."

"I really didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry about that."

"How long did you have to wait until we came?" Allison wanted to know.

"It was only a few minutes," he told her.

Willy shook her head. "I almost decided to go grocery shopping after school. You're lucky I remembered that Allison has a Daisy meeting in a few minutes so we came right home."

"Mama, can I miss it today?" Allison begged. "I want to stay here with Mr. Bell."

"I think that would be all right," her mother agreed.

Suddenly the logistics of this event loomed up in Willy's mind. Was he expecting to stay here in the house? What was in his mind? How was she going to cope with this added problem? She felt her back stiffening and her heart start to pound. Luckily, the kids were occupying Max's attention right now and it would give her some time to think.

"Excuse me," Willy said, standing. "I'm going to go thaw out something for dinner. I'll be right back." She made her escape to the kitchen and opened the freezer. What on earth could she fix? It would have to be something pretty simple. She pulled out some hamburger and a package of tortillas. Enchiladas were always easy and quick.

I'll just have to insist that he go to a motel, Willy thought. It wouldn't look right to have him stay here. And besides, there weren't any beds in the house big enough for him, for one thing. He must be well over six feet tall. She knew there was a Super 8 fairly close and since he had his own car, he could drive himself back and forth. Let's see, what was on the calendar? How long was he going to stay? What would she do to entertain him? Especially when the kids were in school. Oh, it made her head ache!

She had looked forward to his visit when he told her he was coming and had made a few plans, but she had expected him to call and give her some notice. She had waited to shop for food until she knew his schedule but now she would have to do some quick planning.

She pulled out a box of brownie mix to have for dessert. What goes with enchiladas? She rummaged through the cabinets for a can of refried beans. Was there any sour cream left? Or diced green chilis? She was so engrossed in searching she didn't hear him come up behind her and she jumped when he spoke.

"Sorry to startle you, again" he laughed. "My, but you are jumpy. Is it all right if I take the kids with me to pick up my car? It's just around the corner."

"Sure," she answered. That would give her a few extra minutes to get herself together and think.

She saw them off out the door then stood for a moment in thought. The bathroom! She ran to check and see if it was presentable. Then she made a quick run through the house picking up things and checking for dust. As usual, there was plenty of that! Oh well, too late to do anything right now. She threw the meat in the microwave on defrost then started emptying the dishwasher. It was 4 o'clock so she only had an hour until dinnertime. She'd better get going on this meal. What if he wanted to stay? How could she tell him no? Oh, why worry? He was sensitive enough that he wouldn't want to do anything she didn't want him to. He wouldn't be offended by being asked to go to a motel.

By the time the meat and onions were browned, she heard the door open and they were back. Willy's stomach clenched again. How could she love someone so much and still be so nervous and afraid? It was just so unexpected. She hoped she could act somewhat normally and not be a klutz for a few hours at least.

Max came in and in his usual efficient manner got the kids organized setting the table and helping with the meal. Willy could tell by the look in his eyes that he would like to take her in his arms again. Those eyes! She pried her mind off her own desires and soon the meal was done and on the table.

After the dishes and cleaning up were done, they went back into the living room. Willy suggested that Allison show them what she had brought home from school. Jeffy also had some pictures from his classes to brag about and the evening passed quietly in talking and catching up.

"I already checked in at the Super 8 down the road on my way here," Max announced. "I knew you wouldn't want me disrupting your routines so I'll take off now," he said. He stood up and heard two very unhappy children voice their objections.

"You can't go yet!" Allison stated flatly. "I haven't shown you my room or the back yard or anything!"

Jeffy just grabbed Max's leg with both arms and held on. There would be no escape with that little ball and chain holding on.

Max looked a question at Willy. "I'm willing to stay a while, but you'll have to tell me what bedtime is. I'm not going to make a nuisance of myself!"

"Why don't you stay until the kids are asleep? Then we can talk for a while before you go," Willy decided. There were many things she needed answers for, such as what his plans were and what was in his mind. She had been so relieved to hear that he had already made arrangements at the motel. That was just like him. He really was a thoughtful guy. It took a great load off her mind.

With Allison conducting the tour, they made the rounds of all the rooms in the house. Max expressed suitable approval for the décor, toys, pictures, and beds. He was given the history of each little thing until Willy was sure he was bored out of his mind. He didn't show any reluctance, however, and happily let himself be lead around by two very enthusiastic children. Since it was dark and quite cold outside, they just looked through the windows at the back yard. The swing set and patio furniture looked chilly and forlorn. Max offered to push them on the swing tomorrow when it was light.

By then it was bedtime and no amount of pleading would make Willy extend the time. She needed them to go to sleep so she could face this big man herself and talk. So much needed to be said and decided and evaluated. It was really scary but Willy knew her own heart and couldn't wait to discuss her feelings.

Max seemed to know her thoughts and made it all easier by promising the kids that if they would go to bed and to sleep without a struggle he would take them all out to dinner at a real restaurant tomorrow. They were happy to settle down then. Willy tucked them in with a kiss and shut their doors. She breathed a sigh and returned to Max who was sitting in the living room.

When she walked in, he jumped up and spread his arms again. "At last," he smiled. "I love your kids, but it's you I want in my arms now!"

Resisting the urge to be practical and get all the talking out of the way first, Willy wrapped her arms around him and snuggled in close. How could just being held tightly erase all the burdens and worry she felt? She held on tighter and felt tears come at the relief and complete joy that enveloped her.

They stood in their close embrace for several minutes, just reveling in the feelings that washed over them until finally Max lifted her chin and gave her the kiss that had been postponed all evening. It was warm and gentle and everything and more that she remembered from last summer. Then he pulled her down to sit with him on the sofa. "There is so much to say," he said.

"First things, first, though," Willy said. Then taking her courage in her hands, she asked, "Max, will you marry me? I'm a widow with two kids and nothing to offer but I love you so much!"

The look of shock on his face surprised her. Maybe she had misjudged his intentions. Maybe it wasn't marriage he wanted. Her eyes grew worried and her face turned red.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I don't know where that came from. Don't listen to me!"

"Are you kidding? Those are the most beautiful words I've ever heard! I'm just flabbergasted that this is going to be so easy! I wasn't sure what you were feeling and was going to ask the same thing as soon as I found out," he laughed in wonder.

They were up until the wee hours discussing some of the many things that needed to be said. It would take many more days and planning sessions to work out all the details before things were in order, but the bulk of the big questions were answered already. Their quiet talking was interspersed by much hugging and kissing, which would have been very offensive if not downright disgusting to the kids. It was good they were in dreamland and oblivious.

When Max finally pulled himself away and left to make his way to the motel, Willy floated to her own room and dreamily prepared for bed. He would be here again tomorrow! He said he could stay for several days! They would have time to talk more! And she would feel those arms around her again! And those lips! Willy shivered in delight and anticipation as she snuggled in bed. Her pillows got the hugging of their lives that night.

They spent most of next the day together. Jeffy was in heaven playing with his big friend and didn't even want to go to his school. He was afraid he would miss something. Willy dropped him off anyway so she and Max could shop for groceries and have some time together. After Allison came home, they decided together where they wanted to go out to eat.

"Mr. Bell, can I have anything I want to eat?" Allison asked. This was such a treat that she couldn't believe her good fortune.

"Of course you can, Allison, and so can Jeff," Max agreed. "And besides, I don't think it's fair that I get to call you by your first names and you have to call me 'Mr. Bell'. Why don't you call me Max from now on?"

Allison's eyes got big and she turned to her mother. "Is that all right to do that, Mama?" she asked.

"Why don't they get used to calling you 'Dad'?" Willy said, her voice quiet and her eyes filled with love.

Epilogue

It was summer again. The cool morning air settled in a mist around the buildings and trees. The sun hadn't topped the mountains yet and the valley was still in shadow. Two figures were seen walking toward a small copse of quaking aspen. They entered the grove and walked, hand in hand, through the trees for a short distance then stopped and faced each other.

"Two years ago today we met," Willy said, eyes smiling up at Max.

"I'll never forget you quivering up in that tree, hanging on for dear life. Suzy couldn't figure out what you were doing up there so she just kept barking at you."

"I'm glad you helped me get over that fear. She has been a good dog to have around. Her pups and the kids are inseparable," she said.

"We're inseparable, too," Max answered, taking her in his arms. "I just can't imagine life without you. All those months that we were apart was a nightmare for me. I could hardly function for thinking about you. You can't imagine the sheer joy I felt when you called that time and said you wanted to see me again. I don't think I slept at all that night."

"I'm sorry I put you through all that. I had to get over the grief and then convince myself that it was all right for me to be happy," Willy told him. "I couldn't believe that you would still be interested in me after all the put-downs I gave you."

"I'm a hard man to discourage. When I set my mind to something, I don't usually change it. I never lost hope that one day you would come around. I just hated to have to wait."

"That day when you delivered yourself in a box to our door will go down in the annals of family history. The kids will tell their grandkids, 'My Daddy Max was a very strange man. He liked to pull tricks on people.'" Her voice crackled like an old person's. "I remember the first time he came to see us. He climbed in a refrigerator carton and he was all scrunched up because he was a big man. When we got home and opened it up, he jumped out at us. We were scared to death. Mother fainted dead away and all the neighbors came running and called the cops."

Max was laughing at her impersonation. "It gains something in the telling, doesn't it?"

"You can bet they'll get the most out of it," she chuckled.

He drew her to him again. "My favorite story is the one where Great Grandma Willy proposed marriage to Great Grandpa Max the minute he walked in the door after getting out of the box."

"It wasn't the minute after!" Willy hotly denied. "You had been there at least four hours!" she insisted.

"I don't care how long it was, honey. I couldn't believe my ears. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I was resigned to having to pussyfoot around for at least a week before I could even get you in the mood to ask."

"Pussyfoot? Well I hope you have learned your lesson about trying to second-guess me. I'm certainly not predictable, am I?"

"You are now. I can predict exactly where you'll be every night. I know you'll be there to meet me at the door when I get home and you'll put your arms around me and kiss me. I know that you will snuggle up to me in bed and get your hair in my face," he said, ruffling it as he spoke.

"You didn't know I'd marry you so soon or that we'd be willing to move to Star Valley with you," Willy pointed out.

"No, I thought we'd have to wait quite a while to get married, but I did know you would move to Star Valley. I saw how much you loved it here when you came before. And I knew you could do your writing from anywhere."

"Now that I've lived through a winter here, I think Arizona looks better and better," she teased. "Maybe we should go on a long vacation there every winter."

"And miss the snowmobiling and skiing and deer in the back yard?" he asked. "And being snowed in with the power off and having to snuggle up in front of the fireplace and drink hot chocolate with the kids and tell stories and sing songs?"

"No, that was the best part of the whole winter," Willy agreed. "I think later that night is when this happened." She patted her abdomen, smiling wickedly up at him.

Max put his hand over hers on her belly. "Are you sure you should be walking this far? You're six months along now."

"The doctor said walking is the best thing for me. Now horseback riding would be off limits," she laughed.

Max turned Willy so her back was to him but his arms still enfolded her. "Willy?"

"Hmmm?"

"I can't imagine anyone being happier than I am now. I have everything I could wish for in the world. Becoming a father is the greatest thing I can think of. I love Allison and Jeff, but

helping to create a child of my own is beyond any joy I can conceive. It just doesn't get any better than this."

Willy chuckled. "You may have second thoughts about that when you have to wake up every hour and change diapers and clean up throw-up and diarrhea and walk a sick kid half the night."

"No, I'm even willing to do all that. That is only a temporary annoyance, but I'll get to have the child all my life. You're young and strong. We could have a dozen!"

Willy turned in his arms and embraced her, tears spilling from her eyes. "I love you, Max. I can never tell you too many times. I love you, I love you, I love you."

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