



in
Glenwood Springs,
COLORADO



in
Glenwood Springs,
COLORADO

*Millie's
Resolve*

REBECCA JEPSON

BARBOUR BOOKS
An Imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc.

© 2018 by Rebecca Jepson

ISBN 978-1-68322-603-1

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-68322-605-5

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-68322-604-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

All scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Series Design: Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

Model Photo: Ilina Simeonova/ Trevillion Images

Published by Barbour Books, an imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1810 Barbour Drive, Uhrichsville, OH 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



Printed in the United States of America.



Chapter One

Glenwood Springs, Colorado
September 1888

*I*t was his voice.

The troublesome knot that had formed in Millie Cooper's stomach was there because of his voice. The rich timbre fluttered about the edges of her memory, just out of reach. How could a voice be so familiar, yet so forgotten? And how could her pulse leap at the sound, while at the same time her veins filled with spreading apprehension?

She peered around the corner of the stairwell at the man, who was talking to Dr. Murphy in the office across the entrance hall. He stood against a backdrop of towering golden cliffs and forested green mountains, visible through the office window. His back was to her. He wore no hat, so she could see his russet-brown hair. The straightness in his posture, the neatness in the cut of his waistcoat, marked him an easterner. *That's no reason for me to be so upset.* Yet the clenching in her middle only tightened.

She circled her waist with her hand and smoothed the folds of her starched white apron, as if to soothe away her worries. A strand of sandy-brown hair escaped her coiled braids, temporarily blocking her view. But

there was nothing wrong with her hearing.

“No doubt we’ll require the services of a midwife before long as well,” the man said.

The doctor, usually so unflappable, sounded startled. “Your mother is expecting a baby?”

“No, my brother’s wife is. Unless I’m mistaken.”

Realizing she was eavesdropping on a private conversation, Millie descended the last two steps and crossed the entrance hall. There were no patients seated in the cramped alcove, where the wooden bench and two threadbare red armchairs formed a waiting room.

The uneven floorboards creaked under her feet as she passed the office and entered the room beside it. She began wiping down the examination table, a frail-looking piece of equipment. Dr. Murphy had taught her to work “antiseptically,” a newfangled method touted by British surgeon Joseph Lister. Millie was instructed to clean the equipment whenever she had time.

Once finished with the table, she turned her attention to the medicine counter and started scrubbing the assortment of doctors’ tools, scalpels, speculums, syringes, and the like. The maple counter shared a parchment-thin wall with the office, making it difficult to shut out the conversation on the other side. She managed to focus on her task—until she heard the doctor say her name.

“Couldn’t do better than Millie, I assure you. She’s the equal of any doctor, even if she’s never been to medical school. I’ve taught her all I could these past five years. The only procedure she hasn’t undertaken is performing surgery.”

Millie knew of course that Dr. Murphy respected her. He wouldn’t have asked her to come with him and his grown daughter to Glenwood Springs if he hadn’t.

What a day that had been. She’d never forget her first glimpse of the breathtaking valley, dotted with canvas tents and log huts, all tucked in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. The Grand River and Roaring Fork merged on the valley floor, the flowing waterways sparkling in the

pale November sun. Smoke curled up from chimneys and steam rose from the hot springs, melting the early frost that blanketed the ever-green trees. Millie recalled feeling set free, like something inside her had loosened upon arrival.

Though delighted that Dr. Murphy had brought her along, she always wondered if he'd done so partly out of pity. She hadn't realized until today how highly he valued her nursing skills. *A poor fisherman's daughter. . . the equal of any doctor.* She felt her chest expand and her lips curve upward.

Then her smile faded. *Just what position is he recommending me for?*

The man spoke again. "My mother's condition wouldn't involve surgery, at least it hasn't yet. She's had these attacks of the lungs, as I mentioned. The severity and frequency of the episodes requires the promptest of attention."

Millie's limbs went cold. *Does the woman have asthma—or consumption?* She had little experience with the former. The latter was another matter. She suppressed a shiver. Sufferers of the disease rarely survived, even surrounded by the famed Colorado mountain air and soothing hot springs that beckoned the afflicted masses.

There was a momentary silence.

"Millie hasn't dealt with asthma much, I'll admit," Dr. Murphy said. *At least it's not consumption.*

"But I've educated her on the subject, and she's proved herself efficient in any crisis. Still, perhaps you'd like to locate a nurse who's more familiar with the malady before approaching Millie?"

"There isn't time. My mother must not be left unattended, even for a few days."

Something in the man's decisive tone struck Millie. *I know him, I know I do.* A fact that couldn't explain the uneasy churning in her breast.

She reached for the nearby microscope and began cleaning its brass tube and various lenses and knobs. As she worked, she attempted to force her mind elsewhere. *Any minute now, that man is going to come through the door and offer me a position.* She wondered what it would be

like to have the luxury of tending only one patient. *Well, two.* There was the expectant sister-in-law as well. But two patients seemed an easy task compared to her work with Dr. Murphy. In addition to caring for the ailing visitors that flooded his office, Millie accompanied him on house calls, often trekking to remote homesteads or faraway mines. Nearer at hand but equally trying were their trips to the red-light district, where unmentionable female illnesses abounded. By the end of the day, her heart would be as heavy as her throbbing feet. But even during those times, she knew she wouldn't trade her work for anything.

"Ahem."

Millie whirled, her cleaning rag still in her hand. Her gaze flew to the doorway, where, framed by the peeling white trim, stood the man with the familiar voice.

Millie's breath came to a halt in her throat. The rag fell from her hand to the floor with a soft plop.

It wasn't his aristocratic demeanor or lean good looks that had such an effect on her.

It was the recognition that welled in her consciousness. Oh, she knew him, all right. He was the very man who'd caused her heart to break six years ago, when he'd kept her from marrying his younger brother.



The sight of John Drexel took Millie on a slippery journey, a downward spiral she had no control over. In a matter of seconds, she went from a confident nurse in the Rocky Mountains to a trembling girl on the Nantucket shoreline. The one who was deemed unworthy of a man's love and devotion. *How can I look at him and not be angry?* Worse, how could she look at him and not think of Stephen?

Try as she might, she couldn't.

Her thoughts went back to that terrible day. Her senses well remembered the rapid beats of her heart when the hour finally arrived. Her childhood friend turned sweetheart had promised to meet her in their special spot at dusk. To take her away to a world in which she

was someone's cherished wife.

She recalled hurrying along the misty autumn lane, the fallen leaves crunching beneath her scuffed leather shoes. She rounded the corner, the tangy smell of the sea rising to greet her. And there, in the clearing in the woods, waiting between the black iron lampposts, next to the perfect-for-two bench was. . . John.

Not Stephen, John.

Instead of her beloved, she beheld his strictly business, to-himself older brother, who'd never had time to play.

Somehow she knew at once that he was on a mission, that his unbending aim was to keep her and Stephen apart. He'd succeeded too, because she hadn't found the courage to defy him—and because, deep down, she believed his unspoken implication that she wasn't good enough for his brother.

And now, six years later, here he was again. Shattering her confidence, causing an aching swell of memory. . . and, contrarily, speeding her pulse.

Does he even recognize me?

She didn't think so. The relaxed way in which he stood, hands in his trouser pockets, short ruddy curls tilted to the side, indicated he had no idea who she was.

Then there was a flicker in those distinctly blue eyes. *A family trait, that light shade of blue.* But Stephen's sometimes appeared green. *Like the depths of the ocean.*

She swallowed down a knot of pain.

John's gaze slid from hers, and he gnawed on his lower lip.

He knows exactly who I am. The realization that he was caught off guard somehow brought Millie a wave of strength. On its heels came the bracing awareness that she was no longer a timid girl from the fishing quarter of Nantucket. She was a trained nurse, able to bring wellness to the ill. She'd delivered babies, sutured wounds, coaxed fevers to subside.

She lifted her chin. "How can I help you, Mr. Drexel?"

He expelled his breath as if he'd held it in for some time. "Millie Cooper. You've grown."

Hardly flattering, since she was eighteen the last time she saw him. "Thank you. . . I suppose."

A flush crept up his neck. The silence ran on. "I trust you've been well?" he asked finally.

Yes, little thanks to you. "I've managed."

"And your father? Is he—"

"He passed away, shortly after I left Nantucket. An accident at sea."

"I'm terribly sorry," John murmured. After an awkward pause, he added, "The doctor tells me you're quite an able nurse."

"There are many things I might have been 'quite able' at, if I'd been permitted to try." She couldn't believe she'd said it. Her extremities turned numb as she awaited his reply.

He gave her a wary glance. "We're discussing the past, are we?"

"If you want my help, I think we must."

He leaned against the doorframe. "It was a long time ago."

It was yesterday, her heart cried.

He studied her a moment then sighed. "What do you want to know?"

Is Stephen happy?

His wife was expecting a baby, that much she knew. John had no other brothers, only their sister, Rena, so there could be no other expectant sister-in-law. *Stephen probably has several children by now.*

Unable to voice the somehow dismaying thought, Millie searched her mind for something else to say. "Do you still visit the cottage?"

A ridiculous question, since he'd rarely visited his family's summer-house even when he was young. She'd never understood how he stayed away. She could still picture the quaint cottage, overgrown with pink climbing roses. It was a charming place, perfectly suited to the New England seashore.

He shrugged. "When I have the time."

It was her turn to scrutinize him. "And when would that be, Mr. Drexel?"

He shifted his weight, gaze darting away from hers once more. When it returned, he appeared resolved, his jaw set. "I know your view of my family isn't a favorable one, but I have some very pressing concerns just now. My mother's condition is grave."

She fought an inward battle then nodded.

"Her illness began a little over a year ago, the onslaught brought on by an unknown cause. We consulted with the best doctors in Philadelphia. I even traveled to New York on a number of occasions to seek the counsel of respected physicians there. In the end, it was our trusted family doctor whose opinion I heeded. He suggested a different climate, one that might soothe her lungs, somewhere far from the bellowing factories and thick air of our industrial city."

"Well, Colorado certainly is far from Philadelphia."

"Yes, I thought it a bit drastic. But Stephen visited Denver with Father once, and took a liking to the West."

It was the first time he'd spoken his brother's name, and Millie found it difficult not to flinch. She thought she hid her reaction well, until she saw him watching her intently. When she offered no comment, he hesitated then continued.

"At any rate, since he's the one who'll be living here, taking care of our mother, it seemed only fitting to allow him his choice of locations."

"You're not staying?" The question escaped before she could stop it.

"Only until I see my mother settled with a proper nurse and fitted with a household staff." Grim humor entered his eyes. "I'm afraid the wilds of Colorado didn't hold much appeal for the serving class of New England. Our advertisements in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other papers received abysmal responses. Even our existing staff members were reluctant to accompany us west. A coachman, a nurse, and a lone kitchen maid were all that could be persuaded to make the journey. At least, of my mother's servants." He opened his mouth as if to say more then shut it.

He's trying not to mention Stephen again. His caution did little good. Stephen couldn't help but occupy her thoughts, not with his brother

standing four feet from her. She saw her former love in the nuances of John's every expression, from the lift of his brows to the unsettling impact of his gaze.

Suddenly Millie's forehead furrowed. "If your mother's nurse came with you, why are you looking for a new nurse?"

"Because the old one ran off with the coachman shortly after our arrival." A wry grin played about his mouth. "A fine turn of events, isn't it?"

She almost smiled. "How terrible."

He spread his hands wide, eyes earnest. "Will you help us?"

Please don't ask it of me.

"My mother needs you."

Her dry tongue could barely form the words. "Your brother's wife—would I be expected to—to—" She tried again. "Are you sure she's with child?"

A faint blush tinged his cheeks. "As sure as a man without a wife of his own can be."

"I see."

He trained his focus on his black oxford shoe, which was creating circles in the hooked rug. Abruptly he lifted his head. "I've no choice but to beg your assistance, and believe me when I say that if I had other options, I wouldn't be troubling you with this."

The retort that formed on her lips died when she looked more closely at him. She saw the tension in his face, the strain in the lines on his brow. She hardly knew him, having rarely talked to him when they were children. But now she sensed his desperation, and it was enough to convince her that his mother's need was real. And Stephen's wife would require care during her time of confinement and delivery.

A storm of emotions filled Millie. How could she face a months-long ordeal of caring for the very woman who belonged to the man she'd once loved, the man she'd counted on spending her life with?

She grasped at a feeble hope. "There must be other nurses who'd be willing to take the position."

“Perhaps, but none in Glenwood Springs.”

“There are other towns in Colorado.”

“True, but who would see to my mother while I conducted such a search? Besides, how many backwoods mining towns do you know that boast nurses who trained under a renowned Baltimore physician?”

She suspected he was flattering her to secure her help. She wanted to study him but was afraid to. There was something in his eyes, so like Stephen’s—and yet so different—that she couldn’t quite decipher. *I’m sure he still thinks of me as that bedraggled little girl from Nantucket.*

“I’ll think about it,” she said at last.

Time ticked by.

She knew he was weighing her.

She glanced up. . .and nearly lost her breath. In the blue-eyed depths of his gaze, she was transported to another time. Helpless against the memories his scrutiny uprooted, she remembered the stark, unconcealed devotion she’d seen in another pair of blue eyes, looking down at her.

In that moment, a brick-like weight settled into her spirit. This man had cost her a lifetime of happiness. *I can’t forgive him, I can’t.*

“You must pardon me,” she said, a tremor in her voice. “But I fear I have other duties to attend to.”

She knelt to retrieve her soiled rag, straightened, and swept past him, apron rustling as she went.

Chapter Two

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a large, stylized arch with a heart in the center. Below the arch is a solid black square. The arch is composed of two curved lines that meet at the top and bottom, with small arrowheads pointing outwards.

John left the doctor's office, his head pounding. A revitalizing breeze wafted over him, the gust as clean as the pristine mountain peaks from which it had blown. He relaxed his clamped jaw and inhaled deeply.

He couldn't deny that seeing Millie after so many years had shaken him. *Did I even manage to utter a single sensible word in there?*

Fearing the answer, he hurried down the path to the hitching post and mounted his horse. He urged the animal forward, hoping to leave thoughts of Millie behind. The effort met with failure.

The girl had become a woman, that much was clear. She possessed that subtle. . .something. . .that came only with the arrival of womanhood. And like other fair members of her sex, she now had the ability to turn him into a flustered schoolboy.

Though if he were being honest, it wasn't the first time she'd rattled him. With a pang, he remembered that particular Nantucket twilight, when he'd had trouble meeting her damp-lashed eyes. One glance at her, and he'd noticed the new fullness of her figure, the constrained rise and fall of her chest that probably concealed a thousand mysterious emotions. But one of them was obvious—pain.

He tightened his jaw once more. He'd done what he had to do.

And today I did it again. Millie hadn't accepted the position, but he'd

offered it nonetheless. And he wasn't about to concede defeat without a fight.

A new thought occurred to him. *Even if I persuade her, our troubles will be far from over.* His mother would be outraged, which would prove unpleasant, to say the least. And an ailing woman certainly didn't need to be distressed, a fact that stung his conscience. Had he done the right thing for her? He reminded himself that he'd had little choice. Still, he shuddered to think what she'd say when she heard he'd offered Millie the position.

He reined in his horse, deciding a slower pace would be better. It was childish, he knew, but he wanted to put off the dreaded confrontation as long as possible.

Too soon, he reached the board sidewalks of downtown, where he'd turn west and head toward his mother's house. As he glanced over the row of two-storied brick buildings and false-fronted wooden structures, he noted that there were only one or two of each type of business. Grand Avenue boasted a mercantile, a dry goods store, two banks, a post office, a furniture store, two saloons, a hotel, a restaurant, and a drugstore. *What a contrast to the many skyscrapers and smoke-spewing factories of Philadelphia.*

Glenwood Springs lay in a narrow valley surrounded by rugged hills on all sides. Toward the east, the hills loomed tall and steep, lushly covered in trees. Toward the west, an immense red-rock mountain, aptly named Red Mountain, created a stark but colorful sight. From certain vantage points, the white-capped Sopris Peak could be seen in the distance to the south, while Glenwood Canyon, carved between sheer cliffs, served as the gateway to the northeast. Like many other settlements in mining country, this one had begun as an unruly place, filled with gamblers and prostitutes. It was becoming civilized, as evidenced by the tranquil church steeple that rose above the houses of town. Such things often progressed slowly, if the seedy-looking establishment he'd passed earlier on Bennett Avenue was any indicator. At any rate, he found that the town's slower pace lessened the tension inside him—a

tension that reappeared the moment he arrived at his mother's house.

He'd scarcely gotten through the carved oak door when he was met by two servants, one he'd just acquired and the other his mother's faithful kitchen maid, Beatrice. In addition to the servants, the entrance hall reverberated with the stomping boot steps of the men he'd hired to unload the furniture. He'd offered good wages to anyone he could find out and about downtown. His workers included the town scavenger, the coal-delivery man, the fire bell ringer, and what appeared to be a tramp.

John dodged past the servants and tried to edge around the workers, but the coal-delivery man, a beefy fellow with a soot-blackened face, called out to him.

"Hey mister, where do ya want this—this whatnot?"

John paused. The item in question was a rosewood furnishing of sorts, porcelain knobs and miniature drawers suitable for a dining room—or bedroom—or drawing room.

"Just leave it in the entrance hall." He surged forward once more.

The maids scurried along behind him, unable to match his longer strides. He stopped outside his study door, and they caught up.

"This came for you, sir." Beatrice held out a thin, square envelope.

He took it, broke the seal, and read the bold print.

DOUGIN SELLING SHIPYARD SOONER THAN EXPECTED *Stop* ACT
NOW OR NEWBOLD WILL *Stop*

John sighed and rubbed his temples. Realizing that Beatrice was waiting for a response, he retrieved the stylographic pen he kept in his vest pocket and scribbled a message on the back of the telegram.

He returned the paper to her. "Go find my brother and tell him to send his coachman to the telegraph office with this."

She turned at once to do his bidding, telegram in hand. Before he could blink, the other servant, a chambermaid named Sally, stepped toward him.

"Your mother wants to know what you'd like for dinner, Mr. Drexel."

“I’m not hungry.”

He darted into his study and shut the door behind him. He crossed the blue Oriental rug and sank onto his desk chair.

There, in the glorious silence, dark cherry walls all around him, his thoughts began to slow. He gazed absently into the cavernous depths of the hearth, cold and ashy this time of year.

The telegram had reminded him that miles away, he had an estate to manage and holdings to oversee. Many of his investments were like ticking bombs, in need of his most timely attention. He imagined his desk back home, piled high with unanswered telegrams from his New York City broker and unsigned contracts and financial statements from his clerk.

Other images plagued his mind as well. He envisioned his mother, wheezing and pale, her helpless eyes fixed on him. He saw his brother’s wife, the picture of health but pregnant with a powerless babe, mother and child looking to him. And finally, he saw the wood-frame house he’d just left. He knew it served both as a medical facility and a home for Dr. Murphy and his daughter. Reportedly, the man had left a thriving practice in Baltimore when he’d heard about the desperate need for doctors out west. He’d settled in Denver and remained there until medical care became plentiful; then he moved to Glenwood Springs, once again meeting a dire need.

A simple white house without even a proper front porch—and a man’s whole world is inside it. In that moment, John envied the doctor.

Please, God in heaven, help me do right by my family, whatever the cost.

His prayer was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door. He recognized that particular knock and groaned. He glanced up at the ceiling. *Are You testing me?*

“Come in,” he called, but his mother was already tottering into the room, leaning heavily on Beatrice’s arm.

He contrived a smile. “I see your helpful maid told you where to find me.”

“Yes, she’s quite a loyal girl.” His mother had no sooner spoken the words than she was seized by a ferocious series of coughs.

John half rose from his chair, the hair on the back of his neck rising along with him. His mother’s coughing spasms had grown more violent lately. He sank back down when Beatrice circled his mother’s waist with a sturdy arm and offered her a lace-edged handkerchief. The girl’s movements were unsteady, but to her credit, she didn’t flinch away from the unnerving task.

His mother’s coughs subsided. She took the handkerchief and wiped her mouth with trembling hands then gave Beatrice a feeble nod. “You may return to your other duties now.”

Beatrice curtsied and left the room.

His mother gripped the edge of the desk and eased her waiflike body onto the chair opposite John. “I hear you declined dinner this evening.”

As if I’m a child to be scolded. “I wasn’t hungry.”

She raised one reddish-blond brow. “Not even for beef soufflé?”

He shrugged.

Her appraising gaze swept over him. “You weren’t able to find a new nurse, were you, son.”

His knee jogged up and down. “You may as well know, Mother, the only nurse in town is Millie Cooper.”

Her eyes widened, and she clutched at her plum-colored shawl. “Little ’Sconset-girl Millie Cooper? That lowbred fisherman’s daughter—a nurse?”

“Yes, and a good one, if the doctor is to be believed.”

She moaned, a pitiable sound. “I should never have allowed my darlings to play with that child. Why did our cottage have to be built so unsuitably close to a fishing quarter?”

Their cottage wasn’t merely close to a fishing quarter, it was in a fishing quarter. The ’Sconset neighborhood boasted both Nantucket’s premier vacation homes and an assortment of crude fishing shacks.

“I share your regret, Mother.” He hesitated. *Just say it.* “Because if we’d never met the girl, she might be more inclined to help us now.”

His mother's spine grew ramrod stiff. "You didn't offer her a position, I hope?"

He pushed the words past uncooperative lips. "Yes, I did."

"John, how could you?" she cried. "All the pains we took to rout that girl from our lives six years ago, and you invited her back in?"

He shook his head. "Surely Stephen is past his boyish infatuation by now." *Isn't he?* He loosened his cravat, suddenly uncomfortable.

His mother's voice shook. "Your brother's feelings are not to be taken lightly."

"I only meant that Stephen has Florence and the children to think of now. Please don't be upset."

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "That girl is not of a certain quality, you understand. Her kind never lacks ambition. Their aims are almost always—" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "*Tawdry.*"

He frowned. "I hardly think it's fair to compare her to—"

She cut him off. "Mark my words, if you employ her, she'll disrupt our lives." His mother regarded him a moment, head tilted. "One way or another."

He steepled his fingers together and stared at her for several seconds. *She's terrified that Stephen's happiness will be derailed again.* "Your son is content," he said gently.

"Is he?" She gave him an odd look.

She's so terribly pale. He forced another smile. "You know, Mother, now that I think about it, dinner sounds excellent. Shall we see if that Mrs. Winters knows how to soufflé a beef?" Hilda Winters was the cook he'd hired only that morning.

His mother brightened, troubles seeming forgotten already. "I'll tend to it at once."

John rang the bell, and Beatrice appeared at the door.

He waited until the girl helped his mother to her feet and escorted her from the room before he flopped back against his chair. Visions began hurtling about in his mind, primarily one of his pallid, sickly

mother, joined by words like *tawdry* and *lowbred*.

Does Millie think that's why I kept her from marrying Stephen? Because I thought those things about her? He groaned and buried his head in his outstretched arms, no longer able to withstand the tide of memories the day had wrought.

Millie had been bursting with energy as a child, he remembered. He'd seen her on several occasions, jumping about in the surf with Stephen and Rena, eyes crinkled and full cheeks scrunched up in spirited laughter.

What a contrast to the moment she arrived at that clearing in Kramer's Wood. Nantucket's coastal mist had woven through the gold-and-red fall foliage that night. The dim light had shone from the lampposts on either side of him. Footsteps approached. The mist gave way to a whispering wind, and John could see her face clearly. He knew of course that she'd expected Stephen. But he still felt a twinge of envy at knowing his brother elicited a very different response from women than he did. He watched her countenance fall, saw the wariness in her gaze. . .the dawning heartbreak. Youthful ivory skin and a childishly upturned nose couldn't diminish the soulful beauty of her eyes, a soft shade of brown flecked with gold and green. Those eyes reproached him.

In that moment, it had been impossible to think of Millie pragmatically. Before then, he'd thought of her as what she was—an obstacle that needed to be dealt with. *But that was before she looked at me that way.* It had taken every ounce of willpower he'd possessed to hide his misgivings from her.

And truth be told, he'd do it again.

A steely resolve, chased away by the strain of the last few days, crept back into him. Lamentable though the past was, a few girlish tears couldn't change the priorities of his life. True, that wrenching look she'd given him had twisted his stomach with guilt and his heart with. . .he didn't know what.

Nor could he afford to find out. His single-minded focus was what

kept this family afloat. They depended on him to provide for them, to see to their health, to manage their estate, handed down from generations. They required his full attention.

And he would give it—starting with finding a way to persuade the only nurse in town to join his mother's household staff.

Chapter Three

A decorative graphic for the chapter header. It features a large, stylized arch with a heart in the center. Below the arch is a solid black square. The arch is flanked by two smaller, curved lines that point inward.

Millie carefully peeled the gauze back from the wound. She'd soaked it in warm water, but it still clung to the burned skin. Her freckle-faced patient gritted his teeth against what must have been excruciating pain.

"You're doing well, Freddy—so well."

The boy's mother stood in the corner of the room, visibly pale.

"This won't take long," Millie assured her with a smile. She reached toward the medicine counter, where a bowl of soapy water awaited her. She'd prepared it ahead of time, along with a clean cloth and fresh bandage saturated with iodine.

She wrung out the cloth and leaned back toward Freddy. His entire body trembled, and his bare heels drummed incessantly against the side of the examination table. *This could prove difficult.* But to her surprise, he allowed her to lift his injured arm once more.

Millie studied the wound with an experienced eye. In spite of the blisters and dead skin that coiled around the angry red center, the burn was healing nicely. She'd seen the opposite many times. Patients who waited too long to visit the doctor often arrived with high fevers, their sores oozing and emitting odors that nearly made her recoil.

She began dabbing at Freddy's arm. The boy cried out, a sound echoed by his mother. Millie's forehead grew damp at the painstaking effort

of keeping her touch light while still thoroughly cleaning the wound.

Finished at last, she grabbed a towel off the counter and patted the wound dry then loosely bandaged it. As usual, Dr. Murphy's voice rang in her mind. "*Never put too much pressure on a burn.*"

"And. . .we're done!" she announced as she secured the two gauzy ends together with a pin.

Freddy's legs stopped swinging. His gaze dropped to his bandaged appendage, and a quavering grin spread across his face. His mother rushed over and lifted him into her arms.

Millie realized she was clothed in perspiration. The effort to be as gentle as possible had gotten the better of her.

She gave her patient a well-deserved peppermint stick and escorted him and his mother to the front door. After instructing him to keep his arm clean and return to see her in two days, she waved goodbye and shut the door behind her. With a long exhale, she sagged against the door.

She'd encountered worse injuries, certainly. At least Freddy had been cooperative instead of hysterical. *Then why am I so depleted?* And where was her usual satisfaction at a job well done?

But she knew. Her present state had nothing to do with her trying task, and everything to do with yesterday's visit from John Drexel.

She'd been unable to sleep last night, her mind plagued by his audacious offer. It was ridiculous to imagine accepting such an offer. It was unfair of him to even ask it—which proved he hadn't changed at all. He was still the same unfeeling man who'd derailed her happiness six years ago.

But she couldn't erase that desperate look she'd seen on his face. The memory caused a roiling disquiet within her.

She did her best to ignore it, and she returned to the examination room. She washed the bowl in the nearby basin, dried it, and shoved it into a drawer in the medicine cabinet.

"Do the bowls really go there?"

The quiet question caused her to jerk toward the doorway, where Dr. Murphy stood, his patient eyes creased by lines of age and his

frequent, barely there smile.

She glanced back down at the drawer. *No, of course they don't.* She opened the drawer, retrieved the bowl, and put it in its rightful place in the cupboard above the cabinet.

There was a lengthy silence.

"Care to talk about it?" he ventured.

She knew what the "it" was. "No."

He shrugged and ambled off. She went to the door and watched as he entered his office and sat at his hickory desk facing the wall. She stood motionless for a moment then hurried after him.

"The truth is," she said to his broad, solid back.

He swiveled around.

"The truth is," she said again.

"You knew him."

It wasn't a question, so she didn't answer.

There was another lengthy silence.

"How?"

"I almost married his brother."

He replied slowly, "I see."

She leaned against his narrow secretary, a furnishing hardly able to hold the stacks of research papers and medical records he kept inside. "He objected to the match."

The doctor waited, eyes alert.

"Stephen and I had grown—" Millie faltered. "Fond of each other one summer. He returned to Philadelphia in August but promised to come back in the fall, to elope with me. He even gave me a locket, a family heirloom, to assure me of his intentions." She could still remember the weight of that golden treasure in her palm. She'd traced the engravings with her fingertips, her heart full of hope. *How can something that happened so long ago pierce me like this now?*

"And then?" Dr. Murphy prodded.

"I went to meet Stephen, as we'd agreed. Only he wasn't there. John was. He told me that Stephen wouldn't be coming, that he needed to

make a more ‘advantageous’ match.” The word burned like acid on Millie’s tongue. “I couldn’t believe Stephen would agree to such a thing. ‘He isn’t like that,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t care about money and position.’ But John just shrugged. I told him I’d wait, that Stephen was bound to be back next summer, and we’d renew our affection then.” She could feel her eyes darkening. “John didn’t even let me finish before he said, ‘That isn’t going to happen.’ I asked why ever not, and he told me that Stephen understood his familial obligations, and by this time next year, he’d be traveling the Mediterranean on his honeymoon. . .with another woman.”

“And you believed him?”

Millie tasted the acid again and nodded. “He offered to reimburse me for my troubles, and at first I refused. But the more I thought about what it would be like, staying in Nantucket with all my memories of Stephen, the more inclined I was to accept the money.” For the first time, she smiled. “It helped me get to Denver—to you. I’d heard that Colorado was a place with plenty of opportunities for a girl willing to work. It turned out to be true. I got the position at the boardinghouse after knocking on only a few doors.”

Dr. Murphy grinned. “Who would have thought that a humble serving girl would have such a knack for delivering babies?”

Millie had discovered her gift late one night at the boardinghouse, when an overdue pregnant woman sent her husband for a doctor. Dr. Murphy arrived, and before long recognized the signs of a complicated delivery. Millie, whose room was above the woman’s, had been awakened by her cries. She slipped downstairs to see if she could be of use. Desperate for assistance, Dr. Murphy accepted her help.

Now he gazed steadily at her. “I think I must ask—” He paused and began again. “We’ve been through the thick of it on many occasions, you and I. Folks in the midst of all kinds of crises—and you’ve done well by them all. So I know you aren’t an impulsive, heedless girl. But this. . .” His voice lowered, became intense. “Millie, have you sought the good Lord about this offer?”

She looked away. A whisper inside, one she’d tried to dismiss last