

LILY FROM LINCOLN

OPERATION BIG ROCK BRIDES - BOOK 6



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PROLOGUE



BIG ROCK, WYOMING TERRITORY, MID 1880S

The woods weren't quiet that day. They were full of the sounds of saw blades against wood, loggers yelling warnings and good-natured obscenities at each other, and the satisfying noise of huge trees crashing to the ground. A team of lumbermen from the local sawmill was out in force trying to get enough trees felled to meet the lumber demand for new orders. They'd already been through surrounding forests cutting down the standing dead trees, which were prized because there was no moisture in the wood and shrinkage wouldn't be a problem in the completed project. While the weather was cool and clear, they decided to go ahead and cut taller trees. The green wood could be drying and curing while the lumber from the standing dead trees was used first.

The owners of the sawmill, Angus Kelly and Henry Tucker, worked right alongside their men; it was one of the reasons the men held them in such high regard. Besides, Angus was a giant of a man who stood at six feet and eight inches and he was a

handy man to have around. He'd once lifted and held a loaded wagon while the wheel was changed. To his embarrassment, and admittedly to his amusement sometimes, his strength had become almost legendary in the town.

Will Wharton and Amos Cameron made one sawing team. Both were big and beefy men whose muscles seemed to enjoy the workout. Equally yoked, they had their saw strokes down to a rhythmic cadence; it was only interrupted when a knotty eye in the wood got in the way.

They were best friends in their off hours, too. Often one would be found at the other's house, usually working on improvements. They'd helped each other build their houses, tables, chairs and swings to go on the porches. They'd helped each other build barns. At the time, Amos was helping Will put the finishing touches on his house. Next, they planned to build a handsome wardrobe for Will's fiancée, Lily. She was one of the town's mail order brides and was on her way there from Lincoln, Nebraska. Lily was scheduled to arrive within a week.

The two men had felled a sky-high oak and had just finished cutting off the limbs. Amos called out to the men with the horses to come pull it out of the way. Another group of men sorted through the limbs, saving the ones that were large enough to get smaller lumber pieces from and the rest they set aside to be cut for firewood.

Will wiped his brow and took a big swig from his canteen before offering it to Amos. "Here. I need to go over that ridge and find a place to drop my own log. I won't be long."

Amos nodded and took the water from him. He sat down on a stump for a quick rest while his friend went to relieve himself. He closed his eyes for a moment to rest them and nearly fell asleep sitting up. He splashed a small handful of the canteen water over his face.

Before too long a scream of "No!" that quickly grew into a chorus of them drew his attention toward the side of the ridge.

He dropped the canteen and stood while the scene before him unfolded in what seemed like slow motion. He felt like he was trying to run in water. Or maybe molasses.

As he was walking back to the gathering place, the giant tree fell before Will could get out of the way. He'd been hidden by the ridge when the men checked before the tree fell. He was alive; his scream filled the forest for a moment, then his sounds died down.

"Will! Will!" Amos yelled out as he finally made it to where his best friend lay under the tree. There were branches on top of him holding him down, but it appeared the main problem was the thick tree trunk that landed across his legs. Men with hatchets and saws scrambled to cut away the limbs so they could reach him.

Angus and Henry were in the middle of the men as they worked. Angus tried to move the tree, but its branches dug into the ground and prevented any progress.

Another couple of men unloaded a wagon and pulled it up as close to the tree as they could so Will could be transported to Dr. Larkin's office in town. One man rode ahead to make sure the doctor was there. If not, he'd find him.



THE WAGON NEARED the home of Dr. Elliott Larkin, whose office and an examination/surgical room took up the front of the house. The doctor ran out to greet the wagon carrying a wooden stretcher he'd devised himself.

Henry summed up the injuries. "His legs were crushed, Doc. Branches were across him so I suspect he has internal injuries, too. He passed out when we pulled the tree off him."

"All right, let's get him inside. Go in and take him into the room on the right. Put him on top of the exam table, stretcher and all."

Dr. Elliott's wife, Sadie, came in to help. She brought a bucket of steaming water and a bucket of cool water and set them beside a table that held a couple of deep metal bowls. She opened a closet and pulled out fresh cotton dressings. The doctor asked her to fetch her sewing shears so they could cut off Will's clothes. In short order, they had him uncovered down to his underwear.

His torso was already splotchy with red and bluish bruises. "Crushed" was a good word for Henry to have used for his thighs, as they were flattened. The doctor told the men that if Will survived, he'd have to amputate both legs. The men already knew that, but even so, they didn't want to hear it. Amos turned away to silently pray again. He'd prayed most of the ride there as he'd cradled his friend's head.

As Dr. Larkin began to work on him, Will opened his eyes. At first he was disoriented but remembered when he saw the faces of his friends. He looked down at his body and he knew.

Amos jerked back around when he heard Dr. Larkin's voice. "It looks like you lost a fight with a tree, Will. Where does it hurt the most?"

Will's voice was soft. "I can't feel anything, Doc."

The doctor nodded. "I'm glad you aren't in pain."

"I'm dying, aren't I, Doc?"

The doctor looked him straight in the eye. "You've been hurt very badly, Will. I can't tell exactly how much internal bleeding is going on. I fear multiple organs are damaged. I believe your back's broken, too."

"My back?"

"Yes. Can you move your hands for me?"

They waited a few moments but there was no movement.

"Can you move anything?"

The look on Will's sunken face answered for him. "Amos, come here." His voice sounded weakened but resolute. "Amos, see to it that Lily gets the house and the money in my account."

At that, Henry sped out the door, yelling behind him that he was going to fetch Ross Bailey, the attorney. His office was in the next block.

"Amos, promise me you'll take care of Lily for me. It'll be hard enough on her to get here and find out I'm gone." Will's voice was becoming weaker and the discolored skin now covered most of his torso. His breathing was more labored by the minute. "Hell, marry her if she'll agree to it. I can't think of another man I'd trust with her more. I know you'll take good care of her."

"I'll do that, Will, I'll take care of her. I'll see to it she has everything she needs," Amos said.

"And marry her. Tell me you'll make an effort to see if the two of you would make a match."

Amos felt conflicted, but he agreed.

Henry and Ross Bailey entered and stood at the foot of the table. "Will, the attorney's here. Tell him what you said so we'll have everything all legal."

Will looked toward the attorney and forced his eyes to focus. "I want all my worldly goods and the money in my bank account to go to Lily Holt. I want Amos Cameron to see that it's done. I want him to see that she never wants for anything."

Bailey nodded as he made notes.

"Amos, get my clothes and personal things out of the house before she gets here. I don't want her to have to deal with them. She'll need as much of a fresh start as she can get. If she wants to sell the house and move back home, that's all right, too. Or move anywhere else, but please, Amos, try to make it work between you two. You and I are so much alike, I think it's possible."

"I promise, I will." Amos turned to the attorney. "He's paralyzed. Does it matter that he can't sign his name on that paper?"

"No, not with all these witnesses, it won't. I'll have all the men here sign and that'll be sufficient," Bailey answered.

"Good." Will's voice was barely a whisper.

Amos was suddenly overcome with emotion. "Will, I'll miss you. You've been the best friend a man could have."

Will's reaction was merely a moan.

Dr. Larkin felt Will's pulse and quietly told them it wouldn't be long now. He was right.



THE NEXT DAY several men who worked with Will met at his house and began to collect his clothes and personal touches that might be painful for Lily to deal with. They agreed to each keep a memento, a remembrance of their friend. One of them kept a coat that Will wore on the coldest days. Another kept a fairly new pair of boots that fit him. Amos kept his shaving kit since it reminded him of the ribbing they'd given each other about who could grow the better beard.

Amos found a framed tintype of a young Will and his parents and set it aside. He thought Lily might be interested in keeping it. If not, he would. He found the letters Lily had written. Not sure what to do with them, he came back later with a small box and some pretty ribbon. He put the letters and the tintype in the box and tied the ribbon in a bow around it.

The men cleared Will's personal items from the house and barn and cleaned them both well. One of the older men commented that this was one of the saddest and most sobering tasks a man is ever called to do: take care of business left behind by a dear friend. They all agreed it was sad, and they wanted to make the house reflect as much happiness as it could for Lily's arrival. They worked hard to attain that goal.

CHAPTER 1



Lily Holt didn't particularly enjoy riding trains or stagecoaches. She didn't enjoy travel much at all. It was pleasant enough, watching scenery go by, but the cold discomfort of the loud, clanging train and the horrid, dusty bumpiness of the stage offset any joy she felt. She'd be happy if she could get to Big Rock, settle down and never have to travel again.

She'd be even happier if she could get to Big Rock sooner. She smiled inwardly when she admitted to herself that she really meant she'd be happier if she could get to Will Wharton sooner. Will Wharton. *I'll be Mrs. Will Wharton. Lily Wharton.*

Her friends back in Nebraska couldn't believe she was bold enough to become a mail order bride for a lumberjack she'd never even met. She couldn't believe it either at first, but now she knew in her bones, in her very soul, that it was the right move for her.

There were eligible men in Lincoln, but she was never interested in them. Some had called on her, but she rarely agreed to see them a second time, and only one young man had called on her a third time before she tactfully explained that she didn't see

the relationship growing. They were what she thought of as city men. Lily thought that might not be a fair assessment since she was a city girl, through and through. But she couldn't help it. City men didn't appeal to her.

Her father and her uncle had been big, burly, take-charge kind of men, raised in an isolated cabin and brought up to take care of themselves. They could fell their own trees, build a house, hunt and fish to feed their families, catch and tame wild horses, and outsmart grizzlies if the situation demanded. The men she met back in Lincoln all seemed inadequate compared to her father. She doubted if they'd ever even had a calloused hand. She felt sure they wouldn't fare well in a survival situation. They seemed small. At least that's how she thought of them, small and soft.

Lily had idolized her father. Although she wouldn't have criticized her mother aloud, she never thought it was fair that she had forced Lily's father to move to the city. Apparently, theirs was a powerful love, because he gave up the life he wanted to make her happy. It was tragically romantic in a way, but Lily always wondered what it would have been like if she'd been raised in his world instead of her mother's.

She might not have been able to get an education and receive a teaching certificate, for one thing. Although she hadn't had a teaching position yet, she looked forward to it. She knew there was an opening for a teacher in Big Rock, and Will had agreed to allow her to teach if the town wanted to hire her. In one of his letters, he said he'd be 'proud to be married to a woman who would mold young minds, teach them to think for themselves, and always be eager to learn more, even after they'd outgrown her classroom.'

Lily thought of Will's letters, now tucked away in the satchel at her feet. She'd read them so many times she had much of them committed to memory. They were a treasure to her. Sometimes she imagined one of her descendants, perhaps a granddaughter,

going through her personal things after her death and stumbling across the letters. Lily smiled and wondered if she'd be surprised that her grandpa had once been quite the romantic suitor. She imagined what the young woman might think when she read the intimate passages where Will expressed his desire for her, where he described what he wanted to do with her and to her, and how he wanted her body to respond to him.

Perhaps when they were married, she would store their letters together, so that her imaginary granddaughter could read her letters, too, and see the entire correspondence unfold. The poor thing might be scandalized to read about how eager Lily was to become one with Will, to surrender herself completely to the man she would vow to honor and obey for the rest of her life. She'd read how Lily told him she was eager to kiss his mouth and feel his touch on her skin, to take him inside her body and know the very heights of sensual joy that can be shared by lovers. The young woman would surely be surprised at the letters her grandma wrote. *I was surprised at myself when I wrote them!*

Lily heard the horses' hooves clip-clop the miles away. They would arrive in Big Rock soon. She took a deep, steadying breath and realized she wasn't nervous after all. She felt confident that her decision to come and marry a *real man* was the right one, and Will was the right man. If he'd been honest in his letters, she knew she would adore him.

She was eager to meet him and taste their first kiss. She'd wondered many times how his strong arms would feel around her, and even now with their meeting imminent, she yearned to feel that touch.

We're getting married this afternoon. Tonight, I'll know his touch and he'll know mine. We'll join the number of lovers through the ages who have felt that fullness of joy, the connection of hearts and souls that binds us together for eternity. Tonight, I'll be Mrs. Will Wharton, his wife in every sense.



AMOS CAMERON DID NOT LOOK FORWARD to meeting the stage. As Will's best friend, he felt it was his duty to break the terrible news to Lily that her betrothed had been killed and buried while she was *en route*. He'd discussed it with Harriet and they agreed that he, Harriet and the pastor, Reverend Copperfield, should probably be the ones to greet her when she arrived. She might want to talk with the lawyer, but that could wait. Harriet wanted to be there since she represented the Ladies' Aid Society who arranged for Lily and Will to correspond. The pastor should be there to offer comfort and consolation at her time of loss and sorrow. Amos had to be there because Will asked him to take care of Lily. He wasn't going to tell her that Will wanted them to marry, and he hoped none of the others who knew would mention it. Even if he did decide to pursue a union with her, this wasn't the time to bring it up.

The mood was somber as the three of them waited for the stage. They stood on the street, away from the area where the coach would stop so they wouldn't block the sidewalk. It was decided that Amos would fetch her and bring her where the others stood so they could have a little spot of privacy to break the news. After that, they'd take her to her house, the house Will left for her. The Ladies' Aid Society members had brought food so there would be plenty to eat.

"How do you tell a woman the man she came halfway across the country to marry died before she arrived?" Amos asked no one in particular.

"You do it with compassion," the pastor said. "Then we take our cues from her. Will she cry? Will she be too stunned to cry? Will she get hysterical? Frightened? Remember, she's already tired and stressed from a long journey. Then to have this dropped on her, well, there's no telling how she might respond. The poor girl. What an awful position to be in. Having your

hopes and a happy future ripped from you by strangers. Poor, poor girl. I hope she's a woman of faith so she can call upon the strength and comfort of God."

"Will said she is, Reverend."

"Good. Did he tell you if she was leaning toward accepting the teaching job? I hope she'll still be willing to do that. What if she wants to go back home?" Harriet asked.

"We'll all do our best to get her to stay," Amos said.

The sound of the approaching stage got their attention. Harriet put her hand on Amos' arm in a silent gesture of good luck for his unpleasant duty.

Amos stood near the door of the coach, far enough away so people could disembark, but close enough to step up and help Lily step down when he saw her.

Two older women stepped down, steadied by another woman who was obviously there to greet them. A very attractive young woman, eyes bright with expectation, stepped into the doorway. He stepped forward.

"Miss Lily?" He held up his hand to take hers.

"Mr. Wharton?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm afraid not, Miss Lily. I'm Amos Cameron, Will's best friend. Let's step over this way." He held her upper arm, gently pulling her.

She was willing to get out of the way of the stagecoach crowd, but not willing to get too far before she found out why Will wasn't there.

"Mr. Cameron, um, Mr. Cameron. Stop!" He stopped, not because she asked him to, but because she stopped walking. "Where is Will?"

"He won't be able to meet you. Come on over here and we can explain."

"No. What's going on? Why won't he be able to meet me?"

She wasn't going to wait until they reached the others. Amos turned to look squarely at her. "Will was badly injured in a

logging accident. A tree fell on him. He lived long enough for us to get him to the doctor's office. He died four days ago and we buried him two days ago. I'm very sorry, Miss Lily, very sorry."

The color drained from Lily's face. "No! No, that can't be. What'll I do? I can't go back home now. I can't afford another ticket." Her voice was raised, shocked with a little panic.

"You don't have to worry about anything, Miss Lily," Amos said as he once again took her arm and propelled her toward Harriet and the pastor. "Will provided for you. My friends and I will explain everything when we get to your house."

"My house?"

"Yes. Will left it to you."

"My own house?"

"Yes, ma'am. Will was adamant that you get all his assets. You have a house and a modest bank account. Will put most of his money into building his home. But there's enough money to sustain you for quite a while, over a year, I imagine. Enough for your needs, enough to feed the horses, and I'm sure, for any other things you might want."

"He died four days ago?"

Harriet answered, "Yes, dear, he did. There was no way we could reach you on the train. We're so sorry to see you have to go through this. We were all looking forward to today being a happy occasion."

"Did he have to suffer much? Please tell me he didn't die in pain."

"He didn't," Amos said. "The tree paralyzed him. He couldn't feel anything."

"Thank Heaven for that. I can hardly believe it," Lily said. "I never even got to meet him in person."

"He was a good man," Reverend Copperfield said. "He was a church-going man, and as far as I could tell, he walked with God in his day-to-day life."

Amos let go of her arm, but she almost immediately took

hold of it again. "I don't feel very steady right now. I need to sit down."

"We'll get you home. Right now." Amos helped her up onto the buggy, then excused himself to get her bags and two big boxes. Harriet in her own buggy and the pastor on his horse, rode on ahead.

"So, you're the Amos I read about in Will's letters. How long have you been friends?"

"Since we were boys in school. People said we were just alike. And I suppose we were."

"He said you're on the list of men who are seeking wives. But he spoke up first so he got a bride first."

Amos chuckled. "That's about right. I'm confident my time's coming."

"That's a long time to be friends, or a long time to stay friends, I should say."

"We got along from the very start. Our lives paralleled in interesting ways. When we were still in school, my mother passed away within a couple of months of his father passing. That was hard but we had each other to talk to. Then in our first year of college, both our remaining parents died in the same month. We took it hard, both of us. We quit school and drifted for a while. Landed here in Big Rock."

"Sometime you'll have to tell me how that happened. You know, I have several letters from Will and he told me his parents were gone, but he never told me the circumstances. I didn't even know he ever attended college."

"We didn't for long. We figured out that it prepares you for a life of staying inside and working at a desk, and neither of us wanted that. We both needed to be out in the open, not watching life pass by through a window. That wasn't how we wanted to live. So we never went back."

"And never regretted it, either, I imagine."

"Yes, ma'am, you're right about that."

"He told me you helped each other build your houses."

"Yes, ma'am, that's right. We didn't get to finish his front porch. Your front porch, that is. Or get a handrail on the back steps. I will finish that for you. I promise I will."

"I hate to ask that of you, but I suppose I'll need them to be completed."

"Yes. And I intend to. We were hoping to get it done before you arrived."

There was no more conversation until they arrived at her new home.



"NOW, DEAR," Harriet said as she poured coffee into their cups, "The Ladies' Aid Society members have brought you food so you don't have to worry about cooking for a while. I know you must still be in shock. Now listen to me, Lily." Harriet sat and took her hand. "If it's too upsetting for you to stay in this house, I want you to come stay with me for a while. There's also the boarding house you could stay in. The town added extra rooms just for our mail order brides to stay in until they marry or find employment. We named it the Bride & Board. You wouldn't have to pay; our prospective brides stay there rent-free."

Lily looked around at the kitchen Will had built with her in mind. "It wouldn't seem right to live anywhere else. I don't think I would be honoring Will's memory if I didn't stay here. He built this place for us and he left it for me. It's a fine house. I want to live here and respect his wishes. I owe him that."

Amos and the pastor nodded their appreciation.

"I hope that means you intend to stay and accept the position as our schoolteacher," Reverend Copperfield said. "I'm on the school committee, and we sure are hoping you'll agree to teach our children."

"I can't go back home and I don't plan to go anywhere else," Lily said. "So, yes, I'll need that position."

"Wonderful!" both Harriet and the pastor said at almost the same time.

Reverend Copperfield reached into his vest pocket and took out a key. "Here you go, Miss Lily, this is yours. Amos can take you to see the schoolhouse anytime you like. I'd say the sooner the better so you can see what kind of supplies you'll need. You can let me know, or you can go ahead and purchase what you want at the mercantile and tell them it's for the school. They'll bill the town's account that's set aside for it."

"When you mentioned Will leaving you the house, it reminded me of something. You need to sign a paper at the bank to be on Will's account," Amos said. "I'll take you there tomorrow, too. We should probably check at the lawyer's office to see if there's anything you need to sign to have the deed transferred to your name."

"I appreciate that since I don't know my way around yet. You're being awfully generous with your time, Mr. Cameron. Don't you have to work tomorrow?"

"No, you're my priority for a few days. Will was my best friend, you know. He asked me on his deathbed to take care of you, look after the place, and make sure you don't need anything. Henry and Angus—they own the mill—were heartbroken that Will lost his life in their employ and while they were on the job. They want to help, too. When things have settled down, they'd like to meet you. In the meantime, I'm at your disposal."

"Oh, my," Lily said, "I don't want to be a burden to you."

"You aren't a burden. Besides, it wouldn't matter if you were." Amos gave a rueful grin. "A man doesn't break a deathbed promise to his best friend."

Harriet stood and began to tidy the kitchen and put some of the food away. "I know you're worn out, dear, and you probably

feel like a wrung out rag. I'll leave here in just a few minutes. Promise me you'll get some rest."

"I am tired. I think I'm going to need some time to let all this soak in. It's so much! But I thank you all for your kindness. Will said there were good people in this town. He was right about that."

Harriet dried her hands and leaned over to kiss Lily's forehead. "Anything, remember, Lily. If you need anything at all. Perhaps Amos can show you where I live while you're out tomorrow. You're always welcome."

Reverend Copperfield said a prayer asking blessings of grace and strength for Lily as she began her new life among new friends, then he and Harriet left.

Amos and Lily remained at the table, sipping their coffee.

"I should leave and let you rest," Amos said. "I'll get out of here and tend to the horses in a few minutes."

"I'm tired but I couldn't sleep now anyway. Too many thoughts and questions swirling in my head. Would you mind to stay to help me sort things out? I think talking to someone who knew Will would help."

"Of course, I will," he said, then he smiled. "But I'm still going to have to tend to the horses before too long. You can go with me if you'd like. They're your horses."

"Then I should definitely go with you. I've never had my own horse before. I hope you don't mind teaching me how to take care of them. I'm a city girl, remember."

"I remember. And I'll be happy to teach you, but I don't mind taking care of both our stock. I live next door, you know."

"Oh, that's right. Will said you bought property together so you'd be neighbors. It's good to know I'll have a friend nearby."

"You haven't even seen the whole house yet. Let me show you your new home, then I'll show you the barn."

"All right, that sounds like a good plan."

Amos led her through the home, pointing out features as they

went. The water closet held a nice tub and had a flushing toilet. Lily was glad to see that because she was accustomed to the one they had in their apartment back in Lincoln. She had running cold water but would have to heat water for bathing and cleaning. Will had included a mudroom, too, and Lily was impressed. It was roomier than she expected such a room would be. There was a closet, but there were also hooks on the wall to hang coats and other winter wear. In front of the hooks was a plain but sturdy wooden bench. Lily thought it would be an ideal place to put on and take off muddy boots. There was a huge sink, too, and she could picture herself using it to wash laundry items or clean up after having been outside getting dirty.

The two bedrooms and the parlor were all on one side of the house, and the wet rooms were on the other. When she commented on it, Amos explained that it made the plumbing easier that way. They had done the same thing at his house.

"Is your house just like this one?"

"In most ways, but mine's a few square feet larger. I added a third bedroom, another small one. I have one bedroom about the size of yours, and two smaller ones," Amos answered with a shrug. "You never know how many children you might have. Will figured if he needed more rooms, he'd build on later. Let's go jump on the buggy and I'll show you your barn."

On the ride to the barn in the backyard, Lily spied the outhouse. "Well, I know what that is. I don't need a tour of it. I like how he put a star on the door instead of the usual half-moon."

Amos chuckled. "That was the first thing we built when we got started. He wanted it to be just a little different from what most people had. Next, we dug his well. After that, I insisted we build something for me, so we started on my house. For the longest time, I used his well water and outhouse. After that, we'd build on each other's things a while, than catch the other one up. Mine's all done. All we had left was the work on your place that I

already told you about. Well, that and fences. We both wanted fences, at least around the barns."

"I'm very impressed that you both could do all this yourselves. Did you fell your own trees?"

Amos grinned again. "Yes, but not because we were big he-men who went out and tamed the forest. We work at the sawmill so it was our job. Didn't hurt that we get a discount on lumber," he added.

Amos hoped to change the subject. He didn't want to get into the territory of talking about Will's death on the job. "I'm proud of our barns. They're a good size. Nice and sturdy and built to be strong against winter winds. There's enough room for this buggy, too. It shouldn't stay out in the snow and ice."

Lily didn't know what barns normally look like, but she was impressed with hers. "It's so organized in here. It looks like a place for everything and at least right now, everything's in its place."

"Don't get too accustomed to that. I may well slip up and neglect to keep it that way all the time. Will didn't, either, to tell the truth." Amos hesitated a moment. "Before Will passed, he asked all of us, his friends with him at the time, to clean up the place and make it ready for you, so you could start over fresh. He wanted it to be clean, with his personal items removed so you didn't have to have sad reminders facing you every day."

"Oh, my. What a thoughtful man. It seems I would have been a very lucky woman if we could have married as we planned. It isn't ours to question, though, is it?"

"I questioned," Amos said. "I got angry. I was more angry than sad he'd been taken from us. He was closer to me than a brother could be."

"Mr. Cameron, everyone has been so solicitous of me since I've been here. Now I'm almost embarrassed at the outpouring, considering your loss. The truth is I never even met Will in

person, and you've suffered an even more terrible sorrow. I am so very sorry you lost your lifelong friend."

"Thank you, Miss Lily. I think the main thing helping me get through it is that he left me instructions." A grin showed through the sadness on his face. "There are things I promised to do, and I will do them. You might get tired of seeing me, but that's just going to have to be your misfortune."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Cameron. Maybe it'll be a good tonic for us both, mourning his loss together while trying to move on."

"Please call me Amos."

"All right. You don't have to call me 'Miss,' either. You aren't one of my students."

"I'll try, but I might slip up."

As Lily watched, Amos explained how he unhooked the team from the buggy. She watched as he moved the buggy out of the way and thought it would be heavier than it was. He explained that the weight was balanced over the wheels, making it easy to move. He showed her how to remove the tack from the horses, then he showed her how to comb and rub down the animals. She helped with the last part and enjoyed it.

"You can help anytime you like, but I'll be taking care of the animals myself for the foreseeable future."

"You don't trust me?"

"It's not a matter of trust. I like taking care of animals. I guess I still think of these as Will's horses."

Lily gave a little shrug. "I can understand that. Sometime I want you to show me how to saddle one, too, if you don't mind."

"I'll be happy to, but I don't want you going anywhere without me."

"Amos, I can't depend on you for everything. There will be times when I need to go to the store for something, and I shouldn't have to wait for you."

"In time. But for now, I'd feel better if I were with you. Humor me, please. I need to do this."

She decided not to argue. It would be nice to have company to show her the town and introduce her to people. She'd make the best of it. She'd do it for Will.

When they were through taking care of the horses, Amos mentioned there was something he meant to show her earlier when they walked through the house. Once inside again, he led her to the larger bedroom, the one Will had slept in and he presumed the one she'd sleep in.

He reached up on a shelf in the closet and handed her a box with ribbon tied around it. "These were on the table beside his bed and I figured you'd want to keep them. They're the letters you wrote to him. They were loose so I found a nice box to put them in."

"Oh." She hesitated. "Amos, did you read them?"

"No, no, of course not. I didn't let anyone else read them, either. There's one other thing in there I thought you would like to have. It's a tintype of Will and his parents. Looks like he was around twelve or thirteen when it was taken."

She untied the ribbon and took out the photographic image and gently ran her fingers across it. "So this is our Will. That face shows a little bit of angel and devil, I think."

Amos grinned. "That's an apt description."

"Something tells me you let the devil part of him lead you into temptation."

Amos laughed at that. "Yes, ma'am, I did, whenever I wasn't leading him. 'Two peas in a pod' they called us. Oh, before I forget, Will's guns are there in the corner of the closet. He has a rifle and two pistols. Do you know how to shoot?"

"I do," she said. "Daddy taught me how. He used to take me out to the country to practice."

"Good for him."

Lily set the box on the bed and led the way back to the kitchen. "Let's see what we have for supper in here."

"All right. While we're at it, pay attention to what you need

from the mercantile. We can go tomorrow when I'm showing you around."

"Tomorrow's going to be another big day. Let's see, we'll go to see the lawyer, go to the bank, go to the schoolhouse, and go to the store."

"Maybe the restaurant for lunch, too. Mary's one of the best cooks around here."

"That would be nice."

Over supper they discussed plans for the next day and Amos told her about some of the people she'd meet.

"It's entirely possible we'll see Harriet and her husband Arthur at the restaurant. They eat there pretty often."

"That would be nice. I'd like to tell her how much I appreciate her kindness today."

Amos sported a broad grin and nodded. "That's the most subdued I've ever seen Harriet. It shows just how much she was concerned for your welfare. Harriet's normally much more outgoing and lively. Always in a good mood, always being the first to greet people. She knows everybody and usually, everybody's business. But people let her get away with it because she does it in such a charming way."

"I look forward to getting to know her better. She sounds like fun."

"She is. Our lawyer, Ross Bailey, is a quiet man, on the serious side. I think he's a widower. The people who own the mercantile, Shirley and Clint Keller, are good people, too. Mary, at the restaurant, is a short little thing, and I'll warn you, she hugs. She's another one who never met a stranger."

"Amos?"

"Yes?"

"Before you bring me home tomorrow, will you take me to the cemetery?"

"Yes, ma'am, I surely will."



LILY UNPACKED her bags of clothes, then opened the crate that held other things. She had books and notebooks, her mother's teapot and teacups, her father's hunting knife, his six-shooter, and some embroidered tablecloths and napkins. She had a photograph of her mother and father that she knew she wanted to display prominently.

She realized just how tired she was and decided to put the items away at a later time. For now, she'd just set them out of the way. Too tired to heat water and prepare a bath, she took off her clothes and sponged off with cool water, then found her favorite nightgown.

Lily crawled in bed and opened the box that contained the letters she'd written to Will. She carefully checked the dates of each one and inserted his letters so they would be in proper order. As she read some of the passages again, she had a troubling thought.

I expected to marry this man. Only days ago he slept in this very bed. If he had lived, he'd be in bed with me right now, and I would be his. Did I love him? I thought I fell in love with him through these letters. Is that even possible? Maybe I didn't love him. Maybe love would have grown between us after we were together. No, perhaps I wasn't in love after all. How else can I explain not shedding a single tear for the man I was to wed?



AMOS SAT at his table with a small whiskey, thinking about what an emotionally exhausting day it had been. His eye caught the light in the bedroom of the house across their massive yards.

Will, my friend, I wish you were still here with us. You'd be with your wife in that bedroom enjoying your wedding night. Instead, you're in the cold ground and she's mourning your loss, as am I. You were

right to send for her. She's a pretty thing, and smart, and she's touched by how you thought of her in your last moments and provided for her. She knows what a good man you were. Lily would have made you a fine wife, Will, a fine one. You should still be here. That damned tree.

Amos downed the last few sips of whiskey and slammed the glass down on the table. And just as he had done the night Will died, he sobbed.