



# THE LADY AND THE MOUNTAIN PROMISE

MISTY M. BELLER



*Mountain Dreams Series ~ Book 4*

# The Lady and the Mountain Promise

## Mountain Dreams Series

Book 4

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*In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.*

Psalms 56:11 (KJV)

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# Chapter One

OCTOBER, 1877  
BUTTE, MONTANA TERRITORY

“I NOW PRONOUNCE you husband and wife. Bryan, you can kiss your bride.”

Marcus Sullivan turned his gaze away from the couple, trying not to watch this man he barely knew kiss his baby sister in front of half the town.

It was an honor to officiate over Claire’s wedding ceremony, the second one he’d performed in the three months since he’d taken this position at the church in Butte. His church. Correction, God’s church. And the flock He’d called Marcus to shepherd. Mining families. Hard-working people, faithful people, the people he felt called to serve.

Once the lovebirds pulled apart, Marcus caught the blush spreading across Claire’s face. Something tightened in his chest, but he pushed aside the emotion and sent her a wink. How could he trust her care to another man? Bryan seemed like a good enough fellow, but Claire was his sister.

Inhaling a breath, he raised his eyes to the crowd and motioned toward the happy couple. “I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Bryan Donaghue.”

Cheers and whoops from the surging crowd flooded the small chapel. Marcus stepped back from the clamor.

Music echoed from somewhere to his right, a flowing sound like a brook rushing over stones. A sound so lovely, it pushed back the crowd noise and brought a smile to Marcus’s face. He glanced over.

He didn’t recognize the woman seated upon the stool. Rich black hair styled in a simple knot, delicate features, dark eyes that were almost haunting. She was the loveliest thing he’d ever seen. Where had Claire found her? And how had he gone three months in this town without ever seeing the mysterious pianist before today?

“Good job, Preacher.”

Someone clapped him on the shoulder. Marcus turned. “Ol’ Mose. Thank you, sir.”

The man, his new grandfather, offered a toothy grin. “Put me in mind o’ when ya married yer Gram an’ me. Yer a good man.”

The man’s smile was always infectious. Marcus couldn’t help but grin in response. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

The piano music faded, and Marcus glanced back to the woman sitting at the instrument. She started to rise. This was his chance to introduce himself. See if she’d

like to play the Sunday morning hymns.

He gave a reciprocal clap to Ol' Mose's wiry shoulder. "If you'll excuse me, I need to catch someone."

"Sure, son."

Marcus swiveled, his foot poised to stride toward the piano, but the woman had disappeared. He glanced into the crowd. She couldn't have strayed far in this mass.

He scanned for anyone with black hair. A few grubby miners, but they sure didn't fit the bill. What color had the woman been wearing? Something dark. Navy? Or it could have been green. Why hadn't he paid closer attention?

Marcus wove through the people, searching for a glimpse of her. A few hands snagged his arm.

"Liked those verses you spoke, Preacher."

"Done good with the weddin', Parson."

He nodded and waved to each person, never stopping his search. As hard as he'd worked these last three months to get to know the folks of this town, a guilty twinge settled in his midsection as he sloughed them off now.

But he needed to find that woman.

He burst through the open back door of the church. Sunlight glared in his eyes. He raised a hand to shadow his face. A crowd milled in the yard, preparing for the celebratory picnic Mama and Aunt Pearl had planned.

No dark-haired woman.

Where could she have gone? The lady couldn't have disappeared into thin air.

"Are you hungry, son?" His father stopped beside him. "I think your Mama's trying to get everyone on the lawn, and I imagine she'd appreciate you shepherding your flock in that direction."

Marcus forced a nod to his father. "Yes, sir."

As disappointment weighed heavily in his chest, he turned to deliver the invitation to the congregation still lingering inside.

~ ~ ~

THANK GOODNESS she'd slipped out of the church before anyone from the wedding could accost her.

Lilly Arendale settled into the rocking chair and set the wooden runners in motion. The minister's words of hope still echoed through her thoughts. That and the intense expression behind his smile.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders. Winter nipped at the heels of autumn, making the nights especially cold. Soon, she'd need to start building a fire in the tiny warming stove before they went to bed.

Which meant she'd need to buy firewood. Either buy or gather, but she hardly had time to traipse outside of town with her two-year-old daughter to gather chunks of wood.

After turning up the wick on the lantern, she picked up the leather-bound book and pencil from the table beside her. She stroked a hand over the surface, her fingers finding every groove and indentation in the binding. She opened to the first page. Her own handwriting. *The Musings of Lilly Marie Arendale.*

Flipping faster, she found the first empty page. She'd almost reached the end of the book. A pang tightened her chest. This was one of the few possessions she had left of Pa-pa's. Soon, she'd have to move on to a new volume.

Fitting the pencil between her fingers, she opened her soul and wrote.

*To my better self,*

*Today, I played the pianoforte for the first time since leaving England. It was the most rapturous, heart-rending thing I've done since Pa-pa died. I fingered the cold, ivory keys, heard and felt the familiar melodies soaring in my chest. I think it might have completely broken my heart, had I not sat before so many people.*

*It was a good thing their eyes were captured by the more beautiful scene of love before them. Claire was a lovely bride with her flashing eyes and the white lace train on her dress.*

*And the way she looks at her amor. She never gave a thought to music. Most likely did not hear a single note. Yet I am thankful I could add even a small amount of beauty to Claire's special day.*

*It is my own tiny way of partaking in what will never be.*

Dahlia stirred in the bed near the corner of the room and curled in a tighter ball. Lilly closed the book, replaced it on the table, then rose to lay another blanket on her daughter.

As she drew near the bed, blanket in hand, Lilly drank in her daughter's sweet innocence. This precious child. The one solace she'd been granted for the remainder of her days. The one bright flame amidst the darkness.

Lilly settled the extra cover over her daughter, then raised a corner of the covers and slid into her spot next to the child. Together, they would fight against the chill.

Together, they could fight against anything.

## Chapter Two

“PRECIATE YA stoppin’ by, Preacher.”

Marcus shook the man’s hand as they reached the street in front of the little house. “It was certainly my pleasure.” He rested his free hand on his stomach, a little fuller than it had been an hour ago. “My thanks to your wife for her good cooking.”

Paul Mason flashed a yellowed smile. “Nothing much better than Lauralee’s corned beef and potatoes.”

“No argument here.” Marcus waved in farewell.

As he strolled down the lane toward his house, his mind drifted back through the visit. The Masons were good, honest folk, just like he’d known back in North Carolina. Despite the rough appearance of this Montana mining town, he’d found a number of these salt-of-the-earth townspeople so far. The kind of people who made it a pleasure to be their pastor.

He’d do his best for them, too. He’d organize games for the kids after services, giving the overworked men and women a chance to relax and enjoy the festivities. And he had plans to invigorate worship as well. Not just sermons, although his head spun every night with God’s leading for his messages, but in areas just as likely to touch hearts and change lives. Like the music.

He had to find the lady who’d played piano for Claire’s wedding. He’d asked every person he’d met over the last few days if they knew her, but no one had any information to share. If Claire were back from her wedding trip, he could simply ask her. But apparently it wasn’t to be that easy. His parents were strangers in town, having traveled from North Carolina for the wedding, and Mama said Claire hadn’t mentioned anything about where she’d found the pianist. One of his parishioners said he’d passed the lady on the street before or maybe seen her in the dry goods store, but not a soul knew the woman’s name or any way to find her.

How could she be such a mystery? Butte wasn’t so big that someone could simply disappear. Especially a woman as beautiful as she.

Marcus reached an intersection and glanced to his right. Gram lived one block over. He should stop by and see how she and Ol’ Mose were faring today. When Gramps had died a year and a half ago, then Gram went completely blind last fall, they’d all thought she was in the tail end of her twilight years. Claire had traveled all the way from North Carolina to the Montana Territory to care for her in what they assumed would be her final days.

A grin pulled at Marcus’s mouth. It’d been a bit of a surprise to Claire when

she arrived and learned their sassy grandmother had a gentleman caller. They liked Ol' Mose, though. Good thing, too, 'cause one of Gram's first requests when Marcus had arrived in town as the new preacher was for him to perform the wedding ceremony for the two of them.

Now *that* had been a conversation.

Marcus stepped onto the front porch of the little house Gram and Ol' Mose shared when they weren't running freight between Fort Benton and Helena. He tapped on the door. "It's Marcus." With Gram's eyesight gone, he always tried to announce himself right away.

"Come in." Gram's voice held its usual quiver.

Marcus twisted the handle and peeked inside. Ol' Mose and Gram each occupied one of the chairs by the fireplace in the little sitting area. There wasn't a fire in the hearth. Mose looked to be polishing a harness while Gram worked with yarn.

"Come in, Marcus, an' visit with us. Have you had dinner? Let me fix you a plate." Gram set her project aside and started to rise.

"No, thanks. Just finished supper at the Masons'." Marcus grabbed a kitchen chair and carried it over to join the older folks. "Thought I'd stop by and say hi." He settled into the chair, then leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

He nodded toward the leather in Ol' Mose's hands. "Y'all getting ready for a trip?"

The older man sent a fond glance toward Gram. "Yer Gram's got the travelin' itch. Reckon we'll head out the day after tomorry an' run a load."

Marcus swallowed his concern as his gaze traveled between the wiry old man and his sweet little grandmother. He forced a grin onto his face. "You two sure have more get-up-and-go than I do."

Ol' Mose flashed him a toothy grin.

Gram smiled, too, her cloudy eyes staring in his general direction. "How's the sermon coming for Sunday, Marcus. I hate we'll miss it."

"I'll be talking about that passage in Matthew eleven where Jesus tells us to join in His yoke, and we'll find rest."

She nodded. "That's a good one. You're doin' a fine job with the church, Marcus. I'm proud of ya."

Frustration niggled at his gut. "There's still so much more I want to do, not the least of which is provide some music. I can't for the life of me find a pianist. We have that beautiful pianoforte the Bryants ordered, and the only soul in town who can play it has completely disappeared."

The wrinkles on Gram's forehead gathered into twin grooves between her brows. "Who do we have that can play the piano?"

Marcus threw up his hands and leaned back in his chair. "There was a lady playing it for Claire's wedding, but I can't find her anywhere. It's a pure mystery."

Gram's lips pursed into such a thin line they were no longer visible. "Who was it Claire said she was trying to have play?" She mumbled the words almost under her breath, then sat up straighter. "Oh. That's right."

Marcus dared not breathe lest he miss the name. When Gram didn't speak, he said, "Well, who is she?"

Gram eased back in her chair. "It was Lilly." A smile played across her face.

“Sure did a good job, too, didn’t she?”

“Lilly who? Do you know where she lives?” Marcus gripped the seat of his chair and leaned forward.

That thoughtful expression came over Gram’s face again. “Don’t reckon I know her last name. We just call her Lilly.”

“How can I find her, Gram?” Marcus gripped the chair harder, trying to keep his voice from raising.

“Best way’d be to go to Aunt Pearl’s, I reckon.”

“The café?” Marcus blinked. “You think Aunt Pearl would know how to reach her?”

“That’s where Lilly works, honey. In the kitchen.” Gram’s voice was gentle, as if she were patiently waiting for him to catch up with the conversation.

“She works at the café.” Marcus released his grip on the seat and jumped to his feet. He strode across the room, took Gram’s face in both of his hands, and planted a kiss on her left cheek. “Thanks, Gram. You’re the best.”

She patted his hand and chuckled. “I love you, too, Marcus Timothy.”

Marcus clapped Ol’ Mose’s shoulder as he passed, then carried his chair back to the kitchen table. “I’ll stop by tomorrow night before y’all head out.”

“All right, young feller. Good luck.” Ol’ Mose raised a hand as Marcus strode to the door.

~ ~ ~

“WHAT DO YOU mean she won’t see me?” Marcus scrubbed a hand through his wavy brown hair, stopping with a handful of it in his grip.

Aunt Pearl braced her arms over her chest like one of the old-time Roman soldiers guarding Jesus’s tomb. She wasn’t his aunt, nor kin to any person in town, as far as he knew. But everyone called her by the affectionate moniker, and through her good cooking and honest dealings, she’d earned a special place in the hearts of most.

She raised her chin. “Miss Lilly’s got a right to decide who she wants ta be social with.”

Marcus straightened, taking in a steadying breath. He forced a pleasant smile. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come to talk while she’s working.” He scanned the half-empty dining room of the café. “I only had a simple question, but I can wait until after dining hours.”

Aunt Pearl squared her feet and drew her brows into a tight pinch. The woman was more daunting than any Roman soldier. “Preacher, I thought I’d made it clear. Lilly don’t want to speak with you. Not now. Not later. Yer outta luck.”

He stiffened. What did this bulldog of a woman think he was after? For that matter, what did Lilly think he wanted?

“Aunt Pearl.” He kept his tone steady and reasonable. “Perhaps it would help if I tell you what I came to ask Miss...Lilly.” It felt so strange to call a woman he hadn’t even met by her Christian name. “I want to see if she’d be willing to play the piano for Sunday services. She did an excellent job during Claire’s wedding, and we have a need...”

He let his voice drift off as he studied the woman’s face. The pinch of her

mouth might have lessened a little. Maybe.

“I’ll tell her what you asked, Preacher. But I can’t promise anything. Lilly likes ta keep to herself most times.”

Apparently. He spread his most winning smile for Aunt Pearl. “I appreciate that.” He turned and spotted an empty chair right behind him. “I’d be obliged if I could have a bite of whatever sweet your serving tonight.”

Her face softened. “It’s mincemeat pie tonight. I’ll get you a plate.”

Less than a minute later, she settled a plate in front of him, close to overflowing with the savory sweet.

“Thanks. This looks mighty good.” He raised his fork and hovered over the flaky crust.

“Should be. Your Gram baked it.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure it’s wonderful then.” It was amazing what Gram was still able to do, even in her condition. Baking both the bread and the desserts for the café. Claire had been helping her for the last few months, but now that she was married, would the burden fall back on Gram? What about when Gram was traveling with Ol’ Mose? He forced those thoughts from his mind. That was Aunt Pearl’s business. He had plenty to do focusing on his own work.

Aunt Pearl headed back toward the kitchen, and Marcus saw his opportunity slipping away. “If you don’t mind, can you let Miss Lilly know I’ll be out here for a while? Just in case she wants to discuss my request?”

He couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like Aunt Pearl *harrumphed* as she disappeared through the dividing curtain.

~ ~ ~

LILLY PLUNGED the stack of dirty plates into the wash water as her daughter’s timid voice murmured from the play area in the back corner of the kitchen. What a blessing that Dahlia would sit for up to an hour at a time playing with her cloth doll and blocks.

Aunt Pearl swished into the kitchen behind her. “Lilly, hon. The parson said he come by to ask if you’d like to play piano come Sundays. I told him I’d pass along the question.”

Lilly’s shoulders tensed, and she hunched lower over the soapy water. Just when things were working out. Now that she’d finally formed a safe, comfortable life for her and Dahlia...why this?

Why had she ever agreed to play at Claire’s wedding? How could she have ever thought going out amongst all those people was a good idea? She’d planned to slip in, play the songs, then leave the moment the service ended. And that’s what she’d done. But she should have known it couldn’t be that easy.

A soft hand rested on her back, and every muscle in Lilly’s body cringed. She forced herself to take in a long breath. It was only Aunt Pearl.

“Darlin’, you know I don’t usually mind yer business. An’ you’ll always have a safe place here, you an’ the little ‘un both.” The hand rubbed slightly, just an inch or two, but the soothing motion pressed against Lilly’s defenses. “I think you can trust the preacher, hon. Him bein’ Claire’s brother an’ all. You can tell him ‘no’ if ya want. But I think it’d be all right to talk to him.”

Another gentle stoke on her back. “It’s up to you, though. You just let me know if ya need me to pass on any messages.”

With a final pat, Aunt Pearl stepped away.

Lilly exhaled a long breath, then gripped the wash rag and rubbed it over the first plate.

“I’m headed back out ta pour more coffee. Lands, if this town don’t drink enough to fill the Missouri River.”

As Aunt Pearl ducked around the curtain divider, Lilly scrubbed harder on the tin plate. Aunt Pearl thought she should talk with the preacher? A queasy knot started in her stomach. Never. He was a man, and preacher or not, men couldn’t be trusted. Not ever.

He’d said he wanted her to play for church. Too bad. She wouldn’t be doing that either.

## Chapter Three

MARCUS TOSSED his hat on the ladder-back chair in his bed chamber and sank on the mattress with a sigh. He propped his elbows on his thighs and let his head sink into his hands.

What had he done wrong? Why wouldn't the woman even talk to him?

Some would consider an invitation to play during worship services an honor. But this woman didn't seem to see it that way. He'd been so sure he could convince her if he'd been allowed to put the request to her in person. But she'd never given him the chance.

Marcus flopped back onto the bed and stared up at the rafters. Perhaps it wasn't God's will that Lilly play at the church. But the nagging in his gut told him otherwise. Or maybe that was his own desire talking. He had to admit he'd found the woman attractive. And intriguing. That was part of the reason he'd been so eager to find her.

Yet other motives played a role as well.

The sound of the piano and a host of voices raised in praise was a sweet melody in the Lord's ears. Music had a way of reaching people. How many times had he been both convicted and exhorted while singing a hymn? He wanted the same for the people in this parish. Of course, they could continue to sing without accompaniment, as they'd been doing. But the richness of adding piano, especially music as beautiful as he'd heard at the wedding, would only enhance the worship. And she was the only one in town who could play.

"Father, if you want me to pursue Miss Lilly's agreement to play for services, please show me what to do."

Marcus sat up, then stood and walked to the washbasin. It'd been a long day. After he ran the dripping cloth over his face, his eyes found the mirror. As they locked there, his mind drifted back to the woman from the café. Lilly. He'd forgotten to ask Aunt Pearl her last name. What was her story? What had brought her to the point where she was so skittish of meeting anyone new?

Or was it just men she didn't like? He propped his hands on the stand. What had she endured to instill such wariness in her? His chest ached as possibilities flew through his mind.

Piano or not, he wanted to reach out to this woman. But how? His gaze flickered to the desk where his sermon notes waited next to his Bible. A note? If he couldn't ask her in person, would she read a note from him instead? It was certainly an unobtrusive way to communicate. If he could just convince Aunt Pearl to pass it along . . .

In two strides, Marcus reached the desk and slid into the ladder back chair. He took a clean sheet of paper, dipped the quill, and set ink to paper.

*Give me the words, Lord.* This could be his only shot at reaching the woman. He had to get it right.

~ ~ ~

LILLY RUBBED the moisture from a clean mug and placed it on the shelf with the others. Aunt Pearl plopped another stack of dirty dishes on the work counter beside her and added an additional plate on top.

Dishes. Seemed like that's most of what she did anymore. She enjoyed the cooking part of her duties at Aunt Pearl's Café, but the cleanup she could do without. Of course, it was a minor price to pay for the zealous protection Aunt Pearl provided her and Dahlia.

"Look, Mama."

Lilly glanced at her daughter, sitting at her play area in the corner. The child had her blocks stacked six or seven high, enough that they teetered on the uneven wood floor.

"Crash." Dahlia's little voice rang out a moment before she struck the middle squares, and the tower tumbled into a heap.

Lilly offered a cringing smile as her gaze darted toward the dining room. "Be careful not to make loud noises, honey." Aunt Pearl had been tolerant thus far of Lilly bringing her daughter to the café, but if the child got in the way of business or disturbed the paying customers, Lilly had no illusions of the choice Pearl would have to make.

Turning back to the stack of plates beside her, Lilly pulled the cloth napkin from the top and tossed it in the bucket of soapy water beside the stove, where it joined a myriad of similar cloths. Aunt Pearl believed in the extra touches, like serviettes for her patrons, but they were a chore, always needing to be cleaned.

She grabbed the top plate and lowered it toward the wash water in the sink, but a ruffle of something stopped her mid-air. She raised the plate to peer at the folded paper attached to the tin surface with a drop of grease. It fluttered under her breath.

She reached for the paper, then allowed the plate to sink into the water below. Why did her hand tremble? Flipping it over, she searched for writing that might identify its owner without the need to open the folds.

There. On the underside. In bold ink. *Miss Lilly.*

Her? Lilly's stomach tightened as her fingers fumbled to open the folded piece. Had Aunt Pearl written the note, and it somehow fell from her pocket? But what would Aunt Pearl need to communicate that couldn't be said in person? Was she telling Lilly she didn't need her anymore? She'd found someone better to cook meals for the café?

Smoothing the creases, Lilly eyed the bold script covering much of the page, then focused on the first words.

*Dear Miss Lilly,*

*Please pardon my use of your Christian name, as I'm not acquainted*

*with your surname. I was hoping for the privilege of asking in person, but perhaps this note will be easier for clear communication.*

*As I'm sure you're aware, our church was blessed with the gift of a fine pianoforte, the nicest I've seen in a while. It was such a pleasure to hear you bring the keys to life at the wedding held there recently. A pleasure I hope to soon repeat, as we would be honored for you to play a hymn during each of our Sunday services. You would be sharing your great talent with your fellow townspeople as we lift our voices together to worship our great God. Imagine the beautiful sound to the Father's ears.*

*If you'd like to discuss further, I can be reached at the church most afternoons. Or you're welcome to simply come on Sunday and take your place at the instrument.*

*I remain your humble and contrite servant,  
Rev. Marcus Sullivan*

Lilly inhaled a breath, her eyes roaming over the note again. From the Reverend? Warmth slid through her like a rich tea, aromatic and soothing. *Sharing your great talent.*

The way he described the effect of the music—the man had a way with words. That was a rare quality in these rough parts, but one Pa-pa had taught her to admire. In written form, words were jewels, each to be carefully selected and placed for beauty and clarity.

The thud of boots sounded just before Aunt Pearl whisked through the curtain with another tray full of dirty dishes.

Lilly folded the paper quickly and tucked it in her apron bodice. She grabbed the stack of plates from the work counter and submerged them in the wash water just as Aunt Pearl thunked another load in their place.

“Dinin’ room’s clearin’ out. Not many more of these.”

Lilly nodded, but even as her hands worked quickly, her mind spun back through the words on the note. Should she respond? Stop at the church and explain why she couldn’t agree? But what would she say? That the only way she could keep herself and Dahlia safe was by staying away from people? There were too many men in this town who couldn’t be trusted, and she wasn’t a good judge of character.

She’d proved that already.

~ ~ ~

MARCUS SAT in the café, sipping coffee and staring at the curtain blocking his view of the kitchen. Brooding.

Why hadn’t she given any kind of response? Of course, he hadn’t actually asked her to come out to the dining area to talk to him, but if he made himself available...

The lunch crowd had long since dwindled, and Aunt Pearl would likely kick him out soon for loitering. With a sigh, he pushed the coffee mug away from him, and stood, unfolding his long legs.

“You finally think o’ some place better ta hang around than here, Parson?” Aunt Pearl softened the words with a quirk of her mouth.

“Yes, ma’am. Need to finish up some things at the church. I appreciate the extra coffee, though.” He offered a grin that he hoped didn’t reveal his disappointment.

“Anytime.”

Marcus spent the afternoon oiling the tables he’d built for church events, sweeping dust and cobwebs from inside the building, and reading through his sermon notes for the upcoming Sunday.

By evening, though, his stomach growled, and his nerves were tight. He should go back to his little house for dinner. His parents would be there, and Mama always had something simmering on the stove. They only planned to be around for another few weeks before they traveled back to their North Carolina home.

But despite every reason his mind pointed out, his feet carried him to the café.

Aunt Pearl met him at his usual table with a grin and a pot of coffee. “Welcome back. If I didn’t ‘spect you had other reasons fer hangin’ around, I’d think you liked my comp’ny.”

He clapped a hand over his heart. “You found me out.”

Shooing a hand at him, she turned toward the kitchen. “Food’ll be ready a’fore you can shake a stick. It’s fried beef and ‘taters tonight.”

Marcus eased back in his chair and cradled the mug. The food sounded good, but none of it really mattered if he didn’t accomplish his mission. He eased in a long breath. No, it wasn’t up to him to make this happen. If God wanted Lilly to play piano for the services, He would find a way.

He released the breath.

“Here ya go.”

Marcus looked up to thank Aunt Pearl with a smile, then glanced down at the plate. A cloth covered the dish, puckering around the raise lumps of food.

He pulled the fabric off, and his hungry eyes drank in the sight of the steak swimming in juices. The tantalizing aroma of fried beef drew a sharp growl from his midsection. A folded napkin took up a small quarter of the plate. Strange. Aunt Pearl usually kept forks and napkins at each place setting, as she had this time. He’d never received a napkin as part of his meal.

With tentative fingers, he took up the cloth and unfurled it. A folded sheet of paper slipped from the layers and fell onto the table.

Marcus’s chest pounded. Did it hold good news? Perhaps she was too shy to speak to him in person. The note had definitely been a good approach. But what if she’d been offended by his forwardness in writing a letter to her? What if this memo was an expression of her displeasure?

His name was written in lovely script on the outside, much nicer than his scrawling print. *Reverend Sullivan*. He fumbled with the paper as his clumsy hands tried to open it.

At last he straightened the paper, his eyes feasting on the words:

*Dear Sir,*

*I am in receipt of your note and I thank you for the honor inherent in your request. As lovely as your piano is, I must respectfully decline your offer.*

*Sincerely,*  
*L.*

*Postscript: I thank you for your concern over my surname and propriety, however I give you leave to use my Christian name.*

So many emotions assaulted Marcus, it was hard to hone in on just one. But finally he did. And likely the most inconsequential.

*I give you leave to use my Christian name.* Gentlemen only spoke to ladies by their given name if they were relatives or very close friends of the family. As far as he could tell, he and Lilly weren't anywhere near that footing. About as far as England from the Montana Territory.

So why didn't she want him to know her family name? Was she embarrassed by it? Perhaps her father had been a notorious killer or she had some other reason to regret her title.

But as his mind finally accepted the unlikeliness of that thinking, he was forced to consider the real reason.

She didn't want Marcus to find her.

Surely if he knew her last name, he would be able to ask at the boarding houses and stores in the area. Find out how to reach her.

His shoulders slumped, and he picked up his fork, going through the motions to eat without tasting.

The message of the note was clear, both written and implied. No matter how polite her words, she was not interested in playing hymns for the church service. That was the end of the discussion.

~ ~ ~

LILLY PRESSED the creases from the pastor's note as she snuggled into her chair that night. With Dahlia asleep, she had a few precious moments to herself.

Had she given the right answer in her response? Would it really do so much harm to play a simple song or two at the beginning of Sunday services? She didn't even have to stay for the sermon. Surely the church people wouldn't cause problems for her.

She straightened her shoulders. What was she thinking? That she would find another tiny congregation like the one they'd left in Derbyshire? Those good people had been the only ones in her life who hadn't ridiculed their unorthodox family. Not her father for taking a Guatemalan wife. Nor her mother for her dark skin and the raven hair she always wore long with only a single comb on the side. No, it would be almost impossible to find another church so welcoming.

And there was too much chance she would meet more of the unsavory kind she'd already experienced in Butte. Playing the piano would make her too vulnerable. Too noticed.

Her eyes found the form of her daughter, sleeping so peacefully in the bed. But as Lilly's fingers crept up to her neck, they slipped under the collar of her night dress,

and found the scar she always kept covered.

That scar was for her alone to know. Her warning. The reminder to never again allow herself to be that vulnerable again.

Never.

## Chapter Four

AS MARCUS led the congregation in “Just as I Am” at the end of the service, he tried not to cringe every time his voice drifted off-key. His gaze flickered to the idle piano, but he jerked it back and raised his focus heavenward on the final words of the hymn. “O, Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

He breathed a quick prayer of thanks in the silence that lingered, then opened his eyes and smiled at the flock before him. “It was a pleasure to worship with you this morning. And speaking of worship, you may have noticed our shiny new piano sits in want of a pianist.” He waved toward the instrument. “If there’s any among you who have knowledge of the piano, we would be honored to have you play it for services. Just stop by and see me anytime.”

But as he stood by the back door and greeted the exiting people, his spirits dimmed a little more with each encouraging word.

“You’re right, Preacher, it sure would be nice fer someone to play that piano up there. It’s purty to look at but even purtier to hear, I bet.”

Marcus forced a closed-mouth smile. “Yes, it would be nice. Thanks for coming, Mr. Albright, Mrs. Albright.”

After he said goodbye to the last of the parishioners, Marcus stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The mid-sized building seemed vast and empty without the people. It held a hint of a musty odor, maybe a bit of the smell from all the humans packed together.

His footsteps echoed on the wooden floor as he strode forward, turned left past the front pew, and settled his hand atop the piano. Its mahogany surface shone, still reflecting the polish he’d applied earlier in the week. He moved around to the front and eased down onto the bench. He’d never played an instrument before. Never known anyone who had a piano. Not even their church back in Charlotte.

With his right index finger, he pressed a key, then another, searching for the opening sound of “Just as I Am.”

There. That might be it.

He pressed the key to the left of it. Not right. He went the other way. Yes.

His shoulders eased. He had the first two notes. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. The third note was easier to find, but it took at least two minutes of pecking to find the fourth. By the time he’d picked out the first line of the song, sweat made his shirt cling to him, and the sounds of the piano notes ran together in his head so he couldn’t distinguish right from barely wrong.

He dropped his elbows to the keys in a terrifying clang of notes and settled his head in his hands. “Lord, this doesn’t feel right. What am I doing wrong here?”

Several long minutes passed, as his breathing steadied and he listened for the still small voice in his spirit. No resounding message from the Lord pressed him, but a peace gradually took over his soul. Eased his muscles.

At last, he raised his head. And in his heart, he knew what he had to do.

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MARCUS SAT on the stoop outside the café’s back door, forearms on his knees, watching two squirrels chase each other from tree to tree. A breeze whipped up, piercing his wool shirt. With the sun dipping below the far horizon, the night was growing quite cool. He’d need to drag out his coat soon.

After another hour or so, Marcus’s legs had grown as stiff as a mule with joint pain. He’d stood and wandered around the little clearing a few times, but he didn’t stray far in case Lilly came out. Something told him she’d scurry away quicker than a mouse with a scrap of food.

The door finally opened, and he jumped to his feet, doffing his hat as he rose.

“Marcus, what in the world?” Claire stood in the door frame, jaw slack and eyes wide.

He motioned for her to come outside.

She darted a glance behind her, then stepped out and shut the door. “What’s wrong?” She gripped his arm, panic surging in her voice. “Are Mama and Papa okay? I just saw them this morning.”

He waved her worries down and kept his voice low. “Everyone’s fine. I didn’t realize you were back from your wedding trip yet.”

“We arrived late yesterday. Why are you sitting behind the café?” She copied his lowered tone.

He glanced toward the door. Claire could definitely help him convince Miss Lilly. After all, hadn’t the woman played for Claire’s wedding? And the two had worked together at Aunt Pearl’s Café for many months.

“I, um, came to see Miss Lilly.”

She arched a brow and raised her hands to her hips. “You did?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, I wanted to ask if she’d play for services on Sundays.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know Lilly plays?”

His hands were a bit clammy, so he wiped them on his trousers. “She played for your wedding. Do you think you could ask her for me?”

Her brows shot back up, and she pressed a finger to her chest. “You want *me* to ask? Oh, no, no. Not a chance.” She gave her head a hard shake.

“It’s all right. I can ask her.” That obviously hadn’t been the right thing to say. “Do you, um, do you think you could put in a good word for me, though?”

She gave him an impish little smile only a sister could, then patted his arm. “I’m not sure it would help. But you can handle it, Marc. I have faith in you.” She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and turned toward the street. “I need to get home now. I told Bryan I’d try to be there before dark, so I’m late.”

Marcus watched her retreating figure along the side of the café building. It seemed so strange to see his sister rushing home to a husband. She was barely more than a girl. Well, maybe that wasn't true, but he remembered her in braids and short skirts.

The café door opened again, jerking his attention to the spray of light from inside. A woman's frame was silhouetted there, turned sideways with a large bundle in her arms. She hadn't seen him yet.

She stepped down from the stoop, dropped a bundle to the ground, then pulled the door shut behind her. As she picked up her pack again, adding it to the load still in her arms, her burdens seemed larger than she was. She swayed under the weight.

He stepped forward. "Can I be of help?"

She spun with a little squeal, clutching her bundles tighter and backing away from him.

"It's all right. It's only me, Reverend Sullivan." He held out a placating hand and forced himself to stay put.

She stopped moving, but her tense posture told him she might bolt any minute.

"Who is it, Mama?" A girl's voice sounded from Miss Lilly's arms. A very young voice.

She murmured something, and the bundle shrank closer to her.

Was that *her* child? Was she married then? A weight pressed his shoulders. Perhaps it was her husband who didn't want her playing in church. His chest tightened.

"What do you want?" The woman's voice came out clear and strong, articulate, with hint of accusation.

Marcus inhaled a steadying breath. "I only hoped for the chance to speak with you. Perhaps I could escort you home while we talk?"

"No. Speak now and be done."

She certainly wasn't as polite in person as she'd been in her letter.

He cleared his throat. "I know you said you don't want to play for services, but I wanted to extend an invitation to come and play the piano at the church any time you'd like."

She nodded, but her face was too shadowed for him to see any expression save the strong jut of her chin.

He pushed on. "I didn't realize you had a child." He nodded toward the bundle in her arms. "If you're concerned about her while you play, my mother would be more than thrilled to sit with her." He offered his most charming smile. "Now that Claire's wed, she seems to be even more taken with children."

Lilly didn't respond, and the silence stretched.

"If you'd like me to speak with your husband about it, I'd be happy to." The word *husband* felt like mud on his tongue. Whatever the rascal had done to instill so much fear in Lilly, the man should be flogged.

"I'm not married." The words seemed almost vulnerable. Then her chin came up again. "I make my own decisions, and I choose not to play before all those people."

Something about the way she said *all those people* belied her brave front. Her voice held an edge of...fear?

"I... All right." He took a step back, suddenly feeling a strong need to give the