

Praise for Tamera Alexander's
TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS series

“Pull up a comfy armchair! The main and secondary characters [in *Beyond This Moment*] instantly become people to care about, and the plot twists will keep you turning pages long into the night. The themes of racial tolerance and second chances are as timely today as they were back in the early days of Colorado's history.”

Romantic Times, 4½ star review

“Tamera Alexander is, without question, a must-read author who appreciates exceptional writing and loves to close a book with a heartfelt and satisfied sigh of delight!”

Relz Reviewz

“. . . thought-provoking plot and poignant prose. . . . You will be whisked *Beyond This Moment* into another time and place.”

Historical Novels Reviews

“Tamera Alexander . . . is extremely talented in how she paints the scenes so vividly you think you're there watching the story unfold. The story as well as her characters are written with depth . . . you can feel the emotions they are experiencing.”

Once Upon a Romance

Honors for FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES series

Rekindled was named to *Library Journal's* Best Books of 2006 list, was a nominee for *Romantic Time's* Best Inspirational Novel of 2006, and was a finalist for the 2007 RITA Award for Best First Book and for Best Inspirational Romance.

Revealed won the 2007 Romance Writers of America RITA Award for Best Inspirational Romance.

Remembered won the 2008 Christy Award for Best Historical Romance and the 2007 National Readers' Choice Award for Inspirational Fiction.

Honors for TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS series

From a Distance won the 2009 Christy Award for Best Historical Romance.

Beyond This Moment was a finalist for the 2010 Christy Award for Best Historical Romance and the 2010 RITA Award for Best Inspirational Romance.

WITHIN MY HEART

Books by
Tamera Alexander

BELMONT MANSION NOVELS

A Lasting Impression

A Beauty So Rare

A Note Yet Unsung

FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES

Rekindled

Revealed

Remembered

Fountain Creek Chronicles (3 in 1)

TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS

From a Distance

Beyond This Moment

Within My Heart

WOMEN OF FAITH FICTION

The Inheritance

A BELLE MEADE PLANTATION NOVEL

To Whisper Her Name

TAMERA
ALEXANDER



TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS



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To my precious mother, June Gattis.
Heaven is sweeter still,
knowing you're there.

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

PROVERBS 4:23

PROLOGUE

DUSK, HOURS FOLLOWING THE BATTLE OF NASHVILLE
DECEMBER 17, 1864

Half hidden beneath the bare-limbed canopy of a dogwood tree, the gravedigger kept a reverent distance, patiently waiting for the last whispered prayers to be uttered and for the final mourner to take her leave. Only then did he step into the fading light, a worn spool of string clutched tight in his gnarled hand. Not much time left. It would be dark soon. And the last grave still needed tending before the pewter skies let loose their winter white.

The distant squeak of wagon wheels and the clomp of horses' hooves faded into the night, leaving only the faint chirrup of crickets to companion the silence. Jessup Collum lifted the lid of the oblong pine box and with painstaking care, his arthritic fingers numb from the cold and marred with time and age, he tied a trailing length of string around the soldier's right wrist. Mindful not to tie the string overtight, he looped the other end through a tiny bell.

He stared for a moment at the soldier's face—the fallen

Confederate a mere boy judging from his features—then he glanced around at the freshly covered graves. Deep in his bones he knew what he was doing was right, even if a bit out of the ordinary. There was no malice in his actions, and no sin, most certainly. Nothing that would bring serious offense. Though folks would surely think him a touch senile, if they saw. If they knew . . .

So many ways for a man to die, yet only one was needed for the earth to cradle a body back from whence all life had come.

Jessup turned that thought over in his mind as he'd done countless times before, not indifferent to the shadows stealing across the graveyard as the December sun hastened its retreat. Nightfall brought bitter cold, but not a breath of wind stirred, and each snowflake lofted downward from heaven, unhindered in its journey. He worked hurriedly to cover the last grave, mindful of the trailing string.

After the last shovel of dirt, he straightened, slowly, his crooked spine bearing the brunt of forty-two years of tending this hallowed ground—and of the last few hours of burying the bloodied remnants the Federal Army had abandoned following their assault. If the once-valiant Tennessee Army had been crippled in the battle at Franklin two weeks ago, then the past two days of fighting had delivered a mortal wound.

Jessup lit a torch and stared over row after row of mounded earth, the light casting a burnished glow around him. Too many and too young were those who lay here, going before their time. Before their lives had been lived out. He thought again of the young woman earlier who'd been last to take her leave.

Dark-haired with skin pale and smooth as cream, she'd knelt for the longest time at the grave on the far end, one he'd taken care in covering not two hours earlier, as he'd done the one at his feet just now. She'd huddled close by that grave, weeping, arms drawn around herself, looking as if she'd wanted to lay herself down and mark an end to her own life, what little she had left after losing

the man buried there—“a decorated lieutenant from the Tennessee regiment, and my only brother,” she’d whispered through tears.

The wound on the lieutenant’s neck had told Jessup how the man had died, and the sutures and bloodstained bandages told him how hard some doctor had fought to save him. Shame how fast these soldiers were buried. No proper funeral. No time for one—not with the Federal Army bearing down hard, void of mercy, bent on conquering what little was left.

He tugged the worn collar of his coat closer about his neck and begged the Almighty, again, to intervene, to put an end to this war. Surely it couldn’t go on much longer.

A heavy mist crept over the rise from the creek, shrouding the stone markers. The fog seemed to deepen the pungent aroma of upturned earth, and a beguiling trace of honeysuckle clung to the cool night air, despite the wild vine not being in bloom. Jessup took a deeper whiff and could almost taste the sweet summer nectar. A smile pushed up his whiskered cheeks. Maybe folks were right. Maybe he was a touch senile after all. These days recent memories skittered off about as quickly as he reached for them, while others that should have been long gathering dust inched closer as the years stretched on.

He sat down against an ancient poplar, borrowing its strength. Still no wind, and the snow had ceased falling. He imagined the boy’s face again, able to see it clearly in his mind’s eye as he stared at the bell, willing it to move.

Even the slightest bit.

He put his head back, resting his eyes, only for a moment. But the moments lengthened and gathered and pulled taut, coaxing him along on a gentle wave, absent of the throb in his lower back and the ache across his swollen knuckles.

He was a boy again, running through fields knee-high with summer grass, the sun hot on his face, sweat from a humid Tennessee afternoon beading on his forehead and matting his hair to his

head. Someone called to him in the distance. A voice so sweet . . . A lifetime had passed since he'd heard that voice. *Mother* . . .

He ran, youthful legs pumping hard, trying to reach her, wanting to see her again. But the faster he ran, the farther away her voice seemed to—

Jessup awakened with a start, his breath coming in sharp stagers.

An uncanny sense of presence crowded the darkness around him, and he realized the torch had gone out. He sat straighter, head cocked to one side, and listened, straining to hear his mother's voice again.

But her voice was gone.

He wiped the telling moisture from his cheeks and rose, the joints cracking in his knees. In all his days, he couldn't recall so still a night. So loud a hush over the graves. With a sinking feeling, he looked down at the grave of the young boy. It was late now. Too late.

He prayed the boy was at peace, wherever he was. Same for the decorated lieutenant down the way. He didn't know much about the afterlife—not like folks expected him to—but he reckoned if God was as kind as he believed Him to be that there was some sort of special welcome going on right now for those men who'd laid down their lives in this terrible—

The distant tinkling of a bell brought Jessup upright.

A skitter shimmied up his spine. The air trapped viselike in his lungs. Praying he wasn't still dreaming, he searched the darkness at the end of the row where the woman had knelt earlier, and his skin turned to gooseflesh. If this was what some folks felt when they visited this place late at night, he knew now why they never ventured back.

He also knew why he would never leave.

TIMBER RIDGE, COLORADO, ROCKY MOUNTAINS
APRIL 12, 1877

Rachel Boyd stood motionless in the main aisle of the general store, knowing she shouldn't eavesdrop. But heaven help her, she couldn't bring herself to move! Half afraid that Ben and Lyda Mullins would hear her if she *did* try to make a stealthy exit, she gripped the jar of molasses in her hand, unable to stifle a giggle. The only patron in the store, she was grateful for the lull in afternoon traffic and was more than a little amused—and surprised—by the affectionate whispers coming from beyond the curtained doorway.

A soft chuckle. “Ben Mullins, what’s gotten into you? Someone could walk in on us.”

A deeper laugh. “Who’s going to come back here into the storeroom? All I want is a little kiss. Come here, woman, and let me . . .”

Rachel couldn't make out the low murmurs that followed, and

didn't need to. Her imagination filled in the blanks just fine. Warmth rose to her face. Unbidden, her memory skimmed the past two years, and emotions long buried since Thomas's death, yet never forgotten, slowly reawakened inside her.

With them came bittersweet memories of the tender way her husband used to love her, and desires long dormant began to unfurl. She closed her eyes, recalling what it had felt like to be loved by a man. A shiver stole through her, though not an altogether pleasurable one. Her smile slowly faded.

While this wasn't the first time she'd remembered the intimacy she and Thomas had enjoyed in marriage, it *was* her first time to feel those intimate stirrings again. The desire for a man's touch, for that relationship. But the desire wasn't welcome. She would not—could not—ever again love a man the way she'd loved Thomas.

Following his passing, there had been moments when she'd questioned whether she would survive. It had taken so long to find her way out of that fog, that deep, dark place where she'd known she needed to start living again, if only for her boys, but couldn't. With the double-edged gift of time's passing, and the persistent encouragement of family and friends, she'd finally found her way back into the sunlight.

But loving someone so completely, giving herself to a man the way she'd done with her husband, it gave them the power to hurt you in a way no one else could, even when it wasn't their intention.

And she never wanted to hurt like that again. Ever.

More than once, she'd been told she needed to consider remarrying, if only for her boys' sake. But just as she wouldn't risk her heart a second time, neither would she risk her sons having to endure the same hurt they'd gone through with their father's passing. Besides, she and Mitchell and Kurt were getting along fine, just the three of them.

A not-so-gentle check tugged at her flagging confidence. She fingered the jar of molasses in her hand. Perhaps *fine* wasn't the

best choice of a word, but the three of them were managing as best they could. She smoothed a hand down the front panel of her skirt and forced down a recurring tide of emotion. With effort, she refocused her thoughts.

School would dismiss within the hour, and she planned on dropping by to visit with the schoolteacher about Kurt. She didn't have an appointment—and it wasn't her first "meeting" with Miss Stafford over her younger son. She just wanted to make sure things were going smoothly and that Kurt hadn't done something else foolish. Again. Like the shenanigan he'd pulled two weeks prior involving the school's outhouse.

He hadn't been the only boy involved, she'd learned, but she had a feeling he'd been the instigator. And she cringed again just thinking about it, putting herself in Miss Stafford's place. Young and inexperienced, Judith Stafford was, from all accounts, being more than patient with Kurt. How embarrassing that must have been. Kurt had written a note of apology, and she'd written Judith Stafford a note too, offering her own expression of regret and thanking the teacher for her understanding. Hopefully a quick visit today would keep things moving in the right direction.

After dealing with that issue, endless chores awaited on the ranch, not to mention the meeting about the overdue loan payment. Mr. Fossey, the bank manager, had been more than lenient, but she sensed his patience waning.

She returned the jar of molasses to the shelf, considering it a luxury these days with funds on the scarce side. In the midst of everything, she was still determined to keep Thomas's dream alive for their two sons. It was what pushed her from bed each morning and what carried her through each day until she fell exhausted back into bed long after dark. That, and the pledge they'd made as a couple to give Mitchell and Kurt a heritage, a better life than the boys would have had if she and Thomas had stayed in Tennessee following the war.

She fingered a callus on her palm. Losing the ranch Thomas had worked so diligently to build wasn't an option, and it hardly defined giving their boys a "better life." She'd stood over her husband's grave and had given her solemn oath that she would see his dream—their dream—come to fruition. And that was a promise she intended to keep. *If* Mr. Fossey still considered her a worthwhile risk.

The intimate exchange behind the blue-and-yellow gingham curtain grew more ardent, and Rachel felt a blush, regretting not having left at the outset. She made her way to the door, hoping Ben had remembered to oil the squeaky hinge. Guilty as she felt, it was nice to know that after twenty-something years of marriage, Ben and Lyda's feelings for each other were still—

"Ben?"

Hearing the name, and catching the unmistakable alarm in Lyda's tone, Rachel paused, hand on the latch.

"Ben, what's—" A muted gasp sounded from the back store-room. "Honey, what's wrong? Ben . . . are you all—"

A dull thud.

"Ben!"

Rachel raced to the curtain that separated the store from the back part of the building but stopped shy of continuing on. "Lyda, it's Rachel. Is everything all right?" She waited, impatient. "Lyda?"

"No, we're— Ben, can you hear me?" Anxiety constricted Lyda's voice. "Rachel! Something's wrong. I . . . I don't think he's breathing!"

Rachel whipped past the curtain and hurried down the hallway, and came to a stilting halt by the storage closet.

Ben lay crumpled on the floor, motionless, his complexion drained of color. Lyda knelt close beside him. Panic lined her features.

Instinct kicked in and Rachel squeezed in beside them into the cramped space. "What happened?" She checked Ben's pulse, first on the underside of his wrist, then on his neck.

Tears rimmed Lyda's eyes. Her hands shook. "We were . . ." She looked away and Rachel felt a pinch of guilt. "We were . . . kissing, and the next thing I knew Ben was clutching at his arm." Panic thinned her tone. "He acted like he couldn't catch his breath, and then he . . ." She bit her lower lip as tears spilled over. "He just went down."

Rachel closed her eyes and concentrated on finding a pulse, wishing she had her father's old stethoscope. "Has anything like this happened to Ben before?"

Lyda shook her head and nudged her husband's shoulder with a trembling hand. "Ben," she whispered, "can you hear me?"

Fingertips pressed against the underside of his wrist, Rachel stilled. There—finally, she felt something. A pulse. Thready and shallow. Too much so. "He needs Dr. Brookston," she whispered, touching Ben's brow to find it cool and clammy. "I'll go find him. You stay here."

Lyda reached for her hand. "You know what's happening . . ."

It wasn't a question and Rachel didn't answer. Before Timber Ridge boasted a physician of its own, she'd served as midwife to women in town. She'd also treated wounds and sewn up her share of cuts and gashes. People rarely called on her since the doctor arrived—maybe an expectant mother every now and then—but she had a fairly good idea of what was happening to Ben. Yet she wasn't about to state it aloud. It would only add to Lyda's worry, and her assumption could well be wrong. She wasn't a trained physician, after all. Medical schools were for men, not women.

"The important thing, Lyda, is that Ben is breathing and I can feel a pulse. Whatever you do, *don't* move him. If he comes to while I'm gone, make sure he doesn't try to get up. That's very important." She reached for a towel on a shelf, rolled it up, and gently slid it beneath Ben's head. "And keep his head elevated until I get back with the doctor." She stood.

Lyda stared up, fresh tears rising. “Is he . . . going to be all right?”

Rachel knelt again, on the verge of tears herself. At forty-nine, Ben Mullins was almost twenty years her senior—Lyda was half that. Yet in recent years the older couple had become almost like parents to her. Ben treated her much like a father would and was like an uncle to her sons. Lyda was a trusted friend and filled the role of an indulgent aunt to the boys, which included sneaking them candy in church when they were younger, and occasionally even now. Yet Rachel still couldn’t bring herself to answer Lyda’s question.

She forced a smile she didn’t feel. “Did you hear what I said? About making sure Ben stays still and about keeping his head elevated?”

Shadows of realization darkened Lyda’s eyes. “Yes,” she choked out, nodding. “I heard. It’s just that—” She drew in a ragged breath. “Rachel . . . he’s all I have now. I can’t lose him too.”

A horrible, suffocating wave of grief hit Rachel all over again. Only it wasn’t from memories of Thomas. She knew that pain only too well. This was different, and it tore at her heart. She reached for Lyda’s hand and gripped it tight, remembering a bitter wintry night eight years ago. A night she and Lyda had spoken of only a handful of times since.

Filling her lungs, she worked to steady her voice, the image of Ben and Lyda’s children, their expressions so peaceful, so precious, even in death, making that nearly impossible. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the haunting images remained. “I’m going to go find the doctor—he’ll know what to do. I won’t be long, I promise.”

Lyda nodded, her expression communicating what words could not. “Thank you, Rachel. And please . . . *hurry*.”

Rachel ran the short distance to the doctor’s clinic and entered without knocking. Angelo Giordano stood at a worktable inside,

pestle in hand. “Angelo—” She paused to catch her breath, the chilled mountain air still burning her lungs. “Is Dr. Brookston here?”

The young man shook his head. “The doctor . . . he is at—” He lowered his head. “He is away, Mrs. Boyd.” Though his Italian accent was thick and his word choices careful, Angelo Giordano’s diction was flawless. “But if maybe . . . I could be of help—”

“I need Dr. Brookston, Angelo! I think Ben Mullins is having heart failure.”

The boy’s dark eyes went wide.

Rachel hurried to a bookcase crammed with bottles and metal tins, each neatly labeled. But the shelves were cramped, and numerous tins sat stacked on the plank-wood floor gathering dust. She scanned the labels, finding them a challenge to read in the poor light and with the containers stuffed in as they were. She exhaled. Could Dr. Brookston not afford a proper cabinet for his medicine? “Do you know if the doctor has any foxglove? It’s a plant—an herb. It’s used with patients who have heart ailments.”

“I do not know, ma’am,” Angelo said, joining her in the search.

Rachel shoved a tin aside to view another behind it, and a bottle of laudanum slipped off the shelf. She tried to catch it, but the bottle hit the floor with a crack and shattered, splattering laudanum and sending glass shards in all directions. She bit back a harsh word. “I’m sorry, Angelo. I didn’t mean to break—”

“Dr. Brookston will not be angry.” The boy reached for a rag. “I will clean it.”

Her panic mounting, Rachel spotted two wooden crates in the corner, but they held only bottles of lamp oil. Enough to last for an entire year! What did anyone need with that much oil? An unopened box on the examination table drew her attention.

Angelo gestured. “It is new medicine. It came today. That is why I am here. Maybe I should—”

She nodded, anticipating what he might say next. “Yes. Go

through that box—quickly please, Angelo—and look for anything that has either of these words on it.” She grabbed the fountain pen and a piece of paper from Dr. Brookston’s desk and scribbled a note. She already knew firsthand from having assisted Dr. Rand Brookston last fall that he was an exemplary surgeon—she only hoped he was as conscientious about keeping medications ordered and in stock.

She pressed the paper into Angelo’s hand. “Now, do you have any idea where the doctor might be? Who he was going to see?”

Angelo blinked, glancing downward.

“Angelo, *please!* There’s little time.”

Wincing, the young man reluctantly met her gaze. “He spoke of going to . . . to Miss Bailey’s.”

Rachel frowned, confused. “Miss Bailey’s . . .”

He nodded once. “The woman, she has a house over on—”

“I know where Miss Bailey’s *house* is.”

Angelo swallowed and the sound was audible. “The doctor . . . sometimes he sees to the . . . boarders who live there.”

Rachel felt the furrows in her brow. *Boarders* wasn’t exactly the word she would have chosen to describe the women who lived under Miss Bailey’s roof. Regardless, she needed the doctor, and if that’s where he was, for whatever reason, then that’s where she would go. “As soon as you find either of the items listed on that sheet of paper, bring them as *quickly* as you can to the mercantile, to the back storeroom. Will you do that, please?”

Angelo nodded, his chest puffing out. “Yes, Mrs. Boyd. If what is on this paper is in this box, I will find it. I will bring it.”

She thanked him and took off down the boardwalk at a run.

The April air was brisk, burning her lungs. It held the promise of more snow, and Rachel pulled her winter shawl tighter around her shoulders, wishing she hadn’t left her coat at the store. A gust of wind disturbed the layer of fresh-fallen snow lining the rooftops and sent it swirling downward.

Winter wouldn't leave the Rockies for at least another month, maybe two, and she prayed the cold wouldn't cost her more cattle than it already had, or the calves due to drop any day. But especially the calf belonging to Lady. She'd bought Lady a year ago, her first major investment for the ranch, and a good one, for a change.

She turned at the next street. Thankfully, foot traffic on the boardwalk was scarce.

School hadn't dismissed yet but soon would—and she wouldn't be there to meet the boys, or to have that visit with their teacher. When she didn't show, she knew Mitchell and Kurt would walk to James's office and wait there until she arrived. The boys loved their uncle James and never complained about visiting the sheriff's office, but she worried about what they saw and overheard there. Still, some days it couldn't be helped.

Only last fall had she begun to allow Mitch and Kurt to walk to school on their own again. She still accompanied them in the wagon as far as Ben and Lyda's store each morning, unable to stomach the thought of them walking the distance from the ranch like they once had. Not after what had happened to Thomas, and with the recent reports of cougar sightings.

Winded, she struggled to maintain the hurried pace, her breath puffing white. Winter-shrouded peaks towered high above Timber Ridge and drew her gaze upward as thoughts of Ben pressed close. The rush of her pulse pounded hard in her ears.

If only Ben's heart could beat half as strong . . .

If Ben had a history of heart weakness, he'd never mentioned it. Neither had Lyda. And Rachel felt certain they would have, given her closeness to them.

A left at the next intersection led her into a part of town she didn't usually frequent. Saloons and gaming halls lined the thoroughfare. Even midday the smell of liquor was potent. She spotted Miss Bailey's establishment at the end of the street and made a beeline for it, wondering how she knew which building

it was. She couldn't recall being told. It was simply one of those places everybody in town knew of, but most folks—at least in her circle—never spoke about.

Two women lazed against the railing of the wraparound porch, talking, dressed in a manner ill-advised for the cold and that might have been shocking had Rachel been naïve about their occupation. But she wasn't, and she raced up the porch stairs, the unease over having to visit a place like this paling in comparison to her concern for Ben. She never broke stride. "I've come to get Dr. Brookston. It's an emergen—"

The woman on the left, a blonde, stepped directly into her path, blocking the door.

Rachel stopped short.

"I think you mean *Rand*, don't you?" the woman said, looking her up and down and smiling, though not in a friendly way. "That's what we all call him." She crossed her arms over her chest and her ample cleavage lifted to threaten the already strained buttons of her thin shirtwaist. "He's inside, *visiting* with one of the girls. And I don't think he'll take kindly to being interrupted." She gave a throaty laugh. "I know Patricia won't. She's been waitin' for this all week." She tossed a wink at the woman beside her.

"*Visiting with one of the girls.*" Fairly good at reading people, Rachel knew when she was being goaded. She had no qualms about the doctor seeing to the health of these women. Her father had been a physician, and she respected a physician's oath to care for the sick, regardless of person or circumstance. Yet Dr. Brookston's coming *here*, to this place, and his apparent familiarity with these women . . . Such behavior hinted at arrogance. An arrogance with which she was only too familiar when it came to men of his profession.

An arrogance that often led to their downfall.

"Like it or not—" Rachel squared her shoulders, finding boldness when picturing Lyda cradling Ben—"Dr. Brookston's *visit* here is about to be cut short." She pushed past the woman, yanking her

arm free when the blonde grabbed hold. Once inside, she hustled to close the door and flipped the lock into place, knowing it wouldn't buy her much time.

The women pounded on the glass-paned door behind her, yelling obscenities. Surely the building had a back door, so Rachel knew she was only prolonging the inevitable, but she didn't need long.

The sickeningly sweet smell of perfume hit her full in the face. That, and stale liquor. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light.

Laughter drifted down from the second floor, giving hint as to where she should begin her search. She hurried up the spiral staircase. The garish red carpet muted her boot steps. She instinctively reached for the handrail, then held back, thinking better of it.

Oversized oil paintings covered the walls, detailed in their renderings and advertising the services bartered in this place. After her gaze collided with a particularly graphic "portrait," she kept her eyes averted, but couldn't block out the disturbing memories that came with being inside a place like this. Not that she'd ever been inside a brothel before—

But her father had. On numerous occasions. With many women. For many years.

For the thousandth time, she questioned why doctors considered themselves more highly than they ought, more immune to weaknesses in character and less prone to fault—when based on personal experience, with few exceptions, she'd found quite the opposite to be true.

She reached the second-story landing, and the gravel of male voices blended with female laughter to paint a plurality of mental images Rachel tried in vain to block out. She looked down the long hallway. So many doors . . . and they were all closed.

The rush of footsteps sounded from downstairs. "She must have gone up there!"

Time running out, Rachel pounded on the first door.

R and helped the young woman to a sitting position, ignoring how she held his hand a tad too long. What he had to tell Miss Bailey downstairs would not go over well. Not when it meant her *best girl* wouldn't be working for a while. But for Patricia, "working" wasn't an option, and he had a fairly good idea of how to ensure Miss Bailey's compliance. He crossed the room to wash his hands.

"Will it hurt like this for long, Doc?"

"For a few days, I'm afraid." He dried his hands on the clean towel he carried with him in his medical bag, hearing what sounded like pounding from down the hallway. Probably another fight, which would likely result in someone else needing to be sutured, same as the last time he was here. "I'll give you a salve to use and some herbs to be mixed with hot tea. Drink it twice daily, morning and night, until the herbs are gone." He packed his equipment back in his bag, aware of the young woman's continued stare.

Patricia would never be mistaken for subtle, but the way she perched on the edge of the wrought-iron bed—one leg drawn up beneath her while the other dangled off the side—was particularly unladylike. And held purpose.

"You're gonna say no again, Doc, because right now I'm ailin'. But maybe later, when I'm better . . ." Her shapely leg swung from

side to side, keeping time with the clock's pendulum on the opposite wall. She patted the bedcovers beside her. "Miss Bailey wouldn't need to know. Nobody would. And I wouldn't charge you either." She fingered the lace ties of her shirtwaist, a pouty smile rising. "I guess you could say I have a softness for Southern men."

Rand rolled down his shirtsleeves, seeing more challenge in the woman's eyes than softness. "No . . . thank you, Patricia. As always."

Her sharp exhale said she'd anticipated his response.

While he struggled with physical desires, only one woman in the town of Timber Ridge had ever made him look twice. Actually, more than twice. But since she'd never indicated the least interest in him—had done quite the opposite, in fact—he'd set his interest aside. Or was trying.

The pounding in the hallway grew closer, as did the muffle of angry voices.

Patricia gave a petulant sigh, seemingly unfazed by the altercation on the other side of the door. "Don't you ever long for the pleasure of a woman, Rand? Or wish that instead of listening to my chest through that fancy earpiece of yours, that you could—"

"I'm informing Miss Bailey that I don't want you *entertaining* clients, Patricia, for at least three weeks." Rand delivered a straight-forward gaze that silenced any rebuttal. He reached for his suit jacket. "And before you return to work, I want to examine you again. To make sure you're well."

Huffing, she finally dropped the alluring façade. "Miss Battleaxe won't agree to me taking three weeks off and we both know it."

He had to smile at the name the women here had dubbed the proprietress, knowing it wasn't far off the mark. Miss Bailey treated these girls like property, which, to her, they were. "You let me handle Miss Bailey. I don't think I'll have a problem convincing her to—"

“Get your hands *off* of me!” a female voice insisted from the other side of the door.

Rand wasn’t personally familiar with the women who worked here, but something in this particular woman’s tone told him she wasn’t one of Miss Bailey’s *girls*. Why would such a woman be—

A pounding on the bedroom door brought him full around.

“Dr. Brookston! Are you in there?”

“He’s busy,” Patricia called out, laughing and tossing him a playful wink as she struck a seductive pose on the bed.

Throwing her a look of warning, Rand reached for the door. But it opened before he could turn the latch. Stunned, he swallowed. Or tried to. “M-Mrs. Boyd, what are you—”

“We need you! It’s Ben Mullins. He just collapsed!” Her expression fierce, Rachel Boyd struggled against a hard-looking blonde on one side and a shirtless miner on the other.

The blonde gave her arm a jerk. “We *told* her she’s not supposed to be up here!”

The miner smiled. “Fine by me if she’s—”

Rand caught hold of the man’s wrist. “Let go of her. *Now*.”

Smirking, the miner complied. The woman did too, daggers in her eyes.

Rachel shrugged them off and gave the blonde a dark look. “I can’t be sure about Ben, Doctor, but—” She spoke quickly, breathless. “I think it’s his heart.”

Rand grabbed his bag. “Where is he?”

“At the store. In the back. Lyda’s with him.” Her gaze slid past him, and suspicion slipped into her eyes.

Able to guess how Patricia was still positioned on the bed, Rand stepped into Rachel’s line of sight, blocking her view. But her conclusions were easily read in her expression. He needed to clarify his purpose in being here, but now wasn’t the time. “How long ago did this happen?” He indicated for her to precede him down the hall.

“Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty. Angelo told me where to find you.” Unmistakable objection edged her voice. “Did you not hear me calling your name?”

Rand cringed, hearing Patricia’s laughter behind him. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Boyd. I didn’t.” He gestured toward the stairs. “My buckboard is out back.”

Miss Bailey stood waiting in the front parlor, arms crossed, expression defiant. She leveled a loathing stare in Rachel’s direction, then turned the same on him.

Rand motioned Rachel toward the back door. “I’m right behind you,” he said, speaking to Miss Bailey as he followed. “Under no circumstances is Patricia to work for the next three weeks.”

The proprietress huffed, trailing him down the hallway. “Three weeks! That’s absurd! Out of the question! Do you have any idea how much money I’ll lose if she doesn’t—”

“Patricia is ill and *highly* contagious to her clients. As you, no doubt, are already aware.” Rand turned at the door and watched Miss Bailey’s already ruddy complexion turning an even deeper crimson. “Should you choose to ignore my advice, madam, I’ll visit every saloon and gaming hall in this town and will let the men know—in detail—what they can expect to get if they visit Patricia before that three weeks is up. Or perhaps you’d prefer a total quarantine?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Get out,” she whispered. “This isn’t what we agreed to.”

Rand obliged her request and strode to the wagon. “This is exactly what we agreed upon, Miss Bailey,” he called back, stowing his medical bag beneath the seat. “I’m seeing to the health of these women and to the welfare of Timber Ridge. If you don’t like it—take it up with Sheriff McPherson.” He couldn’t help his thigh brushing against Rachel’s when he settled beside her on the narrow bench seat. He also didn’t miss how she attempted to put space between them, trying unsuccessfully to remedy that.

A flick of the reins and the mare responded. The buckboard started forward with a jolt. “Was Mr. Mullins conscious when you left him?”

Rachel shook her head. “No.”

“How would you classify Mr. Mullins’s pulse when you checked it?” Based on their brief interactions prior to today, he was certain she would be able to answer the question.

“Faint, and erratic. All signs of arrhythmia are present. Either that”—she grimaced—“or heart failure.”

Feeling precious time slip past, Rand urged the mare to a faster trot.

Reins taut, he took the next corner more sharply than usual, grateful the side street was empty. “Did you think to tell Mrs. Mullins not to move her husband? In the event of a weakened heart muscle, keeping the patient immobilized is of vital importance due to—”

“The likelihood of increased trauma should the patient be moved.” She tossed him a sideways glance. “Yes, Dr. Brookston, I gave Lyda Mullins that instruction. It also occurred to me to tell her to keep her husband’s head elevated, which aids the body’s circulation, especially when the heart is under stress.”

Wordless, Rand faced forward again, feeling very much put in his place. “My apologies, Mrs. Boyd, if it sounded as though I were insinuating that you—”

“No offense was taken, Doctor. After all”—her lips curved in a tight smile—“I’m not a trained physician . . . as are you.” She spoke the words nicely enough, her Southern accent sweet as honey, but her clenched jawline hinted at her truer feelings.

His male intuition, however deficient and untried when it came to the female gender, told him it was best to leave her statement untouched. Yet—he’d made a misstep somewhere, a serious one, and he wanted to remedy it. “Please let me assure you, Mrs. Boyd, that I regret my presence at the brothel today as much as you do.”

She turned and looked up at him, her expression one of surprise. And disappointment.

“Though not for the reason you might think. My being there today was purely of a medical nature, however much it might have appeared otherwise. I regret that you had to come looking for me. And *there*, of all places.”

Her features softened. For a brief instant. Then her polite but distant poise returned.

Years of medical instruction and clinical practice had prepared him for the challenges of being a doctor, specifically in the sciences related to the female body and reproduction. But the ability to decipher the workings of a woman’s mind . . . He sighed to himself. *That* science remained a mystery.

Yet one thing was indisputable. Any hope he’d entertained of gaining Rachel Boyd’s interest—especially after today—was futile.

The Mullineses’ store came into view, and he narrowed his thoughts and began praying, as he always did, first for his waiting patient, then for himself. *Lord, give me wisdom and discernment . . . and the courage to act.*

He brought the buckboard to a stop and jumped out, not surprised when Rachel didn’t wait for his assistance. He heard her close behind him as he took the stairs leading up to the boardwalk.

Patrons milled about inside the store. A small group of them gathered by the curtain leading to the storerooms in the back, whispering among themselves. They dispersed when they saw him approaching. Rand paused and turned back to Rachel. “If you could—”

“Take care of things out here, Doctor.” She nodded. “Then I’ll join you in the back shortly.”

“You read my mind, Mrs. Boyd. Thank you.” He welcomed her assistance. Last December, she’d aided him in an emergency delivery and surprised him by proving to be a skilled surgical assistant. He

was grateful for her medical knowledge. Not missing how intent she seemed on looking anywhere but at him, Rand slipped through the curtained doorway, mindful of prying eyes.

“Mrs. Mullins?”

“We’re . . . back here,” came a weak voice.

He rounded the corner to see Lyda nestled beside her husband on the floor of a storage closet. Tears streaked her face, and as Rand searched for signs of life in the pallor of Ben’s face, his own chest squeezed tight.

He removed his coat and knelt beside them in the cramped quarters, pulling his stethoscope from his bag. “Rest assured, Mrs. Mullins . . .” He unbuttoned Ben’s shirt. “I’m going to do everything within my ability to help your husband.” He pressed the bell-shaped chest piece over the older gentleman’s heart.

Nodding, Lyda sat upright and wiped her cheeks.

“Has he been unconscious since he first collapsed?”

“Yes.” She sniffed. “But at least I can feel him breathing now. For a while there I wondered if he was going to—” A shudder completed her unfinished thought.

Rand adjusted the ivory earpieces and listened, careful to keep his expression smooth and unreadable. Rachel’s assessment had been accurate. *Faint* and *erratic* aptly described the storekeeper’s pulse.

He moved the stethoscope, listening to the distant thud echoing faintly in his ears before moving the instrument again. With aid of his pocket watch, he timed the intervals between the irregular half beats slipping in and around the already stuttered rhythm, wishing Mrs. Boyd were there to help him. “To your knowledge, has your husband experienced any light-headedness in recent days? Or pain in his chest?”

“No.” She stared at Ben, her lips a tremulous line. “At least he never said anything to me about it.” She cradled the side of her husband’s face. “But Ben has never been a complainer.”

Rand gently probed Ben's abdomen, then reached down and pulled up one of his patient's pant legs. "What about any swelling in his legs or ankles?" He saw the answer to his question before Lyda Mullins opened her mouth.

"Ben had me draw him another warm salt bath one night last week." She took an unsteady breath. "His ankles were swelling up again something awful. Another shipment, a big one, came in for the grand opening of the new resort next month. Charlie Daggett was working out at Rachel Boyd's ranch for the afternoon, so Ben unloaded it by himself. I told him to wait for Mr. Daggett to come the next morning, but he wouldn't." She shook her head. "Ben said Mr. Tolliver needed it right away."

Mention of Tolliver and the new Colorado Hot Springs Resort reminded Rand about Brandon Tolliver's "urgent" request to meet with him. Rand had found the note—the second in as many days—nailed to his clinic door when he'd returned home last evening. He had no idea what Tolliver wanted, but since no reference of a medical nature was mentioned, he'd laid the note aside, in no hurry to meet with the man. His general rule of thumb was to remain neutral about folks he didn't know well enough yet, but Brandon Tolliver seemed bent on testing that long-held principle.

With a sigh, Lyda brushed back a lock of her husband's thinning hair. "Later that night Ben said something about how the two of us were getting older, and we laughed." With a weak smile, she looked up, her eyes full of question—and dread.

Rand managed what he hoped was a reassuring look, then leaned down. "Mr. Mullins?" He waited. "Mr. Mullins . . . can you hear me, sir?" Watching for any response, Rand reached for his bag and felt around inside. He'd put a pouch of digitalis in there two days ago, just before he—

Mrs. Willets. He winced.

He'd given the last of the medicine to Loretta Willets yesterday morning when she'd complained of palpitations and shortness of

breath. Over a month ago he'd ordered more, but it still hadn't arrived. Ben Mullins would need that medication when he came to.

Rand stifled a groan, angry at himself for not being better prepared and frustrated over how long it took to get supplies freighted up the mountain. The country had a railroad connecting east to west, but it still took an eternity to get medicine delivered to Timber Ridge. As soon as Rachel Boyd joined them—where in heaven's name was she?—he would send her to his office with instructions to check this morning's—

“Dr. Brookston, is something wrong?”

Concern in Lyda's voice drew him back, and Rand saw his own fear and frustration reflected in her expression. With effort, he worked to smooth the tension from his brow and his tone. “No, ma'am,” he said softly. “I'm simply . . . ascertaining your husband's condition.”

She nodded, not looking convinced.

He inched the stethoscope higher, toward the upper chamber of Ben's heart, resolving to keep his emotions better contained. Not that he desired to appear perfect or as if he had all the answers, but wavering on a decision, showing signs of hesitation or uncertainty, could undermine his relationship with a patient, which could potentially sway them from following his advice. Which could cost lives.

He adjusted the earpieces again to filter out extraneous noise and worked his way downward, listening to Ben's lungs. What he heard settled like a weight inside his own chest.

He'd never seen Ben Mullins as a patient, but he remembered Ben complaining of indigestion in recent weeks. Twice he'd encouraged the man to come see him about it, but Ben had laughed in that easy manner of his and attributed the tightening in his chest to too much fried chicken.

Using his sleeve, Rand wiped the sweat beading his brow. He

hadn't said anything further to Mr. Mullins at the time, not wanting to force the issue—or his services, if they weren't desired. But perhaps if he had, he could've diagnosed Ben's heart condition before it reached such an acute stage.

Rand considered the possible diagnoses and swiftly settled on one, his decision made easier, painfully so, by the telling *whoosh* coming through the stethoscope. His responsibility as physician to the people of this town—and to this good man lying on the floor before him—bore down hard.

For two years he'd lived and worked in Timber Ridge, yet he had failed to build what he would term a “respectable practice.” Oh, he'd treated scores of people since arriving, had delivered babies. And with the construction of the new resort and with mining operations close by, there was no end to suturing gashes, binding wounds, and setting bones. Thanks to Sheriff McPherson's assistance, he'd even managed to gain the town council's support to conduct fitness examinations on the schoolchildren last fall. But he still felt as if people didn't completely trust him as a doctor, that they didn't see the importance of being under a doctor's care.

They'd accepted him into their town, made him feel welcome enough. But for the most part, they only called on him when they were either bleeding to death or knocking on death's door. Like now. There was so much he wanted to teach these fine people about living a healthier life. So much illness that could be prevented if folks would only listen to—

Rand went absolutely still inside, realizing that the weakened heartbeat thudding faintly in his ears only a second ago had done the same.

His own heart fisted tight.

He repositioned the stethoscope, searching for a pulse, straining to hear something. Anything. A hundred possibilities flew through his mind as he pressed his fingers against the underside of Ben's jaw.

No, God . . . Please don't do this to me. Not again . . .

Knowing what he had to do, yet never having done it himself, Rand felt his insides knot up. Hands trembling, he made a fist and positioned it directly over Ben Mullins's heart, remembering the first time he'd seen a colleague perform this procedure. *Barbaric* was the word that had come to mind then.

He raised his arm.

Lyda gasped. "What are you do—"

Rand brought his fist down directly over Ben's heart.

"No! Dr. Brookston, don't!" Lyda cried.

She tried to block his efforts, but Rand caught hold of her wrists. "Mrs. Mullins, your husband's heart has stopped. If I don't do something, he's going to die!" Saying the words made it even more real, and fear threatened to paralyze his confidence as deeply buried memories clawed their way to the surface.

Suddenly all he could see was Marietta's face.

Her lithe form on the table before him, her crying in soft guttural moans, reaching out to him with one hand while cradling her swollen belly with the other. Remorse stung his eyes as he pictured his sister's sweet face, and that of her child.

He let go of Lyda Mullins, his choices clear. He had no idea whether what he was attempting would save Ben Mullins's life or not. The procedure certainly wasn't without risk, nor was it without its naysayers. But doing nothing would seal Ben's fate without question. Sometimes taking a risk was the best choice.

And sometimes it was the only choice.

"Mrs. Mullins, I can restart your husband's heart. I know I can. But you're going to have to let me do this. You're going to have to trust me."

Her face drained of color. "All right," she whispered, voice thin as a reed.

Rand checked again for a heartbeat. Finding none, he rose up on his knees beside Ben. He fit his hands one atop the other over

the sternum, straining to recall exactly how he'd seen this demonstrated two years earlier.

Using his own weight for leverage, he pressed down, then let up, pressed down, and let up, silently counting as he did, aware of Lyda's body flinching each time he started a compression.

Stethoscope positioned again, he listened. Still nothing. Perhaps the naysayers were right. . . .

As quickly as the thought came, he banished it, but another nipped its heels. What if he was performing the procedure incorrectly? After all, he'd never done it before.

His nerves worn thin, sweat slicked his body. Rachel had said she'd join him back here *quickly*, but apparently they had different definitions of the word.

With Lyda looking on, her expression fluctuating between agony and disbelief, Rand repeated another compression, praying with each downward thrust, then leaned close again, listening through the earpieces, willing for God to grant his petition.

He knew God could heal with a thought. He also knew, only too well, that sometimes God chose not to. Rand rose up again, clasped hands positioned over Ben's heart. If he had anything to say about it—and he did—he was going to make sure that *this* time, God made the right choice.