



LOVE  
*in the Balance*

REGINA JENNINGS



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2013 by Regina Jennings

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jennings, Regina.

Love in the Balance / Regina Jennings.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-7642-0991-8 (pbk.)

1. Texas—History—19th century—Fiction. 2. Christian fiction. 3. Love stories. I. Title.

PS3560.E527L68 2013

811'.54—dc23

2012040439

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

Author is represented by Books and Such Literary Agency

13 14 15 16 17 18 19      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my sisters,  
who loved me enough  
to spend their vacation touring libraries.  
Trina, Becky, Meena, and Cara—  
I owe you a shopping trip.



# 1

PRAIRIE LEA, TEXAS  
OCTOBER 1879

The pew creaked as another sinner rose to unburden her troubled soul. Molly Lovelace twisted around on the slick wooden bench, bunching her tiered silk skirt against her mother's, and watched as Louise Bradford stood. Bother. As if she had anything interesting to confess.

“After all God has done for me, I still can't live in holiness. This week I harbored thoughts of impatience toward my husband.”

Molly cringed. Surely Mrs. Bradford's worst thoughts would bleach Molly's laundry clean.

Molly's transgressions, on the other hand . . .

Leaning forward to see around her father, Molly caught Bailey watching her intently. Her pulse quickened. With all the people trying to make decisions for her, she couldn't afford a misstep, but she hadn't expected to lose her heart so completely. What did Bailey Garner have to offer? Nothing, by her father's reckoning. If only his pockets were filled out as nicely as his homespun shirt.

Molly's sigh earned a stern glare from her mother. She

bowed her head, hoping to appear sorrowed over Mrs. Bradford's tedious list of near sins. How long would the woman ramble on? Bailey was waiting.

Every Sunday for the past year Bailey had escorted Molly to Lockhart, where she boarded for her job at the courthouse, but somehow on the twelve lonely miles between the Texas towns of Prairie Lea and Lockhart, Bailey's skills as a surrey driver diminished. For a cowboy, he let the horse wander off the road with surprising frequency, often failing to get the beast under control until it reached a sheltered grove out of view from the road.

That spot held a special place in Molly's heart. The bitter-sweet kisses shared between the thwarted lovers fueled her imagination, but until Bailey could keep dumplings on her table and silk stockings over her toes, she had to refuse his proposal. Her parents expected more.

But no one had ever delivered so reluctant a rejection. She braved a smile in his direction, noting his clean-shaven jaw and anticipating the smell of his shaving soap. Her father thought she was weak because she'd allowed an earnest young dreamer to disrupt his ambitions for her, when actually she'd never done anything braver than championing Bailey. Bailey was a good man who'd never had an opportunity to thrive, and Molly understood a thing or two about limited opportunities.

Mrs. Bradford's recital concluded.

From the raised platform, Reverend Stoker closed his Bible. "Thank you, Mrs. Bradford. We'll faithfully pray for you this week, won't we, church?"

Grunts and a few drowsy amens echoed over the heads of women itching to get their food on the tables before it cooled in the mild October weather.

"Then if there are no further—"

"I have something to say."

Molly's teeth rattled, she shut her mouth so hard. She turned quickly, her blond curls swinging straight out.

Not Bailey, Lord. Please, not Bailey.

He pulled himself up by the back of the pew and studied the floor. "Y'all need to pray for me. I've got a burden that's wearing me slick."

His silhouette blocked the sunlight streaming through the open window and stretched his shadow across rows of shocked parishioners. His eyes wandered in Molly's direction, held her gaze for an agonizing moment, and then turned toward the stained-glass cross in the window behind the pulpit. "God's convicting me, but I keep falling into the same pit. I'm still snared."

Molly's bonnet quivered. This wasn't part of their plan. She opened her mouth to protest, but her mother elbowed her sharply in the ribs. Holding her side, she looked again to Bailey. He'd never done this before. Only the elders spoke, and when they did, their stories were as bland as buttermilk. Terrified, Molly realized that Bailey's confession could be quite salty indeed.

He straightened his shoulders and shuffled his feet. "Anyway, guess y'all need to hold me accountable. God has something planned for me, but until I'm free of this . . . temptation . . . I can't move on to see what that is."

Freed from her? How could he say such a thing in front of all these people? In front of her parents? Molly's face went hot and her hands went cold. He couldn't mean it.

"I ain't blaming no one but myself, but if I'm serious about following God, I need to get my priorities straight, so pray for me. I can't do it on my own."

He plopped down next to his mother. Mary Garner's face shone scarlet. His father reached around to pat him on the

back before turning forward. Everyone turned forward, but they didn't look at Reverend Stoker. They glared at Molly.

Had her parents been right? Was her relationship with Bailey a mistake? Well, she'd had enough. She wouldn't be tossed aside like last season's gowns. Her broken heart could wait as long as there was a comeuppance to be delivered. Tearing free of her mother's grasp, Molly popped to her feet.

"Reverend Stoker, I have a confession to make, as well." Her voice sounded as clear as a fork tapped against a crystal goblet. She shook her skirts out the best she could within the narrow row.

"Like all of us since Eve, I've made some mistakes." She wouldn't look in Bailey's direction. She would not. Instead, she looked at the parson and wished she hadn't. The horror on his face almost stopped her. Almost. "And like Eve, I was tempted, but I thought the fruit the serpent offered was healthy and wholesome. I didn't realize the snake offered me diseased fruit that wasn't nourishing. Rotten fruit from a tree that was unproductive and fallow. A tree that couldn't provide for a family or make a decent income—"

Bailey leapt to his feet, hands held out in appeal. "I told you I'm looking for a job. I'm moving to town next month."

Mr. Lovelace shot up. "Sit down," he bellowed at his daughter, but Molly could still see Bailey over her father's shoulders, if she hopped.

"Your employment, or lack of, is no longer my concern. How dare you impugn my character. You're upset because I won't—" Her father finally wrestled her to her seat.

"I didn't say anything about your character. No one would know I was talking about you if you'd kept your trap shut."

Reverend Stoker's throat clearing trumpeted with an authority that words couldn't merit. "That will be enough." His chest heaved in indignation. "This congregation would do



well to remember that anyone may come to me for guidance anytime. Some issues are best discussed privately!” He ran his finger under his string tie. “However, we certainly will not forget to pray for you.”

A strident *amen* rang out from the rear of the building, followed by snickers. Molly stared straight ahead, the stained-glass window blurring through her unshed tears. Her heart pounded, causing the lace ruff at her neckline to tremble. Did he mean to hurt her? She bit her lip. Bailey? The one person she thought she could trust?

Her parents stood with the rest of the congregation, and she had no choice but to follow as they pulled her up with them. She submitted, joined their hands, and followed the prescribed procedure to reach the end of the service.

How could she go outside for the potluck and pretend everything was fine? Impossible. She’d hoped against hope she could stall her father’s plans long enough for Bailey to make his fortune. Never had she considered the possibility that Bailey might give up before she did.

Without him, her struggle was over. She’d fought for the freedom to make her own decisions, but without Bailey would she have the courage to continue?

The benediction ended and Molly dropped onto the wooden bench.

“Mr. Lovelace?” Russell James gripped the end of the pew in both hands as if it were a shield. He’d been her father’s bookkeeper her whole life and was still naïve enough to believe it was his good fortune. “If I may be of assistance . . . Please don’t worry about what people say. Their opinions are fickle at best.”

Molly’s father glared at him. “You should look after your own family, Russell, before you attempt to guide mine.”

“Yes, sir,” he stammered. “Please don’t take offense. I was

trying to help. I didn't mean to compare your daughter to Michael."

"I'm getting the surrey," her father said. "If you'll excuse me—"

"We aren't staying for dinner?" her mother asked. "I had Lola make extra. . . ." His look of annoyance silenced her. "Well, I'm not staying in here." She rose to follow her husband out the door, Russell James trailing with a caboose of apologies.

Molly's thoughts whirled. What must everyone think of her? The picnic tables would hum with the story all afternoon. She winced at the laughter floating through the open window and wondered if it was at her expense.

The room grew quieter and quieter until Molly knew everyone had gone, everyone except the man sitting in the section to her left, fourth row from the front.

"And you think I'm going to let you escort me to Lockhart after that?" She kept her eyes on the pulpit.

"No, I don't. That's the point."

She heard Bailey take a deep breath.

"And even if you would, your father wouldn't. At least that's what I'm counting on."

She turned weary eyes to him, surprised to see concern etched on his face. If he wasn't mad at her, why'd he go and do that? She'd fought for him, defended him, and now he was abandoning her. Her arms still twitched with the longing to knock his head off of his broad shoulders. Without that baby face he wouldn't get far.

Bailey picked up a paper fan from the back of the pew and slapped it against his hand as he made his way to her. "I know you're mad, but this is best. I want to make you and your family proud, and it's gonna take some work before I'm good enough for you."

“That’s what I don’t understand. Why jilt me now that you’re free to leave the ranch and make a name for yourself?”

“Because I want to do this right,” he said. “I’m starting something new, and I don’t want to mess it up. God can’t bless my efforts when we’re carrying on like we do.”

Molly stood. “Then move to Lockhart. Get a job. You could’ve done that without calling me down in church.”

“I didn’t mention you, but it’s just as well that you jumped in. I need some accountability, because no private decision is strong enough to keep us apart. We act like we’re fixing to get hitched, and we both know it’s going to be a spell before that’s possible.” His eyelashes, so thick Molly coveted them, lowered as he rotated the paper fan in his hands. “I think of you in ways a man shouldn’t think of a woman unless she’s his wife. You’ve got to give me some room.”

Her toes curled. How could he want her so badly, yet be willing to give her up? Inhaling all that trail dust had addled his brain.

“The scales have never been in your favor, Bailey. I thought Father might relent if the business at the sawmill picks up, but how can I plead your case now? You’ve thrown the balance completely askew.”

“Wait for me, Molly. I finally have my pa’s blessing. He’s even helping me find a position in Lockhart. As soon as I’m settled, I’ll come calling, but I can’t court you now. I can’t keep stepping out with you until we’re ready to wed. Will you wait?”

With an explanation to her parents looming, Molly wasn’t in the mood to make promises to the man who’d humiliated her, no matter how regretful he might sound. “After this disgrace my parents will marry me off to the first gassy old man who wanders into our parlor. And maybe it’s for the best. Maybe I’d be happier with someone steady.” Molly tugged

at the bottom of her bodice firmly enough that the stitches popped. Here she was, lying in church. Well, she might as well make it a whopper.

“Why would I want to marry a cowboy anyway? Stinking boots, barn manners, and rough . . .” She looked at his hands and couldn’t bring herself to disparage them in any fashion. Not when she wanted nothing more than to feel them holding her close. “By year’s end, my father will be marching me down an aisle, and it won’t matter who’s waiting at the altar as long as the arrangement benefits him.”

“Then every kiss I take is stolen from another man’s wife.” He dropped the fan into the slot in the back of the pew before gracing her with a sly smile. “But you won’t be bullied into marrying some old goat. Remember when you stood down those townies pestering my puppy? You were quite the little spitfire.”

She remembered. Every childhood memory of hers included Bailey. He was like the comfortable old wing chair in her room—always there when she wanted him but not essential. Then last year her clumsy attempts to win his cousin Weston had changed their relationship and revealed that Bailey was who she really needed. In the year they’d been courting, he’d gone from a diversion to her mainstay, her future. She couldn’t imagine going on without him, even if it was temporary.

Molly hadn’t realized how close he was leaning until he straightened suddenly. She turned and caught Reverend Stoker peering in the window. He jerked his chin toward the door, and they both understood.

“More time, Molly. That’s all I’m asking. I want to do right by you.” His dark eyes traveled to her lips. “It’ll be worth the wait. I promise.” And he left her alone before the empty altar.

Molly twisted a blond curl to her mouth and chewed as

his footsteps echoed against whitewashed walls. If her parents would allow it, she would walk outside and say yes, and Reverend Stoker would see them wed before the pecan pies were broken out. The vision lingered a second longer than she'd expected, but her wistfulness was replaced once again by frustration.

She lifted her chin and straightened her bonnet. Even if it meant locking herself in her wardrobe, she wouldn't moon after him. How could she? He'd humiliated her in front of half the town. Prairie Lea gossip would be Lockhart news by Monday. No. He'd have to come to her—and not with empty pockets this time.

She'd been willing to accept a poor man despite her parents' dire warnings. She'd begun to imagine a life without the luxuries necessary for a lady. She'd grown less concerned with the latest fashions and coiffures. She'd even ventured out once on a promenade in mismatched gloves.

Molly shuddered. After waiting a year for him to be released from his familial duties, she'd known that she'd have to wait a little longer for him to get established—but not that she'd be waiting alone.

Waiting and bracing for a bombardment of parentally approved suitors.

Reckless man! Even if she did manage to resist her parents, how did Bailey expect her to carry on without him? How long before she stopped looking for him over every crowd in town, wondering if he'd managed to sneak away from the ranch to visit?

Only Molly's insistence and her parents' long-standing friendship with the Garners had prevented them from banishing Bailey outright, but now she'd be gussied up and sold to the highest bidder.

Did he have any idea what he had done?



“I have half a mind to make him marry you. It’d serve him right,” said Thomas Lovelace.

Molly watched the stripes on her father’s shirt expand and contract with every labored breath from her seat in the back of the surrey. This wasn’t how she’d imagined her ride back to Lockhart. Usually the journey had more to recommend it—like a handsome, cheerful driver, for instance.

The grassland between Prairie Lea and Lockhart offered little to distract her parents from their tirade. They had no interest in the longhorns eyeing their trek across the barren winter fields or the jackrabbit bounding over the knots of dried grass. Rebuking their daughter would be their sole diversion for five miles yet.

“Thank goodness the boy’s got more sense than I gave him credit for. You’d make a poor man miserable,” her father said.

“It was this surrey, wasn’t it?” Adele Lovelace’s gloved hand caressed the leather bench. “Do you know how long I pleaded before your father would purchase it for me?”

Molly grasped the support from the second-row bench and thrust herself forward between her parents’ shoulders. “Your surrey remains untainted, Mother. Of all the things to worry about after I’ve been humiliated before the whole world. We didn’t do anything, or not much. Bailey’s just upset I won’t marry him.”

“After all the music lessons and deportment classes, how could he imagine you’d squander your prospects on him?” Mrs. Lovelace shook her head and clucked softly. “I’m glad your brother isn’t here to see your shame.”

But Nicholas would hear about it, no doubt. Although his new business supplying lumber to the railroad kept him away from home, his partnership with his father’s mill ensured

frequent visits and correspondence. Which busybody's letter would reach him first?

The horse slowed its pace as if waiting for redirection. Molly looked up. The pecan grove. She kicked her boot against the bottom of the front bench, startling the horse and earning a suspicious glare from her father as he struggled to keep the horse from wandering toward the copse of trees.

"So now that Bailey Garner has removed himself from your consideration, are you prepared to entertain more appropriate options?" her mother asked.

Molly didn't make a peep. Her head churned with possible candidates and how to avoid them. What would it take to outwit her parents? How could she keep her freedom without an outright rebellion?

"It was our mistake pushing you toward Weston when he obviously wasn't interested," her mother said, "and now we need to make up for lost time. You aren't getting any younger."

Molly adjusted her bonnet as a precaution against freckles.

"Remember," her father continued, "your stay in Lockhart is dependent on your finding a husband. If you aren't becoming acquainted with the right sort of gentlemen, you might as well come home. No sense spending all that money on gowns if no one appreciates them. Besides, unless the sawmill does better, there won't be any money for gowns."

Molly's ears perked at the welcomed topic change. She scooted to the edge of her bench. "What's causing the mill to be unprofitable? Prairie Lea is rebuilding from the fire. Nicholas is sending railroad contracts our way. Lumber prices are stronger than ever."

"Just because you have a little job in the courthouse doesn't mean you understand enterprise." Thomas squared his shoulders.

“You mustn’t allow your position to fill your heart with self-importance. It’s unbecoming in a lady,” her mother said.

“I merely asked a question based on solid information. I fail to see what role pride plays in this.”

“You fail to see what a drought can do,” her father huffed. “If the river wasn’t low, we could float the logs to the mill. As it is, I’m feeding mule teams and paying drivers to bring in the raw material. Nicholas’s railroad contract is locked in, so we’re operating at a loss.”

For all of Molly’s life her father had claimed they were losing money. Made her wonder how rich he’d been in the beginning.

“If you want to help your father,” her mother said, “go back to Lockhart and find a man with income.”

“And connections.” Thomas said. “Someone with capital who’s interested in investing.”

“And, of course, a society leader. We aren’t completely merciless, Molly. There’d be something in it for you.”

Molly frowned. This was no spontaneous discussion.

“Who is it?” She crossed her arms and settled in for a fight. “If you’re going to stick a hook in me and throw me in the creek, I’d like to know for whom we’re fishing.”

Her father pressed his substantial weight back into the surrey seat, causing it to bump into Molly’s knees. “The banker in Lockhart has a son.”

“Mr. Fenton!” Molly covered her eyes. “Mr. Fenton is courting Prue McGraw.”

“The blacksmith’s daughter?” Adele *tsked*. “That’s precisely the problem. His parents do not view the match favorably.”

“You talked to them? No, I can’t come between Fenton and Prue. She’s my friend, the court reporter of whom I’ve spoken. She’s been teaching me shorthand so I can take her job when she gets married.”



Her father chuckled. “Don’t let her fool you. The salary for the court reporter is chicken feed compared to your allowance as Mr. Fenton’s wife.”

Allowance? Molly clenched her reticule tightly. No other word could ruffle her feathers so. Every week she brought home her wages from the courthouse and handed them over to her father. Every week she returned to Lockhart with an allowance from him because he *allowed* her to keep a portion of her own money.

She suddenly filled her chest with a long draw of crisp October air. Would being a wife provide her with any freedom? She studied her mother’s tightly wound coif in front of her. Probably not, but what other choice did she have? Anything was preferable to being treated like a child. A girl child, especially.

Stealing Mr. Fenton from Prue was out of the question. Molly wouldn’t betray her friend. Besides, Mr. Fenton’s devotion to Prue McGraw couldn’t be shaken. He, at least, was safe from her parents’ schemes, but whom would they settle on next?

Molly clasped her hands together. Would Fenton willingly stand in as a decoy? She needn’t worry about losing her heart to him, and he definitely had no interest in her. Perhaps an understanding could be reached with the banker’s son that would pacify her parents and give Bailey time to get established.

Would Mr. Fenton play along . . . and would Prue understand?





LOCKHART, TEXAS  
NOVEMBER 1879

To Do List:

- *Write Mother a scintillating account of dinner with Mr. Fenton.*
- *Buy new tortoiseshell combs.*
- *Learn when Bailey is moving to town.*

Living in the cultural center of Caldwell County agreed with Molly. Ever since Mr. Myers led that first herd of cattle up what they now called the Chisholm Trail, cowboys and cattlemen had flooded the city. Businesses prospered and the streets bustled. Although the cowhands could get rowdy in certain areas of town, the ladies of Lockhart were moving it toward gentility and sophistication, and Molly wanted to be in on every step. To her mind, the only advantage that quiet little Prairie Lea held was a certain man who'd promised to relocate any day now.

Yet he hadn't appeared.

Mr. Fenton entered the dining room and scowled as the

waiter pointed in her direction. Molly had put off this rendezvous as long as she could, hoping that Bailey would renew his suit, but it'd been three weeks, and she hadn't heard a word from him. She closed her journal and hid it in her reticule as the banker's son stalked toward her, taking long strides with short legs. Mr. Fenton barely halted before he collided with her round table.

"I suppose I must make an attempt at civility. If it weren't for my disdain for ungentlemanly behavior, this situation could certainly provoke me toward churlishness." He made a big show of looking around the hotel's dining room, rotating his shoulders as if his chin were fused to his chest. "Fortunately, the presence of witnesses bolsters my restraint."

Molly leaned her elbows on the table. "Please, Mr. Fenton, be seated. There'll be enough said about us dining together as it is. We gain nothing by feigning misery."

"You may feign. My pain is real." But he pulled out the chair and sat, doing his best to avoid her gaze. "The lengths to which we submit to pacify our families . . ."

Molly's eyes widened at the insult. My, what a tantrum he could throw. How dare he act condescending. He was courting the blacksmith's daughter, for crying aloud.

She fought the desire to retaliate. Less than a month had passed since her last public dispute with a man. She'd have to use a different approach.

"If it weren't for my parents, I wouldn't be here, and I assume you are in a similar situation. If you want to revolt, you have my blessing, but please spare me your unpleasantness. I am not your enemy."

Molly had spoken as sweetly as possible, and still his wide eyebrows rose. "I wondered why, despite your well-favored appearance, your parents felt they needed to sweeten the deal with part ownership in the mill. Now I understand. No doubt

your sharp tongue has chased off several offers.” He studied her as he waved the waiter over. “Miss McGraw would never accuse me of being unpleasant.”

Molly smiled at the waiter, taking a moment to bask in the appreciation reflected in the man’s eyes, but was she only attractive to poor men? Well, she’d promised her parents she’d give Fenton a chance. They couldn’t fault her if the results didn’t satisfy. Besides, knowing she had a suitor might build a fire under Bailey. It’d been weeks and she had no news of his progress.

“Prue is an angel, on that we can agree. And you’ve probably never had a reason to be unpleasant with her.”

“True. She is the most gentle, most sincere woman I’ve ever met. It pains me to think of what this is doing to her.” His jaw grew so tight that his ears moved.

“I’ve tried to explain to Prue, Mr. Fenton. I’ve promised her I’m not attempting to steal your affections and that you definitely have no interest in me, but she doesn’t understand the pressures visited upon us.” Molly slid her napkin off the table and spread it in her lap as the memory of Prue’s tear-streaked face appeared before her. “Surely if we both reassure her, we’ll make it through this trial without further damage. Then we can honestly tell our families that we became acquainted and have no interest in furthering the relationship.”

“And hopefully such a declaration can be made before our association becomes noticed—”

“Mr. Fenton, I’d hoped to find you about today.” Judge Rice’s periwinkle eyes peered from a weather-lined face. Like a courtly gentleman, he bowed slightly to Molly before continuing. “It’s come to my attention that my young stenographer is suffering from some form of distress, and I thought you might be able to enlighten me.”

“She is?” Fenton sprang to his feet. “Where is she?”

“No, son, not of that nature.” With a hand on the shoulder he guided Fenton back to his seat. “She’s moping about, sighing as ladies are wont to do when grieved.” His keen eyes rested on Molly. “I’m sure you understand, Miss Lovelace. Perhaps you would have insight as to what ails her.”

Molly kept her chin lifted. Of course she knew, and so did the judge. “Perhaps her father is interfering with matters of the heart. That seems to be a frequent culprit these days.”

“Mr. McGraw? I think not, but I hope that we, her friends, can ease her discomfort.” He rapped his knuckles against the table with the same hand that usually held the gavel. “I won’t keep you from your meal or your . . . uh, conversation . . . but I offer that food for thought should you be able to relieve her distress. Good day.”

They both sat, chastened, until the keen gentleman left the room.

“Insufferable,” muttered Mr. Fenton. “I’ll admit you are a victim of the same parental ailment that plagues me, but how can we proceed?”

Molly’s mouth lifted on one side. She needed to be alert to walk this tightrope, and holding grudges exhausted her. “We will proceed together, Mr. Fenton. That might be the quickest way to get apart.”



Bailey Garner sat high in his saddle, enjoying the prestige of riding through Lockhart at his cousin’s side. Tipped hats, deferential nods—people respected Weston Garner, and Bailey hoped someday to be as highly regarded as his eldest cousin, former employer, and mentor. No wonder Molly’s parents had hoped Weston would favor their daughter. He’d been surprised that Weston had shown no interest in Molly, but maybe she’d been too young for the old man. Downright

crotchety at times, he was. Still, Bailey was glad when his aunt Louise returned from Mexico with that beautiful widow, Rosa. The Lovelaces never would've allowed Molly to step out with him until Weston was spoken for. Now with a wife and a newborn son, Weston was well settled—another reason Bailey envied him.

The Lovelaces, as well of most of Caldwell County, held the Garner family in high regard. Coming from South Carolina before the war, the Garner boys had claimed a large spread that grew every year. His cousin Weston, old enough to merit the title “Uncle” from Bailey’s little sisters, had prospered on his ranch, Palmetto. Weston’s sister, Eliza, and her husband, Jake, were working the land that they’d purchased from his aunt Louise when her marriage to the shop owner moved her to town.

Bailey’s parents, George and Mary Garner, lived nearby and ran sheep with the help of his brothers, but they never seemed to get ahead like the rest of the family and often relied on their relatives to make ends meet.

“Is your mother’s family expecting you?” Weston asked.

“Yes, sir. Uncle Matthew’s got me a job, and Aunt Frances is putting me up. I’m all set.”

Weston swerved closer to avoid a wagon that pulled into the street. “I guess you’ve prayed through this, but it seems like a contradiction, if you ask me. You swear off Molly, and then you move to Lockhart. Don’t know but what you aren’t playing with fire.”

“Believe me, I’ve wondered aplenty if I’m doing the right thing, but this seems best. There’s no future for me on the ranch, not with two brothers who’ll want their share. I’ve always known I wanted to move to town and have a career. Now that Samuel and Tuck can take up the slack, I’m free to make my fortune.”

“So you’re doing it for your gal, but doing it without your gal?”

“It’s like to drive me crazy not talking to her, but we needed to take a few steps back to get on the right path again. Besides, I don’t need any distractions, because until I can support Molly, it’s clear that God has said, ‘Not yet.’” He saw Weston’s shoulders twitch with mirth. “All right, maybe Molly’s parents said it, too, but I’ll keep my distance until God changes their minds or my income, because I’m hooked. Ever since primer school when she whooped everyone at arithmetic drills, I knew she was the girl for me.”

“Of all the credentials I’ve heard for a wife, that’s got to be one of the strangest.”

Bailey was no good at sums, but he could decipher Molly, and she knew it. Long ago she’d given up trying to keep secrets from him. She needed him. And he needed to be needed.

Bailey’s knees tightened around the saddle as they approached the hotel. He couldn’t keep the doubt from crawling back. Did Molly remember why he was leaving her alone?

“It’s a brave move to risk losing your girl.” Weston reined his horse toward the hitching post. “One caution, though. Don’t get discouraged if you stumble. Sometimes we have to deal with the same temptations time and time again.”

“We’re supposed to be ‘more than conquerors,’” Bailey protested.

“Conquerors can lose a few battles along the way. Just yesterday I was talking to your pa—”

Bailey dismounted and looped the reins tightly over the hitching post, trying to avoid a reciting of his pa’s story. They’d almost lost their ranch and endangered his aunt Louise’s farm because of his father’s love of cards. He didn’t need Weston to remind him of his family’s embarrassment. George Garner was a fine man. His pa loved him like the dickens, but



Bailey was made of sterner stuff. Thank the Lord he didn't inherit the same weakness.

"I'm starved." Bailey nodded to the wide hotel with the real second story. "This place looks good." And smelled good, too. His stomach gurgled at the meaty aromas wafting out the swinging batwing doors. Aunt Frances wasn't expecting him until suppertime, and with her houseful of children he knew better than to show up unannounced and hungry.

Bailey followed Weston into the restaurant and nearly bumped into his back when he stopped abruptly. Weston turned around.

"Let's go to the Hungry Drover. It won't be as full."

"I don't mind. Got to get used to the hustle and bustle of a crowd if I'm going to live in town." Bailey stepped past his cousin, afraid he was about to dig in his heels.

And there she sat.

Molly spotted him at the same moment.

Bailey groaned as he took measure of the uptight man with the pinched face and beetle-brown sack suit. It didn't take a genius to figure what she was up to.

"No wonder you threw on the brakes."

"I tried to warn you." His older cousin avoided controversy like preachers avoided the Minor Prophets, and for once Bailey was grateful.

"Weston? Is that you?" The man's voice traveled over the din to lasso them.

The cousins exchanged weary glances, but Weston was trapped.

With one last dark look at him, Weston turned. "Hello, Mr. Fenton, Miss Lovelace. How y'all doing?"

Bailey had no choice but to follow as Weston did his duty. Molly's gown, the same dusky color as a rain cloud, suited his mood. He'd anticipated her parents would present her

with new suitors, but not that she'd fold so easily. At least her companion didn't look pleased. If watching Molly talk to other men got this Fenton character riled, he'd better poke his eyes out.

"Mr. Fenton, my cousin Bailey Garner."

The man stood and offered his hand.

"Mr. Fenton works at the bank." Molly set her fork down next to her plate and wiped her fingertips on the napkin. "Our fathers are business associates."

He should've known. Bailey shook hands with the man and then tried to wipe off the contact on his canvas britches.

"Pleased to meet you." But he wasn't.

"I heard you're building a new house," Weston said.

"Yes, it's nearing completion."

"Is that the new two-story with the beautiful mansard roof on San Antonio Street?" Molly asked, leaning halfway across the table.

Fenton nodded.

"It's magnificent."

Bailey narrowed his eyes. Was she sincere or merely pretending for his benefit? It didn't matter. Mr. Fenton squirmed like a worm on a hook. He looked longingly at his plate of roast beef.

"Yes, well, if you'll excuse me, Weston, Mr. Garner. My dinner hour is nearly over, and I've yet to finish my meal."

Bailey looked up to see Molly scowling at him. She narrowed her eyes and then cooed to Fenton with the subtlety of an auctioneer, "It's a pity you don't have time to converse, but I guess the bank can hardly do without you. Perhaps we can visit with the Mr. Garners some other time."

She paused, offering them the opportunity to voice their regrets.

Boy, was she putting on a show, trying to herd them all

exactly where she wanted them. But Bailey wouldn't be led by the nose. Time to stampede.

He picked up an empty chair from the nearest table with one hand and slung it between his legs, dropping into it backwards. "There's nowhere in the world that I'd rather be than here, becoming better acquainted with Mr. Fenton."

Molly's eyes widened. "Oh?"

"Yes, I've long been fascinated with the banking business. I'm sure it's a breathtaking and dangerous venture. And your house, Mr. Fenton?" He batted his eyes and raised the pitch of his voice an octave. "Oh, I so admire everyone who lives on San Antonio Street."

Molly's attempts to incinerate him with her eyes failed. He was fireproof.

"Bailey," Weston warned.

Bailey cringed, not sure by which piece of his anatomy Weston might drag him out, but his mentor could hardly act as barbaric in the eatery as he would've on the ranch.

Weston nudged the leg of his chair. "There's not room at the table for four. Let them finish alone."

But Mr. Fenton blinked first. He smirked at Molly although he spoke to Weston. "No, please. Take my place. It's an honor I'm willing to relinquish. Please pass the seat on to the next man when he arrives."

"You must disregard him, Mr. Fenton. He is leaving." She got to her feet, but her protests were losing strength.

Fenton tossed a bill on the table, dipped his head to Weston, ignored Bailey, and left the dining room as fast as his rounded-toe shoes allowed.

"You ran off my escort. Father will not be happy," Molly said.

But she didn't look upset. Despite the hand on her hip, she seemed relieved. Her eyes sparkled and her pert mouth tilted.

“I’m trying to help you out,” Bailey said.

“If you wanted to help, you’d be building a house on San Antonio Street instead of lollygagging about town.” But the only work she was doing was twisting a blond curl around her shapely finger.

Then she noticed Weston.

Bailey couldn’t help but be charmed by the change in her. He was captivated by the thought that she had expressions and mannerisms only he was privy to. Decorum replaced the eagerness on her face. She resumed her proper poise, but Weston didn’t notice the difference.

“Won’t you join us?” Bailey reclaimed his seat. “Weston can chaperone, so I should be safe from your charms.”

She rolled her eyes. “I must return to the courthouse. Employment seems to be a rare commodity these days. I don’t want to jeopardize my own.”

With a nod at Weston, Molly clomped across the room so strongly that her square heels could’ve left indentions on the oak floor.

Weston took a seat across from Bailey as the batwing door swung shut behind her. Leaning back, he crossed his legs at the ankles and frowned at his charge from across the table.

“You’re playing with fire, Bailey. Playing with fire.”



The three-story sandstone courthouse looked like a castle, complete with turrets and a waving flag at the pinnacle. Entering through the red sandstone arch as the giant clock chimed, Molly could almost imagine that she was a princess returning to a celebration in her honor. Smiling, dipping her head, she could keep the fantasy alive until she crossed the golden tiles in the entry and reached the land office.

The wooden door eased open just enough for Molly to squeeze her lobster-tail bustle through. Open it any further and the movement would be visible from Mr. Travis's office, and getting caught meant—

“Miss Lovelace, did you not hear the courthouse clock chime one? There was a vacancy at your desk when the event occurred. Again.” Mr. Travis's beard hung on sagging skin and hid his jaw completely.

“Yes, sir. I'm sorry.” Molly untied her hat and exchanged it for her inky apron that hung on the pegboard. She pressed a hand to her rosy cheek, willing it to fade, along with the memory of her tumultuous dinner. Hopefully her father would think she'd suffered enough and wouldn't require her to make another attempt with the prickly Mr. Fenton. Dinner would've been a complete loss if it weren't for Bailey's appearance. And what was even better, he'd seen her with another man. Complete triumph.

“Being sorry doesn't get the work done. I answer to the taxpayers of Caldwell County, and I can't justify spending their funds on workers who neglect their stations.”

Behind Mr. Travis, Molly's co-worker Carrie rolled her green eyes and flapped her hand open and closed like a duck's beak quack, quack, quacking.

“. . . empty all the waste bins after hours—that means on your own time. And see that you aren't tardy again.”

“Yes, sir,” Molly repeated.

As soon as the latch on his office door clicked into place, Carrie slid off her stool and rushed to Molly's work station.

“How was dinner? What did he do? Did he talk about Prue?”

Molly unbuttoned four buttons on her right wrist and pushed back the cuff. If only her situation excited her as much as it did Carrie.

“I survived. That’s all I’m going to say.” Molly touched her neckline and straightened her hair.

Carrie’s sharp eyes searched her face. “What happened? You’re hiding something.”

“It wasn’t as bad as I expected. That’s all.”

“Do you think he’ll leave Prue? He didn’t make advances, did he?”

“Don’t be absurd.” Molly shuddered at the thought. How high a price was she willing to pay to please her father?

Turning her back to Carrie, she took the stack of letters delivered during the noon hour, opened the top envelope, and extracted the payment. The smell of ink and the newly bound ledger cleared her head. Numbers were faithful friends. They didn’t expect you to waste your youth waiting. They didn’t tempt you and then embarrass you publicly. They stayed on their paper until you had time for them, and they always followed the rules.

“Mr. Saul Nimenko, sixteen dollars and twenty-two cents.” Molly dipped her quill in the inkpot and scratched the entry onto the page. Then she slid off the stool and followed Carrie to the wall of bookshelves. Land parcels in the northwest section of Prairie Lea—that was the volume she needed. Carrie took the heavy book for the south central region of Lockhart in both hands and stepped out of her way.

“Northwest, northwest,” she whispered to herself. She’d never met Mr. Saul Nimenko, but if his property tax was a measly \$16.22, she didn’t need to meet him. She’d do just as well with Bailey.

The rat.

The office door squeaked open, and a sturdy brunette peeked around the corner.

Prue.

Molly ducked her head as Carrie silently waved her friend

over. Former friend. The lady would certainly never claim any association with her now.

“Prue, what are you doing here?” Carrie set the heavy book on her table without a noise. “Is court out of session?”

“The jury is in deliberations, so I slipped away.” She smoothed her dark skirt, and with another furtive glance toward Mr. Travis’s door, she leaned across the counter to whisper, “How are my friends in the land office doing?”

Molly lowered her eyes. She felt bad enough already. She mumbled a greeting, trying not to recount Judge Rice’s words. Evidently Prue didn’t believe that any association between her and Fenton was merely endured. She sighed. It *was* strange that a man like Mr. Fenton had become besotted with the blacksmith’s daughter. Molly expected her to attract a nice humble boy—someone as good as gold and shabby as burlap—not a connoisseur like the banker.

“Your friends are doing quite well, thank you,” Carrie said. “At least Molly is. She dined with Mr. Fenton today.”

Molly groaned. Didn’t Carrie understand how hurtful her comments were? Did she enjoy the discomfort she was causing?

Prue’s large brown eyes rested on Molly. She pressed her hand against her olive shirtwaist and swallowed slowly. “Did he have his roast beef?”

Molly nodded.

“Good. If he eats anything else for dinner he suffers from indigestion. He’d prefer to eat at home, but his kitchen is under construction, and there’s no one to cook for him.”

“There will be soon, if Molly has her way,” Carrie said.

“Carrie, stop,” Molly said.

“Why? Prue’s being a sport. If Mr. Fenton prefers you, it’s best he realizes it before he finds himself bound in holy matrimony to the wrong person.”

Prue's face turned gray. "I should go. The jury may have reached a verdict." She clasped her hands together in a martyr's pose. "But I have a favor to ask, Molly. If you have a free evening, would you come for a visit? Come for supper if you're tired of the fare at the boardinghouse."

Visit the McGraws? Did Prue really want her there, or was she trying to increase Molly's guilt? In the long run, it didn't really matter. She could hardly refuse.

"Thank you, Prue. I'd like that."

And she would if the weight of her father's schemes didn't rest so heavily on her conscience.

Carrie, being free from culpability, had no compunction about voicing her opinion, which she did on their walk home after work.

"Why doesn't Prue say what she thinks? She must be fuming. I can imagine how I'd feel if you'd gone after a beau of mine in the same way." The girls linked arms as they crossed the street in front of the courthouse and made their way to the boarded sidewalk of the square.

"But I'm not. Not really. It's all been arranged by our parents."

They made a pretty picture promenading before the storefronts, or so Molly thought as she watched their reflection in the windows they passed. She straightened her back so as not to appear slouchy next to Carrie's flawless posture. And did her charcoal ensemble appear drab next to Carrie's lemon shirtwaist?

"She should've seen it coming," Carrie continued. "I can't imagine why Mr. Fenton has put up with her mousy ways for so long. She should claw your eyes out. Who wants a spineless woman?"

"Believe me, I wish she'd fight for him," Molly said.

Carrie's long strides moved Molly too fast to produce the



correct swing in her skirts. Her hat bobbed as she tried to keep up, Mother's deportment lessons cast aside.

"I can't fault their logic," Carrie agreed. "What business does a blacksmith's daughter have with a family like the Fentons? She'd be better off with that cowboy, Bailey."

Molly skidded to a stop.

"Don't be ridiculous. Bailey and Prue would never suit. He's so . . . dangerous. Wild. He'd scare her knickers off."

"Bailey? He seems like more of a goody-goody. Too tame for me. Unless . . . unless Bailey has some potent charm you've kept secret."

The hair on the back of Molly's neck stood at an unbidden memory. Stunned, Molly dropped her handbag on the boarded sidewalk. Where had that chill come from? So startled was she that she swooped to snatch it off the ground before considering the right angle for her descent. Carrie didn't release her hold on Molly's arm until the last minute, throwing her off balance and causing her to fall on her hands and knees.

"Be careful," Carrie snorted. With a firm grip, she hauled Molly to her feet. She held the errant handbag while Molly dusted herself off and straightened her skirts over the boning underneath. "Don't look now, but we're being observed."

Molly's furious arranging immediately ceased, and she assumed an air of a queen inspecting her . . . what did queens inspect? Who knew? Molly didn't have time to read old books while a man like the one standing in front of the bank roamed the earth.

At first glance she was convinced he was golden. Perfection incarnate. But as she scrutinized him, she realized her opinion was formed more by his bowler hat and silk cravat than his physical attributes. His frock coat was fuller than any she'd seen before, and his trousers were heroically striped, making her workday dress look dull by comparison.

She couldn't see the color of his hair because of his hat but assumed it to be the same shade as his light-brown moustache, unless it was heavily waxed. Yes, the part above his full lips evidenced wax. She smiled. Good grooming meant good breeding. Between the hat, his gloves, and his spats, very little of him was actually visible—only lively eyes and an arrogant jaw.

A queen inspecting her noble courtiers. That's what Molly would inspect if she were queen.

Aware they couldn't return blatant stares, Molly and Carrie resumed their stroll, but not before Molly noted the cane and thick gold chain leading undoubtedly to a heavy pocket watch.

"An interesting development," Carrie said. "Not that he'll pay me any mind. He only had eyes for you."

Molly pretended to pick lint off her shoulder to get another look. He remained in front of the bank, folding bills into a thick wallet. "Let's pray my parents don't hear about him."