

# **GHOST LOVE**

by

Eileen Sheehan

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NOTE: This eBook contains a "Sneak Peek" of **Vampire Iniquity** by Eileen Sheehan.

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*Succubus: A demoness from Hell whose sole purpose is to drain the souls of men by having sex with them.*

*Ref. Urban Dictionary*

## PROLOGUE

Spring 1889

“Miss Bellamy! Miss Bellamy!” The teenage boy called, breathlessly, as he raced up the hillside as fast as his long and lanky legs would let him. When he reached the top, he placed his hand on his thighs to support his torso as he focused on regulating his breathing. “Miss Bellamy.” He swallowed hard while speaking. “Your father is mighty angry to find you left the settlement, once again. I fear you will not fare well if he discovers that you wandered this far away.”

“Call me Lucille or Lucy. Anything, but Miss Bellamy. This is not the first time I have asked this of you, Charles.”

The young man’s face reddened. “I will try to remember, Mi... Lucille.”

Lucy looked down upon the valley below her. Patches of green grass as far as the eye could see struggled against the melting snow as winter made way for spring. Off in the distance, the rugged mountains that had forced them to make camp during one of the harshest winters Montana territory had seen eight years earlier clung to the snow that they coveted year-round at their highest points.

They’d learned of a French settlement not far from Vancouver while booking passage west with a small wagon train and grew excited; as did a few companion French families with every conversation that took place about it. After many long months of grueling travel across country and the unimaginable hardships that

came with it -including the death of her mother and younger brother- many settlers decided to put down roots in the valley they'd been forced to winter in when the thaw finally allowed them to travel on; her father being one of them.

Using his business savvy, he quickly assessed that the best way to live a comfortable life in such a remote mountainside location was to own and operate a small trading post. Little by little, the word spread. The little trading post was being well received by miners and loggers for miles around who appreciated the convenience of not having to trek into Fort Benson for basic staples.

It was already late April. Winter was quick to come and slow to leave in the valley nestled in the mountains, but that didn't stop the settlers from focusing on building a life for themselves. What proved to be a greater obstacle was the lack of law, unscrupulous men searching for gold, and the skirmishes between the Blackfoot and the Crow Indian tribes. Even so, Antoine Bellamy insisted that the young settlement of Muddy Creek in the Montana territory was as good a place as any to live in such a savage land.

He'd often spoken of returning to their little country estate in France, but Lucy knew that it was simply talk. He thought it was a secret, but she'd known since the afternoon when they packed a few of their most precious belongings and secretly fled to the ship that brought them across the expansive ocean that they could never return. She had no idea what her father did, but he was running from the law for certain. Returning to France would mean his death. He knew it and so did she. In fact, this great secret thing that he did was the reason they'd traveled to such an unsettled and uncivilized

territory. Here, he was beyond the reach of the law. More than once, she'd let her imagination walk her through scenarios that would meet the criteria of such seriousness as to force them to flee. Thievery? Debts? Murder?

Seeing the Statue of Liberty standing tall and proud as their ship made its way toward Ellis Island had been breathtaking. She was certain that she wouldn't see anything so majestic and grand for the rest of her life, but she was wrong. The scene before her as she stood on the flat-topped boulder with the crisp mountain air making merry with her full head of long, blonde hair had to be just as grand and majestic, if not more so.

"Lucille, please. I told your father that you went to the creek to see about catching some fish for supper. He's expecting me to return with you shortly."

Lucy pulled the fur collar of her coat tighter around her neck, but not before a gust of cold wind managed to invade the warmth it provided and cause her body to shudder. "What will you say when we return with no fish and no fishing rod?"

Charles grinned at his own cleverness. "Ah, but I have four fish keeping cold in the creek that I caught early this morning. My mother and I only need two. I can give you two of them for your supper."

Lucy smiled. "You are a clever boy."

"I'm not a boy, I'm a man," he grumbled as he hopped off the boulder and started down the hill without waiting for her.

At seventeen, Lucy was only one year older than Charles. It was true that she should no longer refer to him as a boy, but he was still a few years short of qualifying as a man. She sometimes felt sorry for



him. He'd lost his father and older brother on the trip west. He and his mother were all that was left to make up a family and he was forced into the position of being the man of the family. The pressures of such a responsibility pushed him into wanting to become a real man and take on the responsibilities that went along with it; including marriage. While she longed to be a young girl again, he couldn't wait to become a man.

Where circumstances had thrown Charles into the position of being the man of the family, they'd thrown Lucille into becoming the woman of hers. She found it to be tiresome and confining. Her father monitored her every move for fear that some young buck would come along and steal her most precious commodity that was meant for the husband she questioned would ever come; her maidenhead.

Without a female in the family to explain just exactly what a woman's maidenhead was and how it was stolen, Lucy was left to her own devices to figure it out. She had a feeling it was connected to that time of the month when she bled. Molly Ambers had been on hand for her to run to when the blasted bleeding started. She'd assured Lucy that she was far from sick and was definitely not dying. She was simply becoming a woman. She called this time her "menses" and said that most girls started their menses at a much younger age than Lucy and she should be happy she was spared the years. Sadly, Molly passed away of consumption two winters ago, and, since her father only recently started obsessing about her maidenhead, she hadn't a clue who to ask. There were other women in the settlement, but none she felt comfortable enough to discuss such a sensitive topic with.

The responsibilities of the woman in the house fell on Lucy at the tender age of fourteen, so she really didn't realize the extent that her life would have been different, had her mother lived. Although she didn't find caring for the house and tending to her father's needs to be burdensome, she had no desire to take on the role of wife of a new household. Things were running just fine as they were. She guessed that her father wasn't in a hurry to lose her any more than she was in a hurry to leave him. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so worried about her preserving her stupid maidenhead in a settlement that rarely saw an eligible, husband worthy man pass through it.

Charles was long gone before she forced herself to trek back down the hillside toward the part of the creek that she knew he favored for fishing. Her mind worked to think of something clever to say to take away the sting she'd given his sense of pride by calling him a boy. She was so preoccupied with this that she didn't hear the horses and their riders approach until they were upon her.

At a glance, she guessed there to be at least a few dozen men in the unsavory looking group. Most of them rode on, but half a dozen stayed behind. They circled her with their horses, moving quickly to and fro to prevent her from escaping while they laughed and chattered about wanting her to be friendly.

She wasn't sure why she was so frightened about the concept of being friendly to them. She was congenial to everyone who came through the settlement. It was a necessary type of retail politics. Not only was there something about the way they said the word that gave her the impression that their idea of friendly and hers wasn't the

same, but their filthy, rag tag appearance revulsed her with every step their horses took to close her into a tighter circle.

Most who came to the trading post were trappers, miners, and loggers. They were hard working men who were often in need of hygiene lessons, but they were well mannered and respectful for the most part. These characters were not only smelly and filthy, but they were bold and uncouth in their mannerism toward her.

When one of them lept off his horse and tossed her to the ground, she quickly learned what they meant by being friendly. Although, still untouched, she'd seen it done often enough with the livestock to understand what was happening.

Breath that stunk of unbrushed, rotted teeth and chewing tobacco turned her stomach as he forced his kisses upon her lips and person. The sound of tearing fabric echoed off the hillside while icy cold air assaulted her frim breasts. The snow beneath her stung her exposed flesh. She suffered pain both inside and out as each man took his turn with her; some more than once.

They not only enjoyed forcing their peckers into every orifice she possessed as hard and fast as they could, but they accompanied the sexual assaults with blows from their fists and deep, vicious bites from their filthy, rotted, teeth. By the time their lust and need for violence was satiated, she lay naked, bloody, bruised, and barely conscious on the unforgiving hillside.

The last thing she recalled before the world went black was the sound of their laughter and crude comments about what they'd done to her and the overwhelming smell of smoke coming from the settlement.

# ONE

Early Summer 1899

The settlement of Muddy Creek had long been destroyed, but that didn't stop Ian from traveling there to inspect his newly acquired property. It was part of the parcel he'd recently purchased. The Union Pacific purchased it on speculation that the railroad would go through. When a more forgiving and favorable terrain was acquired, this land was considered good for very little and, thus, sold to Ian for a very appealing price. It may not have looked like it was worth much to the railroad, but to Ian Murry it had the makings of a good and solid sheep domain to add to his already established cattle ranch.

The remains of the burned and abandoned settlement were positioned on the far west of his newly acquired thousand acres. More mountainous and hilly than his five-thousand-acre cattle ranch, it was the reason he intended to raise sheep on it. For a cattle rancher to pair his stock with sheep was unheard of in these parts and sure to cause a stir. He just hoped that stir wouldn't be initiated by fear and ignorance from his neighbors. He'd worked hard over the years to build himself up to the level of comfort and prosperity that he now enjoyed. After almost a decade of dealing with outlaws, rogue miners, and battles between the local warring Indian tribes, things had finally settled down. He wanted to keep it that way.

His ranch hand, Jackson Campbell, rode toward him while pointing to a house that looked to be still intact. "It looks like ya might be able to turn this one into the sheep herder's cabin, boss. Its got a

little singe to it, but, for the most part, it avoided the destruction most of them suffered.”

Ian looked at the house in reference. Its weathered exterior sported slightly charred patches that were often left on the exterior of buildings that were near the heart of a neighborhood fire, but the roof looked good and the walls were straight. From what he could tell, the building was large enough to have at least two rooms, possibly three. Traces of his Irish brogue sounded in his voice when he asked, “Have you been inside?”

Jackson hopped off his horse and took the reins to carefully lead it down the debris ridden street. “I was just gonna do that. This place had the makings of a fine mountain town. We could’ve used one of them in these parts. There’s a building that looks like they even had a trading post.”

“It’s a damn shame what that Jones gang did to these parts. It’s good they’re all hanged,” Ian said as he hopped off his horse and mimicked Jackson. He kicked at some pieces of wood and the remnants of a clay pot.

“This will all have to be cleaned up. I can’t risk the sheep coming down and mulling around through it.”

“Are you sure you want to raise sheep, boss? I heard that old man Simpson is bitchin’ up a storm about it. You won’t win any popularity prizes from the other ranchers.”

“Other than logging, there’s not much else I can do with this piece of property. It’s too mountainous for cattle. Besides, wool is a good commodity to be involved in. Simpson and the like will just have

to get over it. Once they see the convenience of having wool for their women so handy, they'll come around."

"A good bowl of mutton stew once in awhile might be a nice change for them as well," Jackson said with a grin.

"Aye, that it might."

"Do you think you might reopen the trading post?"

Ian scratched his weathered chin. "I'll have to think on that. I'm not sure I want to encourage travelers to traipse across my property. It's a recipe for trouble most of the time."

Jackson scowled. The thought of a trading post closer than the town they traveled twenty miles to once a month was mighty appealing, but he could understand his boss' reservations about putting one on his property. Other than the convenience for the ranch hands, the fact that it would be on the far edge of his ranch was the only good point he could emphasize with good conscience. "That's probably true, but at least they wouldn't be going through the heart of the ranch. Even the sheep should see few travelers. If I'm not mistaken, the trail is to the west of here a few miles."

"There's a town with everything you need not twenty miles from the ranch to the south," Ian mused. "Why would travelers bypass a town to come here to a little trading post?"

"They probably wouldn't, but what about the miners and the loggers to the west and the north of here? There's nothing for an easy fifty to one-hundred miles either way. That's a long way to travel for a bit of flour and coffee."

Ian listened carefully to his ranch hand's suggestion as he continued to cautiously lead his horse down the precarious dirt road.

Having wool available locally for women to spin into yarn to make their homespun goods would attract a lot of attention even without a trading post. Although Fort Benton was twenty miles from the ranch house, travelers from the west had to skirt around his property, which added an extra ten to fifteen miles onto their trip. Loggers and miners would surely appreciate being able to acquire their staple needs at a trading post while saving the miles. This newly acquired piece of property that the Northern Pacific considered so worthless could prove to be quite valuable after all.

When they finally reached the small house, the two men tied their mounts to the roughhewn hitching post in front of what looked to have been a trading post next to it and carefully stepped onto the porch. It was dark inside but, after a few shutters were thrown open, they could see well enough.

They entered a room with a fireplace that was large enough to heat the building as well as serve as a cooking location. This fact was emphasized by the cauldron full of rotted and dried up porridge that was still on its hook. The place was modestly furnished with a solid square table and four chairs near the fireplace. A kitchen cabinet with old flour still in its bin sported a wooden work surface that looked to have been well cared for. There were even a few cast iron fry pans, a water kettle, and some dishware that could still prove serviceable.

A comfortable looking rocking chair beckoned them from the corner. Jackson smiled with satisfaction as he eased himself into it while Ian investigated the two small bedrooms. They were just large enough to hold the beds that were still made and washstands that had a bowl and pitcher set, used bars of homemade soap, and a linen

towel. Stagnant water that had accumulated a myriad of insects was still in the bowls and pitchers.

Ian was of a height and build that would be considered a little above average. He guessed the house builder to be a bit smaller than he was, since he filled the doorways of the small rooms when standing in them. "Did midgets live in this place? I feel a might claustrophobic."

"You won't be staying in here, will you, boss?"

"In the beginning," Ian said as he stretched his arms out to see if he could stand in the middle of the small room and touch the walls. He couldn't.

"I thought you were going to send Mike to run the operation."

"I want to get it started with Mike, then I'll leave him to it."

Jackson's face creased with concentration as he considered his boss' intentions. "What about the ranch?"

"What about it?"

"Who's going to run it while you're up here?"

"Who runs it now?" Ian asked with a chuckle.

"Well, I kind of do," Jackson said as he scratched his chin.

"You can kind of keep on doing it, I suppose. Don't you?"

A broad smile crept onto Jackson's weathered face. "I guess I can."

"I'll need a few men up here cleaning this place up right away," Ian said as he looked out of the small window onto the wreckage that was once a flowering home for settlers who had hope for their future. "I see some human remains amongst the rubble. Did no one bother to come and give these poor folks a proper burial?"



“I can’t rightly say, boss. It happened before I came to the area.”

Ian sighed. “I remember hearing about it, but not enough was said to make me understand the impact of what actually happened. I was only a few years owning my ranch. I didn’t have much mind for the happenings around me.”

“You’ve done a fine job with the ranch, boss.”

“I expect the same with this,” Ian said as he stepped off the porch and kicked at a burnt piece of wood. The action caused a human skull to be exposed. “Damn. What evil bastards would do such a thing, and why?”

“They aren’t even sure it was the Jones gang that did it, since no one survived to tell that tale. For all we know, it could’ve been the Indians. Back then, the Crow and Blackfoot were feuding pretty heavy.”

“I had a bit of trouble with the Blackfoot, myself,” Ian admitted. “It took a few years to convince them that I wanted to live as a peaceful neighbor.”

“Didn’t you buy yur land as a ranch already?”

Ian nodded. “It was owned by a widow who tried to keep it going after her man died. By the time she gave up and sold it to me, it was in piss poor shape with only a handful of cattle, but it was already known as a ranch. I had that going for me, at least. The Blackfoot couldn’t claim I was stealing their land.”

“I can’t imagine the Crow or the Blackfoot murdering these poor folks for this. I mean, it’s not much in the line of valuable property. Least wise, not like your ranch.”

“I imagine there’s good trapping in these mountains. People see different value in things. Take the Northern Pacific. They laughed all the way to the bank after taking my check for property they considered junk. Now, I’ll laugh all the way to the bank at how foolish they were to let it go so cheap.”

Jackson picked up the human skull and inspected it. Scrapings that he assumed were from teeth marred the cap. “I sure hope you’re right, boss. Between having to clean up this graveyard before you can bring in the sheep and then dealing with some mighty pissed off cattle ranchers.... I just hope you aren’t making a mistake.”

Ian started back toward his horse. “Get some men up here within a few days. I want this place cleaned up within a week. Two at the latest. I’m expecting the delivery of my sheep by the end of the month.” He hopped into the saddle and looked around. “You’ll need to select a few men to work the sheep. Post a notice in town if need be. I want four on each watch until we see how bad the wolf situation is in these parts. If it can be managed with two per shift, then we’ll cut back, but, start with four.”

“Eight men, plus you, ain’t going fit into that little house, boss.”

Ian looked around. “I see a few houses that look like they can be salvaged. Carefully inspect them when you’re cleaning up and fix up the best two or three. Leave the trading post as it is. I just might decide to resurrect it. I’ll be sending the cook’s helper here in the beginning. Roy ‘s a finicky old bird who’ll want his own place. It doesn’t need to be big, but it needs a good stove in it. I doubt we’ll find one here. I’ll have to buy it when I go to town.”

Jackson tossed the skull he'd been holding and wiped the dirt from his hands on his chaps. As he climbed onto the back of his horse, a chill crept down his spine. He looked around and shuddered. They were standing in the middle of a settlement turned graveyard. The bones of the poor murdered souls were scattered everywhere. From the condition of the skull he'd just held, he assumed their remains were the victims of wild animals foraging for food. He knew it was nature's way, but the thought still left him unsettled.

## TWO

Melony Jameson paced the porch in nervous agitation. Ian was late. He'd promised her father that he'd come for dinner. She'd spent days scheming for ways to hint marriage to him and finally came up with a viable plan. Her friend, Sally Conway just got engaged to the eldest son of the Bar X ranch. It was the perfect bit of news to lead into a conversation that would hint on him asking her for since she'd returned home from school in the east. It was time to take things further. She'd worked it all out in her head, but how could she put it into motion if he didn't show up?

With summer on the horizon, the sun was setting later and later. For a young woman who came from means with time on her hands, this wasn't always a good thing. Life could prove lonely. Any man worth a grain of salt would take advantage of the extra daylight to squeeze in a bit more work. For most ranchers, days were long and filled with chores that were seldom accomplished before the darkness of night forced them to quit and wait until daylight returned. She understood this, but Ian wasn't most ranchers. He was one of the few ranch owners who was successful enough to be able to hire men to do the chores so that he could sit back and enjoy life, even for just a bit.

It annoyed her to no end that he still insisted on working right alongside of his men. Now, with this new venture with sheep farming, she questioned when she'd have an opportunity to corner him for a proposal again. It would surely be winter before it happened.

He just had to come to dinner. She simply had to find a way to squeeze that proposal out of him that night. Her biological clock was

ticking. If she managed to get him to marry her right away, she could be settled into his beautiful big house with a belly full of baby by winter.

Adam Jameson stepped out onto the porch and placed the side of his hand at the rim of his thick, black brows to shade his eyes as he looked down the crowded street. "You're either going to wear a path on that porch or wear down the soles of your shoes, girl."

"He's not coming, is he Father?" She pushed at a strand of silken, ebony hair that had escaped her carefully crafted pompadour and teased the side of her temple while her lavender eyes searched the street for a sign of Ian.

"I expect he'll be along. The man has a lot on his plate these days. Are you sure that you want to set your sights on a rancher? Young George Appleby seems to be doing right well with his feed store. I hear tell he's ready to settle down. He's handsome enough and closer to you in age. Ian's a good enough man, but he's more my age than yours."

"He's also got your kind of money. It's at least twice the money that George Appleby has. His house is as big and beautiful as ours, Father. George lives in a little one room hut that he threw together five years ago and has made no effort to improve upon since. How could you even think of pairing me with a man who wants to take a wife and place her in that shack he calls a home? Ian may be older and not as handsome, but he did things right. He took the time to create a paradise to bring his bride home to. You should consider that for your daughter. Most fathers would."

Although it wasn't the least bit hot or sticky, Melody pulled at the collar of her blouse while she briskly fanned herself with the delicate fan her father recently purchased for her on his recent trip to Billings. He'd told her it was all the rage with the fine ladies there.

"I feel like I might faint if we do not have our dinner soon, Father."

"Go have Julia loosen your stays," he drawled as he lowered his lean, five-feet-ten-inch frame into his favorite rocking chair and lit a cigar. His dark eyes joined her in the search for signs of Ian. "I won't be rude. We'll wait until one hour after the sun sets before we put him down as a no show and eat dinner."

Although she would have preferred to stamp her feet in protest as she entered the house in search of their maid, she was ever mindful of appearances. So, with the grace of the lady she thought herself to be, she summoned a sweet smile for her father as she glided, gracefully, through the front door.

The house was built in the popular Victorian style that lined the streets of most eastern cities. Her father built it to mirror the one her mother grew up in as a gift to reward her for agreeing to move so far away from the civilization that'd she known and loved. Not that Fort Benton wasn't growing every day, but it certainly couldn't compare with Boston.

They'd sent Melody east to a finishing school. Mary was also insistent that her daughter experience the hustle and bustle of the east before she made her decision about where to settle down. She had enough relatives in the Boston area to care for her, should she wish to stay and find a husband.

She'd returned only the year earlier, a mirror of her mother's petite, dark beauty with solid ideas of what she wanted in life. Unlike her mother, she preferred the expansive and picturesque scenery that only the west could provide. This surprised her mother and pleased her father, who felt the same.

He considered his daughter's words. She'd proven to be far more level headed than he'd expected from a spoiled socialite moved west. She knew what she wanted in life and was prepared to go after it. He thought about her mother, his wife. Melody was the image of her mother, but that's where it ended. Mary proved to be far more frivolous than her daughter. She'd grown up pampered and spoiled at a school for young ladies. When Adam approached her father, he was but a young doctor fresh out of school. Fortunately, he was heir to a considerable family fortune that he used to back their eventual settling in the west where he hoped his skills as a physician would make a difference. Had Mary been more like her daughter, Melody, he doubted she'd have accepted the match and blindly made the move when he complained just five years after their marriage that he felt like he was lost in the crowd of healers and wanted to go where his talents would be more needed and appreciated.

With four-year-old Melody at her hip and three-month-old Thomas on her teat, his ever-faithful wife followed him on board a train that took them as far west as possible and, without complaint, traveled by wagon the rest of the way. When he tried to imagine his daughter being so faithful and obliging, he could only chuckle. May the good lord watch over the man Melody ended up with and bless him with the patience of a saint because he'd need it. He'd also need

deep pockets. He guessed Ian Murry was one of the few men for miles around who fit the mold his daughter had formed when she thought about what she required in a husband. He'd managed to tolerate her ways, and even enjoy them, for a year now. If he did propose, it was probably for the best. It was certainly time.

The sight of Ian approaching on foot caught his attention and he stood to greet him. With a smile on his face, he extended his hand in greeting. "We were just wondering if you got tied up or waylaid into not making it."

Ian could hear Melody's nearly angelic voice singing to the music she played on the piano as he climbed the steps and accepted his host's vigorous handshake. He enjoyed her singing. It never failed to ease the tension of the day from his muscles. More than once, he'd thought what it would be like to have that lovely voice lulling him into a state of heaven on a regular basis.

After being directed to the second rocker on the porch, he joined Adam for a smoke. Instead of a cigar, he opted for a hand-rolled cigarette.

"Melody will be happy to see you," Adam said with a chuckle. "I'm going to warn you. The girl's just itching for a proposal. I suppose she'd have my head if she heard me mentioning it to you, but I'm far too hungry to let my dinner be ruined by her damn fool hints and frivolous gossip."

"Gossip?" Ian wondered if they'd heard grumbling of the other ranchers.

"One of her friends got engaged to the oldest boy over at the Bar X. Now she's hell bent on getting married."



Ian chuckled. "I see."

He'd been considering marriage to Melody for some time now. He'd spent his years building an empire fit to bring a wife home to. Now that he'd accomplished that, it was time to marry and start a family. He'd developed a strong love for her over the last year, but was it strong enough to hold up under the strain of her not being happy as a rancher's wife? She seemed far too headstrong, pampered, and accustomed to the conveniences and pleasures living in a community offered. Would she really be able to live as the wife of a rancher whose nearest neighbor was a twenty-minute buggy ride away? He decided to voice this doubt and see what his good friend had to say about it. "I can't see the daughter of a popular physician of good social standing living so far away from the bustling society she loves so much as the wife of a rancher."

"I have my doubts about that too, but she's hell bent on snaring you. The isolation factor, that is. You come from fine Irish stock and are certainly just as socially elevated as I am, so there's no worries there." Adam leaned forward to better get Ian's attention. "Tell you what. Why don't you two have a long engagement? Say, a year or two. That will give you some time to bring her out to the ranch for extended visits and see how she handles it."

"She's been to the ranch."

"Only while accompanying me and never for more than an overnight night stay. She needs to experience what it would be like to stay away from society for several days. Maybe even a week at a time or a month, even, to get the full effect of ranch living."

“She’d go along with that?” Knowing how impatient Melody seemed, Ian questioned the suggestion.

“If she wants to marry you, she damned well better.”

“Well,” Ian mused. “She is a pretty young thing who has managed to steal my heart. She presents herself well, too. I never asked her age. I know she’s young next to me, but just how old is she?”

“She’ll be eighteen next month.”

“She’d still be young enough to have a few kids if we waited a few years,” Ian said, thoughtfully. “I’m thirty-nine, you know.”

“I told her you were past your prime, but she doesn’t care. Her sights are set on you and that’s that.”

“Well, alright then. If she’ll agree to at least a year’s engagement and come to the ranch for long stays during that time, I’ll make the proposal.”

With an enormous smile that openly displayed his pleasure, Adam assured him that his daughter would agree and extended his hand for Ian to shake on the matter.

The music stopped. They were still smiling, chatting, and shaking hands when Melody sauntered back onto the porch. She wore the usual serene smile she’d stood before the mirror over the years to practice and perfect. “Why, Mr. Murray, what a delight.”

Ian freed his hand from Adam’s as he leapt from the rocker. Removing his hat from his head, he bowed low. “Miss Jameson. You are as lovely as ever this evening.”

Although he’d left Ireland twenty years earlier, Ian’s speech still told of his origins. Melody found it soothing and melodic to listen

to. "I trust our little dinner invitation did not prevent you from concluding your day's business?"

Ian flashed a warm smile. He remembered his departed father's words when he was just a boy; *Son. If you find yourself a woman who shows an interest in a man's livelihood, treasure her.*

Adam stood. "I'll go tell the cook we're ready for dinner."

Melody was about to follow her father into the house when Ian asked her to stay behind because he had a very important topic he wished to discuss that just couldn't wait. She spread her fan wide and held it close to her bosom in hopes of covering any hint of how wildly her heart was beating. It felt as if it was about to break a few bones in her rib cage as she struggled to maintain steady, relaxed breathing.

Her legs barely supported her as she listened to his proposal. Disappointment mixed with elation at his insistence of a long engagement for the assurance that she fully understood what the life of a rancher entailed. With a few flirtatious battings of her long, black eye lashes that perfectly matched her thick, black hair -followed by the widening of her lavender eyes to impress upon him her virgin innocence- she agreed to his terms.