

Love at Wolf Creek

By

Ailene Frances

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EARTH WISE BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

April 1865

Cannons roared and gunshots echoed off the distant hills. They blended with the cries of men as they were taken down in droves. He looked into the eyes of his neighbor. There was fear mixed with something else? Regret? It was probably regret. He knew he wasn't the only one who wished he'd reconsidered joining up with his confederate brethren to fight for something he didn't even believe in.

Aiden Kennedy owned no slaves. Having immigrated from Ireland with his mother and two brothers, he was all too familiar with the concept of one person owning another. They called it indentured servitude in his homeland, but it was nothing more than slavery with a time stamp on it.

He'd only been in Virginia for a week before war was declared. He'd started out in New York, but the reception for Irish immigrants was poor and they were forced to live in conditions they wouldn't ask a rat to enter back home. His mother contracted tuberculosis on the trip over and died shortly after they landed. His older brother, William, was killed by a blow to the head in an exhibition match by an opponent as big and strong as a bear within a week of setting foot on land. That left him and his younger brother, Colin, to make their way in a strange and foreign land. Colin was killed by a runaway wagon after stepping out of a tavern while pissed.

Aiden was disheartened and devastated. There was fortune awaiting back home. Sadly, it was attached to his father, who was a ruthless brute. The way his mother had gathered them up and snuck away in the middle of the

night would have surely set his father off. Aiden had no doubt that, if he stepped foot on Irish soil, his father would beat him until he longed for death.

With his entire family wiped out within a matter of a few weeks, and heading back to Ireland not an option, Aiden decided to set out to explore a bit of the country and see if he could find a more amiable people to settle amongst. His travels eventually took him to Richmond where he was hired on as a peacekeeper at a local inn. When war was declared, he thought, 'Why not?'. He had nothing holding him back. If he was killed, there was no one left to mourn him. If he wanted to be accepted by the Virginia society, he had to support their cause. The fact that they were solidly convinced that the war would be over in a matter of weeks also played a factor in his decision to join up.

Now, after four long years, he'd found himself fighting alongside men he'd gotten to know, appreciate, and trust; as well as strangers from another regiment in the state of Texas. One by one, he watched them drop around him. He felt lost. He was a man without a home or family. Should he just lay down and let the battle consume him? Or, should he stand and fight a battle he knew in his heart was lost?

ONE

May 1875

“Pauline, ma’s going to skin you alive if she sees you still haven’t gotten dressed for dinner.”

“I plan on begging off with a headache,” Pauline O’Malley said as she clambered up the bank of the creek with her fishing pole in one hand and four good-sized trout in the other.

Her brother, Jimmie, looked at the fish and smiled, “You always did know where to catch the biggin’s.”

“I thought I could use the fishing as an excuse to beg out of dinner,” Pauline explained. “The sun was pretty hot today. I can say I’m suffering from heat exposure.”

“While standing, mid-calf, in a creek of cool, running water?” Jimmie laughed. “Ma wasn’t born yesterday. Besides, she invited this fella especially to meet you.”

“She and da still don’t intend to go ahead with their plans to marry me off to that Texas rancher, do they?” she gasped with horror. “It isn’t him who they’ve invited, is it?”

“This is the guy who was hired by the Texan to bring you to him,” Jimmie explained.

“Over my dead body,” she bellowed.

“That might happen if you try to defy pa,” Jimmie said sadly. “When you marry this fella, it will solidify pa’s business dealings. He’s our biggest cattle supplier. Pa wants this alliance real bad.”

Pauline handed her fishpole and the fish to her brother and then untied the rope she'd fastened around her waist to hold up the length of her skirt and let the fabric fall around her ankles. She traded the wide brimmed hat for the frilly bonnet Jimmie brought with him. If her mother had any idea how she adjusted her wardrobe to accommodate her tomgirl interests, she'd be locked in her room for a month. After pulling free the ribbon that held her curly, and often unruly, hair in a knot on top of her head, she shook out her dark, sun kissed locks and let them fall around her shoulders. Smoothing her tangled hair with her fingers as best she could, she positioned the bonnet on her head and nodded for her brother to lead the way.

Aiden handed his coat and hat to the prune faced butler as he stepped into the vestibule of the plantation's mansion. It was clear the grey-haired servant was aware of who he was and did not approve. He stood quietly, holding Aiden's coat and hat, while openly eying the gun and holster on his hip with disdain until Aiden rested his hand on the gun handle and shook his head to indicate the holster stayed exactly where it was.

With a heavy sigh, the old servant gave the coat and hat to a young man who'd scurried up to fetch them and then asked Aiden to follow him into the parlor where the mistress of the house awaited.

Having trained his eyes to miss nothing over the years, Aiden took in the luxurious décor as he was led out of the vestibule and down a wide hall to a cozy, well-furnished parlor.

"Mr. Kennedy," the butler said in a voice that was crisp and clear as he bowed and left the room.

Aiden inspected the petite red-haired woman standing in the center of the parlor with eyes that had witness far too much over the last fifteen years of war, change, and rebuilding. He guessed her to be approaching forty. She'd managed to hang onto a youthful figure. Her skin looked fresh and supple; which he found surprising, considering the fact that she lived in the south where the sun assaulted Caucasian skin with a merciless fury. Of course, being a wealthy family living on a plantation on the outskirts of New Orleans afforded opportunities to obtain lotions and creams from all parts of the world that the ladies in Northern Texas could only dream about. His ranch was not far from the port of Brownsville, so he had access to a good deal more worldly goods than the average Texan as well. He made a mental note to find out what Josephine O'Malley used to keep her skin so young looking and obtain it for Maggie. Her skin had already suffered years of the ravages of the Texas sun and heat, but perhaps the cream could help a little. If nothing else, it would make her feel special to receive a gift. Lord knows, the woman could use a bit of reminder that she's a woman once in a while.

Josephine's eyes darted from Aiden's deep-set blue eyes -that threatened to look into her soul and bare all of her deepest secrets and desires- to his carefree auburn hair. He stood an easy foot taller than herself, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist that still wore a gun and holster.

As she extended her hand in greeting, she said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kennedy. Although, I question why you feel the need to wear firearms in my home?"

"It's habit, ma'am," he replied. "I can't remember the last time I took these off before bedtime."

"Then, perhaps we can make history and you can remove them before dinner," she suggested forcefully. When he didn't immediately unbuckle his gun belt, she continued with, "I understand it is your profession to carry a gun and

protect those around you, but, surely, there is no need to protect me in my own home?”

He studied the room as if he was waiting for someone to jump out from behind the billowing floor to ceiling moiré draperies at any moment. Once satisfied, he slowly removed his gun belt and set it on a nearby side table.

“Mr. Kennedy,” bellowed Dennis O’Malley as he bounded into the room with his hand extended. “’Tis a pleasure to meet a fellow Irishman.”

“Just because his name is Kennedy, doesn’t mean he’s a fellow Irishman. He could be of Irish heritage. For all you know, he was born and raised in Texas,” Josephine snapped while still smiling and studying Aiden to the point he felt uncomfortable.

“Do ye think I’d leave the safety of me daughter in the hands of a man I didn’t investigate first? He’s a fellow Irishman, alright. In fact, I knew his family,” Dennis said as he pumped Aiden’s hand up and down enthusiastically. “Well, I didn’t exactly know them, but I knew of them.”

Aiden stepped back at the mention of his family. It was just a small step that went unnoticed by Dennis, but not by Josephine.

“You are an immigrant, Mr. Kennedy?” Josephine asked with her sweet southern drawl.

“Most everyone in this country is, ma’am,” Aiden drawled.

“You speak like a Texan,” she added.

“Comes from living there so long, I guess,” he replied.

“I can still hear a hint of brogue in there,” Dennis said. “I can’t for the life of me understand why ye’d give up your native tongue, lad. I’ve been here since eighteen-fifty-four and I still talk like the folks back home.”

“Would ye prefer I reverted back to me brogue?” Aiden asked. He’d worked so hard to shed his Irish accent that it felt foreign to resume it for the benefits of the O’Malley family.

Dennis cocked his head as he studied Aiden for a moment and smiled.

“The Texas accent suits ye, lad.”

Aiden was taken by surprise when he found himself smiling. It was years since he’d felt relaxed around strangers. In Texas, relaxing around strangers without your gun on your hip could prove fatal. Yet, here he was with his gun belt resting on a nearby side table and a broad smile displaying his perfectly straight, white teeth.

The butler entered the room with a note for his Irish mistress. She excused herself to read it and then, with a scowl on her lovely face, she excused herself from the room.

Dennis seemed not to notice as he poured them both a brandy. It was Aiden’s habit to drink very little, but he accepted the brandy from his host and sipped it out of politeness. There was something about Dennis O’Malley that made him miss his homeland. Perhaps it was because it was the first he’d heard his native tongue since the war took him to Texas.

Pauline lay on her bed, feigning sleep, as her mother stormed into the room.

“Headache is it?” Josephine hissed as she pulled the cord to summon Pauline’s attendant. “We’ll get you some powders to take the edge off, but you will attend dinner. Is that understood?” When Pauline’s assistant, Mary Anne, meekly entered the room and stood waiting for her orders, Josephine gave her a formidable look and said with emphasis, “Get her some headache powders. Then, have her in the purple dinner dress and fix her hair as best you can. Dinner is in fifteen minutes and I expect to see her seated at the table.” As she headed for the door, she turned and added, “This marriage means a lot to your

father's business. I expect you to behave and not do anything that would make Mr. Kennedy wire Mr. McCann that he's making a mistake. Do you understand?"

Pauline let out an exasperated huff as she grudgingly watched her mother leave the room as quickly as she entered it. "No need for the powders, Mary Anne, I was trying to get out of dinner tonight."

"You need to cover your skin better when you are outside," Mary Anne clucked. "You are getting a bonze tint. If you are not careful, people will think you are mulatto."

"One more thing for mother to fuss about," Pauline sighed. "Can I help it if I brown easily?"

"I will order some lemons for a bath this evening," Mary Anne offered.

"That's probably a good idea," Pauline replied as she poured some water in the bowl that sat waiting on the nearby wash stand. She grabbed a jar of scented soap and quickly washed away the evidence of her afternoon of fishing.

TWO

Aiden was deep in thought as he rested his head on the pillow and stared at the hotel room ceiling. His plan was going well so far. Even though Dennis O'Malley claimed to have investigated him, he'd managed to keep his true identity from them.

It was fortunate the he'd operated his business with Angus McCann as his front man. Sometime during their years of doing business together, Dennis got it into his head that Angus was the owner of the Bar J&K ranch. Neither Angus or Aiden felt the need to set him straight. When the offer for a union of families -and businesses- through marriage to his daughter, Pauline, was extended to Angus, the cantankerous old cowboy took pleasure in joking about what kind of a husband he'd make for a pampered New Orleans society princess as he handed the proposal to the true owner of the ranch.

Since Aiden was an unknown, he could travel to New Orleans and get to know the daughter of his business associate before the marriage actually took place.

The last battle he'd fought on behalf of the confederacy was at Palmito Ranch near the banks of the Rio Grande. It was a battle that should have never taken place since it occurred one month after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant. It was also a battle that nearly cost him his life. Had it not been for the kindly ministrations of Maggie Jones, when she found him full of bullet holes and left for dead by the remnants of his regiment, he would have died for sure.

It was Maggie who ordered her men to carry him to her struggling cattle ranch and it was Maggie who fetched a doctor to tend to his wounds. When he was fully recovered, he repaid her kindness by helping out on the ranch; doing

whatever needed to be done within his capabilities. Little by little, he learned the ways of a cattle rancher. Seeing that he had a good eye for livestock and a good head on his shoulders for figures, Maggie began to depend on him more and more.

Aiden's dream of making it big in America was a constant driving force. When he was certain Maggie's ranch was now longer struggling and was running smoothly, he approached her with his intentions to leave and get a spread of his own. He and his siblings managed get their hands on some of the family fortune in preparation for their new start in America. Since he was the only one left, all of the money belonged to him. It was simply a matter of finding land and getting started.

Maggie didn't hesitate to offer him majority shares in her ranch. There was a small spread of land bordering hers that was up for sale. It wasn't enough to start a ranch with, but it would make an impressive addition to the one she already had. Since Maggie and her place were the first things since he'd left Ireland that felt like home to him, and he was practically running the ranch already, Aiden agreed.

With Maggie being about the age of his mother and admittedly tired, the partnership was made in favor of Aiden being the primary owner.

She felt it was only fair that he assumed the greater portion of the ranch ownership. After all, the ranch was struggling and on the verge of going under before he came along and stepped in to turn things around. Maggie retained enough shares in the ranch to guarantee her comfort as she stepped back and handed the leadership duties to him. He remembered the genuine smile of satisfaction on the old woman's sun worn face when they hung the sign for the new name of the ranch; the Bar J&K.

As the country settled down after the war between the states and there was less of a need to supply beef to the military, the ranchers found themselves

reaching further for their customers. During a visit to his family in New Orleans, the head ranch hand, Angus McCann, heard about a businessman named Dennis O' Sheehan who was developing a solid meat packing and export business. He owned a plant that would treat both beef and pork in preparation for shipping it up and down the east coast, as well as inland. His business was thriving and his need for suppliers was great. Angus was so excited about the potential Dennis offered the Bar J&K that he wired Aiden with the information almost immediately. He emphasized that although a good distance away, with the help of the newly built railroad, driving their cattle to New Orleans wasn't as big an obstacle as it would have been before the war.

After some deliberation, Maggie and Aiden appointed Angus to be their front man with Dennis and initiate the business relationship. They knew Angus had a good head on his shoulders and could be trusted to make the less important decisions without them there. As for the bigger, more important ones, well... they were just a telegram away. That was eight years ago.

Over those eight years, both Dennis and Aiden's business flourished. Uniting the families and businesses through marriage seemed like a good solidifying step that Aiden wasn't opposed to. In fact, since he came from an aristocratic European culture that married for political gain more than love to begin with, had Maggie not stepped in, he would have done a marriage by proxy and called it good.

It was dear old Maggie who insisted that he step back and make sure Pauline was a suitable match for him. She reminded Aiden that he'd escaped that life in Ireland because he wanted the freedom to live his life as he saw fit. Marriage was a lifetime commitment that shouldn't be taken lightly. He'd suffered enough in his thirty-three years. He deserved to be happy. She also assured him that, if the deal went sour, the Bar J&K would, and could, manage without Dennis O'Malley and his meat export business.

He was hesitant to lie to the O'Malley family by allowing them to think he was the bodyguard sent to assure Pauline made it to Texas safely by Angus. He justified the lie by reminding himself that it was the truth to claim to be her bodyguard since he would act as such all the way back to Texas. Guarding was something he did well. There were times when Aiden hired himself out as a peacemaker or guard during a dangerous trip. He was fast and accurate with a gun, plus he had battle experience. He knew of no one better qualified to offer the protection Pauline needed for her journey into the unsettled west. It was the fact that he didn't admit to them that he was the intended groom that bothered him. He was doing this on Maggie's insistence, but he questioned the wisdom of it.

He hoped it didn't backfire on him.

His first impression of Pauline was that she was a spoiled little socialite. He supposed it was to be expected. He'd seen it while growing up in Ireland. Why should it be any different here; especially when the O'Malley were Irish immigrants.

Aiden's family was of considerable wealth, but he'd been anything but spoiled. His father's cruelty wouldn't accommodate spoiling and pampering the family members, like so many families of fortune knew as a normal way of life. He lived in a home that displayed their wealth and station in life, but he enjoyed very little of its benefits himself. This wasn't the case with Pauline; as she so clearly displayed in her conversation and temperament during the evening.

Although there were times when he wanted to take her over his knee and spank her like the child she acted as, he was admittedly surprised and taken by her beauty. After hearing the description Angus gave of Dennis O'Malley, he questioned what type of beauty a man with bulging eyes, rounded face, overly thick waistline, and kinky red hair could sire. Pauline inherited the kinky hair from Dennis, but was blessed with the rest of her beauty from her mother.

Although an inch or two taller than Josephine, Pauline was of slight build to the point of appearing fragile. Her skin had a tawnier tone than did her mother's, but it looked equally as soft and silken. He had all he could do not to reach out and caress her flesh whenever she was near.

Her baby blue eyes were set perfectly on her heart shaped face. They hinted of a wildness behind her reserved demeanor that she longed to set free. His eyes were drawn to her full lips whenever she spoke. They had a natural rosiness that defied the use of makeup. When she laughed -which was often- tiny dimples appeared in her cheeks.

He struggled throughout the evening to focus on the conversation in the room. His mind kept wondering what it would be like to hold Pauline in his arms and stroke her silken flesh while getting lost in her kisses. He was certain she was a good kisser, although he couldn't say why.

It was clear that Pauline was not amiable to marrying him blindly. He used this information to convince himself that he was giving her an opportunity to know him as well. He would give her until they reached Texas. If she was still opposed to the union, then he wouldn't hold her to it.

He smiled as he closed his eyes and Pauline's beautiful face floated by. Maggie was a smart woman. Giving them both an opportunity to get to know each other without the pressures of courting could be the best thing he could do. All he had to do was make sure it didn't blow up in his face somehow.

THREE

Pauline fidgeted in her seat while Mary Anne struggled to tame her wild locks enough to braid her hair for bed. Her mother agitatedly paced the room behind her.

“There’s something that man is not telling us,” Josephine said with knitted brows. “I can feel it.”

“Then, call off the wedding,” Pauline said as she shrunk away from Mary Anne’s ministrations and placed her hand on her head where her hair had been pulled too hard.

“Good try,” Josephine said as she unceremoniously yanked the brush from Mary Anne and tackled the tangled mop on Pauline’s head with gusto.

“Have you been using the coconut rinse I purchased for your hair?”

“I hate the smell of coconut,” Pauline whined.

“I should think you’d prefer it to going through this every single night,” Josephine spat.

“Ouch! Mother, please give the brush back to Mary Anne,” Pauline begged. “You’re hurting me.”

Josephine sighed and handed the brush back to the lady’s maid. “I’m sorry, my dear girl. It’s just that I’m certain Mr. Kennedy is keeping something from us and I want to know what it is. Did you see the way he avoided talking about his family every time your father brought them up?”

“Not everyone has a good relationship with their parents, mother,” Pauline said with a sigh.

“Did you know he comes from wealth?” Josephine added as if she hadn’t heard Pauline’s comment. “Why would a man who was raised in gentle society walk away from his family legacy to become a body guard and a

gunslinger? It's my understanding that he's the only heir. I would think he'd return to Ireland and claim his inheritance and title from his father. I don't wish to speak ill of the dead, but it was odd the way his mother and siblings came over, but his father stayed behind."

"Is he truly a gunslinger?" Pauline asked enthusiastically.

"From what I understand, he's fast with a gun," Josephine said.

"So, he shoots well," Pauline chuckled. "I should think that would be a bonus in a bodyguard."

"Did you know his skills are for hire?" Josephine continued.

"I would imagine he's being paid to fetch me, mother," Pauline said patiently. "Unless you charmed him into carrying me off to the slaughter house out of the goodness of his heart."

"I'll have you know, young lady, that your father and I never laid eyes on one another until the day of our wedding. It's considered wise to allow your parents to find a suitable match for you to assure your security and happiness in life," Josephine hissed.

"If I'm not mistaken, it isn't my happiness father has in mind," Pauline drawled.

"I'll hear no more of this. We have only a few more days together before Mr. Kennedy whisks you off to meet your future husband. I'd like them to be pleasant days, if you don't mind."

"Why do I have to go to him? Why isn't he coming to me? Do you even know what Angus McCann looks like?" Pauline practically screeched. "All I know is that he's old and dresses like a cowboy."

"Of course, he dresses like a cowboy," Josephine snapped. "He owns one of the most prosperous ranches in Texas. As for his looks... well... be grateful he's not handsome. A husband with looks and money is a dangerous

combination. You'll find you won't have to worry about unscrupulous females competing for your husband's pockets if he's less than desirable to look at."

"Doesn't it bother you in the least that he's more your age than mine?"

Pauline asked with teary eyes.

Josephine looked startled by her daughter's remark. In her day, it was considered desirable to marry your daughter off to a man of advanced years. It was those advanced years that allowed him to acquire the means to keep her in comfort and style. There was also the possibility of the husband leaving her to enjoy the remainder of her life as a free, young, and wealthy widow. Marrying for love was a rarity, so the prospect of being left a wealthy young widow was a desirable thing. She found it difficult to believe that her daughter did not understand that.

"Are you going to sit there and tell me that you would rather marry a penniless young upstart than a well to do man of advanced years?" Josephine gasped.

"I just wish he looked like Aiden Kennedy, but had Angus McCann's money," Pauline sighed. "That's all."

"That only happens in fairy tales, my darling daughter," Josephine said as she placed a light kiss on Pauline's forehead.

"Didn't you say Mr. Kennedy came from money?" Pauline asked wistfully.

"Mr. Kenney does not have the Bar J&K Ranch," Josephine said with a sigh as she left the room.

Pauline pulled the waist length braid that Mary Anne finished binding with a ribbon over her left breast and stared at herself in the mirror. "What I wouldn't give to have my future husband be Aiden Kennedy."

“Is he really handsome?” Mary Anne asked. Now that Josephine was out of the room, she could relax and be the friend to Pauline that she’d become over the years.

“I’m sure I’m in love,” Pauline said as she fell across the bed on her back. “He has blue eyes that encompass you when he looks at you. It’s like he’s looking deep inside to your soul. It’s mesmerizing. His hair is a beautiful sun-streaked brown that he wears in an ‘I don’t care’ kind of fashion. It suits his personality.”

“Is he tall?” Mary Anne asked as she sprawled across the bed next to Pauline.

“I felt small when he stood next to me, yet safe. He has big, broad shoulders and slender hips,” Pauline sighed.

“You looked at his hips?” Mary Anne giggled.

Pauline giggled back and confessed that she watched him put his gun belt on before he donned his coat and hat. She was completely smitten by the handsome and dangerous gunslinger, Aiden Kennedy, and totally disheartened that she was being married off to a Texas toad.

She asked Mary Anne to wake her early enough to slip out of the house before anyone was awake. She found solace while fishing in the creek. She wanted to return to there in the morning to be alone and think. She’d been lucky to have a good catch. Maybe it would happen again. A good catch always helped lighten her mood.