

Prologue

Indian Country, 1845

Ten-year-old David walked along the creek bed, proudly gripping the bow and arrow he'd made himself. He'd tied turkey feathers to each end of the small bow and decorated the arrow with colorful stripes just like ones used by Indians. He ignored a rabbit that dashed back in its hole and continued searching for tracks of deer or elk. So eager was he to see his father's look of pride when he returned with such bounty, he gave little consideration to how he could bring back the burden by himself, or the skill required to kill large game with a bow and arrow.

Looking up through the overhanging branches, he squinted at the sun beaming down from the center of the sky. He'd promised his mother he would be back in time to study his reading lesson with Glen before the noon meal. He knew he'd ventured too far from home and started retracing his tracks.

As he approached a large clearing, he stopped abruptly, straining to see through the distant grove of cottonwoods trailing the stream back to his family's homestead. Why did everything look so dark and hazy? His gaze lifted higher. The sight raised the hair on the back of his neck. Ominous billows of black smoke rose above the treetops and swirled across the pale blue sky. An acrid smell wafted through his nostrils.

Swallowing his fear, he continued walking at an even pace, but he couldn't convince himself that only some dry brush had caught fire. Something much larger was burning. Something in the direction of home.

Suddenly, a scream split the air, followed by the sharp crack of a musket. No longer able to hold back his fear, David hurled aside his bow and arrow and raced through the tall grass. He reached the far side of the glen, jumped a ditch, and scrambled up the other side. He clawed through the thick underbrush, thrashing his way closer to the acrid smoke. Sweat mixed with tears of fright stung his eyes.

Piercing yells echoed through the thickets. When he reached the open road next to the corral, the sight yanked the breath from David's lungs. He stood frozen. His home was ablaze, flames leaping out the windows and shooting up through the roof. The fire roared in his ears. From where he stood, he felt its intense heat, yet he shuddered as cold, icy terror took hold of him.

Painted Indians astride shaggy ponies were rounding up the horses and mules from the corral. He recognized their shields and lances. They were the Pawnees he and his father had seen a few days ago on their way to the trading post. Herding the animals into the dense woods, the marauders swiftly made their escape.

David looked around. His insides began to shake with panic. *Where are Ma and Pa? Where's Glen?*

He saw his father lying on the ground next to the corral gate, an arrow protruding from his chest. He ran over and knelt beside him. "Pa ... Pa?" He lifted his father's head. No words came from his mouth. No sound, no breath. Nothing but a thin trickle of blood. He lowered him to the ground, and then stood, looking for his mother.

He caught sight of her lying beside the garden. A scream exploded from his throat. "Mother-r-r!"

He ran past the burning house and flung himself down next to her. His mother's beautiful, long auburn hair had been scalped from her head. Blood oozed down the side of her face and her eyes, devoid of any further pain, stared up at the heavens. David looked away, a wave of nausea gripping his stomach.

When he was finally able to look at her again, he saw something in her outstretched hand. Shaking uncontrollably, he picked up the cameo his mother had always worn and clutched the pendant in his fist.

Turning to look at what was once his home, he cried out his brother's name. "Glen?" His only answer was the howl and hiss of flames devouring the wood cabin.

Shock replaced reality. Time stopped everything but the gentle breeze that tossed David's hair about his face. Dreamlike, he stood and walked back toward the corral where his father lay. The prone, lifeless body of a Pawnee lay sprawled a short distance away, a gaping hole in his back.

Slowly, he scanned the vicinity and there, crumpled against the wall of the stable was Glen, a knife driven in his side, and an arrow sticking into his thigh. Circles of bright red colored the boy's shirt and pants. A musket lay by his body.

David thought how strangely peaceful his brother looked, as if he were sleeping. Squeezing his eyes shut, he bowed his head in despair. Glen wasn't asleep. He was dead. Like Ma and Pa.

The soul-wrenching sight of his family's bloody massacre was too much for him. Shock gave way to fury. He screamed with helpless rage and dropped to the ground. Gripping his mother's cameo, he pounded the earth with his fists.

Tears streamed down his face. His hands throbbed from cuts and bruises, but still he continued to beat the hard earth in a desperate need to release the pent-up rage against this horrible fate—the agony of being left alive but alone, when all he loved and lived for were dead. David didn't know how long he'd lain in the dirt, his chest convulsing with dry, wracking sobs. The fire was spent, leaving only the smoldering ruins of his home. Numb, he rose to his feet and rubbed his forehead, trying to gain control of his thoughts.

The sound of approaching horses jarred his mind back into focus. More savages came into view. From their garb and weapons, David knew they were a different tribe than the Pawnee raiders.

Fear propelled him toward the protection of the woods. He tripped and stumbled his way along the high bank of the stream. Stealing a glance over his shoulder, he saw the small band stop to look at the destruction. Then several of them pointed in his direction.

Desperately, David searched for somewhere to hide. Hearing the horses picking up speed and getting closer, he leaped over the edge of the steep embankment. Sliding down the rocky slope, he spied a large, empty burrow and crawled inside. He tried to conceal himself by tucking his legs under him. Then he turned his face toward the opening.

Minutes later, horses' hooves thudded to a halt directly above the small den. Dirt and rocks tumbled around David. As the seconds crept by, he wished with every beat of his pounding heart that he were a wolf hiding in his den.

He sucked in a deep breath when a pair of buckskin-clad leggings and moccasined feet slid in front of his cramped hide-out. Suddenly, a bronze face appeared in the opening. Vermilion-painted cheeks lifted into a stiff smile, and animal black eyes stared into David's grey ones.

Hours later, as the small army patrol rode past the charred remains of the ravaged homestead, a pall of grey smoke floated around the soldiers like an eerie fog, and every man sensed death before actually seeing it.

The lieutenant in command dismounted and stood in front of the first body they found. Near him lay a second body, an Indian.

“Damn Pawnees again,” he said to the soldier who had dismounted beside him. The lieutenant looked past the corral. “Search the area, Sergeant. I suspect we’ll be burying more than these two.”

It took only a few minutes after the sergeant had issued the order for the dragoons to find two more bodies—a woman bludgeoned to death and scalped, and another lying next to the stable, an arrow and knife protruding from him.

“Damn shame. This one’s only a kid,” the officer said, peering down.

Frowning, the sergeant knelt and took hold of the boy’s wrist, then opened one of his eyelids. “My God, sir, he’s still alive!”

Pennsylvania, 1845

Five-year-old Laura Westbrook swung her legs over the side of the bed, tucking her favorite dolly under her arm. She peered through the dawn’s waning darkness at Alex lying in his bed opposite hers. His rust-red hair had fallen across his closed eyelids, and a skinny arm hung over the bedside. She could hear Papa and Mister Dan’s voices downstairs. Laura crossed the room and quietly opened the door. She eased through the narrow opening. Mister Dan’s voice grew louder. Quickly, she closed the door behind her, not wanting to awaken her brother.

“John, I’ve taken about all the city life I can handle.”

Laura knelt by the banister at the top of the stairs. She leaned against the wooden post, clinging to it with one hand, the other holding her dolly. She looked through the open doorway of the kitchen where Mister Dan sat at the table opposite her father.

“More to the point, I’ve taken about all of your mourning for Lucy I can handle. I’m sorry for being so blunt, but it’s been six months since the accident. It’s time to stop brooding about the past, my friend, and start—”

Wham! Her father slammed his fist on the table. “Enough! You’ve said enough!” He rose abruptly, sending the chair clattering backward to the floor. Grabbing his cup from the table, he walked to the cook stove.

Laura bit her lower lip. Papa was upset again. She watched him pour himself more coffee. Since Momma had gone to heaven, he’d changed. He didn’t seem to know she and Alex were still living there. He no longer read stories to her or helped her brother with his school work. Aunt Sarah kept saying he would soon be like the Papa Laura had always loved—happy and laughing. She remembered how he would sneak up behind Momma and kiss her on the neck, making her happy and laughing, too.

The sound of chair legs scraping across the floor interrupted her thoughts. Mister Dan stood and bowed his head. He was very tall with massive shoulders. Laura had been frightened

by his size when she first met him last year, but she liked him now, especially after he'd given her the baby doll for her birthday.

Often he came over to sit in the parlor with Papa in the evenings while Aunt Sarah washed the dishes and put her and Alex to bed. Sometimes he'd eat Sunday dinner with them at Aunt Sarah and Uncle James's house.

Dan released a deep sigh. He walked around the table and set Papa's chair upright. "John ... make up your mind." Her father remained tight-lipped, staring out the window, his gaunt figure supported by a thin, outstretched arm braced against the wooden frame. "I can't stay any longer. Are you leaving with me or not?" Dan demanded.

"Yes, damn it! God, yes, I need to get away from here." John shook his head. "I'm no good to anybody, least of all my kids. Be best if Sarah took them to raise."

Laura's eyes widened. Her father's words resounded up the stairs, their meaning slapping her in the face. *I need to get away from here.* Her fingers tightened around the banister. Papa was leaving!

Hearing the door at the front of the house open, Laura scurried out of sight. When her aunt stepped into the hallway, she quickly returned to her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Standing in the entry, Sarah Osbourne removed her shawl and bonnet and placed them on a chair. She rubbed her hands together to ward off the chill from her early morning walk to her brother's house. "Landsakes," she whispered, "that wind is brisk."

She noticed a light in the kitchen and called out to her brother. "John, are you—" She faltered when Dan stepped out from the doorway. Clasp ing her hands, she asked, "Daniel, why are you here this time of day?" Her gaze darted from him to the kitchen, then back to him. "What's the matter? Is John all right? The children ..."

Dan laid a hand on her shoulder. "The children are fine. They're still asleep. I came over to talk to John." His eyes met hers. "Sarah, I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Leaving ... tomorrow?" she repeated, her voice breaking. She skirted around him and into the kitchen.

John stood at the window. He gave Sarah a cursory glance before returning his gaze outside. Taking her apron from its hook beside the cook stove, she cleared her throat. "If you two men will give me a few minutes, I'll fix some breakfast." "I'm not hungry," muttered John.

It was the way he said it. No, more than that, it was the way he'd spoken to her for the past six months. Pitching the apron aside, Sarah spat out her words in a voice seething with anger. "John, I can't take your self-pity any longer! It's those children upstairs you should pity. But you don't seem to care about *them* anymore." Her voice trembled with emotion. "Lucy is gone and, God knows, I've understood your grief and heartache. But Laura and Alex are not gone. They need, more than ever before, love and understanding. Harboring this deep depression is not only destroying you, it's affecting your children."

Strong hands gripped her shoulders from behind. "Sarah," Dan said in a firm voice. She put her hand over her mouth, ashamed of her outburst. She turned and hurried from the kitchen.

Dan heaved a sigh and glanced at John whose head was bowed.

After a tense moment, the silence was broken when John reached for his jacket off a peg and said in a tight voice, "Got some papers to sign at the office. Then I'll be back." He looked over at Dan. "Please, go talk to Sarah. Tell her ... well, you know what to tell her."

Dan watched John walk out the back door. "Do I?" he questioned under his breath. "I'm not so sure, old friend."

Across the hall, he found Sarah seated in the open parlor, staring into the fireplace. He sat on a settee facing her. "What you said about John is true." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. "That's why he wants to go with me. I'm heading back west out to Oregon Country."

At her groan of protest, he raised a hand. "Now before you get all riled up again, hear me out. I know he'd be leaving his family and law practice. But you said it yourself. In his present state, he's neither a decent father nor a good lawyer. John's not only fighting despair but guilt. He's torn between wanting to leave with me and thinking he should stay for the children's sake." He stood and walked over to the fireplace. Resting one boot on the raised hearth, he propped his arm on the mantel. "And yet you, Sarah, are the one Laura and Alex need most. If John did stay, you'd still be running from your house to this one to care for them. He's convinced it would be best if you took the children into your own home."

All the while Dan spoke, Sarah had kept very still, her hands clutching the arms of the chair. Now she stood and began pacing. "Daniel, Lucy's tragic death was a terrible blow to us all." She sighed. "And yet, I actually feel blessed in being given the opportunity to care for Laura and Alex. I love them as if they were my own children."

Dan understood. Barren all these years, Sarah was grateful to have her niece and nephew fill that void in her life. Compassion for her welled up inside him. For an instant, he wanted to take her in his arms and remind her that once he had wanted her to bear his children. Instead, he pulled his gaze away from her and picked up an iron poker.

"How would James feel about their living with you?" he asked, idly stoking the fire. "James is a good and generous man. He would welcome the children into our home. He loves them as much as I do."

"Then it seems they'd be well taken care of, doesn't it? You know John will provide for their financial needs as well."

"Yes, Daniel, but tell me, how long will John be gone?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "That I can't answer. We'll be traveling clear across the continent." For the first time that morning, he smiled at her. "Hey, don't go worrying your pretty head. I'll make damn sure nothing happens to your brother."

Nodding, Sarah tried to smile back. "In time, I hope he meets someone else. John needs a woman to love and care for him."

Dan placed the poker back in the stand. "Most men do, but I never found anyone else." Not giving Sarah a chance to respond, he strode into the hallway where he lifted his hat and jacket off the coat rack. Before letting himself out, he turned and said huskily, "Tell little Laura and Alex good-bye for me." His gaze lingered on her face. "Take care of yourself, Sarah."

CHAPTER 1

Missouri, 1860

*The years of youth are a memory.
So quickly those footprints fade.
The future lays a path for me.
Which one, my chosen destiny?*

Laura Westbrook read and reread the poem she'd composed on the first page of her journal. Releasing a long sigh, she got up from her chair and walked to the window, her eyes straining to see through the dirt that coated the glass on the outside. With a couple of jerks and a loud "umph," she forced the window open, admitting the various sounds from the main street below. In the town of St. Joseph, it was the beginning of another busy day. The distant clangor of a blacksmith hammering iron on his anvil was superseded by the noise of two loaded buckboards rumbling their way past the hotel. Several restless horses hitched to a rail snorted and stomped, seeming eager for their riders to return so they, too, could be on their way.

As Laura gazed down at the horses, her wistful smile widened into a grin. "I bet I'm more anxious than you are to get going."

She turned to see Aunt Sarah twist away from the dresser, both hands pushing pins into her hair. "What did you say, dear? I can't hear you with that window open."

With another grunt and two hard pushes, Laura shoved the stubborn window shut and faced her aunt. "I was just thinking out loud."

Seeing Sarah still clothed in only her dressing gown, Laura sighed again, walked back to her chair, sat down, and opened her journal to the second blank page. After she wrote, *May 7, 1860*, she slowly tapped her pen against the paper, searching for the right words. As the minutes passed, her thoughts whirled, but she made no attempt to write them down.

"I can hardly believe it," she said, a tremor of excitement in her voice. "Soon we'll be traveling clear across the continent in a wagon."

Sarah glanced at Laura's reflection in the dresser mirror. "I wish I were as enthusiastic about it as you." She shook her head. "Two thousand miles to California seems an impossible distance."

Laura picked up the *St. Joseph Gazette* from the table beside her and pointed to an article. "The government estimates the number of emigrants who have traveled to California and the Oregon Territory by the end of this year will exceed two hundred thousand."

Sarah's brow lifted. "It's no wonder your father's law practice has grown. He said in his letter he's taken on a partner."

Setting the newspaper aside, Laura tried to picture them arriving at their final destination, Placerville, and seeing her father for the first time in fifteen years. "You know, I can't even remember what Papa looks like. If it weren't for his letters, I'd be meeting a total stranger." Noting her aunt's frown, she added, "But I promise to judge him for who he is now. Not the father I didn't have." Her words held a stubborn tinge of bitterness.

Sarah rose and walked over to rest a hand on Laura's shoulder. "He did what he thought was right for you and Alex at the time, dear. Sometimes the strength of love is measured not by how one holds on to it, but by how one let's go." She gave Laura's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "One thing's for sure. Your father will have no problem recognizing you. You're the perfect image of your mother—her auburn hair, her emerald eyes. Why, she even had those same tiny freckles sprinkled across her nose."

Returning to her dressing table, Sarah continued, "Laura, I've been slow as molasses this morning. Since you're dressed, how about going down to the hotel desk to see if Daniel left us a message? I'm sure he knows our steamboat didn't dock until late yesterday. He probably doesn't want to disturb us, thinking we might be sleeping late. As one woman would have liked to have done," she quipped, rolling her eyes upward.

Laura ignored her aunt's last remark. She, herself, had been awake and dressed for what seemed like hours. "Good idea," she replied, gathering up her journal, pen, and ink. She placed them inside the carved wooden box, a special gift Uncle James had given her shortly before he died.

"He could be waiting for us in the lobby right now." Laura got up and walked to the door. "Although I guess I wouldn't recognize him, even if he were."

"Oh, yes, you would!" exclaimed Sarah. "Unless Daniel's changed, a man that well-built you couldn't miss."

Letting herself out, Laura laughed. Of course, how could she forget! As a little girl, she'd thought he looked like a giant out of a fairy tale.

When she returned five minutes later, Sarah stood at the bedside in her petticoats and camisole. Looking at two dresses spread across the bed, her aunt frowned. "Honestly, Laura, I don't know what's the matter with me. I've never been so indecisive. Nothing looks right on me." She waved a hand in frustration. "Well, never mind. Did you see Daniel?" "No, but he did leave us a message." She handed Sarah a note.

Sarah read it aloud, "Hope you ladies have gotten enough beauty rest. I'll have your wagon in front of the hotel at noon to load up and ferry you across the river to our campsite. Dan."

"So, while you finish dressing," Laura said, "I'm going to take a look around town. I'll be back before noon."

"I don't think you should be traipsing around a strange town by yourself." Laura pursed her lips in annoyance. "I won't traipse ... I'll walk in an appropriate, ladylike fashion." She could tell her aunt didn't appreciate her sarcasm, but refused to give in. "Sarah, for heaven's sake, I'm twenty years old and quite capable of taking care of myself. Haven't we had enough discussion about you allowing me my independence?"

"Yes ... yes," Sarah replied resignedly. She shoved aside the dresses and slumped on the edge of the bed. "It's just that ... well, you're all I have left." Her voice wavered, barely above a whisper. "First your brother was sent to that godforsaken outpost. And then James ..." She shook her head in despair. "I still can't understand how a healthy man, a physician himself, could die from pneumonia so quickly."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she shrugged her shoulders. "Then selling the house—all my possessions. This past year hasn't been an easy one, Laura. I've had to let go of so much that was a part of me."

"I know," Laura said, her own eyes misting. "But we still have each other." She leaned over and embraced her aunt. "We're making this trip together, remember? Before too long, we'll be stopping to see Alex at Fort Hendricks. Then a few months later, we'll be reunited with Papa."

Sarah nodded, putting her fingers to the corner of her eyes to catch the tears. "You're right, of course. Please forgive me for being such a goose this morning."

Laura walked to the door. "Sarah, you're not a goose. A mother hen perhaps," she teased, "but not a goose."

She had dropped the customary use of the word, aunt, before Sarah's name long ago. Aunt and niece had been determined through family ancestry, but years of living together had created a bond like mother and daughter, and thus, an acute awareness of each other's feelings. This morning Laura sensed her aunt's uneasiness at seeing Dan Driscoll again. After they'd

arranged to join his wagon train to California, Sarah's past memories surfaced, prompting her to confide in Laura about her brief, passionate affair with Dan before her marriage to James. Now as she let herself out into the hall, the thought occurred to her, *maybe fate is bringing Sarah and Dan back together so they can re-ignite those flames.*

She shut the door and hurried down the stairs and through the lobby. As soon as she stepped out the front of the hotel, her eyes and ears were filled with the sights and sounds of the bustling town. People were everywhere. With purpose in their steps, they walked up and down the street along the wooden sidewalks.

Laura moved out from under the shaded overhang of the hotel, and the bright midmorning sun glared its greeting. A light breeze blew its warmth over her face and ruffled her hair. She watched a covered wagon roll past her and wondered what it was going to be like spending the next six months in one of those things. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she ran across the road before another rumbled by from the opposite direction. She grinned when she reached the other side. She wasn't traipsing, but she doubted her mad dash had been very ladylike, either.

In a remote part of Kansas Territory, the Indian maiden, Stargazer, walked out of the woods and down the bank to the edge of a narrow river. As she knelt to fill her water sac, she spied two bear cubs cavorting along the embankment downstream. Obviously they had not caught wind of her scent, for they continued to frolic and nip at each other. Their antics were so funny she laughed aloud.

But then, as if by magic, they disappeared. In the next instant, she heard muffled wails and realized the cubs had tumbled into the concealed pit her brother, Swift Eagle, had dug to trap pronghorns.

Though her mind cautioned her, she couldn't help feeling sympathetic to their howls and started toward the pit.

Suddenly, a loud roar filled the air, and a huge, dark form burst from the trees. Stargazer came to an abrupt standstill. Charging toward her was an enormous grizzly. It slid to a halt not ten steps from her. Hackles up and ears flattened, the bear opened its mouth to reveal deadly fangs.

Stargazer's mind whirled in fear. When the beast reared up on its hind legs becoming twice her height, she knew that here stood death itself. Letting her trained, spiritual mind take over, she closed her eyes and dropped to her knees in surrender to the Great One Above.

Behind her came a shrill war cry. "*Hi-i-ya!*" A second later, a lance whizzed past her head, its iron point piercing deeply into the middle of the grizzly's chest.

Stargazer scrambled to her feet as Grey Wolf leaped between her and the raging bear. Clad only in a breechcloth and moccasins, he faced the massive animal, a long-bladed knife in his right hand.

Not diverting his eyes from the bear, her brother spoke in the Cheyenne language he'd learned so well. "Run, little sister!"

"But, Grey Wolf, she will kill you!"

"Go! Get Swift Eagle."

The grizzly bellowed her anger. She swung her huge arm across the protruding lance and snapped the end of the pole from its embedded point.

Stargazer's eyes widened in horror. She dashed into the woods, wasting not another word or backward glance.

Grey Wolf knew there would be no time for help to reach him. Sending Stargazer after their brother was only a ploy to ensure her safety.

He watched the mother bear lower herself again on all fours. She snorted and swayed back and forth, as if sizing up this new threat standing between her and her young still whining in the pit. Fierce black eyes glared out from her massive head. White froth foamed from her mouth.

Grey Wolf crouched low and shifted slowly to one side only a few steps from the bear. The grizzly lunged. Grey Wolf jumped back, but not far enough. Her giant claws raked bloody gashes across his stomach, the powerful blow knocking him to the ground. Before he could recover, she pounced and sank her fangs into his left arm.

Struggling under her huge body, he tasted the vileness of fear in the back of his throat. He thrust his knife hard into her abdomen, yet knew it would take a strike to the heart to kill her. He yanked the weapon out of the tough hide and wrenched his other arm from the grizzly's jaws. The flesh tore away from the bone, but there wasn't time to react to the searing pain. He pushed away from the beast and rolled to his feet.

The bear roared her anguish, blood foaming from her muzzle. She rose again to her full eight feet. Swiftly, Grey Wolf lifted his uninjured arm as high as he could and with all his strength, plunged the knife into the mortal side of the bear's chest.

In her final death throes, the crazed animal flung her mighty arms around him and sank vicious fangs into his shoulder. The excruciating pain and pressure he felt from her powerful jaws consumed the last of his strength. The convulsing mass of fur and muscle plummeted to the ground, pinning him beneath it.

Time seemed suspended as Grey Wolf's life flashed before him. He struggled to grab hold of the cameo strung around his neck. Just before darkness closed around him, he wrapped his fingers around the treasured medallion and prayed for God to join his soul with his beloved family of long ago.

Laura lay awake staring up at the arched canvas cover as the first rays of morning seeped into the wagon. Her aunt slept soundly a few feet away on the same type of makeshift bed as hers, a thin pallet stretched atop a long wooden box. Underneath they'd stored their linens, household items, and personal belongings, including Uncle James's medical supplies. Without a doctor this trip, Dan was counting on Laura's nursing skills to help see them through. Her father had paid Dan for their wagon, mule team, and provisions last winter in California. He'd also instructed Dan to purchase a mount for her. Laura wondered if it would be a mustang, a small, sturdy horse often used on the frontier. She was amused at Dan's apology yesterday for having to buy a western saddle since no side-saddle could be found anywhere in St. Joe. If he only knew how often she'd ridden bareback at home.

The clink of spurred boots approaching drew her gaze to the rear of the wagon. The canvas flap rustled. "Wake up, you two! Time to rise and shine. This is the big day you've been waiting for."

Sarah's eyes slowly opened. She winced as she rolled to her back. "Land sakes, I can see it's going to take a while getting used to sleeping on these boards," she muttered, swinging her feet to the floor.

"Hey in there," Dan bellowed, "you up?"

Uncorking a bottle, Sarah pulled out a match and lit the lantern beside her. "Barely!" Dan chuckled. "Henry has breakfast ready, and his coffee is just the right color of mud."

Meet you at our wagon.”

“Dag nabbit! Where in tarnation are they?”

Coming around the back of Dan’s wagon, Laura slowed her steps. Beside her, Sarah shot her a wavering glance, signaling to hang back out of view.

Hunched next to a campfire, a small, wiry-looking man fanned smoke with his hat. “Hell, serve ’em right if the whole damn mess burned up!” The man stood and crammed his hat back on his head. Tufts of straggly gray hair stuck out over his ears, the hat’s brim flattened against the front of the crown.

Dan sauntered out of the woods, opposite the campsite. “Whoowee ... you’re cussing mighty early this morning, Henry.”

Alongside him, his young scout, Lucky, laughed aloud. “What’s he fussing about now?”

Dan shook his head. “Beats me.”

Henry’s bushy brows twitched up and down. “Humph!” he belched and squatted back down. Grabbing a fork, he flipped over some pan bread that was turning from shades of brown to black inside the skillet. “If those little ladies of yorn don’t get their tender hides over here, they can forget this breakfast. I can’t keep grub hot all mornin’, ya know.”

Dan threw Lucky an amused glance. He then picked up a tin cup off a rough-hewed stool and walked over to a smaller fire. Taking the boiler from an iron hook secured to a tripod, Dan poured coffee into his cup. Just as he lifted it to his mouth, he caught sight of Laura and Sarah standing beside the wagon.

Lowering the cup, his appreciative eyes gave Sarah the once-over from head to toe while Henry continued to prattle away.

“No sir, I never hired on to cook for no uppity women!”

Dan frowned in Henry’s direction as tin ware clattered from an overturned box. He raised his voice. “Good morning ... you gals are sure looking bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.” “Good morning, Daniel,” Sarah responded, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders as she stepped around a large water barrel.

Abruptly, the noise stopped, and Henry lurched to his feet.

Laura glanced purposely from Henry to Dan. “Hope we’re not late.”

Dan smiled. “Nope, not at all.” He gestured with a nod of his head toward two stools, both newly sanded. “Have a seat.” Reaching for the boiler, he poured coffee into two more cups. He gave Sarah a wink and handed her a steaming cup. He gave the other to Laura.

As he rested his hands on his hips, Laura noticed the holstered gun at his side with the handle butt facing out. The scout had one, too. Neither of them had worn the guns yesterday when they’d loaded their wagon in St. Joe and ferried them across the Missouri.

Lucky touched the brim of his hat. A dimpled grin emphasized his boyish good looks. “Morning, ladies.”

“Henry,” Dan said, “this is Sarah Osbourne and her niece, Miss Laura Westbrook.” Henry wiped his hands on a towel and swung it over his shoulder. He was actually blushing. “It’s, ah ... right good to meet ya.” His head bobbed up and down as if it were attached to a spring. “Big D has spoken of ya often ... yep, he surely has.”

Smiling, Laura echoed her aunt’s “hello,” and sat on the stool next to her. Taking a sip of coffee, she made a mental note to fix herself tea tomorrow morning. As for the food, she really didn’t care what it tasted like, just as long as it filled her empty stomach. Neither she nor Sarah

had eaten much yesterday. Like the other travelers, they'd been too busy loading supplies in preparation for their long journey. In all, twenty-seven wagons and seventy emigrants had signed onto Dan's wagon train.

Laura hadn't more than scooped up the last of her scrambled eggs, when Lucky came around the side of the wagon leading a dark bay-colored horse. He held out the reins to her. "He's all yours."

Setting down her plate, Laura rose and walked over to take the reins. "Lucky, he's beautiful." She slid a hand over the animal's glossy neck as his intelligent eyes watched her. He was finely built and stood a good fifteen hands high.

"His name's Sonny."

Dan stepped beside her. "He's a Morgan. Don't see many in these parts. Your father wanted me to buy you the best I could find. 'Not some cayuse bred on the plains,' he told me." A familiar twinge of bitterness stirred inside her. Just another atonement like the other gifts my father's sent me over the years, she thought. Still, she returned Dan's smile, not wanting to seem ungrateful.

She lifted the hem of her full skirt and set her boot in the stirrup. Thank goodness she'd left those silly crinolines stashed in her trunk. She waved off Lucky's offer to help her up and with one hand on the pommel, easily swung into the saddle.

Dan grinned. "Well, looks like Laura's ready to hit the trail." He turned to Lucky. "What you gawking at, boy? It's time to turn those eyes westward. Let's get the wagons forming a line up the St. Joe road."

Trail To Destiny is Book 1 of the Wheels of Destiny Trilogy

Please visit my web site at:

www.cherikayclifton.com