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Christy Award-winning author

Even Forever

CHAPTER ONE

Boulder Creek, Idaho Territory

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“Your pa’s coming home.”

The soup ladle dropped from Rosalie Tomkin’s hand into the kettle, splashing an ugly stain onto her apron. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, hoping against hope that when she opened them she would find she’d only imagined her mother’s words. But when she looked, she still stood before the stove in the kitchen of the Crescent Valley Room and Board.

Rosalie turned around. Her heart raced and an odd buzzing sounded in her ears. She felt choked by the icy panic swelling inside of her. “He’s coming *here*?” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

Her ma, Virginia Tomkin, nodded as she lifted the letter in one hand.

It can’t be true. It can’t be true. “When?”

“Couple weeks, according to his letter. Doesn’t say exactly when they let him out, just when he should get to Boulder Creek.”

Rosalie shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. “But why’s he coming *here*?”

“Where else is he to go? He lost the saloon while he was in prison. Besides, for all he’s done, this *is* still his home ... and I’m still his wife.”

Rosalie’s voice sharpened. “This was *never* a home, not as long as he was in it. Ma, you can’t let him come back. You *can’t*.”

Ma lifted her shoulders in a helpless gesture. “For better or worse, I’m his wife. That’s the vow I took when I married him. He’s got a right to come back, if that’s what he wants. I

can't rightly stop him."

Rosalie opened her mouth to protest again, then turned toward the stove. If her ma had wanted to change her life, she would have done it long before now. She would have done it the first time her husband hit her. Or she would have done it the first time he struck one of their children.

No, there was nothing Rosalie could do to keep her pa from coming back to Boulder Creek and resuming his life in the boarding house. And once he was there, there would be nothing she could do to keep him from hurting Ma—or from hurting *her*.

She closed her eyes as her hands clenched against her stomach. Pa was coming back. Pa was going to move into the boarding house and stay in the room next to her own. And then he would drink, and when he got drunk, he would strike out at them in the black rages Rosalie remembered all too well. Mostly he would hit Ma. He would hit her until she had to hide in the house so nobody would see her black eyes or her swollen lips. There wouldn't be anything Rosalie could do about it. Everything would be the way it used to be, before he went away. Everything would be the same.

Rosalie stiffened her spine and opened her eyes. No, it wouldn't be the same. She was older now. She wouldn't let him hurt Ma, and she wasn't going to let him hurt her either. Never again. Not ever again.

She turned to face Ma a second time. "I've got almost forty-five dollars saved from working at the restaurant. We could leave Boulder Creek. We could go to San Francisco ... or as far as it'll take us. I could find work. I'd take care of you, Ma."

Ma's smile was bittersweet. "You shouldn't ought to have to take care of your ma. You're too young to have such worries."

"I'm not a child anymore. I'm going on nineteen. Say you'll come with me."

"I can't go, Rosalie."

"Then I'll go alone."

"Rosalie—"

"I can't stay, Ma. I hate what he did to you and to me and to..." She felt the old sickness churning in her stomach as a vision of the burning sawmill sprang into her mind. But Rosalie had never told anyone what she suspected her pa had done the day he left Boulder Creek nearly a decade ago, and so she stopped herself before she could speak those suspicions aloud.

Ma's shoulders sagged. "If you feel you have to go, I'll give you what money I can spare."

"You haven't anything to spare." Rosalie knew that whatever profit the boarding house

made, her brother, Mark, drank up at the Pony Saloon. “We don’t have any boarders now. You’ll need anything you have to see you through.” She untied her apron as she spoke, hanging it on a peg near the stove. “I’d better get ready for work.” She headed toward the hall.

“Rosalie?”

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder.

“When will you leave?”

“Before he gets here. On the next stage.”

“So soon?”

“I’ve got to, Ma.”

Ma nodded in resignation. “I’ll miss you, Rosalie.”

“I’ll miss you, too.”



Michael Randolph stopped his horse and stared down the lone street of Boulder Creek. He’d known it wasn’t a city like Denver or San Francisco, but he’d hoped it would be bigger than the small town that lay before him.

He nudged the roan gelding with his boot heels and started down the street, his eyes perusing each building, making note of things most folks wouldn’t see. For instance, though it had a fresh coat of paint, the Barber Mercantile had been around longer than the other buildings in town, probably twelve to fifteen years longer. The First Bank of Boulder Creek, in contrast, hadn’t been built more than two years ago, judging by the appearance of the red brick walls.

Besides the bank and general store, there were the usual businesses that made up small towns across the West—a church, a school, a livery and blacksmith shop, restaurant, saloon, barber shop and bath house, post office, and a jail. Michael had seen the like in a hundred different places. What was missing, of course, was a hotel.

And that was why Michael Randolph had come to Boulder Creek.

John Thomas must be getting senile to send me to a town like this.

John Thomas Randolph had never operated a hotel in any but the biggest cities in America. Michael’s father had taught him everything about building and running a hotel in cities like San Francisco, Denver, Chicago, and New York. How was he supposed to run a profitable hotel in a backwater burg like this?

His mouth thinned.

Of course, that was no doubt *why* John Thomas had chosen Boulder Creek. Because Michael would have to prove himself in unfamiliar territory.

“Since you and Dillon don’t seem inclined to agree on anything,” his father had announced several months ago, “there’s only one thing for me to do. I’ll leave Palace Hotels to one of you when I’m gone. It’ll be up to you to prove who that one will be.”

The surprise and betrayal Michael had felt then was just as strong today. He shouldn’t have to prove himself. He’d known since the time he was a small boy that the business would be his. It should be his without question. He was the oldest Randolph son as well as the legitimate heir. Dillon, while indisputably John Thomas’s son, had no right to any part of Palace Hotels.

Michael shoved those thoughts from his mind. He had no time to examine old wounds that continued to fester. He was in Boulder Creek to win what was rightfully his, and unless he wanted to lose the management and eventual ownership of Palace Hotels to his half-brother, he’d better set his plans in motion. He would need a place to stay, but before that he wanted something to eat. He stopped his horse in front of a wooden building with a sign that identified it as Zoe’s Restaurant.

Dismounting, he brushed the trail dust from his trousers and the sleeves of his shirt, then stepped onto the boardwalk and entered the establishment. Delicious odors greeted him, and his stomach growled in response. The place was empty of customers. If it weren’t for the sounds and smells coming from the kitchen, he would wonder if the restaurant was open for business. Certainly no one bothered to answer the bells that jingled when he opened the door.

He selected a table against a wall, with a view of both the front door and the entrance to the kitchen, and sat down, placing his hat on one of the other chairs. He was untroubled by the wait. His stepmother said that Michael had the patience of Job. She also said he had the stubbornness of a mule. He was willing to act or wait, whichever was most beneficial. He was hungry now, so he waited.

About five minutes later, the bells jingled again as the front door of the restaurant swung inward, and a young woman hurried through the opening. Michael had a quick impression of shiny, chestnut colored hair swept smoothly up from her neck, gathered in a bun atop her head, and of a pleasingly female figure compacted into a body barely five feet tall.

She stopped short when she saw him.

“Rosalie, is that you?” a voice called from the kitchen.

She looked away from him. “Yes, it’s me, Mrs. Paddock.”

A middle-aged woman came out of the kitchen. Michael supposed she could be the

Zoe of Zoe's Restaurant as well as the young woman's Mrs. Paddock. "I was just—" Her words broke off when she noticed Michael. "Oh, dear. I didn't know we had a customer."

"No trouble, ma'am." He nodded in her direction. "I didn't mind the wait."

"Rosalie, will you take the gentleman's order?" Mrs. Paddock turned away. "I've got chickens roasting."

Michael watched as Rosalie followed the woman through the swinging door, reappearing a moment later wearing a crisp white apron over her simple blue blouse and skirt. A white cap now covered much of her dark hair. She carried a small paper tablet in her left hand and a pencil in her right.

She crossed the room, stopping on the opposite side of the table from him. "What would you like, sir?" She pointed toward the wall near the entrance.

Her eyes weren't brown, he realized. They were hazel, the dark centers flecked with gold. She was young, but something about her eyes made her seem older, wiser, a little sad. He wondered why.

"Sir?"

"Sorry." He turned his gaze in the direction she'd pointed. Written on a blackboard in precise letters was the menu for the day. He considered his choices. "I'll have the corn-dodgers, chicken-fixins, and coffee."

Rosalie slipped the pencil into the pocket of her apron. "I'll bring your coffee right out." With that, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Two men entered the restaurant soon after. One was dressed in a business suit and bow tie, the other in denim trousers and a vest with a badge pinned to it. There was a look about the first man that almost shouted "Banker." Michael knew it was wise to get on good terms with the town financier as soon as possible. Such men tended to wield a strong voice in any community. Folks listened to their advice as if it were gospel. The second man was obviously the sheriff. He had steel gray hair and eyes to match and was built like a grizzly bear. When the sheriff looked his way, Michael nodded, silently admitting he was a stranger in town.

By the time the men were settled at a table, two more customers arrived, an older couple who reminded Michael of the nursery rhyme about Jack Sprat and his wife. The man was bean pole thin with a shiny bald head, the woman merrily plump with thick gray hair. They, too, glanced his way. The woman's eyes sparkled with curiosity, as if to say, *We don't get many strangers in Boulder Creek*. As with the sheriff, Michael acknowledged her frank appraisal with a slight nod.

Just then, the waitress entered the dining room, carrying Michael's cup of coffee.

"Afternoon, Rosalie," the other woman called.

Rosalie smiled. “Afternoon, Mrs. Barber, Mr. Barber.” She set Michael’s coffee on the table, then headed toward her other customers. “Sheriff, Mr. Stanley.” She pulled her small tablet and pencil from the pocket of her apron. “What can I get for you today? Mrs. Paddock’s got some mighty good chicken-fixins ready, and there’s beef steak available. She’s also baked up some cider cakes and cherry pies.”

Michael sipped his coffee, observing the waitress as she took each of their orders. Now that he wasn’t distracted by the sorrow he’d read in her eyes, he could study the rest of her appearance. He found it much to his liking. She was sweetly pretty with a heart-shaped face and dimples that appeared whenever she smiled. Her mouth was small and pink, her nose dainty. Long lashes—the same dark chestnut color as her hair—framed her expressive eyes.

He lowered his gaze. He didn’t feel guilty for noticing the pretty waitress, but he wondered if he should. He’d kept company with Louise Overhart for more than a year, and all of their friends and acquaintances expected them to marry. Coming from one of San Francisco’s most distinguished families, Louise was beautiful, sophisticated, and intelligent. There was no reason why he shouldn’t marry her, yet he felt no urgency to do so.

He looked up again, gazing across the restaurant at the waitress called Rosalie. What would it be like to be married to someone like her instead? The question made him think of home cooked suppers and bedroom slippers and long nights spent nestled in a featherbed in a house in a small town like Boulder Creek.

But those things weren’t for Michael Randolph. He thrived on the bustle of the big city. He loved the challenge of business. He enjoyed nothing more than a night at the theater or a brutal game of cards with the men at his club.

He wasn’t interested in a small town waitress with sad eyes. And he never would be.



“Who’s the stranger?” Zoe asked when Rosalie entered the kitchen, bringing more orders with her.

“I didn’t ask. He didn’t say.” Rosalie glanced down at her tablet. “I need one beef stew, an order of chicken-fixins, corn-dodgers, and a slice of cherry pie, and two orders of ham, mashed potatoes, and slaw.” She dropped the tablet into her pocket. “I’ll serve the coffee.”

Rosalie wasn’t as disinterested in the stranger’s identity as she pretended. Outsiders passed through Boulder Creek on their way to the mining areas or the logging camps. Others came looking for land with intentions of settling in this valley or the next one over. But few of them were as handsome or as well-dressed as this particular traveler, and she couldn’t help

wondering what had brought him to there.

As she carried a tray into the dining room, Rosalie cast a surreptitious glance in the stranger's direction. She wasn't mistaken about his good looks. He had hair the color of spun gold, and his eyes were the blue of a summer sky. His masculine features seemed nothing short of perfect, from his straight nose, to his firm mouth, to his beardless jaw. His profile spoke of power and confidence, yet she sensed a measure of gentleness beneath the surface.

Looking at him, she was reminded of the books she'd read in school, her studies of Greek gods of mythology or romantic medieval knights from ancient poetry. But she'd never thought they could be real until she saw this man.

He looked up and their gazes met. Rosalie glanced away, but not before she felt heat rise in her cheeks.

"You seem to have an admirer," Emma Barber said softly as Rosalie set two cups of coffee on the table. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before."

"Sam, you know who he is?" Emma asked.

Her husband looked across the room, then back at Emma. "Nope." He picked up his coffee and blew on the steamy hot liquid.

"New in town," Emma continued, undeterred by her husband's lack of interest. "I wonder if he's come to stay."

Rosalie had wondered the same thing but wasn't about to admit it. Besides, it didn't matter. She wouldn't be around more than a few days. What did she care if this stranger stayed? She was leaving Boulder Creek.

She felt a tiny flutter in her stomach, a niggle of fear along her spine. She couldn't remember living anywhere but here. What would it be like, out there on her own?

Silently, she set the other two cups of coffee in front of the sheriff and Vince Stanley, then returned to the kitchen to help Zoe, trying not to think about how frightening it might be to leave Boulder Creek.

Still, she knew it would be worse to stay, now that Pa was coming back.

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Not a scrap of food remained on Michael's dinner plate when the woman at the next table—Mrs. Barber, he remembered Rosalie calling her—caught his eye.

She smiled and said, "You're new to Boulder Creek."

He nodded as he rose from his chair and picked up his hat. "Yes, ma'am." He pulled some coins from his pocket and left the payment for his meal beside his empty plate.

"Are you settling in the area?"

“I’m here on business.” He walked toward her table. Turning his eyes on her husband, he held out his hand and said, “I’m Michael Randolph.”

“Sam Barber.” The men shook hands. “This here is my wife, Emma.”

“I’m pleased to meet you both.” He offered a polite bow. “Perhaps you can help me. I need a place to stay. Are there any rooms for rent in Boulder Creek?”

“There’s the boarding house down near the church. Crescent Valley Room and Board. Mrs. Tomkin’s rates are reasonable, and she’s a good cook. You’ll be comfortable there.”

“Tomkin, did you say?”

“Yes, Virginia Tomkin. She’s run the place for more than ten years now. Used to be called Tomkin’s Rooming House, but when we started getting so many newcomers to the valley, Virginia did some fixing up and adding on and changed the name. You can’t miss it.” She pointed down the street toward the west end of town. “Big, two-story place. There’s a sign on the porch.”

“Much obliged.” Michael placed his black Stetson over his hair, then touched the brim and nodded before turning and leaving the restaurant.

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