

## **Excerpt For Prairie Peace**

### **Chapter One**

#### **Dakota Plains, 1867**

Cecile's gaze froze on the striking man leaning against the hitching post. Her heart seized with a gasp as she nearly stepped off the edge of the wooden walkway. She turned her attention back to delivering her father's mid-day meal, but fixed a smile on her face and slowed her pace, hoping to catch the stranger's eye.

He'd never been in Silver City before; she would have remembered his rugged good looks. Tight, dark denims clung to his masculine thighs, and beneath a black leather vest, open shirt buttons revealed a well-muscled chest. Her gaze slid boldly down his body, thoroughly enjoying the sight until the reflection of the sun off his silver belt buckle blinded her. She swallowed and averted her eyes. What had come over her? Such brazen leering. Goodness, she wasn't a harlot.

At almost the exact moment that she walked past, he stepped onto the sidewalk and made eye contact. In a polite doffing gesture, he touched the wide brim of his hat and smiled. For a second, his blue eyes held her captive.

Suddenly, the weight of the tray tripled, and her breathing quickened. Her cheeks warmed at the crooked smile that told her he knew she'd been staring at him. In her haste to escape embarrassment behind the bank's doors, just a few steps away, she caught her heel in a large knothole in the wooden sidewalk. She tried to recover gracefully but fell flat on her bottom with a resounding plop, hitting the wood so hard it jarred her teeth. Her dignity suffered as she realized how pitiful she looked, with her father's lunch spilled all over her. Luckily, most of the mashed potatoes and gravy landed on the ground, but the vegetables and ham slices filled her lap.

Before she could stand, he knelt at her side, plucking green beans from her dress. "Are you all right, ma'am?" His quivering lips failed to mask his desire to laugh.

How could she be all right? She'd just made a fool of herself in front of the most handsome man she'd ever seen. What must he think?

Managing a weak smile and struggling for some semblance of composure, she accepted his proffered hand. While avoiding his gaze, she nervously smoothed wet wrinkles from her dress, hoping to find her voice. "Yes, I'm fine," she croaked. "Thank you for your help." Her voice trembled in unison with her insides.

"Name's Walt Williams," he said, when she finally made eye contact. "I'm visiting my Aunt May. She owns the boarding house here."

Lost in his azure eyes, Cecile heard very little of what he said. Becoming aware of her boldness, she glanced down, trying not to be so obvious. The evidence of her accident reminded her why she happened to be here in the first place.

"Oh, my gosh ... Father's lunch!" Although reluctant to leave, she dared not dawdle. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Williams, and I'm sorry to be rude, but I have to hurry home to replace my father's lunch. He must be wondering where I am."

Again he touched the brim of his hat. "Mighty nice meeting you, too, Miss..."

"Cecile, Cecile Palmer." Her introduction was brief as she bent and picked up the tray, utensils and the china plate that had somehow remained intact. Before taking her leave, she flashed him a warm smile, hoping the memory of this incident would fade from his mind. She gave a little wave and started for home, but after only a short way, she tutted in disgust, pulling at the dampened material that insisted on clinging to her legs. It and the glob of potatoes on her shoe served as grim reminder of a ruined opportunity.

Why couldn't she have met him after delivering Father's lunch? Her thoughts refused to focus on anything else other than Walt Williams. What a wonderful name. She said it over and over again in her mind, wondering if she'd ever see him again.

She kicked a splintered piece of wood and sent it flying. Why hadn't she asked him where he was from or why he'd never visited before? Had he come to town and she just didn't recall? No, she'd certainly remember him. With any luck, maybe he'd stay in town long enough to come to the Spring Fling. Her heart quickened again.

She had never actually met his Aunt May, but knew her by sight. She was a short, rather plump woman with silver gray hair usually pulled back into a bun. They had exchanged smiles and pleasantries across the aisles of the mercantile on several occasions, but Cecile's father referred to the woman's boarding house as being on the "wrong side of the tracks." He forbade Cecile to step foot into that area; warned over and over again that it was no place for a respectable young woman to venture. Cowpokes and drifters traveling through Silver City frequented the saloons nearby. Sometimes she found her father far too judgmental.

How could she manage to run into Walt again? A mental picture of him flashed through her mind, and she knew she could come up with something.

"Afternoon, Miz Cecile," a passing resident called, drawing her from her thoughts.

Afternoon? Another face emerged in her mind's eye--her father's, and he wasn't happy. Here she dawdled along thinking about Walt and her father still hadn't had eaten. He'd be furious. She hastened her steps.

Her mother met her at the door, her brow raised. Eyeing the stains on Cecile's dress, Mrs. Palmer shook her head. "My goodness, what happened to you? You're a mess."

Cecile handed her the tray. "You wouldn't believe it. Let's just say I had a mishap that involved father's lunch and I need a replacement."

Her mother quickly dished up a second platter of food. "It's not as hot as the first, but at least it's better than nothing at all."

Cecile took the tray and headed back to the bank, vowing to be more careful this time.

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"You're late!" Harvey Palmer clicked open his pocket watch then glared at his daughter. "You know how I feel about punctuality."

"I know, Father, and believe me, it won't happen again. I would have been sooner but suffered a fall and..." She flashed him a pouting smile.

His gaze softened. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just enjoy your lunch and I'll see you at home later." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. He was often cranky but she always wrapped him around her little finger. She was Papa's little princess.

She made her way back home, her smile broadening with thoughts of Walt Williams. The heat from the midday sun seemed exceptionally warm as visions of his handsome face filled her mind. Before meeting him, her mind had been occupied only with thoughts of the upcoming Spring Fling and what she would wear. Her mother, a wonderful seamstress, worked on a beautiful new dress, and today would be Cecile's final fitting before the dance. She pictured the dress, the dance, and his face, wondering, hoping that he'd get a chance to see her in her new gown.

The days passed quickly with no signs of Walt. On the evening of the Spring Fling, Cecile prepared for the big event, applying the final touches to her appearance. Standing in front of the mirror, she tied her auburn hair back with a ribbon matching her dress and pinched her cheeks soundly to give them just the right shade of pink. She danced around her bedroom, sweeping her skirt from side to side and twirling in circles like a small child until dizziness forced her to stop.

Her mother had outdone herself on the yellow gingham dress with little daisies smartly placed around a large white collar. Its fitted style and sweeping skirt accentuated Cecile's tiny waist, and although the neckline revealed just enough to be sensuous, she felt sure it still met her father's strict modesty standards.

Thoughts of the dance whirled through her mind, and among the sea of faces she imagined there, one drifted into clarity ... Walt Williams.

"Please come to the dance. Please come to the dance," she repeated, hoping he somehow sensed her wishes. She paused to check her reflection one last time, pleased with what she saw. Her thoughts drifted to him again. Would he be there?

"Cecile, it's time to go," her father called from downstairs.

She took a long breath, trying to calm her apprehensive heart, and descended the staircase. Her contagious happiness spread to her lips, and a wide smile blossomed as she followed her folks out the door and down the walk. Crossed fingers were hidden in the folds of her skirt as she and her parents walked into the Town Hall.

The Spring Fling was a big to-do in Silver City. All the families from surrounding areas gathered together to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of planting time. Some lived far away, so for those folks, trips to town were few and far between.

The tantalizing aroma from the bounty of food on the heavily laden tables across the room wafted in the air. Cecile's stomach rumbled in anticipation, but she forgot her hunger as she stood on tiptoe and surveyed the hall, hoping to see those blue eyes once again. When she realized he wasn't there, a frown tugged at her lips. She sighed and tried to convince herself it didn't matter. The evening was planned long before she laid eyes on him, and she meant to have a good time. Besides, she felt extra pretty tonight.

Already, her sparkling eyes and long, shining auburn hair earned her many compliments from a number of adoring young men. The fact that her father held the position of town banker didn't hamper her popularity.

A handful of children in a corner of the hall caught Cecile's attention. The games they played brought back fond memories of her younger days. Ah, to be able to play hide and seek, red rover, and tag again. Her gaze followed two little boys as they grabbed slabs of ham and homemade yeast rolls from the food table and scampered away. She shook her head and chuckled at their impishness.

Her attention shifted to the older girls gathered across the room. Although they acted aloof, they were clearly sneaking peeks at the group of possible suitors at the opposite end of the building. The young men strutted around like the Bantam roosters Cecile's mom kept in their backyard. It seemed the whole place was filled with folks desperately trying to catch up on a whole year's worth of socializing.

Spotting some of her friends, Cecile waved and walked over to join them. She stood idle as they chattered with excitement about who might ask them to dance. Her own thoughts kept drifting to Walt, and she scuffed her shoe against the floor, disappointed that he hadn't shown up. Her gaze continually drifted to the door each time it opened.

Her mood changed when the dancing began. A contingent of local townsmen combined their musical talents to provide the evening's entertainment, and Cecile tapped her toe to

the lively melody of the guitars, fiddle, and harmonica. A group of young men rushed across the floor like someone had fired a starting pistol for a race.

She leaned over and whispered to her friend, "Get ready, here they come!"

Before long, Cecile was breathless from continuous whirls around the floor with one young man after another. Pushing a stray curl from her face, she took a seat along the wall and enjoyed a moment to relax. As she scanned the room, she saw him enter. Her heartbeat quickened, and she held her breath as someone passed in front of her, obscuring her vision. Had she really seen him?

It was Walt. Her gaze followed him and his Aunt May to the food table, where he deposited the pies he carried. Cecile's heart pounded, and she realized she was staring at him again. She adjusted herself in her seat and feigned nonchalance, looking down in her lap and smoothing her skirt. All the while, hoping he'd notice her.

Judging from the people clustering around the boarding house proprietress and her nephew, Cecile was amused that not everyone shared the haughty opinion of her father. A voice interrupted further pondering, and she glanced up into the face of a nervous looking young man. "May I have this dance?"

Painfully aware that if she accepted she might miss the opportunity to connect with Walt, she bent down and rubbed her ankle. "I do appreciate the offer, but I seem to have injured myself during the last dance."

Her would-be suitor's expression dropped at her rejection, and as he turned away Cecile dealt with a momentary pang of guilt until she considered the benefit of her little white lie. She was free to dance with Walt, and that was all that mattered.

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Walt straightened up from placing pies on the table and was immediately besieged with introductions to his aunt's friends. While he politely acknowledged each, he scanned the hall, intent on finding that familiar face in the crowd.

He spied her. There, sitting across the room. God, she was a beauty.

Even covered with food, as she had been when they met, she was still the prettiest girl he'd seen in all his travels. He had planned to ask Aunt May for a loan and be on his way, but after meeting Cecile, he decided to hang around long enough to attend the dance.

His life experiences had taught him the appreciation of having a home. After his mother passed, Walt worked with his father to try to make a success of their small plot of land. With his father's failing health and no money coming in, the bank called back its note, and the Williams lost their farm. The memories, still fresh and painful, made him all the more determined to make a home for himself and settle down.

Although he'd met many women in his travels, he'd never stayed in one place long enough for a lasting relationship. He'd been in loud and crowded towns, and ones so small it seemed only those who lived there knew they existed. He'd been on countless cattle drives, ridden for the Pony Express, and even served as foreman for a wealthy ranch owner in Colorado, but never had Walt met a gal who stirred anything other than a casual interest.

He supposed he had broken some hearts, or at least disappointed a few women, but until three days ago, no one had grabbed his attention like the auburn-haired beauty with the green eyes. After all he'd done and seen in his lifetime, he couldn't figure out why he felt so awkward at the opportunity of becoming better acquainted with her. Perhaps because he hadn't danced with a woman in a very long time. The last he remembered was his mother at a harvest festival much like the Spring Fling.

The sound of music drew him back to his present surroundings, making him realize just how nervous he was about asking Cecile to dance. Just the thought of holding her close made his palms sweat.

Great!

What kind of impression was he going to make when he walked up, asked her to dance, and took her lovely hand in his clammy one? He pushed the disturbing thought aside, wiped his hands on the sides of his pant legs and sauntered in her direction. He would be damned if he let her leave this time without asking a whole lot more questions.

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From beneath her lashes Cecile saw him approaching, though she pretended not to notice. Her breath caught in her throat as he neared.

"May I have this dance?"

His husky voice brought chills to the back of her neck, and she realized she had sprung to her feet before even accepting his offer.

Thank goodness a waltz was playing. Being held in his arms seemed like a dream; everything she had fantasized about for the past few days was coming true. She peered over to where her girlfriends gathered, hoping they'd noticed. Meanwhile her mind spun, trying to think of something to say to him, but she decided not to spoil the moment by making idle conversation. It was a struggle not to rest her head on his wide shoulder and lean the length of her body against his.

His arm tightened around her waist, drawing her close, yet maintaining a proper space between them. The ripple of muscles beneath her hand and the masculine smell of his clean, cotton shirt stirred feelings new to her--her stomach clenched with excitement when she noticed all her friends watching.

If only time would stand still. But the song ended, and they stepped apart and applauded.

"Would you mind if we sat?" she asked, feeling a little giddy and unsteady on wobbly legs.

He agreed, and placing his hand on her elbow, guided her back to her chair. "Can I fix you a plate?" he politely inquired.

She tried to read his face, tell from his body language if he liked her, but images of sitting on the sidewalk, covered in food, flashed before her eyes. Despite her stomach's hungry rumblings, she declined with a shake of her head. "But thank you anyway."

Walt sat in the chair next to hers. "You left so quickly the other day; I didn't have a chance to find out much about you."

"I think I mentioned that I'm Cecile Palmer, and if I remember correctly, you're Walt Williams." Her lips quivered, wanting to curl into a smile at her feigned dispassion. How could she forget his name? She'd only said it a thousand times since meeting him.

With each dance, the conversation flowed. As the evening progressed, she learned more about him. Aunt May, his only surviving relative, was helping him secure a loan to purchase the piece of land he wanted more than anything else. He intended to build his own cattle ranch and realize a life-long dream. Her mind painted pictures of the acreage he described, associating beauty, serenity and lushness with the image she saw.

The band finished the final song, the last note striking a sour note of disappointment in her chest.

Walt held her at arm's length and dropped his hands to applaud the musicians again. When the commotion died down, he locked gazes with her. "Thank you so much for the wonderful evening. Would it be all right if I call on you before I leave town?"

"Yes, of course." She responded quickly, then reminded herself not to appear quite so eager. It wasn't easy given the happiness plucking at her heartstrings. She refused to think about him leaving town.

"So, Miss Palmer, after my appointment tomorrow, maybe I'll have some good news to share with you."

Her spreading smile faded as dread crept over her. Walt was about to discover her father ran Silver City's bank. Notorious for his serious nature, and for glaring over his spectacles at anyone who displeased him, Harvey Palmer deemed no one good enough for his daughter. It hadn't concerned her until now. Perhaps she should speak with him before he met with Walt. But then her father would know she had an interest in him. She grimaced at the prospective outcome. Saying nothing seemed the best option.

Across the room, she caught sight of her father motioning to her. When he looked away, she stood on tiptoes and quickly kissed Walt's cheek. If Harvey Palmer witnessed such boldness, he would give her a lengthy lecture on public brazenness. In her opinion the kiss was worth the punishment, but there was no use putting Walt's loan in jeopardy. She crossed the room to join her parents for the walk home.

The mild evening air smelled of honeysuckle and horse manure, but nothing could spoil the perfect evening Cecile had just spent. A million stars twinkled overhead, and her step was as light as her heart. At the hitching rail outside the hall, the horses nickered as the Palmers walked by, and Cecile paused to rub the nose of an old mare tethered to a covered buggy. Up ahead, her mother's voice elevated in laughter and Cecile hurried to catch up.

Harvey Palmer's heavy footsteps shivered the planks of the old walkway as the trio passed by the mercantile, heading for the end of Main Street, where they lived. Lively laughter behind them rang through the silence as the social hall emptied and others departed. A pang of melancholy plucked at Cecile, her sadness growing. The dance had ended far too soon for her liking.

"I notice that a particular young man monopolized most of your evening, Cecile. I didn't recognize him. Who was he?" Her father halted to light a cigar.

Just as she'd expected, the conversation turned to Walt. She hesitated before answering, sure her father would find fault with his breeding. There was no use avoiding the topic. Tomorrow, when he met with Walt and his aunt about the loan, her father would learn the truth anyway. Why not show her interest in him?

"His name is Walt Williams, and he's here visiting his aunt for a few days at her boarding house." Cecile's tone bordered on defensive.

She turned to her mother. "He's really very nice. Can I invite him to Sunday supper, Momma, please, please?"

"Now, Cecile, I..."

"No! That wouldn't be proper." Her father expressed his opinion in a most resounding manner, leaving his wife with her mouth gaping. "After all, you've just met and we know very little about him." The tip of Harvey Palmer's cigar flickered deep red as he drew smoke into his mouth.

Cecile started to beg her father to change his mind, but that's what he expected. Instead she choked back her usual emotional outburst and cast a pleading look at her mother. The trio paused inside the gate of the picket fence surrounding their house.

"Now, Harve," Mrs. Palmer said, gazing up at her husband, "there's no better way to get to know a young man than to invite him for a meal. What harm can come from it? After all, Cecile is nineteen and old enough for us to trust her judgment. I think it's a fine idea."

Mr. Palmer walked up on the porch and unlocked the door, mumbling something under his breath about Cecile being able to do much better. Usually, when she and her mother joined forces, he didn't have a leg to stand on, but still Cecile crossed her fingers for luck as she joined him on the stoop. It only took puppy-dog eyes for him to relent.

Cecile wanted to jump up and down like a little girl; instead, she held her happiness in check. "Thank you, Father, I know you'll really like him." She used her most restrained voice, trying to display the maturity her mother had pointed out.

Inside, she kissed both parents goodnight and scurried upstairs. While changing into her nightclothes, she softly giggled over getting her father's approval to invite Walt to dine. She jumped into bed and snuggled deep under the covers, almost too excited to sleep. Thoughts of dancing with him flashed through her mind, and she wrapped her arms around her body, trying to recapture the feeling of his embrace. When sleep finally came, her last conscious thought was of his deep blue eyes.

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Walt heard little of Aunt May's chattering on the ride home. He was lost in thought about Cecile, still enjoying her sweet smell and the recollection of holding her in his arms.

He halted the buggy in front of the boarding house and helped his aunt down. A single lamplight shone through the living room window of the white two-story structure, and even in moonlight, one could clearly see that the front yard was neatly trimmed. A shingle bearing "Rooms to Let" dangled over the door. With his mind elsewhere, he almost tripped over the black cat that darted past him on his way up the front steps.

"It appears you thoroughly enjoyed the company you kept during the dance. You've barely spoken since we left." Aunt May chuckled as Walt struggled to maintain his balance.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, opening the door. "And I wouldn't mind keeping company with her on a regular basis." He seriously hoped tomorrow would bring another opportunity to see Cecile. What was it about his need to see her again ... to be with her? More importantly, was he good enough for her?

After escorting his aunt into the house, Walt went back outside to see to the horse and buggy. Aunt May stood in the doorway and hollered after him. "I'm calling it a night, dear. Don't forget our very important appointment at eleven tomorrow. We don't want to be late."

Walt laughed out loud. "Nope, we'd better not keep the banker waiting."

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## Chapter Two

Walt opened the bank door and followed Aunt May to a large mahogany desk where a rather stern-looking man sat. Deep furrows in his brow indicated he didn't smile very often, and the nameplate in front of him read Harvey Palmer, President.

Palmer? Cecile Palmer ... were they related? The question zipped through his mind, but the man's measuring look over the top of his glasses told Walt it wasn't the appropriate time and place to make small talk, so he didn't ask.

"Good morning, Mr. Palmer," Aunt May said in a very authoritative voice. "This is my nephew, Walt Williams, and we're here to see about a loan."

Harvey Palmer offered her a chair and reached over his large desk to shake Walt's hand. Walt took a seat next to his aunt.

"As you know, Mr. Palmer," Aunt May said, "I own the boarding house here in town. The revenue provides me with a very comfortable, yet not extravagant lifestyle." She pulled a ledger from her handbag and opened it to demonstrate her continuing profits.

He briefly glanced at the figures and flashed a smug smile. "It's just too bad that your boarding house is in ... well shall we just say, a less than desirable part of town. Word has it that some of the people you cater to have questionable backgrounds."

"Look, Mr. Palmer, you may not approve of the manner in which I support myself, but as a businessman, you have to admit that loaning me money would be a sound investment." She locked gazes with him. "My nephew has his heart set on buying a piece of land, and I'm ready and willing to mortgage my boarding house to get the money he needs."

Walt felt a pang of guilt for putting his aunt under such unpleasant scrutiny on his behalf.

"Well, I don't know exactly how much I can loan you," Harvey Palmer countered. "Like I said, location of the collateral property is important."

"Mr. Palmer, where my boarding house is situated has nothing to do with its worth. It's the only one in town and I have proven to you that it's a solid investment. I expect that you will put aside your prejudice and act wisely by granting my request."

Harvey Palmer steepled his fingers below his chin. "I fear if I loan money on your establishment, I'm going to be overrun with similar requests. I'm sure you understand my predicament."

Walt leaned forward. "I'm not sure that's my aunt's concern. She's simply trying to get money so I can purchase land several days north of here, and she's willing to mortgage

her livelihood for me. I assure you, sir, that Aunt May's loan will be paid in full as soon as my ranch is operational. I plan to farm as well as raise cattle."

The banker suddenly perked up. "Hmmm, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to help a young man get a start." He pushed back from his desk, rose, and held out his hand to seal the agreement.

Walt shook with him, feeling as though an immediate invitation to leave town had just been extended. He suspected what sealed the deal was the announcement that money was for land miles from Silver City. But why?

He escorted his feisty aunt out into the fresh air and midday sunshine.

She peered up at him with a smile and pinched his cheek. "Boy, I love standing up to that snobbish banker. I don't think Harvey Palmer will be looking down his nose at us anymore."

Walt grabbed her, gave her a squeeze, and danced her around on the sidewalk until she was out of breath from laughing. He kissed her cheek. "Aunt May, how can I ever thank you for helping me to realize my dream? I promise I'll pay back every penny as soon as I can." He helped her into the buggy then dashed over to his side, whistling a happy tune.

He dropped his aunt off in front of the boarding house and went around back to the barn to stable the horse and put the buggy away. Now that the land deal was finalized, he had to think about leaving Silver City to begin work on his new place. But first, he had to find a way to get better acquainted with a certain Miss Cecile Palmer. "Palmer?" He muttered her last name, then shook his head. There was no way she was related to the grouch at the bank.

He ducked beneath the clothesline and crossed the side yard, whistling slightly off key. As he rounded the house, he saw Cecile coming down the street. His breath caught in his throat, and he paused to admire her beauty. The halo of sunlight shining in her hair gave her an angelic appearance, verifying his belief that she was sent from heaven. What he wouldn't give to run his fingers through those long locks cascading over her shoulders and help tarnish that halo a bit. An immediate whoosh of air pushed past his lips, exhibiting the shame he felt for thinking like a heathen. If Aunt May suspected his unseemly thoughts, she'd grab him by the ear just as she had when he did anything wrong as a child. He smiled at the memory, funnier now than it was then.

As Cecile neared, his smile widened. He refused to leave Silver City without her, but how he'd manage getting her to go wasn't yet clear. Still, when he put his mind to something, he almost always got his way, and she'd been on his mind every minute since he first saw her.

Cecile noticed Walt and waved. Her steps quickened until she paused in front of him. "I was hoping I'd run into you. I'd like to invite you to Sunday supper. Will you come?" She sounded a little breathless.

Watching her supple lips move made him want to savor the taste of them. He listened to her words but his mind begged to explore her sensuous mouth. He took a deep breath, fighting the urge to succumb to the sweet temptation.

Knowing a kiss would be worth the wait, he turned his full attention to her invitation. After all, she'd no doubt defied her father to come here. "I'd love to come. What time should I be there?"

"Well, Father likes to eat promptly at two o'clock, so if you could be there around noon, we could have some time to visit. And about my father ... well, he seems rather stern, but he can be very nice." There was a shimmer of doubt in her eyes.

"Uh ... your father wouldn't happen to be Harvey Palmer would he?" He kept his tone light, hoping he was wrong in his assumption.

"Why ... yes, you must have met him?" Her smile faded, but she quickly restored it. "Good, if you already know each other that makes it even better."

Better? He felt he'd been treated like something Harvey Palmer scraped off the bottom of his boot, but he forced a smile. "Yes, I did meet your father today. At the bank." He had nothing pleasant to say about the man, and an uncomfortable gap suddenly opened in the conversation. His gaze locked on Cecile's mouth again--the button shape of her lips, her pearly white teeth, and the tongue that pushed against them in an ever so slight lisp when she said anything ending with an "s."

"I ... I have to pick up something at the mercantile for Mother, so I should get going," Cecile finally stuttered. "See you on Sunday. I can't wait!"

He watched her until she disappeared around the corner, thinking how hard the wait would be for him, too. He'd totally forgotten to share the news about getting the money he needed. She'd be pleased, but he was anxious to see her reaction to finding out she was part of his plan.

Turning, he climbed the boarding house steps, his mind conjuring up visions of Harvey Palmer's beady eyes staring over the top of his spectacles with that stern and disapproving look.

"Yeah, I can't wait, either," Walt mumbled, as he slipped inside.

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The sun's brilliant rays peeked through the window of Walt's boarding house bedroom. He threw the covers aside, rolled out of bed, stretching his arms high over his head and

yawning. His aunt was already busy in the kitchen, and the delicious smell of frying bacon made his stomach rumble.

He pulled on his pants while wondering what kept her going. Just a little past dawn and she was already up and busy. Although at least sixty-five, Aunt May seemed to have more energy than someone half her age. He adored her. She was all he had left to call family, at least until he persuaded Cecile to build a new one with him. To others it might appear he was moving too fast, but he wasn't about to miss out on a good thing to stand on propriety.

She invaded his every thought. He had dreamed of marrying the right girl, settling down on a ranch, and raising lots of cattle and kids. Now he had the money to buy the land, and he was pretty sure he'd met the right girl. The cattle and kids would come later. Whistling again, he descended the stairs, two at time, and joined the other boarders in the kitchen for breakfast. He filled his plate with less than usual, knowing it wouldn't be long before he went to the Palmer's for supper. Small talk and an extra cup of coffee killed a little time, but he made a mental note of the things Aunt May said needed tending.

After completing a few odd chores and doing some much-needed carpentry on the steps of the boarding house, Walt went in to bathe. The warm water felt good to his tired muscles, and while he languished in the tub, he pondered how nice it was to have a woman to take care of him. He hadn't had that luxury since his mother passed. He slid down until the water lapped at his chin, listening to Aunt May's humming as she went about her housework downstairs. She spoiled him by doing his laundry; he'd become used to wearing wrinkled shirts.

A smile spread across his face as he lathered his chest. If everything went well today, maybe he'd have a woman in his life on a regular basis.

He glanced at the clock on the bureau, surprised that it was only ten o'clock. It seemed as though he'd worked outside all morning. How depressing to think he still had to pass two hours before seeing Cecile again. He sat in the tub until his skin began to prune, then climbed out and donned the clothes laid out on the bed.

Dressed in his best jeans and the crisp white shirt Aunt May had just washed and ironed, he surveyed his reflection in the mirror. He pushed back that one curly lock that always wanted to fall forward over his brow and straightened his string tie, satisfied with his appearance. He checked the time again, frowning to see that barely a half hour had elapsed. He busied himself spreading the ruffled patchwork quilt across his bed, hanging up his wet towel, and stowing his dirty work clothes. It seemed as though someone had glued the clock hands in place. With one last assessment of his reflection, he deemed his looks proper enough to marry a banker's daughter and went downstairs to wait. He shadowed his aunt, bothered the boarders, and fidgeted in a chair until time passed.

At twelve o'clock sharp, Walt nervously knocked on the Palmers' front door. His mind was a jumble, wondering what he'd say? Was tonight really the night he was going to

convince someone he barely knew to marry him and move away? If so, how did he plan to, especially when that someone's father obviously didn't think to highly of him?

He tried to convince himself that the meeting at the bank was just a bad first impression, but from the stories Aunt May shared, he feared he'd met the true Harvey Palmer. A trickle of sweat ran down Walt's forehead, and he reached up to wipe it away just as the door opened.

Cecile stood before him in a dark brown dress that turned her auburn hair fiery. The modest expanse of bared skin at the neckline took his breath away. At her welcoming smile and motion to enter, the same nerves that earlier stilled the clock hands glued his feet to the floor.

"Don't just stand outside. Come on in." With a giggle, she playfully grabbed his arm, dragged him into the entry hall, and closed the door.

He swallowed a sigh, thankful she hadn't pulled him in by his sweaty hands. While she led the way to the parlor, he swiped his palms against his pant legs, and in polite fashion, waited for her to be seated. The room reflected the good taste of a woman's decorating, from the matching settee and chairs trimmed in mahogany, to the throw rugs on the floor that added some color to the neutral cushions.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to find a relaxed stance while crossing and uncrossing his arms. Glancing down, he checked to assure that he really hadn't grown an extra one, and almost laughed at his ridiculous antics. Those brave thoughts he'd entertained in the tub had turned tail and run. Cecile's presence reduced him to jelly. First soggy palms at the Spring Fling, and now again. Only this time it was a nervous, all-over kind of sweat. He'd heard that thoughts of marriage did that to some men, and at almost twenty, he considered himself one.

Cecile sat and patted the cushion next to her. "I'm so happy you could join us. Please, have a seat."

Us. The word beckoned images of Harvey Palmer scowling over his spectacles. That was a look Walt didn't want to see tonight. His stomach did a little flip flop as he sat next to Cecile, keeping a fair distance between them. "I've been looking forward to seeing you again."

The sofa was comfortable, but he definitely wasn't. He sat back and tried to look relaxed, but felt a trickle of sweat running down his temple. Fishing in his pocket, he extracted a handkerchief and nervously blotted the offending moisture.

"Is it too warm in here?" she asked. "I can open the front door."

"No, not at all. I'm..."

Mrs. Palmer swept into the room, removing her apron and pushing back stray auburn wisps from her face. "Walt, I've heard so much about you. I'm very happy you could join us this evening. Harve will be right down. He's in the study tending to some sort of business; the man never rests."

Cecile resembled her mother. They had the same green eyes and hair color, although Mrs. Palmer had a few streaks of gray in hers. Visions of Harvey Palmer reared again, and Walt whispered a silent thank you that Cecile had inherited her mother's pleasing personality.

At the sound of someone clearing his throat, his gaze shifted to the doorway.

"Good evening, Mr. Williams, nice to see you, and how is your aunt?" Mr. Palmer straightened his vest and peered over his reading glasses in a familiar fashion.

Walt sprang to his feet and offered his hand. "Just fine, Mr. Palmer, thanks for asking. You have a lovely home, sir, and it's made even lovelier by the presence of your beautiful wife and daughter."

He almost rolled his eyes at his own cornball compliment. But then, he'd never been a smooth talker. A glance in Cecile's direction showed she seemed impressed nonetheless. The four made small talk until Mrs. Palmer announced that dinner was ready and they moved into the dining room.

Mr. Palmer dominated the conversation around the table, until he took a breath.

"Tell us a little about yourself, Walt," Mrs. Palmer asked.

He swallowed a nervous lump, knowing nothing in his background could compare with a banker's wheeling and dealing. Cecile's father was an influential person in Silver City; certainly powerful enough to make or break a man. His mind spun, looking for something to share. "Well ... uhh..."

"This week I foreclosed on Fred Wright's loan. It seems no one takes their financial obligations seriously these days." Evidently not interested in what Walt had to say, Harvey Palmer looked pointedly at Walt with beady eyes that sent a message.

The accusing look aimed at him made him wonder if Mr. Palmer was anything like the man who had taken away Walt's home after his father died. Clearly, Cecile's father lost no sleep over his business decisions. He droned on and on, giving a good glimpse of his hard-heartedness. Walt's mind wandered, finding more pleasant things on which to dwell.

When the blowhard banker finally took a drink, Walt jumped in. "Mrs. Palmer, that was a scrumptious meal. I don't think I could eat another bite without busting." Unable to think of anything more to say, he just sat back and let Harvey ramble on about his successes. It was a blessing when the meal was over and they adjourned to the parlor.

Mr. Palmer offered him a brandy.

"No thanks, sir; I'm not a drinking man." Walt had never developed a taste for spirits. What he really wanted was to savor those luscious rose-colored lips of Harvey's daughter. That thought had crept into his mind all during dinner. Several times he'd had to rearrange the napkin on his lap to hide the result of his thoughts and he knew for sure Mr. Palmer didn't want to know that. A twinge of pain passed through Walt's earlobe. Yep, Aunt May would give it a good twist if she knew her nephew's thoughts.

"So, Walt, now that your business is concluded, when do you expect to be leaving Silver City?" Mr. Palmer had hinted at the subject several times throughout dinner, but now he blatantly asked.

Walt still had no answer. He'd stay as long as it took to win Cecile, but first he had to ask how she felt about marriage. But first, he directed his parting comments to his hostess. "Mrs. Palmer, thank you again for the wonderful dinner. I hope I didn't overstay my welcome. And, thank you, Mr. Palmer, for the entertaining evening." He'd successfully dodged the question one more time. He pardoned himself and stood.

"I'll see you out, Walt." Cecile rose and excused herself from the parlor, but not before her father cast a disapproving look in her direction. The look bothered Walt more than it seemed to bother Cecile. She grabbed Walt's hand and led him out onto the front porch.

He took in a deep breath, overwhelmed by the pleasant aroma of honeysuckle growing around the railing. The fragrance reminded him of Cecile's hair, and he had a sudden desire to bury his nose in her auburn tresses as he had at the dance.

They stood side by side on the front porch and watched the fiery sun settle below the horizon. Crickets chirped softly in the distance, and a gentle breeze cooled the early evening air. Thoughts ran wild through Walt's head. He had to decide how soon he'd leave Silver City, and just exactly how he'd ask Cecile to accompany him.

He gazed straight ahead and broke the silence by clearing his throat. "Cecile, your father probably doesn't realize how much he did for me when he approved the loan for my Aunt May. Now I have the chance to buy the land I told you about and build the home I want ... to see my dream come true--a ranch, complete with animals and crops."

She beamed. "I know, Father told me. I'm so happy for you, but..."

He needed to get to the point. "Between now and winter, I'm going to be working my tail off to get things into shape so that by this time next year I can plant, harvest, and sell a crop that will keep the cash coming in. I plan to start with a small herd of cattle and increase as money allows."

None of what he said mattered unless she shared it with him. Ever since her father brought up Walt's impending departure, her mood had turned somber, and a look of sorrow clouded her beautiful green eyes.

His hand inched over and covered hers. He wanted to say the right thing, but suddenly he had trouble finding the words to exactly express his feelings. Turning to face her, he clasped both of her hands, and like a weakened dam, his thoughts burst past the lump in his throat. "Cecile, I want you to come with me. I want to marry you and take care of you for the rest of my life. Now don't talk, just listen. I know this is serious stuff, and we barely know each other, but ever since that first day when you tripped and fell right in front of me, I knew you were the one I wanted. It must have been destiny because I fell that day, too. I fell in love with you."

He gazed up at the sky, holding his breath, expecting her to run screaming into the house.

Instead, she cupped his chin, forcing him to face her. "Oh, Walt, I love you, too. I haven't stopped thinking of you since we met, and I know this is meant to be. I won't let you go without me. My heart would break if I never saw you again." She released a breath. "Now, all we have to do is find a way to get Father to approve."

Walt's heart sank. "I don't want to appear negative, but I think I stand more chance of surviving a blizzard naked than getting your father to approve our joining!"

"Oh that's not true. Father likes you. You just have to get past his rough edges."

"I hope you're right, but I think the only thing your father likes about me is the fact that I'm leaving town." He ran his fingers along her cheek. "Don't worry, Cecile. I'll find a way to make you my wife."

He took her into his arms, finally savoring the dessert he'd waited for all through dinner. He found it well worth the wait. Her soft, supple lips parted just enough to let his eager tongue brush against her teeth. The feel of her body pushing against him caused him to shiver. It felt wonderful to hold her close again and enjoy the feel and smell of her, but his desire to continue was thwarted by the fear of seeing that all too familiar scowl peering through the curtains.

Not wanting to add more fuel to her father's fire, he forced himself to release her, and using restraint, gave her a quick peck. "I'd better be going."

Their clasped hands slowly drifted apart, and Walt stepped off the porch. Halfway down the sidewalk, he cast a look back to make sure she had gone into the house so he could adjust his pants to accommodate the evidence of his excitement. All the way back to the boarding house, in between reliving the kiss, he mulled over the dilemma regarding her father, finally deciding to discuss it with Aunt May. She was already in bed when he let himself in and climbed the darkened stairs. Once beneath the covers, sleep was slow in coming.

