

## CHAPTER 1



CARTERSVILLE, COLORADO TERRITORY

SEPTEMBER 1874

*I*t was only the second week of the school year, and Nettie could tell that the children were anxious for their day to be over so they could be outside. Their attention wasn't on the arithmetic problems she'd given them to copy to do for homework, but on the sunny fall day that was exceptionally beautiful. She certainly understood that. She felt the same way! "Chester, bring your paper here, please."

The little boy looked at her in horror. "I ain't got 'em done yet, Teacher."

"I don't expect you to have them all done, Chester," she said with a smile. "Please bring me your paper."

"Yes, ma'am." He got up and hurried to her desk.

Nettie looked at his paper, and saw that he'd copied all his prob-

lems correctly. "Very good, Chester. You may gather your things and leave for today."

He was happy, and he hurried to do as she said. "I'll wait outside for you, Jerry," he told his younger brother, who was still furiously copying the problems he was assigned.

Nettie continued to call on the children, one at a time, and if they were finished copying the problems, she released them. If they weren't quite finished, she sent them back to their desks to finish. Within a very short time all of the children were gone for the day. Nettie stood in the doorway for a few minutes, breathing in the fresh air and enjoying the warm breeze. After a bit she gave herself a mental kick and then she turned toward her desk and went and sat down. Nettie had papers to grade, and since she tried to set a good example for the children by doing her 'homework', she sat at her desk and graded spelling tests. Most of the students did well, but one little boy obviously hadn't studied for the test. He'd only spelled one of the new words correctly, and it was a pattern she was seeing repeated over and over in the last two weeks. It was time to talk to his parents before it became a pattern that couldn't be reversed for the school year.

Nettie took out the small wooden file box where she kept a card on each student, their name, address, birthday, grade and other information that was pertinent. She found Scotty Greene's card. He was ten years old, but only in the third grade. He'd been held back at least once. There was only one parent listed. Nettie decided there was no time like the present to talk to Mr. Greene. She packed up the rest of the papers and put them in the new small satchel she'd purchased for her teaching job. Once that task was completed, Nettie took her bonnet off the hat tree and put it on over her red hair and tied the ribbons under her chin. Even in this western town the proprieties must be observed. As the school-teacher, she was under close scrutiny all the time, and since she wasn't from around here, people examined everything she did and offered an opinion, whether it was asked for or not.

She made sure the door to the schoolhouse was locked, and then she walked to the livery and asked Mr. Watson to prepare a buggy for her. She would rather don a pair of pants and ride as she normally did, but she didn't want to shock the townspeople who barely knew her.

"It's shore a nice day to go fer a drive, Teacher. Do you have any idee where yore goin'?" the older man asked. "It ain't safe fer you to go too far northwest. Them Utes is actin' up," he warned her.

"I will be very careful, Mr. Watson, and I do appreciate your concern," she answered politely. It was none of his business where she was going, but she wasn't looking to make trouble for herself, and she didn't want to get on the bad side of anyone in town. She knew that Mr. Watson was respected by everyone in town, and that meant she needed to behave and tell her temper to stay hidden.

Within minutes she was on her way out of town, enjoying the warm breeze. There wouldn't be too many more warm days before autumn arrived, and then winter. It was nice to enjoy this day while she could. Nettie hated winter and snow and she always had. At least this year she would have a roof over her head and food to eat. Teaching school was preferable to living at home with all that her Papa expected of her. Nettie loved living on her own, but she had to wonder how long it would last this time? Of course, anyone who knew her well would never expect to find her teaching school.

It wasn't that she didn't love children; she did! But teaching school required wearing a dress all the time and behaving like a lady, and that was definitely not the way Nettie normally behaved! She was raised on a ranch with ten older brothers. She could hold her own with any one of them, but now that her father and older brothers realized she was grown, they wanted her to be a lady, and get married! In fact, they wanted to pick out her husband, and they scared off anyone else that she might show an interest in. Nettie was sick and tired of it, so she left... for the third time. Each time they managed to find her because she didn't go far enough to evade her father's long-reaching circle of family and friends. The last

time, her eldest brother, William, was the one to locate her and he took her home, kicking and screaming. Her father locked her in her room for a week and threatened to blister her butt good if she ran away again. She tried telling him how she felt, but Bill Mientkiewicz felt he knew what was best for everyone within his domain, including his two married sons and their wives. The last time that Nettie cooked a dinner for her entire family, sans help from her sisters-in-law, she was urged by her parent to go upstairs and change into something pretty for the occasion. Nettie rolled her eyes, but she knew her father would rant on the subject until she did as she was told. When she came back down, it was to learn that there was one guest for dinner, the town's new minister for the new church her father and brothers built. She didn't like the man, but her Papa had his mind made up. He wanted her to marry the minister, and he didn't want an argument from her. If the man asked her, she was to say yes! He wanted her married and settled right there at home. Nettie set out on her own again that very night, and she didn't stop until she heard about a teaching position opening up in Cartersville.

Nettie explored the area around Cartersville before she 'arrived' in town to apply for the position, so she knew pretty much where she was going. Nettie wasn't afraid of running into Utes. So far they were sticking farther to the north than she intended to drive today. Today she was concerned with one thing- talking to Scotty Greene's father to learn what the problem was with his son. She understood the need to try and keep up with the never-ending chores on a ranch, but not at the expense of a child's education. Scotty would need to be able to read well, spell well, and do arithmetic if he was to take over the ranch his father was building. If his father didn't feel he could give the boy the necessary supervision and study time, then she would offer to tutor Scotty after school. The only difficult thing about that was that the other children would tease him and call him names such as 'teacher's pet.' She'd seen that before when she was a student and Wendell Holmes had

trouble with his reading and spelling. He finally quit coming to school, thanks to her brothers and some of the other kids.

Nettie easily found the ranch she was looking for and as she approached the buildings she noticed how neat and orderly everything looked. Scotty's father obviously took pride in his ranch. She spotted a man in the corral, gently putting a saddle to a skittish horse for the first time. He was doing everything right... until an Indian leaped over the corral fence behind him, his knife drawn. He crept closer and closer, and when he let out a warrior's cry and prepared to leap on the man that Nettie assumed was Scotty's father, Nettie fired a shot and the brave fell to the ground. She quickly looked around, jumping down from the buggy so she could fight better if she had to.



***BEAR CREEK, Nevada***  
***September 1874***

BILL MIENTKIEWICZ SLAMMED his fist on his large desk and roared, "Someone has to know where that girl is!"

"Pa, you need to calm down." William was the only one of his brothers who could get away with saying something of that sort to their parent without getting smacked. "We'll find Annie," he insisted.

"I'm afraid that something bad has happened to her," Bill admitted, shocking his sons. "She's been gone for weeks now, and not a word! That's not like our Annie."

"Pa, Annie was mad as hell when she rode out of here, that's for sure and certain. She didn't like that Preacher."

"I know that now, Rob," Bill answered. "We sent him straight to prison when we learned what he was, didn't we?"

"Sure, but Annie doesn't know that," Rob said gently.

“How can we tell her when we can’t find her?” Bill demanded. “I tell you, if that girl is still alive when we find her, I’m going to whale her into next week!” It wasn’t an idle threat, and his sons squirmed at the thought. They’d all been taken to the woodshed at one time or another, and knew that their Pa wouldn’t hesitate to take a stick to Annie’s backside if he was provoked enough, and the man was certainly provoked!

“I have a suggestion, Pa.” Chad decided there was nothing to lose by speaking his mind. All of his brothers and his father turned to look at him.

“Speak up, son. I’m willing to hear you out,” Bill replied, even though Chad was the youngest of his ten boys.

“I think we should ride out and look for her. If we go in different directions, one of us is bound to find someone who has seen her, and then we would know where to start.”

“Are you still thinking that she went north, Chad?” William asked thoughtfully. “You know how much she hates the cold and snow.”

“Annie was upset when she left, and my guess is that she is doing just the opposite of what we would expect her to do. The last time she only went a few counties away from home. I think she knew it wasn’t far enough, so she went farther. She’s hoping it will be far enough that Pa’s name won’t mean anything to anyone.”

“You have a point, boy,” Bill said. “Let me sleep on it tonight.” That was the signal that their Pa wanted to be alone to think. They all got up to leave the very masculine study, but Bill stopped them. “William, Rob, are you two boys positive that Annie hasn’t written to either of your girls? I know how much Annie loves them both.” Bill gave them a look that seemed mild enough, but those sharp green eyes missed nothing, and he was looking for any sign of deceit from his two oldest boys.

“I asked Lori, Pa, and she said she didn’t have a clue where Annie was,” William answered his father.

"Neither does Katie, Pa," Rob echoed his brother. "I'll ask her again tonight, just to be sure she isn't keeping secrets from me."

"Do you think she would do that?" Bill asked, shocked.

"She might... if Annie told her to keep it a secret," Rob said sincerely. He wasn't about to lie to his father. His wife was a regular handful at times, and he used the palm of his hand to deal with her when necessary.

"Would Lori keep it secret?" Bill asked of William.

"I didn't think so, but now I don't know," William said as he looked at Rob. "I'll talk to her, Pa, and she'd damn well better hope she isn't keeping Annie's whereabouts from us and letting us worry or I'll give her to understand that isn't going to fly in this family."

Chad snickered, and soon the rest of the single brothers were laughing.

"You boys just laugh. You'll find out what it's like one of these days, and all I'm going to say is: hand to bare butt. Works every time," Rob said with a grin as he and William left the house to return to their own homes.

William waited until they were well out of hearing before asking, "You spank Katie?" William was shocked and it showed on his face. "Doesn't she throw a fit?"

"She can throw all the fits she wants to throw. If Katie goes out of her way to earn a sore butt, then she gets the sore butt. Don't tell me you've never put Lori over your knee?" he asked his brother.

"Never needed to," William said defensively, but he knew it was a lie. His Lori was moody and he never knew what mood she would be in when he came home for the day. He'd considered spanking her one time, but was positive she would run home to her mother, screaming bloody murder. In this matter, his brother was the one with more experience, and he wondered if he had the right of it.

"You should give spanking a try sometime and put a stop to Miss Lori's spoiled behavior," Rob said seriously, and only for

William's ears. "The making up after is worth the pain a spanking causes you."

"Causes me?" William asked with a grin.

"She gets the physical pain, and the dent to her pride. We get the pain of hearing her cry and knowing it is because of the pain we are inflicting. That part is difficult, brother. She is going to fuss and threaten you with everything under the sun; the secret to handling all that garbage is not to stop until she says 'sorry' and means it. It is a firm expression of love, and it works, believe me."

William nodded, and then headed his horse for the little house his father and brothers built for him on a small patch of the ranch they all loved and called home.



TANNER GREENE HAD WHIRLED at the sound of the Indian's battle cry, only to see him fall to the ground dead from someone's shot. He didn't waste time wondering who fired; instead, he leaped to the fencepost where his gun and holster were, and he grabbed his weapon, immediately crouching and slowly turning, looking for other Indians. He didn't spot anyone, but his son came running out of the barn to see what was going on.

Tanner ran to scoop him up in his arms, shielding him with his own body, and constantly looking around him for more Indians. He spotted the beautiful young woman standing beside the rented buggy from the livery stable and called out to her, "Come with me right now, young lady! I want to get you and Scotty out of sight!" Certainly she wasn't the one who fired the shot that killed the young brave and saved his life?

"I don't think there are any others." Nettie didn't take offense at his attitude. It was obvious that he was the type of man who took charge, and he didn't want to see her hurt, even though he wasn't aware who she was.



"Teacher, listen to Pa!" Scotty called to her. "There's bad Injuns here! I want you to be safe, too!"

"I'm okay, Scotty," she answered, trying to calm the child as she followed and entered the barn with her student and his father.

"You two stay right here, out of sight, while I go outside and look around. Don't come outside until I tell you it's safe." He looked at the gun in Nettie's hand and abruptly realized she was the one who saved his life. "Nice shot," he said. "Thanks."

Nettie nodded, knowing full well that it took a big man to thank a woman for saving his life. She wasn't about to tease him, knowing that his pride was hurting. "You're welcome."

"Will you please stay here with Scotty while I look around?" he asked, wording his order from a few seconds ago differently.

"I'll keep him safe. Be careful," she added as he left the barn. He gave her a nod, and then slipped outside. "Scotty, I think you should hide in one of the stalls. You'll be safer there. I'm going to go outside and watch your father's back."

"He'll be mad at you, Teacher!" the child protested. "He might spank you and you wouldn't like that at all!"

"I'll be okay, Scotty. I admire you for obeying your father, but I am an adult, and I'll survive his temper. I want to make sure he is safe, too. You stay put, and if something happens, hide under the straw until they leave. Okay?"

"I will," he promised. "Be careful. Injuns are mean to women."

"I know, Scotty. I promise I'll be careful." Nettie hurriedly slipped out the barn door and looked around. She spotted Scotty's father checking behind the house. She swiftly ran to where she could watch his back, and she kept a wary eye on her surroundings. Scotty's father was a handsome man, and he made her think thoughts that would horrify the men in her family. His pants rode low on his hips, and when he knelt on one knee to check for tracks, she loved the outline of his backside and thighs in his well-worn pants.

He then checked inside the house, and when he found nothing,

he walked toward a wooded area a ways from the house. It would be the ideal place to leave a horse, and Nettie followed at a distance, hoping she was close enough to get off a good shot if other Utes attacked Scotty's pa. It didn't take long for him to find a single pony waiting patiently for its owner to return. He released the animal, gave it a hard slap on the flank and watched the poor animal start running.

That was when he spotted Nettie, and she could immediately tell he was angry, even though he hadn't said a word to her... yet!



LORI MIENTKIEWICZ LOOKED up when she heard William's boots on the front porch. She loved her husband, but the man was infuriating most of the time. She hated that he was always at his father's beck and call, but William told her it was his job, and his father was also his boss. If he didn't work, he didn't get paid. Every time she spent so much as a dime, he acted as though it was the end of the world. At times she wondered why on earth she'd married the handsome man. If only things were different... She felt restless, and she felt like crying all the time. One glance at William and she could tell that he was in one of his moods.

"Lori, I'm going to ask you something straight out, and I expect an honest answer from you, hear me?" William asked after kissing her on the cheek and telling her that whatever she was cooking smelled wonderful.

"I try to be honest with you all the time, William," she answered. "What do you wish to ask me? I'm not pregnant, if that is what you want to know." They argued about that endlessly. He wanted children, and she wanted to wait for a couple of years. She didn't want to be like her mother and lose her figure.

William was immediately irritated. He knew how she felt about children, and he kept trying to change her mind. His brother's suggestion might work for some things, but he wasn't going to

force himself on Lori and make her bear his child, simply because he was stronger and could take advantage of her that way. No, she kept track of the time of the month, and she was careful not to let him touch her when she was supposed to be fertile. So far her plan had worked, much to his disappointment.

“I wanted to ask you if you’ve heard from Annie since the last time I asked you?”

“Don’t you think I would have told you?” she demanded, turning her back to him so that she could stir the venison stew on the stove. She checked the biscuits in the oven, and then announced, “Wash your hands; I’m going to take up.”

William knew he’d angered her, but this time he was not going to put up with it. “Lori, I’ve about had it with your moodiness. Half the time you act like a spoiled brat, and it stops as of right now. I treat you with respect, and I expect the same respect from you. My family is worried sick about Annie, and it is rude of my wife to act like I’m crucifying her for asking a simple question. Enough of the attitude, Lori, or I’m going to see to it you regret behaving like a pain in the butt.”

“How dare you talk to me like that!” she screamed at him.

“I’m your husband, Lori.”

“I won’t be scolded like a child!”

“Perhaps you would rather I spanked you like a child?” he asked, taking a step toward her.

Lori backed up to the table and then reached for the journal she’d been writing in. Without thinking, she picked it up and threw it at her husband, trying to stop his approach. A letter flew out and onto the floor, and she knew the very instant that it landed face-up that William would recognize the handwriting on the envelope... Of course he did, and his furious green eyes leveled on her as she scrambled to pick it up. He managed to reach it before she did, and it took him all of two minutes to read the brief note inside. His eyes met her once again, and she knew that she was in big trouble.

William was furious, and he remembered Rob’s advice and

decided that it was high time he took his wife in hand. He backed her against the table and then pulled out a chair and sat down before reaching for her.

“No, William!” Lori protested, trying to pull free of the grasp he had on her wrist. She tried to dig in her heels as he pulled her closer, but it didn’t work. “I mean it, you overgrown, arrogant bully! Let me go!” She screamed as he pulled her down over his knees and started spanking her. His hand was hard, and he was spanking her like he meant it. Lori hadn’t been spanked since she ran away from home when she was ten years old! Her Pa had given her a few half-hearted swats, but William was intent on punishing her. “Owwww! Stop!” she yelled.

“Stop? Not on your life, Lori Mae Jones Mientkiewicz! You’ve earned this spanking, and I intend to enjoy every last smack. In fact, I think I’ll enjoy it a whole lot more if I bare your cute ass so I can watch it turning red!”

“Nooooo!” she pleaded with him as he flipped up her skirt and petticoats. Lori tried to wriggle off his lap, but William held her down and jerked her drawers down to her knees, breaking the ribbon that held them up. “Stop, please, honey! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Annie asked me not to tell any of you!”

“And you let us worry all this time?” William demanded angrily.

“I thought I was protecting Annie from all of you. You men are so bossy you don’t even listen when Annie tries to tell you something! Owwww!” She kicked her legs as he continued spanking her bared bottom. “You’re hurting me, William!” She burst into tears as he ignored her cries of pain in favor of doing his best to make her sorry for the worry she’d put his family through. Finally, her pride gave over and she stopped struggling. “I’m so sorry!” she claimed, sobbing so hard it was difficult to understand what she was saying.

William nodded in satisfaction. “Never lie to me again, wife.”

“I won’t, honey. I’m so sorry; please forgive me!”

William gently lifted her and then sat her on his right thigh, holding her as she cried against his chest. “I do forgive you, sweet-

heart. This is all over now.” Lori cried a bit longer, and finally quieted. “There, that’s better now. Why don’t you go and lie down for a while, and when I get back from telling Pa that Annie is okay, we can eat... and talk.”

“You aren’t going to spank me again, are you?” she asked tearfully.

“Not for this,” he replied, kissing her tenderly. “I do love you, Lori.”

She watched as he rode away from their little house, and then she smiled as she rubbed her stinging backside. Lori suddenly knew what she’d needed from her husband but couldn’t put into words. She didn’t like the fact that William permitted her to walk all over him... Now she knew that he wouldn’t, and she felt safer than she had since they married.