



SILVERTON

CLAIMS ON THE HEART
KAREN COGAN

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THE HEART

Karen Cogan

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Dedication

To the Lord, Who guides our paths.

1

Kathleen craned to see out of the dusty window as the train slowed to a stop at the tiny depot. She had spent the last few days packing up her worldly possessions and wondered what she would find at the end of this ride. Now, after tedious hours of traveling from St. Louis, she was in a tiny hamlet high in the Colorado mountains.

Her father shifted to get his first look at their new home. Giving her arm a pat, he said, "There she is, Kat. We'll soon be settled again."

Kathleen shoved loose strands of fine, dark hair back into her bedraggled bun. "I'll be glad to have solid ground under my feet. But I bet I won't know how to walk after getting used to a swaying train. I may even look a little tipsy."

"You have been a good sport about coming west. Your mother would be proud of you." Her father gazed at her with tenderness.

A lump filled Kathleen's throat. Her mother had died of consumption only six months ago, and they both missed her terribly.

When Kathleen's father got the letter informing him that he had inherited a mercantile from his brother, they were both willing to quit their life in St. Louis and make a new start in the west. New memories could be formed away from the sadness that lingered in the home they had shared with Kat's

mother.

"I think Mama would think we're crazy, giving up your little store and coming all this way."

Papa followed her as they headed for the doorway. "But we wouldn't be doing this if your mama was alive. She would have kept us safely at home."

Mama had been the sensible one, the one who had kept accounts for the store and paid the bills. She had complained that Kathleen was too much like her father, soft hearted, yet inclined to be stubbornly impulsive. But she had doted on her daughter and done her best to instill a sense of propriety.

Kathleen stepped down the wobbly steps, holding her small traveling case.

Straight ahead, past the small depot, the mountains rose, looking rosy in the glow of the late afternoon sun. Pine trees dotted their slopes, lending splotches of green to the barren landscape. A bright patch of wildflowers grew near the train station, stubbornly holding on to their late summer blooms.

She paused, taking a deep breath in the too thin air.

As they plodded towards town in search of Uncle Jack's store, Kathleen's pulse quickened.

The settlement had streets of clumped buildings and a few other homes scattered about the valley. It was like a foreign land, such a complete change of surroundings.

She saw a sign—Blair Street—and noted the absence of women. Was this town filled with only pack mules and men?



Colin McAllister scanned the message and then crumpled it in his hand with the bitter taste of disappointment. After six months in exile he had hoped to be invited home. If he wanted his inheritance he had to continue making his own way and hope that hard work would restore him.

A petite, brunette woman was walking down the street. Most of the women here were of a certain character. She might be one of Billy's new girls.

But her modest dress and the dotting man she was with, indicated she was not. Both of their heads were turning back and forth, taking in the sights. As she pointed, a handkerchief fluttered to the ground.

Collin moved towards them to catch and return the hankie before the wind swept it away.

But Martin Long, who owned the stamp mill that brought prosperity to Silverton, was already striding towards her and had captured the little piece of cloth.

Collin didn't like Martin's high-handed manners and the cruel streak that he suspected lay just beneath the man's amiable façade. A man had died in an alley under suspicious circumstances after Martin accused him of cheating against him at cards.

Collin headed back to the boarding house for supper, frustration making him tense. Tedious days working in the mine were his future. Perhaps, if he hung on and gritted his teeth, another six months would buy him a ticket out of town.



"Excuse me, Miss." A young man spoke. He was lean and tall, with dark eyes and black hair slicked into

place. The fine gray cloth of his pants and coat were too clean to have ever been worn in the mines. A merchant or perhaps an assayer. He smiled and a dimple showed in the cleft in his chin. He clutched a hanky, holding it aloft.

Kathleen returned his smile.

"I saw you walking from the train. And when I saw this on the ground, I knew it must belong to you."

"Thank you. I didn't realize I had dropped it."

"My pleasure. My name is Martin Long."

"I'm Kathleen Morris. This is my father, Stan Morris. We've just arrived from St. Louis."

"We have something in common. I come from St. Louis, too. I arrived only a few months ago."

"Do you know where we can find Jack's Mercantile?" Her father asked. "Jack was my brother, and he left the store to us."

"Of course. Your brother's store has been an important part of our town. I would be glad to show you." He turned to Kathleen. "You must be tired after your long trip. I'd be happy to carry your valise."

"I'm just glad to be off the train. It feels good to walk on a street that doesn't move. I hope we're not taking up your time. I'm sure we can find our way."

"It would be my pleasure. My business can spare me for a few minutes." Martin took her valise

He had a rather long face, firm lips, a strong jaw, and eyes that were intense now that he was not smiling. He had taken charge and seemed like a man used to getting his own way.

"What business are you in, Mr. Long?" Kathleen asked.

"Call me Martin. I'm the owner of the stamp mill."

"That sounds interesting."

"I would be happy to give you a tour." Martin gave her a pleasant smile.

"That would be interesting, though we'll have lots to do in taking over the store." Stan replied.

"I expect you're a man who knows how to run a business. You'll do all right."

Her father peppered him with questions about the competition. Papa smiled when he learned his was the only dry goods store in town.

While they'd been walking down 12th Street, Kathleen's attention had been fixed upon the man at her side.

As they crossed Blair Street, a jail came into view. Past the jail, other log and frame buildings nestled along the street.

"I'll have to take a walk around town once we get settled," Kathleen commented.

"It can get a bit rough on Blair, what with all the saloons and drinking. I suggest you confine your walking to Green Street. And it would be best if you had an escort. I'll drop by the store one day. If you're not busy, I'll take you around town."

Though she was sure he meant it as an offer, she chaffed a bit at his commandeering tone. Females might be in short supply, but she hadn't meant to become the immediate property of the first man she met.

"That's very kind of you, Martin. I imagine we'll be busy for a while. Maybe in a week or two, I'll take you up on that offer."

"But of course you will. Be sure and let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Kathleen hardly heard him. On Green Street, there was an impressive brick structure with ornate window

frames. "Why this is lovely. It reminds me of St. Louis."

"The Grand Hotel. I'm a man who has traveled, and I can tell you there aren't many that are finer."

A little further along, fading letters on a white plank in the center of the two story building told them the name of the store.

"This is it," Martin said. "Your mercantile."

Tall, grimy windows stood on each side of the door. Bolts of cloth, pick axes, clocks, and jars of fruit were displayed in the windows.

The door stood open, yet Kathleen hesitated. She hoped the layer of dust was not as thick inside the store as it was on the windows.

Her father didn't seem to share her disillusionment. He ran his hand along the wooden door frame. "So this was Jack's store. After Papa died, I kept the family store in St. Louis. Jack sold me his share and came here." He stepped into the darkened abyss of the interior.

"Has the door been standing open since my uncle died?" She was surprised they had anything left to sell.

"Old Vic Abbot has been staying upstairs. Your uncle let him help out in the store, though I don't know why. The old man is drunk half the time."

This did not seem like a promising beginning to their new life.

She stepped inside. It would probably be a far different sight than the small, yet tidy, shop her father had kept in St. Louis. "Thank you, Martin. You've been kind, but I need to see what we've gotten ourselves into."

Martin tipped his hat. "I'll leave you to help your father and look forward to seeing you soon. I'm sure

we'll see a lot of each other from now on."

"I'm sure we will."

Martin continued down the plank walkway.

Kathleen ventured further into the store. Her feet squeaked on the floorboards as she padded towards the counter.

Her father stood talking to a man who looked nearly as thin as the broom in his hand. He had a whiskered face the color of a walnut and eyes faded to a watery blue. The faint scent of whisky lingered in the air. He grinned broadly. He was missing several front teeth. "This must be the missy." He stuck out a hand of questionable cleanliness.

Kathleen shook it.

"I'm Vic. Been here with your uncle for 'bout five years."

"It's nice to meet you, Vic."

"I hope you like the way I been keeping things running since ole Jack died. I thought that was the way he'd a wanted it."

"I'm sure you were a good friend to him." Stan nodded solemnly.

"I done my best."

"It looks pretty well stocked."

"Yep. We got an order long about July, though we'll need more 'fore winter sets in."

"I'll take inventory, and we can order more. You know better than I do what will be needed over the winter here."

"Well, the boarding houses always need flour and sugar. We get eggs when we can." He went back to sweeping. "Look around, get a feel for the place."

Kathleen and her father made the rounds.

The scent of pickles and cheese filled the air. The

familiar scents would have been comforting were it not for the dust covering every item. Flies buzzed about and landed on the rounded head of cheese and the smoked sausages.

She would dust and then cover every item in the store before she stepped behind the counter.

"I guess we better get settled. Our trunks will be arriving from the depot soon," Papa said.

"I been stayin' upstairs. Ole Henry let me bed down there. I could move out."

"Nonsense. We wouldn't hear of it, would we, Kathleen? We can fit the three of us until Kathleen and I get a place."

Kathleen managed to nod. She had spent two days on the train and dearly wanted some privacy. A warm bath seemed like a luxury beyond hope, but at least a private space to collect her thoughts would've been nice. She doubted there were more than two rooms above the store. How private could that be?

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that lunch on the train had been light and long ago. She glanced around, wondering what provisions she might gather for a makeshift meal. Perhaps she could look upstairs and see if there was a usable stove.

As though reading her thoughts, Stan said, "Let's take a lantern and have a look above. I bet Kathleen would stir us up some supper."

"That would be pretty durn nice. I got some tins of beans and soda crackers. She could take up some salt pork and fry us up some tack."

Kathleen was not fond of any item on Vic's menu. Visions of her mother's roasted chicken and juicy ham floated through her mind. Maybe when they were settled they could have the kind of suppers she

remembered.

Since there were no customers in the store, Vic took the lantern and led the way up the plank stairs. They were so narrow and steep the light cast elongated shadows of their figures on the wall.

She and her father paused at the top to let Vic set the lantern down.

A rectangular room stretched in front of her. Unadorned windows at each end of the room let in a small measure of the fading afternoon light. Dust hung in the air, catching scattered beams of sunshine. A sofa, worn out and oozing stuffing, sat against the wall. A rough plank table and two rickety stools graced the middle of the room. A single narrow cot stood in the far corner under a window. Those coarse blankets were probably home to a variety of bugs.

Kathleen rubbed her arms and shivered.

"It's not much. But me and ole Jack called it home."

Politeness kept her from making a reply.

Someone had nailed a crooked shelf on the wall next to an ancient stove. The shelf held half a dozen plates, mugs, and a few cracked bowls. A heavy cook pot hung on a hook nearby. The stove looked as though it had not seen a coat of blackening since it was placed in the room. A skillet and a tin coffeepot sat on the stove. The skillet needed a good scrubbing before she cooked supper.

Her father tossed some wood into the stove from the pile that sat beside it. "What do you think, Kat? Do you think you can convince this old stove to heat us some supper?"

"I'll do my best." She turned to Vic. "Do you think you could find me some water? I'd like to do a little

washing up before I cook.”

Vic blushed behind his whiskers, apparently misunderstanding her request. “Of course, missy. You take all the time you want. I forget how ladies like to be clean.” He trotted off with a bucket.

Kathleen swung her arm to encompass the room. “I wouldn’t like to see Vic put out of his home, but how will we fit the three of us in here? There aren’t even enough places to sleep.”

“You take the cot, and I’ll bed down on the floor with a blanket or two. It’s only for a few days until we get a house and some proper furniture.”

Nothing would entice her to crawl under those covers. “Do you suppose Uncle Jack died in that cot?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Does it bother you to sleep there?”

“What if he died of something catching?” She fought down fatigue and rising irritation.

“I hadn’t really thought of that, either. I suppose we could take rooms at the hotel, though it would be expensive...” Her father was loathe to part with the cash he had brought to buy a house and to order supplies for the store. Deep lines of fatigue marred his face. Complaints would exhaust him more.

“It’s all right. Our trunks should be here by now. I have my quilt and sheets from home. We can bed down on the floor tonight.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No.”

“That’s my girl, always a good sport. I promise I’ll go out first thing in the morning and find us a place to stay.”

Vic returned with the pail of water.

Kathleen set to work scrubbing out the skillet.

When she was sure that it was reasonably clean, she set the salt pork and beans to cook and mixed up a batch of biscuits.

She and her father sat on the stools at the table.

Vic settled on the sofa and ate as though he was half-starved. He'd probably been living on little more than a bottle of whiskey and a can of beans. "This is the best cooking I've had since I was a boy."

"You'll have to come out once we're settled and set your teeth into one of Kathleen's chicken dinners. That would put this to shame."

"I'd be mighty pleased to try one." After supper, Vic took out a harmonica and filled the sparse room with music.

Kathleen washed up, and then she and her father carried up bedding from their trunks that had been deposited inside the door downstairs.

Her clean quilt was spread onto the rough, dusty floor. It would need a thorough washing before she could use it on a bed. Tonight, she was too tired to care.

The next morning, after breakfast, her father left to inquire about housing.

Kathleen knew from experience that a mercantile was a good place to make friends and discover new neighbors. Meeting the town's ladies when they stopped by to shop would be good for business. But first, the shelves needed dusting.

A young woman entered and gave Kathleen a measuring look. She wore a mint green dress with a high waist and lacing on her bodice. Her blonde hair was piled neatly on top of her head.

Vic was helping a party of miners collect shovels and supplies.

Karen Cogan

Kathleen set down her dust rag and stepped to the counter to greet her new customer.

2

The woman greeted her with a smile. "You must be the daughter of the new owner. Let me be one of the first to welcome you to Silverton. I'm Nancy Parker. I've been here since May. My husband is an assayer."

"I'm Kathleen Morris. We got here last night." She gestured at the merchandise. "I'm embarrassed to open the doors with the place so untidy. I've been working on it, but there's still a lot to do. My father owned a mercantile in St. Louis. It was nothing like this one."

"You'll get used to the dust, or at least learn to live with it. Still, I'm pleased to have a woman behind the counter. Maybe now this store will pay more attention to our needs. And I don't mind finding it a bit tidier in the bargain."

A man entered the store.

"I see you're busy, so I'll select my buttons and thread and let you tend to business," Nancy said. "I hope you'll come to church tomorrow. The Congregational Church on Reese Street would surely welcome you."

"Thank you. I appreciate the invitation."

"When you're settled, you must come to my house for tea."

"I'd love to." Kathleen felt warmed by the invitation. Perhaps they would be able to talk awhile longer, maybe share a cup of tea. She had so many questions about the town. She looked forward to

making a new friend. Yet there was no time to think of friends now. The store was filling with an endless stream of men who required everything from nails to tins of food.



Collin tossed restlessly all night. He could not get the young woman out of his mind. Her smile and the tilt of her head had intrigued him.

Of course, Martin had slithered out to greet her as soon as he saw her. Had they spent the evening together?

At breakfast, everyone was talking. She was the daughter of the man who inherited the mercantile. The gossip indicated the pair arrived alternately as wealthy merchants with penchants for adventure, or as desperate and penniless relatives thrown on the mercy of their inheritance.

Collin would pay a visit to the store and see for himself. He would have to relinquish a few of the coins he kept at the boardinghouse to buy something. He had been taking most of his pay straight to the bank to prove that he could save more than he spent. His nest egg was growing. But his desire to come face to face with the merchant's daughter was stronger.

He set off along the street. It was crowded with miners coming in for a Saturday in town. Collin dodged around mules and men who smelled as strong as their animals. The miners clogged Blair Street and spilled into more saloons, stores, and laundry establishments on Green Street, some stumbling from the whiskey that had already claimed their pay.

He reached the store and stepped inside to have a

glance around. There was a lull in business. The slender, dark-haired beauty behind the counter made his heart beat a little faster. She was every bit as lovely as he remembered. He hurried towards her to avoid being waited on by old Vic, who had caught his eye.

A bearded miner finished his purchase.

Collin stepped up. For a moment, he stood transfixed by eyes that reminded him of liquid pools of shimmering water, blue and cool on a summer day.

"May I help you?"

"I'll take a hat," he replied. "I'd like a nice one."

She smiled and a dimple showed in her chin. "Oh, you need a church hat?"

Collin nodded. How long had it been since he had spent a Sunday morning at church? No matter. If that's what it took to see another of her smiles, he would buy a new hat and attend every Sunday.

"Which church do you recommend?"

"I'm new here, but a woman just came in and invited me to the Congregational Church." She smiled. "I'll probably go there."

He filed the information away.

She turned to secure a selection of hats for his approval. She set three hats on the counter.

He placed them each on his head, in turn, and then asked for her opinion.

"I believe I like the brown bowler best. The green trim along the band suits you well. Shall I make out a bill of sale...mister?" Her brows rose in query.

"McAllister. Collin McAllister. And you must be Miss...?"

"Kathleen Morris. My uncle used to own this store."

"I met him when I first came here."