



COWBOY
IN THE
Moonlight

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MARCOUX**

Cowboy in the Moonlight

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Cowboy in the Moonlight

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1

"I heard some men in town talking about getting wives."

Zachariah Keane's jaw froze as he looked at his partner, Molly Crammer. He'd bet she'd waited for him to take a mouthful of her delicious beef hash before making that statement. He chewed, swallowed—and intended to put an end to the subject fast. "Ain't interested in a mail-order bride."

She scowled. "You ain't heard everything I have to say."

"Heard enough." He filled his mouth again.

Molly and Zachariah were the most unlikely team on the cattle trail, and had settled under a rain-battered tarp for supper. She was a widow, sixty-eight years young, lean as a maypole, but strong-boned, with an even stronger will. He was twenty-two years old and single.

She heaved the cast iron frying pan off the coals. "It ain't mail order," she said. "It's a scientific matchmaker doing the hitching. He takes a strand of hair and looks at it under a microscope so he can find the compatibilities between a gal and a feller."

"A strand of *hair*?"

"It's science."

"It's hogwash."

"It's satisfaction guaranteed."

Satisfaction? "Your hash is going to cool off," he

said.

Molly gave him a hard look. "You deserve yourself a good woman just as much as that old goat-faced Malachi Moore."

As far as Zachariah was concerned, if old Malachi wanted a wife, that was his business. But maybe he could use Malachi to get her mind off him. "Now Molly, name calling ain't Christian-like."

"Ain't Christian-like, huh? If I said Malachi looked like a stallion, that'd be Christian-like, wouldn't it? So if God made the horse, and God made the goat, what makes one creature better than the other?"

"Malachi's got a suiting place for a lady to live."

"You call that a suiting place?" Molly said. "I call it an outhouse. Besides, your ma left you a fine home."

Gone months at a time with money spent on women, whiskey, and making a rumpus, typical cowboys didn't have a home.

But Molly and Zachariah weren't typical cowboys. They had Ramsden, Texas to call home.

Molly would return to the house her late husband Danny had built for her.

Zachariah had recently started fixing up his mother's old house, which had been abandoned for eleven years to the wrath of storms and the ravages of just plain neglect, while he'd been away cowboying. "The place needs a lot of work." He bit off the food on his fork.

"Just needs a few comely touches, like some curtains and maybe a tablecloth."

"And maybe an upstairs that ain't all rotted out, and some windows that ain't busted--"

"You *need* yourself a wife."

He pushed an empty dish at her. "I *need* myself

more of that hash."

Slinging more chuck into his dish still didn't make her drop the subject. "Good Book says that a feller who finds himself a wife finds a good thing."

"I got myself something better," he said. "I got you. You do my cooking, you do my wrangling, and you do my nagging." He filled his mouth and mumbled, "You're real good at that last one."

"I ain't going to live forever," she said. "Besides, it ain't good for a young man to be spending his days with an old lady and a bunch of cows."

"First of all," he said, "I reckon you'll live another hundred years 'cause God's enjoying the peace. And second," he gave her a long look, "I ain't the one complaining."

"Yup," she said after a pause, "that's right. You ain't the one complaining. You ain't never the one complaining."

"That's right." He always made it a point to act as if he was satisfied with his lot in life, even when that lot wasn't so satisfying.

At nine years old, he'd lost his pa to a wagon accident, and two years later, lost his ma to tuberculosis. Just as he was getting up the gumption to ask his sweetheart to marry him, he'd lost her to a fire. A big piece of his heart got cut out with each loss. Especially the last one. He rubbed the rough skin on his face over a scar the fire had left on him.

Lonely. It seemed his lot in life was to be alone, and the scar was fate's way to keep him that way. He thanked God for Molly's—albeit meddling—company.

Molly heaved a sigh. She had a look on her face he didn't like. She was up to something.

~*~

The sea breeze rustled Lillian Rauling's dress as she stood on the deck of a ship, bound for matrimony.

Night had fallen, and the vessel swayed soothingly. Waves slapped in a restful rhythm. The full moon cast a glow over the ocean. It would have been so calm, so romantic, except for one thing.

She was here because she had solicited the services of a matchmaker. Worse, it was a matchmaker who referred to himself as *The Love Doctor*.

"If the lady don't like the chap," one of her cabin mates and fellow brides had said, *"she's got to pay him back every penny for the fare and the Love Doctor's services—plus damages."*

Lillian had learned that what those so-called damages entailed was vague and determined entirely by the gentleman. But those were the terms of the contract she'd so hastily signed.

"If she ain't got the money," the girl said, *"that constitutes stealing, and she'll wind up in the clink."*

Prison. Lillian felt a chill beyond that of the crisp night air. She clutched her shoulders, wishing she had a shawl in which to wrap herself.

A couple came out on the deck as romance drew them to the side. They looked at the moonlight magic, and then kissed.

Would the man she married hold her like that? Who was the man waiting for her beyond the shimmering ocean? Could he be a godsend? Someone who would put an end to the chaos her life had become?

If the so-called Love Doctor had taken any note of her upon her visit to him in London—other than the

fact that she had unusually black hair—her chosen match would likely be an accountant or a man of some profession. Her gentility would dictate such an arrangement. And that's all it would be. An arrangement. Indeed, the last thing she wanted was a business partner.

She drew near to the warmth of a mounted oil lamp with a chimney of etched glass and a brass cherub base. She stared into a flame glowing through a globe as transparent as her own heart felt. The core of her being burned with loneliness.

But she knew what she wanted. She wanted someone who was brave and kind and uncomplicated. Someone with smiling eyes who would draw her out and strong arms that would catch her as she passionately threw herself into them. Most of all, she wanted someone who would see past the pretty globe and into the caged fire that was Lillian Rauling.

She could hear a pianist in the dining hall playing, most appropriately, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. It brought back memories of a time long past when she was learning to play such pieces, before she'd been forced to live with her aunt and an uncle who couldn't keep his hands to himself. Before she'd been sent away to school. The memory that stirred was back in a time when she was simply Lilly, her father's delight, talkative and expressive, and proud as could be of him.

Papa performed in opera houses all over Europe—in Stuttgart, Vienna, and Paris—and on several occasions entertained royalty. He was the sunshine in her life, and without him, every day seemed dreary. Unfortunately, month-long engagements were common for the well-known tenor.

She couldn't wait until he was home, when she'd

run into his arms, and he'd catch and twirl her. One day when she was eight years old, he returned with some sheet music. It was a song he'd written especially for her, and he asked her to play and sing it for him.

"Papa, you sing it," Lilly said. "You have the best voice in the world."

"Not so, my darling." His eyes filled with tenderness, and he perched her on the piano bench.

Perhaps he sang so often that he was tired of doing so. So she pressed her hands to the ivory keys and played with the hesitant chords of a beginner, and sang with the small voice of a child.

*When it's cold,
And skies have turned to grey,
When the sun that's been shining in my world
Has suddenly gone away,
I close my eyes and see with the eyes of my heart
Because I know
God's given me a promise
And sealed it with a rainbow.*

Her father assigned her to play "Sealed with a Rainbow" once a day every time he went away, until he returned. "That's to remind you that your Father in Heaven is always watching over you, even when your earthly father can't be."

*When troubles rise and flood beyond the brim,
I stand my ground, I close my eyes
I put my trust in Him.
I know He's up in Heaven
And watching me below,
I know because He promised*

And He sealed it with a rainbow.

Lillian's body was still on the ship's deck, but her spirit had gotten caught up in the fond memory. So much so that the words to the song slipped through her lips, and she sang toward the moonlit horizon.

"When storms are over,
I always lift my eyes
Sometimes I can see it there
His name up in the sky.
It reminds me of His promise
That my longings will come true
He sealed it with His rainbow,
So I know He will come through."

It was too late in the evening for rainbows, but the moonlight glistened over the water just as magically. Her eyes and heart became fixed upon the softly glowing blue-black horizon. She could swear she saw in the moonlight the silhouette of a tall, gallant cowboy, with her name in his pocket.

~*~

Molly finished washing the dishes in a bucket she'd set out to catch the rainfall off the tarp.

A gap in the clouds to the west allowed the sun to break through for a while before more rainclouds rolled in.

She spotted Zachariah on the crest of a hill overlooking the river valley. He was a fine figure of a man, majestic on horseback against the slate gray sky. He had a secret he shared only with the animals, with

her, and with the Almighty.

That grand singing voice.

At the end of each day, he'd ride to the highest point and sing a hymn. His voice would spread over the valley like a blanket of peace. But watching him up there singing, alone and solitary, made her heart ache. That's why she'd done it.

She'd snatched a hair from his hat when Zachariah had come over for Sunday gathering before they'd left on the cattle drive. Selling her old piano gave her enough money to pay the Love Doctor's wages and the girl's fare. Even though Molly no longer had the one piece of furniture she had insisted her late husband drag across the country forty years ago, she smiled contentedly as she watched Zachariah on the hilltop.

It didn't matter if a hymn was meant to be sung soft throughout. He sang each verse the way his heart said it ought to be sung.

The beauty of his voice filled Molly with so much awe that she couldn't take her gaze off him.

The air was still. The cattle and horses grazed calmly. She bet that even the angels had settled among the bluebonnets on the hillside to listen.

Zachariah was as close to God as a man could get.

She hugged her shoulders anticipating the end of the hymn. He always gave a grand finale that gave her goose bumps.

Zachariah finished the hymn, but Molly continued to stand there spellbound. "If that don't beat all." Amazed, she rubbed her shoulders and shook her head at a rare phenomenon, which held her in holy awe. Zachariah's back was to it, so she knew he didn't see what she was looking at.

From where she stood, he was standing right

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underneath the arch of a rainbow—so that it looked as though God had painted a big, glorious circle around the man.

2

“Nate! Get that calf!”

“If you want it, *you* get it! I’m not risking my neck for a piece of veal!”

The rain started up again, and the storm had swollen the river into rapids.

Just as Zachariah suspected, someone was in a hurry to cross it.

“You made the decision to push them across the river!” Marcus Powell shouted over the pelting rain and the bawling cattle to his twenty-two year old son, Nate.

Safely on the other side of the tempest, Nate just spurred his horse and rode away.

That left one thrashing creature fighting a losing battle.

Some cattlemen didn’t bother with the calves born during a drive. But Marcus respected that these creatures were being driven to the slaughterhouses and deserved to have their last days on God’s earth to be pleasant ones. Marcus tried to rope the calf, but missed.

Zachariah’s lasso hit the mark. “I heard the ruckus,” Zachariah shouted over the storm and the cattle. “Thought you could use some help.”

“Is that a polite way of saying, ‘I knew some fool would be headstrong enough to try to cross the river?’” Marcus shouted back.

Thunder had panicked the cattle, and the ones behind pushed the ones ahead to bottleneck and crowd into a rushing river that was getting too wild and too deep to cross.

Zachariah didn't want to get involved in a father/son dispute between Marcus and Nate, so he just got down to business. He let the current carry the calf a ways farther to take the fight out of the little beast and get him away from the panicked herd. Cattle perceived a man on horseback as part of the herd, but a man on foot would only spook them more.

He dismounted and followed the rope into the cold, churning river. The current pulled his legs out from under him and tried to wash him away, but he got back on his feet. When he grabbed hold of the calf, the river pulled them both under. Zachariah broke through the surface for a gasp of air. He summoned all his determination and strength to haul himself and the calf out of the roiling water. He stayed on the riverbank with the calf until it got back its kick, and then he draped it over his saddle.

Now, to face Nate.

Zachariah coaxed his sure-footed horse through the river.

Nate met him on the other side, but as Zachariah peaceably offered over the calf, Nate acted pretty much as Zachariah suspected he would.

"We don't need charity," Nate said. "Not from a man with the mark of Cain."

Zachariah didn't say a word. He just let the calf down, and let Nate's words pour over him like the battering rain. Nate blamed him for the fire that killed Sally, Nate's sister, five years ago.

"Start gathering them cattle before you lose them

all," Marcus yelled through the lashing rain.

Nate glared a moment longer at Zachariah before spurring his horse to head off the cattle.

Zachariah crossed back through the river, bid Marcus farewell, and rode off to tend to the forty-six head that made up his own small herd.

~*~

"Some fool tried to cross the river, didn't he?" Molly looked up from her cooking fire and saw that Zachariah was soaked. She grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around him. "Bet it was Marcus," she continued at him.

They'd spotted the dust from another herd a week ago, and the campfire two nights before. "That son of his is always in a hurry. Going to ruin his pa. If he inherits nothing but ticks, it'll serve him right, the way that feller treats you."

Everybody knew Nate's side of the story, that he blamed his sister's death on Zachariah's irresponsibility.

There was more to the story, because Zachariah never told his side. All the nagging in the world couldn't drag it out of him, either.

"Now get ready to eat."

Zachariah's horse nudged its nose against him, and he obliged it with an apple from the chuck wagon.

Then Dusty, who'd been watching the herd, ran over and greeted him, and he gave her a piece of jerky. The dog's bushy tail swung over Molly's frying pan.

"What do you think this is? A barn? Now tether that horse and get that matted old dust mop out of my kitchen." It didn't matter that Molly was under a tarp.

Cooking was serious business, and wherever she cooked, there was her kitchen.

Zachariah took the horse away, shooed the dog, and then joined Molly under the tarp. He was so tall, he had to duck. Being the gentleman he was, he took off his hat. His dark brown hair had grown scraggly and hung in his face.

It was a face that broke Molly's heart.

"This rain's given me a hankering for that hash and them sourdough biscuits you got stinking up the air," he said.

She planted her hands on her hips. "Stinking up the air, huh?"

He nodded to the side. "That's why them cattle are standing over there."

She followed his gaze to the herd. The cattle were *standing over there* because a cook kept a distance in case of a stampede, as he well knew. "That so?" she said. "I'm the best chuck cook in Texas, and you know it." Her secret was a pinch of cinnamon and a peck of caring. She'd never been blessed with children, and she loved the man like a son.

They'd partnered up two years ago.

When Nate quit college, Zachariah quit working for Marcus.

Molly had just lost her husband to a thief who broke into the house and shot him for eleven dollars and a sweet potato pie.

The town formed a posse and hung the killer, but it couldn't bring her Danny back. She didn't know what she'd have done without Zachariah. That's why it hurt her so much to see his face like it was.

He'd once been a good-looking son-of-a-gun, and it was no wonder Sally Powell liked him. But the fire

that killed her had left him scarred. The hollow of his cheek on the left side of his face was red and rippled. The beard that had grown while they were out on the cattle drive never did fill it in.

It was a crying shame no one had taken a hankering to him since Sally, and as far as Molly was concerned, it was the woman's loss. Because if a lady was willing to look beyond what was on the outside to see what was on the inside, she'd find she had herself a gem of a man.

~*~

Lillian returned to her ship's cabin, but hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. Inside, she could hear her cabin mates and fellow brides talking—about her.

"She brought nothing with her but the clothes on her back." That was Aggie's voice. She was a full-figured woman with a pretty face and a wardrobe of dresses with daringly low necklines. With the scrutinizing glares she'd cast, Aggie had made her dislike toward Lillian obvious from the beginning. "And that's another thing. That's a governess's dress she's wearing."

"And you don't think a governess wants to marry as much as the next woman?" That was Rosie's voice. She was an aging woman with frayed red hair, a face caked with rice powder, and she seemed uninterested in prying open the Pandora's Box that was Lillian's business.

"I think a woman raised in high society would rather be a slave to her own class than mingle with the likes of us." That was Aggie again. "I'm telling you, there's something ain't right going on with that little

prissy.”

“Well, I think she’s a pretty little thing,” Rosie said. “She can’t be more than seventeen years old.”

Thank you. Lillian appreciated her advocate, but wanted to correct her by saying, *the little prissy is nineteen.* Instead, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

Rosie was dressing Aggie’s hair, a daffodil-colored mass of ringlets, by the mirror.

Both women fell quiet, and the gazes of their images fell askew.

Lillian found her own faraway image to be a stranger’s. A stranger who had the impassive expression of an old spinster and the radiance of a young woman. A stranger whose severely drawn, blue-black hair framed an oval face of ivory skin. A stranger donned in a black dress on a petite frame that moved fairylike. Not only was the image in discord with its circumstances—but it was especially out of harmony with the soul that inhabited it.

“So, Rosie,” Aggie abruptly said. “What brings you across the Atlantic?” The ice-gray gaze of Aggie’s image peered into Lillian’s core. It wasn’t Rosie Aggie wanted to ask.

A groan reminded Lillian that the fourth cabin mate, Prudence, still lay bedridden with seasickness.

Lillian welcomed the opportunity to escape Aggie’s glare by dabbing at Prudence’s forehead with lavender water.

“I’ll tell you what brought me here.” Rosie took the hairpins out of her mouth. “I was fed up, that’s what.” Her tone suggested Rosie was especially fed up with Aggie’s suspicions about Lillian. “I was through with working for hours, standing half-naked and

shivering like a twig in a blizzard 'cause the boss was too cheap to put a log on the stove, and 'cause my bosom was popping out so the ladies could gawk at a dress they'd never look good in, and their gents could gawk at me." With a final jab, Rosie finished Aggie's hairstyle.

"What about you, Prudence?" Aggie asked, though her gaze never budged from Lillian's mirrored image. "What brings you here?"

Rosie hushed her. "If you must know, Prudence is a widow. She didn't know her husband had a gambling problem until after he died. The creditors took everything." Rosie was the only one who hadn't gotten seasick, and she'd tended to the other three.

Lillian had overheard Prudence disclose her history with no caution of confidentiality.

Aggie altered her question and sweetened her voice. It seemed the widow roused some understanding. "So, Prudence, what are you looking to marry?"

Prudence had the figure of a preadolescent boy, and she barely made a bulge beneath the covers. Behind the damp cloth Lillian pressed to her forehead, and in a voice filled with pure misery, Prudence answered, "A doctor."

The humorous answer eased the mood for a moment, until Aggie turned away from the mirror and flatly demanded of Lillian, "What's your story?"

Lillian looked into Aggie's eyes. It was like looking into the twin barrels of a coach gun.

Lillian may have done something irrefutably wrong that drove her here, but one thing she was *not* was a liar. And one thing she could *not* conjure up was a credible answer.

"I'm starved." Rosie's statement interrupted the tense moment. "Pudding. All I want is a good dish of plum pudding. I bet the rich are in the dining hall this very minute feasting on roast duck and plum pudding." Rosie's rescue was a fine attempt, but for one thing. She should have curbed her critical culinary tongue. "The slop they served *us* last night tasted like swill. I swear, the cook took all the scrapings from the night before, mixed it in a pot with fish entrails, and—"

And Prudence shot up in bed. "Fetch the bucket!"

Rosie stretched for the bucket, but Lillian beat her to it and reached Prudence just in the nick of time.

When Prudence finished, Rosie offered Lillian a soft and thoughtful, "Thank you."

But Aggie had a one-track mind. She stepped away from the mirror and put her hands on her femininely rounded hips. "So what are you looking for in a bloke from America that you couldn't find in a bloke from England?"

"A-?" Not only did Lillian have to come up with an answer, but she also had to translate the question. It took a moment to figure out what a *bloke* was, and when she did, she quoted the Love Doctor. "I'm looking for a-'a compatible connubial companion,' of course." With a strained smile, she tried to convince Aggie not only of that, but also of her urgency to get rid of the bucket.

But Lillian's answer only stimulated an inquiry from Rosie. "You're going half way around the world to marry a stranger. Ain't you been thinking about what kind of man he'll turn out to be? That's all I been thinking about for months, dearie." It came out more as a sentiment of sympathy.

Aggie wasn't as understanding. "Sounds peculiar