

INNOCENT HEARTS

by

RADCLYFFE



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Martha Beecher looked up in surprise as her husband rushed into the drawing room waving a piece of paper in his hand and shouting her name.

“My goodness, Martin! What is it?” She put her needlepoint aside and stared at him in alarm.

“It’s from Thaddeus,” he exclaimed. “He’s talked to the wagon master of the next group leaving for the Northern Territory. We can join them, he says. He’ll arrange everything as soon as we send word!”

She smiled at his joyful expression. There had been far too much sadness in his brown eyes of late, and although he tried to hide it, she knew he was unhappy. His enthusiasm now transformed his craggy features, making him look much younger than his forty-odd years. She wanted to share his pleasure completely but was gripped by a quick surge of anxiety as she thought of leaving her home for an unknown destination, surrounded by strangers for months while traveling over hundreds of miles of wild, unpopulated land. How impossible it had all seemed less than a year ago, when a letter had arrived from Martin’s boyhood friend Thaddeus Schroeder, extolling the virtues of the unsettled West and the Montana Territory in particular.

Pure air, clear skies, and no crowds or stench of factories. Such a prospect was marvelous enough, but Thaddeus had also written:

The war that has divided the nation is a distant thunder here in the northern territories. Out here, any man can claim land just for the tending of it and make his fortune with the sweat of his brow. The newspaper is growing every day, Martin, just like our fine town, and I need a partner to help me run it. I want you to be that man.

At first, the idea of moving west had seemed nothing more than a wild dream. True, she had known for some time that Martin was discontented with his teaching position and equally dissatisfied with the changes in their life that the war and industrialization had brought. More and more people had flooded the northern cities from the impoverished countryside and the decimated South. They were looking for work in the factories that had sprung up everywhere, crowding the landscape and fouling the air. Crime and disease grew with the swelling population, making even her much-anticipated outings for shopping or socializing a cause for worry. Now, it seemed not a day passed without some new horror scandalizing the city and disturbing Martha's peace of mind.

Thaddeus's offer of a partnership on a newspaper and a chance at a new life had truly energized her husband. But what did they know of frontier living—they who had never been farther west than Albany? Soon after they'd received that initial letter, they visited the public library to study a map of the new territory.

Martha had to smother her horror at the sight of a few ink lines tracing a vast open area marked by very little evidence of civilization. "But, Martin, it doesn't even seem...settled."

"The towns are small and far apart, my dear," Martin had explained. "They started out as mining camps during the rush west to find gold. But they are growing larger every day."

"It's so far..."

"Only the last half of the trip would be difficult." He traced the route of the Oregon Trail with his finger as it passed through miles of territory marked only by one Army fort after another, oblivious to her reservations. "Thaddeus says about four months altogether, and the roads are good all the way into Nebraska. Of course, we would have to leave most of the furniture behind. But think of it! It's a brand-new country out there, just beginning to grow. With the Homestead Act promising land to any man who lives on it, a whole new world is going

to spring up overnight. We could be a part of something grand, and the newspaper would be at the heart of it!”

As he spoke about their prospects, Martha realized he had already set his heart on leaving. She had tried then to share his enthusiasm and had gradually accepted that they would someday go. Now, looking at the flush of excitement on her husband’s face, she knew the time was at hand.

“If we are to leave soon, we must settle on what to do about Kate,” she said, struggling to hide her apprehension. “She is eighteen now and at the age when a girl should be marrying. How can we ask her to leave behind all that Boston has to offer for a life in a place we know nothing of?”

She knew how hard it would be for her husband to part with Kate, especially when it might be years before they saw their daughter again, and she saw his hesitation. “I’ll go anywhere that makes you happy, Martin,” she added, keeping her deepest fears to herself. “If you are happy, I will be, too.”

But our Kate? Don’t we owe her more? Who knows what type of men we might find in such an unsettled place. Kate is much too refined to become the wife of a shopkeeper, or worse, a...farmer!

Sitting beside her on the settee, Martin took her hand. “Martha, I don’t know how I know, but I feel certain that this move will be right for us.” His eyes clouded with concern. “But perhaps you are right about Kate. A young woman like her, giving up all of this—the dances, the parties, the finer things. Perhaps it would be too much of a hardship.”

Doubt had crept into his voice, and Martha could not bear that. She took his large hand into her small one and said with determination, “Kate can stay here with my sister Ellen until she marries. She is almost of the age when she would be leaving us soon for a husband anyway. Perhaps it will be sooner, that’s all.”

He seemed comforted by her calm, strong words, and smiled again. “I suppose, after all, we should ask her.”



Kate Beecher looked up from her book as her parents walked into the room. She was seated in front of the fire, the flickering glow illuminating her bold features and shimmering waves of shoulder-length hair. She smiled at them fondly, a question in her dark eyes. “You look

like you have news,” she said in her rich, full voice.

“Kate, darling,” Martha began tentatively, “your father and I have talked at great length about this move west, and we feel that we should go.” She glanced at Martin and took his hand. “We are not sure what lies ahead, but it will be very different from our life here. We are prepared to leave, but you’re a young woman now, and this is the only life you have known. There are many opportunities here and comforts that you might never have in Montana. The theater, opera, your friends...” She trailed off and looked intently at her daughter, who seemed to be struggling not to interrupt.

“You two!” Kate exclaimed, her eyes alive with laughter. “Do you really think I would let you go without me and miss this great adventure? There is nothing I care for enough to keep me here, and no one I care for more than you. I want to come. I have always felt that this is *not* where I belong. Perhaps I shall find that I belong in Montana.”

Martin was aware that his mouth was agape as he listened. *Not belong here? Preposterous.* Surely there was no young lady either more popular or more accomplished than his daughter. She had many friends and not a few would-be suitors. In addition to her dark-eyed, black-haired beauty, her wit and intelligence quickly won her acceptance in any circle.

Martha was dismayed by the excitement, so like Martin’s, in her daughter’s voice. Kate had altogether too much of her father’s adventurous spirit. Martha blamed herself for allowing her to spend so much time with Martin as a child, accompanying him everywhere. Plainly she had not emphasized enough that Kate needed to prepare for a life as a wife and mother.

She had warned Martin that the college library was no place for a girl to be spending so much time. Although she accepted a young lady’s need to read and write, she was concerned that Kate spent far too many hours alone with her books. When Martin had given in to their daughter’s demands that he teach her about his photographic pastime, Martha finally had to put her foot down. A dark room filled with foul-smelling chemicals was no place for a girl, even if Kate was a “natural” at image making, as Martin so proudly proclaimed. If Kate needed something to occupy her time, she could learn needlepoint.

“There are not likely to be the prospects for your future on the uncivilized frontier that you would find here.” Martha looked to her

husband for support but found none. Bluntly, she continued, "There are so many promising young men here in Boston. You must think of that, Kate."

Kate spoke carefully, knowing her mother could insist that she remain behind. "Whether I am here or there, Mother, I will only make a match that feels right in my heart. I do not believe that love is dictated by geography. You know there is no one here for whom I have formed any attachment."

That was precisely what concerned Martha most. More than one suitable gentleman had accepted invitations to their home over the past year. Kate had received each one politely and had just as politely sent him on his way. But before she could protest further, her husband interceded.

In truth, Martin could not bear the thought of leaving for a new life without his daughter. "Are you sure, Kate?" he asked. "This journey will be long and difficult."

"Quite sure, Father," she answered, feeling the first thrill of adventure. "Make no mistake. I want to go!"

"Well then," Martin said with obvious relief. "It's settled."

Martha, her expression tinged with lingering uncertainty, said nothing as Martin took her hand and led her toward the door. Kate watched them go, struggling with the sudden urge to dance.

"The West," she whispered, hurrying to the window that looked out upon the cobblestone street that fronted the hedges enclosing their small, well-manicured yard. Just the word conjured a sense of freedom that she had despaired of ever finding in Boston, where it seemed that the shape of her life had been determined before she had even begun to imagine its possibilities. *She* had gone to the library too and, sitting alone at one of the long wooden tables, had pored over the very same maps her parents had likely studied. She'd repeated the names of faraway lands, imagining herself in the midst of wide-open spaces and wild countryside, so unlike the tight, narrow streets and crowded buildings that seemed to confine her every bit as much as her mother's plans for her future.

She traced a shape from memory on the window glass, an irregular outline of the Montana Territory, wondering who she might become on this journey. Whatever dangers or disappointments lay ahead, the future now held a promise that it never had before. She might have the

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opportunity to choose her own fate, and although she wasn't certain exactly what form she wished her life to take, she knew that it was something far different than what her friends hoped for. The staid and comfortable life that her mother envisioned for her and which her friends so readily embraced—married to a man who would provide for her and decide for her—filled her with a sense of unease whenever she contemplated it. Why that should be, she did not know either. But for the first time, she believed she would have the opportunity to find out.

“New Hope.” She smiled, her heart light as she repeated the name of the town at their journey's end. “Oh yes. I want to go.”

CHAPTER ONE

*New Hope, Montana Territory
May 1865*

Martin Beecher halted the wagon on the crest of one of the lower peaks of the eastern reaches of the Rockies and sat forward eagerly, anxious for his first glimpse of their new home. He looked down upon a sprawling town nestled in a valley carved out of rock, most surely by the hand of God. After weeks of traveling across seven hundred miles of plains and prairies, the majestic Continental Divide, consisting in some places of hundreds of miles of impassable peaks broken only by a solitary pass, appeared to Martin to be unassailable by anything other than a greater power. Yet far below, like a nugget of gold caught in a crevice of ancient stone, lay a tranquil sanctuary of scattered meadows still dotted with snow, a meandering river running high and fast with the melt from the towering ice-capped mountains, and copses of trees just beginning to green with the spring's warmth.

"There it is, Martha. We've finally arrived." He took his wife's hand. "And isn't it beautiful!"

Martha shifted on the rough wagon bench beside him, stiff from the lingering chill of the spring night barely past and bundled to the nose in a heavy wool blanket. She couldn't help but think that in Boston the tulips would be in bloom, whereas in the valley below, winter still lingered.

Kate pushed between them from the rear of the covered wagon, one gloved hand on each of their shoulders. Despite the cold, she was bareheaded and her glossy hair shone darkly in the bright sunlight. She shielded her eyes against the early morning sun and eagerly surveyed the scene before her. There were perhaps a dozen buildings, most constructed of milled lumber but a few of brick, on either side of a rutted dirt road that was clearly Main Street. Other clapboard structures centered on the main thoroughfare, and more than a few log cabins were scattered along the outskirts of town and farther into the foothills, where the early homesteaders had obviously settled. The rapid expansion that Thaddeus had spoken of was evident in the large numbers of structures under construction and the early morning bustle that was visible even from a distance. Wagons loaded with lumber and barrels of goods clogged the streets, and men on horseback churned up clouds of dust entering and leaving town.

“Is that New Hope?” Kate asked, her voice alight with an echo of her father’s enthusiasm. “Are we here?”

She could hardly believe they had finally arrived. Once the decision had been made to leave Boston, everything had happened so quickly. Her father had resigned from the college and sold their house at a good profit. Her mother had donated most of their garments to several charities that provided for those who were displaced or left behind by the rapid pace of progress. Kate had helped Martha purchase simple, sensible traveling clothes for the entire family, although Martha insisted that they keep some of their “finer clothes” for social affairs or funerals, two events that well-bred ladies would be expected to attend even in a “frontier town.” Taking Thaddeus’s advice, however, they left almost all the furniture behind.

They set out from their home before the last graying snows of winter had melted from the streets with a plan to follow the warm winds west. Looking back, Kate wondered if they would have set off so readily had they any idea of the hardships that lay ahead.

The first segment of their journey had been relatively comfortable as they traveled by rail to Independence, Missouri. Since this was where the “regular” railroad service ended, it was the starting point for most expeditions heading to the western territories. In the previous

year, 1864, a Congress still divided by the uneasy sentiments of war had passed the second Pacific Railroad Act, allocating funds for the construction of a transcontinental railroad. Shortly after the surrender of the Confederacy, the Union Pacific railroad began moving westward, rail by rail, but it hadn't yet been completed.

This meant that in Missouri, the Beechers had joined a wagon train, both for safety and to afford company for Martha and Kate. During the weeks that followed, they had many reasons to be grateful for Thaddeus's experience and the arrangements he had made in advance for them, especially since none of them, not even Martin, had ever been beyond the confines of civilized eastern society. Their trek across the midwest had been in a ten by five foot covered wagon that had barely accommodated the three of them, six stout trunks containing all their remaining worldly goods, several boxes of books, and a wardrobe of Martha's with which she refused to part.

As they slowly labored over narrow, rutted trails that often threatened to capsize their prairie schooner, spring had first overtaken, then threatened to pass them by, somewhere along the northern trail through the Great Plains. Even as they had traversed the flatlands and begun the climb toward the eastern slopes of the Rockies into the newly created Montana Territory, the last snows had not yet completely retreated. Overflowing riverbeds and streams made the last few weeks of their trek arduous for animals and humans alike.

The journey had been longer than expected, and they all agreed after a time that it was harsher than they had imagined. The Overland Trail was littered with the possessions of families that had not been as well prepared for the journey as they. Sadly, there were more than a few hastily erected markers remembering fellow travelers who, due to accident or disease, would never reach the land of promise they had so hopefully envisioned.

Even in the darkest moments, Kate had not succumbed to the sense of defeat she detected at times in her mother. She was aware more than once that her buoyant sense of anticipation combined with her father's unfailing optimism kept all their spirits from flagging. Now, with Boston receding into a distant memory, she looked down upon the tiny town and felt that her life was truly about to begin.

“Are we really here?” she asked again.

“Yes indeed, darling Kate,” her father answered cheerfully. “At last—New Hope, Montana.”

“I am so glad! I can’t wait to meet the Schroeders. Do you know which is their house?”

He laughed, delighted by her eagerness. Perhaps he needn’t have worried about her after all. He pointed toward the spire-peaked square clapboard building nearest them. “That’s the church. Thaddeus said it was the first building they raised, and next to that the schoolhouse, I imagine. The Schroeders live somewhere near the center of town. I’m sure we will have no trouble finding them.”

Kate did not see the stark simplicity of the town and the wild countryside as something to fear, as her mother did. Like her father, she saw a chance that her life might be more than she had been raised to believe it would be.

She thought about the last year of her life in Boston, the year that most girls her age remembered as the most exciting. It had not been for her. She had attended the required coming-out parties, the afternoon socials, and the debutante balls. She had been properly introduced and had made the proper connections. It had been pleasant, but somehow it struck her as frivolous, too. She found the conversations considered appropriate between young ladies and gentlemen dull and the attentions of would-be suitors tiresome. Perhaps here she would find that there was more substance and fulfillment to life than that.

She gripped her father’s shoulder harder, saying, “And the newspaper office. Where is it?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s the first place I want to see. Imagine it—one of the very few in the territory and soon to be the biggest,” he pronounced proudly, throwing his arms around both Kate and her mother. “Just think of it!”

His excitement was so boundless, and so simple, that Martha’s heart lifted at the sight of his pleasure. She returned his hug and said softly with more conviction than she felt, “It will be wonderful, darling. I’m sure of it.”

“Yes,” Kate whispered fervently. “It will be.”



Less than an hour later they located the Schroeders' house. Apparently, everyone in town knew them, and each other, because it had been simple to obtain directions from the first passerby. Martha was astounded at their reception. Thaddeus Schroeder's wife, Hannah, took them into their home as if they were long-awaited relatives.

"John! John Emory! You carry those bags upstairs while I get these folks something to eat!" Hannah bellowed merrily while herding the Beecher family into her living room.

She was a head shorter than Martha and almost twice her size, with a round face and twinkling dark eyes. She had none of the pampered look of the Boston matrons Martha had called friends, and her palpable energy was almost overwhelming.

Very much aware of being a sedate Easterner, Martha protested, "Oh no, really. We only stopped to let you know we had arrived." She looked to her husband and daughter for support. "I'm sure Martin can find us suitable lodging at the...uh...hotel."

"Don't see as how," Hannah responded earnestly, moving books and papers from the worn couch in the sitting area. "That hotel is sure to be full with cowboys in for the week's end or worse, and it's no place for you folks. You'll stay right here with us 'til you get settled. We've plenty of room, and a couple more mouths to feed is no hardship."

Kate recognized the look of consternation on her mother's face and took her arm, whispering softly, "Mother, I think we should accept Mrs. Schroeder's hospitality. It's been so long since we've slept anywhere but the wagon. Besides, it will give Father a chance to talk things over with Mr. Schroeder, too."

"That's right, my dear," Martin added. "I'm sure Thaddeus has suggestions for a place we might acquire."

Hannah nodded. "That he has. Now, I'll get busy heating water because I should think you'll be wanting proper baths along about now."

"Why don't you rest awhile, Mother, and I'll help Mrs. Schroeder in the kitchen," Kate urged.

The journey had taken its toll on all of them, but none so much as her mother. She had lost weight and seemed more fragile than Kate could ever recall. The hardships of the last few weeks on the trail, when there had been little to eat but salted meat and unleavened biscuits,

seemed to have sapped the last reserves of Martha's strength. It did not occur to Kate when looking at her mother that *she* had been the one to change, growing stronger in body and spirit as the journey had progressed. She had been the one to handle the horses' reins while her father pushed the wagon from the deeply rutted, muddy trail and, sadly, she had witnessed death in all its cruelty without faltering. Sometimes she felt guilty for loving the challenges that were clearly so difficult for her mother. She patted Martha's arm. "Perhaps Mrs. Schroeder and I can make some of that tea we've been saving while we prepare the bath water."

"Yes, of course," her mother responded politely. She sank down onto the couch as if her legs could hold her no longer.

"Right you are. You come with me, child," Hannah said with authority and bustled out.

Kate followed, as eager for the chance to talk with Hannah Schroeder about the town as she was for the chance to soak in a tub for the first time in months.

Martha turned to her husband, uncomfortable in a home that was not her own and anxious that their presence would be an imposition. "Martin?"

He shrugged good-naturedly. "I guess it's decided."