



Lily and the Major (The Orphan Train Trilogy)

By Linda Lael Miller

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than a hundred historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the "First Lady of the West" hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. Visit her at LindaLaelMiller.com.

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Chapter One

Tylerville, Washington Territory

April 10, 1878

The *rinka-tink-tink* of a tinny piano flowed out onto the street from the Blue Chicken Saloon, and greasy gray cigar smoke rolled out the open doors of the hotel dining room. Lily Chalmers consulted the cheap timepiece pinned to the bodice of her blue calico dress and nodded to herself, satisfied that she wouldn't be late for work.

Lifting her skirts with one dainty hand, Lily picked her way carefully through the mud and horse dung that littered the street. A little smile curved her lips when she reached the other side and stepped onto the wooden sidewalk. The land office was open for business.

The clerk, a young man with spectacles and pockmarked skin, stood behind the counter. He touched the brim of his visor when Lily entered. His gaze moved from her pale blond hair, done up in a chignon at the back of her neck, to her wide brown eyes and small, slender figure. "Mornin'," he said, with what Lily suspected was unusual enthusiasm.

Although she had never liked being assessed in that particular way, she'd long since gotten used to it. Besides, nothing could take the glow off this perfect blue-and-gold day -- not even the fact that she had to be at the Harrison Hotel in half an hour to serve another meal to a lot of noisy soldiers.

"I'd like to stake a claim on a piece of land, please," Lily said proudly. She took a folded map from her ancient beaded bag and held it out.

The clerk's eyes shifted to a place just beyond Lily's left shoulder, then back to her face. "Your husband isn't with you?" he asked. He looked disappointed now, rather than fervent.

Lily sighed and straightened her shoulders. "I don't have a husband," she said clearly.

There was a twitch in the clerk's left cheek, and his small eyes widened -- behind their spectacles. "You don't have a husband?" he echoed. "But you can't -- you don't just -- "

Lily had prepared for his argument, incoherently presented though it was. "Under the law, any able-bodied

person of legal age may stake a claim to one-half section of land," she said, praying no one would demand proof that she had reached her majority. In truth, she was not quite nineteen. "One has only to prove up on their three hundred and twenty acres within five years, by building a house and planting crops."

The clerk was now thrumming the fingers of both hands on the countertop. He was clearly agitated. He started to speak, but his words came out in such a garble that they were unintelligible. Lily reached out to pat one of his hands.

"Be calm, now," she said in a gentle but firm voice. "Just tell me your name, and we'll work this all out amicably."

"Monroe," he replied. "My name is Monroe Samuels."

She nodded, pleased, and extended one gloved hand. "And I'm Miss Lily Chalmers," she responded sweetly. "Now, if we could just get down to business -- I have another appointment very shortly."

Monroe took up the map Lily had laid on the countertop and unfolded it. His Adam's apple jogged up his throat, then down again as he scanned the rough drawing of the land Lily had selected. He looked at her helplessly for a moment, then went to a shelf and took down an enormous book, which he opened with a flourish.

Lily stood on tiptoe, trying to make out the words marching neatly across the pages in a slanted black scrawl, but she was too far away.

"There is a five-dollar filing fee," Monroe said after clearing his throat. He seemed to expect Lily to be daunted by this announcement.

Again she opened her drawstring-bag, this time taking out a five-dollar note. "I have it right here," she answered.

Monroe came and snatched up the map again, carrying it back to compare it with whatever was written in the book. "It might already be taken, you know."

Lily held her breath. Her land couldn't be taken -- it just couldn't. Right from the very beginning she'd known God meant it to be hers and hers alone. She closed her eyes for a moment, summoning up images of the silvery creek shining in the sun, of the deep green grass and gently flowing bottomland where she meant to plant her crops. She could almost smell the stand of pine and fir trees that lined the southern border of her claim.

Monroe cleared his throat again, glanced at Lily's money as if to make sure it hadn't vanished, and dipped a pen to make a grudging notation in the book. "You need a husband to homestead," he fussed. "You're going to be dealing with Indians, and rattlesnakes, and outlaws -- "

"We had all those things in Nebraska," Lily, broke in politely, consulting her watch again. "And I survived. Now, if you'd just hurry..."

Scowling, Monroe wrote up a receipt and a temporary deed. "The half-section next to yours is already claimed," he warned, "Just make sure you've got your property line straight."

Lily scowled back. "I paced it off myself," she said.

Monroe did not look reassured. He snatched up the five dollars and shoved the deed and receipt at Lily. "Good luck, Miss Chalmers. You'll need it."

If the ink had been dry, Lily would have pressed the temporary deed to her bosom in triumph. She smiled at the petulant clerk to let him know he hadn't managed to discourage her, and she hurried out.

A stiff breeze made the certificate crackle between her fingers as she stood on the sidewalk inspecting it. For the first time in her life Lily owned something solid and real. Once she'd built her house and put in her crops she would be completely independent; never again would she be the interloper, the unwelcome burden.

She pursed her lips and blew on the deed like a child bending over a birthday cake and, when she was sure the ink was dry, rolled it neatly and tied it with a piece of string from her purse.

Her step was brisk as she hurried toward the hotel, where a long day's work awaited her.

She entered through the back way, recoiling as a blast of heat from the kitchen stove struck her. Carefully, she put her handbag and the precious deed away on a pantry shelf.

"There's a lot of 'em today," barked Charlie Mayfield, the cook, as he shouldered his way through the swinging door that led to the dining room, "and they're fractious."

Lily reached for her checkered apron, tied the strings at the back of her neck and at her waist, and nodded. "They're always troublesome," she said with resignation. "They're soldiers."

For Lily, those last two words said it all. She had no use whatsoever for men in uniform. They were invariably obnoxious, with no consideration for other people's rights.

Lily smoothed her hair once and set to work.

Later, as she passed between the crowded tables, gripping an overloaded tray in both hands, one of the soldiers reached out and wrenched hard at her apron strings. Pulled off balance, she stumbled, and the tray clattered to the floor.

Infuriated, the joy of her temporary deed forgotten for the moment, Lily whirled on her tormenter, a young infantryman with a broad grin, picked up the mug of foaming beer in front of him, and flung the contents into his face. The other troopers whooped and cheered with delight.

A surge of heat moved up Lily's neck to throb in her cheeks and along the rims of her ears. Soldiers never seemed to care what trouble they caused, just as long as they had their good times.

She knelt and began gathering up the dirty cups, plates, and silverware she'd dropped with the tray.

The movements of her hands were quick and jerky, but she went still when she saw a pair of scuffed black boots come to a stop directly in front of her, and her temper swelled anew. These rascals had been harassing her with their exuberant mischief all morning, and she was through turning the other cheek.

She rose slowly to her feet and sighed as she felt the pins in her once-tidy hair give way, sending the silver-

gold tresses tumbling down over her shoulders. Crows of amusement rose all around her as she set her hands on her hips and raised her chin.

The eyes that gazed down at her were just the color of maple sugar and shadowed by the brim of a dusty blue field hat banded in gold braid. A gloved hand reached up to remove the hat, revealing a thatch of golden-brown hair.

"On behalf of the United States Army, ma'am" a deep voice said with barely contained amusement, "I'd like to apologize for these men."

Lily reminded herself that the soldiers from nearby Fort Deveraux kept the hotel dining room in business, and that without them she wouldn't have a job. Nevertheless, she was near the end of her patience. "They would seem to be boys," she answered pointedly, "rather than men."

The barb brought a chorus of howls, whistles, and cries of mock despair.

The man looking down at Lily -- a major, judging by his insignia -- grinned rather insolently, showing teeth as white as the keys on a new piano. "They've been on patrol for two weeks, ma'am," he explained with elaborate cordiality, apparently choosing to ignore her comment on their collective bad manners.

Something about the curve of his lips made Lily feel as though the room had done a half spin. She reached out to steady herself by gripping the back of a chair. "I fail to see how that gives them the right to behave like circus gorillas."

The major's grin intensified, half blinding Lily. "Of course, you're right," he said. Every word that came out of his mouth was congenial. So why did she feel that he was making fun of her?

Lily found herself looking at the button-down panel on the front of his shirt and wondering about the chest beneath it. Was it as broad and muscled as it appeared, covered in a downy mass of maple hair?

With a toss of her head she shook off the unwelcome thought and knelt to finish gathering the crockery. She was surprised when the major squatted down to help, but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Lily flung the last of the silverware onto the tray with a clatter. "It'll be mud if I don't get back to the kitchen and pick up my orders," she snapped.

The major took the heavy tray and stood with a sort of rolling grace while Lily scrambled inelegantly back to her feet. Just as she reached out to take the tray back someone pinched her hard on the bottom, and everything cascaded back to the floor again.

Lily cried out, spinning around in search of the culprit. "Who did that?" she demanded.

The unshaven, unwashed faces around her fairly glowed with innocence. It was obvious that no one was going to admit to the crime.

The major cleared his throat, and the troops, so rowdy only an instant before, immediately fell silent.

"That'll be enough," he said with quiet authority. "The next man who bedevils this woman will spend his leave time in the stockade. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the men answered in rousing unison. One picked up Lily's tray and handed it to her, brimming with shattered plates and cups and dirty silverware.

She turned in a whirl of calico and stormed away, remembering the man who'd come into her mother's life years before and persuaded Kathleen to send Lily and her sisters west on the orphan train.

Soldiers. They were all alike.

In the cramped, sweltering kitchen she found Charlie in the expected state of annoyance. "These dinners are getting cold!" he complained, gesturing toward platefuls of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and creamed corn.

Hastily Lily smoothed back her hair and pinned it into a chignon for the second time that day. "I know," she said, and I'm sorry."

Charlie softened. He was an older man with thinning white hair and a crotchety manner, but he was basically kind. "I suppose the lads were pestering you a little. Serve them right if they had to eat their dinners cold," he said, but all the while he was filling clean plates from the pots and kettles on the stove.

Lily smiled at him and hurried out with the tray, keeping to the edge of the dining room in hopes of avoiding more trouble with the soldiers. But they were behaving themselves.

Reaching the table beside the corner window, Lily was taken aback to find the major there, along with an older man wearing the uniform of a colonel. An elegantly dressed woman with iron-gray hair and a sweet expression sat beside the ranking officer, and she smiled as Lily set a plate before her.

"You're new in Tylerville, aren't you?" the lady asked.

Lily bit her lower lip and nodded. She had no time to chat, but she didn't want to offend a customer. "Yes, ma'am," she answered. "I've been here a month."

The woman extended a gloved hand. "Welcome," she said. "My name is Gertrude Tibbet."

Lily glanced at the major, who was watching her with a look of humorous interest in his eyes, and swallowed. "I'm Lily," she replied. "Lily Chalmers."

This is Major Caleb Halliday, an old friend of ours," Mrs. Tibbet went on cheerfully, indicating the man with the bold smile, "and beside me is my husband, Colonel John Tibbet."

Lily nodded politely at the colonel, a stout man with snow-white hair and a mustache to match. She ignored the major. Neither man stood, as they might have done under other circumstances.

"Let the poor girl get on with her work, Gertrude," Colonel Tibbet protested, chewing.

At that Mrs. Tibbet fell silent, and Lily turned and hurried away. She spent the rest of the day scurrying breathlessly from one table to another, filling coffee cups, carrying food, taking away dirty plates and

silverware.

By the time the dining room closed hours later Lily's feet were throbbing, and she was so tired she could barely see. She spent another hour washing and drying dishes, then stumbled back to the storeroom beside the kitchen to fetch her bonnet and cloak. When she stepped out into the cool spring evening Major Halliday was waiting for her.

He tilted his hat. "Evening, Miss Chalmers," he said.

Lily glowered at him. "What do you want?"

The major smiled that insolent, melting smile of his. He had bathed, Lily noticed, and his uniform was fresh. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "I'd like to walk you home. It's dark, after all, and a town full of soldiers is no place for a woman alone."

Lily squared her slender shoulders. "My rooming house is nearby," she said in dismissal. "So I don't need an escort, thank you."

It was as though she hadn't spoken. Major Halliday fell into step beside her, settling his hat on his head with a practiced motion of one hand. "Where did you live before you came here?" he asked.

Lily sighed. The man was over six feet tall, and he probably weighed twice what she did. There would be no getting rid of him if he didn't want to go. "Nebraska," she replied, quickening her pace.

The major frowned. "That's a long way off. Do you have family in Tylerville?"

An old grief sounded inside Lily like a far-off bell as she thought of her lost sisters. Maybe, despite all her prayers and her letter-writing and her traveling from place to place, she'd never find them. She shook her head. "No family."

"Anywhere?" the major pressed.

Lily glanced at him. "I have an adopted brother living in Spokane," she answered. She wouldn't tell him about Emma and Caroline; that would be like baring a freshly bandaged wound. "Why are you so curious about me, Major?"

He smiled. "My name is Caleb," he corrected, ignoring her question.

"That's more than I care to know," Lily replied haughtily, and he laughed at that.

"I suppose it is. May I call you Lily?"

"No, you may not. I'm to be 'Miss Chalmers,' if you must address me at all."

He laughed again, and the sound was warm and richly masculine. "You've got all the warm congeniality of a porcupine, *Miss Chalmers*."

"Thank you." Oddly, Lily found her thoughts straying back to his chest, of all things. He was a strong, well-built man, the kind who could put in a good day's work behind a plow without falling asleep over his supper,

but there was no reason to hope he'd ever become a farmer. Obviously, given his rank, Caleb Halliday had been a soldier for a long time, and he meant to remain one.

They had reached the rooming house, and Lily was both relieved and sorry. Stepping up onto the rough-board porch, she forced a smile. "Good night, Major," she said.

Just when she would have turned and run inside he caught hold of her hand. "Tell me why your brother let you come all this way by yourself." The words had the tone of an order, however politely they were framed, and Lily tried, without success, to withdraw her fingers from his grip.

"I am almost nineteen years old," she responded briskly. "I didn't ask Rupert's permission." Guiltily, she thought of how she'd left Spokane, where Rupert lived now, without telling her adopted brother good-bye or thanking him for his many kindnesses.

Another slow, smoldering grin spread across the major's face. "So you ran away," he guessed with distressing accuracy.

"No," Lily lied. "In any case, this is none of your business."

"Isn't it?" Major Halliday turned her hand in his and began stroking the tender flesh on the inside of her wrist with the pad of his thumb. The motion produced a series of disturbing sensations within Lily, not the least of which was a warm heaviness in her breasts and a soft ache in the depths of her femininity.

The door of the rooming house opened, and Mrs. McAllister, bless her nosy soul, peered out. "Time to come in, Lily. Say good-night to your young man."

Lily glared at Caleb. "He's *not* my young man," she said firmly. The day she took up with a soldier would be the day irises bloomed in hell.

Caleb's expression was as cocky as ever. "Not yet," he replied, in a voice so low that even the landlady's sharp ears could not have caught it. "I'll see you tomorrow, Lily."

Lily whirled in frustration and stomped into the house. It had been a perfectly horrible day, and she was glad it was over.

After brewing a cup of tea in the kitchen she made her way up the back stairs to her room and sat down on the edge of her narrow, lumpy bed to remove her shoes. When they were off she stretched out with a sigh, pillows propped behind her back, and wriggled her cramped toes.

In order to keep from thinking about Major Caleb Halliday she turned her mind to Rupert. She knew she should write to her brother and tell him she was all right, but if she let him know where she was, he would surely come and drag her back to Spokane.

As much as Lily loved her brother, she couldn't live the kind of life he'd mapped out for her. She didn't want to teach school or sell coffee beans and yard goods at the general store. Or be forced to marry the first suitable man who asked her.

She smiled up at the darkened ceiling, her hands behind her head. Her temporary deed was safely tucked away.

Lily was going to be a farmer, once she'd saved the money to prove up on her homestead. This time next year she'd be planting fruit trees in her own sunny valley, with its fringe of timber. She'd set out a vegetable garden and start herself a flock of chickens, too.

Lily's smile faded. Before she could do any of that she had to have a cabin to live in. As determined as she was, she knew it would be impossible for her to cut down any of the huge Ponderosas that bordered her property, let alone drag them to the site she'd chosen and shape them into a house.

She sighed, getting off the bed to put on her nightgown. She'd find a way to get that cabin built. Somehow, she'd find a way.

Church bells awakened her with a persistent *bong-bong-bong*, and Lily tumbled out of bed muttering. She peeled off her nightgown and scrambled into drawers, a camisole, and a petticoat, then dragged her Sunday dress on over her head. She was going to be late again.

Lily fumbled with the cloth-covered buttons of her blue muslin gown and hastily brushed her hair. She was pinning it into place when Elmira McAllister rapped at the door of her room and called out, "Lily? Have you overslept again?"

It was one of Mrs. McAllister's rules that all lady boarders attend church faithfully. If Lily had had another place to live, she would have questioned the fact that male lodgers were allowed to sit in the front parlor and smoke of a Sunday morning, never giving the state of their souls a serious thought.

Clutching her Bible, Lily wrenched open the door and greeted her landlady with a slightly frantic smile and a breathless "Here I am!"

The plump, middle-aged woman replied with a "harumph." Her brown hair, streaked with gray, was pulled into its usual severe knot at the crown of her head, and her dark eyes moved over Lily with a look of suspicion. "I daresay the choir will be through the first hymn before we even reach our pews," she said. Then, with a sniff, she turned and led the way down the narrow staircase to the kitchen.

Although she knew it was anything but polite, Lily fell to watching Mrs. McAllister's wide hips brush the walls as she descended. It wouldn't be long, she reflected, before her landlady had to use the front stairs exclusively.

The sun was shining, and Lily noted with pleasure that the sky was the same deep blue as Mrs. McAllister's sugar bowl. The lilac bushes beside the back gate were just beginning to bud, and a spring rain had come during the night to nourish the awakening grass.

Lily drew a deep breath and wished devoutly that she might spend this morning on the half section of land that lay midway between Tylerville and Fort Deveraux. She'd have been closer to God there than in any clapboard church.

The musical "Amen" of the choir swelled out onto the spring air to meet Lily and Mrs. McAllister as they approached the front steps.

Inside, crowded onto the benches that held schoolchildren during the week, the townspeople closed their hymnals with a series of claps. Lily and her landlady took seats near the door, one on either side of the aisle.

Having registered this indication of Mrs. McAllister's disapproval, Lily squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and focused her attention on the pastor, who was taking his place behind a makeshift pulpit. She started slightly when someone settled into the pew beside her, forcing her to move over.

Lily's brown eyes narrowed when she recognized Caleb Halliday. The major was dressed in a crisp blue uniform, his boots were polished, and he held his campaign hat respectfully in his lap.

He glowered down at her for a moment, as though she'd taken his seat, then turned his gaze toward the front of the church.

Once or twice during the next hour Caleb's muscled thigh actually brushed against Lily's skirts, and she felt as though she'd just dipped a ladle into a thunderstorm and taken a drink.

Because of the crowd, Lily wasn't able to escape quickly enough to evade Major Halliday. He was right behind her in the crush of people, and she was painfully conscious of his proximity.

Once outside under a maple tree she gulped fresh air and fanned herself with her Bible.

"Fine sermon, wouldn't you say?" the major drawled, his eyes dancing as he took in her flushed face and frazzled manner.

If Reverend Westbrook's sermon had been devoid of a single redeeming feature, Lily wouldn't have known it. She hadn't heard a word for worrying about Major Halliday and the odd feelings he produced in her. "It was fine indeed," she agreed grudgingly.

"I've always thought the Book of Proverbs to be particularly uplifting," he went on.

Lily longed to flee, and yet she seemed rooted to the spot like the tree she leaned against. "Y-yes," she said uncertainly. "Proverbs has much to inspire us all. Reverend Westbrook was wise to choose it as a topic."

Caleb's grin was slow and slightly obnoxious, and it caused a strange melting sensation in Lily's knees. "Perhaps he will someday," he said. "Today, of course, he talked about Jonah and the whale."

Lily felt color throbbing in her cheeks. "You delight in making a fool of me," she accused in a furious whisper.

"Not true," Caleb replied smoothly. "But I do like watching the sparks catch in your eyes when you realize you've just been had. May I walk you home, Miss Chalmers?"

"Certainly not. In fact, I would deem it a great favor if you would simply stop bothering me, Major." With that Lily thrust herself away from the tree and started toward the road.

Caleb reached out and caught hold of her arm, and she was forced to choose between turning to face him and making a scene. Since she knew Mrs. McAllister would be keeping a weather eye out for unseemly doings, she pretended that meeting Caleb's gaze had been her own idea.

"Come on a picnic with me," he said. It wasn't an invitation, but an order.

Color pulsed in Lily's cheeks, and she blinked, astounded at the man's arrogance. "I don't think that would be

proper," she replied when she'd recovered a little. "After all, we hardly know each other."

Caleb sighed and replaced his hat. "And you obviously mean to see that we never do."

He sounded resigned and slightly wounded, and in spite of herself Lily was sorry about that. She did find the major attractive, if entirely too tenacious. "I'll go if you can get Mrs. McAllister's permission, she said, feeling proud of her resourcefulness.

The twinkle in Caleb's eyes said he knew she expected her landlady to refuse the request without mincing words, but he turned and sought out that good woman in the crowd, where she stood chatting with two members of the choir.

Lily watched in mingled amazement and ire as Caleb made his way toward Mrs. McAllister, carrying his hat. He spoke politely to the woman, who rested one hand against her breast in delighted surprise and beamed up at him.

Presently Caleb returned, looking damnably pleased with himself. "She says I'm to have you back before sundown," he announced.

If Lily had been holding anything other than a Bible, she would have flung it down in pure exasperation. At the same moment, inexplicably, she wanted to kiss Mrs. McAllister for giving the picnic her blessing.

"Just how did you manage that?" she demanded as Caleb put his hat back on with a cocky flourish.

"I'm a very persuasive man," he replied, offering his arm.

Grudgingly, Lily took it. "And a very arrogant one."

Caleb chuckled. "So I've been told."

They'd reached a smart-looking buggy drawn by a coal-black gelding, and Caleb graciously handed Lily inside. She settled herself on the seat, making a great business of smoothing her skirts so that she wouldn't have to look at the major.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

Lily was caught off-guard by the question, since people rarely inquired about her preferences. A little shyly, she gave him directions to the plot of land she considered her own.

Caleb set off in that direction without hesitation, and Lily liked him for that. To keep him from finding out that he'd pleased her, she turned on the hard, narrow seat to glance behind her. Sure enough, a picnic basket was wedged into the narrow space. Tentatively she lifted the lid, and the scent of fried chicken tantalized her.

She couldn't help an appreciative little "ummmm," even though she was annoyed that Major Halliday had been so confident of her response to his invitation.

Caleb grinned. "So you like chicken, do you? You'd better watch out, Lily Chalmers -- before you know it, I'll know all your deepest secrets."

Lily turned again and looked straight ahead at the rutted trail that led off into the countryside. The major's remark had given her the most unnerving feeling of intimacy. "You are too sure of yourself, sir," she replied stiffly.

"We'll see about that," he answered.

Lily squirmed on the seat. It appeared that nothing would do but the most straightforward approach. "If you're courting me, Major Halliday," she said, "it is only fair to tell you that I have no intention of marrying. Ever."

He unsettled Lily completely with a chuckle. "I'm not courting you," he answered, with such assurance that Lily was stung. "But you'll never make a spinster," he added.

"I will," Lily insisted through her teeth.

Caleb stopped the buggy and, with the black leather bonnet hiding them from the prying eyes of Tylerville, cupped Lily's chin in his hand and lifted it. His grasp was not painful, but it wasn't gentle, either. "You'll marry," he replied, "and here's the reason why."

Before Lily could make a move to twist away he kissed her. Those lips she'd found so appealing shaped hers effortlessly to suit them. Her breasts were pressed to his chest, and she could feel her nipples budding against him like spring flowers.

She gave a soft whimper as his tongue touched hers in a caressing flick, and the kiss went on. Endlessly.

When Caleb finally broke away Lily found her hands clutching his shoulders. Shamed, she let go of him and made to smooth her hair.

He took up the reins without a word and set the horse and rig in motion again.

They'd gone some distance before Lily could bring herself to speak. "You really should take me back to Mrs. McAllister's."

Caleb's eyes glowed like amber coals. "Not a chance, Miss Chalmers. We haven't finished our argument."

They *had* finished, as far as Lily was concerned, and he'd won. Never in her wildest dreams had she guessed that being kissed would feel like that. She could hardly wait to do it again. "What argument was that, Major?" she retorted.

"You said you'd never marry."

Lily sighed in spite of herself. "You were very forward just now."

"Yes."

"Would you care to be forward again, please?"

Caleb laughed. "That's one thing you won't have to worry about," he answered.

Lily waited but he made no move to stop the buggy and kiss her a second time. She remembered how brazenly she'd behaved and flushed. If Mrs. McAllister ever found out, Lily would be out of the rooming house on her ear. "Do you like the army?" she asked when some considerable time had passed.

Caleb removed his hat and set it behind him, on top of the picnic basket, then ran splayed fingers through his hair.

"I've been a soldier since I was sixteen," he said, and there was a serious expression on his face now. "It's not a matter of liking it. I don't know any other kind of life."

Lily couldn't believe her own boldness. "Have you ever considered being a farmer?"

He turned his head to look at her, and Lily was startled by the amused rancor she saw in his face. "I'd sooner lead a raid on hell itself," he told her.

"Farming is good, honest work," Lily protested, incensed -- and strangely wounded -- that he didn't share her dream.

"If you've got no imagination," Caleb replied.

Lily bridled, folding her arms. "But soldiering is an art, I suppose. Well, you just try eating a sword for your Sunday supper -- "

"Calm down," the major said, and though the words were spoken softly, they had the crispness of an order. In fact, Lily was as intimidated as the rowdy infantrymen had been the day before in the hotel dining room.

"Farmers are necessary to all of us," Lily pointed out. "Without them, we wouldn't eat. Soldiers, on the other hand..."

"Yes?" Caleb prompted when her voice fell away.

Lily cleared her throat. "I'm not claiming we don't need soldiers," she said diplomatically. "It's just that they do seem rather a luxury in a time of peace."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever been through an Indian attack."

Lily shivered at the images that came to mind. Unwittingly, the major had touched upon one of her deepest fears. "I thought the tribes around here were friendly," she said, her eyes widening as she looked up at Caleb.

His broad shoulders moved in a shrug. "If there's one thing I've learned about the red man, it's that he's unpredictable."

Lily bit her lower lip, thinking of all the nights ahead, when she would be alone on her little farm with no one to protect her.

Caleb favored her with an indulgent smile. "You don't need to worry, Lily. You're safe as long as you don't go wandering off into the countryside by yourself."

The reassurance didn't help. How on earth could she run a homestead single-handedly and not be alone? "I'll

just have to buy a rifle and practice my shooting," she reflected aloud.

Even though they hadn't quite reached the valley, Caleb stopped the rig again. "What did you say?" he asked.

Lily sighed. "I want to practice shooting. I used to hunt grouse with Rupert, and -- "

Caleb was staring at her as though she'd just said she planned to ride to the stars on a moonbeam. "A lady's got no business fooling with a weapon," he interrupted.

Lily sat up very straight. "You're certainly entitled to your opinion, Major Halliday," she said primly, "however antiquated and stupid it might be."

Caleb started the rig rolling again with a lurch, slapping the reins down on the horse's back. "What would you want with a gun?" he asked after a few moments had passed.

Although Lily knew her answer would start more trouble, she could no longer hold it back. "I'll need it for hunting, of course -- and to protect myself, should the need arise. I mean to farm for a living, you see."

"By yourself?" There was a note of marvel in Caleb's voice.

"By myself," Lily confirmed as the horse and buggy topped a grassy knoll. Below lay the valley -- her valley -- dappled with purple and pink and yellow wildflowers, resplendent with spring.

For a few moments Lily had had doubts. But now, seeing her land, and her creek sparkling in the sunshine, she knew she would build her house and plant her fruit trees and crops. She could make it all come true if she just kept on working and planning, and she wouldn't need a man to help.

Especially not a soldier.

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