

Winner of the *Romantic Times* Lifetime Achievement Award

ELAINE BARBIERI

*To
Meet Again*



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IDENTIFYING MARKS

“If you think this act you’re putting on will distract me from recognizing you, you’re mistaken. I recognized you immediately. I know who you are.”

Banning’s eyes flicked open. “Really? Who am I? *Wade?*”

Thea gasped. “You really are a bastard!”

“And it seems you’re really not the *lady* you pretend to be.”

Ignoring his deliberate affront, Thea responded, “You’re wasting your time if you think you’re fooling me. Just for the record, I know you’re not Wade. You look like him, but that’s where the resemblance ends. Your personality is sadly lacking—but most importantly, Wade was a *lawman*.” Pausing, she then spat, “And you’re a *thief!*”

Other *Leisure* and *Love Spell* books

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NIGHT RAVEN

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*To Evan Marshall,
my agent and my friend.
You're the greatest!*

*To
Meet Again*

Prologue

1880

“Do you, Wade Randolph Preston, take Thea Elizabeth Radcliffe to be your lawfully wedded wife . . .”

Reverend Martin’s deep voice rang with familiar authority in the small Georgia church, yet the dreamlike quality of the moment persisted as Thea stared up into the eyes of the man she loved.

“. . . to have and to hold from this day forward . . .”

She had waited all her life for this moment—since she was eight years old and first set eyes on the lanky, fourteen-year-old son

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of a nearby rancher; since she saw his reluctant smile flash, and decided then and there that she would marry him one day.

“ . . . in sickness and in health . . . ”

But she was no longer a child, and Wade wasn't a lanky adolescent anymore. He was a man—a tall, handsome man with a smile that still melted her heart—and she was his woman.

“ . . . until death do you part? ”

Wade's dark eyes held hers. “ I do. ”

I love you, Wade.

“ Do you, Thea Elizabeth Radcliffe, take Wade Randolph Preston to be your lawfully wedded— ”

Gunshots broke the silence of the small church. The sounds reverberated in Thea's mind as Wade's powerful frame jerked with the impact of the bullets that struck him—as she stood frozen with incredulity, and he sank toward the floor.

There were screams from the pews, startled shouts and the sound of running feet. The slamming of the church doors.

Inured to all, Thea kneeled beside Wade. Her sense of unreality expanding, she cradled him in her arms. No, this couldn't be happening. Wade couldn't be lying on the hard church floor, his blood staining the pristine

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white of her wedding gown. He couldn't be struggling to breathe, his lips forming words that went unspoken. He couldn't be looking up at her, pain creasing his face as she leaned closer, imploring him to tell her this wasn't real.

"Thea . . ."

Unreality vanished when Wade gasped her name. In its place came excruciating desolation as Thea cupped his cheek with her hand and pressed her trembling lips to his.

"Don't cry."

She wasn't crying, was she?

"I . . . love you, Thea."

"You'll be all right, Wade. You have to be."

"No."

Thea's breath caught on a sob.

". . . can't stand to see you cry."

"Wade, please—"

Wade's breath rattled in his chest and his eyelids drooped. Making a supreme effort, he grasped her hand. His dark eyes suddenly acutely clear, he rasped, "Don't . . . don't cry. We'll meet again."

Shouts. Sobs. Racing footsteps.

The frenzy of the moment continued as Wade went lifelessly still.

Chapter One

1882

She must be crazy.

The stagecoach bumped and swayed along the dusty trail as Thea covertly studied the assortment of characters occupying the seats around her. She had never before seen the like of the fellow dozing across from her. Bearded, wearing soiled, fringed buckskins, his shoulder-length hair hanging in unruly strands from beneath an equally soiled, broad-brimmed hat, he looked like a character from a poorly written dime novel—and he smelled perfectly awful.

The fellow seated beside him, also dozing,

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wasn't much better. She had never seen a handlebar mustache as broad and sweeping as his.

Seated on either side of her, their wide-spread thighs claiming far more of the seat than they were entitled to, sat two nondescript, unshaven Westerners who had spent the last hour snoring in an uneven chorus that was driving her wild.

What was she doing here?

Are you sure you want to do this, Thea?

The question softly posed by Maribelle Carter a week earlier echoed in Thea's mind. The dear woman had taken her under her wing after her mother had died when she was twelve. Grief-stricken, Samuel Radcliffe had protested vociferously, saying Thea didn't need anybody but him. Maribelle had been there for her again when her father failed to wake up one sunny morning only five years later. Maribelle—and Wade.

Thea, Wyoming isn't even civilized!

It was civilized enough to accept Aunt Victoria as a doctor after Georgia turned its nose up at her.

That's what I mean.

And that's the kind of thinking that forced Aunt Victoria to leave.