

SAMPLE OF A CHOICE
OF LOVE

HOME TO OSCEOLA
BOOK ONE



ALENA MENTINK

PROLOGUE



Osceola, Nebraska
April 1879

“**W**hat will you do now?”
The question that had been looming in the atmosphere for days, taunting her, mocking her, finally escaped from her brother’s mouth. His regret-filled eyes did nothing to keep the question from piercing deep into her heart.

Emily Keath averted her gaze and instead stared at the horizon where yellowish blades of grass contrasted with the deep blue sky. She shouldn’t have to address this question. *No* woman should ever be faced with it.

But life didn’t always happen the way it should.

She leaned against the sod house that she had called home for the last six years, the wall’s uneven surface digging against her back. All the unknowns in her life felt like salt being poured on her lacerated heart. As soon as she caught her breath after one dose, another round of salt trickled in to aggravate the pain. Was it ever going to stop?

“Emily, I’m sorry it has to be this way, but you need to make

some plans.” Her sister-in-law, Sadie, slid one arm around her waist, squeezing her tightly.

Emily swallowed. Ephraim and Sadie were trying to help, but . . .

“It’s just too soon.” Her words emerged as little more than a whisper—and they sounded hollow to her own ears. She knew as well as they did that she needed to make some decisions and she needed to do so quickly. After all, the planting season was almost upon her.

Ephraim cleared his throat. “This isn’t what you’ll want to hear, but I had a man come into the store yesterday asking about land for sale around Osceola. If you’re going to sell, now would be the time.”

“I’m not selling.” Emily gripped a fistful of fabric from her black dress, her chest heaving. How could he suggest that she sell the land that Colton had loved more than anything else in the world—other than herself and their children? He had devoted his life to it, and she would sooner starve than give it up.

Ephraim’s eyebrows drew together, but he made no effort to change her mind. He simply nodded and gestured toward the fields still filled with stubble from last year’s harvest. “And how will you make a living from the farm?”

Emily stared at the fields as well, the hopelessness of the situation washing over her afresh. Maybe *she* would rather starve than sell the farm, but she had the children to look after as well. She was all they had, and it was up to her to provide for them this year—and every year after that.

She bit her lip. Maybe she could learn how to work the fields. Maybe she could figure out a way to bring the children with her—

“Emily.” Ephraim took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. “You aren’t alone in this. I’ll help you, and so will Pa

and the other neighbors. But we need a plan that will work long-term.”

The tears that seemed to always hover just beneath the surface sprang into her eyes. “I can’t lose the farm, Ephraim. The children and this land are all that I have left of Colton, and I just can’t let it go.”

Ephraim’s throat jogged. “But what about you? How would Colton feel if he knew that you’ve been running yourself ragged to hang on to this land? He loved you far more than the farm. He wouldn’t want to see you do this to yourself.”

Emily inched away, and Ephraim’s hands fell from her shoulders. “Just let me try to keep the farm. I don’t deny that I’ll need help from all of you men, but I’ll try to do most of the work myself.”

Sadie heaved a deep sigh beside her. “And that’s the problem, honey. You can’t keep on like this.”

Emily kept her gaze fixed on Ephraim. “Please?”

Ephraim shifted, rubbing his hand along his jawline. His shoulders rose and fell. “I can’t stop you from trying, but it isn’t going to be easy, Emily. You’ll need to let me and Pa help you as much as we can.”

A wave of relief washed over Emily. *Good*. If she could just hold on to the land until the boys grew older, she would have nothing to worry about.

But that was still years away.

Emily lifted her chin. One day’s problems at a time.

She pushed away from the sod house that served as a home for her and the children, letting her gaze sweep over the squat structure. It was a solid building. Rustic, but built with care by Colton’s own hands. He had intended to build them a frame house in a couple of years, but that was just one more dream that had died with him. It seemed that she and the children would be living in the soddy as long as the dirt walls held.

She took a deep breath. “If you’ll both excuse me, I have one

more matter to deal with before we can move on with life. I need to write to Colton's brother, but I've been delaying."

Sadie grasped Emily's hand, stopping her retreat. "Do you suppose Colton's brother might help?"

Emily shook her head. "He's busy with his own life."

And she would *never* ask a favor of Matthew Keath. Not even if she had nothing more than bread crusts in her pantry.

She'd heard enough stories about Matthew to warn her that he ran a little on the wild side. Definitely not a man she wanted to expose her children to, even if he was their uncle.

No, she and the children would wrestle through this on their own. Somehow. At least, she prayed they could.

CHAPTER 1



Bar K Ranch, Scottsbluff, Nebraska
May 1879

Was there ever a season that compared to spring? Matt Keath surveyed the land from atop his horse. Gradually, the earth was being freed from its icy winter prison, snowdrifts turning to slush beneath the weight of the sun's warmth and new blades of green shooting through last year's withered growth. Calves bucked alongside their mothers in the pasture, and birds sang their sweet serenades from the sky.

Even the atmosphere was changing; it no longer pierced Matt's lungs with cold when he breathed in deeply.

A smile tugged at his lips. A man couldn't find a day better than this.

Matt urged his horse, Bowie, toward the corral.

Riding for the Bar K had been the best decision of his life. He loved spending his days outdoors, even if the weather could be brutal at times. He didn't mind the loneliness either. Working as a deputy for a couple of years had given him his fill of others and their violence.

Matt tilted his head back, allowing the setting sun's rays to slip past the brim of his Stetson and caress his face. Nope, being a ranch hand wasn't a bad job. Not at all. He'd dreamed of this job from the time he was a kid, even though the idea was met by disbelief and scoffs from Pa and his brother, Colton. Neither of them understood Matt's thirst for adventure or his drive to become anything but a farmer. At one point or another, they had both tried talking him out of his dreams, but Matt wouldn't hear a word of it. He couldn't stand the thought of following a plow and milking cows for the rest of his days.

Matt drew Bowie to a stop in front of the corral and dismounted, shrugging as he did so. Pa and Colton had found their life's work in farming, and he wasn't about to start fault-finding with his family. Pa had gone on to his reward years ago, and Colton seemed to find joy in plowing and milking, if his last letter was any indication.

Matt stripped Bowie of his saddle and bridle, his fingers deft. Before long, Juan would be calling them all to supper, none too soon for Matt. Working out in the fresh spring air had a way of awakening an appetite within a man.

Besides that, Juan's supper was sure to be a treat. He had a reputation for being one of the best cooks on this side of the Mississippi, making the hands at the Bar K the envy of all the neighboring ranches.

"Hey, Matt!"

The call prompted Matt to turn. Another Bar K employee sauntered toward him, waving a rolled-up newspaper above his head. It could only be Flick, walking with the swagger that no one else could duplicate.

"Mail came in today." Flick opened the newspaper as he drew closer, producing a cream-colored envelope and holding it for Matt to see. "This one's yours."

"Thanks." Matt reached out and took the letter, sticking it in his vest pocket without looking at the return address. Colton

was the only person who ever wrote to him. He would read it later when he had some privacy.

Flick leaned against the corral, resting his elbows against one of the rails as if settling in for a long stay. “Say, I got something I think you’ll be interested in.”

“Oh yeah?” Matt rubbed a hand along Bowie’s neck. On second thought, maybe he *wouldn’t* get to eat his supper soon. Flick always did like to drag fresh news out for as long as possible.

“How many years has it been since you were a deputy in town?”

Matt blinked. That was not the question he anticipated. “Uh, two—no, three years ago. Why?”

“You remember Frank Harvey?”

“Sure I do.” A crawling sensation crept along the base of Matt’s neck. Frank Harvey wasn’t a good fellow. He’d started several brawls at the saloon, and one night, he’d shot the place up, resulting in two deaths. Matt had helped Sheriff Telmond arrest him for the murder.

Flick jabbed the newspaper at Matt’s chest. “Well, you might want to read this.”

Casting a sideways glance at Flick, Matt took the newspaper and unrolled it, his gaze falling on an advertisement for the mercantile. He started to read through what they were selling, but Flick snatched the paper back and turned it to the front page.

“Not that. Look at the headlines, fool.”

Matt rewarded Flick with a glare, then turned his attention back to the paper. The headlines turned his blood cold.

MAN WANTED FOR KILLING SCOTTSBLUFF SHERIFF.

Matt jerked his head up. “Somebody killed Sheriff Telmond?”

Flick smiled, obviously enjoying Matt’s shock. “Guess who?”
“Frank Harvey?”

“Way to rope the steer around the neck.”

Matt stared down at the paper, feeling as if he'd just been punched in the stomach. His breath came in shallow jerks that failed to fill his lungs. “But why?”

Flick rolled his eyes. “Use your head. You know Frank Harvey has reasons to resent Telmond for locking him up after that shooting. He would've been hung if he hadn't made a break from jail and escaped.”

“But why now? If he was so upset with Telmond, why now and not three years ago when he first escaped?”

“For a former deputy, you really aren't that good at putting the pieces of the puzzle together.” Flick scowled at him, shifting so that he stood taller against the corral. “Three years ago, he was running for his life and didn't have time to plan revenge. Besides, he probably couldn't have caught Telmond off guard then like he did now.”

“He must be mighty bitter to hold a grudge against Telmond for this long.” Matt lingered on Frank Harvey's picture that was spread across the paper's front page. The black and white image didn't give a very accurate view of the man. It sharpened the lines of his face too much, giving him a sinister look.

In truth, Frank Harvey was a deceptively normal-looking man. It was only the glint in his eyes that hinted at his evil. Matt hadn't forgotten them in the three years since he'd last seen Frank Harvey.

“Yeah, and just think, you were the one who helped Telmond lock him up. You wonder if he's got a grudge against you too?”

A chill ran down Matt's spine. That was the question he'd been wondering as well. “I was only the deputy. He probably didn't notice me as much.”

“Well, just be careful. He could be lurking around here even now, waiting for you to end up in some lonely corner where he could jump you.” Flick leaned closer, his stale breath hitting

Matt's face. "I sure would hate to see a good man like you killed, and at such a young age too."

Suddenly the ranch didn't feel so safe. Matt's gaze strayed to the horizon in spite of himself, but all was still. He darted a glance toward the shadows of the cook shack and bunkhouse, but nothing moved there either. He shifted uncomfortably.

Flick burst out a cackle of laughter. "You look so serious, Matt. Ain't scared, are you?"

Matt glared at him. "I'm not scared."

"Then why so jumpy? You afraid Frank's a better shot than you?"

That was the problem with Flick. He never took other people's problems seriously.

Matt pressed his lips together to keep from snapping at Flick. Then he took a breath and the words spewed out anyway. "I'd like to see how calmly *you'd* react if you heard that a man you helped arrest a few years back was in the area and on the warpath."

"You hold your life pretty highly, don't you?" Flick smirked. "Maybe Frank doesn't think you're worth a bullet."

Matt gritted his teeth. "Who knows what Frank thinks? But either way, I think it would be wise for me to be extra careful. Being off guard is what wound up getting Telmond killed."

"Whatever. Just don't get trigger-happy. If you don't know for sure that your target is Frank Harvey, then don't shoot, 'cause I sure don't want to end up with a bullet in my skin if I happen to pass your bed on my way to the privy tonight."

"Ha. Very funny, Flick." Matt folded his arms across his chest. He cast a glance at the horizon, then forced his gaze away, giving his shoulders a shake. "Can we talk about something else now?"

"I was having a heap of fun talking about good ol' Frank, but if you're too spooked, I suppose we can move on." Flick shifted

from one foot to the other, making his spurs clink. “You know that the boss is looking for a new foreman, huh?”

Matt merely stared back at him. Of course he knew. The open foreman position had been the only talk on the Bar K Ranch for a week.

“Well, I was talking with some of the boys, and a number of them think the boss is considering you for the job.”

Matt’s next breath tangled in his throat. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“Why would I? Everyone knows you’re one of the Bar K’s top riders. You’ve had years of experience with cattle, and you know how to handle men too, or else you never would’ve been a deputy. You seem like a good choice for the job.”

Matt worked to keep his face expressionless. Truth was, he’d had his fingers crossed that Keller would consider him for the position. Riding as foreman for the Bar K would be one of his biggest dreams come true, but he wasn’t about to let that on to Flick. He’d learned long ago that every word he told Flick was sure to travel through the bunkhouse faster than a prairie fire.

“Can’t believe everything those boys tell you,” Matt said instead. “Guess we’ll just see what happens.”

“I think there might be some truth to what they’re saying this time. You better start thinking on your words of acceptance for when Keller asks if you want the position.” Flick studied Matt, fingers drumming the top board of the corral. “That is, if you think it would be the best idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if Frank’s after you . . .” Flick shrugged. “Maybe Scottsbluff isn’t the best place for you. There are other places looking to hire hands. Like Texas. Maybe you wouldn’t be offered a foreman’s position right away, but better safe than dead, right?”

Matt frowned. Texas? The thought put a strange feeling in his middle. Maybe he just disliked change—or maybe his senses

really did detect something dangerous about Texas. Either way, he wasn't about to downplay intuition. "I'm not looking to run, Flick."

"Who said anything about running? I was talking about safety and opportunities. Why, if you do want to go to Texas, I might just go with you. I'd like to see Texas. What do you have to say to that?"

Matt wanted to say that there was *no way, no how* that he was going to saddle up and leave behind the life he had built for himself here in Scottsbluff. But instead, he heard himself muttering, "Texas? Seriously?"

"Think it over, partner." Flick clapped him on the shoulder and swiveled away. "I see Billy by the cook shack, and I've got a letter for him. See you at supper."

"Sure." Matt watched Flick leave, then realized he was still holding the newspaper. "Hey, you want your newspaper back?"

Flick waved his hand. "Keep it. You might want to give the Telmond story a closer going over. Maybe it'll help you change your mind about Texas."

Matt shook his head, but he set the newspaper on top of his gear. Maybe he would read it more thoroughly later.

In the meantime, he had a letter to read from Colton. Leaning back against Bowie, Matt reached into his vest pocket and retrieved his brother's letter, a twinge of guilt pricking him as he opened it. He ought to write more often to Colton, but time got away from him. He'd never liked writing. Colton, however, *did* like writing, and that made it easy for Matt to let him shoulder the bulk of their correspondence.

But a correspondence shouldn't be one-sided.

Matt pulled the letter out of its envelope, sensing something different about it. He squinted his eyes at the paper and discovered that there was only one page of text, with nothing on the other side.

That was it. Colton never left any of his paper blank. He

always said that since he wasn't lacking for things to write about, he might as well not waste any money in sending blank paper. Every inch of space was always crammed with his handwriting.

Frowning, Matt unfolded the page. *Odd.* The handwriting wasn't even Colton's. This handwriting was more delicate, feminine, and even more perfect than Colton's penmanship. Matt skimmed down the page until he found the signature. *Emily Keath.*

Emily? She was Colton's wife, but Matt had never met her. She'd never written to him, either, and Matt's stomach did a funny little twist, leaving it hard and knotted.

Matt forced himself to start reading.

Dear Matthew,

It is with a heavy heart that I write to you now, for the news I have to share is one of great tragedy. Three weeks ago, Colton's life was taken from us in an unexpected manner—

"What?" The single word escaped from Matt's lips as little more than a whisper. *Colton's life was taken?* Matt's pulse raced. That couldn't be true. Emily must have confused her words, surely.

Colton passed from this life and into the arms of his Savior. He had left home early in the morning to cut wood, perfectly healthy and strong. When he hadn't returned on time, my father went searching for him and found that Colton had been injured. His ax had slipped, leaving his leg severely cut. He brought Colton home and sent for the doctor, but it was too late. Colton had already lost too much blood to be saved.

"No." Matt tore his gaze away from the letter, unable to comprehend what he'd just absorbed. His eyes burned and each breath felt as if it was tearing through him. This had to be someone's mad idea of a joke. Colton was too young to die, only twenty-eight, two years older than Matt. He had always been a

strong man, a man with good health and a clean lifestyle. He ought to have lived well into his old age.

A shudder ran through Matt's frame. His hold on the letter tightened, and he crumpled the paper in his hand as if destroying it could somehow erase the painful words that it contained.

But glancing down at the paper, he realized that it was foolish to let his emotions out on the paper. He had to read it through to completion. Even from miles away, he needed to know what had happened to Colton.

Matt smoothed the letter out again, but one glance at the handwriting sent a tremor through his body. He couldn't do this. Not now, at least.

Matt thrust the letter back into his vest pocket, hands shaking. Maybe later, when he was calmer, he'd be able to make it through the entire thing without feeling like a knife had been plunged into his chest.

