



Lanterns and Lace

© DiAnn Mills.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Chapter 1

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26 KJV

***Texas
May, 1895***

Jenny Martin would face a gang of outlaws in the hope of finding her sister's child. Over the past several days, she'd slept upright until her back throbbed, eaten beans as hard and dry as stone, and endured the humiliation of men eyeing her because she traveled the Union Pacific without an escort.

Now, as the end of her travels grew to a close, she couldn't help but sense an air of excitement despite the long uncomfortable journey. She attempted to stand and walk about the car, but dizziness forced her back down onto the scratchy seat. Sleep tugged at her stinging eyes, and she closed them for an instant, but a painfully loud snore from an elderly man across the aisle kept her from giving in to the rest her body craved. Other womanly discomforts plagued her aching body, and she did her best to will them away. At least for the present.

I will never take my life as a proper lady for granted again.

The doors between the railroad cars slammed shut, and she startled. Nothing in Cleveland had prepared her for the primitive living conditions of the Wild West. A less than pleasant odor met her nostrils and threw her stomach into a whirl. No doubt from the elderly man who snored. Between this and a portly man's foul cigar, the last few hours had been nearly unbearable.

Jenny glanced out the window and watched the countryside slip by. This trip was supposed to have been an exciting adventure, one she'd describe to her students once school resumed in September. She'd ridden the Northern Pacific Railroad to Texas and boarded the Union Pacific en route to Kahlerville with the enthusiasm of a giddy girl. Viewing the terrain across this vast land had given her a sense of freedom, but her sentiments faded as the hours moved to one grueling day after another. Still, at the end of Jenny's journey to Kahlerville, Texas, lived a little girl who needed her family.

She smiled despite her discomfort. The destination of her dreams was but a few miles away. Jenny resisted the urge to open the window and allow some portion of the sultry air to circulate. She wanted to disembark without a fine coating of soot to darken her face and traveling attire. Earlier she'd changed into a clean traveling dress and a cape of slate gray lined in gray taffeta silk that could also serve as a mackintosh, but for her purposes it would shield her from smoke and dust. She sighed. Oh, how she'd welcome a fresh, cooling rain. The clear azure sky held no such promise. Instead, she'd think about her niece and how the child must be as beautiful as Jessica.

Within moments, it became increasingly clear that if she didn't permit some breeze to blow in from the outside, she would surely faint. Jenny lifted the latch on the window. Soon fine black dirt settled on her hat, face, neck, cape, and dress. How foolish to change into clean clothes. Perhaps her little niece wouldn't mind that her auntie was soiled.

She fanned herself as vigorously as propriety allowed and stared out the window. Tall pine trees grew close to the track and swayed just slightly offering a brief respite from the heat. They reminded her of the gas lights on the street corners of home. The trees passed, and an array of black-eyed Susans covered an entire field. How utterly captivating. Never had she expected such beauty in this desolate country.

The porter walked by, and Jenny lifted her gaze to offer a faint smile. "Sir, do you know what time we will arrive in Kahlerville?"

The elderly man, whose molted mustache bent below his chin, tipped his hat. "Late this afternoon, miss."

"Thank you." Sometimes she feared her constitution would not allow another minute onboard the train. "Sir, can you tell me anything about the town?"

“It’s quite pleasant, rather homey. Let me think...I have an aunt and uncle living there, so I’m more familiar with Kahlerville than some of the other stops. I remember a newspaper, telegraph office, a bank, sheriff’s office, law office, barber, livery and feed store, a general store, a church, and an undertaker.” He pointed with his right index finger as though he’d memorized the businesses located up and down the street. “I think there are a few other establishments too. A boardinghouse for one. I remember the food is especially good there. Are you visiting family?”

Jenny pondered how to answer the question. Her mother would have told the porter to mind his own affairs, except her mother’s ways often sounded impolite. “My deceased sister used to live in Kahlerville.” She promptly focused her attention on the cracked and split seat beside her.

“I’m sorry, miss. And I nearly forgot the reason why I’m here.”

She turned her attention back to the kindly man.

“There’s a gentleman sitting in first class who would like for you to join him.”

Jenny sighed and fought the unsettling in her stomach. Sitting in first class had its advantageous. Abruptly her breakfast nearly made it to her throat. “I couldn’t possibly. I feel rather ill, and I don’t have a chaperon.”

“I understand, and I’ll give him your reply. I believe he’s taking the train to Kahlerville too. I would not have approached you with the gentleman’s request except he specifically asked for you by name and described your appearance. I thought perhaps you were acquainted.”

A mixture of curiosity and alarm raced through her. “My goodness. I don’t know anyone on board. What is the gentleman’s name?”

“Mr. Aubrey Turner.”

Jenny tilted her head. “Is he from Ohio?”

For more information about *Lanterns and Lace* and other books by DiAnn, visit www.DiAnnMills.com.