Destiny of Heart

CATHERINE ULRICH BRAKEFIELD

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DESTINY OF HEART

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To my readers…
who have inspired me immeasurably
with their words of gratitude!

Cast of Characters

Ruby McConnell Meir	Daughter of Ben & Maggie, Wife to Stephen
Collina May McConnell Blaine	Daughter of Ben & Maggie, Wife to Austin Blaine
Franklin Long	Married to Melissa
Maggie Gatlan McConnell	Referred to as Grandma Maggie
Stephen Meir	Married to Ruby McConnell Meir
William Meir	Son of Ruby and Stephen
Esther Meir	Daughter of Ruby and Stephen
Julie Ann Meir	Stephen's twin sister
Buck Briggs	Widower living in Las Animas, Colo.
Myra McConnell Cass	Daughter of Ben and Maggie, Wife to Clem Cass, Mother of Sue Ann and Theresa Cass
Clem Cass	Married to Myra
Jane	Widow of Joe Deerhawk, President Roosevelt's friend

Dawn	Daughter of Jane and Deerhawk
Luke Baker	Son of Doc Baker
Rose Baker	Daughter of Doc Baker
Ruth Jones	Widower/nurse in Las Animas, Colo.
Eric Erhardt	Son of Frances and Anna, Brother to Ann, Grandson of Mrs. DeGrandcamp
Gill McConnell	Cousin to Ruby, Owner of Gill's Dry Cleaners
Skeeder	Shushan's top hand

Acknowledgments

"Where do I begin?" the theme song for *Love Story* is a fitting way to describe my feelings after finishing *Destiny of Heart*. This novel has been on my heart to do for years.

My research took two years, and my companions in writing *Destiny of Heart* were the memories told to me by my mom and gran. The sweet melody of my imagination played a fitting backdrop for my ever-unfolding mission. For this "sweet love story is older than the sea."

My mission is twofold. First, to transport my readers into a nostalgic journey of remembrance, romance, and realism. Secondly, to bring us all to a better understanding of the love story our Savior has for His children:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God… full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14).

Only a benevolent God could have brought this wonderful team of the like-minded staff at CrossRiver Media Group and my agent, Cyle Young and his Hartline Agency group, working toward this single goal.

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To my precious readers, I pray *Destiny of Heart* will reward you as it did me in writing "a sweet love story that is older than the sea"! That *Destiny of Heart*'s simple truth woven into the characters Collina, Ruby, Franklin, Stephen, Buck, Myra, and Clem gleams the love that Christ Jesus has for us and lights a pathway to the stars and heavens above for you, too! God Bless!

Prologue

Ahhhh…" Collina cried. "I'm so thirsty." Her tongue touched her cracked and bleeding lips. "Water." She felt her eyelids fluttering. She lacked the strength to open them. It was hot. She had to find Austin. She had to tell him it wasn't his fault. That smell…The swine were back. They were everywhere, pulling at her skirts, keeping her from Austin.

Face down she fell. She'd tripped. The swine were walking on her! Gagging, she clutched her throat, spitting out the mud…no, phlegm. She had to find Austin—but the swine wouldn't let her up.

She couldn't yell. Their smell was horrendous. There was no escape but through the mud, through the long dark tunnel, to that flickering ray of light.

"Collina. Collina, wake up; its Mother."

Austin was waiting for her. He stretched out his arm, his palm open to her. "I know I'm a poor substitute for a husband; you deserve better…always remember that you were loved by me."

"Come back!" She was a fingertip away from him. He leaned closer, his handsome, dimpled grin, his sparkling eyes glowed into hers. Someone shoved her away. She was falling. Twirling into the blackness.

"Oh, you're so hot. Dear Jesus, please, I can't lose her, too." The cool water Mother bathed her face with felt good. "You're burning up. I'll go see if Bugie can overtake Doc."

Mother's footsteps pounded to the beat of Collina's throbbing head. So quiet. The pigs had stopped grunting. Franklin was here. His eyes as

blue as the stripes on Old Glory, his hands comforting. "Don't ever take true love for granted, Collina." Tears formed pools in her throbbing eyelids and the salt stung her eyes.

Austin stretched out his hand. "You're my wife." Far, far away she fell into the awaiting abyss.

She was in the cornfield; Franklin was there with her. He was holding the mustard seed. "Nothing is impossible—if you have faith and believe."

She was dancing, dancing in a flowing gown made of starlight white and glistening gold. Faraway, bagpipes played "Minstrel Boy."

"Love, like a budding rose can never too quickly reveal the flower, that is, if it is to last, for all things worth having are worth waiting for…" Back, back into the fog Franklin rode, galloping up Shushan's hills until the mists engulfed him.

Chapter 1

April 7, 1917

Sunlight swept across Ruby Meir's face. A roar like the rumbling Cumberland Falls vibrated through her bedchambers. Horses neighed, men yelled out orders, and brakes screeched to a halt just below her windowpane.

Trucks at Shushan? No, silly, you're in Amarillo, Texas, in a fancy suite at the Grand Hotel. I must have been dreaming. Her hand touched Collina's letter. She snuggled deeper into the soft bed and drew up the covers. Stephen and she were on their way to Colorado to homestead a section of land near Pikes Peak.

Drums pounded in the distance, followed by a duet of trumpets. This must be the preparations for the parade the bellhop had told them of the night before.

Since her marriage to Stephen, the years had rolled into her world with Stephen's illness baffling the doctors. Now, the chain of war events in Europe had reached America's shores. The Great War did not concern her. Her husband and son did.

She clasped Collina's letter to her bosom. Collina's right; the Lord orders all things. Queen Esther faced her darkest hours at Shushan with perseverance. *And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* God carried Queen Esther through her life trials to jubilation. He could do that for her family, too. She wasn't going to allow a silly war or Stephen's peculiar illness or moving to some place she'd never heard of before upset her joy. She just had to

keep her faith and hope in God. No matter what happened.

But how was Stephen's fancy book learning from the University of Louisville going to help him out on the Colorado prairies? Neither she nor Stephen had any idea where they would live once they reached Las Animas. Her husband had acquired an itchy foot in spite of the doctor reports.

Cold air swept the bedchambers. She peeked out beneath the covers. The silk curtains fluttered like the colors on a sailboat. Stephen, with their son wrapped in his arms, stepped out onto the balcony that overlooked Main Street. The warbling notes of a trombone followed by more instruments playing a patriotic tune caused her husband to raise his voice an octave. "Are you up?"

She flapped the covers aside. "I am now." She pointed to the partially open french doors. "That's enough noise to raise Lazarus a second time."

He chuckled. "You want to go down and watch the parade?"

"Is it still snowing?" Amarillo's wind had been unrelenting last evening. She wished she hadn't taken William out to meet Stephen's college friend and see the cattle show. The snow was deep in spots, and five-foot drifts had piled up along the roads and walkways. "If you do go out, bundle William and make sure he wears his hat with the ear muffs."

"Give Mommy a kiss."

Little sloppy lips, followed by Stephen's larger ones, found connection with her cheek. William, who'd been riding his father's back, squirmed uncomfortably, his small fist finding solace in Ruby's face.

"Oh me! That's some kiss."

"Ha! Not even eight months old and already swinging a wallop!" Stephen lifted the squirming infant off his back and swung him into his arms amidst the laughter of his son. She opened one eye, attempting to focus, and smiled, swinging her legs over the end of the bed, watching the antics of her child and husband.

William's peals of laughter mingled with the commotion of the parade's preparation outside their window. With blue eyes and light hair, he was a miniature version of Stephen. Both heads came together like two bear cubs romping amidst a clover field. Only William's short legs were not that of his father's.

Ruby frowned. "Do you think that by some quirk of nature William mistakenly acquired my legs?"

Stephen glanced up, one large paw placed firmly on his son's chest, he took one look at his wife's woebegone face and laughed. "Son, I don't think there could be a mother alive that can worry as much as yours." He jumped up and giving her nose a playful thump, said, "Be glad he didn't get that."

"Oh dear!" Covering her nose with her palm, her feet glided across the thick hotel rug and she clutched the edge of the bureau, staring into the mirror. An oval face, large eyes and thick curly hair bounced to her shoulders and down her back. Carefully she uncovered her nose. "Has my nose grown since last night?"

He burst into merry bliss. "Hon, don't take what my sister said to heart."

"How can I help it?" She stared back at her image, turning her head from side to side. Wishing she hadn't eavesdropped on a conversation between Stephen's sister and Emma Glaser. "Your sister's right, my nose is…predominate, and if noses do grow the older you get—oh, why couldn't your sister be wrong?" Ruby pointed to her face. "But she's not. Here's the proof."

Stephen flopped down on the carpet. "All kidding aside, you have nothing to fret about." Seeing her face, he swooped up his son and stood surveying her. He walked over to the bureau with the squirming William wrapped in his arms. "Let this be a lesson to you, son, never kid a worrier."

If she was a worrier, it was because she married the star kidder. "Ever since I confided in you, you've been ribbing me constantly about my poor schnozzle." She wagged an index finger in front of his, giving it a thump. "Is that what a loving husband does?" Her long thick hair flowed down her shoulders in front of her face. She blew one curl away. She was huffing like an over-worked steam engine. Honestly, just when she needed her husband's sympathy, why must he continue to joke?

"You look more like a misplaced angel than a mother of a seven-month-old." A mischievous gleam surfaced to Stephen's laughing eyes as he lavished them on her. "No, come to think of it," he said, placing William on the carpet, "you are absolutely right, a loving husband should be…" grabbing Ruby in one lunge, "making mad and passionate

love to such a succulent and beautiful damsel."

She laughed as he swung her easily into his strong arms.

The sounds of trombones, tambourines, and marching feet boldly announced the parade was moments from beginning.

"I forgot." He kissed her smartly. "I'll get him dressed." He hurried to William's room.

Before she could grab her heavy wool skirt from her trunk, her son came in dressed in a winter coat, mittens, and scarf, and Stephen topped this off with his woolen hat with ear muffs. "Good."

"I might need to stop by the enlistment office. If the rumors are true, the Selective Service Act will require every male over twenty-one to register, only unlike the Civil War's conscription law, this will strictly forbid the use of any substitutes." He sent her a cheeky smile.

Stephen's love for adventure rivaled his dedication to her and William. Blinking, she said, "Are we one or two on your list?"

Stephen laughed. "You and William are and will always be first. Now hurry." The glass panel doors of the balcony banged against the walls as Stephen flung them open.

"You're a grand old flag," the words of the song floated up to them.

"I think the parade has started," Stephen said.

"You're a high-flying flag."

He swept William up. His footsteps pounded like a Cherokee war drum on the balcony.

"And forever in peace may you wave."

Stepping into her wool skirt, she glanced out the window. Snow slapped the glass pane with a vengeance. Oh, men and their fight for valor and honor. When will it end? Dressed, she joined him on the balcony, hugging him to her.

"You're the emblem of…the land I love, the home of the free and the brave."

"Look at them, son. Remember you're seeing a page of history unfold before your very eyes."

The young men below them pounded the pavement with their combat boots. Their stance bold and unyielding, their steps attuned to

one another. So many, so willing. "Robert has already left to go overseas."

"Your brother? Yes, Europe's war became America's when that German U-boat torpedoed the *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland. And five American ships have been sunk this year. That war's too close to our shores and has every red-blooded American in an uproar."

The radio on the next balcony reiterated President Wilson's words. "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war."

Ruby shivered, not due to the cold; she wished it was. Robert had written her from a foxhole in Europe that war was terrible and frightening beyond words.

President Wilson's words blared out. "The right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have carried nearest our hearts."

"Come on." Stephen took her hand and they rushed down the stairway. Bus boys arrayed in flashing red and gold braided suits greeted her. Crystal chandeliers twinkled gaily about the lavishly decorated lobby of the hotel, accenting the deep red and gold drapes and rich mahogany furniture in the lobby.

The doorman opened the outside doors of the Grand Hotel; a gust of cold air greeted them. Snow lined the newly shoveled walkways. The horses' neighs and the tinkling of sabers clashing against the soldiers' stirrup irons mingled with the cheers of the crowd.

A regiment of the cavalrymen rode before them, the insignia of the crossed swords displayed on their sleeves and cavalry blankets. "How dashing." Ruby squealed with delight. "I can envision that gallant Rough Rider Franklin Long there among them."

"Far better it is to dare mighty things…even though checkered by failure," Stephen said, quoting Theodore Roosevelt. "The United States became a world power because of the Rough Riders when America defeated Spain in 1898."

"Ev'ry heart beats true under the red, white and blue."

The horses nodded their fine heads, and their flowing manes caught the sunlight and glistening snow, as they pranced forward as proudly as the foot soldiers in the snow that had fallen last evening and this morning.

"Where there's never a boast or brag."

Stephen's eyes gleamed brightly. "See them, son, I wish for one month with these brave men, just for the experience, the elation of being a small part of this history we are now watching march before us."

"Be careful what you ask." One bystander had overheard her husband's remarks. "My son will be unable to purchase another person in his place because of this new law." A plush mink hat covered the attractive lady's powdered forehead. Her thick reddish-brown fur swept her form from neck to boots.

Ruby turned. "I'm so sorry. My husband wants to fight, but he's too sick and past the legal age of thirty to go."

"Sick? He's walking, isn't he?" Her angry eyes stared back at Ruby. "If this war continues more than a few years, you'll see how sick the enlistment office thinks he is. So, your husband is…?"

"Forty-two."

"Well, there's talk about extending the legal age to forty-five."

Ruby pulled on her husband's coat sleeve. "Why would President Wilson sign that into law?" she whispered.

"President Wilson will only do what he must to keep Americans safe." His voice grew louder, she suspected so the lady next to them could clearly hear. "Remember what he said when the crowd below his oval office had applauded after he agreed to a declaration of war?"

Try as she could, she didn't remember. "Was it important?"

"'My message…was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud that.'" Stephen looked out at the marching soldiers, glassy eyed. "Such fine outstanding men each and every one. No, President Wilson will only request my service if he must. Americans want the fighting over there in Europe, than to face our foe on American soil. We want those trenches in France and Flanders, far from our shores. Freedom is never without a price." He touched her nose. "Our young men are willing and eager to do what we cannot."

"But should old acquaintance be forgot...keep your eyes on the grand old flag."

She pressed closer to him. Wishing she could give him her health

and grant his wish. He had sacrificed all he owned for her and William. "Knowing you, you'll hide the fact you are ill in order to ride in that cavalry regiment." She wagged her finger in front of his face. "Remember what happened to Lieutenant Franklin Long?"

"Have you?" He laughed. "I seriously doubt we have seen the last of that good man." He drew her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Shall we purchase our tickets for tomorrow's train?"

"No, you mustn't," the woman's voice vibrated with emotion. She dotted her eyes. Her embroidered handkerchief was moist.

"We—" a chain of coughs followed. Noting his flushed face, Ruby reached in her pocket for the pills Doctor Luke had given her. "Go inside and take two with some water. I can walk to the train station and get the tickets."

Stephen waved her words aside, wiped his mouth with a fresh handkerchief, and popped in a Luden's Cough Drop. "My mouth was dry, must be the elevation, don't worry."

"I, but," the lady fluttered her handkerchief toward the Grand Hotel. "The porter said the railroad crew just tunneled through a large drift."

Stephen nodded. "He told me that Amarillo's never seen a storm of this magnitude."

The woman dabbed at her eyes again. "True, and this morning I overheard one of the workers on the railroad crew tell the engineer that they hadn't been able to clear all the track, and the engineer said headquarters was aware of this. Said the passenger car could become a steel death trap for those foolish enough to ride the iron horse tomorrow."