

# LORI WICK

## PROMISE ME *T*OMORROW

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## **PROMISE ME TOMORROW**

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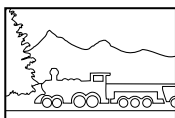
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# 1

## ***Manitou, Colorado*** ***April 10, 1897***

Katherine Alexa Taggart, “Rusty” to family and friends alike, gently took the little girl’s hand within her own and smiled as she was watched with worshipful eyes.

“We’re going to be late if we don’t hurry,” she urged the child. Even when rushed, Rusty moved with grace and poise. She wasn’t a tall girl, just a hair over five feet, and her frame was on the slim side. Her hair, a dark shade of her nickname, hung rich and full down her back. At times it seemed too heavy for her slender neck.

“Oh, Rusty, there you are,” her aunt, Sammy O’Brien, said as soon as she saw her in the hallway outside the girls’ bedroom. “Is Tara ready for bed?”

“Yes, ma’am. I knew we’d be running late, so I told her a story while she was in the bathtub.”

“Good thinking. Come along, Tara,” Sammy bade kindly. The little girl tugged on Rusty’s hand, who bent to hug her and to give as well as receive a kiss. She watched as the little girl skipped off to bed for the night. Rusty peeked into the large room that held 30 beds with almost as many orphan girls. A few called greetings to her and many waved. Rusty waved in return and blew a few kisses before turning away.

She was tired enough to seek her own sleep but thought it might help to have a little dinner. Knowing she was finished for the day, she made her way downstairs, past the kitchen and huge dining room and toward the private living quarters that she shared with her aunt, uncle, and three cousins, Eileen, Nolan, and Renny O'Brien. Surprisingly, her Uncle Paddy was already there.

"The boys must have settled in rather swiftly tonight," she commented.

"Yes, they did. I told them Grandpa O'Brien is coming to visit next month and that now would be an excellent time to work on their best behavior."

Paddy spoke of his own father, Cormac O'Brien, who lived and worked as a mine surveyor in Georgetown. Paddy and Sammy had met in Georgetown, and although some years separated them, they had attended the same one-room schoolhouse. Eventually the couple began dating and were married when Sammy turned 18. They now ran the Fountain Creek Orphanage for Children, living on the premises as a matter of course.

The orphanage was a huge two-story structure that had dormitory rooms for at least 60 children and enough smaller bedrooms to hold 15 staff members. The private living quarters, sporting a small kitchen, dining area, and parlor, along with two bedrooms, were downstairs at the rear of the mansion. Rusty shared the larger of these two rooms with her three cousins, while Paddy and Sammy occupied the other. There was room for Rusty in one of the upstairs staff rooms, but most of the time everyone preferred the living arrangements the way they were. Rusty's hands now joined Paddy's, and the two of them set the table. Eileen, the oldest of the children at 14, came to help as well.

"How was school today?" her cousin asked her.

"It was okay." She sounded rather down as she placed forks and knives on the table. "I missed one of my spelling words."

"Which one was it?" her father wanted to know.

The young teen hesitated. "Gramps would howl if he knew." She sighed dramatically. "It was Ireland."

Paddy laughed in delight. "We won't tell," he assured her, but he continued to chuckle.

"It's not funny, Papa." Eileen's tone was aggrieved. "I don't know what I could have been thinking."

He was still laughing when Sammy bustled in.

"Well, this sounds fun," she commented as she lent her hands to the work. She took a casserole from the warming drawer in the oven and placed it on the table. Rusty quickly set a bowl of applesauce next to it.

"It is fun," Paddy replied after he greeted her with a kiss, "but I'm afraid Eileen wouldn't appreciate my telling."

"Telling what?" 11-year-old Nolan asked as he came in. He was the middle of the O'Brien children. His brother, Renny, who was 10, followed just behind him.

"A private joke," his cousin supplied for him, crossing her eyes in his direction. Nolan crossed his eyes right back and asked, "What are we having tonight?" He was willing to let the joke go as long as he could eat.

"Cheese and mushroom casserole," his mother informed him. "Are your hands and face washed?"

The young boy nodded.

"And you, Renny?"

"Yes, Mother," he answered as he took his place at the table.

"I think Renny has the right idea," Paddy commented, and the rest of the family joined him by finding their respective seats. There wasn't an abundance of room, but they all fit. A moment after they were seated, and without needing

instruction, every head bowed as Paddy thanked God for the food.

“Father in heaven, You have blessed us so greatly and we thank You. So many people go without food, but our plates will be full tonight. Thank You for each person around this table and for the wonderful children sleeping upstairs. We ask You to find homes for every one and to bless our care of them until that time. In Your holy name I pray. Amen.”

Dishes were passed and plates were filled in the minutes that followed, and for a time everyone worked in silence. Renny had a little trouble with his knife, so his mother helped him cut the bread efficiently. The family was eating in no time at all. At an age when he was often hungry, Nolan finished before the rest of the family, putting his fork aside and finishing off the milk in his glass. He then looked to his sister.

“Hey, Eileen,” he said conversationally, “did you tell Papa that you spelled Ireland wrong today?”

Eileen could do nothing but groan, her forehead dropping into her hand. Paddy sailed off into laughter again.



“Did I tell you I received a letter from Chase today?”

“I don’t think so.” Sammy sat on the edge of their bed, Paddy already under the covers. She was working on her nails with a long file and now looked at him. “I hope nothing is wrong.”

“No, not at all. He wanted to know how things were going and if he could help with anything. He reminded me that he helped take children to their new homes about two years ago. He didn’t come right out and say it, but I can tell he’d like to be asked again.”

When Sammy looked at him, his eyes were on the ceiling. “You’re thinking, aren’t you, Paddy?”

"Yes, I am," he admitted. "I know Rusty can handle the 'people end' of placement. In fact, I think she's better than some of the others who have been doing it far longer, but this placement is in Kurth. I worry about the travel and her safety." He paused and said gently, "She's been very sheltered, you know."

"Yes, and I'm glad she has been, but I know what you mean."

For a moment husband and wife stared at each other.

"I can't remember," Sammy continued. "Did Chase take the children on his own or did he escort one of our women?"

"Let's see," Paddy replied thoughtfully. "He escorted one group and then took children on his own one other time—two little boys it was."

"So you think he would be open to taking Rusty and the Parks children?"

"Yes, I do."

Sammy nodded. "What did Rusty say when you told her she'd be taking them? Was she excited?"

"I didn't tell her. I was about to call her into the office when Lane brought me the mail. After reading Chase's letter, I thought this might be a better plan."

"Well, it won't make any difference to Rusty; she'll be thrilled no matter what."

"It's settled then," Paddy declared. "I'll tell Rusty in the morning and get a letter off to Chase."

They said nothing more on the subject, but husband and wife both thought about it. Sammy climbed into bed and moved close to share a kiss with her husband. As her head settled on the pillow, she wondered what Rusty would make of Chase McCandles. On the other side of the bed, Paddy was wondering if it was really wise to put Chase at Rusty Taggart's mercy.



"Do you remember the people who were here, the man and woman who talked with you?" Sammy asked Lizzy and Thomas Parks.

Thomas nodded in the affirmative, but Lizzy looked uncertain. In truth, Thomas was the younger of this brother-sister team, but he had more confidence because he remembered less of the horrendous situation from which they'd been rescued.

"The woman had black hair and gave you each an apple," Rusty supplied. "Do you remember that?"

Lizzy nodded, but the smile that went all the way to Thomas' eyes at the mention of the apple did not come to Lizzy's face.

"Their names are Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, and they want you to come live with them," Sammy said gently. "They want you to come and be their little boy and girl."

"For all time?" Thomas asked.

"That's right. They live on a ranch and have horses and cows. Mr. Davidson just wrote and said to remind you that they have a dog and a cat who just had kittens."

Sammy fell quiet for a moment, giving the children time to take things in, but Rusty plunged on.

"I'll be going with you," she said enthusiastically.

"Oh, Aunt Rusty." This was the first Lizzy had spoken. "You'll be staying with us!"

Rusty looked uncertainly at the pleasure in the little girl's eyes and then to her aunt, knowing she should have remained quiet. But Sammy's look was patient and her voice gentle as she addressed the children again.

"Aunt Rusty will be going with you, Lizzy, and she'll stay with you for a few days, but she won't stay for always. I will tell you that if you're too frightened to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, you may come home with Rusty."

Sammy and Paddy didn't give this option to all the children they placed, but Lizzy's case was different. Lizzy still remembered



being locked in a room for days and fed only when someone remembered.

"How does that sound?" Sammy asked.

"I want to go," Thomas replied eagerly. "I want to see the kittens."

"And you shall," Sammy assured him. "How about you, Lizzy? Do you want to see the kittens?"

She nodded shyly, a small smile on her face.

"Will we ride the train?" Thomas had to know.

"Yes," Rusty returned. "Won't it be fun? We'll ride the train from here to Colorado Springs, where we'll be met by Mr. McCandles. He's going to escort us for the rest of the train ride and then to the Davidsons. They live on a ranch in Kurth. We'll even be riding horses or taking a wagon. Doesn't that sound grand?"

Rusty's enthusiasm was contagious, and even Lizzy's eyes began to show some interest.

"Now—" Sammy's voice brought them back to business, but you couldn't help but hear the satisfaction in her tone. She and Rusty had just prayed together about this meeting, and her heart was very light over how well it had gone. "You will both go with Aunt Rusty and start to gather your things. You'll be here through the weekend and part of next week, and then you and Aunt Rusty will leave on Thursday. How does that sound?"

"Can I take my slate?" Lizzy asked uncertainly. She loved school and her teacher, Miss Linley, and somehow her little heart knew she would not see that lady again. Taking the slate that she used every day in school was very important to her.

"*May* I take my slate," Sammy automatically corrected. "And yes, you certainly may. In fact, if I know Aunt Rusty the way I think I know her, she'll have it right handy on the train with her so you can play games on the way."

Rusty's huge smile told them they would do just that, and knowing they would be welcome, both children put their arms around her. Watching them, Sammy felt something catch in her throat. This was not a job where one could wear her heart on her sleeve, but Sammy knew of no one who had a better way with children than her niece. To a child, she was nearly worshiped by the little ones in the orphanage. It probably helped that she was lovely to look at, but it was more than that. Rusty's manner was so genuine, her touch so light and gentle. When she spoke, she looked each child right in the eye. Added to all of this was the fun. Rusty was never without a game or a funny face, and the children were naturally drawn to her.

The Parks children gave Sammy a hug as well, and Rusty took them to find a spare case in the attic. Sammy stayed in place. Fetching a case was such an ordinary task, but Sammy didn't need to be with them to know that they would soon be shrieking with laughter if Rusty had her way.