

LORI WICK

*Cassidy*



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## *About the Author*

LORI WICK is a  
multifaceted author of Christian fiction.  
As comfortable writing period stories  
as she is penning contemporary works,  
Lori's books (6 million in print)  
vary widely in location and time period.  
Lori's faithful fans consistently put her series  
and standalone works on the bestseller lists.  
Lori and her husband, Bob,  
live with their swifly growing family  
in the Midwest.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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### **CASSIDY**

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## § CHAPTER ONE §



*Token Creek, Montana Territory  
June 1880*

CASSIDY NORTON, THE PROPRIETRESS of Token Creek Apparel, adjusted the shoulder of the brightly patterned dress she'd been working on and then stepped back a little.

"How is that, Mrs. Potts?" she asked the woman wearing the dress.

Mrs. Potts frowned into the full-length mirror and said, "It's still crooked."

Cassidy could not see what the woman was talking about, but she stepped forward to make another adjustment. She pinned and shifted and stepped back again, her brows raised in question.

"That's better," Mrs. Potts conceded. Cassidy smiled. She hadn't moved it much, but she had learned early on that pleasing the customer was paramount to her business.

"How is the waist?"

"It's good," the woman said, but she was still frowning into the mirror. Her face cleared enough to ask, "When will it be done?"

"In the morning."

"Not today?" she questioned, the frown returning.

"I thought you needed it Friday," Cassidy reminded her.

"I do. I just hoped to have it a few days early."

"Wednesday morning *is* a few days early," Cassidy said sweetly. Mrs. Potts actually smiled. "It is, isn't it?"

Cassidy laughed a little, and the other woman shook her head.

"If all of your customers are like me, Cassie, I don't know how you keep from losing your mind."

"I love my customers," Cassidy said sincerely, helping Mrs. Potts out of the dress. "You included."

"I'm glad to hear it. God was smiling on Token Creek the day you came to town."

Cassidy thanked her with a laugh, made a few notes about some mending the woman wanted done, and then saw her out to the front of the shop. She wasted no time settling back at the sewing machine, finishing Mrs. Potts' dress in less than an hour. Cassidy was happy with the results and thought Mrs. Potts would be as well. She knew the other woman would return in the morning and pay in full. Mrs. Potts was one of her best customers.

That dress done, Cassidy was free to work on the other projects waiting for her attention.



"Hi, Brad," Cassidy said, greeting Brad Holden, the tall cowboy who had just stepped into her shop an hour after lunch.

"Hey, Cass," he said quietly, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Something I can do for you?"

"Maybe," he said cryptically, his eyes shifting around the rather feminine establishment with its small covered chairs, lacy curtains, and bolts of fabric.

Cassidy smiled and waited. Brad's eyes roamed the room a bit and then met hers. His own smile broke out when he saw the amusement in Cassidy's eyes.

“All right,” he chuckled, his voice resigned. “I knew I would catch it if I came in here.”

Cassidy laughed but repeated her offer.

“Yes,” Brad said this time. “I want something for Meg—something pretty and comfortable.”

“Is she already uncomfortable in that dress we remade?” Cassidy asked, frowning a little. She had just helped her friend, who seemed to increase in size daily, open the waistline on one of her calico dresses.

“No, I want something soft and lightweight that she can sleep in. She’s not getting much rest right now.”

“I think I have just the thing,” Cassidy offered, not mentioning that she slept in the same fabric she brought from the shelf to hold out for his inspection. “You have your choice of colors.”

Brad looked down at the sheer, lightweight fabrics in white, pale yellow, blue, and green. He fingered the very fine cotton, noting its near transparency. His gaze shifted to Cassidy’s eyes.

“Perfect?” she asked.

“Yes. Can you make something for her? I think you must know her size.”

“Certainly. If I have time, I’ll bring it out tomorrow.”

“You can do it that fast?”

“Unless something unexpected comes up, it shouldn’t be a problem. Do you want to surprise her?”

Brad smiled before saying yes. “Leave it in your buggy, and I’ll find it.”

Cassidy laughed a little. He looked a bit like a small, mischievous boy just then. Brad didn’t linger. Cassidy walked him to the door and then stood on the boardwalk in front of her shop and watched him put his hat back on and head in the direction of his aunt’s house.



Brad’s long legs covered the distance to Jeanette Fulbright’s house.

Jeanette was his mother's sister and lived in one of Token Creek's finest homes. She was a widow with more energy than five women and one of the most generous people Brad knew.

Brad was in his aunt's yard when he realized his brother, Trace, was on the porch, meaning he'd just finished his own errands. Trace waited to go in until Brad joined him. Brad was older by twenty-one months, but they were often mistaken for twins. They were both tall, lean cowboys with dark hair, beautiful brown eyes, and mischievous smiles. They owned the Holden Ranch, a good-sized spread outside of town.

"You get done at the livery?" Brad asked.

"Yes. How's Cassie?"

"Fine."

"What did you need?" Trace asked.

"Something for Meg." Brad frowned a little. "She's not sleeping much."

Trace nodded, and the two men turned toward the door, not bothering to knock but slipping inside to greet Heather, one of the two women who worked for Jeanette.

"Well, boys," Heather said, smiling, a vase of flowers in her hands, "this is a nice surprise."

"Hello, Heather," Trace greeted. "Is our mother up?"

"She is. All settled on the porch. I'll tell your aunt you're here."

Brad thanked her and then followed his brother to the large sun-porch, technically a small conservatory but now "home" to Brad and Trace's mother.

Nine years earlier, Theta Holden had been severally beaten by her husband. Normally Brad and Trace's father was not a drinker, but one Saturday night Wes Holden came home very drunk and attacked his wife. The boys were still in their teens and woke to find their mother barely alive and their father hung over. It was obvious what had happened, and they had rushed her to town for help, leaving their father to fend for himself.

It turned out to be the last day they saw him. By the time their mother had been seen to and made comfortable at her sister's, their father was gone from the ranch. Had she died, he would have been wanted for murder, but Theta clung to life for almost two weeks before seeming to make a full recovery, at least physically. What no one expected was the change in her mental state, the one that could be seen in her glazed-over eyes. Theta never soiled her clothing and would eat when fed, but Heather dressed her and saw to nearly every need. She didn't speak or show any interest in books or songs. Unless urged to do so, she never moved from her chair. Few could break through the stare that had become normal. Some days having her sons visit seemed to agitate her, and they could not stay. This morning, she was completely unaware of them, but the boys still sat down and spoke to her.

"Meg was tired and decided not to come, but she'll probably see you next week," Brad told his mother, always talking as though she'd been a part of their life when in fact he'd met Meg after his mother's attack and she'd not been at the wedding. Brad added, "The baby is due in about two months, and Meg isn't feeling sick anymore."

The brothers looked at each other. They were used to this, and although it was not what they wanted, they were both glad to see their mother.

"We branded all day yesterday," Trace put in, his voice soft and deep. "The herd is growing strong, doing well."

For a moment it looked as though she would turn to Trace, but she kept staring out the window. Trace, the brothers had figured out one day, sounded the most like their father, and that was not always a good thing.

"Good morning." Jeanette appeared, hugging the nephews who were more like sons and bending to kiss her sister's cheek.

"How are you, Theta?" she asked as she always did. "It's a beautiful day."

"How are you, Jeanette?" Trace asked. "Not working today?"

“Since Cassie takes Wednesday afternoons off, and I’m at the shop all day, I take Tuesdays off.”

“At that rate you’ll be a woman of leisure in no time,” Trace teased, and Jeanette laughed.

Jeanette’s husband had been a very successful banker, and he’d left her in considerable comfort. Indeed, she still owned the bank. The part-time help she gave Cassidy with her sewing was not done for money but to get out more. For years she’d taken care of Theta on her own, but when it seemed obvious that her sister didn’t know who was seeing to her needs, she hired Heather. It had been a good match.

“How’s Meg?” Jeanette asked.

“Other than being a little tired, she’s doing well.”

“Why don’t you come in for her birthday next week, and I’ll put on a meal? Whom shall we invite?”

While Jeanette and Brad talked about this, Trace watched his mother. She didn’t look bad—a little thin, but that wasn’t the problem. It still hurt his heart that there was nothing left of the mother he had known. Her life had never been easy—his father had been a hard man to understand—but she had made a home for them. She had been constant, hardworking, and cheerful, and she’d loved her sons with every fiber of her being. She had taught them what the Bible said from Trace’s earliest memory. Their father liked to go into town on Saturday night and not come home, so there wasn’t always a wagon to get them to church. But that hadn’t changed their mother’s desire to teach them. And she didn’t wait for Sunday. Any evening their father left them alone she would take out her Bible and share with them the way God had saved her and what He expected her to do with her life.

It was no surprise that both boys believed the Bible and what it said about salvation in God’s Son. Their mother had not been a part of their daily lives for a long time, but they still felt her influence on them. Both men took their faith seriously, and when Brad met Meg,

a woman who was serious about wanting a godly man in her life, it wasn't long before they fell in love.

"You ready to go?" Brad asked, surprising Trace.

"Sure," Trace agreed, dragging his mind back to the moment.

"Are you all right?" Jeanette asked.

"Just missing my mother," Trace admitted honestly, and Jeanette hugged him again.

The men took their leave a short time later.



"Is there a problem, Mrs. Ferguson?" Cassidy asked the woman who had the shop next to her. Cassidy had found that lady standing out front, frowning into the sky.

"A hornet's nest," Mrs. Ferguson answered, drawing Cassidy's eyes to the corner of the building.

"I'll get my broom," Cassidy said without delay, and the women went to work.



Back at the ranch, Brad saw to the wagon and team, which meant Trace was the first one into the kitchen. He greeted his sister-in-law, who sounded completely normal, but Trace could see that all was not well.

"You've been crying," he said quietly.

"You can tell?" Meg asked.

"Not at all," Trace swiftly denied, his brows rising. "Just a wild guess."

Meg laughed, but it was short-lived.

"If you can tell, Brad will notice."

"Why don't you want Brad to know?"

"He'll know I didn't take a nap."

Trace smiled. It was an ongoing battle between husband and wife,

and in truth he found it endearing. His brother was trying to take care of Meg and baby her a little while Meg was insistent that she couldn't get everything done if she slept during the day.

It looked as though Meg was going to say something else just then, but they both heard the door. Giving her an amused but compassionate smile, Trace slipped away. Brad was in the kitchen a moment later.

"Hi," Brad greeted his wife before he kissed her. He looked into her eyes and saw just what Trace had seen.

"How did it go in town?" Meg asked.

"Fine. Did you nap?" Brad wasted no time in asking.

"No."

"Are your ankles swollen?"

Meg looked at him with a certain measure of exasperation and said, "Brad, I want to ask you about your mother and Jeanette."

"You can do that over supper," Brad said, having taken her hand. He led her to the living room and pointed to the sofa. "Sit down and put your feet up."

"I think I'll be all right."

Brad smiled and put his arms around her. The action was so tender that tears threatened, but Meg swallowed them back.

"Thank you for working so hard," he spoke softly in her ear, "and trying to make everything just right, but you have to take care of you."

Without warning Brad bent and lifted Meg in his arms, placing her carefully on the sofa. She wasn't lying completely back, but her feet were up, and if she put her head back, it would rest on one of the pillows she'd stitched by hand.

Meg tried one last tactic. "It's almost time to start supper."

"I'll be back for you in less than an hour. Even if you fall asleep, I won't let you stay out too long."

The look she gave him was slightly mutinous, and seeing it, Brad's gaze shifted to her legs. He lifted the hem of her dress enough

to see her bare feet. There was little distinction between her calves and ankles. By the time he met his wife's gaze, his look had become stern.

"Don't you move," Brad said quietly. "I'll be back in an hour."

Meg didn't argue this time. She worried about things she wanted to get done until she fell asleep.



Cassidy closed and locked her shop door at the end of the workday and turned toward the Bank of Token Creek. It was her habit to close before the bank shut its doors for the night so she could make deposits she felt would be securer in the bank's safe.

Not even looking at the teller windows, she went to the manager's desk, smiling when the manager saw her and stood.

"Hello, Cassie," Chandler Di Fiore said, smiling in genuine pleasure at the sight of her.

"Hi, Chandler. How are you?"

"Fine. Were you busy today?"

"Steady all day. Just the way I like it. How about here?"

"A little quiet," Chandler said, counting the currency Cassidy had given him and writing the amount in her bankbook.

Cassidy took the book back when he handed it to her and studied the last total. She was doing fine with her expenses but tended to worry about the future. Having become lost in the facts and figures in her mind, it took a moment to realize that Chandler was watching her.

"I'm sorry," Cassidy said with a laugh.

"Did I make a mistake?" Chandler asked, a teasing glint in his eye.

"Not at all. I was just making sure I had figured right for the month."

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked, completely serious.

"Yes, Chandler, thank you."

"You're sure?" he asked, sincerely concerned.

“Yes,” Cassidy smiled as she spoke and began to turn to the door.

“Wait a minute.” Chandler stopped her. “Rylan had to cancel our men’s study tonight,” the banker said, speaking of their pastor. “Why don’t we go for a walk?”

“What time?” Cassidy asked, liking the idea.

They decided when Chandler would come and get her, and Cassidy went on her way. For some reason Tuesday evenings tended to be lonely. Cassidy’s steps were light because she knew that would not be the case tonight.



Meg woke up with Brad’s hands on her face and hair. He touched her gently, calling her name as she drifted back from deep sleep.

“Oh, Brad,” she whispered. “Did I fall asleep?”

“You must have.”

“I was cross with you,” she said.

“I was cross right back,” he admitted.

They looked at each other for a few minutes, and then Meg struggled to sit up. Brad helped her, and that was when she smelled supper cooking.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Only an hour, but Trace said he’s starving.”

Meg laughed a little, standing and stretching her back before starting toward the kitchen.

Meg and Brad had been married for only two years, so the men both knew their way around this kitchen. For that reason, the three of them fell to preparing the meal as naturally as breathing. Within twenty minutes, they were sitting down, Brad leading in prayer.

“Thank You, Father, for this food and the blessings we’ve enjoyed this day. Thank You for this family and this home. Please bless our efforts with the ranch and help us to remember that it’s all from You. I ask that You take care of this baby inside Meg and that You

take care of her in the weeks to come. Please provide a godly wife for Trace and help each of us to honor You in our lives. In Your Son's name I pray. Amen."

Both Meg and Trace echoed the amen, appreciating Brad's honest faith before the Lord. They passed bowls and began the meal. Not surprisingly, beef was on the menu, but so was a huge bowl of potatoes, early corn, baking powder biscuits with honey, and for dessert, a lavishly frosted spice cake.

"So how is your mother?" Meg asked the moment their plates were full.

"The same," Trace answered.

"Did that bother you today?" Brad asked, having remembered his brother's brief conversation with Jeanette.

"It did. I never just sit and look at her. We always try to talk to her, and today I realized how much I miss having her contribute to the conversation."

"But she wasn't agitated?" Meg checked. "You got to stay and speak with her?"

"Yes," Trace nodded. "It was nice in that way."

"She moved a little when Trace spoke," Brad remembered. "I still think she hears Pa. Oh," he continued, "Jeanette wants us in next week, Friday night, to celebrate your birthday. She wants to know whom you want to invite."

"Can I tell her on Sunday?" Meg asked.

"That's what I told her you would say," Brad said, smiling at his wife.

"I hate being predictable," Meg said, smiling back.

"I'll take predictable any time," Brad teased her dryly before the three began to discuss the guests Meg would want at the party.



The entrance to the apartment above Cassidy's shop was accessed from an outside stairway. Chandler climbed these outside stairs at

about seven o'clock and knocked. Cassidy came right to the door, sweater in hand in case it cooled off before they got home.

"Ready?" Chandler asked politely; he was always polite.

"Yes. Is it very cold?"

"Not yet, but that sun is dropping."

The two started off, talking companionably about their jobs for the first block. Then Cassidy asked Chandler about his mother. She knew he'd heard from his family, who lived in the East, that her health had been in question.

"They think it's her heart," Chandler confided, having just gotten another letter from his sister. "She gets tired easily, but her spirits are good."

"That's good to hear. I can't remember, Chandler. Does your family share your faith in Christ?"

"Yes," Chandler answered, smiling at a memory. "I was seven and stole some money from my father's drawer. I came to Christ when my father talked to me about how serious my sin was, and how I would answer to God for all sins that were not covered in Him. I remember how familiar the words were, so I know I'd heard about salvation before, but I had never made that commitment myself."

"But you did that day?"

"Yes. My father had already punished me for stealing and then lying about it, but later, when the tears were dry, he told me he feared for me and explained salvation. Even as a little boy, I knew a peace after I'd prayed. I knew it was real that day."

Cassidy smiled at him as they continued to walk. It was wonderful to hear his story. She had not come from a home that was as settled as Chandler's. For reasons that were almost too hard to think about, she had had no contact with them since moving to Token Creek.

"That's a thoughtful face," Chandler mentioned.

"Just thinking about families. You must miss yours."

"I do miss them. It's been more than two years since I visited. I'm thinking about going back for a visit in the fall."

“Who does your job at the bank when you’re away?” Cassidy asked, and the two talked about that for a while. Before it grew too dark to continue, they had covered myriad topics. At the end of the walk, Cassidy climbed the stairs feeling very content. It had been a very satisfying way to spend an evening and gave her much to write about.

Not many minutes later, she was ready for bed, her summer nightgown in place, her blonde hair hanging down her back, and her writing paper in hand.

*Mrs. Ferguson found a hornets’ nest outside her shop today, Cassidy wrote to her mother. Remembering how you always handled them, I got the broom and then did my best not to get ‘kissed.’ It was in the front of the shop, and customers were scarce for a while, although entertained I’m sure, but no one was stung and the nest is gone.*

Cassidy went on to tell her mother about the customers of the day and her walk with Chandler. The *good-looking banker*, as Cassidy liked to call him. She didn’t try to write too much, but as always her heart felt lighter just from sharing.

The letter done, she folded it carefully and reached for the carved wooden box that sat on her bedside table. This letter, along with all the others she’d written to her mother, went safely inside because it wasn’t possible to send it. The task done and her heart prayerful, Cassidy settled down to sleep.



“You’re drooping, love,” Brad said to Meg, who sat next to him on the davenport.

“I’m tired.”

“Go to bed.”

“I don’t want to *go* to bed; I want to *be* in bed.”

Brad laughed at this but knew how true it was. Sometimes climbing the stairs and readying for bed was the hardest part of the day.

"I'm going," Meg said, pushing to her feet and telling the men goodnight.

Trace surfaced from the book he was reading long enough to tell his sister-in-law goodnight. Brad told his wife he'd be right behind her before looking down at the account book he had been poring over.

"What are you frowning about?" Trace asked, having noticed his face.

"Just thinking."

"Are we in trouble?"

"No," Brad said, but he didn't sound as convincing as Trace would have liked. "I'm for bed," the older Holden said as he closed the ledger and rose to follow his wife.

Trace went back to his book, but only for a moment. Brad had him curious. He soon set the novel aside to study the ranch accounts.