

Rachel's Journey



Mary S.
McGuire



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She knelt down in front of the rocker placing her hands on his knees, "Jeb, I love you so, but I'm the one that must decide what's best for me. There are decisions each of us must make for himself. Things that can't be dictated by another person no matter how precious they are to you. This is one of those choices."

"Rach, you don't need to work outside our home. Ranching should be a full time commitment for us both." Drawing a breath, he added, "I have no debts and this trip will pay for more livestock if that's what bothering you. I want to take care of you."

"I know you do. It's not the money. I have some saved and there'll be more coming from the folks' property in Pennsylvania. I worked so very hard to become a doctor and there's such a need out here."

He rose and began pacing through the room. "Don't I have needs, too? It may sound ridiculous, but the thought of your examining another man is hard to swallow. Then softening his tone, he said, "Let's compromise. We'll wait until we get to the San Joaquin to decide just what we'll do. I want you, but I also want you to be happy."

For Jeb it was quite a compromise. Rachel couldn't believe what she heard. He had come so far but was it far enough?

What They Are Saying About Rachel's Journey

Mary S. McGuire's premiering novel of Rachel William's journey across the sweeping plains of America is filled with tenderness, honesty and heart.

On her way West as part of a marriage pool—an idea similar to a mail order bride—Rachel answers the call of destiny while fate and circumstance lead her on a path she could never have imagined and into the arms of a man who will fill her more than she ever dreamed.

Sara V. Olds

Author of Hanne's Farewell To Juarez

Wings

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by

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Dedication

To Gene, my beloved husband.

Preface

The problem of balancing family with a career is quite prevalent in modern society, but the problem has existed for decades in America. The determination of the pioneer woman going west, was in itself a difficult decision. However, without the basic support of an established family, a single woman faced almost insurmountable odds on her westward trek. Add to that, a professional background, and only the truly brave of heart could succeed in finding a satisfying place for herself. One with such a heart was Rachel Williams.

One

The Leaving

Rachel Williams, you're much too headstrong and independent for any man to marry. Ever! Alfonse Meyer's demeaning words reverberated in Rachel's mind as she knew they would for the coming months, and even years. Not that she loved this arrogant man, but rather she feared what he said might be all too true.

It was a warm April day in the small town of Four Corners, just east of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Rachel stood on her front porch enjoying the afternoon sun when she saw a visitor hurrying up her lane.

"Rachel, Rachel, the letter's come. It's here. Finally here," Iris called as she waved an envelope wildly over her head.

She greeted her blonde haired, blue eyed cousin with a warning. "Slow down, Iris, or you'll fall. You know your leg can't stand much."

"Oh, I'm so excited." Iris panted with exertion. "Hurry! Read it out loud."

Despite Rachel's own emotions, she read the message slowly and clearly.

January 15, 1854

Dear Cousins and All,

I am doing well here in this new, sunny land. I hope my letter also finds you in good health and high spirits. My thoughts are with you often.

I am sending this by packet. The ship takes about three months so I pray it will reach you before summer.

Four other men and I have a special request. We have formed what we call a marriage pool to bring brides to us here. It is an ideal based on the sound principles civilizing the new frontier. As you know, many of us came with the yen for gold. We are wiser now and desire only a stable and happy family life. All of us are in a position to provide well for a wife and children. I can vouch for the character of these men involved in the pool.

Since you are acquainted with most of the women in and around Four Corners, I beg you to help us in our selection. I would like you to be one of the candidates. I also thought of our Cousin Iris who, though crippled, is lovely and has an abiding Christian faith. Hopefully, you can locate three other maiden ladies in the area who would be suitable for our new and exciting life.

I am enclosing a draft on the Bank of Boston for five hundred dollars to pay your traveling expenses. It is important you decide soon since the trip across country must begin as quickly as possible lest you be caught in the snows of the Sierras.

I am sending a message to Mr. Jeb Morgan alerting him to the fact that you may be joining his wagon train, which leaves from St. Joseph, Missouri, on May 10. We have the utmost confidence in him. Mr. Morgan is also bringing freight to Len Smith, one of the men in the pool, and owner of General Merchandise here in Garden Grove.

I know you have been giving this matter your greatest consideration, but now I need to know what you have decided. Please notify me of this decision as soon as possible by whatever means available. We will be counting the days until you answer. It is a leap of faith for all concerned. We pray for your safe journey.

Love,

Martin Williams

Your obedient servant and cousin.

P.S. Rachel, we are in great need of medical services. Please consider our offer in light of these needs also.

Rachel stood quietly holding the message in her hands for several minutes. Martin had written to her in just this same vein several times in the last two years, but this was the first time he had sent money or suggested a plan. She was surprised and apprehensive to make such a decision so quickly. She shook her head in disbelief. Yet, was it the hand of fate that had delivered this message at one of the most disappointing times of her life? Was this the second chance at the kind of life she truly wanted?

“Rachel, what shall we do? It’s all so exciting. I’m sure it is a great opportunity.” Iris trembled. “Can we go? Do you think someone would really want to marry me? Cousin Martin said I was pretty enough someone would want to marry me even with this gimp leg.”

"More than pretty, Iris. Fine Christian girls like you are hard to find, especially in a new land." Rachel hugged her smaller cousin. "I'm nearly thirty years old. An old maid by anyone's count."

"You'll be snapped up in a minute with those auburn curls of yours and tall statuesque build. Pa always says we Williams are lookers. Just because we haven't married yet, doesn't mean we're not desirable. You're so smart, too. And look at all you've done for the people here."

"That's just it. This is our home. It will be so hard to leave here." Even as she spoke these words, the phrase *second chance* kept running through her mind. "I do have a longing for a child every time I place a newborn babe in its mother's arms—" she broke off her recitation, for she hated to reveal her innermost feelings, even to Iris.

"I know how you feel. This is my only chance to marry and have children. Women have to be in short supply for someone to accept a wife with a bad limp."

Rachel smiled at the girl's fair upturned face, framed with blonde curly hair and set off by the brightest of blue eyes. "You just need your opportunity like everyone else."

"Then you would really consider Martin's proposal?"

"Yes, I think I will. Dr. Henry told me his grandson is replacing me in the practice, and Alfonse has stopped coming to call..." Rachel's voice faltered. "The trip itself will be extremely difficult, but under the circumstances it might just be worth it."

"Who else are you going to ask to go with us?"

"I thought about Marie."

"Marie Lyle?"

"Yes."

"But what about little Jimmy? How would we explain him?"

"Why would we need to explain him?"

"An illegitimate child always has to be explained, Rachel."

"Perhaps, but remember, California is a land of new beginnings. For everyone. No one would know he was born out of wedlock."

"It's all so full of adventure. The folks will never believe it. Only I can't imagine leaving them, especially not Pa." Iris lowered her voice.

"On your way home, please stop by the sewing shop and ask Marie to come see me after supper."

Rachel stood on the porch watching Iris leave. The sun was warm on her face as she spied a rabbit hiding in a clump of her neighbor's grass. The sky was blue and the apple tree was beginning to leaf out while the tulip bulbs she had planted last fall were starting to peek through. Pennsylvania was so beautiful in the spring—so full of the very essence of life, a life, ironically, which was proceeding so very well without her.

Rachel went inside and sat moving back and forth in Pa's rocker, the one he had fashioned out of rough-hewn oak, from a tree he had felled himself. The Regulator ticked quietly from the mantel while the wind caressed her cheeks and rustled the starched curtains at the open window. She picked up the family bible, a bible brought by her Grandfather Williams from England.

Inside the book she traced the family tree with her forefinger until she came to the line recording her birth and that of her sister, Nell. *Nell is carrying on the line, but how about me?* She had always hoped to marry but while she studied medicine, the eligible bachelors either married or moved away. Now, with her parents dead, she was very much alone.

Later, Rachel stirred up the fire and reheated a pot of stew she had left from her noon meal. The fire crackled, sending a cheery glow around the room. *Was all this talk of California preposterous? Wasn't the trip so fraught with danger it would be impossible with all of the deaths from cholera, accidents, and even Indian attacks? What about crossing the Sierras?* The very thought of the Donner Party sent a shiver down her spine.

Yet, she knew she would go. Her family had been pioneers and she was now willing to don that mantle herself.

Rachel finished putting up the supper things just as Marie and two-year-old Jimmy arrived. Jimmy, a blond-headed cherub, ran to Rachel who picked him up, carrying him into the kitchen for a cookie and glass of milk. Marie followed.

"Iris said you had something to talk to me about?"

"Yes, Cousin Martin sent this letter," Rachel said handing it to her. Every time she saw Marie she was in awe of the dark-haired girl's astounding beauty. Her skin was pale, smooth, and her features regular. Her eyes were hazel with specks of green that added a bit of mystery when they reflected a change in her mood.

"Would you and Jimmy like to go with us to the Joaquin Valley in California?"

"To live?"

Rachel nodded.

Without hesitation Marie answered, "You know we would, but are you sure we would be—well, how do you say it, accepted in California?"

"No one would have to know Jimmy was illegitimate. You could be a respected widow with a small son. California is a land of new beginnings," Rachel told Marie to assure her. "Jimmy is young but I would help you care for him on the trip."

"Thank you," Marie paused, then said, "I guess the Mortons would be glad to see us go, all right. But that's not the reason I'd go. It would be for Jimmy's sake, not mine." Tears welled in her eyes.

Jimmy clutched at Marie's skirts. "Mama sad?" he asked, looking up at her.

"I'm fine Jimmy. Run and play in the yard. Here's another cookie for you." After Jimmy left, Marie paced up and down, her heels hitting the wooden floor with a sharp, staccato beat.

She drew a long breath. "I was filled with rage that day I came to you for an examination to see if I was pregnant. You told me the first time I held my baby, I would feel less bitter.

You were right, you know. People might think I'm crazy, but Jimmy has been worth all the pain and the humiliation." She hesitated. "The only person I'll miss will be the Widder Brown. She's given us a home when nobody else would, and she gave me a job in her shop, too. My folks won't have anything to do with Jimmy and me, so I won't miss them much. Oh, maybe my mother a little." Both women were silent.

In an effort to change the mood, Rachel said, "You don't have to worry about the passage. Martin sent a draft to cover our traveling expenses."

Rachel was surprised to hear Marie answer, "I never have to worry about money. I haven't in a long, long time."

Rachel glanced at her quizzically but said nothing more about the matter. "You know, Marie, this calls for a celebration. I have a jug of corn 'likker' a farmer gave me in part payment of his bill. I've been wanting an excuse to try it. Now seems as good a time as any."

Rachel went into the back room returning with the bottle and poured two glasses. "Here's to California." They laughed as they both choked a little in response to the white heat of the alcohol. "If we are strong enough to drink this stuff, we're strong enough to make it to the Joaquin Valley."

"I have so much to do before we can leave. I have to make arrangements for my patients and sell the house. I guess Syd Morton down at the bank can take care of it."

Marie all but screamed. "Don't trust him. Don't let him handle any of your affairs. He's a snake."

Rachel shook her head. "What's wrong, Marie? I've never known him to be anything but honest."

"Take my advice and stay away from him." Marie looked at Rachel with concern.

"Well, I guess Iris's pa, Uncle Will, and my sister Nell, from Harrisburg, could handle the sale." Rachel shook her head.

After Marie had gone, Rachel tried to sleep, but there was too much to think about. Marie's harsh words were hardly a

soothing bedtime story. More over, she knew there was something more to Marie's tale, a missing piece. But Rachel realized that piece would be revealed only when, and if, Marie deemed the time right.

There were more immediate details to be handled. Not only was there a baby to care for on the trip, there was Iris, who would find it hard to leave her doting parents. How exhausting the trek would be for her. She must see Iris got special shoes with a padded lift for the left foot because her congenital hip would be forever with her. Shepherding an old maid and a worldly-wise girl with a child, would be a Herculean task. It would be a new beginning for all, but they each carried a burden from the past. Considering this aspect, she determined it would not be wise to search for any further marriage candidates to take along. The positive aspect to all this was, at least, the decision to go had been made.

As she sat musing, Rachel rubbed her chin, placing her forefinger in the cleft there. She thought of Pa, who also had a cleft and who told her not to complain about the distinctive mark. "Just put your forefinger in that indentation and make a wish." Right then and there she wished their journey to the Joaquin to be successful and bearable.

Laughing to herself she said aloud, "I wonder how the California men will react when they see us?" As if in answer to her own question, she poured herself one last glass of the whiskey before blowing out the lamp and finally going to sleep.

~ * ~

Rachel awoke the next morning to a loud pounding on her front door. She opened it to find Iris again standing on the front porch.

"Ma baked these muffins for your breakfast," she said, handing them to Rachel.

"Thanks. Come in. I'll make some coffee. I really need it."

She touched her head, "Ooh, what a headache!"

Iris spied the liquor jug and the two glasses sitting on the table. "Why, Rachel Williams, I do believe you've been

imbibing.” Iris grinned. “I’ve got some news. The people of Four Corners have decided to give us a going away party and dance. To honor us. Isn’t this great?”

“I guess so. You’ve already let them know we’re going, I suppose.” Rachel shook her head, laughing at Iris’s excitement. “Now go home and start deciding how much you can fit in one trunk, and one trunk only. Do bring your sketch pad. Artist that you are, you can record the trip for our children.”

“Children?”

“Yes, children.”

“Rachel, do you think I’ll have children?”

“I’m positive we all will. After all, those California men have their eyes on the future, and how can there be a future without children?”

“I’m going to name my first girl Rose, after Ma. She’d like that. In fact, maybe I can have a whole garden full of girls and name them Lily, Iris, Rose...”

“What about the boys?”

“Oh, their father can name them after his side or maybe like weeds from the garden—cocklebur or stinging nettle.” Iris giggled at her own humor.

“If I were ever to have a son, I’d name him Michael Williams after our great uncle. He’s the one who left a large endowment to the medical college in New York. Otherwise I wouldn’t have been one of the first two women ever to graduate from there.”

“That’s right, Rachel, I’d forgotten. Well, I’d best go. Don’t forget about the party. I’m so surprised at the people doing this for us.”

“I think they know they’ll miss us.” Rachel smiled at her cousin’s delight. “I’ll bet some of them, especially the women, would like to go with us even if it’s just a secret wish.”

“Is Marie going?”

“Yes, and no objections.”

"I understand. I've been thinking about it. It isn't just Marie. It's little Jimmy, too. I'm sorry I acted that way about them." She placed her arms around Rachel.

Watching Iris retreating down the lane, Rachel felt hopeful. Her head still ached and she had apprehensions, but she was more at peace now. Somehow she no longer felt torn like a two-headed Janus, part of her looking forward and part of her looking back. Now she was singularly facing directly into the future.

~ * ~

When Alfonse came by unexpectedly to squire Rachel to the dance, she was glad she had splurged on a new spring dress. It was pale green and complemented the reddish brown cast of her hair, which she wore swept up and held by two matching pearl combs. The sweetheart neckline was low enough to make heads turn without being truly risqué. The taffeta rustled tantalizingly when she walked beside him.

"Rachel, aren't you the fetching one tonight? I've never seen you like this," Al told her as they walked hand in hand to the brightly lit Pavilion.

Indeed, other eligible bachelors seemed to agree with Alfonse's assessment of her appearance, for she was much sought after as a dance partner. During intermission, she looked across at Iris sitting and talking with a handsome, dark-haired young man whom she didn't know and who was probably from another town. The music started and the young man led Iris to the dance floor. Rachel held her breath; but, Iris, smiling and confident, was able to keep pace with the slow waltz. Whoever he was, he seemed to help Iris perform almost normally.

To Rachel's amazement Marie and Brad Morton were dancing together. She commented to Al, "I can't believe it."

"What?"

"Marie and Brad together."

"Why not? It's an open secret he's Jimmy's father."

"Oh. Is it?" Rachel replied with an icy tinge to her voice.

"Come on, Rach. Don't worry about them. Let's take a walk so we can be to ourselves."

Alfonse led her to the other side of the Pavilion where there was a secluded bench. The scent of lilacs filled the air, and the moon shone softly on them while a cool breeze stirred the leaves on the elm sheltering them.

He took her hand. "Rachel, I wish you would reconsider going out west. It won't be the same without you here." He looked at her expectantly.

"Al, I know we've been keeping company, but you never seemed interested in any lasting ties. Why now?"

"I just realized how much I really want you to stay so we can spend more time together."

Trying to decipher his motives, Rachel asked, "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Well, yes, if that's what it takes." He stammered a little and reached for her.

"If *that's what* it takes for what?"

Rachel was caught off guard. Here was the very thing she had waited for, a proposal of marriage from Alfonse. Oh, how she had longed for this very moment. The irony was it came too late. It was a hollow victory.

A little voice inside her began to question his dialogue. Was it because he *had* to ask her to marry him? Would he support her because he *had* to? Would he love her only because he *had* to? Thirty years from now would they still be married only because they *had* to be? Rachel disliked the answer even though she knew it was true.

Rachel's throat felt dry as she said, "You don't sound very enthused."

"Hell, Rachel, you've never let me get close to you. What did you expect?" His voice rose to a rasping pitch. "You knew how badly I wanted you in my bed!"

So that was the problem. He only wanted one thing and she had never let him seduce her. Rachel boiled with anger as she pushed him away. "Well shame on me. Did you expect

intimacy without some kind of commitment from you?" The blood rushed to her head as she felt the palm of her hand make contact with his face. Her words gritted through tightly clenched teeth, "Get away from me, Alfonse. I never want to see you again! I'm going to California for a new and better life." She ran back toward the other side of the enclosure with his voice ringing mockingly in her ears. "Good riddance to you, Rachel Williams. You damned little tease. You're much too headstrong and independent for any man to marry. Ever! Do you hear me? Ever!"

Rachel shook with humiliation, the blood pounding through her temples. When she rounded the Pavilion, she saw Iris sitting alone. Her attentive young escort had left her side. The tempo of the music had changed and she sat watching the handsome young man twirling another girl to the faster beat of the *Virginia Reel*. Iris bent her head in an effort to conceal the tears, which Rachel knew were in her eyes.

Forgetting her own inner tumult, Rachel pulled the girl to her feet. "It's time to go, Iris."

Just then the music stopped. Rachel saw Marie and Brad standing in the middle of the dance floor. Silence fell over the crowd of fifty or so spectators as they backed away from the floor into the grass, leaving the arguing couple alone while they acted out their personal drama center stage. Both Marie's and Brad's voices rose in a crescendo of bubbling emotions.

"You abandoned Jimmy and me, Brad Morton, and now I'm supposed to forget that?" Marie screamed.

Finally Marie, small as she was, caught Brad off balance. She pushed mightily against him knocking him to the floor. "It's too late now, Mr. Bradford Morton. Jimmy and I are leaving for California. I aim to find a decent life for both of us."

There was a stunned silence followed by a ripple of laughter, running through the crowd. Several people clapped while an angry and humiliated Brad struggled to his feet.

Amazed and proud of Marie, Rachel made her way through the crowd to Marie's side. Thrusting her arm forth, she said, "It's time for the three of us to return home to our packing."

Returning to the Pavilion, Rachel pushed her way through the crowd to the three couples who had sponsored the dance and who were standing together watching the excitement.

Rachel extended her hand to each, "We do thank you for thinking of us." Then to ease the tension of the moment she added, "At least no one can say the evening has been dull."

~ * ~

It was the day before the women were to leave Four Corners. Rachel packed one trunk with her medical supplies and equipment. She mentally checked off the contents—quinine, laudanum, antiseptic, as well as scalpels, needles. She utilized every inch of space, packing each opening with bandages, lye soap, and cotton to protect the bottles of medicine. Everything was there except her medical books, which she would have shipped to her later. They were just too heavy to carry.

She carefully chose the most utilitarian clothing, though she did find room for her new green dress. She wanted to take something of her parents. She chose her father's pocket watch and chain. The gold was worn away and the face scratched, but it still ran. "Some day this will belong to my son." She smiled to herself. Then she went to the kitchen and pulled out a gingham apron. "I can still see Ma wearing this. Oh, I nearly forgot, I want Ma's wedding ring, too."

Rachel had just finished closing the lid on her trunk when she heard voices on the front lawn. "Rachel, come on out and join us for your picnic lunch."

Opening the door, she saw women laughing and talking while they spread tablecloths on the ground. Ginny Sprague, the school marm, said, "We called a long recess and all of us came to see you one last time." She hugged Rachel. "Hope you're hungry because we have a lot of fried chicken and pie for our favorite doctor."

"Ginny, I can't tell you how surprised I am. It's wonderful of you to do this."

"Well, we best get on with it. Recess can't last too long. Reverend, please ask the blessing so we can eat."

"Dear Heavenly Father, bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies. Guide and protect our beloved Rachel and her friends as they travel into the future. Amen."

The Pennsylvania sun shone warm on the group of seventy-five or more. Almost every woman of the town and surrounding area was there. When they finished eating, they filed past Rachel exchanging good-byes and well wishes. One woman said, "We have a lot of damned fool men around here who haven't swept you off your feet, Rachel Williams. Well, Pennsylvania's loss is California's gain."

Sophie Meyer added, "My brother Alfonse is probably the biggest fool of all. You wait, he'll be moaning and groaning about how you abandoned him."

Many of the children Rachel had delivered were among the group. "I was counting just last night and I have delivered better than a hundred babies in my time," Rachel stated with pride. "Thanks to God, I've had the best of luck with my deliveries." A ripple of applause broke out among the people.

The most special time was when one tiny child with shiny blonde hair came to Rachel with a single daisy clutched in her sticky, warm hand and offered it to her. "Mama said this is for you." Rachel placed the child on her lap. She looked up to see Miriam Johnson beaming at her. "Mama said if it weren't for you, there wouldn't be no me."

"Explain that, Rachel," someone called.

Miriam pushed forward. "I'll explain. Johnny and I were married for five years with no results. No matter what we did, I couldn't get in the family way. Finally, I went to Rachel to find out what was wrong with me. When she examined me, she found I had a slight infection. After she cured the infection, I still couldn't get pregnant. So, she told me the fault must be with Johnny. Well, it took all my courage to go home and tell

him. But I did; and with a lot of nagging from me, he finally went for an examination. Rachel forbade him to drink either liquor or coffee or smoke. Put him on a diet with lots of tomato juice and fresh vegetables. Within the summer, I was pregnant with our little Emily. He grouched around saying it was only coincidence, but I made him start drinking that danged tomato juice not long ago and give up his likker and his pipe. You guessed it, I'm pregnant again." She chuckled. "I'm only sorry you won't be here for this delivery, Rachel."

One of the women asked, "How do you know all this stuff, Rachel?"

"I don't have any scientific proof, but I had read these results in my Journal from school. It seemed worth a try. The main thing to remember is it isn't always the woman's fault when there isn't a baby."

"Now you're talkin' sedition," one of the women said while the rest chortled.

Ginny came forward with a small money pouch. "Many families owe you money they can never fully pay, but this is what we collected. We hope you'll use it just in case the California men disappoint you. Give you a bit of security, anyway."

"Yeah," someone shouted. "So you can come home if you want to." Murmurs of approval ran through the group.

Finally Ginny gave Rachel one last hug. "It's time to take up school again, so we'd best go now. Take care of yourself, Rachel Williams."

Tears rolled down Rachel's cheeks as she stood watching the good women retreating down the road to their homes and families and Iris recording the faces and the events in her sketchbook.

"How wonderful it is you have drawn those pictures," Rachel told her. "They'll help me remember this day and these people who are etched in my heart forever."

Two

The Adventure Begins

That afternoon, after the picnic, Rachel was going through the house reminiscing about life there in Four Corners when Iris's pa came to the door. "Come in, Uncle Will." When she looked at him she always thought of her father. Indeed, Will was just a younger version of Pa, tall and thin with graying reddish brown hair. He was a typical, congenial Williams.

Will embraced Rachel. "The time has almost come for you to leave. It's about to break our hearts. But I know you and Iris need your chance at life, too. We have other daughters but they have their own families. Unless Iris marries, she'll be all alone when we die." His words came slowly, causing him to choke back his tears.

"I know how dangerous the trip will be so I brought this." He reached in his pocket withdrawing a pistol, which was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. "I want you to have this. I special ordered it for you. It's called a Derringer and it can easily fit in your drawstring purse. You could keep it with you at all times."

Rachel, shuddering slightly, looked at the shiny gun which Will held out to her. "But I've never used anything but a gun for hunting. I—I don't know!"

"Come outside, I'll show you how it works." When they were outside, he handed her the gun. "Cock it first and aim it at that fence post. It's only about five feet away."

Rachel followed his instructions, hitting the target on the second try.

"It has an over and under barrel so, if the first shot doesn't do it, you have a second chance. But as you can see, at close range, you can hardly miss."

"Does Iris know about this?"

"No, I think it's best for you to have it and the other two not know. The trip is daunting enough without scaring them any more. I have confidence in you, Rachel. You'll help everyone through to California. Once you get there, Martin will see you don't want for anything. Even if you don't care for them Joaquin gents."

Rachel watched Will leave. She felt the cold metal of the gun in her hand. *Was the trip so fraught with danger she would need a Derringer?* She walked back into the house, filled with both hope and anxiety.

As nearly as Rachel could tell, the stage trip to St. Joe would take about ten days, barring lengthy delays. Just to be safe, she decided they'd leave five days early and sent a message, by post, to Jeb Morgan telling him they were on their way and should be in St. Joe by the tenth of May.

~ * ~

The stage pitched and creaked across the rutted roads, throwing them about as so many sacks of flour. The three of them with Jimmy filled much of the interior; but when other passengers boarded, they were forced to squeeze them in also. It was still cool in the mornings, but afternoons were stifling hot with a choking cloud of dust stirring up from the trail.

They disliked their layovers almost as much as the ride itself. The inns around the larger towns were acceptable, but when they were forced to eat or sleep in some of the smaller places, it was a study in hardship. One night the food they were served had a rank, forbidding smell.

Rachel went into the kitchen. "We can't eat this," she told the grimy cook. "We have a child with us."

"You can go hungry then," he said.

Rachel spied a stack of dishes that seemed to fill the room from floor to ceiling. "I'll make you a deal. Get me some hot water and I'll wash all these." She waved at the debris of dishes and old food. "In return, you'll let me fry some eggs and bacon for us."

"It's a deal."

It took Rachel two hours of work, but at last she finished her chore and then served Jimmy and the women a clean, decent meal.

Despite Rachel's daily vigilance towards cleanliness, Jimmy developed diarrhea, probably from drinking water at a fouled well. Rachel cared for him constantly, using a variety of medicines and finally resorting to having him drink rice water, which she boiled nightly at each layover. Somehow, she kept him from becoming completely dehydrated.

A couple of days later as they jolted along in the stage, Marie told Rachel. "I think the fever's broken. His brow is moist and cool. How can I ever thank you? You know, Rachel, you'll make a wonderful ma. I can tell how much you want children. As a ma, I know I couldn't do without my little boy."

"You're right. I want a child very much," Rachel replied.

Marie began again. "You know all the ruckus the night of the dance? Well, I'm here to tell you Brad Morton asked me to marry him. No, in fact, he begged me to. He wanted to acknowledge Jimmy. He told me old Syd, his father, couldn't stand the idea of losing little Jimmy. He called Jimmy the family link to the future. Can you believe he said such a thing after three years of me being the butt of gossip? A word never, ever tasted so good on my tongue as when I told him 'No'."

The women began to clap. "We're so proud of you, Marie!" Iris told her. "The Mortons found one thing their money couldn't buy. I'll bet ole Sydney nearly had apoplexy when he heard your answer."

"You'll never really know how true it is," Marie responded.

Rachel noted the same mysterious expression on the girl's face she had seen before when the two of them had discussed Jimmy's birth. She started to question Marie's meaning; but, it was as if a closing curtain fell over her hazel green eyes. Rachel decided to let the matter drop.

They laughed and talked excitedly about the adventure before them. Iris took out her sketchpad and drew each of them, as they posed, not in a salon, but on the inside of a western bound stage.

Rachel saw the camaraderie developing among them. It would take all of them working together to face the grueling journey that lay ahead. For, if what had turned into a two-week stagecoach ride was tiresome and taxing, Rachel knew that the three months ahead in the wagon train would be just that much worse.

~ * ~

About two days before they got to St. Joe, they stopped at a way station to change horses and to have their noon meal. Rachel finished eating her meal of steak and potatoes and then went outside alone to stretch her legs.

She heard Ed, their driver, a pleasant middle-aged man dressed in western attire, talking to the stage manager. "They want me to take a gold shipment without a guard? I can't believe it."

"We're a little short handed right now, and they need this money at the bank in St. Joe. You're an experienced driver and they know they can depend on you."

"That's good, but I also have three women and a little boy to look after."

"A couple of gents bought tickets to go with you. Maybe they could give you a hand in case you get in a pinch," the manager said. "You're armed aren't you?"

Ed nodded his head. "Brought me a rifle and hid it in the rifle boot under the seat. Well, standin' here complainin' won't change things. Let's get it loaded."

The two went into the office near the front of the building and returned carrying a metal strong box between them. They hoisted it up to the space under the driver's feet.

"Good luck," the manager told Ed.

"I'll need it. Send the passengers out. I'm ready to go."

That morning there were only the women and Jimmy aboard when they started and it had made for comfortable riding. Now they were joined by two men. One was portly and well dressed and called himself Caine. Ruben Caine. The other, tall and thin was dressed in frontier attire. He simply called himself "Slim".

Rachel usually paid little heed to the passengers, but for some reason these two didn't ring true. Ruben passed himself off as a drummer, but the case he carried with him was so light that it obviously was empty. Both of them carried pistols. They acted as if they were strangers, but Rachel had seen them talking privately.

Ruben pushed himself onto the coach seat, taking up so much room the women vacated it for him, choosing to squeeze together on the other seat. Slim decided at the last minute to ride on top with the driver.

Immediately, Ruben tried to strike up a conversation. "Where are you lovely ladies going?" he asked.

"We're on our way clear to California. To the San Joaquin Valley," Iris said with excitement.

"Are you going to join family there? You have sponsors, I presume," Ruben asked.

Rachel interrupted. "We have our arrangements made. There's really no reason for you to trouble yourself with our affairs."

"Oh, Madam, you misunderstand. I was just trying to be helpful. I have so many connections I imagined I could be of service to you. No offense taken?"

"No offense. I think little Jimmy usually naps at this time so we would appreciate your silence, Mr. Caine."

Caine pulled his hat over his eyes and appeared to be sleeping, though on several occasions Rachel saw him peeping

at them out of one eye. He reminded her of a tabby cat she once had, a very successful mouser who would find a rodent's hole and pretend to sleep until the naive creature tried to venture forth. Then with lightning speed, she pounced on the unsuspecting mouse. Rachel felt for her drawstring purse making sure it was securely attached to her arm.

The coach rocked along for several miles when Caine told them, "There's a watering hole up ahead where they stop to let the horses drink. We passengers usually stretch our legs there."

"Oh, so you've been over this route before?" Rachel inquired.

"Oh, indeed I have." He turned his head and intently scanned the horizon as if expecting someone.

Rachel looked at Marie. She, too, was watching Caine's every move with that skeptical look of hers. Rachel winked at her and she winked back.

"Iris," Marie asked, "could you hold Jimmy while he finishes his nap? I need a little break." She scooted the boy over to Iris's lap. Rachel knew Marie, now free to move, was ready to help if the need arose.

There was a suffocating air in the coach; something inside her warned Rachel of impending danger. She noticed Caine wore his gun on his left hip. *He's left-handed so I need to be on his right side if I have to surprise him with my pistol.*

The coach hit a chuck hole, throwing the women against each other. Using this as an excuse Rachel said, "You don't mind if I move over here with you do you, Mr. Caine? It's so crowded with all of us together on one seat." Before he had a chance to object she pushed across and sat to the right of him.

Rachel loosened the drawstring on her purse and, as if reaching for a handkerchief inside, coughed loudly, bending forward over her purse concealing it with her chest. Her hand fumbled for the Derringer. She waited for a sound to cover the cocking of the gun within the bag. Suddenly she had her opportunity. Jimmy awoke with a loud cry when the coach wheels rumbled across a deep rut shaking the entire coach.

"My that was a jolt, wasn't it?" Iris asked.

Caine was silent, now uninterested in conversation, keeping his eyes focused on the horizon.

Ed slowed the team. "Must be close to the watering hole you told us about, Mr. Caine," Rachel commented.

"About there." He drew his pocket watch from his vest. "We're just a little ahead of schedule, too." Ed pulled the horses to a creaking stop. Suddenly there was a scuffling sound coming from the top of the coach. They heard Slim tell Ed, "Hand me the rifle you got hid in the wagon boot. Be quick about it."

At the same time, Caine reached for his pistol and lifted it out of its holster. He pointed it at the women sitting across from him. "Time to disembark, Ladies."

At that moment, Rachel pulled the Derringer from her bag. "Better reconsider, Mr. Caine." She pressed the gun in under his jaw, forcing his head up and back. "Drop your gun." He paused as if to resist. "At this distance I can't miss. Have you ever seen what a bullet can do this close? It wouldn't be pretty. Now drop it."

Caine grunted but obeyed. Marie quickly picked up his pistol, training it on him.

"Now, you tell your friend up there to let the driver go. If you don't, you're dead." Rachel pushed the gun against him a little harder.

"You wouldn't shoot me? I heard them call you Doctor."

Rachel's stomach churned, but she did not flinch. "Do you want to find out?"

Caine shook his head in hang-dog style. "Hey, Slim," he called, "they've got me cold. Let the driver go."

"What?"

"You heard me. Let the driver go."

Rachel released her gun from his jaw saying, "Caine, get out of the coach with your hands up and don't turn around. I'm right behind you."

Rachel made a decision. *I need a gun with more range.* When he turned his back to leave, she took Caine's gun from Marie, handing her the Derringer in return. With both his own pistol and Rachel's gun trained on him, Caine crawled out of the coach with his hands high in the air. Rachel alit behind him, placing his gun against the middle of his back.

When Slim saw them emerge from the coach door, he yelled, "How in the hell did she get your gun?"

"Don't worry about that. Just do what she says."

Seeing the hesitation of the bandits, Ed seized the opportunity. He grabbed Slim's rifle, and with its butt, gave him a blow to the head. With a thud, the bandit fell off the coach seat to the ground below. Ed leaped down and seized Slim's gun, which had gone flying into the road. In that moment the would-be heist was over.

While Ed watched Caine help Slim to his feet, Rachel walked to the open coach door. Iris, wide-eyed with fright, held Jimmy on her lap, comforting him. Marie sat sentry-like by the window, her hand still clutching Rachel's small gun. *Thank God, they're all right.* Rachel closed the door for them as if to protect their vulnerability.

Ed crossed over to Rachel. "Lady, you done great."

"Thanks. We all did, but we'd better get out of here before their accomplices arrive. Caine's been looking out at the horizon for half an hour trying to spot someone," Rachel warned.

"You're right. They didn't plan on carrying the gold by themselves. I'm not takin' any more chances. We need to make time, so I'm gonna leave them here and let the sheriff worry about rounding them up."

Rachel climbed up to the driver's seat and picked up the rifle, keeping it trained on Slim and Caine while Ed lowered his pistol and came up beside her to take the reins.

Looking back at the two, Rachel suddenly was angry at all the trouble they had caused. In fact, she was more than angry, she was enraged. She began to perspire as she raised the rifle

and aimed at them. *You can't, Rachel, you can't.* She knew her inner voice was right. In utter frustration, she fired at the bandits' feet.

"Hey, what the devil are you doing?" Caine shouted rubbing the dirt from his eyes. "You could've killed us."

"The thought did cross my mind."

With Caine standing in the road and Slim crouching beside him, the coach sped off leaving the frustrated robbers behind in a cloud of red, Missouri dust.

"My stars," Rachel sighed. "Is this only the beginning?"

~ * ~

When the women alit from the stage in St. Joe, they stretched their stiff tired bodies. "I'm sure I must have a purple spine from all the jostling," Marie said. "And a few jangled nerves after that meeting with the distinguished Mr. Caine and his friend, Slim."

"Anyway, look at what's going on. Half of the country must be moving west out of here," Iris observed.

Rachel nodded. "I've read St. Joe, here on the Missouri River, has become the 'jumping-off' place for many of the wagon trains. Did you ever see so many horses, wagons, and people thronged together?"

Reticules in hand, the three women took refuge in the first hotel they came to, making arrangements for their trunks to be sent later. As they passed the dining room, Rachel rejoiced, saying, "Good gracious, I think I see clean cloths on the table. To sleep in a clean bed will be a thing of joy. How good it will feel to take a hot bath. First thing, though, I've got to find Jeb Morgan and let him know we've finally arrived."

By luck Jeb Morgan, the wagon master, was registered in the same hotel and had left instructions to be notified as soon as the "Pennsylvania Women" arrived.

Rachel had just bathed and dressed when there was a knock at her door. When she opened it, there stood Jeb Morgan, all six feet of him. Tanned, with twinkling blue eyes and curly dark hair, his very presence seemed to fill the room. He stood and

gazed at her for a moment before extending his hand. He was, as she had heard, "sizing her up."

"I'm Jeb Morgan. Rachel Williams, I presume."

Rachel was awed by his overpowering manner. "What? What did you say?"

"Let me rephrase the question." He grinned at her. "Are you Miss Rachel Williams?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry," she heard herself saying, though why she was apologizing she wasn't sure. "I hope we didn't delay your leaving too much. More things went wrong with the stage coach journey than I could imagine." Rachel laughed nervously.

"I heard about your little adventure with the bandits. Consider it a fluke. Something best forgotten. If I'd been running the stage, there would have been someone riding shotgun. Anyway, you won't have to worry about anything on my train. Not when I'm in charge."

Rachel nodded. *Modesty isn't one of Jeb Morgan's better attributes.*

He changed the subject abruptly. "I've gotten the wagons and loaded them with provisions. Are there five of you or just three?"

"Just the three of us and one little boy."

"Guess you could've done with one wagon instead of two. Well, it's all right, too. If it makes the trip, Len can sell the extra wagon for a profit in California. I didn't know there'd be a child along. Pretty long trip for a little one." He paused. "You'll have to take the responsibility for him. I don't encourage taking children along without a father." He gave Rachel a rather withering look. "In fact, I only agreed to bring you women as a favor to Martin and the others. One good thing, though, is you're a doctor. You are a doctor?" He looked at her quizzically.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you'll probably get a chance to practice out on the trail. It's a hard go of it. Now, do you want to see the gear? I

haven't paid for it yet, but I think I drove a pretty good bargain. Nothin's cheap here, but I got equipment that will last."

Rachel merely nodded. She sensed he was one people listened to and obeyed.

"Anyway, we will leave exactly on the tenth. That's day after tomorrow. In the meantime, I want you to outfit the others in your group with pants and hats and durable shoes. Can any of you manage a team? I hired one driver, but that's all I could find."

"No, none of us can drive. Maybe I could learn?"

"Someone will have to. You look strong enough. I guess you're sensible?" He gave her a stern look.

Rachel was surprised. No one had ever asked if she were sensible. She bit her tongue, trying to hold back a nasty reply, saying only, "People tell me I am."

"All right. Get yourself a good night's sleep. My driver'll be by at seven to give you your driving lesson. Hope you learn fast." Without as much as an adieu, he donned his hat and clumped down the stairs.

Hearing the commotion, Iris came out of her room. "What was all that about? Is he Jeb Morgan?"

"That's Jeb, all right. But, I'm not sure I know what that's all about."

"He sure was handsome, Rach. Looks like the kind who keeps things under control, too."

"I won't argue the point. I'm certain he'll get us to California even if he has to pull us by the hair on our head."

They both laughed.

~ * ~

Jeb left the hotel feeling his first meeting with his new passengers hadn't gone well, particularly Dr. Williams. Even in such a short time, he had liked her, even felt attracted to her; but he knew he often masked his shyness or embarrassment by being overbearing and brusque. It had always been difficult for him to know exactly the right thing to say, and being around nothing but frontier men for so many years hadn't eased the

situation any. His mother had educated him well in those country schools where she taught, but much had faded with time.

I worry about having the responsibility of those women. This is a hard country and the trail will be difficult even without them. I've already lost a mother and a wife to this life. I can't afford to get involved just now at the very beginning of this trip. It'd just cloud my judgment. In a nervous gesture, he slicked back his unruly black cowlick and placed his hat firmly on his head, pulling the brim down over his eyes.

~ * ~

Promptly at seven the next morning there was a knock on Rachel's door. She opened it to find a weather-beaten, gray haired woman dressed in buckskins standing there. "Hullo, I'm Glorietta Baxter. I'm gonna be your driver. You can call me Glory. That's what my friends call me when they ain't callin' me somethin' worse."

"I-I'm a little surprised," Rachel said.

"Shouldn't be. You're a gal and you're goin' to California. I'm a gal and I want to go, too. Only way to get there is to work my way. Husband died a year ago and I don't have no reason to stay here. Me and him used to run a freight haulin' company and I guess you're a kind of freight, ain't ya?"

"Anyway, grab your bonnet and come on. If you could learn doctorin', you can learn a little thing like team drivin'"

Rachel followed Glory downstairs and up onto her wagon. The streets were teeming with settlers and townspeople. "You drove down here in all this crowd?"

"Yep, I need to get my mules used to confusion. Old Jenny is used to me, but the other three are new. Got to get them under control. Stubborn as a mule means just that—right up there in meaning with mule-headed. Just nary let them think you're 'fraid of them."

"Will I be driving mules?"

"No, Jeb's got horses for you and a smaller wagon. I'll carry most of the freight." She patted Rachel reassuringly. "We'll do fine. Me and you. I like ya already."

Glory's confidence didn't reassure Rachel. She'd driven a light buggy at home but old Bessie practically hitched herself and then followed the road, often without Rachel holding the reins. *This will be a new experience, I expect.*

When they reached the campsite, the activity halted as all eyes fell on Glory, and especially Rachel. One of the settler's wives, Mary Johnson, came to greet her, followed by several of the other women. They were just getting acquainted when Jeb arrived.

"Hate to break up this little tea party but Miss Williams came to have a driving lesson. Glory, get busy," Jeb said.

Glory led Rachel over to a team tied to the limb of a nearby tree. "Guess first thing is to harness them up. Ever done it before?"

Rachel shook her head.

"Better put on your gloves."

"Gloves?"

"Here, take mine. I'll show you how to swing this up." With an astounding show of strength the wiry woman swung the harness over the first horse in one movement. Now you do the other one and we'll hook them together while they're still tied up."

Rachel tried to imitate Glory's deft movement, but she landed on the ground with the harness atop her. Glory laughed, "You ain't the one's supposed to get harnessed" She helped Rachel up. "I'll hitch them up for ya this one time. You'll get the hang. It won't hurt old Cookie, Jeb's driver, to do this for you anyway."

When Glory had the team in the traces, they climbed up on the wagon seat. "Now you take the reins just kind of firm like. Not that way, you're pullin' too hard; it'll hurt their mouths. There, that's better. Just drive across the pasture there and come back. Kinda talk to them. They gotta get to know you."

"What are their names?"

"Don't know. Just call 'em boy. Kind of cluck to them."

After an hour of practice, they returned to the camp. "Now you're doin' better, so let's try backin'. Tell 'em what you want—'Back', 'Back' and turn the reins accordin'. See the tree, turn the wagon and back over there. There's a sawed off tree stump over yonder, but that ain't no problem. Won't hit that. It's way over on the other side."

Sounds simple enough. Rachel took the reins, watching the tree out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to show just how much she had learned so she slapped the reins over the horses' back, urging them into a trot.

Suddenly Glory began to yell. "Slow down. Whoa. Cut the other way. Yer gonna hit that stump!"

It was too late. The back left wheel ran directly into the stump. The wagon righted itself without capsizing. The team reared and whinnied, the sound echoing through the camp. By this time Rachel was trembling. She saw Jeb Morgan running toward her. *Good merciful heavens it would have to be him.*

"Having a little trouble with your pupil, Glory?" He laughed. "Climb down and I'll see what I can do." He called to one of the other men, "Bring my team and hitch 'em up. The Doc and I'll try them." Turning to Rachel, "This is a young, green team. Mine will handle better for you. Old Roan and Bud don't have to be told much. They just know what to do and do it."

Rachel was in shock. She had expected his wrath to come down on her in front of the whole train, but instead he was defending her ineptness by blaming it on the team.

"Everybody just go back to your business." He waved the others off as he headed the team back to the pasture. Little by little he put her through the driving exercises again, even allowing her to back up successfully.

"I'm going to return you to the hotel now and I'll stow your trunks on the wagon. You still need to get your women dressed out for traveling and you might want to stock up on some fresh fruits and vegetables. The early apples are in the stands and some green

vegetables. Maybe it'll keep you from getting tired of bacon and beans so quick. Incidentally, some settlers brought cows so the boy will have milk for at least part of the way."

"Good advice, I think the others have gotten the clothing, but I'll tell them about the food."

When he stopped the team at the hotel, Rachel turned to him saying, "I'll have the trunks sent down. I apologize for the trouble I caused with the team. I do thank you for your help."

"Just be at the camp by six in the morning. We have to be first in line at the ferry." Grinning at her, he added, "Sleep well and use a little liniment. Your muscles might be a little strained."

"Sleep well?" Rachel mumbled to herself as he drove off. "I'm so tired I probably won't be able to do anything but sleep. Smart aleck. Just when I start to like the fellow, he makes a crack like that." She chuckled, "I have to admit he does have a sense of humor."

As Rachel limped up the stairs, Iris called to her. "Rach, we got your clothes and something else. Marie thought we ought to have it." There leaning against the wall was a small rifle.

"What's this, Marie?"

"I thought we ought to have it. After the experience on the stage. Anyway, I had reason to learn to shoot about three years ago, and I know we might need protection now."

"I'm too tired to argue, but I wouldn't let Jeb Morgan see it. He'd be insulted for he plans to take care of us. Good care if you ask him. Also, keep it out of Jimmy's sight, Marie."

"I know, but I just like my own protection. Past experience taught me that."

"I'm going to take a long hot bath now and go to bed. We've got to be at the camp by six in the morning so plan accordingly," Rachel warned them.

Iris added, "And so our great adventure begins. I'm wrong. It continues."

Three

The Crossing

The women were just finishing breakfast when Glory arrived to pick them up for the trip to the ferry. When they loaded their last belongings, Glory eyed the blanket-wrapped rifle. "What's that?" She tore away the blanket. "A woman's kind of rifle. Light and easy."

"I thought we'd need some kind of protection," Marie said.

"Hardly, but you can keep it if you'll let Rachel put it in the boot under her wagon seat. All drivers got one. Well, Jeb said to hurry. They're already lined up at the ferry. Sent the remuda of mules and other livestock across last night with a couple of men to herd them."

Glory hurried them out the door. "The ferryman is worried about a flash flood. There was lots of lightning to the north, meanin' there was rain. When them bottomlands flood, there's lots of trees and other stuff washes down into big Mo."

When they topped the rise overlooking the river, they gasped at the sight below them. A pink, fluffy fog reflected the rays of the sun obscuring the water. Not a whisper of wind blew. The covered wagons sat perched like giant mushrooms on the hillside while the voices of the men were low and muffled, adding to the dreamlike setting.

Iris withdrew her sketchpad, hoping to catch the magic. "See, I told you this was a new beginning for us. A beautiful continuation."

Then a voice from the river brought back a sense of reality. "Unhitch the first team. Put the wagon on the skids so we can load it on the ferry."

Rachel could barely make out the forms below, but they seemed to be putting the wagon on some sort of wooden runners. They lowered it carefully by cables to the water's edge below. A group of black men were grasping the ropes firmly, holding back the bulk of the weight. Suddenly one of the ropes snapped and she heard a nightmarish scream as the wagon came down full force on the man guiding the wagon tongue.

"My God! What's happened?" Rachel jumped off the wagon seat and sped towards the accident.

The man lay moaning while the others lifted the wagon off his body. Rachel pushed to his side. "Who the devil are you?" someone asked.

"I'm a doctor. Get out of my way." She leaned over the injured man and then knelt beside him. "What's your name?"

"Gideon. I'se hurtin' somethin' awful. Awful." He grabbed her arm. "Help me. Please help me."

She motioned to one of the other men. "Put your jacket under his head. Easy. Easy. Someone get me a blanket."

Blood was spewing out of his leg in a frothing, scarlet stream. Rachel ripped his pant leg back and applied pressure, holding the spot until someone could relieve her while still maintaining the pressure. "Give me your kerchief," she told one of the drivers. She found a small stick and wound the cloth around, forming a tourniquet which she applied to the wound. Finally she was able to stop the bleeding. "I need a bottle of your finest Missouri whiskey."

"What fer? Ya gonna use it inside or out?" one of the men asked.

"Both. Don't dally. Just get it." She cleaned the wound, washing it with the liquor. Then she passed the bottle to Gideon.

He took a long pull and smiled weakly at Rachel. "You knowed just the right things to do!"

Glory arrived carrying Rachel's doctor kit and handed it to her. "Lie quiet, Gideon. I still have to stitch the wound and bandage it." The crowd watched her every move. The air was close and hot. "Move back. He needs the breeze on him," she told the onlookers.

By then, Gideon's owner and manager of the ferry line, John LeBois, arrived on the scene. He was a dark, burly man with a forbidding expression. "What's going on here? Who are you?" he growled.

"I'm Rachel Williams from Pennsylvania. I've been treating Gideon. He had a terrible accident. I was afraid he might bleed to death, but he should be all right now. Just let me finish sewing him up." Rachel turned back to her patient.

She finished with Gideon and then turned to LeBois. "With rest he should be all right. I don't want him to break the wound open." She looked directly at LeBois.

"A woman doctor?"

"Yes, I am. Does it matter? Isn't Gideon's life the important thing here?"

"Guess, so. How are you feeling, Gideon?"

"I'm all right. Thanks to this kind lady."

"Well, then the rest of you better get to fixing that rope and moving on. This has delayed us enough."

Rachel grabbed his arm. "Just a minute."

"Oh, yeah, I owe you some money!" LeBois started digging in his pants' pocket.

"That, too, but I want to know why these men are working without shoes?" She pointed to the half dozen barefoot slaves. "More important, as thin as they are they're probably working without much food."

"Lady, that's none of your damned business. They belong to me and you don't have no say," LeBois said while his face flushed.

Rachel burned with anger; but she had learned anger didn't produce results. She disliked all this slavery bit and especially disliked this man. Despite her feelings, she said calmly, "You're right, but did you ever consider with better care you'd get more work out of them? A slave is an investment. Don't you take care of your other investments? Why shouldn't you manage these men for the best production?" Rachel presented her point with what she hoped was a logic this beast of a man might understand.

"I don't need no lectures from you." He slapped his left fist against the palm of his right hand with a loud smacking sound. "Now, how much do I owe you?"

"Let me see. Six pair of work shoes would be about three dollars. Fifty cents each? Three dollars will be enough."

LeBois handed her three silver dollars which she gave back to him. "I guess I can trust you to buy them shoes with this." She forced a smile.

LeBois looked at her in amazement. "You buying them shoes with your money? What a deal" He laughed at what he perceived as her stupidity. "All right boys, this is all over. Take old Gideon up to the quarters and get one of the gals to look after him. Now get crackin'. Be careful. We don't want no more accidents and maybe ruin one of them wagons."

"No more accidents because he's worried about the wagons." Rachel mumbled to herself shaking her head incredulously.

Jeb pushed through the crowd. Never had she been so glad to see anyone. Even in her time of stress, she noted how tall and imposing he was, dwarfing the other men in the crowd. He took her firmly by the arm, leading her out of earshot. She was surprised by his words. "Rachel Williams, did you know who you were dealing with? John LeBois. He is one of the most influential men in St. Joe and one of the biggest slave owners. I

thought you said you were sensible? I think meddlesome is more like it.”

“I thought I was being practical. He needs to take care of those men. If I couldn’t appeal to his heart, which he may not have, at least I could appeal to his pocketbook,” she defended herself.

Jeb glared at her. “Slavery is a touchy issue with them since they just opened the Kansas-Nebraska Territory as a free area. Missouri is a southern state and people here don’t like the fact that across this river there are different laws. LeBois can’t even use his Negroes on the other side. He doesn’t like that one bit.”

Jeb scowled. “If you hadn’t been a woman, he’d probably have belted you for saying what you did. Do you understand? He could have even refused to carry us across the river and we’d have to go downstream to get help.”

Rachel lowered her eyes. “I’m sorry but I couldn’t keep myself from helping those men. I don’t pretend to know anything about politics, but I did the right thing.”

“Your trouble is you think you have to save the whole world. And I just want to take care of this wagon train.” He let go of her arm and stepped back, looking at her as he might a rebellious child. “I don’t have time to argue. We’ve got to get across the river. Stay here. Glory, watch her and try to keep her out of trouble.”

Rachel watched him leave. He pulled his hat down on his head and with his shoulders determinedly set, took long, hurried strides toward the crossing.

“Glory, I think I’m a thorn in his side.” For some unfathomable reason, Rachel regretted this truth deeply.

“Now, Rachel, I think there’s a bit more to it. Jeb isn’t easy to understand, but it’s for certain he’s worth understandin’.” Glory made a small clucking sound and grinned at Rachel. “You’re smitten with him, ain’t ya?”

“Smitten? How could I be smitten when I’ve only known him three days?”

“Don’t take long sometimes,” Glory laughed.

Alfonse Meyer's words came ringing back in Rachel's ears. "Rachel Williams, you're just too head strong and independent for any man to ever love!" It was the same old problem; but this time, for some unknown reason, it really mattered to her. Rachel turned her head from Glory lest she see the tears welling up in her eyes.

Despite her determination to the contrary, Rachel spent the rest of the morning watching Jeb. He had twenty-five wagons lined up for crossing, five freight wagons, seventeen settler's wagons, his wagon, and the two for the women. Theirs and his were the last in line.

Jeb saw each one loaded carefully on the barge and then watched, like a protective father, while it crossed the river. Sometimes there were two barges going at once, but Jeb was vigilant, seeming to be everywhere at once and always having everything under control. He was as tireless at noon as he had been at daybreak.

Marie walked over to Rachel. "Aren't you going to get cleaned up? Look at your clothes. You have dried blood and mud all over your pants. Go put on your dress and come with me to the food stands to buy something for lunch."

"Lunch? And he hasn't had a thing since morning and probably only coffee then."

"Who are you talking about, Rach? You mean Jeb Morgan?"

"I have an idea Marie. While I clean up and change, could you go and buy something like meat and fruit for us to eat now? Get a separate portion for him. Perhaps a little peace offering is called for. Oh, and it will be my treat." She handed Marie a few coins.

While Marie was gone, Rachel returned to her wagon and donned her best everyday dress, a cotton print of gray with small blue flowers. She began washing her dirty britches and shirt but Glory grabbed them from her, "You'll get yourself all messy. I'll do that. I'll hang 'em on the wagon wheel to dry while yur gone deliverin' Jeb his vittles."

When Marie returned with the food, she looked at Rachel approvingly. "Let me arrange your hair. I'll put it up and bring a few curls down over your forehead." She worked deftly, then finally stood back to admire her own handiwork. "Wait just a minute. I have an idea." She ran back to the other wagon and returned with a blue bow which she pinned onto the back of Rachel's upswept hair. "Now, that adds a little," she laughed. "Only thing is, you need to remember you're in the California marriage pool not the Missouri one."

"Taking lunch to a friend isn't all that serious," Rachel retorted.

"Maybe not. But maybe so!" Marie answered with a grin.

When Rachel met one of the men who helped Jeb, she said, "Andy, would you please get Mr. Morgan from the dock? I have some lunch for him. I'll meet him over there on the big rock under the elm. I'd go myself but I don't think I should be down where they're loading." She added, "Without Jeb's approval."

"Spect not. He's pretty busy. But you're right; he needs to eat."

Rachel spread a blanket out under the trees. Sun filtered down through the leaves leaving a speckled pattern on the grass below. The wind was cool with a damp, soothing feeling. The day, in contrast to the early morning, was crystal clear. Here, on the side of the hill, was a world unto itself away from the bustle of activity below.

In a few minutes, Jeb came up the hill. He looked at her with surprise. "I didn't know it was you. I just supposed it was Cookie bringing me a lunch. But you're not Cookie, are you?" He grinned impishly.

"You haven't eaten all day, have you?" she asked.

"Now, did you bring this to me as a friend or a doctor?" he asked.

"Both. I just know how important you are to me—all of us."

He caught the slip but ignored it only saying, "We're getting along pretty good. Sending the first batch of settlers over on the

barge in a few minutes. Then our wagons, yours and mine will be last. We've been lucky the river hasn't risen yet."

Rachel laid out the good smelling lunch. There were ribs, roasted over an open flame of oak, slabs of fresh bread slathered in butter, roasting ears, and fruit.

Jeb began eating. "This is pretty good. Those strawberries are the finest I've ever tasted. We used to have a patch when I was growing up and I've never gotten my fill of them since. Nice."

Rachel kept her fingers crossed. So far, things were very amicable. Rachel didn't want to appear inquisitive, but she did want to know about him so she asked rather timidly, "Where were you raised, Jeb?"

"I was born in Buffalo. My pa worked helping to build the Erie Canal, but he was killed in an accident when I was about two. Ma had enough schooling to teach so we gradually moved west from one country school to another. First to Ohio and then to Missouri. Along the way she gave me a lot of education. I know she hoped I would read for the law or become some kind of professional, but I just loved the outdoors too much. She had a great influence on me, though." He paused as if weighing his words. "In a way, you remind me of her." He lowered his head so Rachel could not read his expression.

Rachel was surprised and pleased at the remark. How she wished she could think of something clever to say. Instead she merely said, "Thank you!"

Jeb pointed to the river below. "Did you ever see such a sight? So much going on? Look at those barges carrying the people and the rafts with the wagons. All out on the muddy Missouri.

"I remember my Ma used to read to me in Latin about Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Well, these people don't realize it, but they are crossing a Rubicon of their own."

Rachel was surprised Jeb could make such a classical comparison. His mother must have given him quite a good

education. "Well, I guess the main thing is there isn't much of value behind them so they want to go forward."

"That's about it. They hope the future is going to be an improvement over the past. Anyway, they can't go back."

Andy interrupted them then. "Jeb, the barge is loaded and ready. Do you want to come and sort of send our people off?"

"Yep, I'd best go. Thanks for the lunch, Rachel." He started to leave, then turning back he said, "I *like* that blue ribbon."

She blushed a little as she waved to him when he started back down the hill. What was it Glory had said about Jeb being hard to understand but that he was worth it?

When Rachel returned to the wagon, Glory came out to meet her. "We've got a problem with Iris. She sez she's scared to cross the river. Been bawlin' for half an hour. Sez she's gotta go home. Back to Pennsylvania. Sez she's had a vision and someone's gonna drown."

Rachel found Iris lying face down on the mattress inside the wagon. "Iris, what is it?" She laid her hand gently on the girl's rigid body.

"Rach, I just can't cross all that wide, dark water. I'll get swallowed up. I know I will." Iris's breaths came in short gasps between sobs.

"Oh, no, Iris. You'll be all right. We're going across in a regular boat. Not the rafts that take the wagons. You won't fall in."

"But what if it sinks? I can't swim. Pa would never let me try to learn. He said I was too weak. He was afraid for me."

Softly Rachel told her, "You can't go back, you know. Besides, my brave little Cousin, you are *not* a quitter."

"Yes, I am. I want to go home to Pa. Please, Rach."

"Iris, I'm going to give you a little medicine to make you feel better." She opened her medical supplies, bringing out a bottle of laudanum and pouring out a spoonful for her.

Rachel had finished medicating her when Andy arrived saying, "We're ready for you women. Go down the hill and get ready to board the boat. Jeb's waiting for you."

"Glory, come in here. We need to help Iris down there. You take one arm and I'll get the other. Come on, Iris, walk between us."

Surprisingly, the girl meekly obeyed with Marie and Jimmy following along behind them. "Want to ride the boat. Iris want to ride the boat, too?" Jimmy asked innocently.

When they reached the landing, Jeb greeted them. "Glad you're here. Our time is running out. The current is getting very strong. Good thing this is our last load." He looked at Iris with concern. "Are you all right?"

Suddenly she began screaming, throwing herself to the ground. "I can't go. The water will suck me down and there'll be nothing left of me."

"Listen to me, Iris," Jeb commanded. "That boat is strong. I've never lost anyone at this crossing. Ever. Get up and go to the dock. Now."

"Want to ride the boat." Jimmy grabbed Jeb's pant leg, looking up at him, begging to be carried.

"You're a good scout but let's let your mama take you on board. I've got to help Iris." With that he scooped up the frightened girl and carried her up the gangplank onto the deck. He placed her on a bench against the cabin. "You keep her there, Rachel. I have to check the others."

Rachel held Iris against her bosom to shield her eyes from the sight of the river. The waves increased in intensity and the boat began rolling. Then the gangplank was locked in place with a sharp clang and they were off while the steam engine hissed and chugged erratically as it strained against the current. The water roiled with foam. Rachel looked up to see tree branches and other debris floating around the boat. She caught her breath.

"What's wrong?" Iris wailed.

"Nothing." Rachel assured her holding her closer.

Glory, unaware of the change in the water, came over to Rachel. "Why don't ya go with them others and look over the

rail. I'll tend to Iris." She pulled Rachel up and took Iris in her arms.

Marie and Jimmy were standing next to the rail watching the water. "Looky. I think I saw a fish jump, Ma."

"Marie, I'd feel better if you and Jimmy came back and sat on the bench with us," Rachel said.

The ship began to rock, wavering and shuddering with the increasing strength of the tide. Rachel turned to see a giant wall of water overtaking them.

"Look out! Hold on! It's a comin'!" a loud voice warned. Rachel grabbed for the rail, securing herself just as a huge wave washed over the deck with a deafening roar. She glanced at Marie just in time to see Jimmy being swept off the deck into the seething black waters below.

Marie wailed, "Jimmy! Jimmy!"

Rachel looked down and saw the boy being pulled into an eddy at the bow of the ship.

Without thought or hesitation, Rachel crawled through the pipes of the rail and dived after the small bobbing figure below. She propelled herself through the foaming waves toward Jimmy, who was being tossed about like a rag doll. She reached for him just as he submerged. She spotted a blur of red, Jimmy's shirt. Holding her breath she dived after him. He struggled in panic but with a firm grip on his arm, she pulled him to her. Then she surfaced, triumphantly clutching him to her protecting body.

Rachel looked up and saw Jeb leaning down from the deck. A large swell lifted her so she was able to reach up and hand Jimmy to Jeb's down-stretched arms. The child was safe.

Someone threw a rope to her to pull herself aboard. Coughing and sputtering, she reached for it; but, her terror was not over, for out of nowhere, a huge uprooted tree came bearing down. As if watching from afar she saw the wooden monster approach with unbelievable force and speed. "So this is the death Iris foresaw?" she thought wildly. There was a crushing, searing pain when she was pinned between the tree and the side

of the boat. She pleaded prayerfully, "Oh, God, let it be over soon." Then she lapsed into merciful unconsciousness.

~ * ~

Rachel raised her hand and touched her head, trying to find the cause of the terrible throbbing. She felt the bandage then and looking down saw she was in her gown lying on a bed of quilts in her own wagon. She moaned and Glory came to her side. "Oh, Glory, I thought I was dead."

"Almost, but not quite. Scared us so. But Jeb and Mr. Foreman, one of them settlers was able to pull ya out. Knocked senseless but alive."

"And Jimmy. Is he all right?"

"Doin' good, thanks to you, Rachel."

Iris entered. "Oh, Rach, I'm so sorry! Maybe if I hadn't acted so awful, this wouldn't have happened." Iris bowed her head.

Rachel drew the girl to her. "We should have listened to your warning and been more careful."

Glory interrupted her. "Better take it easy. Yer pretty bruised up and ya have lots of cuts and bruises. Jeb and me tried to clean the cuts. Don't think they need stitchin'. Maybe ya can show us how later. Not bleedin' or nothin' at present. Gonna call Jeb now."

"Glory, couldn't it wait until morning? I feel so tired."

"Well, I'll go tell him about ya rousin' up at least. He give me strict orders to let him know."

Hearing all the talk, Marie came over to the wagon. She took Rachel's hand and with tear-filled eyes exclaimed, "How can I ever, ever thank you. You saved my Jimmy. You are so brave. I will be forever in your debt. If I never have another kindness shown to me, I will always know there is goodness in this world. Goodness and bravery."

Rachel was too weak to speak much so she reached over and simply patted Marie's hand.

~ * ~

The next morning Glory forced a cup of broth on Rachel. "When ya take a cup of this soup, I knowed ya be on the road to recovery. Jeb came after you went to sleep. He just sat there and gazed at you. But you was slumberin' too hard to know. He says if you're feelin' up to it, we'll start our goin' today. Are ya?"

"Yes, I'm ready. As long as I don't have to drive this wagon." Rachel and Glory both laughed.

"Help me get dressed. I want to sit up on the wagon seat for a while." Glory protested, but Rachel insisted. She was glad she had, for it was a sight to behold with Jeb on his saddle horse, Prince, a large, handsome sorrel, organizing the wagons into an orderly line, a real wagon train. She had read about this but nothing was ever more exciting than when she actually saw him raise his hand, waving it forward and calling, "Wagons, Ho."

Iris was right. This was the beginning of an adventure of a lifetime. Though a very dangerous one.

Before long, Rachel's head began to ache and the jarring of the wagon seat found every sore muscle and bruise on her body. She retreated to the comfort of her bed inside the wagon.

After a few miles, she heard Jeb ride up. "How is she, Glory? I thought I saw her riding with you?"

"Ya did, but common sense prevailed and she took to the bed. Why don't ya tie your horse to the wagon and go see fer yurself?"

Jeb pulled himself up to the wagon seat and crawled inside, sitting on the floor next to her bed of quilts. Beams of sunlight inched through the cracks in the wooden sides of the wagon bed. Primitive as it was, the interior gave a comforting sense of shelter from the huge expanse of ground and sky. "Well, Rachel, I see you're much better. You know you scared us all."

She looked into his eyes which were bluer than ever as they picked up the blue from his homespun shirt. He looked concerned, but there was something else on his mind, for his smile turned into a half scowl.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you. But I was a little frightened myself." Rachel said.

Jeb responded in a low, deep voice, "Will you tell me why you jumped in like that? There were plenty of us men there to save the boy. We were right behind you. It would have been easier to pull him out than it was you." He frowned openly this time.

"But I didn't see you. I didn't know anyone was there to help. I didn't think there was time to deliberate the matter," she said.

"You *didn't think*, is right. Acted on impulse. Had to save the whole world all by yourself." His eyes reflecting unconcealed pain and concern, he said, "Never have I seen such an independent female." He turned to go and then flushing slightly said, "Well, anyway, I'm glad you're all right." He jumped off the tailgate of the wagon, pulling his hat down on his head. "Come on Prince, we've got a train to run."

"Oh, my stars, I can't believe him," Rachel moaned. "Here I feel awful but lucky to be alive. I guess if I'd gotten killed, he'd have followed me to heaven to give me a lecture!"

Glory overheard her and called back. "Don't let him fool ya none. He was just scared we'd lose you and it made him mad. He's not used to being scared and he has other feelins' riling him, too. Hard to understand him sometimes, but that's what I figure it to mean. Don't fret now. Just rest a little and I'll give ya some more broth the next time we stop."

Rachel pouted. Thinking to herself that the men in California were bound to be easier to understand than the pig-headed one leading the train. She crouched down to look through her medical supplies to find a dose of headache powder for the throbbing in her head and the exasperation in her heart.

Four

The Prairie

The prairie was a vibrant, living thing as the waist-high grass flowed rhythmically in the wind. Prairie chickens ran frightened ahead of the wagons with quail rising from the ground in a whirring mass of feathers. The recent rains caused the shorter grass to be carpeted with all hues of wildflowers, some pink, some red, and even yellow. It was a fairytale world in the wilderness.

Growing stronger, Rachel spent her days riding up on the wagon seat with Glory. Jeb wouldn't let her drive yet, so he had put Glory with her wagon, which he called the doctor wagon. Andy drove for Iris and Marie.

"I never dreamed any place could be so huge and so open. Beautiful but almost overwhelming." Rachel told Glory.

"Looky there, Rach. See the herd. Them buffaloes. Ain't they somethin'? Big and dumb. They's still magnificent animals. Must be forty or fifty of them." Glory pointed to a series of forms on the horizon.

"Oh, how I'd love to see them up close, Glory."

"Be patient, girl. Ya will."

"I imagine. The country is getting much wilder. We aren't seeing many homesteads like we did when we first left Missouri. I liked it when we passed those homesteads; seeing

their cabins and families and the fields laid out neatly, and the children playing around the doorstep. It was kind of like what Pennsylvania must have been when it was first settled. More hilly, not level like this, but young and exciting.”

“I miss them fresh eggs and roasting ears and milk and sech we could buy off them. It was nice just campin’ close in. Kinda comfortin’ against the loneliness of all this wide openness. Speaking of sech things as fresh foods, yer appetite is sure improvin’.”

“Yes, it’s a sure sign I’m nearly recovered. The bruises are almost healed and most of my stiffness is gone. Oh, Glory, I feel so lucky to have come out of the accident like this. Owe it all to your good nursing.” She gave the older woman a little nudge.

“I’m glad yur doin’ so good cause there’s plenty need fer doctorin’—least for little things.”

“I’ve noticed. Mrs. Ganzer, Grace I think they call her, is expecting and fairly soon. Her husband, Mort, came by and talked to me about examining her. When we make camp tonight, I’d like to have you help me scrub down the inside of the wagon with some good lye soap water. Also, I need to wash all my bandages again. I think they’d dry overnight.”

“Be glad to. I heard Jeb talkin’ about early camp.”

“Let’s do it then. Also, maybe we’ll have time to cook a little extra. I’m tired of nothing but beans and bacon and cold biscuits. I’m hungry for some dumplings. I think I’ll use the last of those St. Joe apples and make us some. If I put the apples on to boil when we first make camp, they should be ready for our dessert. I’ll peel them now while we ride along.”

“How ‘bout Jeb?”

“What about him?”

“Why don’t ya ask him to eat with us? That Cookie’s fixins are awful.”

“I don’t know about that. Cookie’s food smells pretty bad, but that doesn’t mean Jeb would eat with us. Especially me.”

"Well, I'll just go ask him and see. Here, ya take the reins and I'll go catch him. I'll bribe him with them apple dumplings." Glory laughed.

When she returned she was chuckling, "It worked. Ya know the old sayin' about the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?"

Rachel interrupted. "That hardly applies here. It may work for a man with a heart, but I'm not convinced it includes Jeb Morgan."

Glory ignored the remark. "I told the other gals. They're gonna put on dresses and fix up. Make it kinda a comin' out party for ya. Now that yer nigh on to healed. Ya do the same. Marie's a comin' to fix yer hair."

"Now whose being meddlesome, Glorietta Baxter? You're a regular matchmaker. If we take you with us to the Joaquin, you'll have us all married inside a week."

"Me included, 'course."

"You included. Matter of fact I think I should introduce you to Cousin Martin. It would surely be like the old adage of 'Greek meeting Greek.'"

"Don't know what that means. Ain't got nothin' to do with the Trojan horse, does it? But about Martin. Is he a big manly man? Bein' a blacksmith and all. Yep, that's what I like. A manly man." Glory made that famous clucking sound of hers.

It was not quite sundown when Jeb arrived wearing a clean shirt as well as sporting a new shave. When Jimmy saw him, he came running. "Morgan, Morgan. Hold me."

"Hi, Scout, you been a good boy?" With Jimmy in tow, much to Rachel's surprise, he circled around the fire until he could sit next to her.

The fire crackled and the aroma of good home-cooking filled the air. "Smells good," Jeb told the women.

Iris said. "I do a pretty good job if I do say so myself. We've got stew and cornbread and then you can tell by a cinnamony, sweet smell that Rachel's dumplings are waiting." She grinned at Rachel.

Jeb looked at Rachel until she rose, taking his plate to the fire to be filled.

"Mr. Morgan, how are we doing? Are we making good progress? I'd think so as long as our days have been." Marie asked.

"I'm pleased. Real pleased. We've been making good time. Have to remember though here and up through the Platte River country is the easy part of the trip. It's when we turn up over the mountains, the going gets rough." He began eating. "This is the best meal I've had since we left St. Joe. I thank you folks."

Iris said. "We've plenty here. Do you think Andy and Cookie would like to come over? Glory, would you go ask them?"

"I know those boys. They were green-eyed with envy when they heard you inviting me. They'll be right over. Ask Andy to bring his fiddle. We might as well have a little music."

An impromptu party and dance began as people from the other wagons came drifting by. One settler had a Jew's harp and he joined in to harmonize with Cookie.

"Play something slow so I can dance," Iris begged. After that a series of waltzes echoed through the night, softening the bleakness of the vast horizon. Then one by one, the stars came out with a large silver moon hovering above them.

Jeb pulled Rachel to her feet. "We might as well give it a whirl. If you aren't going to say anything, we might as well dance." He gave her a grin. And dance they did, in perfect rhythm with Jeb holding her lightly and looking down at her.

Finally Rachel said, "I guess I'm not quite up to snuff. I have got to rest now. Though I have to admit I enjoyed it."

"That's fine. It's time to sit out anyway. We need to talk. There's a place just over there on the creek bank where we can go." He led her forward, though she pulled back slightly at first.

"I don't know, Jeb. What will the others think?"

"Do you care?" Then he grimaced, "I'm sorry, it was a rotten thing to say. I know you care and maybe I ought to consider what other people think a little more myself." He

smoothed an unruly lock of hair back from his forehead. "Anyway, we won't be far away. We just need some privacy."

Jeb spread his jacket for her. The moon reflected off the water with dancing, rippling beams. A frog croaked while a dove cooed goodnight to his mate. A cooling breeze swept through the grove of trees carrying the musical sounds from the camp above.

Rachel was apprehensive. Jeb had chosen a romantic setting, but she was unsure why.

"Rachel, I want to apologize for what I said the other day when you were so sick and all. I'll have to admit I was a little hard on you."

"A little hard?" she asked.

Jeb lowered his head, beginning again. "Guess I was thinking of myself and I didn't quite know how to handle the situation. You scared me. When I looked down and saw you being thrown against the boat with the tree on you in all that terrible, black water, my heart was in my boots. I could hardly breathe." He gazed at her.

"I can understand. Maybe I acted too hastily, but I'm afraid I'd do it again just the same way." She rested her hand on his arm. "It isn't the first time I've been told I'm too headstrong by a man. Back in Pennsylvania—"

Jeb stopped her. "When I thought of it, I realized how brave you'd really been. If it would've been my son, I'd have wanted you to do just what you did. Anyway, I reacted the way I did because of my past."

He rose going to the elm that sheltered them, and leaned back against the rough trunk. He hesitated. "I don't talk about this to just anyone, you know." He pleaded slightly as he reached up, grabbing a handful of leaves to rub together in his hand.

"I understand. Please go on."

"I was only about twenty and working for a freight line owner by the name of Ira Swanson. It was back in Ohio. He had a daughter, Muriel, just my age. She had the most beautiful

golden hair and blue eyes in the world. In fact, Iris reminds me a lot of her. A little quieter, of course. Well, I fell head over heels for her. I didn't dream I had a chance of winning her, for every gent for miles around came courting and I was the youngest and poorest of the lot. But I did. She chose me and we were married. Her dad liked me so that part was easy, even though she was the Swanson's only child.

"Ira warned me she had a bad heart and the doctor had told him any kind of stress would be too hard for her. He also told me she shouldn't have a child. It would be too much for her. She was determined that was just what she would do. She wanted a baby more than anything. That's the only thing we ever fought about.

"Anyway, she turned up pregnant about a year after we were married. The doctor said he could get rid of the baby. Her pa pleaded and I pleaded, but she would have none of it. Her pregnancy seemed to go along pretty well at first. During her seventh month, I was gone on a trip taking some freight clear over to Independence when she got sick. She went into what they called early labor and lost the baby. All of that was too much strain on her heart. She died a couple of days later.

"By the time I got home, she and the baby boy were both out in the graveyard. I didn't even get a chance to say good-bye." Jeb's voice failed him.

"Oh, Jeb, how awful for you."

"Even now I remember how it was, looking down on her grave. The ground was fresh dug and there was this large mound and the tiny one beside it. Standing there, it was as if my world had come to an end. What I wanted most at that moment was to die. I was the coldest, emptiest any person could ever feel inside." He tucked his arms against him then shivered slightly.

"I felt so darned guilty. If I had put my foot down and taken care of her, Muriel would still be alive. Somehow the day on the river with you, it all came back to me." He rubbed his boots across the grass. "I didn't know how to feel except angry,

mainly at myself. I swore I would never get so involved with another person again because I couldn't chance being hurt in the same way.. There I was standing on that deck knowing I was getting involved again. Exactly what I'd sworn I'd never do."

"Oh, Jeb, I didn't understand. Please forgive me for being so prideful with you." She rose going to him. She took his arms away from their protective fold on his body and grasped his hand. "It wasn't your fault about Muriel, you know. You must not feel guilty. You did what you could, and there is no guilt in love. Muriel cared for you so much she was willing to take a chance with her life to have your baby. I think I can understand how she felt." Rachel paused. "Now she would want you to go on with your life. To celebrate the love you had."

They stood silently together, unsure of the rising tide of emotion between them. He reached to embrace her, but she turned quietly and said, "We'd better go now. But thank you for sharing these things with me."

When they reached the camp, the fire was burning low with the dancers returning to their own wagons. They walked to Rachel's wagon. Again, Jeb reached for her hand and this time kissed it. "Good night, Rachel. Maybe I should reconsider what's important in life." Then he turned and, whistling softly, walked briskly to his own wagon.

Rachel lay awake thinking of the events of this night and of Jeb. Never had she been so affected by the emotion in one person's life. She ached for him and his sorrows. She thought of Alfonse. How different he was from Jeb. What was it he had said about the settlers crossing the Missouri and it being their Rubicon? Well, she hadn't known it, but she had been crossing a Rubicon of her own. She looked at the star-laden sky through the opening at the back of the wagon for a very long time. She had always prided herself on being a woman of restraint and logic. Now she felt very unsure of herself and her emotions. Finally, after much tossing and turning, she capitulated and fell asleep.

~ * ~

In the morning, Marie switched wagons with Iris. Andy was busy again so Rachel drove, leaving the two of them alone.

"I'm glad to get to talk to you, Rach. I really haven't been with you much since the crossing. I have something for you." Marie spread out a blue gingham dress on her lap. "It should just fit. See, it has a white collar and a straight skirt with a bustle in the back. It will really bring out your figure the way I've gathered it over the bosom."

"It's wonderful. Thank you. Take the team so I can look at it." She laid the garment across her lap. "What fine work you do. I don't see how you could cut it and sew it with all these bumpy roads."

"Did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself." Marie laughed. "Just think of it as a gift from Jimmy. After all, we want you to look nice for the wagon master," she jibed. "Especially after last night."

Rachel's color rose. "We are getting along better now—Jeb and I."

"So it seems. What about the California marriage pool?"

"I don't know. We still have a very long way to go."

"Oh, Rach, I didn't mean to pry. But I know men well enough to know Jeb Morgan's got a certain look in his eye. You know I blame it all on Eve."

"Eve?"

"Yes, Eve and that damned apple." Rachel couldn't help herself as they both laughed.

~ * ~

The next day, Rachel continued doing her own driving. Andy was needed to scout, so Glory returned to driving the other wagon while Iris came to ride with her.

When the train stopped for morning break, Rachel received the first of her many patients. Mary Johnson brought her eight-year-old son, Sam, for Rachel to examine. He had jumped off the tailgate of their moving wagon the night before. Mary thought the leg was just bruised and tender; but, when Rachel

examined him, she found it was a fracture. Making him as comfortable as possible, she set it, placing it in a splint.

Jeb rode back to see what the delay was. "Rach, is everything all right?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for the delay, but Sam had a broken leg and I had to set it. Any other patients can wait until we make camp tonight." She smiled at him and he answered with a humorous wink. *I'd never noticed before but his eyes are the same color as the sky, azure blue.*

A comfortable pattern developed for Rachel's days and she saw patients when the train rested and always at night camp. Iris, Marie, and Glory helped her with much of the routine work of cleaning and cooking. The days were tiring and long but there was always one thing made her day—Jeb's visits. Sometimes, he could break away during the day coming to take the reins from her when they could chat or sit in companionable silence. After supper, which he now always shared with the women, she walked with him as he made his evening rounds. She could always be assured they were in clear and visible sight of the rest of the camp limiting their physical affection to a small pat on the back, a clasping of hands or a spontaneous laugh and meeting of the eyes.

Rachel told herself this would keep things in perspective for both of them. Though at other times, she wondered just what was really happening to both of them. *Yes, there's always, Eve and that darned apple to contend with.*

~ * ~

One day about noon, Rachel detected a terrible smell, a stench, coming from beyond the next hill. The sky was literally blackened by flocks of vultures and other carrion. "It's the smell of death." She exclaimed to Iris. She looked up to see Jeb mounted on Prince with his hand raised in a signal to halt.

Andy, having scouted ahead, rode up to Jeb. Rachel could barely hear the words. "There are dead buffalo everywhere up ahead. The skinners have killed them. Took their hides and left their carcasses to rot. There's wolves and all kinds of animals

lurking around. Don't think they'll bother us none. They're busy feasting. The horses will be kind of nervous though. There's too big a herd of them buffalo to circle around. Anyway, we have to follow the trail."

Jeb signaled the drivers to come up where they could meet. "There's a whole herd of slaughtered buffalo ahead. Work of those danged hidlers. Anyway, there are lots of scavengers. They won't bother you, but try to control your horses. They'll get pretty nervous over this mess. Put your handkerchief over your nose. Put the rest of the people in back of your wagons. Kids and women don't need to see this."

"Rachel, Andy'll drive for you. I don't think Roan and Bud will get skittish, but you can't tell. I'd do it but I've got to try to keep the wagons moving."

Rachel was not prepared for the scene that lay ahead of her. A whole herd of buffalo had been wiped out, leaving only the rotting clumps of meat. Scavengers from the air and the ground gorged themselves while clouds of flies swarmed everywhere, descending even onto their wagons. How Rachel had wanted to see those magnificent beasts, but not in this state of carnage. She was filled with revulsion.

"Andy, who would do such a thing?"

"Hiders. They the same as killed the Indians who depend on these animals. It's a dirty, rotten shame, too."

Jeb led the wagons through this valley of death without thought or mention of a morning break. The sun was well up in the afternoon sky before they first rested well away from the putrid odor, but nothing could clear the devastating picture from Rachel's mind.

Over the far horizon a rider was approaching at breakneck speed. When the figure came closer, Rachel could see it was an Indian girl riding bareback, holding on to her paint's mane and leaning forward over his neck in an effort to stay mounted.

Jeb ran toward her with Rachel on his heels. He grabbed the pony just as the girl fell to the ground.

Turning her over, he questioned her. "What's the matter?"

"Help. Help me," she moaned before she fainted.

"I wonder who she is?" He carried the girl to Rachel's wagon. "Better look her over. Looks like she's had a bad accident."

Rachel drew a breath. The girl looked to be only about fifteen, thin and emaciated. She would be lovely with large dark eyes and clear olive complexion if it were not for her dirty, ragged appearance. Her left eye was nearly swollen shut and there were scratches and bruises over her arms and legs.

The girl moaned. Then becoming aware of her surroundings, she pleaded, "Help me. Help me. Don't let him find me. Please."

"That's all right. Just let me look at you." Rachel tried to comfort her.

"This is no accident. Someone beat her. Jeb, do the Indians beat their women?"

"Not that I know of. I think she's a Kickapoo and those people are calm and quiet. Smell that stench. She's been with a buffalo hunter. I'd bet on that."

"Just look at her. Someone's even cut her with a knife. Look at that gash on her arm." Rachel began cleaning the girl's wounds.

"What's your name?"

"I'm called Little Deer."

"Little Deer, I'm going to undress you so I can check you over. I'll try to be very gentle so I won't hurt you." Rachel waved the bystanders away and closed the canvas flap on the wagon, letting only Glory remain.

"Who did this, Little Deer?"

"Hunk."

"Who's Hunk?" the girl began crying, but Rachel persisted. "We can't help you unless you tell us who hurt you."

"Hunk hunts buffalo. He says I am his woman. He bought me from my father for three horses." Little Deer made a choking sound and then added, "He got drunk last night and he beat me." The girl became rigid, her eyes wide with fright.

"Glory, don't we still have some milk we bought from the farmer this morning? Pour some for her while I bathe her." After Rachel finished and Little Deer drank the milk, Rachel gave her a spoon of laudanum to ease the pain.

Jeb came to the back of the wagon. "We've got to be on our way, Rachel. Can't we travel now?"

"She'll sleep for a while. Go ahead. I expect we might have a visitor later on. A buffalo hunter called Hunk. He thinks he owns her."

"For Pete's sake. That's all we need—a run-in with a bunch of hidlers."

"We can't let him take her. He'd probably kill her now."

"Doesn't she have any kin?"

"I doubt it. Her pa sold her for three horses."

"We'll take her with us, but I can't jeopardize this train even for her." He gave Rachel a stern look. "Remember, Rachel, no saving the whole world." Jeb turned and mounted Prince.

When Jeb left, Rachel motioned to Glory to come drive the wagon, sending Andy back to take her place on the other wagon. She said, "I think we're in for a fight. That buffalo scum is bound to try to claim her, and Jeb doesn't want to jeopardize us with a confrontation. Oh, Glory, I don't know what to do. I know he has the best interest of the people on the train at heart."

Glory looked back at the sleeping girl. "She's awful young. That buzzard of a hunter." Glory thought for a minute. "Are the rifles still in the boot? I'd better get 'em loaded. See, there was a reason we brought 'em. Not the reason we thought, but still a reason."

"You and I can't stand up against Hunk and any friends he might have." Rachel cleared her throat. "I'm afraid if I go against Jeb, he'll never forgive me."

"Ya mean ya wouldn't fight fer her?"

"Oh, Glory, you don't know what you're asking of me," Rachel wailed, bending down so the older woman couldn't see

the turmoil on her face. "I just don't think he would ever forgive me. Not if I jeopardized the whole train."

Rachel looked out and saw Jeb sitting so upright and commanding riding Prince at the head of the wagons. Her heart rolled over with the emotion she now was beginning to recognize as love. *Why am I so often beset with these moral dilemmas? Why can't I just mope along like everybody else?*

After a few miles, Glory called back to Rachel. "The women on the train—they'd help ya. Why don't ya ask 'em?" Glory stopped the wagon. "Jest jump off and go talk to Mary Johnson and Grace Ganzer and the others."

"Grace Ganzer is expecting any time. I couldn't ask her to get involved."

"Maybe not—but all these women got plenty of grit or they'd not be here. Go on. Ask." Glory literally shoved her from the wagon.

With her shoes feeling as if they were filled with stones, Rachel started slowly to the Johnson wagon. When she reached it, she found Mary Johnson walking outside along the back wheels.

"Rachel, I'm surprised to see you here. How is the girl?"

"Pretty sick. She'll survive but she took a horrible beating."

"You mean it wasn't an accident?"

"No, a buffalo hunter bought her for his woman. He got drunk and beat her. She's terrified of him."

"And she's just a young girl. It's awful."

"I know. I'm afraid Hunk, she calls him, will be coming after her soon."

"Did you tell Jeb?"

"Yes," Rachel replied, her voice slipping into a monotone.

"What did he say?"

"Just that he couldn't risk the wagon train's getting involved."

"I imagine that is just what all the men would say, too. Isn't it?" Mary stopped, looking into the distance. "You know we all came here to find a better life. We risked everything. But if we

let this Hunk take her, would it be the beginning of a better life even for us?" She frowned, mopping her brow and taking off her sunbonnet.

Rachel shook her head helplessly.

"Rachel, the women of this train will rally around you. I just know it," Mary said with determination in her voice. "If the men won't support you in saving this girl, the women will. Our men won't oppose us if they want to eat our meals and spend blissful nights with us." Turning she added, "I'll talk to the other women for you. Just go back to your patient." She clapped Rachel on the back.

Mary paused. "Rachel, you're the one making the sacrifice by going against Jeb. Are you willing to pay such a price?" She eyed Rachel somberly.

"Do I have a choice?" Rachel's voice cracked slightly. She turned and walked slowly back to her own wagon, kicking pebbles in front of her down the sun-baked trail. Everyone had warned her of the terrible hardships lying between Pennsylvania and California. She had thought of the physical trials, but she had not imagined such emotional pain.

Five

The Buffalo Hunters

Rachel spent the afternoon, of the day Little Deer came, looking at the horizon to see any strange riders, who might be approaching. As the wagons wound along the trail, she saw Mary Johnson going from wagon to wagon talking with first one woman and then another. Rachel knew she was gathering support for the protection of the Indian girl. How Rachel prayed she would not need this support and that the hidlers would not come looking for Little Deer.

Jeb led the wagon train forward to a late camp that evening. Glory said to Rachel, "He's bound and determined to make them fifteen miles a day. Guess he knows best, but my bones are tired."

"Little Deer's still sleeping so I guess we can cook now. We just need to listen for her. I don't want her to wake up and be afraid," Rachel told her.

Marie came to them saying, "Rachel, I have this old dress. I think it'll just about fit Little Deer. Her clothes looked so bad and smelled awful. I'd wash them but I don't think I could ever get them clean. Just use these for her."

"That's thoughtful," Rachel told her.

"I know what it's like to take such a beating I—I..." Marie left the sentence unfinished. Rachel wanted to question the

meaning, but she decided against it. Maybe, just maybe, Marie would reveal the secret she had hidden within, but Marie had to choose the time for it herself.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Rachel, why don't you model your new gingham dress tonight? You'll have to clean up anyway from tending Little Deer's wounds, and we'd like to see you in it. Especially, that handsome wagon master of yours." Marie grinned and walked away.

Marie was right. The new dress did lighten the mood at supper. There hadn't been much time to prepare food so it wasn't a very festive affair otherwise. As they were eating, Little Deer roused and Rachel coaxed her into taking some broth before she fell asleep again.

"Your patient seems to be doing all right, Rachel. Come make my rounds with me," Jeb told her.

The night was pleasant with a damp breeze blowing out of the east, cooling the land that became more and more blistered as the summer gained sway over the spring.

They walked through the camp with Jeb checking the teams and wagons. He stopped to talk to a group of men when Mary Johnson drew Rachel aside. "I've talked to most of the women and you have their support in case you need it." She drew a breath. "Perhaps the hunters have given up trying to find her. Hopefully. But I'm proud of the spunk of our women. Well, I'd best be going and get little Sam into bed."

When Jeb caught up with Rachel, she turned to him, saying, "I need to go back and check on my patient again. Can you come sit with me on the wagon seat for a while?"

"It's like the gals used to ask me to sit on the porch for a while isn't it? Some day I'll have a porch of my own. Maybe you'd like to sit on it with me." Grinning with slight embarrassment, he boosted her up. "You do like porches don't you, Rach?"

"Of course, but where will this porch be?"

"I have a friend—an Indian I used to hunt with in southern California. He found this valley, right in the middle of a dry,

arid region down there. It has a small river running through it, and it keeps the grass green almost all year long. It was part of an original Spanish land grant. Anyway, he talked Señor Zapata, an old widower, into selling it to me.”

Jeb looked into the sunset. “The land’s paid for. I just made this one last trip to get money to buy the livestock for it. I need to build a house. It just has an old line shack on it now. That’s where Joe, my Indian friend, is living while I’m gone. Does that sound inviting to you, Rach?”

“I’m sure it’s a wonderful country. Or are you asking me about the porch you’re going to build?” she giggled.

He cleared his throat. “Rachel Williams, you know what I’m getting at. The valley would be the perfect place for us. I’m proposing if it’s not too soon...” his voice trailed off.

“Maybe we’d better wait. We’ve had a chance to get to know each other traveling like we’ve done, but there are so many miles lying ahead of us. So many issues we have to solve.”

Shock rippling through his voice, he said, “Is that a no?”

“Of course not. I’m highly flattered. What about the marriage pool, Jeb?”

“Well, I’ve thought of that. You didn’t sign a contract. I’ll refund your travel expenses and all. I guess, under the circumstances, it’s about all I can do. Maybe they can send to Pennsylvania for some more gals. Unfortunately for them, you’re taken.” He leaned forward and kissed her, holding her against him. “I’ve wanted to do that since the night we first talked on the creek bank.”

“Jeb, can you accept me the way I am—headstrong and independent? As much as I care for you, I probably can’t change.” She lowered her eyes.

Just then Little Deer called from inside the wagon. “I guess I’d better go see about her. Good night, my dear one.”

Rachel stood and watched him leave. *Oh, Jeb, will you still want me if I stand against your orders in a confrontation?*

Little Deer roused several times in the night to ask for a drink. Rachel was relieved that she seemed more lucid and it lessened her fear the girl had been injured internally. By morning, it was clear she would recover.

A procession of women came by to meet the girl bringing gifts of clothing and food. Little Deer was so young and so fragile she endeared herself to all who came to meet her.

~ * ~

Rachel's worst fears of a confrontation with the buffalo hunters were validated. At sunset, she looked up to see three burly men come riding out of a clump of trees ahead.

The largest of the three waved to Jeb, calling out, "Hey, there, I see you found my little Indian gal. Saw her pony back with your mules." He approached the train and reined in his horse. "Hope the little thing's all right. Her horse ran away with her and she fell off the other day. Same thing must have happened again."

"Little Deer, if that's who you mean, is here all right," Jeb answered. "But she's badly hurt and she's with the doctor."

"You have a doctor, do you? Well, gracious alive, that's mighty handy. Has he fixed her up, yet?" His squinting eyes assessed the strength of the camp, belying his friendly tone.

"It's Dr. Rachel Martin. She says the girl needs some rest." Jeb eyed the three with suspicion as the stench of the men wafted toward him. "Why don't you let her spend the night with the train and then we'll talk in the morning?"

He ignored Jeb's question. "Did you hear him boys? The trains got a doctor and she's a woman. Now ain't that somethin'?"

The other two approached cautiously, looking over the situation with short, furtive glances. They pulled their horses on either side of Hunk.

"I couldn't inconvenience you no more. We'll just pick her up and we'll be on our way. Sure was neighborly of you to take her in, though." Hunk dismounted and brushing past Jeb, he

walked directly toward what he had correctly surmised was Rachel's wagon.

The wagons had come to a complete halt as all eyes rested on the heavysset hunter. Glory and Rachel clamored down from their wagon and stepped into his path.

"That's far enough, fellow." Glory warned. She and Rachel raised their guns in unison.

Hunk merely laughed. "You gals think you can take on ole Hunk, do you?" He motioned to his two companions to come help him.

Morton Ganzer's voice rang out. "It's not just these gals facing up to you, Hunk. Look around ya." Ten men, with guns raised, came forward encircling the three as the women watched silently.

Hunk raised his arm. "Now, boys, don't get excited. We just want what's ours. If you feel that strong about it, we'll leave peaceful like." He sauntered with an arrogant strut to his horse.

"Don't nary come back neither." Glory hissed. "Or I'll report you to the territorial marshal when we get up to the Platte. You know we been missin' things and I'll bet yer the ones stealin' from us. Now git."

Heads held high, the three rode off into the trees from where they had come. Once out of sight, the people from the train heard them galloping away as if lightning were about to strike them.

Rachel turned to the men. "I thank you. I won't ever forget this. You know you saved the girl's life."

All of them began laughing and talking—everyone except Jeb Morgan who gave Rachel a troubled look before signaling the group to circle for the night.

Rachel leaned weakly against the wagon and then turned to Glory. "Whew, that's over. Incidentally, what things have we been missing?"

"Well, if you got them wives to use blackmail on their men, what's a little fib to go with it?" Rachel shook her head at Glory's words.

"I'm so relieved, but I know Jeb is furious with me. He thinks I went behind his back. Worst of all—betrayed him. I don't know if he'll ever forgive me."

Rachel had little time to reflect on this for she heard Little Deer crying. She went in to comfort her as she wiped tears of relief and worry from her own eyes.

~ * ~

Jeb, for the first time in several weeks, did not come for supper with the women that night nor any of the following nights. Any communication necessary from Jeb from then on came through Andy or Glory. Not only did Jeb not give her the time of day, he did not even glance at her. It was as if she no longer existed for him. In return, Rachel grieved over her loss.

The one consoling fact was Little Deer recovered completely. Never had one human being been so grateful for life and freedom. Every day she did some special thing for Rachel and every day she told her, "Thank you. Thank you for my life."

Little Deer soon became a favorite of the camp, being forever helpful by showing the women where to pick berries or how to best cook game. Iris undertook the girl's education by reading stories from the Bible, an arcane version with a unique dialect. It was not long before Little Deer began sounding like a special religious sect with her thou's and thee's. One important change was she adopted the Christian name of Mary, based on the story of Mary Magdalene.

"Mary" had other effects on the people. A driver came to Rachel with a hugely infected arm. It had started simply enough with a mosquito bite he had scratched. Rachel cleaned it and bandaged the open wound to keep out dirt and other insects. Even so, with the beginnings of a fever, red streaks began to shoot out from the sore.

Mary, who often helped Rachel, saw the man's plight. "Thou needs the moss that grows by trees."

"Moss?" Rachel asked. "I don't know what you mean. Can you show me?"

Mary mounted her pony. "You wait, I'll come back."

When she returned, she handed the grayish, green mass to Rachel, who proceeded to try to wash it. "No." the girl took the weed and unwrapped the wound putting it directly on the sore. Then she secured it in place under the bandage.

The driver looked at Rachel. "Will this work?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"I don't really know, but we haven't much to lose. I remember reading something about such a plant, but I had never seen it."

The next day the driver was better but Mary insisted on leaving the moss on the wound. "How many days should he wear it?" Rachel asked. Mary raised the fingers on both hands.

When the ten days were up, the wound was healed and all signs of fever were gone. Rachel asked, "Mary, can you tell me about other medicines your people use?"

She nodded while Rachel drew out a journal and began to write as best she could, interpreting the girl's information. "How do you know these things?"

"My grandfather was the medicine man in my tribe," she answered proudly with her head held high and eyes sparkling. "He used to take me with him when he gathered the sacred plants."

~ * ~

It was hard for Rachel to believe the normal routine was going on all about her when her loneliness and mourning for Jeb left her so devastated. It was as if she were an island alone amidst a sea of activity. She did what was required of her but only very mechanically.

Late one afternoon Andy came bringing some quail he had shot. "Iris, do you think you could fix these for our supper? I really think you'd have better luck than Cookie with these." He laughed a little.

"I'd be glad to try," Iris told him. By sunset, the fowl was emitting a most delightful aroma. Rachel was amused at how Iris had improvised. Without cream or milk, she had made a

unique brown gravy of flour moistened by corn liquor and seasoned with some herbs Mary discovered along the trail. It was a gourmet dish cooked in the most primitive of circumstances, in a Dutch oven over an open fire.

Cookie and Andy came to eat; but, as usual, there was no sign of Jeb. "What is the wagon master eating tonight, boys?" Marie inquired in a mimicking way.

"Oh, he's still on duty. I think he's out by the crick over there." Andy pointed to a place beyond the perimeter of the wagons.

"Rachel, why don't you take him a plate? He has to try some of this quail." Marie said.

"I-I don't know." Rachel hesitated.

"Oh, sure. You are the very one to do it." All eyes turned to her.

"All right. If you insist." She filled a plate with the hot food and started to where Jeb was supposed to be.

Despite herself, Rachel felt a ray of hope. Maybe, just maybe, this gesture would appease him. When he was within her sight, she saw he was not alone. A young settler girl was talking to him. Lizzie Brown had long dark hair, a winning smile, and a budding figure, none of which had been lost on the men of the train.

Rachel was too far away to hear the words but the body language spoke for itself. Lizzie was leaning forward, enthralled by his every word. He in turn was laughing and talking, gesturing in pleasure. To be sure, the girl appeared the aggressor but Jeb was not repulsing her.

"It doesn't take long for the vultures to seize an opportunity," she mumbled to herself. "This much I know. Jeb Morgan is not all business. He's a lot more human than I thought."

Although she could hardly force herself forward, Rachel interrupted the conversation. "Oh, Jeb, I didn't know you were busy. We fixed this plate of quail for you. You really need to eat it while it's hot."

Lizzie turned, trying to conceal her anger. "Oh, Doctor Rachel, I was just leaving. Bye, now." She turned and smiled at Jeb.

"Iris did a wonderful job on this bird. Andy and Cookie came to share it so we thought you'd like some, too. I'll just sit down and wait so I can take the plate back."

Jeb said nothing. Rachel sat praying he would begin the conversation. Finally he said, "Why did you really come, Rachel?"

"I haven't seen you to talk to you in all these days. I guess I missed you." She lowered her eyes. If it was humility he wanted or an apology, she would gladly give it. She felt her face grow warm as he surveyed her coolly.

"I haven't had anything to say to you. You know what danger you put us in! Those hidlers could have laid in wait and shot us." A look of pain crossed his eyes. "As far as that goes, we may still not be out of the woods with them."

"Oh, Jeb, I had no choice in the matter. Even Glory insisted we take a stand. Mary Johnson organized the women and I had to stand behind my principles. Please, Jeb. Try to understand." Although the last thing she wanted to do was cry, that was exactly what she did. He handed her his kerchief.

He shook his head and said in a soft voice, "You're not above using feminine wiles, are you?"

Rachel shook her head in return. She detested her position of a blubbering schoolgirl.

His blue eyes bored into hers and then softened. "Since you've come to me with an apology, I will as they say 'cogitate' on the matter." He handed her the empty plate, "Tell Iris it was very good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." He placed his hat on his head pulling the brim down over his eyes and with his shoulders slightly stooped, strode off to his wagon.

Rachel sat watching him disappear. She tried to assess any progress she had made. Maybe even his cogitating could be considered a step forward. *No situation is ever black or white. The responsibility of the wagon train and its people weigh heavily on Jeb Morgan as did my commitment to Mary.*

~ * ~

One morning Rachel and Glory were in the wagon when Rachel pointed to the sky asking, "Are those vultures circling ahead?"

"Yep, 'spect so."

"Not slaughtered buffalo, I hope?"

"Naw nothin' so big. There'd be more birds than them."

"That's some relief. But something is dead."

Just then Andy rode into camp hailing Jeb. The women couldn't hear the conversation, but the men rode quickly out of camp toward the area where the vultures marked the sky.

"Wonder what it's all about?" Glory asked.

In a few minutes, Jeb returned, raising his hand to halt the wagons and then signaling to the drivers to join him. When they were assembled, he said, "The water hole ahead has been poisoned. Some stray cattle drank from it and are dead. Lucky for us they found it first and this warned us." He pushed his hat back on his head.

Someone asked, "Who'd do such a rotten thing?"

"Can't know for sure, but I'd lay money it's those damn hidlers, getting even."

There was a grumbling sound from the men. One said, "You wuz right about the Indian girl. She brought us plenty of trouble."

Jeb cleared his throat, "That's over and done, too late to change now."

One of the other drivers said, "We could turn her out now and they'd find her and leave us alone."

"Never. The decision was made, I didn't agree with it, but we've got to take responsibility now." Jeb took a stick and leaned over to mark a crude map in the dust. "Had hoped to fill our water barrels and let the horses drink there." He circled a spot in the dust. "That's out. We'll just have a dry trek to the next spring, here. About two days away." He drew an x for their destination.

"I'm sending Andy and a couple of other drivers to guard the next spring."

Sounds of disgust rose from the men. "It's nothing we can't handle. Just have to conserve the water we have. We've had dry camps before and probably will again. Now we best get started."

He turned and mounted Prince, leading the wagons forward.

With trepidation, Rachel heard Jeb's words about the spring; but the fact he would not abandon Mary showed a depth of character she cherished. *It'll be hell to pay tonight when I see him, but I understand. I do understand.*

~ * ~

That evening, after she had eaten, Rachel spotted Jeb making his rounds. She walked up quietly behind him, finally falling into step beside him. Glancing askance at her, he said nothing. At last, she broke the silence. "I'm sorry about the watering spring..." He gazed at her with an all too familiar look of pain shining in his blue eyes.

"I know."

Laying her arm softly on his sleeve, she felt the coarse fabric of his shirt over deeply muscled arms. "But I was so proud of you when you didn't abandon Mary."

Eyes narrowed, he answered, "You know I couldn't once I've committed. Besides, I have to admit it really wasn't the girl's fault to begin with." Pointing to a nearby log, he said, "Let's sit over there and talk."

The sun released the day with a burst of pink, gold, and faded orange while a soft breeze cooled the approaching night. His presence, both exciting and frightening to her, Rachel sat waiting for him to begin.

"Rachel, I'm not a tyrant or a monster. The decisions I make are hard—very hard. I have to be as objective as possible, based on the common good. Surely, as a doctor, you've had to make just this kind of judgment." He looked at her in a way that pled for understanding.

She sat thinking of the right thing to say. "Yes, I have. Unfortunately, not all my decisions have been right either." She sighed.

"I've sent a messenger into town to report our problems

with Hunk. I imagine the army will be hunting him down so we shouldn't have to worry, or at least I hope not. Besides, we'll soon be out of the hidlers' area."

"I'm so thankful."

Jeb took her hand, raising her to her feet and the solemn air lifted as they returned to her wagon. Then abruptly he smiled and reached for one of her auburn locks, pushing it back behind her ear. "Good night, my curlylocks."

Each day the train made its required fifteen miles of travel until finally Andy came riding in to Jeb, waving his arms and thrusting his hand, pointing to the hill ahead. "The Platte is just over the ridge. There's another train camped there already. The Hiram Wilson train. He says he knows you."

Jeb rode through the wagons telling the drivers, "The Platte's up ahead. We'll make camp and rest a couple of days. The Hiram Wilson train is there so we'll go up river and find a site above theirs. The water's always cleaner there."

Jeb gave this information to Rachel and then winked slyly at her. "He isn't angry with thee now?" asked Mary, who was sitting beside her. "Was it because of me?"

"No, Mary, it was something else. Something deeper. He feels betrayed."

"I don't understand. He likes thee. I know."

Rachel patted the girl. "I don't understand either. Hurt pride."

"Is this pride bad?"

"Well, the Bible tells us so, especially if it's stronger than love." When she uttered this answer, she suddenly understood the problem better. *That's it. A matter of pride. Perhaps it's my pride, too. We both need to grow and understand each other.*

Rachel was brought back to reality by Mary's voice. "I'm sorry but I am glad we are here. I have never seen this river. My father talked of it.

"We are well on our way. It's on this side of the Rubicon."

"Rubicon?"

"Never mind. Let's just enjoy the next few days of rest. Just one thing. I hope Grace Ganzer can have her baby while we're stopped. It's really overdue and the baby is so big. I'm going to bring Grace over here to examine her when we make camp."

After Rachel had examined Grace, she told her, "I think we need to try to bring the baby now while we're stopped. Before he gets any larger."

"Guess he's going to take after Mort in size and all. You think it's a boy, don't you?"

"Whatever it is, it will be a wonderful child with parents like you two. Anyway, first things first. I'm going to give you some castor oil. It'll kind of work you, but it should bring labor. You're already beginning to dilate."

She handed Grace the bottle of medicine. "We'll see what happens." Rachel smiled, helping Grace down from the tailgate. "Let me know when your labor pains come. It's better that way." She spoke calmly and with assurance, but Rachel felt anything but calm and assured.

She met Glory on the way back to her wagon. "Help me set up my table. We're going to cover it with some sheets. We're getting ready for a hard delivery, believe me. Then get Jeb. He's going to have to help me. Tell him to come to the Ganzer wagon. Oh, yes, and tell him to wash his hands. Hurry."

Rachel scarcely remembered a harder night. She was able to turn the baby, but it was still hard to deliver him. He was so large it took Jeb holding her by the waist and stabilizing her as she literally dragged the baby through the portals of life. But by midnight, Morton Williams Ganzer had arrived red-faced and protesting his entrance into this world.

It was with great relief Rachel lifted the canvas flap and displayed the baby to the waiting father. "Here he is. Your son."

Mort rushed forward taking his son and gazing down on this miracle. "And Grace? Is she all right?"

"She's a bit tired, but the bleeding is slacking off. She'll be all right. I'll tell you, I've done some praying this night,

though.” Rachel mopped her brow. “Go in now and rejoice with Grace. I’ll send Glory to sit with her in a few minutes.”

She turned to Jeb, “We can go now. It’s been quite a night for all of us.”

As Rachel and Jeb walked back to her wagon, she said, “Thanks for the help. I could not have delivered the child alone.” She looked at him, hoping against hope that the teamwork and the accomplishment of the night would help form a bond between them. Perhaps he would even reveal the solution for them, the one he had cogitated on.

“You are a skillful doctor, Rachel. I’m sure the Ganzers will be forever in your debt.” He raised her to the wagon seat.

“Would you like to sit on my *porch* for a while?” she asked invitingly.

“No, I think I’d best turn in. It’s been a long day.”

Rachel sat a long time on her *porch* alone. Finally, she rose to go inside, only to toss and turn, wondering just how things were between them. *He’s wrestling with himself. My skill as a doctor is a matter of pride for him, but it’s also a threat for our love. Someday this won’t prove to be a problem for a woman. Someday.* Finally from utter fatigue, she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

~ * ~

The sun was already up and the camp stirring when she awoke the next morning. Her arms and shoulders were sore from the exertion of the night before. She stretched, thinking to herself, *It’s another day.* Then she remembered, *Will it be another day without Jeb?* She went to see Grace and the new boy, which cheered her some.

Then she decided she would go wash the sheets and her own clothing in the river. When she asked Glory about it, she said, “There’s supposed to be some clear running water up the stream a ways. Why don’t ya go and take a soak while you’re at it. Might loosen up them muscles. I cud go with ya if ya wanted me to.”

"No, I'd like to be by myself for a while. I'll go far enough to insure my privacy. I might be gone a while. I'll spread the clothes to dry on the bank when I'm through."

Rachel strolled along, carrying her bundle of clothes and a bar of lye soap. The day was clear and warm and despite her loneliness, she felt encouraged at the thought of a leisurely bath. She had gone about a half mile when she heard the rushing of water. It was coming from a small falls on a tributary of the river itself. The water was cool and inviting as it bubbled clear and bright over a series of rocks coming to rest in a deep pool. The spot was shaded by trees and set back out of sight of the river. She began washing the sheets and her clothes, pounding them against the stones at the edge of the pool.

What the heck? She shed her clothes and began washing them too as she bathed. *It's been too long since I've gone skinny dipping.* She soaped her body and hair, diving down to rinse herself. It was then she sensed a presence. She looked up to see Jeb standing there gazing at her.

"Well, I wasn't expecting company." She was too far away from the bank to grab her clothes, which would do little good since they were wringing wet.

"I didn't think you were. I came to talk to you." He paused. "But guess this isn't the best time."

"No, I guess not. But even in here I can listen."

"Well, I've never known a woman quite like you except my ma. You're independent, strong and beautiful. Times are changing, but it's still hard for me to think of you working. Maybe it's selfish of me; but to tell the truth, it would be hard for me to share you with the whole world."

"Maybe you could learn..."

"I hope so. In fact, I'll have to. Guess the thought of you on the porch in Val Verde with me would be worth it."

To her surprise, he began pulling off his boots to join her in the water when suddenly a snapping of a twig caused him to turn. There stood Glory. "Oh, excuse me, I didn't know Rachel

had company.” She stuttered, “I—I was worried about you, Rach. Yer being gone so long and all.”

Jeb responded quickly. “I was just shaking a rock out of my boot. There, that’s better,” he explained. “Maybe you can find a towel for Rachel. I was just leaving.”

Rachel watched in dismay as he took his leave. Glory shrugged her shoulders, “Didn’t mean to come at sech a bad time.”

Grabbing a towel, Rachel said, “You came at exactly the right time. Just in time to gather in the clothes.”

“Well, now, I just meant—”

“You were not intruding. Hurry now, I need to get back to camp to see Grace and the baby.” Rachel felt disappointment and yet relief. *How could I be so easily swept off my feet? He offers a porch a thousand miles away and I acted like that?*

~ * ~

Jeb hurried along. *How embarrassing for both of us. What am I getting into anyway? I think I love the woman, but aren’t we too very different to ever make a life together? She had more sense than I do when she said we should wait a little. And how about my responsibilities? A good general puts his troops first and gives them his undivided attention.*

Then he remembered something his mother had said to him when he had his first girl. “Wait until you find a woman who makes your heart sing. Then marry her.” Well, Muriel had done that for him, but could it happen a second time with Rachel?

~ * ~

When they all returned they found the women had prepared a meal of fried prairie chicken with vegetables and hot biscuits. “Come set and eat ya two,” Glory insisted.

Rachel and Jeb joined the group. Iris fixed their plates, but soon looked over and said to Rachel, “Why you’ve hardly touched your food and here I thought I’d done a good job.”

“It’s fine. I’m just a little tired after staying up with Grace last night” Finding the perfect excuse to escape, she said, “That reminds me, I need to go over and check on Grace and the

baby.” Turning to Jeb she asked, “Would you like to go with me?”

“No, I’ve had a day of it. See you ladies tomorrow.” Glancing back at Rachel, he pulled his hat down on his head and smiled.

“I’ll go with you,” Marie told her. “I haven’t gotten to see the little one. I understand they gave the baby your maiden name, Williams. It’s such an honor.”

She looked at Rachel giving her a quizzical look. “I don’t suppose you’d like to tell me what went on this afternoon, would you?”

“Nothing went on.”

“Well, it’s none of my business, but I’d suggest you slow down a little bit. I see that same look in your eyes I had when I was going with Brad. It’s not smart to throw caution to the wind. There are just too many things that can go wrong and you have too much to offer the world.”

Rachel hugged the younger girl. “Thanks for caring. Now let’s go see the baby.”

Six

The Butterfly

The following day Hiram Wilson, captain of the other wagon train, came riding into camp on what Rachel first believed was Jeb's Prince. Hiram was a tall, thin man with a friendly smile and graying blonde hair and hazel eyes. He sported a neatly trimmed mustache and even in his trail clothes, had a polished look. He appeared to be in his late forties, but his stride was so long and brisk it was hard to tell.

Hiram had come as he said for 'two reasons'. First he wanted to invite Jeb's group to a barbecue and dance for what he called a "Get Acquainted Celebration." Secondly, some of his people had medical problems and he wanted the doctor to look at them.

Jeb brought Hiram to Rachel's wagon saying, "This is my long-time acquaintance, Hiram Wilson. He says he has some people who may need your services."

Hiram bowed to Rachel saying, "So you're the famous woman doctor I've been hearing about. I'm so glad to meet you." He stretched out his hand, gripping hers firmly. "We don't have any big problem but there's one woman thinks she's expecting. Another man cut his hand and the wound needs tending. There are various other ills, real and imagined." Hiram chuckled. "It won't take you long."

"Is it all right, Jeb?"

"You're asking me this time?" He laughed audibly. "Go ahead. Bring her back when she's through, won't you, Hiram?"

Hiram took her medical kit and placed it in front of him while Rachel rode behind holding him around the waist.

After they left the camp, Hiram asked, "What's between you and Jeb you have to ask his permission to treat patients?"

"Nothing. He just likes to be in command. A little."

"A little. He's been domineering since I've known him. But aren't you your own person? A professional and all."

Rachel was beginning to feel uncomfortable so she changed the subject. "What's your horse's name? When I first saw him, I thought he was Jeb's Prince with the white mane and tail. So beautiful like him."

"No, this is King but he sired Prince. Jeb bought Prince from me when he was just a colt. Said he wanted to train him his way."

"Sounds like Jeb. Then you've known him long?"

"Over ten years. He went west with me on my first trip to California. A steady, reliable man but one with some pretty set ideas. I'd stake my life on him, but he's a bit complicated. I was talking to him earlier, and I think you might be having a bit of an influence on him from some of the things he said. He was telling me about Little Deer."

"I don't want to discuss it with you." Rachel answered with an angry tinge to her voice.

"I stand corrected. You're right. I hardly know you, though I'd like to." He laughed quietly.

Rachel was glad to reach his train and leave this probing talk behind. She was busy with Hiram's people for almost three hours. There were minor problems, though she did find one man who was on the verge of scurvy, for which she left several portions of rose hip tea for him to use, and recommended all of them begin supplementing their diets with more fresh vegetables and fruits, such as berries and greens.

Somehow Rachel's mood lifted when the people thanked her for her help. Some even offered a few pennies in payment, but she chose something different. "I wonder if any of you have some good corn likker? I haven't had a taste since I left Pennsylvania." The bystanders laughed while one of them went to his wagon, pulling out a jug.

Another asked, "Hey, Doc, how about coming along with us to Oregon? We'd like that."

"No, I'm committed to the Joaquin in California. Thanks just the same." It sounded so good, so strong to say that, when in reality she felt adrift—floating and wavering along in life.

Hiram interrupted, "Are you finished now, Doctor? I'm going to call you Rachel. Anyway, let's walk back to your camp so we can visit a little. Here, let me take the jug. Can you manage your bag?" Hiram took her by the hand and led her along the river. "They're right you know. You ought to go with us to Oregon City. You'd fit right in. The people took to you so easily."

"I know, but there are good people in California expecting us." She paused, "Why are you talking to me on such a personal level again, Hiram?"

"You just strike me as a person with a lot of potential. Not just as a doctor but as a woman. What I can't understand is why you're so unhappy."

"Unhappy? Why would you say that?"

"Well, aren't you? Unhappy, I mean."

"I left my home of almost thirty years; I am facing an unknown land and an arduous trip that may be life threatening. Isn't that enough to make me unhappy?"

"Not you. You're the type to thrive on challenge. How else could you have overcome the obstacles of becoming a woman doctor?" When she gave no reply, he led Rachel to a fallen log. "Let's sit here and sample the contents of your jug. It was a nice touch asking to be paid in liquor. They'll laugh about it all the rest of the way. The lady doctor who likes her liquor."

"I'm not much of an imbibor, but I thought it gave me something in common with them."

Rachel handed him a cup from her bag and he filled it, passing it on to her. "Do you mind?" He lifted the jug to take a long pull from the neck.

Hiram choked a little from the bite of the whiskey. "Darned good stuff. Made out of good Illinois corn." He smiled as Rachel sipped hers slowly from the cup.

Rachel surveyed the grass leading to the river beyond. "There's a peace here away from the bustle of the camp. So quiet, so calm. I hate to see this land fill up. It'll never be quite the same again, will it?"

"You're right. But for me, it's you who makes this place special. The sun on your hair lends an auburn halo around you. Your eyes radiate such a softness." Then laughing, "And I like the cleft in your chin."

"That's the Williams brand. My pa and Uncle Will had it and even my cousins. You're observant, aren't you? And, you, Hiram Wilson, you're the surprising one to be out here in the wilderness. So distinguished and well spoken. The kind who carries books in his saddle bags." Rachel smiled.

"So you peeked, did you? Anyway, you're right. I read for the law back in Connecticut but then like most men who come out here, I had a bad experience."

"A woman?"

"Yes, I was jilted. Turned out to be the best thing ever happened to me; but, when you're twenty-two, it's a catastrophic event. I didn't need to work since my pa left me well fixed, but I had to fill my days. Voilà. I came west. First to California and then Oregon. I found the love of my life. Not a woman, but the Willamette valley outside Oregon City. I settled there and now I'm so established they've made me a judge." As an afterthought he added, "Incidentally, I'm still looking for the right woman." Hiram grinned a little.

"If you're settled, what brought you on this trip?" Rachel asked.

"We needed settlers, so when this group wanted to come to my valley, I said I'd lead them. And that, my dear, is about it. A summary of my life."

Rachel applauded. "That is quite an oration, sir."

"I guess you're wondering why I told you all this. I have to admit I really don't know, except sitting here with you, I wish I had written to Pennsylvania for a bride. Now I would be bringing you home with me. You're such a bright and beautiful woman."

"Don't forget independent and strong-willed."

"That doesn't make you less desirable to me."

A golden butterfly with graceful wings and unique black markings alit on some yellow wildflowers nearby. Hiram rose and quietly cupped his hand over it. He returned, releasing the graceful insect in front of Rachel so they could watch it soar upward as it resumed its aerial flight.

"Life's so like that. So delicate, so lovely, so very, very fleeting." Hiram extolled.

Unexpectedly, Rachel rose and catching up her dress on either side began twirling around. Then raising her arms, she fluttered them, mimicking the butterfly sailing through the grass and dipping down as if alighting on the same clump of yellow wildflowers. "I'm floating, I'm floating," She called to Hiram, who also began running and swooping after her. They played together as two children would on such a summer day.

Hiram caught her, swinging her round and round until she cried, "Stop, stop, I'm getting dizzy."

"You, my little butterfly, have made me quite dizzy, also."

He returned her feet to the ground but then he clasped her to him and kissed her—sweetly and softly and then again with more emotion. Rachel responded but she did not feel the passion that consumed her when Jeb held her. Somehow, she regretted it, for she realized how loving and gentle Hiram would always be with her.

"Oh, Rachel, how I wish I had met you sooner. That you were to be mine."

"How much better it would have been for us both. Fate is rather fickle, isn't it?" Reluctantly she pushed Hiram from her. Slowly Rachel picked up her medical bag and started toward her wagon.

When she turned to wave good-bye, Hiram, tall and thin, bowed low, looking slightly fragile on the huge landscape of the prairie around him. He doffed his hat, waving it upward while he shuffled his feet in a silent farewell jig. "See you at the celebration tonight. Save me a dance, my precious butterfly. Adieu 'til then."

When Rachel entered the camp, Iris came to meet her. "I've saved you some food. It's way after noon, you know. Jeb has been looking for you. Wondering why it took you so long."

"Oh, I've been on a little excursion," she told Iris.

"An excursion between here and the other camp. It isn't very far."

"An excursion of the spirit isn't measured in miles." Rachel smiled to herself when she saw the perplexed look on Iris's face. She patted the girl's arm to reassure her and, without further explanation, picked up her plate and began eating. A boy from Hiram's camp arrived carrying her jug of corn liquor. Glory said nothing, only guffawed.

~ * ~

Later that afternoon, the four women began getting ready for the Get Acquainted Party. Even Glory and Mary donned their Sunday best. Rachel pulled out her green dress she had worn to the dance back in Four Corners. "I hope it is a more pleasant evening than the other time I wore this." She shook the wrinkles from it. Marie came to arrange her hair, bringing a green bow as well as some lilac water for Rachel to sprinkle on her. It was going to be a festive occasion.

"You look spiffy, Rachel," Marie told her. "Jeb Morgan will be so jealous if any man so much as looks at you. Mark my words." With that she pulled a little 'spit' curl down over Rachel's forehead. "Here, use a little lip rouge. It will set your face off."

"All of us look nice, if I do say so." Rachel told her friend.

"Why shouldn't we? We're special. Remember we're the Pennsylvania Women." Marie retorted. "Even Glory and Mary are calling themselves by that name now."

They had barely finished when a wagon pulled up with Hiram driving. "I thought I would come myself to bring you eligible ladies to the party." He jumped down and helped each of them into the wagon, introducing himself in the most gallant of ways.

Iris asked, "Rachel, have you seen Jeb? He'll want to be included."

"Dear girl, Mr. Jeb Morgan, wagon master extraordinaire, can most certainly find his own way this little distance. Believe me, he won't get lost." He boosted Rachel to the seat beside him and drove away. He motioned to the other people in the camp inviting them to follow him.

The food was laid out and the meat smoking when they arrived at Hiram's camp. Everyone was laughing and talking as they introduced themselves. Rachel looked around trying to keep an eye out for Jeb. She turned and said quietly, "Iris, you're right. It really wasn't right to go off without him."

Marie heard her. "Rachel, this is good for him. You're acting like some kind of trained pup waiting for her master. Let him worry a bit." She grinned, "Trust me."

The music started then and Hiram came to Rachel. "I'm going to have this dance with you before the others interfere."

Hiram led her to the ground where they had cleared off the grass patting the ground level. He bowed in a gallant swoop and led her into a graceful waltz.

"Hiram, where on earth did you learn to dance like this?"

"At Mrs. Milford's School of Music and Dance. My mother insisted I learn properly. I hated it. It was so sissyish, but nevertheless I never missed a class. I pleaded with Pa, but he gave me no sympathy. He believed he was raising a gentleman."

"Was he?" Rachel giggled.

"At least on the outside." he laughed pulling her closer.

It was not until the third dance Jeb arrived. Rachel sensed his presence before she actually saw him. Shortly he tapped Hiram on the shoulder. "My turn, fellow."

Rachel knew he was perturbed when he asked, "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I don't know. The other women were coming and Hiram teased saying you could find your way." She smiled at him. "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. Come and sit with me while I do." He glowered at her. He softened his voice, "You do look pretty. I understand why any man would like to dance with you."

"You look nice, too, Jeb." He was wearing yet another blue shirt that set off his eyes. Practical woman that she was, she felt weak just looking at him and remembering all too vividly what had almost passed between them at the falls. Rachel hoped the incident of her leaving the camp without him would be dropped but she doubted it.

"No, Rachel, I thought we had sort of an agreement that during this trip we would be together. I don't like having you off with Hiram. I suspect he could be a womanizer."

"Womanizer?"

"Well, what would you call him? He barely knows you and then tries to move in on you."

"That's hardly the way it is. Believe it or not, he likes me. For myself."

"Platonic friendship, is it?" he laughed in a sobering way.

"Why, Jeb Morgan, you're jealous!"

Flushing, he said, "Maybe a little."

Rachel didn't like the drift of the conversation so she decided to change the subject. "Are we pretty much on schedule as far as the journey goes?"

"Doing fine. Hiram's train left ten days before us and we caught up with him." Jeb set his plate down. "I'm finished. Let's go back to the dance."

When they returned, it was ladies' choice. Before Rachel knew it, the same settler girl grabbed Jeb and led him forward. Then Hiram stood in Rachel's path. "I guess you'll have to choose me since I'm in your way." He danced her through to the other side of the floor.

"Come with me, Rachel. I need to talk to you." He seated her on the tongue of the nearest wagon. "I guess I'm not the most objective person when it comes to you, but I am beginning to care for you. I must tell you this. I watched you and Jeb together. He's terribly possessive of you. I know he loves you, but is there something wrong? I don't think he accepts you as a whole person. I sense a lot of passion between you, but there needs to be more. An understanding and acceptance of each other as each of you are. My guess is he thinks you're too much your own woman."

"How did you know?"

"I suspected it and then I talked to Marie. She's very worldly wise, you know. Rachel, listen, you can't be subservient to his every whim or it will destroy you."

Rachel turned and bowed her head, trying to conceal her tears.

Hiram cupped her chin in his hand and spoke directly to her. "If you won't go to Oregon, go on to the Joaquin. You'll find someone who will accept Rachel Williams as a doctor and a person. If not, you can always join me. No matter what, I'll always be there for you. You will remain my fragile, perfect butterfly.

"But you said, I was having an influence on him."

"Yes, but will he change quickly enough?"

Jeb approached. "Hiram, we've got to go. Come on, Rachel." He grabbed her elbow and guided her over to Prince and raised her up behind him.

"We're going to the trading post just north of here first thing in the morning. I promised Ed Foster you'd come check on his daughter. We'll spend the night there and meet the train the following day. It'll give us a chance to be together without too

much supervision.” He laughed a little. “We’ll like that, won’t we?”

Rachel knew she should protest, but he was right. She literally ached to be with him. *He’s changing. It won’t be overnight and I don’t expect or want him to be totally different—just more accepting.*

When they reached Rachel’s wagon, they stood for a moment together in the silent camp. Jeb pulled her to him. “Rachel, I didn’t mean to be hard on you.” Before she could answer, he reached up, taking the ribbon from her hair so that her locks cascaded down her back. He pulled the tresses from her face and stood stroking them softly. Finally, he gathered her to him, kissing her passionately. When he released her, he placed the bow in his pocket. “A little memento. I’ll see you in the morning.”

~ * ~

It was only sunup when Jeb came by for Rachel. “Jeb, what is the problem with the Foster girl?”

“I suspect it’s consumption. Foster talked about her constant coughing. Even coughing up blood.”

“Then I best take along a mask and gloves and another full apron to protect myself. I’m afraid I don’t have anything to cure her. Especially if the sputum is already bloody.”

The day was sunny and warm and they moved along quickly. They rode silently for several miles when Jeb turned to Rachel. “You’re awfully quiet this morning, Rach.”

“Umm. Suppose so,” she answered in a monotone voice.

“Is it about last night? I apologized for being hard on you, but I had expected to take you to the party.”

“That’s over.”

“Good, let’s just enjoy our time together without a wagon train full of people.” He smiled, “At least without Glory?” They laughed together at the thought of the incident at the falls.

I wish he’d talk about his porch at Val Verde again, but that’s so far away, both in distance and ideas. Despite herself, she leaned against him feeling the reassuring strength of his

body. *"Now is all there may ever be.* She sighed inwardly as she faced reality.

A wind sprang up, bathing them with cool, damp air blown in from the river. "Your hair is curly now with the humidity." He reached up and twirled a curl around his thumb. "Remember that coolness when we get into the desert."

"Then this is really the last part of the easy travel?" Rachel asked.

"It is. We are gradually going upward but the real test comes when we cross the Continental Divide after we leave Ft. Laramie. That's why so many of the families are leaving the train to settle here in Nebraska. Only the hardiest will go through to California with us. Like the Johnsons and the Ganzers."

"You make it sound terribly forbidding, Jeb."

"Yes, it's not impossible; but if we can make eight miles a day instead of the fifteen we're used to, I'll feel lucky. Wagons give way. Horses die. Worst of all, the people wear out. All the while I'm worried about getting us over the Sierras before the snows come."

"Is that why you talk about just living for the here and now?" A shadow seemed to pass over his eyes as if cloaking his thoughts from her.

"That's not for you to worry about. I'll handle the passing." Then, with a sudden change, he forced a smile, beaming at her with those blue eyes of his in a way that defied her comprehension.

Rachel thought to herself. *Jeb Morgan, you are truly an enigma.*

The wagon ground forward over the bumpy trail while tufts of white clouds teetered over the horizon beyond. Tranquility reigned over the ever-growing expanse of prairie.

Suddenly Jeb said, "Rachel, don't act surprised but there are Indians over in the cedar brake ahead waiting for us. Did you see the flock of blackbirds that just flew off? Something is

disturbing them. I heard Prince whinny to their horses a while back."

"What do they want?"

"Our wagon. The horses."

"My stars, Jeb."

"Shh— Be quiet. We have to act as if we haven't spotted them. I have an idea. Do exactly as I tell you even if it doesn't make sense."

"All right?"

"Lean over and kiss me then start unbuttoning your shirtwaist."

"What?"

"I want them to think we're going to stop for a little lovemaking. Go ahead. Start giggling and carrying on."

Rachel did as he told her while he pulled the wagon up under a large elm at the side of the hill off the trail. He angled the rig so the back would be hidden from the trees ahead. He pulled Rachel into the back of the wagon laughing and playing with her. "You're my gal," he shouted.

Releasing her, he said quietly, "Now, I'm going to get on Prince and circle around through the gully and get behind that stand of trees. You've got to cause enough ruckus inside here to make them think we're both still inside. While you do that, put on this extra pair of my pants and shirt to make you look like me."

He patted her head. "Remember to pull up your hair and cover it with my hat. Then in about ten minutes get up on the wagon seat and start driving ahead on the trail toward those trees. It should distract them. Remember, keep the loud talk coming."

He reached over and kissed her before leaping silently off the tailgate. Rachel laughed raucously from the wagon. "You rascal, you. You're some man." She guffawed. "How about another snort from this here jug?" She began singing a version of *Buffalo Gals*, always turning her face towards the front of the wagon so the sound would carry to the trees. Out of the

corner of her eye she could see Jeb riding down through the gully. She struggled into his clothing while she kept a continuous stream of banter and nonsense coming.

Finally Rachel caught her breath. When Jeb was out of sight, she climbed onto the wagon seat and started the team slowly down the trail to the stand of trees. The wheels of the wagon creaked with an ever-increasing intensity as she approached the site of danger. She felt goose bumps crawl up her spine onto her arms.

The lower limbs of the cedar stirred. Rachel sensed eyes watching her every move. So tight was her chest she could scarcely breathe as she approached ever closer to the ambush site. A bird whirled up from the back of the trees, but there were no other sounds. Rachel felt a shiver run through her even though perspiration dripped from her nose onto her shirt. Maybe she hadn't given Jeb enough time to get behind them. Maybe she was riding headlong into danger. Her heart began to race. If her timing had been wrong, all would be lost and they would both die.

Still she could not stop. She slowed the team to a leisurely pace. Then a terrifying thought raced through her mind. She had forgotten to check for the rifle behind the seat on the floorboard of the wagon. How could she have been so careless? Yet, she dared not reach for the gun now or the element of surprise would be dissipated.

Just as she pulled the wagon parallel to the trees, Jeb appeared with two young Indians walking in front of him, their hands held high. She stopped the team and reached behind her, bringing out the spare rifle and training it on them.

Jeb raised his own rifle with his index finger resting on the trigger. He took a step toward the frightened pair. He steadied the gun with his right arm resting on his left forearm. Rachel drew her breath. Was he going to shoot them down? She cringed as she waited for his life and death decision.

Then Jeb said something to the two, which was inaudible to her. The boys understood, however, because they took off

running like two wild deer. To drive home his meaning, Jeb shot his rifle over their heads as they fled in sheer terror. Rachel felt weak with relief.

Rachel watched Jeb stoop and pick up their one rifle. Then he mounted Prince and went back into the brake to retrieve the Indians' ponies.

"Oh, Jeb. Jeb," she cried running to meet him.

"It's all right now, Rachel," he comforted her.

She said quietly to herself, "Yes, it really is, Jeb Morgan, because you couldn't murder those boys. Even with good cause."

He tied the ponies on the back, letting Prince follow along beside the wagon. He joined her. "Well, we did it."

"Oh, I thought I hadn't given you enough time to circle around. I was so scared."

"You needn't have worried. I had the situation in hand." Then, he reached over and kissed her. "Your timing was perfect. It was the performance of yours with all the singing and talking that did it. You could go on the stage." They both laughed.

"Did you get a good look at them, Rach? I think they're Cheyenne. They were both young, so I suppose they were just out on their own hunting. They saw us and wanted to try to take advantage of the situation. Another thing, I said I'd turn their horses loose up over the hill. That'll keep them busy so they won't bring the tribe down on us."

"They can't do much damage without their horses or guns, can they?"

"Not afoot, for sure." He lowered his voice, "I should have killed them, but I couldn't."

"You did right, Jeb," Rachel told him, patting him on the shoulder. "You did very right."

"Maybe, but I'm not sure they won't attack someone else later." He shook his head before continuing. "This is a little far south for Cheyenne, but I understand there's a drought farther north. That's something else we'll have to contend with up in

the hills. No forage for our animals. Little water. Hungry natives.”

Rachel rode silently beside Jeb. She did not understand him, but she knew she loved him deeply. As for herself, yesterday she had felt the glory of the spirit alive in the carefree butterfly. Today she sensed the rock hardness of reality. Of what was she, Rachel Williams, really made—sheer gossamer or hardened flint?

Seven

Joy and Sorrow

Rachel sighed in relief when they crested the ridge and saw the Foster Post in front of them. Only a few buildings stretched out before them; but they represented a point of safety after the attempted ambush by the Indians. The crude, wooden structures might as well have been a castle so welcome was their sight.

Ed Foster, a large, burly man, came to greet them. "I've been expecting you. Was the trip all right?" he asked, extending his hand.

"We had a little run-in with a couple of braves, but we came out all right. We took their horses and their gun. It should slow them down a little."

"Just so you're all right. We'll keep an eye out for them in case they give any more trouble. Guess there were two braves? Come on in, Jeb. You can tell me more about them while the Doctor examines my girl."

Elsie Foster was sicker than Rachel had even imagined. The terrible hacking cough, ringing through the living quarters behind the store, told her that. Before she entered the bedroom, Rachel donned her protective mask, gloves, and apron.

When she opened the door, the smell of prolonged illness filled her nostrils. Elsie, angelic looking with long blonde hair,

was small for her age though she must have been around nine. She smiled weakly at Rachel.

Her mother, a petite, middle-aged woman, came forward with an expectant look on her face. "Oh, Doctor, I'm so glad you came."

Even though Rachel knew the situation was hopeless, she said, "I'd like to examine your pretty little daughter."

It was one of those heartbreaking situations Rachel had faced before but had never learned to accept. Not only was Elsie coughing up blood, Rachel detected pieces of the lungs themselves coming out. Cheeks flushed with a searing fever, Elsie was slowly losing consciousness.

"Elsie, we're going to bathe you to see if we can't bring your fever down. It will make you feel better." She caressed the girl's cheek.

Rachel knew she could do little other than make the girl as comfortable as possible. She encouraged the girl to take a drink of water but it caused her to choke, bringing on even more of the bloody coughing. She searched her medical case for her bottle of laudanum, finally getting Elsie to take a spoonful.

Leading Mrs. Foster aside, she admonished her. "You must burn every rag or towel that catches her blood. You need to wear a mask or kerchief and completely cover your mouth and nose with it. All body fluids are infectious."

"But she is my child. Surely I don't have to be so careful."

"I'm sorry. You may have already been infected, but these last days are the worst. Losing your life will not help Elsie or your husband." Rachel patted the small woman's arm comfortingly. "Anything like a cup or a dish that comes in contact with her must be boiled. And you, yourself, must get rest and eat properly. Not just now but forever. The disease may lay dormant for years and wait until you are run down before surfacing."

Rachel clasped Mrs. Foster to her. How she grieved for Elsie and her mother. The only good part of this heart-

wrenching situation was Elsie's suffering would be over very soon.

When Rachel left the bedroom, Ed met her. "Well, can you help her?" he pleaded.

"I am so sorry. Elsie has only a few days at most. Maybe only a few hours." Rachel felt frustrated. *Some day this killer will be vanquished but not very soon, I fear.* She watched the tears well up in the hardy man's eyes. *How bitter this time,* she thought.

Rachel removed her gloves, mask and apron. Turning to Ed Foster, she said, "I'm leaving the mask and the gloves for your wife." She removed the apron. "I saw you had a bricked-in fireplace outside where you burn trash. I'm going to place my apron there to be burned. That's what you must do with anything that is bloody."

Rachel patted his arm gently. "I'm so sorry I cannot help you more. Please see Mrs. Foster cares for herself, for she's gravely at risk."

Ed shook his head. "Can we pay you something for your time, Doctor?"

"No, I have done nothing."

"We own the inn. Let us give you and Morgan each a room and your meals. At least that."

"Thank you. It's very kind."

Using the necessity of business to change his mood, Ed said to Morgan, "We'll have your supplies loaded by morning. Guess your next stop will be Ft. Laramie?"

"Yep. It's the shortest route. We wouldn't have come as far as the Platte, but I had several families leaving the train and settling north of here. Besides, it was easier going along the river. Hope there's no more Indian trouble for anyone."

When they left the store Rachel said, "Jeb, I've got to have a bath and rest before we eat our supper. This has been a day I'll never forget." She took his arm, forcing a smile.

Rachel reclined in the tub of warm water, letting the tension and the dirt soak slowly away. When she finished, she put on

her petticoats and threw herself across the bed. The picture of Elsie Foster stayed with her. Then it came to her that, fleeting as the good things in life seemed to be, she wanted to spend the rest of her time at the post alone with Jeb in joyful ecstasy. For that she must have rest.

How long she slept, she didn't know. The next thing she realized was Jeb bending over her. "Time to get up, curly head. We need to eat before they close the kitchen." He raised her up, kissing her briefly. "You'd better get dressed for those people downstairs. Though I like you just fine this way." He grinned at her. "As long as you're about it, I would like to see you in this." He held out a package.

When she opened it, there lay a beautiful, shimmering silk dress with a matching shawl. It was the color of sunlight. Rachel held it up to her while Jeb tilted the mirror on the dresser so she could see the full length of it. "Oh, Jeb, it's gorgeous. Thank you."

"Thought the color was just right for you. We had to let the hem out cause you are a little taller than most women. Also, the bodice. You're blessed in such a way." Then he grinned that perturbing grin of his again.

When she tried it on, it fit perfectly. Rachel ran her hands down over the skirt feeling the subtle smoothness of the garment. When she fastened the upper buttons over the bodice, he chuckled. "See, I gauged the size of the bosom just right."

"I'll bet the seamstress wondered about that, Mr. Morgan."

"Don't care. Gave her something to think on. Now fix your hair cause I've got this." He dangled a piece of matching yellow hair ribbon.

After she finished, she stood in front of the mirror again. Jeb came and stood beside her so his reflection was captured with hers. "Now don't I look pretty, too? This is my new blue suit. I bought it special for tonight."

Rachel looked at him. Never had she seen a more handsome man. He seemed even taller than usual with his beautifully proportioned body. Though tanned, his skin had a creamy,

smooth texture about it. He had dampened his hair and combed it determinedly but still there were tantalizing wisps standing up on the very crown of his head. It was as if she were seeing him for the very first time. She thought to herself. This is the Jeb Morgan I love so.

He guided her down the stairs into the dining room. They hadn't planned it, but they gave an impressive entrance for the other diners. When they were seated, Rachel told Jeb, "I think we caused a bit of a stir."

"Why shouldn't we? I'm escorting the most beautiful woman they've ever seen."

"And a most charming gentleman is her escort."

She saw him blush slightly before answering. "As to be expected."

After dinner, a fiddler came and started playing a waltz. "Madam, may I have this dance?" Jeb bowed slightly. As always they danced in perfect time together. So well attuned to each other were they, the people applauded for them when the number was finished.

"Oh, Rachel—" but Jeb did not have a chance to finish for the girl from the store came bursting into the room.

"Doctor, you've got to come quick. They think Elsie is dying. She's gasping for breath and in terrible agony. Come quick."

Rachel rose immediately while Jeb pulled on her arm. "You said yourself you can't help her. Do you have to go? I've ordered some wine for us as a surprise."

"Jeb, I have no choice. I'm sorry. I must go. Wait for me, please." She looked back at him shrugging his shoulders in disappointment. When she entered the store, she grabbed a kerchief and apron placing it over her yellow dress.

Indeed Elsie was dying. Mary, who stood by the bed, convulsed with crying. "Ed, take care of your wife. I will stay with Elsie."

Rachel raised Elsie's head to help her breathe. The girl looked at Rachel in a silent, pleading way. Finally Rachel

picked her up, wrapped her in a shawl, and carried her to the rocker. There she held her against her body, crooning a lullaby to the frightened child.

To and fro, their bodies moved in a calming movement encapsulated in the warmth of love for one human being for another. Over and over Rachel reassured her, "Elsie, you are not alone. I am here and so is the Holy Spirit." Surprisingly, the dying child seemed to understand for she snuggled closer to Rachel. Rachel heard the clock from the hallway strike ten, then eleven. Was this to be an endless night?

Ed Foster came to the door. "May I relieve you? I gave Mary some medicine and she's sleeping."

Elsie roused and began the whooping, deadly coughing again. She spewed out a scarlet stream of blood and tissue giving one last gasp. Rachel shuddered at the agony of the child. Then, almost as if in answer to Rachel's silent prayer, she felt Elsie's body grow limp in her arms.

Ed started to sob. Rachel said, "No, don't cry. At last her suffering is over. When I first held her, she was so very, very frightened but then gradually she relaxed. I think she felt surrounded by love. She didn't have words to tell me, but there was something stronger than words about her. It was the commune of spirits. In all my days of practice I have never felt such closeness and love."

Ed started to lift Elsie from Rachel's lap. "No, go fetch the box. I will clean her and put on a fresh gown. Line the box however you'd like and I will place her in it. Once she is there, it must be nailed shut. She would not want to pass this terrible malady on."

When Ed returned with the coffin, they placed Elsie in it. Ed looked down at the sleeping child. "My God, she looks like an angel." Then slowly he placed the lid on the box and firmly nailed it in place.

Rachel began gathering up the covers to be burned and cleaned the room. It was then she noticed her blood soaked apron which had seeped onto the bodice and skirt of her dress.

"The sunlight is darkened with blood—a kind of red sunset," she moaned. She stripped off the dress and apron placing them with the blankets to be burned. She walked to the burning receptacle in back, throwing everything in and striking a match to the bedding and the wonderful silk dress.

Rachel bid Ed goodnight. She took a gray blanket from the store shelf and wrapping it around her, crossed the street to the darkened inn.

When she opened the door to her room, Jeb was sitting in the rocker waiting for her. "Rachel, where have you been? I started to come after you." He lit the lamp. "Where are your clothes?"

"I had to burn them. I had vomit and blood all over the dress. It couldn't be saved. I'm so sorry."

She sat weakly down on the edge of the bed. "This is too much. Couldn't the Fosters have relieved you?" Jeb demanded, an angry tinge to his voice.

"No, they were much too upset and I couldn't let the girl die alone. It sounds like a horrible experience, but it wasn't. I know her spirit was at peace."

"I should have never brought you here. This is just too hard on you." He placed his arm over her shoulders.

"Death is never easy to accept, but it's part of life and part of my work." She smiled up at him saying, "Let's not talk about it any more. Instead, let's share our time together. Today and tonight proved to me just how fleeting life may be."

Rachel went to the basin, washing her hands for a last time. Then she sat on Jeb's lap, pulling his face to her to be kissed. He embraced her passionately, and then lifting her, carried her to the bed. As she undressed, Rachel shivered slightly.

"Rach, are you cold?"

"A little. But more than that I'm excited. I've waited all day for this time, you know." *I'm amazed. He's exactly what I expected a Greek god to be.*

He held her body close to him. "My God, Rachel, how beautiful you are! And how I need you. You've awakened something in me I thought died with Muriel. But I was wrong."

She was heady with the feel of him next to her. Even the pure, hardy scent of his body emanated from him into her.

She placed her fingers over his mouth. "Shh-shh, let's not talk any more." So the lovemaking began.

Rachel could not believe how the world turned for her. It was almost more exhilarating than she had dreamed. She moaned with sheer delight, wondering briefly if Jeb were as pleased as she; but only briefly, for his results indicated he was there in paradise with her.

"Oh, Rachel, how I love you." Then laughing softly, he added, "You are so lovely. I never imagined how truly lovely you are. Good thing I didn't know this in St. Joe."

"St. Joe?"

"Yes, the first day we met or I would have had to have you."

"Oh, Jeb..." Rachel wanted to stay awake to savor this time together, but the strain of the day sent her into a sound sleep, arched under the protection of his arm and the closeness of his body.

~ * ~

Rachel awoke. She wasn't sure just why. Maybe it was because she missed the warmth of Jeb's body and felt a chill. She tried to go back to the comfort of sleep but the morning light had begun to filter into the room.

She stretched, looking across at Jeb fully clothed and sitting in the rocker gently moving back and forth.

Sensing she was awake, he looked over and said, "About time you woke up." He rose and sat on the bed next to her. Rachel straightened up, pulling the blanket around her and reaching over to him for her morning kiss.

"Oh, Jeb, I love you so. Never have I felt so much a part of anyone."

"I know, my curly head. I was just sitting there thinking about us. I was right in the first place. We belong together."

"Do you really mean it, Jeb?"

He laughed at her, his eyes twinkling. He pushed a stray curl back from her forehead. "Yes, I really mean it." Then he grew solemn, his eyes narrowing as he said firmly, "There's only one condition. We have had only one problem. Only one factor always brings us conflict."

"What do you mean?" Rachel pulled away, looking directly at him.

"It's this being a doctor business. You take it too seriously. Really, that's where our trouble started. Over your involvement with Mary. Like I've told you before, you think you have to save the whole damn world and practicing medicine just brings trouble to us. Look at last night. We couldn't even have a peaceful meal together. You had to go rushing off. Then you were so exhausted you looked positively gray when you got back. I hesitated to make love to you when you were so tired."

"What do you want me to do? I'm not sure I understand."

"I'm not sure either. It would be simple if you would just stop practicing medicine, but I don't think you would."

Rachel was stunned. Finally she answered. "I can't. Please, please don't ask me. . Anything but that."

"Don't you want children? We can't have a family with you running off all the time. Even in the middle of the night."

"But it wouldn't have to be like that. Honestly." She put her arms around him, pulling his head against her breasts. "I could cut back on my work when our children are small or when I needed to help you on the ranch. We could work it out. I'm sure of it."

"I'm not sure that's the way it'd be. Once people found out you were a doctor, they'd be coming to our door. Besides, I need you and it's hard for me to share you."

"But, Jeb—"

He rose abruptly, going over to the basin to shave, leaving her hunched under the covers with her head lowered. Finally she rose and began dressing. Silence filled the room.

At last he came back and sat in the rocker. "You know, Rach, I have an idea. The Fosters will have a minister to say a few words over Elsie. While he's here, he could marry us. Then we would be man and wife when we rejoin the train."

Rachel felt her very heart was being ripped from her being. She loved Jeb Morgan more than she had thought possible. To be married to him would be a dream come true. But to give up medicine? It was an impossible choice."

"Rachel, are you listening?" Jeb demanded.

Her mind went back to the day Hiram caught the butterfly. He had warned her not to let Jeb destroy her. How prophetic he had been.

She knelt down in front of the rocker, placing her hands on his knees. "Jeb, I love you so, but I'm the one who must decide what's best for me. There are decisions each of us must make for ourselves. Things that can't be dictated by another person no matter how precious they are to you. This is one of those choices."

If he were testing her, she knew she was failing badly.

"Rach, you don't need to work outside our home. Ranching should be a full time commitment for us both." Drawing a breath, he added, "I have no debts and this trip will pay for more livestock if that's what's bothering you. I want to take care of you."

"I know you do. It's not the money. I have some saved and there'll be more coming from the folks' property in Pennsylvania. I worked so very hard to become a doctor and there's such a need out here."

He rose and began pacing through the room. "Don't I have needs, too? It may sound ridiculous, but the thought of your examining another man is hard to swallow." Then softening his tone, he said, "Let's compromise. We'll wait until we get to the San Joaquin to decide just what we'll do. I want you, but I also want you to be happy."

For Jeb it was quite a compromise. Rachel couldn't believe what she heard. He had come so far, but was it far enough?

"Well, I'm going down to get the team hitched up and check the freight. You stop at the kitchen and see if they'll pack us a breakfast. I'll take our satchels." He added in a flat tone, "You can bring your medical bag, can't you?"

"Jeb, can't we stay for Elsie's burial?"

"We really can't spare the time. As far ahead as it seems, the snows in the Sierras could catch us."

Rachel watched him clump down the stairs with his shoulders set in the determined way of his and pulling his hat down over his eyes. She looked back at the bed, thinking of the joy they had shared there. Then she closed the door and followed him down the steps, all the while thinking *Jeb, Jeb what am I to do?*

Rachel ordered their breakfast then crossed the street to console the Fosters.

"I'm glad you came. Mary has been expecting you. She's in our room in the back."

Rachel was surprised to see Mary Foster dressed and looking much calmer.

"Oh, Doctor, I've been waiting for you. Can you stay for the burial?"

Rachel shook her head. "I'm sorry, but we have to meet the wagon train today so we must leave." She went over to Mary, embracing her.

"How can we ever thank you for staying with Elsie last night?"

"It is I who should thank you. It was a spiritual time for both Elsie and me."

"Elsie was a very special little girl. You comforted her and all of us such a great deal. You know Ed and I've been talking. Maybe we could have another baby. Not to replace Elsie. No one could ever do that. Just another child for us to love. I'm not too old for it." She blushed, searching Rachel's face for encouragement.

"No, you're not too old, but you must give yourself a chance to recover from the terrible strain you've been under. Time to rest and build up your strength."

"How long?"

"At least six months."

"That gives me hope. Another chance, maybe."

Ed came to the door. "Your wagon's loaded and Jeb's impatient."

Rachel embraced Mary again. Ed handed her a package. "Here's something to replace the dress you ruined last night. We didn't have another yellow, but maybe this will do."

Rachel opened the box. There lay a pale shimmering dress of blue. "It's so beautiful. Whenever I wear it, I'll think of all of you."

Mary asked, "Could it be your wedding dress?"

"Maybe so," Rachel answered as she winced inside.

Jeb called, "Rachel are you ready? Did you pick up our breakfast?"

"I really must go." Rachel turned and went out the door just as the girl from the inn brought the food wrapped in a napkin.

Jeb started to boost Rachel up on the wagon seat when the girl stopped them, begging, "Doctor, I have a bad sore on my leg. It's all puss'd up. Couldn't you look at it, please. I know I should have taken care of it, but it didn't seem bad at first."

Jeb shook his head. "Can't you fix it yourself? We have to leave now or we'll be traveling in the dark."

"No, Jeb, I have to look at it." Rachel took her medical bag out of the back and jumped to the ground.

Rachel pulled the girl up the porch steps. "Get your stocking off. Hurry." She looked down at the pus-filled scab and began cleaning the sore. She bandaged it, telling the girl, "Soak it twice a day in warm salt water until the redness leaves. Next time clean your wound immediately. Don't let it get dirty."

When she finished, Rachel dashed inside and washed her hands in the basin. When she returned, he jumped down

quickly lifting her to the wagon seat. As they left, the mourners were already coming for the burial.

At first, Rachel burned with anger. Yet, she knew Jeb was right about leaving on time. They had a rendezvous to keep with the train. In the scheme of things, every day lost on the trail was a threat to their very survival. That was the problem. It wasn't a canvas painted in black and white with Jeb being wrong and Rachel being right. Rather it was a panorama of grays intertwined with the bright and dark shades of their life.

~ * ~

When Rachel and Jeb caught up with the train, the people had already camped for the night.

Glory came to greet them. "Thought you'd got lost or somethin'. Bein' so late and all."

Jeb told her, "No, we just had some delays."

"Set down and eat a bite. We got stew fer supper." Iris fixed it—so it's mighty tasty."

Jeb ate hastily, then left them to make his evening rounds. Marie came and sat next to Rachel. "Do you have any news?" she squeezed Rachel's hand. "I mean about you and Jeb?"

"Not really. As always, things are complicated."

"You know, Rachel, I had the feeling you might come back married."

"We almost did but—"

"But what? Who's to stop you?"

"As I said it's complicated." Rachel paused. "We did fend off two Indians. That was quite exciting. Then Elsie Foster died. She was just too far gone for me to help her. Very sad. Could we talk about it later? I'm very, very tired right now."

"You look it. But before I forget. Our Mary wants to talk to you about California. Like you said, it can wait."

~ * ~

The next day was early rising. The wagons were on the trail at the first sign of light. The women took turns riding with Rachel so they could hear about her adventure with the braves and about Elsie's death. Rachel tried to downplay the encounter

with the Indians since she didn't want them to become apprehensive about the natives on the trail ahead. She told them quite truthfully the threat of disease was greater than any hostile Indians.

Finally it was Mary's turn to ride with Rachel. "I wanted to talk with *thee*. No *you*. It's better, isn't it? I don't want to sound so funny. I like the Bible talk, but I want to sound like everyone else. What I want to ask you is can I live with you in California? I have no place to go."

The girl's words pricked Rachel's heart. She had been so wrapped up in her own world she had completely forgotten about Mary's plight.

Rachel hugged Mary impulsively. "Of course you can. You'll help me with the medicine or in my house. Then, too, you may find someone you'd like to marry."

"Oh, no one would want me after Hunk." She cast her eyes down, beginning to cry.

"You didn't do wrong. He did. Anyway, I know the people here won't gossip. You can start new. All of us are counting on it." Rachel reassured the girl even though her own plans were far from settled.

"Oh, I forgot. Mr. Wilson sent this package for you. It came after you went to the post."

"I wonder what it could be?" When Rachel opened it, there lay a small, green leather-bound book. On the front embossed in green lettering was the title, *BUTTERFLIES*. There were facts telling about the various species with hand drawn and hand painted illustrations of each. It was an exquisite gift. There inside the cover in neat, precise handwriting was an inscription, "To Rachel, my most valued butterfly of all. H.W."

Even after Mary left, Rachel sat running her thumb across the gold letters. Oh, how she longed to talk to Hiram about the momentous decision she knew she must make. Even as she held the book she saw Jeb, atop Prince, guiding the wagons forward. Never had she seen such a handsome man and one she loved so

desperately. How much easier for her if she were a butterfly—to be free and wild without worry or decision.

Then, considering Mary and even her own future, she thought of the men waiting for them in California. How did they fit into the scheme of the future? What were their plans?

Eight

The California Men

The sun was just peeking over the hills to the east of Garden Grove when Gray Collins awoke. He had the habit of rising early and today was no exception, for as usual he had wagons to dispatch—this time to Sacramento. He really didn't have to open the office himself. Tom, his manager, would gladly take on that responsibility but what else was there for him to do? Hard work had gotten him where he was. Hard work and planning. Now he owned the largest livery and freight hauling company in the Valley. Though he had hated those "damned gold fields" with their muddy, grueling work, he had used every ounce of glittery stuff to buy horses and wagons and always at bargain prices. Now, approaching forty, he was financially secure.

There was only one thing missing. He wanted a wife and family. What good was success if there wasn't someone to share it with and to carry on his name? That's why he had gone into Martin's crazy marriage pool. He had never been one to buy a pig in a poke, but he guessed sometimes circumstances just called for a gamble. If one of the women is desirable, he felt he had a good chance of winning her. Anyway, it was well worth gambling a hundred dollars to find a decent woman.

He looked out his upstairs window at the magnificent view of the town and the Valley beyond. He mumbled to himself, "There are damned few two story houses around and none made out of rock like mine and none designed by a real builder. It's not one of those shabby cabins so many townspeople live in."

He padded across the rug over to the washbasin and began shaving. He looked into the mirror. "Not too bad," he told himself. Blue eyes laughing as his own vanity twinkled back at him. He was tanned and blonde with a slightly prominent nose. He brushed his hair. "Damned if I don't see some more gray there. Wonder if the gal will think I'm looking old? I don't want to be gray just now when I need to look my best." He dampened his locks in the hope of darkening the silver streaks.

He finished dressing and put on his boots, which he polished with a dirty sock. There was always dust in the street but he liked to start out the day looking neat at least.

He walked to the kitchen putting the coffee on to boil and then began strolling through the house trying to see it as any prospective bride might. Gray was proud of the way he had furnished the house with its leather divan and ready-made drapes, all brought in from San Francisco. He fingered the china tea set with the roses painted on them. "Dust again. It's all right. Rosa will be here to clean today. She'll have everything tiptop by night."

After finishing his coffee, Gray strode directly to his freight office. The morning was rather routine except he had a letter from his youngest sister, Anne, who still lived in the old home place, back in upstate New York. At one time he had been so lonely he had considered sending for her; but he remembered how it was after Pa died, leaving him, as the oldest, with Ma and four sisters to support. He had enough of that.

Gray opened the letter reluctantly. He never knew just what to expect in a letter from home. This time Anne had good news. She was finally going to be married and did he mind if she and her betrothed, John Hammerle by name, continued to live in the house? Gray sighed with relief. He was sure those giggling,

flea-brained sisters of his had driven Ma to an early grave, and would have done the same to him if he hadn't escaped to California. So delighted was he to be out from under this final burden that he decided to give Anne the house as a wedding present. He didn't hesitate. He sat down, writing the letter immediately so he could send it with the afternoon shipment to San Francisco.

Good Lord, do you suppose these Pennsylvania women will be like my sisters? Good-looking and silly? Worse yet, homely and silly. He moaned aloud.

Gray was ready to leave for lunch when Tom, his manager, came in. "Joe Hearne is here. I think you'd better handle it. He wants us to pick up a load for him in Sacramento. Only thing is he wants to do it on credit. You know he hasn't paid for the last shipment, either."

"All right. Show him in," Gray said reluctantly.

"Mr. Collins, I really need your help. I have seed and a new plow waiting for me up country, and I don't have a way to bring them. The thing is, I don't have enough left to pay you," Joe told him with his head bent, trying not to look at Gray. He wasn't any older than Gray but he seemed a hundred with stooped shoulders and weather beaten face. The look of discouragement was written all over him. "This new plow and seed should set me on the right path, but I didn't figure in the freight and the bank won't give me any more credit." There was a pleading quality to his voice now.

Gray knew Joe had a wife and several kids and was trying to scratch out a living on some pretty hard, rocky soil. He had a streak of bad luck with his wife sick a lot and the kids too small to help much. *Damn, I hate this.*

"Well, you still owe me from last fall for hauling your grain to market." Gray paused, studying the man before him. "But I know you need these things so I'll give you credit for one last time so you can go ahead and farm for the rest of the season. Maybe things will turn around for you." Gray added sternly,

"But—keep your mouth shut. I don't want it to get around I have the habit of giving credit."

Joe turned to Gray. "I can't tell you what this means to me and my family. Somehow, someday, I'll pay you back. I do thank you." A look of relief flooded his face. He extended his hand to Gray, straightened his shoulders, and walked briskly from the office.

"I may not get paid," Gray said to himself, "but the grateful look on Joe's face was worth a lot. This must be my benefactor's day." He kicked the leg of his desk but not very hard.

The clock in the square struck twelve when Gray started home. His mood lifted as he felt the warm sun on his face, cooled just enough by a breeze blowing in from the west off the ocean. Besides, he could look forward to a good lunch since Rosa would fix his noon meal after she cleaned the house. She was a very good cook.

Rosa was not only a good worker, she was darned good looking with flawless skin and dark eyes and a kind of easy swing to her hips. Must be about twenty-five. Damned good company. But that's the way he wanted to keep it between her and him—just company. Jorge Vega had found her for him, and Gray wondered if Jorge got her for him for other reasons besides cleaning the house, knowing how lonely Gray was. "Better not get involved with her just now with the brides coming," he warned himself.

The aroma of fresh tortillas and beans greeted him as he entered the kitchen. "Señor, you are right on time. I have a special surprise for your meal. Sit down." Rosa smiled her broad, earthy smile. "You are looking... well... more—how do you say it—more handsome every day." She winked at him.

Rosa brushed against him as she filled his plate. When she leaned over, her peasant blouse gapped down, revealing a very soft, rounded bosom. Gray pulled back, but his gaze remained riveted on her every move.

He felt beads of perspiration forming on his brow as she worked around the kitchen. He tried again to pry his eyes away from her but without success. His throat was sandpaper dry. He took a drink and then tried to eat, but the food stuck in his throat. Finally, after a few minutes, he shoved his plate away saying, "I have a lot of work to do. I've got to go." He knew he was only a movement away from grabbing her and leading her to the bedroom. It would be easy, for it was obvious she wouldn't resist. He had to get out of there. *Maybe if this marriage thing doesn't work out, I'll take her for my mistress or wife. It wouldn't be a bad trade-off.* But for right now he had to leave. *Any kind of gossip would ruin my chances in the marriage pool.*

As Gray pushed his chair back, Rosa protested loudly, "But, Señor, I fixed a very special dessert for you."

Gray laughed then, saying, "I'm very certain of that. Maybe some other time." He rushed out the door and into the street, breathing a sigh of relief.

Gray had almost gotten himself under control when he looked up to see Martin Williams and Len Smith coming out of Smith's General Merchandise. He knew they'd be going to Jinx's Saloon for lunch. He, himself, never drank during business hours but today he felt in great need of a little liquid refreshment. Jinx always kept his beer kegs cold out in the well in back. "A good cold beer is just what I need. Funny, I didn't realize what a hot day it's turning out to be. Wind must have died down or something else made me hot," he chortled to himself.

Jinx's place was one of the more imposing structures in the Grove. It was built of regular milled lumber and finished with a whitewashed exterior. The interior exhibited several items unusual in town, mainly a mirror running behind the full length of the bar and a large chandelier holding lamps to light the room each evening. The bar itself was supposedly fashioned of some rare mahogany, though its material was a subject much discussed and often doubted. There were a dozen or so tables

scattered about the room for playing poker or eating, depending on the desires of the customers. An upright piano sat against the far wall, though it was rarely used, unless some thirsty customer agreed to play in return for free drinks. A broken roulette wheel leaned against the opposite wall. It hadn't been fixed since the last time an angry miner decided it was a public menace and, as such, should be shot. At any rate, it was the social center of the town.

Gray followed Martin and Len inside to a table. They greeted him and Martin said, "Got a letter from Jeb Morgan written back when he was in St. Joe and sent with some riders comin' through. They're on their way at this very time. What do you think of that, boys? Can you believe it? They're really comin'."

Len asked, "You talkin' about the women I suppose. How many of them are there, Martin?"

"Just three for now, but maybe they'll find some other gals on the way. Jeb said he had hired a woman driver, a widow, who was wantin' to settle here."

"So it makes four candidates possibly. That don't help with five men." Len noted.

Martin told him, "Now don't give up, Len."

"Oh, I'm pretty old. Wasted those years out chasing them nuggets. Serves me right, I 'spect. I'm a little scrawny anyway up aside of you manly gents. I won't prove much competition to you other fellows."

Martin turned to Gray. "How you doin'? Don't usually see you here during the day? What's up?"

"Not much. I'm like Len. Wondered if you had heard from your cousin or anything." Gray shook his head, "It'll be a while before they arrive and the hard part of the trip is just ahead."

"You're right. It'll be some time yet, but it ain't too soon for us to start preparing for them. Me and Len were just talking about them. We started calling them the Pennsylvania Women."

Jorge de la Vega, the fourth of the five marriage candidates, came sauntering in. He was of Spanish lineage and as such was a native Californian. He was the next youngest of the men and certainly the wealthiest, with a ranch stretching for miles down the Valley. Handsome and strong, he would impress any woman with his gallantry. Yet, there was something about him that bothered Gray. From the beginning, Gray had wondered why Jorge had not gone to Mexico to seek a bride from the aristocracy there. It was not until later he learned Jorge had been a “woods colt” and had not gotten his name or inheritance until Señor Vega’s wife died, leaving the Señor a childless widower. It was then, and only then, the Señor married his mistress and claimed Jorge as his son. *I hope he wasn’t kinda warped by his experience. Hope it hasn’t ruined his outlook on marriage. Then maybe, it will make him more understanding of a woman’s problems. Can’t tell exactly how it would go.*

Gray’s thoughts were interrupted by Martin proclaiming loudly to someone’s remark, “I ain’t no experienced marriage broker. We got to look at it as a kind of experiment—a way to build a city. Hell, even a state.” He grinned at the others.

“Well, what do you know, we’re all here except Adams,” Martin proclaimed.

“He’ll be along. He’s supposed to bring in some of his horses to show me, hoping to make a sale,” Gray told them.

“Si, Señors, Jeremy will be here. He has to keep up with anything to do with the women. He’s what I call eager.” Jorge laughed.

“Dang, it’s roasting hot in here and smoky, too. I’m going to get us some cold beer to cut the heat.” Martin went to the bar to get the schooners. Gray watched him as he glanced in the mirror, rubbing his hand over his scraggly beard and dark black hair. He muttered something to himself.

“What were you talking to yourself about?” Gray asked Martin as he set the schooners on the table.

"Need to get a shave and cut my locks. Gals might like me better. I'm so big, they might think I resemble one of them grizzlies the way I look now."

"You might think about taking a bath a little more often, too," Gray volunteered. Martin nodded.

They had scarcely started drinking their beer when Jeremy Adams strode into the saloon. He was the youngest of the group. Rangy with red curly hair and a boyish grin, he had insisted on being included in the pool. Gray guessed him to be about twenty, but it was generally agreed he was a young man who was going places, having worked himself up from being a mustanger to becoming a rancher and horse breeder. He had been too young to have the gold fever. Anyway, Gray knew he would have been too smart to waste his time on anything so unreliable.

Jorge called to Jeremy, "Amigo, come sit. Have a drink. We have just been talking about your favorite subject—women."

"Not just women, those Pennsylvania beauties. They're beauties, aren't they, Martin?" Jeremy asked.

"Hope those two didn't take after their Cousin Martin," Gray said half seriously. The others guffawed.

Martin answered, "Like I told you from the beginning, I ain't no marriage broker. You'll like 'em. Just wait and see. Rachel's tall with a pretty face and smart as a whip. A doctor. Iris has the beauty of an angel. Don't look a thing like me. Neither one."

"You mean they don't have a scraggly black beard and aren't big as a barn or nothin'?" Jorge added.

"What about the others?" Jeremy asked Martin.

"Just one other comin' from Four Corners. Her name's Marie Lyle. She must be a widder cause she has a two-year-old boy. Then, Jeb wrote he hired a woman driver, another widder, who's wantin' to settle in California." Martin scowled. "That's enough about them for now. I don't want to take the suspense away."

Jennings "Jinx" Master, owner of the saloon, pulled a chair up to the table. "I been listening to you gents talk. I'll give any man two hundred dollars for his place in the pool. Double his money. Right now."

"No siree. I already told you these women are of high moral fiber and don't belong in no saloon." Martin's face crimsoned scowling at Jinx.

"You've got me wrong, friend. If I hankered for a dance hall gal, there are plenty I could bring from San Francisco. I want a wife, too. I'll build her a mansion up on the hill next to Gray and I'll keep her like a queen."

"No, Señor, you're not part of this." Jorge intervened, rising to take a threatening stance over Jinx. "We drink your whiskey and play your cards but we're not gambling with these women."

"Jinx's taken your money once too often hasn't he, Jorge?" Martin laughed. Then he pulled on Jorge's arm saying, "Sit down. Jinx's not a part of this. He heard all of you kinda' grousing about the women so he had a right to try to move in."

Jinx rose with his dark eyes twinkling. "I'll leave you to your own devices, gentlemen. Remember, though, my offer still stands."

"That dude. Did you ever see such a sight? Him and his dark suits and silk vests. I'd like to drag him through the mud feet first," Jeremy grumbled.

"Let's all calm down." Gray chided. "One thing we haven't thought about is the women and what they're giving up and what dangers they face just to get here. We have to think of them, too." He looked at the others. "Here's to their safety."

The California men raised their schooners in a toast to the Pennsylvania women "Here, here," they said in unison.

"Guess I'd better go open the store now," Len said, rising to leave with the others filing out behind him.

"Wait up there, Len." Martin grabbed his arm. "I need you to fit me for a suit. Didn't want to say nothin' in front of the others."

"Need a suit, huh? Maybe a couple of shirts, a vest, and a tie?"

"That's just right. How'd you know?"

"Not too original an idea. I just ordered the same things for the rest of the bunch. Guess they want to look good when they court, too. I've been holding their orders just waiting on you."

"Damn." Martin snorted. "Thought I'd be ahead of the pack."

Gray, accidentally overhearing the conversation, shook his head. This marriage pool thing was turning into some unique kind of competition.

When Gray got back to the office, Tom came to him saying, "I'm going to take a couple of horses over to Martin to let him shoe them. I won't be gone long."

"I'll do it. I'd like to talk to Martin alone, anyway." Gray took the bridles, leading the horses over to the smithy. Gray needed some more information about the women. Well, one particular woman, he told himself. His thoughts raced to the subject of the women. Rachel sounded pretty inviting. Beautiful and intelligent.

He and his Ma used to read Shakespeare in the evenings each taking a different part. Those were some of the best times of his life. If she were a doctor, at least she'd know how to read. That was a rare talent in a woman out here. She probably wasn't much of a cook or a seamstress, but he didn't expect housework out of her. What he wondered most was if she would be cold. "Lacking in womanly warmth" his mother used to say. Some really smart women were. He wondered how he could pry that out of Martin. Maybe Martin didn't know himself, but Gray was going to try to see if he did.

"Hey, there, Gray. Seems like I just saw you." Martin greeted him, his sleeves rolled up, and sweat pouring off his forehead while he sorted through his scrap metal heap.

Gray liked Martin with his open, friendly ways but he wished he weren't always soaked in perspiration and always covered with soot. It would take a very special woman to love

Martin. Not that his work panning for gold hadn't been dirty, but he wondered how he ever stood that slime. At least it wasn't for a lifetime.

"I brought this team over, hoping you could shoe them for me."

"Set a spell while I do just that."

Gray considered the best way to glean the information. Martin wasn't what you would consider genteel but he was smart. He'd rather not be too obvious. Unsure of himself, he plunged ahead anyway. "I was thinking about your cousin, the one who's the doctor. Rachel Williams."

"Yeah?"

"What's she like? Now be honest, Martin." He gave him a skeptical look.

"She's tall and thin—not bony or nothin'. Has kind of auburn-colored hair that's on the curly side. With warm brown eyes. Has a cleft in her chin, but I think it kind of adds something special to her looks."

"Sounds pretty. What's she like as a person?"

"She has a sense of humor. I know, cause when we was growing up, we always played tricks on each other."

"Wonder why she's still single? Didn't you say she's about thirty?"

"Yep, I always wondered myself. She courted a lot when we was in school. Kind of a favorite with the boys, really. Guess she never found the right man. She was off at school when most of the eligible bachelors got hitched. She used to deliver a lot of babies. Remember her saying it was hard deliverin' them and then havin' to leave 'em with their mas. She kept company with old Alfonse Meyer, a widderer there, but nothin' ever came of it. I was kinda glad. He weren't nothin' but a wet noodle. No backbone at all."

Gray nodded his head in agreement as he carefully recorded all these facts in a sort of mental filing system. He pulled his pipe out of his coat pocket and went over to the forge to get a light off a stick he dipped into the coals.

"Shouldn't be givin' you all this inside information, but I kinda had it in my mind you and Rachel would make a good pair. You both bein' kind of refined and all. You're about the right age, too. You and Len. I'd marry her myself, but we're cousins."

"Does she talk a lot? Is she the pious kind?"

"The answer is no to both."

Gray heaved a sigh of relief.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, my sisters were the silliest bunch and wouldn't you know one was a psalm singer from the word go. I couldn't stand a lifetime of that." Gray mopped his brow.

Silence followed. Then Martin asked, "Did you buy that wheat land out west of town that was for sale?"

"Matter of fact, I did. Got someone to rent it on halves next year."

"You're getting quite a spread, ain't you?"

"About six hundred acres now. Course farming's a gamble. Depends how much rain we get. One thing, though, there's plenty of market for wheat right here in California. I make more hauling it than raising it. Have to have some place to put my money though and there's nothing better than land for the long run."

"Suppose Rachel won't have to worry about workin' if she marries you."

"That's true. Maybe she'd want to practice medicine since there's so much need. It's up to her. I've always believed God gave women minds to use as well as men."

Martin gave a low whistle. "Now there's a liberal view if I ever heard one. Yep, you and Rach might just hit it off."

Martin stirred the coals in the forge. "I've got some plowshares to work on when I finish with them horses."

The smoke billowed toward Gray with ashes lighting on his jacket. He brushed them off, rising to say, "Guess it's time to go back to work. Tom can pick up the horses in a little while."

"Found out all you needed to know?" Martin laughed at him.

"Yes, I think I did." Gray grinned back.

"Knew that was what you were up to." Martin guffawed again.

Gray ambled slowly back to the livery, talking to himself. "Yes, sir, if Rachel's half the woman she's made out to be, she's going to be Mrs. Gray Collins. Dr. Rachel Collins. Dr. Rachel Williams Collins. Any and all of those names sound fine." Gray began whistling. He couldn't believe how excited he was. So preoccupied was he, he almost passed by the office door and then, turning back, missed the step and almost fell.

Tom looked at him quizzically. "Are you all right, Mr. Collins?"

"I'm fine. Fact of the matter you might say I'm extra fine." Gray rummaged in his bottom desk drawer and brought out a bottle of whiskey. "Bring two glasses, Tom."

"I thought we didn't dare drink during business hours?" Tom hesitated watching Gray in amazement.

"Here's to my new life and hopefully my new wife. Drink up now."

Tom shook his head. "Isn't this a little premature? You haven't met the lady yet. She's still out on the trail. Heaven knows what could happen." Tom never remembered seeing his boss, all-business-and-no-nonsense Gray Collins, outside his shell.

"No, I have this gut feeling. I'm going to marry Rachel Williams for sure. You know, Tom, I'm feeling a little giddy over all this."

"With that I agree." The baffled Tom raised his drink saying, "To the lovely and captivating Mrs. Collins, whoever and wherever she may be."

~ * ~

It was a few weeks later before the five men were together again. They met as usual in the place of choice, namely Jinx's saloon. Martin had sent messages for them to come in that

particular Saturday night in July to do what he called "marriage pool planning."

It was a sultry, windless night and even with all the doors and windows open, the saloon was sweltering. Smoke hung in a hazy fog around the tables while some miner played the piano, singing slightly off key to his own music. The miners who usually swamped the place hadn't been paid for some reason so the place was fairly quiet. Even so, Martin had chosen a table towards the back to assure the group a modicum of privacy.

"What have you heard from the wagon train, Martin? Anything recent?" Len asked.

"Not since St. Joe. Knowing Jeb Morgan, though, I'll bet he's on schedule. He won't get caught in the Sierras when the snow flies. I calculate they are at least to Ft. Laramie if not farther."

Jeremy Adams asked, "If you ain't heard nothin', why did you call us in for this meeting?"

"Yeah, why?" the others asked in unison.

"Are you wanting to plan?" Gray asked. "It's getting to be about time."

"Exactly right," Martin answered. "Since we've agreed to let the women do the choosin', we are gonna have to find them a place to stay. A place where we can go courtin'."

"I'm all for doin' away with the courtin' stuff. Let's just put their names in the hat and each man pull one out," Jeremy suggested.

"That won't do. As far as we know there are only three women—four if you count the woman driver. How about the odd man out?" Len asked.

"We could cut for that. Low man loses out." Jeremy countered.

Gray interrupted. "Stop that talk. We've already decided to let the women do their own choosing. The lucky ones pay off the guy that is left out. We contracted with Morgan to bring five women and he's only bringing three for pay, so we can use the extra to give the loser his money back."

"Señors, what if we don't like 'em when they get here? What then?" Jorge asked.

Martin answered, "We've got a moral obligation to find them a place. They'll be O.K. Anyway, anybody wants out can talk to Jinx. He'll buy 'em out."

Gray sided with Martin. "Come on fellows. The gals have a right to choose. It will be something to see how all this fits together though. Every community around is watching how this goes."

"You're right," Len said, "A miner came in the store and was telling me they brought this mail order bride thing up over in Rocky Creek Mining Camp the other day. How it came up the man didn't know, but it was during a murder trial. The poor devil on trial had to wait to hear if he was going to get hung while the men found out about the Pennsylvania Women."

"What happened?" they all asked.

"Let him go. They got so interested in our little project, they forgot what the testimony had been."

"I'm not sure, but I'll bet this isn't the last time brides are sent for from the East. Let's get down to business." Gray said.

Martin started again. "We need to find a place for them to stay. I guess my cousins, Iris and Rachel, can stay with me. My quarters are a little cramped. After I get a wife, I plan to build a regular house."

"Señors, they could stay at the rancho with me. Madre already suggested it. She could chaperone them. We have plenty of servants to take care of them."

Jeremy interrupted. "I don't like either of them suggestions. I'm sorry, Jorge, but it's too far out to your hacienda. Besides, once they see all your wealth, they'd be fighting over you."

"Well?" Jorge laughed.

Jeremy's face turned red. "I may not be rich, but I'll be a damned good husband."

"At least an eager one. I'm going to call you Señor Caliente from now on. I'll bet you'll fill this valley with kids if anybody can."

“Well I heard tell your Madre is already sewing baby clothes for the grandkids.”

“That’s enough.” Martin commanded.

Gray cleared his throat. “I have plenty of room for all of them while they get settled. And I promise not to influence them unduly.”

“Don’t know, but it’s probably for the best.” Jeremy agreed.

Martin concluded the meeting with, “That’s settled then.” He raised his schooner saying, “Let’s all have a beer and may the best men win.”

In a more somber tone Gray added, “A safe trip for those brave women.”

Nine

The Epidemic

Rachel was enthralled by the scenery as they trekked to Ft. Laramie. Chimney rock thrust a slender spire pointing to the sky, as some said, like a finger of God. They had already passed the well-known landmarks of Courthouse Rock and Jailhouse Rock. All of this in a matter of days.

“Out here it seems as if we are inexorably linked to the past and the future. According to Jeb, the paths we follow were first trampled out by the hooves of buffalo. Then taken up by tribes of Indians and later mountain men. Today, we settlers pass by the same mileposts used by these forerunners for hundreds of years. We are linked to the past forever,” Rachel exclaimed breathlessly.

“I don’t know about that, but I’ll be glad to reach Ft. Laramie and even gladder to be at South Pass. Do you suppose we’ll be able to tell when we are on the Continental Divide? Will there really be a great division?” Iris asked.

“You know, they say we climb almost imperceptibly until we reach the Pass. So gradually, you can hardly tell. Only a little ways west of the Pass, the trails divide. One branch goes north to Oregon and to Ft. Hall then down the Snake River and on to Oregon City.” Rachel became silent as she thought of Hiram whose train was already on that route.

"What about us? Which way will we go?"

Rachel answered, "From what I understand we'll go to Ft. Bridger and the Hastings Cutoff. Then we follow the Humboldt and Truckee Rivers. But then, there are the terrible Sierras to cross. We follow the western slope down to Sacramento."

"The Sierras? Don't they sound romantic?" Iris purred.

"Perhaps, but can you imagine what it will be like to cross them. I understand they are eight thousand feet high. Eight thousand feet up and eight thousand feet down. Quite an excursion, I'd say."

"Rach, I'm not worried. Jeb will take care of us."

"Doubtless." Rachel nodded, thinking what Hiram had said about how he'd trust his life with Jeb. Yes, the trip might try their wills but Jeb would see them through.

The two of them rode along in quiet companionship until Rachel asked, "Are you excited about California?"

A slight color rising to her cheeks, Iris sighed, "Oh, very excited. When I'm so very tired, I try to keep my spirits up by trying to imagine what the men—rather the man whom I'll marry will be like."

Rachel laughed. "I'm sure he's just as curious as you are. And just as excited."

"But, Rach, are you going to stay in Garden Grove? Now that you're involved with Jeb and all?"

"Oh, Iris, I don't know. I have such a decision to make. He finds it hard to fit my practice in his life. Honestly, I don't know if I can."

"Oh, Rach, no. You're a doctor."

"I'm much more than that. I'm a woman, too," Rachel added emphatically. "He has a point. It would interfere with a family life. Such interference would surely bring us into conflict. Sometimes I think my medicine isn't so important anyway."

Iris, almost always placid and quiet, literally screamed at Rachel. "Not important? Wash your mouth out with lye soap, Rachel Williams. Ask Grace Ganzer if she thinks your

doctoring isn't important. She'd tell you her baby is very important. You saved his life and maybe Grace's, too. Or the driver with the infected bite, or the Johnson boy with the broken leg. Your being a doctor is vital. Don't doubt it ever."

"I don't know how to resolve this." She hugged Iris. "My dear little cousin."

"Rachel, have faith. That's what your pa and my pa would tell you."

Rachel felt the guilt rising slowly within her. *If only they knew I've slept with Jeb, they'd have a bit more to say than that. I was raised better.*

Suddenly a jackrabbit bounded across their path. Rachel sighed with relief at the distraction.

"Oh, look. We have company. Sometimes it seems so lonely out here."

"Doesn't it? I heard someone say we are asea. Not in a ship on an ocean but in a wagon in a desert of sand."

Mid-morning, a rider approached from the north. He hailed Jeb who greeted him as an acquaintance. The two of them stood talking for several minutes before they turned, coming over to Rachel's wagon.

"This is Tom Mason, scout for the wagon train ahead. He has something he needs to discuss with you."

Tom nodded. "Howdy, Doctor Williams. I was glad to hear you were with Jeb's train. We're sorely in need of your help."

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

"We have a sickness. Brought the train to a halt. Don't know what it is. Thought maybe you'd ride ahead and look at some of them that are sick."

Rachel looked intently at Tom, who avoided her eyes and raked the dust into a circular pattern under his boots. What was this problem? A certain sense within her warned her of danger.

"Tell me about it, Tom. Describe how this sickness is making the people act."

He paused, then grudgingly answered. "Well there are about twenty people sick—men, women, and children. All kinds.

They're vomiting a lot and got dysentery. The brown kind like I've never ever seen before. Yes. They're so weak. Two of them already died. Every morning there's somebody else sick. Some call it trail fever, but I don't know."

"Where did your train form?"

Tom looked surprised. "I don't know why you need to know, but we started out in St. Louis. Most of the people came from Ohio."

"The rest?"

"A couple from Missouri and a couple of the men came up the river from New Orleans."

"New Orleans?"

"Yep, all the way."

"Were they the first ones sick?"

"Come to think of it. They were. One of them was the first to die, too."

Rachel shook her head and cleared her throat. "I see. Could you excuse us while I talk to Jeb?"

When Tom sauntered off, Jeb turned to Rachel with alarm. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Oh," she moaned. "I'm afraid it's cholera."

"Cholera? My God."

"They've got to be placed under quarantine. There's little I can do for them. It's awful."

"Now, Rachel, don't get it into your head to go over there. I won't let you expose yourself and this train to such a menace."

"Then you forbid me to go?"

"Yes. Damn it, woman." He grabbed her arm with an iron grip.

"Believe it or not, I'm relieved. I have a certain amount of immunity built up against most diseases—but not that. If I could really save some of them, I'd want to go. Their own body strength is all there is to save them. Poor things, half of them will die. I'll gather up a sack of medicine to send with Tom. I'll give him some general instructions about caring for them."

"Rachel, is there anything else we can do?"

"We'll need to cook some food and leave it at the edge of their camp. It's all we can do. Oh, yes, I have some red cloth they can display to show the quarantine. I feel so helpless." Tears welled in her eyes.

"How'd you know it was cholera?"

"When they said the men who got sick were from New Orleans, I knew. That's one of the main ports cholera comes through, plus there's lots of swampy land in that area for things to breed in."

~ * ~

It was almost dark when their train passed the stricken Ethridge group. Someone asked if they weren't going to stop soon, but Jeb, at Rachel's request, insisted they go well above the other camp. Someone growled, "Ain't this far enough? We've had a mighty long day having to fix food for the Ethridge bunch."

"Rachel says we have to be about a quarter mile above them so we won't get any contaminated water. We don't need to cause them any more problems. Besides that grove of trees up ahead is a good place to stop."

So it was fully dark by the time camp was set up. Rachel wrestled with her conscience. The thought of those people down there fighting their terrible disease alone was almost more than she could stand. Finally she grabbed her medical kit and began to retrace the route toward the stricken train.

She turned, hearing footsteps behind her. Jeb's voice called to her, "Rachel, wait, where in thunder do you think you're going?" As he caught up with her he took her arm.

"Jeb, I can't abandon those people. I took the Hippocratic Oath. Those aren't just empty words you know."

"You aren't going. I have forbidden it. Think of our people and what you might carry to them. Think of little Jimmy or the Ganzer baby. You have an obligation to them, too. Besides, do you realize how dangerous walking in the night would be. Snakes and all sorts of varmints are out now."

Rachel sobbed as he led her back to her wagon. He put his arm around her and said comfortingly, "Can I sit a spell on your porch?" He lifted her up to the wagon seat.

They looked up into the clear sky where the stars were so brilliantly near they cast a soft light over the broad expanse of the prairie. The gigantic boulders were so outlined they were more than rocks, they were the sentinels of the world. A cricket provided nature's tune on his high-strung fiddle while an owl hooted from some distant tree. The perfume of the blooming sage wafted softly on the night breeze, brushing their cheeks with a soft caress.

Rachel leaned against Jeb. "I feel so guilty loving life as I do."

He held her. "Never feel guilty over something like that. You've earned your right to live. I just wish you didn't feel so responsible for the whole world. Maybe once we're home on my ranch, life will be simpler for you—for us."

It's easy to be a woman here with him, but there's another side to me. Right now, I'm not thinking of that part of my being. I'm just content to feel secure here with Jeb.

~ * ~

The next morning they arrived at Ft. Laramie, a bustling hub of the westward flow. The train stopped just outside the gates and circled into formation.

Jeb told Rachel, "I need to go into the fort and see Colonel John Schallenbarger. Colonel Shelly, they call him. Kind of a courtesy call. Guess I'd better tell them about the Ethridge train. Maybe they can send out some supplies."

"Could I go with you? I'd like to see their resident surgeon. There are some medical supplies I'd like him to give me."

"Put on your bonnet and let's go." Jeb grinned at her. "Andy, here's the list of supplies we need. Go to the post and pick them up while we're gone."

Together they made their way through the milieu of horses, settlers, and soldiers. The day was already hot with the dust from the grounds ascending into the air. The smell of stables

and sweat filled their nostrils. There was a sense of excitement and anticipation everywhere.

Colonel Shelly, himself, rose to greet them when they entered the commander's office. He was a very large man, taller even than Jeb. Imposing, Rachel thought to herself, in the blue uniform. And distinguished with an impeccably trimmed mustache and dark, graying hair. Nobody's fool with those dark brown eyes that could penetrate even the most devious of thoughts.

"How do you do? I'm Colonel John Shelly." He smiled at them, extending his arm.

Jeb grasped his arm answering, "I'm Jeb Morgan and this is Miss Rachel Williams. I'm in charge of the wagon train just outside the gate. We're in route to the San Joaquin."

Turning to Rachel, Colonel Shelly bowed, "Welcome to the fort, Miss Williams. I'm honored. You couldn't be the woman doctor I've heard so much about, could you?"

"Yes, I'm Dr. Williams." Rachel saw Jeb watching intently as the colonel delivered his flattery. She ignored the Colonel's remark and hurriedly changed the subject. "I've come to see your surgeon, Colonel Shelly. I'm a little low on a few medical supplies and I thought perhaps he would help me."

"I'm sure it can be arranged. Dr. Cooker is a little indisposed right now so I'll just take you to the infirmary myself and you can pick out whatever you need. He can reorder next week when the army supply wagons come through."

Jeb broke in. "Colonel, there's a wagon train—the Ethridge train about two days back. They have had a bout with cholera and they are pretty low on supplies and medicines. You might want to send some goods out there. I wouldn't suggest direct contact but you could leave the materials at the edge of their camp."

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan, I'll send a detail out there later today. Are you sure about the cholera?"

Rachel answered, "As certain as I can be without a direct examination. The scout described the symptoms and the first

members on the train to get sick came up the river from New Orleans. The way the people are coming down with it and the rapid rate of death, I feel there can be little doubt. Even if it's something else, we can ill afford not to quarantine them. It's a terrible situation."

Jeb interrupted. "I forbade her to go into the camp lest she expose herself and our train to such a deadly disease."

"A wise decision, Mr. Morgan. Though I imagine it was protested a bit by Dr. Williams." The Colonel smiled knowingly at Rachel. "Mr. Morgan, would you like to accompany us to the infirmary?"

"No, I'd best check on my scout who's picking up our supplies." Turning to her, Jeb said, "Rachel, don't be too long."

"Come, Dr. Williams, Rachel, the infirmary is in the next complex of buildings." Colonel Shelly propelled her forward.

"You said Surgeon Cooker was ill?" Rachel asked.

"Not ill—indisposed."

"Indisposed?"

"Yes, the good doctor is on a toot. Drunk, if you will."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. A kind of natural state for him. I could have him cashiered out of the army but then we'd have no medical help at all."

When they entered the infirmary, a nauseating smell of infection met them. A soldier lay moaning on a cot in the corner while an orderly sat watching helplessly.

"What is this?" Rachel demanded.

"Private Jensen had an accident last week. His horse stumbled in a gopher hole throwing him and then falling atop him. Dr. Cooker set the leg but then the leg swelled and began to drain," the orderly told her worriedly.

Rachel asked the young helper, "What's your name?"

"Corporal Brown, ma'am. Most just call me Orderly or Ned."

She looked down at the sick boy lying half-conscious before her. He looked to be only eighteen at most, tall and thin with a

mop of red curly hair and a thick carpet of freckles. Her heart went out to him.

Rachel turned to the corporal, "Orderly, how long ago did you change this bandage?"

"This morning. I know it looks bad. It's been soaking through very fast."

Rachel nodded her head. "I'm not criticizing you. I know you've had a lot to do by yourself." He, too, was very young and rather small. Probably for that very reason he had been assigned to the infirmary.

Rachel laid her hand on the Private's forehead. "This man is burning with fever. I'm going to examine him."

Shelly nodded his head. "I hoped you would."

Rachel unwrapped the bandage, taking off the splint as well. She noted a gaping cut. "The wound itself is still dirty and infected. I also suspect there are bone fragments that need to be removed from the leg." Rachel added with an air of emergency, "I'll need to operate."

"Operate?" Shelly inquired.

"That's what needs to be done." Rachel answered.

"Do you feel confident enough to do this?"

"I have to unless Surgeon Cooker can be sobered up."

The Orderly shook his head. "He has tremors too bad. He doesn't operate any more."

Shelly corroborated, "He's right you know. You, my good woman, are the Private's only chance."

Rachel hesitated briefly but said, "All right but first I'll need to look over your supplies and instruments. While I do that, Orderly, scrub down the table over there with warm water and lye soap. Be sure we have a supply of clean bandages." She caught her breath before continuing.

"Colonel, send to the wagon train and summon Mary, my assistant. She's the Indian girl with my train. Have her bring my medical kit, too."

"What else do you need, Doctor?" Shelly asked. "I know Cooker got new supplies last month, though I doubt he ever checked them. Here they are."

Rachel raised the lid of the box he set out for her. "Oh, look, here's a bottle of chloroform. It says it's new and experimental. An anesthetic. Just what we need. Someone will have to administer it." She glanced at the Colonel, "Here, read the instructions, Colonel. Make yourself a ten-minute expert."

"Wait just a minute." Shelly objected.

"There's no one else."

"The Orderly."

"No, he's busy. Besides I need *your* help." Rachel laughed softly at the consternation of the usually self-assured and imposing man.

Rachel walked to the Private's bed, touching his forehead. "His temperature is rising. We've got to get this fever down or he'll have brain damage. Not much good to correct his leg if his mind is gone. Orderly, find a tub and fill it with cool water. Hurry."

When the tub was in place, Rachel hurriedly undressed the Private, motioning to the men to place him in the water. She used a rag to bathe the man, keeping him immersed as much as possible. "I didn't realize how dehydrated he was."

Mary appeared with the medical bag and began laying out Rachel's scalpel and other tools. "Do you want me to boil these things?"

"Yes, thankfully, you know the procedure." She felt the inside of his elbow. "His temperature appears to be going down so we can dry him off now and cover him so he won't chill too badly." Rachel sensed the clock of life was ticking for this young man in all his misery.

"Orderly, if you're finished with the bandages and the cleaning, I'd like to talk to the Colonel alone, please."

When he had gone, Rachel spoke softly to Shelly. "We have quite a situation here. The boy's leg is almost gangrenous. I have to make a decision. I can go in and operate, scraping away

the morbid flesh and try to remove the fragments of bone. It will be tedious, and there is risk to his very life even if I save the leg. The safest way would be to amputate, but it would be a bitter pill for someone so young to lose his limb. What do you think?"

Shelly strode to the window, looking out at the activity in the compound. "He is robust with generally good health." The Colonel drew in his breath. "I know this boy. He was raised on the streets of New York without an education. Tough and wild. Believe it or not, his getting into the army was the best thing ever happened to him. Without his leg, he'd never be able to sit a horse." Sighing again the Colonel continued, "I think he'd want you to save the limb even if there is a risk of dying." Surprisingly, tears welled up in the Colonel's eyes.

She signaled to the orderly, who was standing outside on the porch, to return. "I'll do my best. I pray that is good enough. Now, let's each determine our assignment here. Orderly, please take the Private's pulse and determine as best you can his breathing rate. Colonel, fix a cloth over his nose and attempt to regulate the flow of the anesthetic from the bottle into a very slow drip. Mary will hand me the instruments and help me otherwise."

Rachel motioned them to pull the table in front of the west window to gain the most daylight for her vision. "Place the Private here on the table and cover everything but his leg with a sheet."

Rachel turned to Ned. "Get us each an apron and a kerchief to use as a mask. Now, all of us need to wash our hands. Scrub them mightily."

The twelve o'clock bugle had just blown when they situated the Private on the operating table. He roused from the handling. "Colonel Shelly, don't let 'em take my leg or nothin'." He clutched the Colonel's arm.

"That's all right son. She'll do her best." The large man patted the boy's arm. "I'm going to put this cloth over your

nose and mouth so I can drip medicine to put you to sleep. Then you won't hurt so much. God Bless you. Bless us all."

The air was stiflingly hot and the smell of the medicine chokingly close as Rachel made the first incision. The minutes turned into an hour and then another as she worked with intensity, repairing the wound and scraping the leg. Mary anticipated Rachel's every need and together they worked in perfect unison.

The sweat beaded on Rachel's brow while her clothes began to stick to her back as the sun beat down on the low roof. Rachel unbuttoned her skirt, merely stepping out of it trying to get cooler. Finally she removed her shirtwaist from under her apron. "Colonel, you might as well take off your jacket. Don't you know we can work better in our undergarments anyway?"

The Colonel laughed but Rachel had already bent back to her work. "How's he doing, Orderly?"

"Surprisingly well. His heartbeat is steady. Will it be much longer?"

"Not much. I want to completely finish before you bring him to."

The Colonel began to choke as the chloroform encircled them. "Open, the door and the windows. We'll all be overcome if we're not careful. Quick."

The Orderly obeyed and when he did so he saw a large crowd had gathered outside. "We're being observed."

Neither Rachel nor the others commented. They were too intent on the task at hand. Finally, at the sound of the three o'clock bugle signaling the changing of the guards, Rachel said, "I just have to stitch up the incision and we'll be through. Mary, I'm ready for the moss."

"Moss?" the Colonel demanded.

"Yes, I always keep some. It seems to draw the infection. Don't worry. I'm going to put it on the outside of the wound. Believe me, it's a miracle cure."

"If anyone but you told me that, I'd call it witchcraft, but I trust your judgment." Mary smiled at his response.

"It's over then?" the Colonel asked.

Rachel nodded and he responded, "Thank God."

When they put the Private back in bed, he roused a little. "That's fine. He's still with us." Rachel sighed in relief.

A round of applause rippled through the crowd of bystanders. "My stars, have they been out there watching long, Orderly?"

"Long enough. Not everyday are they privy to a medical team operating in their unders. Especially if their commanding officer is part of that team." Ned laughed.

Rachel picked up a wet, stray curl from her forehead. "Thank goodness for our covering of aprons. What a sight we are."

Shelly chortled. "Madam, you and Mary, surely have never been more beautiful." Then, in courtly manner, he bowed to them both.

As Rachel pulled on her shirt, she thought to herself what if Jeb had seen her in such a state. He would surely drag her back to the train himself. She giggled at the thought.

"Is there anything I can do for you ladies? Just anything?" Shelly asked.

"Something very dear. We need a cool drink of water, please, Colonel." Rachel laughed.

"I'll have it sent plus the bucket brigade will wet down the roof and see if this oven of a building can be cooled down for you." He turned to go, "I have a fort to run plus I want to make sure the supplies for the Ethridge train are sent out."

"Oh, Colonel Shelly, would you send a messenger to Jeb telling him why we are so late?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll go myself and thank him for your services. Personally." As he left, he turned and said, "Thank you."

Rachel was amazed to find Private Jensen's condition had already stabilized. He was still comatose but his temperature was down and his pulse steady. By early evening he roused long enough to take a few sips of water, showing little or no

nausea from the anesthetic. *This is the advantage of being hale and hearty and eighteen.*

Rachel sent Mary to rest on an empty cot in the corner. She sat down in the chair next to the boy. Despite her best intentions when she put her head down on the side of his cot, she dropped off to sleep.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Jeb. "Rachel, I need to talk to you," he said quietly. "Colonel Shelly came and asked me if you could stay another day with the patient. I think he wants you to check some of the women on the post. He said he'll send you with a detail to catch up with us on the train. I'm against it."

"Were you planning on leaving in the morning?"

"I had intended to leave this afternoon but you were busy." He grimaced.

"I'm sorry. Did you get your supplies?"

"Most of them. I had hoped to get some more grain for the horses and mules. I hear forage is pretty short ahead, just like I figured. Anyway, I couldn't find any to buy." He paused, "Well, Rachel, what'll it be?"

"Jeb, I agree we can't delay the train, but perhaps I can help everyone. Maybe Colonel Shelly would help you with the supplies if I help him with his medical needs."

Then Shelly entered. "What's that?"

"Our train needs more grain for the animals. Could you help us?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know," Jeb interjected.

Ignoring Jeb's remark, Shelly answered. "Why not? If Dr. Williams is willing to help us medically, I think it'd be proper for us to supply some grain. Our new shipment will be in next week anyway."

With that, Shelly took a pad and pencil out of his pocket and wrote a message, handing it to Jeb. "Just show this to the men at the granary and they'll give you what you need. I'll send Rachel and Mary out in the rick. They can easily catch up with you. Say day after tomorrow?"

Jeb nodded saying grudgingly, "It's settled then. Just be sure you take good care of them, Colonel."

Rachel watched in amazement as the will of the titans clashed and then subsided, reaching a compromise. She needed to learn to handle Jeb that way. Maybe she would have practice shortly for she was sure there would be the devil to pay when she rejoined the train. For now, it was the best solution. She watched Jeb cross the compound with his shoulders squarely set in his determined way. As she expected, he reached up pulling his hat down over his eyes.

"Compromise isn't easy for him, is it?" Shelly asked his eyes twinkling.

Rachel shook her head in silence.

Shelly continued. "He's what I call a man's man, but then where does that leave a woman?" He smiled knowingly at her.

Ten

The Birthday Dance

Private Jensen was showing remarkable progress by early evening of the day of his operation. Colonel Shelly dropped by the infirmary to check on him. "How is the boy?"

"Doing well, really." Rachel answered. "The next time he rouses, I want to try giving him some broth if I may have some."

"That you will have." He strode off across the courtyard to his office with a sure, steady gait.

Speaking of a man's man, she thought . Yet he reflects something more. Understanding? Maturity? How appealing. She realized Shelly was at least ten years older than Jeb, but he was more than an equal to most younger men.

An hour had passed when Rachel heard footsteps pause outside. Shelly's voice came clearly through the door. "Cooker, you are to relieve that woman. Do a good job of it. If I find you drunk in there, plan to spend six months in the guardhouse."

"A woman, you let a woman operate on one of your men?" Cooker grumbled.

"Not just a woman but quite a woman. She saved your bacon. If the boy had died, you would have been tried for dereliction of duty. I would have seen to it personally. Do you understand, sir?" Shelly told him threateningly.

When they entered, Rachel looked at the errant doctor, a rotund balding man with a gray cast to his skin. Rachel rose and Cooker propelled himself, wobbling forward, to take her place by Jensen's bed.

Rachel extended her hand to him. "I'm Dr. Williams. And you are Dr. Cooker?"

He nodded. "What, madam, have you done here?"

Rachel described the operation, outlining the procedure briefly.

"I'll have to admit he isn't looking so bad." Cooker said, making sure the element of surprise carried in his voice.

"Let's go now," Shelly told Rachel and Mary. Turning to Cooker, "I'll have some dinner sent over with some hot coffee. I expect you to eat and drink everything."

"All right," Cooker growled.

When they walked into his house, he told them, "You'll have to excuse my bachelor quarters."

Rachel looked around, noting the rugs on the floor, the floral draperies, and the large grandfather clock in the corner. "It's beautiful. So tastefully furnished."

Shelly smiled proudly. "I sent to your wagon for a change in clothing. I put the two of you in my room. I'll bunk in with my lieutenants while you're here. I've taken the liberty of having baths drawn for both of you."

"Thank goodness. The odor of the medicine is choking me. Instead of lilac water I smell of chloroform even in my hair."

"Ladies, dinner is in half an hour."

As planned, Ned, the orderly, joined them for the meal. The table was set with fine china and shimmering glassware on a snowy white tablecloth. The aroma of fresh food wafted through the dining room. The two women were dressed in simple shirtwaists and skirts. Rachel sat at the foot of the table facing Shelly at the table's head while Ned and Mary sat across from each other on the sides.

Shelly filled their glasses with blood-red burgundy. "I propose a toast to today's successful operation and the fine

medical team that performed it.” They rose, clinking their glasses together and then tasting the wine with its invigorating warmth.

The meal, though frontier in content, was gourmet in preparation with wild pheasant smothered in cream and fresh vegetables taken from the post’s garden, as well as newly baked bread slathered with sweet churned butter. There was dried apple pie for dessert.

“I haven’t felt so civilized since we left St. Joe. Just to sit at a table within a house is a wondrous thing.” Rachel rejoiced.

Mary watched Rachel’s every move, picking up the napkin, laying it in her lap just as Rachel had done. She used the same fork and spoon while imitating the cutting of the meat by carefully holding the knife. Rachel realized Mary had never seen such a table, let alone eaten at one. She was an apt student of the culture.

When they had finished, Rachel told Shelly, “Give my compliments to the chef.”

“He’s the mess cook but he enjoys doing my dinners as a change of pace. He’ll be pleased by your compliment.”

Before they left the table, Shelly said, “Corporal, I was watching you this afternoon. Do you have a genuine interest in medicine? You seemed quite helpful and knowledgeable.”

“Oh, I’m very taken with medicine.”

Shelly chuckled, “I imagine Dr. Cooker has allowed you to spread your wings.”

“Sir?”

“Cooker has let you do a lot of the work on your own, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Someone would have to do it. Do you ever write his reports?”

“Well—uh—yes, sir.”

“I thought as much. Then you’re literate. How much education do you have?”

“Through the eight grade.”

"Do you read much?"

"As a matter of fact I do. Mostly Surgeon Cooker's journals and books."

Rachel looked at the corporal's face turning slightly crimson at the attention he was receiving from his commanding officer. As she had noted before, he was of slight build with a thick head of blonde hair and blue eyes. He radiated pleasantness.

"Corporal, if you can pass the entrance test, I'll see what I can do about getting you into medical school. The army's in desperate need of doctors and they might be willing to help with your education. If you're interested, that is."

The young man's face flushed even more fully this time. "Interested. More than interested. I'm pleased when people call me Orderly. I can't imagine how it'd be like to be called doctor. Like a dream come true."

Ned smiled at Mary. Rachel thought, *I hadn't noticed but they're attracted to each other. Why not? He isn't exactly handsome but his personality makes him appealing. Mary radiates a petite loveliness which compliments his own small build.*

"Colonel Shelly, John, this has been a fabulous evening but I'd better relieve Surgeon Cooker," Rachel informed him.

Ned asked, "Dr. Williams if you don't need us, I thought I'd show Mary around the post. Take a little walk."

John turned to Rachel, "I'll go with you and give the cook time to clean up here."

While Rachel and John walked through the compound, she said, "That's a nice thing you're doing for Ned. I think he has potential, plus he understands frontier life and it will add to his usefulness."

"Until today, I hadn't known this boy. Somehow just being around you has given me a different perspective on things."

When they entered the infirmary, Cooker was sitting by Jensen's bedside. John asked, "How's the patient?"

"Doing pretty well. He was complaining of pain so I gave him laudanum, and he's been sleeping ever since. He turned to

Rachel and said, "He was perspiring so I guess his fever is gone."

"Wonderful, doctor."

John walked over to the table where Cooker's food was sitting untouched on its tray. "I thought I told you to eat, Cooker."

"I drank the coffee but I wasn't too hungry."

Rachel, sensing a confrontation, said, "Why don't I relieve you, Doctor? I'll spend the night here and you can get some rest in your quarters. I know you've been a bit indisposed."

"Thank you, Doctor Williams. I'd like that." Cooker rapidly retreated through the door.

John laughed, pulling up a second chair by the bed for himself. "Now don't dismiss me. I'm not ready to go just yet."

Rachel smiled. "You're on to me and my ways, aren't you? I have a better idea. He seems resting well enough and the bandage isn't weeping. Maybe we could sit out on the porch. I see there are some benches there. We'd be close enough to hear him if he cries out."

It was a night of cool enchantment after the blazing sun of the day. The moon cast a soft glow on to the porch while the wind softly caressed them and then softly rustled the leaves of a nearby tree.

After a few minutes of silence Rachel built up her courage to ask him about something that had been nagging her all evening. "I hope you don't mind my asking. John, are you married? I saw that painting of you and that beautiful dark-haired woman hanging over your mantel."

"Yes, that's my wife, Sophie, looking down on us. She and I have been separated for more than five years now. She took our daughter, Betsy, back East to raise her 'properly' as she said. Sophie hated life here on the post so I wasn't surprised when she never came back."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have inquired."

"I'm sorry, too. Our daughter married last year so now we're both alone."

"Now what about you, Rachel? What brought you so far from home?"

"Oh, I was alone and my career as a doctor was threatened mainly because I wasn't a man, so I decided to come west when my cousin offered me a chance to become part of a marriage pool. And, he said they were in dire need of a doctor."

"I see," he mused. "Rachel, tomorrow is my birthday. The men always give me a dance to celebrate the occasion. Would you go with me and be my partner? Your work checking the women will take half a day or better anyway. Then I'd send you to the train early the next morning."

"Well, I suppose it'd be all right. I don't think Mary would object." They looked across the parade grounds at the two figures silhouetted there.

John chuckled, "I think the Corporal is pretty well smitten."

"Someone told me it doesn't take long sometimes. Well, I'd best go inside now. See that Mary gets to bed pretty soon. Everybody has had quite a day." She added softly, "Goodnight, John."

~ * ~

The next morning Rachel had just changed Jensen's bandage when she heard the women patients start to assemble on the infirmary porch. Rachel asked Ned and Mary to help her move the examining table into the supply room where she began checking the women one by one. Between each examination, she took time to wash her hands and replace the sheets on the table.

Ned commented, "Cooker will have a fit when he sees all this laundry."

"Don't forget how much soap I'm using washing my hands, either," she laughed. "I learned about the good effects of cleanliness from the common midwife. They lose far fewer patients to childbed fever than the doctors, especially those who never wash their hands. What is the saying about cleanliness being next to Godliness? Time will vindicate my carefulness. Remember that when you take your training."

By early afternoon, Rachel had finished with her patients. Most of the ailments were minor in nature though happily she did find two women who were pregnant. Ned fed Jensen a cup of broth and agreed to spend the afternoon looking after him and doing the other detail work. Doctor Cooker sent word he was feeling "poorly" and wouldn't be in until later.

When Rachel and Mary went back to John's quarters, they found the post seamstress, Carrie Martin, waiting for them. "Colonel Shelly told me to bring these dresses over to meet with your approval and to fit them to you. He said you'd need them for the dance tonight."

Carrie held up a dress of pastel pink silk with an over-all floral design and puffed sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. Mary squealed, "Is this for me?"

"Yes," Carrie told her. "I hope you like it. Try it on and we'll see."

"Oh, Rachel, I've never had anything so—so—how do you say?"

"Beautiful?"

"Yes, that's it—beautiful. Don't tell Marie but it's even prettier than the dress she made me." Mary's face shone with delight.

"You need to learn another word for the way you look, Mary. It's charming."

"Dr. Williams, this dress is for you." Carrie produced a pale lavender dress, also of silk, that flowed gently from an empire waist directly to the floor in front but caught in a bustle in the back. Its rounded, scoop neck revealed Rachel's graceful neck while emphasizing the clear, white skin of her shoulders. "Colonel Shelly said if you didn't care for it, I should bring you this." She held out a shimmering yellow garment. "To tell you the truth he was very partial to the lavender."

"The lavender is fine. It was very generous of him." Rachel told her.

"Also, he asked that I bring these slippers to coordinate with the dresses. I guessed at the size but I think they'll just about fit."

Surprisingly, the shoes did fit. "I have very thin feet and larger than most." Rachel chuckled.

"Not in proportion to your height." Carrie told her soothingly. "I must go now. See you at the dance tonight."

After Carrie left Mary said, "Did you see the pretty things on the table over there?"

"Oh, you mean the dresser set with the comb, brush, and mirror? They are lovely, all finished in silver. It's like a shrine with the framed daguerreotype of Sophie overlooking her delicate collection of perfume and lace hankies. Just as she left them. For five years, John has kept her memory alive." Rachel paused, "He still loves her even though he would not openly admit it."

When Rachel and Mary had bathed and put on their clothes, Shelly came to the door. "Rachel, I have a buggy waiting. I'd like to take you for a ride before the dance if you have time."

Rachel asked Mary, "Would you go and help Ned with the patient?"

"I'd like it." Mary grinned shyly. "Colonel, thank you for the nice dress."

Rachel added, "The dresses were wonderful. What a delightful surprise. Incidentally, Happy Birthday, John."

"You know it is. A happy birthday, I mean."

John pointed the buggy out to the prairie beyond the fort. "There's a view I've been wanting to share with someone and you seem the perfect candidate, Rachel." He patted her lightly on the arm.

"It seems a lot like my farm in Pennsylvania and I thought you might see the similarity, too. Aren't you from a small town there?"

Rachel nodded. "I didn't realize you had a farm back home."

"Yes, Sophie doesn't live there. She lives in Harrisburg, but we do have quite a nice farm farther east. I call it my retirement home. My retirement won't be very long now. I started at the academy when I was just a pup and have stuck with the army ever since. Sometimes when I'm alone I think it was a mistake, but I know I'd do it again."

Suddenly they topped a small hill and a green valley spread out before them. A running stream outlined the land followed by a stand of trees that cast a cooling shade along the rim. A small cabin centered the cropland while cattle grazed in the surrounding pasture. It was a lovely patterned quilt of many shades and colors, the epitome of peace and serenity.

Rachel sighed, "It does remind me of home. Oh, John, I didn't realize how much I missed it."

"I ride out here every now and then just to renew my spirit, as it were." John took Rachel's hand. "You so belong in a place such as this."

Rachel felt a sudden bond with this large, strong though vulnerable man. The moment was so rife with emotion to deflect it she said, "I'll find a place such as this, and you already have your farm."

"But no one to share it with," he added glumly.

"I think you do. Sophie's undoubtedly as lonely as you. Maybe just too proud to tell you. She didn't like frontier life; it doesn't mean she didn't love you."

John cleared his throat. "Let's don't talk about it just now. I brought along a cup to let you taste the water from the stream. It has the sweetest flavor I've ever found and always very cool. Wait here."

When he returned, he handed the drink to her. "What was it the Vikings called it?" Rachel asked.

"Meade, I think. It was made from honey. It is almost that sweet. Just like today. A day of honey." John embraced her. "I had forgotten how fulfilling the companionship of a beautiful woman can be."

Rachel felt a rush within her, but she drew away gently. "Thank you for showing me this wonderful place." She paused, "I have never known anyone I could admire so totally, but I think we'd best go now."

John turned the team around with reluctance. They were quiet on the return trip, but even this silence communicated a strong feeling of attachment. Rachel thought if things had been different, if she had never met Jeb, she could love this great, gentle man. She sighed within. *Why was fate always so fickle?*

When they entered the fort, Rachel said to John, "I'd like to go by the infirmary to check on Private Jensen. Ned and Mary are there now. I wonder who will be available to sit with him this evening?"

"Where's Cooker?"

"He says he's indisposed."

"I imagine he will be recovered very shortly." John laughed. "Right after my immediate visit to his quarters."

Rachel was pleased to find her patient propped up in his bed. "Doctor," Ned told her, "he's been after me to fashion him a pair of crutches so he can get up."

"That's wonderful. No sign of fever?" she asked.

"No, and he ate quite a meal at noon. When I changed the bandage, I saw no streaking and no bleeding. It's remarkable."

Jensen interrupted them. "Can I say something? You talk about me like I'm not here. But I am. All of me. The reason I am is because of you, Doctor. I can never thank you enough. I'm not a very religious person but I know God sent you here. Just remember you're a blessing to this earth, Doctor Rachel Williams."

Rachel was so overwhelmed with this simple declaration tears welled in her eyes. "Thank you for saying so." She turned to leave, "I'll always remember you, Private Jensen. Always."

~ * ~

They had just finished dressing for the ball when Ned came to call for Mary. He stood looking at her with surprise showing on his face. "I can't believe how lovely you look, Mary. In the

dress with your hair pinned up. What a lady you are.” He thrust a bouquet of rather wilted wildflowers toward her. “This was the best I could do, but I do have something else. Close your eyes and turn around.”

He reached into his pocket withdrawing a small golden locket on a fine chain. Then he fastened it carefully around her neck. “Now you can open your eyes.”

Mary looked down at the shiny ornament. “Oh, oh,” she gasped. She struggled for words and, finally giving up, hugged him instead.

Rachel added, “I think you can safely say she likes it.”

She watched the young couple, arm in arm, as they went out the door to the dance. “I hope he doesn’t break her heart. There’s just so much against them; and, after Hunk, she’s so very fragile. It’s that darned fickle fate that brought them together.”

There was a knock at the door. When she opened it, there stood John in all his handsomeness. She had never seen such an elaborate dress uniform, high collared and adorned with gold braid as it was. His suntanned skin was highlighted by his gently graying hair and twinkling brown eyes.

“My, don’t you look fetching tonight, Madam,” he exclaimed. “I see you chose the lavender. Just the color for you.”

“I’ll be ready in a minute. I just need to fix my hair. It got wet when I bathed and it’s all awry. Water does it to my curls.”

“Let me arrange them. I always did for Sophie. She had the same type of hair, only black. Go sit at the dressing table.” This robust man carefully combed each lock, arranging it high on her head then securing it with two fan-shaped pearl combs he took from the drawer.

Rachel rose to leave. “Wait, I have something more.” He found a small wooden box with the letter “S” burned into the lid. From it, he withdrew a large amethyst brooch on a golden chain. “This is just what you need for your dress. See.” He

secured the lock and pointed to her reflection in the dressing table mirror.

"Oh, thank you for letting me use it. It's Sophie's, isn't it?"

"No, as a matter of fact it was my mother's. A jewel my father gave her the day I was born. Sophie never wore it. Said she didn't have a dress to go with it." John reached down kissing her on the hollow of her neck. He stopped, saying, "I guess it's time to go. The whole post will be watching us so we'd better not be in here too long." He laughed softly, pulling her to her feet and offering her his arm.

An aura of excitement surrounded the mess hall, pressed into use as a ballroom. Everyone, even the children, was there. Oriental lanterns, carefully hung from the ceiling, cast a soft glow. An imposing banner in large blue letters which read "Happy Birthday Colonel" fluttered over the door. As Rachel and John approached, a hush spread through the crowd. When they entered, a red carpet was rolled down from the stage into their path while the band played a military march. The crowd called out, "Hail to the Colonel."

Rachel was overcome by the demonstration, but she saw John marching forward, letting no emotion show. When they reached the center of the room, he stopped, bowed to her. Then turning, he smiled and waved to the people. The band played a waltz and Rachel and John led off the dance while other couples joined in.

Rachel whispered, "How these people adore you."

"I love them, too." He circled her around, giving no more opportunity for conversation.

Rachel looked across and saw Mary and Ned dancing. How well she did considering this was a totally new experience. However, she doubted a few missteps would have been noted by either of them. Things like that hardly mattered in young love.

Rachel danced with one officer after another in some sort of procedural protocol. The room, despite a crosscurrent of wind, was become oppressively warm. John removed his jacket,

leaving him in shirt sleeves. Soon all of the other men followed suit.

With the growing informality, the orchestra began playing "Sweet Betsy from Pike" while a young tenor rendered the humorous antics of Betsy and Ike. The bystanders whooped and clapped in rhythm to the beat. Of course then they played "Oh, Susanna" with their own ad-libbed words.

Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel saw one of the men doctoring the punch from a small brown bottle. Adding a little medicinal value, no doubt she thought to herself.

John came across the floor. "Do you want a little punch while you can still taste the punch?"

Rachel giggled, "Before it gets too punchy, you mean?"

"Exactly. You don't disapprove then?"

"Hardly. I was used to getting paid in corn 'likker'. I could clean wounds with it and drink the leftovers. A very practical commodity." They both chortled.

After intermission, a few of the lanterns were turned down and the music became slower. One of the men called out, "Colonel, Sir, sing 'Santa Lucia' for us. No one can sing it like you do."

John smiled, going to the stage. "I want to dedicate this to our guest, Dr. Rachel Williams. Come up here, Rachel." Then he began his very special and richly deep rendition of the old and very sentimental melody, holding the smiling Rachel's hand. When he finished singing, he led her back onto the dance floor as the band continued playing the instrumental rendition of the song.

"Oh, Rachel, are you certain you need to go back to the train tomorrow?" he asked her gently.

"Yes, I'm afraid I do. Things are happening too rapidly."

"This is a new country and things move forward at breakneck speed. Think about it. Right now I have to end this celebration. We still have a fort to run and these men need their rest."

After he had thanked the people for his party, he led Rachel out into the moonlit night. Mary and Ned were ahead of them.

"John what will happen to those two? They seem so attached. So in love. So quickly. I'm worried."

"As you would say, the prognosis is not good. They will vow to be true to each other but the outside forces will be too much. Oh, at first, he'll write her and even pine for her; but as he moves back East and gets involved in medical school, her presence will fade. After a couple of years, his letters to her will be far and few between and one of his friends will take him home to meet a sister or cousin and he will fall in love again with one of them."

"And what of Mary?"

"She'll adjust to the way of the whites. She'll learn to read and how to keep house. How to fix herself up. She'll wait and wait for him but to no avail. Finally she'll find someone else. It will be harder for her, but someone will love her. Some man lonely and mature enough to cherish her."

"Can't we help them?"

"No, Rachel, in this moonlight they are going to vow their love will last forever. For her this is true, but it will be different for him."

John led her towards the back of his quarters. "Let's sit here in my little garden. It has a few roses Sophie planted and somehow I've kept them alive. I rarely come here to sit any more. It's just too lonely by myself."

"It's lovely here. What a nice tribute to Sophie."

"Rachel, you're avoiding my question. Why don't you stay on here? It would take only a few months to get my divorce. The army takes a very dim view of a woman who won't support her husband by living with him whatever his assignment. I know it's soon, but this country waits for no one. I should know. I've wasted five years waiting for Sophie."

"Maybe it hasn't been wasted. Maybe, just maybe, both of you have gained a new perspective. Now, your marriage would be more precious to you both."

Silence sat heavily on them both. Finally John said sadly, "You're in love with Jeb Morgan, aren't you? You plan to marry him?"

"I don't know. He has conditions."

"Conditions. What conditions?"

"He is having a hard time with my practicing medicine. It just brings us into conflict too often. I really think he's trying, but it just seems circumstances are against us. It is very hard for a woman to have a family life and a profession, especially in this new land."

"How do you feel, Rachel?"

"Very sad. It's possible there are certain people who can love each other, but without compromise there can be no lasting marriage, and compromise comes very hard for Jeb." She hesitated and then continued, "That's what you have learned these five years and that's why I believe you and Sophie can be together. Maybe you'll have to go back to Pennsylvania and court her again but it is what you must do."

"I can't talk you out of California?"

Grasping his hand, she said, "Another time it might have been different..." Squeezing his hand, she continued, "Promise me you will try again with Sophie."

"I'll try, but I want you to realize knowing you has been the greatest thing that has happened to me in a very long time. You have restored my confidence in my manhood." He embraced her then before turning and walking into the night.

Eleven

Marie

The wagon train was taking its noon break when Rachel and Mary, accompanied by their military escort and Ned, who drove the buggy, caught up with them.

Jeb approached the lieutenant-in-charge, who said to him, "Well, Mr. Morgan I brought them back safe and sound just as the Colonel promised."

Nodding, Jeb said gruffly, "I'll take over now." Jerking his thumb at Ned and Mary, who stood in one last embrace, "What about them?"

"They're just saying goodbye." The lieutenant laughed.

Later, going over to Rachel and Mary, Jeb said, "Are you two all right? If you're ready, we have miles to make now." Rachel nodded. He hesitated for a moment but turned and started toward Prince. *I'll be darned if I'll show how much I missed her. But I really wish I could. Saving face isn't so important.*

Without another glance at Rachel, Jeb mounted Prince and raised his hand, shouting, "Wagons Ho!"

Rachel thought to herself. *I missed you too, Jeb. The Morgan chill has set in again.* She climbed up to the wagon seat and took the reins from Andy to relieve him from that chore.

To Rachel's surprise Marie joined her. "Welcome back, Rachel. I thought I'd take Iris's place and ride with you for a while. I'll put Jimmy on the bed in back so we can talk."

The wagon moved slowly but relentlessly forward. "Rachel, I've been thinking about the Joaquin. Well, really the men there. I'm afraid they won't accept me and Jimmy. I know I'll have to go as a widow. I'd tell whomever I marry about Jimmy and all. That'd be all right, wouldn't it?" she asked Rachel. Her voice had a pleading quality to it.

"I think it would be fine. As long as you're honest with your husband. It's no one else's business." Rachel reached across to pat Marie's arm.

"There's something else you need to know. In case anything happens to me. It's a very dark secret but I trust you so, Rachel." Marie began tapping her foot in a nervous staccato beat against the wagon floorboard.

"You had a very hard life when you were young, didn't you?"

Marie nodded. "I was the oldest of eight. I remember the day I was nine. I was getting ready to go back to school, but Pa told me I had to stay home and work. He told me I didn't need any more of such 'uppity' nonsense. I begged to go back because I loved to read and cipher. It didn't help. He told me boys worked in the fields while girls worked in the house. That was the way it had always been. Ma tried to intercede but Pa never listened to her. After all she was just a woman, he told her.

"Evenings I remembered sitting in front of the fireplace trying to make out the words from some old school books someone gave me, but usually I fell asleep. It was so warm there and I was so tired from the long day.

"Finally, as the boys and Pa were able to plant more acres and the babies stopped coming, the money was a little more plentiful. It was too late for me to catch up in school, but I did have time to learn to sew from our neighbor, the Widder Brown.

"You certainly learned well." Rachel leaned over to pat her.

"One day the Widder said to me I had 'skillful fingers' and would I like to work for her sometimes in the sewing shop. By the time I was fifteen, I was working for her full time." Marie paused and cleared her throat. "It was there where Brad Morton first saw me. Even now I remember how tall and handsome he looked with his slight build and pale skin with blue eyes. What I remember best were his hands. Soft and smooth, not rough and coarse like all the other men who worked in the fields. I knew others called him 'fop' and 'dandy' but he was always polite and not too arrogant around me. It must have been hard for him, with his pa owning the bank here and part of another one in Harrisburg.

"That summer he had just come back from school in Philadelphia and happened to come in to pick up his ma's new hat. I remember the day so well. He brushed past Mrs. Brown and came directly to me. He introduced himself, telling me he had come for his mother's hat. He asked me what my name was and then called me his 'little pretty'.

"That's the way it started. He took me everywhere that summer—picnics, dances, even suppers at the inn. It was all so exciting for he swept me completely off my feet.

"There's an old saying that nothing in life is free. He began bringing me gifts. Well, in return he introduced me to the pleasures of the flesh. Each time there would be a present and then there would be a trip to Spoonin' Hill for us to make love.

"The Widder knew what was going on and she pushed me to ask him when we would be married."

"Did you ask him, Marie?"

"Yes. He just laughed, telling me I was taking all this too seriously since I was just his good time gal. I worried I might get pregnant, but it wasn't 'til he had gone back to school when the Widder told me I needn't have worried since rumor had it he couldn't father children because of some childhood illness. Anyway, I was relieved when my final period came after he left."

"Oh, I didn't know that. But about Jimmy?" Rachel asked. Marie stopped, her eyes searching Rachel's.

"Marie, are you all right?" Rachel turned to her. "We could talk about this later though at this point I really don't understand. I don't judge you."

"No, I have to go on, Rachel." The worldly-wise girl was on the verge of tears.

"About a week later, I stayed in the sewing shop after closing. Mrs. Brown had asked me to do the handwork on an elaborate wedding gown for a girl from Harrisburg. We planned to ship it to her on the stage the next day. The finishing work was very tedious and it took longer than I expected. The bell on the steeple clock had just struck ten when I turned the key in the lock for the night.

"I sensed a presence behind me. When I turned, I saw Sydney Morton, Brad's pa, standing there.

"His words still haunt me."

"Marie, what did he say?"

"'Caught you just in time. I want to pick out a nice gift for Mrs. Morton. Tomorrow's her birthday. I want you to help me.'

"He reeked of liquor and he slurred his words. I realized he had been entertaining himself down at the saloon. "'Can't you come back in the morning? Mrs. Brown will be here and she can help you better. It's too late tonight,' I told him.

"'Oh, girlie, be good and help me tonight.' He grabbed the key from my hand, undoing the lock and pushing me back into the shop. He closed the door behind us. I was really scared then.

"I tried to struggle free but he gripped me tightly. 'Now, Marie, let's go to the back room and see what you've got there. Bet you can find a special present for me.' He laughed in a frightening way.

"I bolted free, but he cornered me against the storage shelves. Trembling with fear, I fought with him, pushing and shoving with a strength I didn't know I had.

““You are a little *wildcat*,’ he snorted. Then, with one rap of his fist, he knocked me to the floor. He tore at my clothes, undressing me. No matter how I fought I couldn’t stop him. But I never gave up.

“As he lay atop me, I clawed his back and he screamed in pain. ‘Damn you. I bet you don’t act that way with Brad.’

“I started to scream again but he put his hand over my mouth. ‘Shut up if you know what’s good for you. You little trollop.’

“He was a man possessed and it seemed like forever that sickening sweaty beast used me. But finally he was done. Then he had the gall to tell me, ‘Well, I’ll have to admit my son does have good taste.’

“The moon shone through the back window and I looked at the heavy-set, gray haired man with hate and utter disgust. He had always seemed so polite and gentlemanly. Now he had the look of Satan about him and a stench I still remember.

“I couldn’t believe it but then he dressed calmly as if nothing had happened. When I started to cry, he said almost comfortingly, ‘Don’t fuss. This isn’t the first time you’ve slept with a Morton. Just look at it as entertaining another of the family.’ Unbelievably, he chuckled.

“After he left, I lay there weeping. Finally, I forced myself to rise. I was never sure just how I was able to dress and stagger home; but as I limped along in the night, I devised a plan.

“Mrs. Brown plied me with questions while she cleaned my wounds and bathed my swollen face but I told her, ‘You don’t want to know who, but only record in your mind my condition this night.’

“The next morning, Mrs. Brown told me I didn’t have to go to the shop to work, but I insisted. When we got to the shop and she saw the damage to the back room, she threatened to call the sheriff.

“I didn’t tell her even then who had done this, but began cleaning up the mess. I found a torn shirt collar bearing the initials SBM as well as a tuft of dark gray hair which I put in

my pocket for safe keeping. Then I chose an expensive dress, which I boxed up and wrapped.

"When Mrs. Brown asked me what I was doing, I told her I had chosen the perfect birthday gift for one of our best customers. 'Make out a bill for me, will you?' I asked. 'It's almost time to make this delivery.'

"Just as the clock struck nine, I looked through the window and watched Syd Morton enter the bank. I grabbed the parcel and proceeded to follow him.

"One of the clerks looked up at me saying, 'My stars, Marie, what happened to you?'

"Oh, I had an accident. I fell and bumped my face and eye.

"You certainly did. Looks as if you were in a fight. Mercy. You need to use a poultice or something.'

"I'm all right. I brought this dress for Mr. Morton to give to his wife for her birthday. Is he busy now?

"The girl motioned me inside. Syd looked up when I entered slamming the door. 'What in blazes are you doing here?' he asked in utter amazement.

"Delivering the birthday present you needed for your wife, of course." He hurried across the room, locking the door and closing the transom. "What in hell are you up to?" He eyed me with suspicion. "About last night. I was a little tipsy. Best for everyone that we forget it. Just my word against yours, anyway."

"That's the end of it?" I shook with rage. "I don't think so. Mrs. Brown wants to go to the law."

"You told her about me?"

"No, but she saw how I was when I got home and how her shop was all messed up. Someone had to have done those things."

"No one would believe you."

"Wonder how you got those scratches on your neck? How does your back feel? The scratches there are even deeper, aren't they?"

"Cut myself when I shaved. Like I say, no one would believe you."

"Maybe not, we could find out. There would be plenty of gossip either way. Besides, when I was cleaning the back room this morning, I found a tuft of your hair and the torn collar from your shirt. It had your monogram on it. Something I've put away for safe keeping."

Syd began to perspire. "Sit down, you slut. Well, how much do you want? Five hundred dollars?" He withdrew a bank draft from his desk drawer.

"Five hundred? How about twenty-five hundred? In gold. You don't want to leave a record like that around."

"You're insane. You wouldn't make that much in a lifetime of sewing."

"Maybe not, but how about fifteen minutes which will stay with me for a lifetime?" I was frightened as I spoke, but I was determined to make my stand.

"No, never will I be blackmailed to the tune of a fortune just for a little caper with a no account girl like you." His face was crimson as sweat began trickling down his neck onto his collar. He dabbed at the rivulet with his kerchief. He gave off that same sickening sweatyodor I remembered from the night before.

"I'm going on a journey. It will either be a short one across the street to the sheriff's office or a longer one to the bank in Harrisburg. It's your decision."

His eyes bulged and he clenched his fists. Then he walked to his safe, withdrawing a bag of gold coins. "Here's five hundred for a down payment. The other two thousand will be in an account in your name in the Harrisburg Bank by the end of the week."

He pulled a gun from the bottom of the safe, brandishing it in the air before returning it to the shelf and locking the safe. "This will be the end of it if you value your life." He took my arm, shaking me and pointing his finger in my face. "Go and don't bother me or Brad again."

"Syd ushered me out. For the benefit of the employees, I turned saying, 'I hope Mrs. Morton enjoys her present.'

"I turned and smiled, waving good-bye to the distinguished bank president.

Rachel sat mesmerized by what she heard. She pulled Marie's head against her. "Oh, dear, I had no idea about this. I'm so sorry."

"Let me finish while I have the courage."

"Marie, is there more?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Marie's voice broke but finally she was able to continue. "If only that had been the end of it. Two months later I found out that I was pregnant. I knew instantly that Syd was the father. I could hardly believe that fate could be so cruel, but you confirmed it and the date matched with the night in the store. I feared for my life, but again I wrapped a present for Mrs. Morton and delivered it to the bank.

"Syd rose at the sight of me. 'What are you doing here? I warned you.' He raised his hand to strike me.

"Should I scream? It might bother your customers and your employees; but if you don't mind explaining, go ahead.'

"If you're after more money, forget it. Too much time has passed for anyone to swallow your cock and bull story.'

"I've news.'

"Nothing you could tell me would be of interest.'

"He began dragging me to the door. 'I'm pregnant. I went to Rachel yesterday and she confirmed it.'

"And who is the lucky father?' He chortled.

"You.'

"He stopped and spun around, facing me. 'I won't take the rap. No way. You've been out with every scalawag around.'

"No, I have not. Only with Brad and I wasn't expecting when he left. You were the only one I've been with since then. The delivery date fits with that night in September. I marked it on the calendar. It was such a red letter day for me.' I was more than sarcastic.

"Syd narrowed his eyes, 'Are you sure it isn't Brad's? I'm too old and you know it.'

"'This child isn't Brad's. God, how I wish it was.'

"'Then get rid of it. There are ways. Rachel can help you.'

"'I've already thought about it and it's wrong. Do you think I *want* your child? Beast that you are.'

"Syd collapsed at his desk. He fidgeted for several minutes. 'You'll have to write to Brad and tell him you're pregnant and he's the father. It's the only way. He thinks he's sterile so it'll please him. I don't want him to marry you, but the family will provide for the child. Just keep your mouth *shut*.'

"'One other thing, I have this all written down and in safe keeping with a solicitor in Harrisburg in case anything should happen to me—an accident or something.'"

Amazed again, Rachel drew a breath, "Go on, dear."

"I did as Syd told me. I wrote the letter to Brad, and each month there was a payment made to my account in Harrisburg."

"Oh, Marie, this is unbelievable. How could you be so strong? And you faced this all alone." Tears welled in Rachel's eyes.

"Don't cry, Rach, for when I first held Jimmy in my arms, I was less bitter. When I first came to you, you told me it'd be that way. Anyhow, my final victory came when Brad Morton asked me to marry him that last night at the dance back home. I'm sure it was Syd behind this. Unbelievable as it is, I think he looks at Jimmy as the last of the line. His only heir and that rascal knows it.'"

Now Marie began sobbing, "Oh, Rachel, you'll think I'm a wretch after hearing this, but I just had to tell you." She drew a breath. "Please, please help me. Tell me what I must do."

Rachel pulled Marie's head down on her lap, patting her with one hand as she held the reins in the other. "There, there, now. First, you must not feel guilty about any of this. You were brave and strong to have little Jimmy, and you did what you had to do to survive. If there are any sinners in this, they are the Mortons. It is such an incredible story, but now I understand

what you said about Syd not being trustworthy. A snake you called him. Justly so.”

Rachel sat thinking. She said, “Now what we must do is decide how best to proceed when you reach California.”

“I’m so worried about how Jimmy will turn out. I don’t want him to be like Syd or Brad, either. I need a good, strong husband to help raise him.”

“You are right there. I am sure with a new beginning, you’ll find just the right person. I have the feeling. One good thing has come out of all your trouble, you have learned a lot about people and how to judge them. That is certainly an asset for which you’ve paid dearly.” Again she patted Marie.

Finally, Marie stopped crying. Parallel to the unleashed emotions on the wagon, a jackrabbit dashed wildly across the trail in front of them. It was a headlong dash through life, relaying fear and determination, much as Marie had exhibited. Rachel pulled hard on the reins to keep the team from bolting. Then slowly, steadily both the team and the women returned to a more even keel.

Jimmy awakened from his nap and Marie placed him on the seat between them. Marie told Rachel, “We both thank you for being so kind to us these years. Please keep on being the strong, helpful person and doctor you are. Forever.”

Rachel felt herself cringe inwardly. For warm as these words were, they roused the conflict which lay dormant within her—the torment she felt in trying to both love Jeb and practice her profession.

~ * ~

Although the trip from Ft. Laramie hadn’t been so long, Rachel was glad for the respite at South Pass. There were two other trains already resting there. Jeb decided they would spend the remainder of the day and the night. Even though they were ahead of schedule, he wanted a cushion of time when they got into the Sierras.

The other two trains invited the Morgan train to a dance and supper that night. Iris, Glory, and even Mary had decided to go,

but Rachel wanted to talk to Jeb first. Communication between them had been limited since her return from Ft. Laramie.

After they had made camp, Rachel saw her opportunity. Jeb came back to his wagon parked next to hers.

She walked slowly toward him. "Jeb, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Of, course," he answered noncommittally.

"Are you going to the dance tonight?"

"No, I'm going to stand watch so Andy can go. You know how he thinks he has to play for those gatherings."

"Well, maybe I could stay with you. If you'd like that?"

"You know I would."

"No, I wasn't sure."

"Why not?" he questioned.

"Jeb, you haven't spoken to me in days. Not since I got back from the fort."

"Oh, that. Thought I'd give you time to think of your Colonel Shelly."

"Jeb Morgan, he's not my Colonel."

"Well I heard you went to that birthday dance of his. Quite the belle of the ball, too."

"I'm glad I did. It gave me the opportunity to convince him to return to his wife."

"Oh." He paused and then grinned at her. "So that's the way it was." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, that's the way it was."

"Bet Shelly was eyeing you, though."

"Maybe so, but I wasn't eyeing him," she said. *If ever there was a human being who tried my patience, it's Jeb Morgan. Yet I know, in his own way, he's trying to understand. He wants to protect me, but he doesn't realize he can also suffocate me.*

Jeb tilted his hat back from his forehead. "I'll be back soon as I check the wagons. Andy cooked me a pot of stew. We'll have it for our supper."

While Jeb was gone, Rachel washed up, changed her dress and affixed a blue bow to her hair. She knew how he liked those blue bows.

While sitting by the fire waiting for Jeb to return, she thought ruefully how easily she had dispensed advice to both John Shelly and Marie Lyle about their personal lives and yet was puzzled about how to handle her own relationship. The fire crackled as a large limb gave up its final resistance to the flame. *Am I like that log—resistant and strong to the world but consumed by my feelings for this man?*

When Jeb returned, he looked at her. "You look nice tonight." He tweaked the blue bow. She smiled as he sat beside her.

The camp was silently empty and the clear sky illuminated by a series of emerging stars. The music from the dance carried softly from the next camp.

Jeb pulled her against him. "I missed you, Rach. It just seems something is always coming between us. Not just your medicine but circumstances."

Rachel placed her finger over his lips. "But you've come a long ways towards understanding me as a woman—a person."

"I'm trying, but it isn't always easy."

"You are a complicated person yourself, Jeb Morgan."

"I know, but..." Jeb turned then and kissed her with passion.

Rachel felt the familiar fiery emotion surging through her veins. *I know I should resist, but I've waited thirty years for this love. Maybe, just maybe we'll find a compromise.*

In one fell swoop he lifted her, carrying her to his wagon, laying her gently on his bed.

"Oh, Jeb," she murmured unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm ashamed but I live for these moments with you."

"You think I don't?" he answered.

Her hand swept over the cool smoothness of his back. He kissed her again, clutching her breast. "My love," she said as she acquiesced to the magnetic force of the moment. She clung to him desperately hoping this time would never end. But end it did, with Rachel feeling more fulfilled than ever.

Jeb pulled on his trousers, "I've got to make my rounds." He laughed, "I'm supposed to be keeping watch."

Rachel stirred, "I've got to go now. The others will be coming soon."

He held her arm. "If we were married, you wouldn't have to leave."

"I know, Jeb, I know."

~ * ~

Soon the revelers returned and she feigned sleep when Mary crawled under the blanket next to her. She turned her head to look at the sky through the open canvas pinned up to let the breeze through. Never had she been so torn. Should she abandon her practice of medicine or would he, in the final analysis, love her enough to let her have him and her profession?

The same stars shone from above, the same breeze caressed her cheek just as it had when she was with Jeb, but she was now in a lonely frightening world brought on by her own indecision. *Perhaps by the time, we cross the Sierras I can say the dye is cast.*

~ * ~

Though Jeb traced his usual path through the camp, his mind remained unsettled. *Here I'm a grown man, and I'm acting like a school kid over this woman. Why can't I just marry someone like Lizzie, the settler girl? She wouldn't challenge me at every turn, and I'd be her hero.*

Picking up a stone, he tossed it at the trunk of a tree directly in his path. The branches shook as a flock of startled birds whirled into a squawking, protesting mass flying into the night. "Damn," he muttered.

A small voice within chided him, *And why don't you marry some pleasant, subservient girl, Jeb Morgan? Because Rachel is the one who makes your heart sing.*

Twelve

Trying of the Mettle

The weeks that followed breaking camp at South Pass tested the courage and endurance of every person in the train. Rachel thought reaching the Humboldt would prove a relief but quite to the contrary, unexpected rains made it a veritable marshland. Obviously this happened before because there were dead animal bones strewn everywhere along the river bottom.

Jeb proved just how wise he had been to bring along the *remuda* of mules. The horses wore out pulling the heavy wagons through the mud and mire. Many times, the teams were unhitched and the wagons were emptied and goods placed on the backs of the mules. A deep sucking sound came as the animals took each labored step. Shoes and wagon wheels were caked with mud and the broiling sun shone through a fog of mist and humidity.

Despite the heat, Rachel donned a long-sleeved blouse to cover herself against the swarms of small black mosquitoes clinging to her through the breathless swamp. The horses switched their tails unceasingly trying to rid themselves of the pests.

Finally they camped on a small hill surrounded by a sea of mud. Fires were hard to build without a dry spot and no dry wood. Their meal was of cold biscuits and leftover beans.

Rachel fell exhausted into her wagon to sleep despite the droning of the mosquitoes in her ear.

The next morning the struggle began anew. Little wonder tempers were short. Only Jeb never lost his patience, working tirelessly among them. He moved the wagons forward foot by foot giving an encouraging word or a pat on the back to everyone on the train.

Glory said to Rachel, "Jeb Morgan is quite a man. I don't see how he keeps going. Almost like he's a pullin' us forward all by hisself."

Rachel nodded her agreement. Jeb Morgan was quite a man. One she adored but did not truly understand.

After three days of being closed up in the wagon, little Jimmy had all he could stand. He began to fuss and then to cry constantly. Marie tried to pacify him, but he would have none of it.

Jeb came by riding Prince. Looking at Jimmy he asked, "What's the problem, Scout? Have you had about all being cooped up you can stand?" Jimmy raised his hands to Jeb, who lifted the boy, placing him in front of him on the saddle. "We'll take a little ride and maybe things will go better," he told the relieved Marie. Jeb placed his hat on the delighted Jimmy's head.

Rachel watched the two ride to the front of the train. The sight tugged at her heart—the large man entertaining the tiny child. She mused to herself what a wonderful father Jeb would be. Surely they could work out their differences.

Finally on the fourth day, the rain stopped and the sun emerged giving the settlers a chance to make camp and dry out. For the first time in several days, the aroma of freshly cooked food filled the air. Washing was hung from the wagons and the men hunted for game. Spirits rose.

"Isn't the clear sky a sight to behold?" Rachel asked Glory.

"Yup, but I think we'll be wishin' for some moisture mighty soon."

Glory was all too right, for any respite was all too brief and they soon reached the sink, where the Humboldt mysteriously disappeared into the ground. Ahead lay the dreaded Forty Mile Desert.

Jeb warned the settlers about the new danger that lay ahead. He insisted every barrel and canteen be filled with water and every unnecessary item be discarded from their wagons to lighten the weight. Rachel looked back to see the Ganzers removing Grace's rocking chair. It was the one she used to soothe the baby and one that had been made for Grace's mother by her grandfather. It was a family treasure. What a sacrifice it must have been. Rachel herself emptied her mother's trunk, laying her dresses on the rough floor of the wagon. She combined all her half empty medicine containers and threw away what bottles she could.

Jeb came by to check her cargo. "Isn't there anything else you can throw out, Rachel? The chest that holds your medical supplies is heavy. Can't you do without it?"

"I can't do without my supplies," she wailed.

"I didn't mean them. Just the chest itself."

"But the bottles will break when they clang together."

Jeb pointed to her dresses arrayed on the floor. "Wrap them in those clothes."

"If they were to break, they'd ruin my good things. Some of them are silk."

"Rachel, you of all people, should know a bottle of medicine is worth more than a silk dress."

Shamefaced, she agreed.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. I know how hard those dresses will be to replace, but I just can't play favorites." He placed his arms around her for a moment. "I'll buy you another silk dress, sweetheart."

Rachel saw the drivers lead the horses into the water, bathing their legs for one last cooling time.

Rachel, watching this, knew the challenge of the desert before them was greater than even she could imagine. Already

a hot, arid wind began to dry her face, pulling her skin tight against her cheekbones. When they reached the desert's edge, she could not see one speck of green on the horizon. A feeling of sheer desolation gripped her.

They broke camp before daylight to make as many miles as possible before the blazing sun would make it impossible to continue. By noon they came upon a few misplaced rocks that cast some scant shadows.

Jeb raised his hand. "We'll rest here until evening. The moon is near full so we can travel tonight."

"What about snakes and sech? And holes for the horses to step in?" someone asked.

"We'll have to be careful, but it is still the best way," Jeb answered.

The drivers unhitched their wagons and they began watering their horses out of buckets. Several filled them to the brim with the animals slurping up the liquid in greedy gulps.

Jeb intervened. He grabbed a bucket and turned it so they could see the measure he traced with his finger. "No more than half a bucket now. Half when we hitch them up tonight. Do some arithmetic. Look at your barrels. Then divide them mentally into seven or even eight days travelling."

"It couldn't take us long to cross forty mile," someone chided.

"Hopefully not. But we may have to ride out a sandstorm, or what else I don't know. Anyway, aren't you planning to drink out of those barrels yourselves?"

A hush descended over the group as the gravity of the challenge began to take hold.

Rachel sat with her back against the side of the rock when Mary came to join her. "Look, I have these for us to share." She laid a red bandana on the ground before Rachel. When she undid the tied corners, there lay a dozen or more purplish wild berries.

Rachel tasted one. "Oh, they are so juicy. Never have I tasted anything so sweet. Where did you find them?"

"In the thicket before we came into the desert. I wish I had more to share, but I wanted you to have them."

Rachel, pulling the girl to her, embraced her in thanks. "You really know this land, don't you?"

"Like you, I have never been here before, but it is easy to know this new place. All places are much the same."

"You're right, Mary. All people are much the same wherever they may be, too."

"Rest now. This night will be long." Mary removed Rachel's boots and began massaging her feet. Soon Rachel was sound asleep.

The sun was low in the sky when Rachel awoke. The men were hitching the teams and giving them their measure of oats. The people ate a small meal of their usual dried rations and savored one last drink of their precious water.

The sun slid slowly below the horizon. As it receded, the desert came alive. A mouse poked its head from a hole that was merely a crack in the ground. A lizard scudded across the rocks along the trail. The moon rose and the cactus stood like solemn sentinels guarding the land.

Jeb joined Rachel trudging alongside her wagon. He took her hand, and there was a companionable silence between them. Finally he asked, "Did you notice the other face of the desert?"

"What do you mean?"

"The life all around us. This barren land teems with life." He laughed as a rabbit scampered in front of them. "See?"

Rachel nodded. As if to further re-enforce his words, a coyote wailed a lonesome call from a nearby mound. "Calling out to his mate, I'd bet," he told her. "Course human animals don't have to bay at the moon for their loves. Though I guess the human male isn't much different otherwise." He laughed softly.

Jeb had made her see the beauty of this land; and, somehow, with him by her side, things did not seem all that dismal.

The night wore on and Rachel began to shiver. What had been a scalding inferno soon became an icy chill. Jeb went to

his saddle, untying his coat slung behind it. He placed it over her shoulders. "Well, I'd better go to the front and scout. There's hardpan ahead and it has cracks and holes for the horses to step in. The last thing we need now is a broken leg on a horse or a person. We've made good progress today, but you can never let your guard down."

He pulled her to him then and kissed her. They stood together silhouetted against the horizon as the rest of the train passed by. "Well, I guess the secret's out now," he chuckled.

"As if it were ever a secret." She reached over and swatted him on the back.

Rachel watched him swing into the saddle and resolutely head to the front of the wagons. "Oh, Jeb," she sighed to herself, "what would life be without you—then again, what would it be with you?"

~ * ~

The train's progress continued. When they had gone more than half of the forty miles, Jeb increased their portions of water. Rachel rejoiced particularly for Grace Ganzer, who dehydrated as she was, had an increasingly difficult time nursing her baby. Rachel and Mary had shared their allotment with Grace but it still was barely enough.

The next day a few thunderheads began to move in from the west. Rachel was overjoyed at the prospect of rain. When she mentioned this to Jeb, he merely shook his head. "Rain would be fine but there's probably more wind than water."

Rachel pointed out the clouds to Glory. She, too, shook her head with a dour expression on her face. All day the wind skipped across the desert stirring the sand and whipping it against their faces and the backs of the plodding horses.

Jeb pushed the train to travel into the late morning with the admonition of, "We won't be able to travel tonight. We've got to keep going as long as we can."

At last Jeb called a halt in a small wash. It was an unusual choice for a camp since they usually stopped at a high point so they could observe the landscape. Even stranger was the

placement of the wagons which were lined up in single file against the side of the embankment. Rachel was much too tired to question this arrangement and would have collapsed inside her wagon if Mary had not brought food and insisted she eat.

"Mary, what about Iris and the others?"

"They have eaten already. Now we must sleep."

It was almost sundown when Rachel awoke. When she looked out, the sky was overcast but not gray as would be expected. Instead the air was heavy with a reddish brown cast to it. It was difficult to breathe since there was no breeze at all and the heat was heavy on the earth.

Stranger still was the fact Jeb was making no effort to start the train on its nightly trek. They were no more than a day's trip from the edge of the desert, but he had said they would not be able to travel tonight. Rachel was puzzled.

Glory came to the wagon. "Get up and do whatever you need to do. Eat somethin', get a drink, whatever. I'm going to check the canvas on your wagon and see it's tied down tight. Give me a blanket, too."

"What for?"

"I'm going to cover your water barrel so as no sand will get in it."

"Glory, what's going on? Why all this and why aren't we on our way? It's almost dark."

"Can't ya tell? Jeb's expectin' a big storm. A sandstorm. Never been in one but I heard tell them's awful." She pointed to the horizon. "See them dust devils. The wind is whippin' them up. That's why the air is so thick."

Rachel felt a rush of fear. She went to the next wagon bringing Iris, Marie, and Jimmy back with her. "We have the night off so we might as well share it together." She knew she wasn't fooling anyone. They all knew a storm was brewing, but she also knew they felt comforted by being together. They talked of Four Corners, trying to guess what might be going on there.

"I wonder if Pa's putting in his fall garden now?" Iris queried. "He likes his cabbage and turnips to produce before the first freeze. Freeze. Can you imagine a freeze? How I'd like just one puff of those cold Pennsylvania winds on my cheeks. I'd never complain about the winter again."

Marie spoke. "I wonder what kind of clothes the widder has put in her shop for this winter. How I'd like to be cutting into a good piece of wool right now—maybe something in green."

Rachel interrupted, "Green sounds fine. Right now anything green would be a great change. But wouldn't it be too hot to work with wool here?"

Marie laughed as they all joined in. Their merriment was short lived for the wind outside began to rise, making the flame of the lantern begin to flutter from side to side. Rachel closed the back flap on the wagon and turned out the lantern. The wind moaned and the wagon shook. They could hear the men hobbling the horses together.

Soon Jeb came to the wagon. "Rachel and Glory, come outside with me."

They stepped outside into a churning, blustery world. He handed them wet kerchiefs. "Take these to put over everybody's mouth. Then bring them outside and I'll bury you under the canvas over there against that embankment. Hurry."

Rachel protested, "Jeb, we can't go out in this. Little Jimmy and Iris won't be able to breathe."

"You can't stay in the wagon. It'll be on top of you."

What was usually a moonlit night was pitch black instead. Jeb lifted Jimmy to his shoulder. "Rachel, take my hand and each of you take hold of the next one's hand."

With their heads bowed and leaning against the wind, they made their way to the canvas, which was anchored down by rocks. Jeb raised one corner of the cover and one by one they slowly crawled underneath. The canvas tipped up and would have torn away if Rachel and Glory had not grabbed it.

Jeb yelled above the wind, "You're going to have to keep it down. Everyone get in the middle and wrap up in it. Let Rachel

and Glory do the holding there on the edges. Remember just stay put.”

In a few minutes, the wind howled a wolf-like sound followed by a scraping sound over the top of the canvas. Rachel's hands ached from the tightness of her grip on the edge of the canvas and her knuckles burned as they were raked with the knife-like edge of the blowing sand. Only her hands were exposed but it was a punishing exposure.

Someone began to cough. “Keep your kerchiefs over your mouths. Turn over on your stomachs and keep your heads down,” Rachel admonished.

Suddenly a sound of torrential rain raked the canvas. *Not rain*, Rachel thought, *Blowing sand. It's coming with so much force*. It became harder and harder to breathe as the five of them used up the oxygen under their makeshift tent. Rachel pried her hand loose from its death-like grip on the edge of the cover. A stream of sand and dust entered but a small breath of air came with it. *It's a bad trade off. Suffocate or strangle*.

Iris, who was next to her, wept softly. Rachel patted her head for it was useless to try to speak over the sound of the furious gale and the closeness of the air that made them gasp. Rachel prayed to herself. *Please help us. Don't let me have brought these women all this way only for us all to die. Please, God, please*.

How long the storm went on, Rachel never knew, for she slept in exhaustion. She awoke with a start. *My stars, I let go of our cover*. She grabbed for the edge but it would not budge. It was as if the weight of the world held the canvas in place. An eerie stillness held her in its grip. The storm must have passed. We're buried in sand. She felt the others move. They were buried but they were alive.

Rachel heard voices. “Hey, are you all right in there? We'll dig you out. It'll take a minute cause we don't dare use shovels. Just our hands.” There was a busy stirring above and suddenly the cover was jerked back and they were free. The moon and

stars shone from what was then, a faultlessly clear sky. Never had she seen a more tranquil sight.

Jeb was there then, pulling them to their feet. "We made it. Every one of us. Even the wagons aren't in too bad a shape. Glory's turned over and the canvas is ripped on the others, but we can manage. Andy's out rounding up the horses. Don't think they got far. Course Prince never left me."

The people circled around Jeb in weary relief. They stood like shadows there on the sand in the moonlight, each recovering from the trauma in his own way. Jeb asked, "What would you think about going on after we get things settled and the sand picked out of our teeth? I think we can leave the desert behind us in little more than half a day."

There was a resounding "Yeah" to his suggestion. Rachel brushed the sand from her face. When she put her hand in her hair, she felt each curl matted to her scalp with a scoop of sand nestled in the center of each ringlet. No matter. She was alive.

The first water hole they reached was little more than a small, slightly muddy pond. Never had Rachel seen anything more appealing. There was only one scraggly shade tree, but it too looked as lovely as any great elm at home.

Rachel and the others shared the shade while they talked of their experience. She praised them, saying, "You were all so very brave. I'm, oh, so very proud of you."

Iris answered, "I learned something about bravery last night. You're only brave because you have to be. I didn't realize that before."

Rachel hugged her. "I still say we were all brave. How lucky those California men will be to get us." They all giggled and agreed.

"Nuf of this jabber. We got wagons to clean and food to cook so let's get at it," Glory commanded. "It's not over yet. Look at them mountains we gotta climb."

"That's all right. At least it'll be cooler up there." Marie laughed.

"Yer right there. Just ask any of the Donner party," Glory warned.

The whole train was very tired and fatigue caused people to make mistakes which cause accidents. This was underscored by the fact Rachel spent her day of rest treating minor wounds. One man had gotten a cactus thorn that worked through his worn boot and wedged into his foot. A mule stepped on another's man foot and it was tender and swollen.

Rachel also treated a horse terribly bloated with gas. He had gorged on the first fresh grass he had seen in weeks. Fortunately, she knew just where to stick him to relieve his distended stomach.

Jeb arrived just as she was working on the equine. "I knew that knife of yours would come in handy, Dr. Williams," he guffawed. "Did you learn the procedure at medical school?"

"Hardly. Pa showed me how. You can't live in a farm community without knowing a few things." She made a face at Jeb. "He was a better patient than most. At least he can't sass me like one person I know."

Jeb gave her that ineffable grin of his. "Just inquiring, ma'am, just inquiring. Guess you're too het up now to ask, but Andy wanted to invite you and the others to eat some of his cooking tonight. Then afterwards thought we could sit on that mobile front porch of yours. Course if we were married, we could spend our time in the wagon together. But we aren't, are we?"

"We'd love to eat with you. About being married, we still have a couple of issues to settle first." He grinned at her again. He was a wonderful man but he really liked things to be done his way. *Some day things will be different for women. Then they'll be able to have a career and a family. I hope the time comes soon.*

~ * ~

The mountains ahead were both a beacon to guide them and a silent warning of the one last hurdle standing between the pioneers and their goal. The respite after crossing the desert

seemed all too brief, but Jeb warned them fall came early to the Sierras.

Rachel could not comprehend the sheer magnitude of their size or height until the train approached them. Even in the foothills it was often necessary to unload the wagons and pack the goods up by mule over a side trail while winching the empty wagons up by rope and pulley. Rachel saw this procedure and was overwhelmed by such a daunting task.

Jeb came to her after sending the line of pack mules ahead up the side of the mountain. "You women will need to ride up the same trail that the mules are on. I've picked out gentle horses from the teams for you to ride—like your Bud and Dan, Rachel. Harness horses but still they have accepted the saddles. Anyway, Glory will help you. She'll lead the way. I have to go ahead to help the men set up the pulleys and attach them to the tree."

Marie asked in fright, "Isn't the trail awfully steep? I'm not much of a horsewoman. Then there's Jimmy."

"I'll take Jimmy up with me on Prince. As for the rise being steep, it's not really so bad. At least the horses can make it up there. I've had to use slings to lift all the animals and humans up. So in comparison, that hill isn't so steep."

Marie blanched. Iris came over to her. "I know you can do it. I'm just glad I don't have to climb it the way my hip is." She clapped Marie on the back.

Jeb lifted the gleeful Jimmy up on the saddle in front of him and rode away. Andy brought the horses for the women to mount, and Marie reluctantly joined them. "Rachel, can I keep my horse next to you? I'm really scared. I can't stand heights. Pa used to want me to help him work on the roof and I'd vomit every time. Just looking down from the roof made me so-o sick. Look how much higher that mountain is."

"Marie, don't look down; just look ahead. We'll be going up gradually so maybe it won't be so bad." Beads of perspiration formed on the girl's forehead. "They've already packed my

medicine up so I don't have that for you. Wait a minute, I have an idea."

Rachel jumped off her horse and went over to a wagon being unloaded. There on the ground were two bottles of corn liquor and a tin cup. She returned, uncorked the bottle, and filled the cup half full. She handed it to the now peaked Marie. "You and I shared one of these back in Pennsylvania. I'll bet it's just as good in California for treating what ails you."

One of the drivers watching them began to laugh. Rachel said, "Don't pay any attention to him; he's only jealous I didn't prescribe some for him."

Finishing her drink, Marie begged, "Don't ever tell Jimmy you had to get his ma drunk so she'd climb this mountain."

"What difference does it make? At least you're game to try."

Marie tossed her head. "I hope there's some guy over in Garden Grove worth all of this." With that, the petite woman hoisted herself up in the saddle. Giving old Dan a kick with her foot, she said, "Giddyup." Then she reached down and whispered something in his ear.

Rachel laughed. "What did you tell old Dan?"

"*Be careful.* That's what." Everyone rolled with laughter, including Marie.

They all survived the climb and several more just as difficult. One morning, when they had camped at an even higher elevation, they awoke to find a fine dusting of snow covering the camp.

Jeb greeted them with the news that their days would have to be longer, for as he said, "We've had our early warning and I'm not one to ignore mother nature's signs. Besides, Sacramento and then Garden Grove aren't very far away."

Indeed they aren't and my dilemma is not close to being solved either, Rachel thought. A chill ran through her and it had nothing to do with the new fallen snow that so beautifully enhanced the evergreen and spruce around her.

Thirteen

Decision by Default

The air remained cool and invigorating at such lofty levels, but progress was slow as the travelers challenged the mountains. Men and horses were spent, literally digging in their heels for every inch they scaled higher. The thin air added breathlessness to their ordeal.

The women fared somewhat better for they either walked slowly behind the wagons or rode horseback up the inclines. The men kept them supplied with game so they assumed the task of cooking in lieu of the heavier work. The men would move one wagon ahead each morning to what they called their high point, or goal, for the day and let the women set up camp. Then the men would return to the tedious task of moving the other wagons to this spot.

Once the cooking was done, the five women were allowed a chance to rest. Rachel had been concerned about them all but especially Iris, who had become thin and pale from the strain they had all suffered. Days passed and the color returned to Iris's cheeks and her limp lessened. To the delight of all the crew, she displayed her quite notable culinary skills.

Andy remarked one day, "No matter how tall the mountain, just set up camp, and the smell of Iris's home cookin' will raise us right up to the top. Nothin' can stop us. We ain't never

gonna be late for supper.” Rachel noted how Iris smiled at such compliments and she was glad for her little cousin.

Rachel became less concerned about Iris and began to wonder why she herself felt so sluggish. She literally had to make herself drag one foot in front of the other. Could it be the thin air? She had never had lung or breathing problems. Their diet was improving, for Mary almost miraculously found fresh berries and even winter greens to supplement the meat. Rachel began napping whenever the opportunity arose, but still she felt very lethargic.

One morning she awoke to the smell of fresh coffee and frying bacon, usually a most welcome aroma. Not so today. In fact it was repulsive. She rose wearily and dressed. She jumped from the wagon to scoop up a handful of snow, which she rubbed liberally over her face and neck. At first she felt refreshed. Then her stomach growled and began churning.

“Hey, Rachel, come on have a cup of java. It’s ready to gulp.” Glory called.

Rachel answered, “Not just now, thanks. Give me a minute.” She went to the other side of the wagon to escape the breakfast smells. Even there the wind wafted the aroma of smoky bacon over her. “My God, I feel sick,” she moaned.

A wave of nausea overtook her and she grabbed the back wagon wheel to steady herself. With her hand gripping a spoke, she bent down and began to vomit. She threw up her supper from last night and even that did not relieve her. She felt so faint she released the wheel to sit on the wet snow, leaning her head against the cold, rough boards of the wagon.

Rachel had heard her patients tell her, “I felt too bad to die.” Now she understood just what they meant.

At least no one had seen this performance. She felt so foolish. She only hoped she wasn’t spreading some rare disease or plague.

Rachel suddenly learned she hadn’t gone unobserved for there stood Mary with a worried expression on her face. “Are you sick, Rachel?” Mary leaned over, pulling her to her feet.

"You're wet and cold," she said and she began brushing the snow and dirt from Rachel's skirt. Mary took her arm leading her back to the feather bed in the wagon.

"You stay here while I make tea. You'll feel better in a little while."

"Mary, please don't say anything about this. It's just something I ate or maybe I'm run down. I don't want to worry anyone."

"Don't talk. Rest."

By the time Mary returned with the tea, Rachel felt well enough to go outside. Just in time, too, for they were ready to move the wagon for the day.

Jeb came by. "Missed you at breakfast. Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, sure. I guess I'm just a little lazy today. The thin air seems to be getting to me." She laughed lamely.

"O.K. Just thought I'd check." He stopped momentarily to caress her cheek.

Rachel suffered nausea in the morning twice more in the next week. Finally she started eating a leftover biscuit or a slice of bread before going to bed at night. *It seems to help. Guess I was more rundown than I thought. And here I was worried about Iris.*

~ * ~

One day two riders came into the camp. One was young and thin and the other middle-aged and stocky. The older man dismounted and extended his hand to Jeb. "I'm Henry Parks from Pike County, Missouri, and this here's my nephew, Danny."

"Glad to meet you, Henry. I'm Jeb Morgan and we're going to Garden Grove in the Joaquin Valley. Below Sacramento."

"That's surely a coincidence. We're going to the Joaquin ourselves and we have a cousin near Garden Grove supposed to help us get settled. Can't believe it."

"That being the case, would you take a message to Len Smith? He runs the general store there."

"Sure will. What do you want us to say?"

"Just tell him Jeb Morgan is on his way with his wagons and his women passengers. We'll be there as soon as I can get us out of these mountains. Shouldn't be too long now, bar any set backs."

"I'll tell him. Say, one of those women isn't a doctor, is she? I heard tell about her back at Ft. Laramie. If she is, I need to see her. I cut myself while I was dressing out a deer. I noticed this morning it's feelin' kind of sore."

"Yes, we do have one. Rachel Williams is her name. She can take a look at it for you, but don't go telling everybody about her. She's giving up her practice. It's too much aggravation for a married woman."

"Who's she marrying?" Henry asked nosily.

Jeb raised his voice. "Never mind. All you need to know is she's not going to be practicing medicine any more."

"Well, all right. Don't get huffy. We won't say nuthin' about it. And we will deliver your message to old Smith." He moved away from Jeb, whose face had turned crimson.

Rachel, who happened to be within earshot, was stunned by what she had overheard. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't heard it herself. As much as she loved Jeb Morgan, she was furious. She knew he only meant to protect her, but she abhorred this kind of domination. *I thought we were working on a compromise.*

Rachel was still shaking with anger when Henry came to her wagon for treatment. She seated him on the tailgate. Pulling herself together, she excused herself to wash her hands and retrieve her medical supplies. She rolled up Henry's shirt sleeve to reveal a deep gash in his lower left forearm. She cleaned the wound, placing it in a solution of warm salt water to soak.

While Henry waited, he began to question Rachel. "Sure is a shame you're giving up doctorin'. You seem so good at it. You're givin' it up to get married. That right?"

"I really don't want to discuss it with you right now." Rachel turned, going farther back into the wagon to busy herself by rearranging her bottles of medicines.

In a few minutes she returned and without saying a word dried the wound and bandaged it. Finally she spoke briefly, "Keep the cut clean and soak it for a couple of days. Here are some extra bandages and some salve. If you take care of the wound, it should be healed in a week or so. It shouldn't leave much of a scar, either."

In a subdued voice, Henry asked, "How much do I owe ya, Doc?"

"Nothing, just deliver Jeb's message. Oh, one other thing. Go by the blacksmith's shop there in Garden Grove and say 'Hello' to my cousin, Martin Williams, for me."

"Will do. Now thanks. Still think it's a bad thing you ain't gonna doctor no more. Bet you'd help if there was an emergency." He gave Rachel a guarded look.

Jeb bid Henry and Dan farewell and then came over to Rachel. "Well, will he live?" Jeb laughed.

"Without a doubt. But Jeb what did you tell him about my practicing?"

"That you were going to give it up. I don't want you bothered. You seem kind of run down, and you don't need all of this aggravation." He caught her arm, pulling her to him. "We are going to get married, aren't we?" The muscles in his neck tensed as he waited for an answer.

"Jeb, I love you, but is my giving up my profession a condition for our being married? Surely not."

Rachel began to cry while Jeb steered her to the other side of the wagon away from prying eyes.

Drawing a deep breath, she began again, "But Jeb, even though I love you, you can't ask me to give up my life's work."

"God, it would be so easy if I didn't love you so much." He pushed his hat back and slicked down his cowlick. "Rachel, honey, I don't think you realize how hard it will be on you to be a doctor with all the responsibilities of a wife and mother, too. I

know we both want children..." He searched for words. "I've been looking forward to your working on the ranch with me. And now, you seem so rundown. I don't think anything is worth risking your health over."

"Couldn't we try it for a while? With me practicing part time. Emergencies and such. Just to keep my skills honed?" She added softly, "Your mother worked and raised you."

He gently grasped her hand, saying, "Exactly and I hated it. She always had things to do—papers to grade, parents to contend with. I hated sharing her that way, and I always told myself my own children wouldn't have to put up with such divided attention. My wife wouldn't have to work as hard as she did." He stepped away from Rachel, releasing her arm.

"Oh, Jeb, give us some time."

"I wasn't going to bring this up because I like to leave the past in the past. But Henry told me something pretty scary. Remember he said he was from Pike County, Missouri? Well, when he came through Kansas he heard about a bunch of hidlers who banded together and had been raiding homesteads and performing all sorts of cutthroat acts. Even surprised one small wagon train and set it afire, killing most of the people. The law finally caught up with the outlaws, but kind of late. Their leader was somebody they called Hunk."

"Oh, my God!"

"Rachel, that could have happened to us. We were just lucky. But bad things happen when you don't act rationally." He pounded his right fist into his left palm. "This isn't easy for me either, sweetheart, knowing how important your medicine is to you. We just can't go into a marriage at odds—without using our common sense. How would I feel if something happened to you if you were making a call and someone attacked you? Or did you harm."

"That's not the same thing at all. This is California, not Kansas."

His eyes held a troubled look. "Yes, and Kansas is probably more settled than California right now. Besides, it's a deeper

issue.” He thought carefully before he continued. “You have the greatest feeling for those in need. I suppose that is part of why I love you so, but you really take too much on yourself. Women talk about being fulfilled, I think that’s what they say; but don’t you think I could meet your need? Especially if we had children... Think about it. You have from now until we reach the Joaquin. Think about it very *hard*.”

Rachel watched while the love of her life turned and walked away with his shoulders slumping. He reached up and pulled his hat down over his eyes in the no-nonsense way of his. These gestures told her how much he, too, was hurting.

Rachel stood with her eyes riveted on him as he returned to work. Her whole world seemed to recede with each stride he took away from her.

She threw herself on her bed crying like a broken-hearted schoolgirl. How could she lose Jeb Morgan, the most important person to touch her life? Alfonse Meyer’s despicable words taunted her, “You’re just too independent and headstrong for any man to love or marry.” She knew Jeb loved her, but marriage between two strong-willed people was a different matter. Al, cad that he was, was only half right. A man could and did love her.

Glory came to the back of the wagon. “Rachel, ain’t you gonna have a bite of supper with us?” She took one look at Rachel’s red swollen eyes and gasped. “Heavens to Betsy, what’s wrong with you, lady? It’s Jeb, ain’t it? If it’s any satisfaction to you, he’s out by the fire lookin’ mighty glum hisself. Won’t eat. Won’t talk. Nuthin’.”

Rachel turned over, facing the wall. Undeterred, Glory continued, “You two are the most dad-burned pair I ever seed. Can’t ya work this out?” Belying her strong words of derision, she reached down and patted Rachel’s head. “It’ll be all right. Only thing, might take some time and there ain’t much of that before we get to the Joaquin.”

After Glory left, Rachel lay under the softness of her quilt with her mind racing. How she longed for Jeb the way he was

the first day at the inn. She still felt the tenderness of his caress, the warmth of his body, and his passion. Ah, his passion. To have been a thirty-year-old virgin and to receive such passion. Ahh. He alone had awakened the woman within.

Rachel shivered slightly. Then she got up, poured water into the basin and bathed her swollen face. After donning a clean yellow shirtwaist, she straightened her gray skirt, brushing away the dust of the day. She arranged her curls, catching them up with a large yellow ribbon and then paused to dab a sprinkling of lavender toilet water behind her ear. She jumped from the tailgate of the wagon and approached the campfire.

Jeb sat alone with legs crossed and his shoulders slumped, a cup in his hands. He did not move, even to sip his coffee. The night was silently black around him except for a crackling sound emitted by the expiring flame. Despite her own inner turmoil, Rachel's heart went out to him, for he was a man alone.

The scent of pine spiced the air as Rachel moved quietly over the thick matting of tree needles. She laid her hand gently on his shoulder, "Jeb." He jerked in a startled response. "Jeb, it's only me." She sat down leaning against him.

"Rachel. I didn't expect you. I'm glad you're here."

"I forgot my coat. It's very chilly. Can I cuddle with you?"

"Can't think of a better idea." He removed one sleeve of his coat, sharing it with her as they sat together.

"That's much better." she sighed.

In a moment he asked, "Rach, would you like some supper? I haven't eaten and neither have you. Glory left some food for me. There's some berry cobbler over in the Dutch oven."

"Cobbler sounds good. And a cup of coffee."

"I'll get it for us, I'd be honored to serve my beautiful woman." He stroked her hair. "Like your yellor ribbon." He laughed.

They ate in silence. Both of them seemed restrained. At last Rachel began, "About this afternoon. Well, I've been thinking." She placed her hand on his knee. He immediately grasped it in

his own. She smiled, though she spoke hesitantly. "If it is so important to you, I will give up my practice once the trip is finished and we're married. I don't agree with your decision, but I will devote my whole attention to you and our family."

"Oh, Rachel, you don't know how happy you're making me. I love you."

Despite her resolve, tears trickled down Rachel's cheek.

"Sweetheart, don't take it so hard. We'll have a good life—a full one." He kissed her passionately, raising her to her feet and pressing her body against his. The same old warmth coursed through her veins.

Jeb laughed. "That Andy. I ought to kick him out to sleep on the ground. We ought to have my wagon to ourselves tonight. Darn his time."

"Well, anyway, I guess we'd better turn in even if it's in separate beds." Rachel retorted. Impulsively, Jeb lifted her, carrying her to her wagon. He set her down and kissed her fully on the mouth. "Good night, my sweet Rachel." He paused, "Since I can't have you tonight, I need a trophy." He pulled the ribbon from her curls and twirled it around and around before depositing it in his shirt pocket, allowing one end to dangle tantalizingly over the side.

Rachel lunged toward him trying to retrieve the shiny strip. Playfully, Jeb ran away turning back to wave at her. "Goodnight," he called over his shoulder.

Rachel laughed at their antics, answering, "Sleep well, my hero."

Rachel, exhausted from the emotions of the day, slept soundly at first. Then she began to dream. First Pa came to her, his face unsmiling and then Ma was there with a stern look on her usually cheerful face. Ma spoke to her, "Rachel, what are you doing? First you sleep with a man who is not your husband and now you abandon your life's work. What is the matter with you, girl? We are so disappointed."

With sweat pouring from her, Rachel awoke with a start. It was only a dream. A dream prompted by a guilty conscience.

Had she traveled this far only to surrender everything she valued?

She remembered her family's sacrifice in sending her to medical school. How her father farmed and worked with Uncle Will in his business just to have the money to keep her in school. Ma had helped him by sitting up into the wee hours of the night to keep Uncle Will's books. Her parents had paid dearly for this dream of hers and done it without complaint.

Rachel lay there in the night trying not to disturb the sleeping Mary on the mat next to her. Somehow it was the thought of Ma that bothered her most. Quiet, loving Ma. Quick with figures and an admirer of new ideas. It was Ma who read her medical journals with a thirst for knowledge. Rachel had never realized until that moment that Ma would have loved the opportunity to become a doctor. Now she was voluntarily walking away from this wonderful profession and her own dream. She ached at the thought, but she had given her word to Jeb, and Pa had instilled in her that a promise was not to be broken.

At breakfast, Jeb came over to Rachel, tugging at the yellow ribbon still protruding over the edge of his breast pocket. With his blue eyes twinkling, he greeted her. "Good morning, my lady. Did you sleep well?"

Then to her astonishment, he pulled her to him, kissing her fully, not just a buff on the cheek, but a full-fledged commitment of passion. Andy, who was standing there, laughed as did the others. Jeb, releasing Rachel, turned to his grizzled friend saying, "Well, can't a fellow give his *intended* a good morning kiss?" Then turning abruptly, he added, "Time to get started if we ever want to get out of these mountains. Look at those clouds. They look threatening, but with a little luck we'll be done with these Sierras and down in the valley below by tomorrow."

After Jeb left, the women gathered around Rachel. Marie came forward, catching her hand. "What exciting news. Why didn't you tell us?"

"We just decided last night."

Glory grabbed Rachel, hugging her. "Well, I can't say 'twas a big surprise. I am so happy for ya. I told ya way back there old Jeb was a fellah worth knowin'. Guess ya took my advice." Glory uttered a soft cackling sound.

Iris began to cry. "I mustn't be selfish, but I wanted you to live in Garden Grove with all of us. I'll miss you very, very much."

"Just who will deliver our babies when they come?" Marie demanded. "We had counted on you."

"Well, I won't be practicing medicine anyway. Either in Garden Grove or at Val Verde. So you won't be missing much." Rachel lowered her head to mask the emotions welling within her.

"You're what?" Marie demanded.

"My practice. Jeb doesn't want me to work. He says I'll need all my time to help him and raise our family."

"Not completely. Surely you're not giving it up completely." Marie's voice was tinged with a stern tenor now. "What about your commitment to the men in Garden Grove?"

"Jeb will take care of any financial adjustment to be made." With all eyes on her, Rachel turned to leave. "Please forgive me if I have misled any of you. Also, please remember I love each of you like a sister."

Mary was sitting on the wagon tongue when Rachel returned. "If you go to Val Verde, can I come with you? Will," Mary hesitated, "will Jeb let me come with you just until Ned can come west for me?"

"Yes, I said you could and I meant it."

"Are you sure?"

Rachel nodded. "I am very sure."

"Jeb wants to take care of you? Keep you safe?" Mary asked.

"Yes, you're exactly right."

"Maybe too safe?" Mary smiled knowingly at her.

Jeb looked at the sky and said to Andy, "I guess we hit it lucky getting over the mountains before the snows come, but it's the wet season here. We'd better not waste time. Some of those passes into the Valley can be pretty treacherous after heavy rains. Have known people to cross the continent only to lose it all in a mud slide."

"You're right, Jeb. Say, what's down there?" Andy pointed below.

At the bottom of the last hill they came across a wagon, crushed on one side and with a broken wheel. A small, red-headed woman and two, young freckled-faced children frantically hailed them.

Jeb rode up to them.

"Oh, Mister, you got to help us," the woman pleaded. "My husband lost control of the wagon coming down the last hill and he had a terrible accident. He's laying in the wagon bad hurt." She caught her breath. "Two fellows, Henry and Dan I think they was, came riding past and said you could help us. They said you had a doctor with you for my mister."

Jeb shook his head as he dismounted. "I'll see what I can do about your wagon. We've got an extra wheel. A hammer and nails and a few boards will probably mend it enough to get you to the trading post up the road."

"Clem is hurting something turrible. Do you have a doctor? They said she's a woman, but I don't care, if she knows her stuff."

"Well, she can look at him, but we don't have time to wait on her long. Soon as we've fixed your wagon we have to be moving on," Jeb warned.

Rachel pulled her wagon to a halt. She had heard the remark about her being a woman doctor, but chose to ignore it. Coming forward, she extended her hand to the frantic woman. "I'm Dr. Williams. I'd be glad to examine your husband. And who are you?"

The woman nervously took Rachel's hand in her own dry, leathery one. "I'm Abby Honeycutt and these are my kids, Bob

and Mary Ann. My husband, Clem, is inside. You gotta help him. He's hurt bad. His leg and all. Out of his head with pain."

"What happened, Abby?"

"Ain't quite sure—it was all so sudden. He was bringin' the wagon down by hisself. The kids and me had walked on down and I think he got to goin' too fast and the horses spooked and broke free. Then he hit a big rock and the wagon turned over. He jumped clear just before he crashed. His leg doubled under him when he landed and it musta broke to smithereens."

When Rachel entered the wagon, she found Clem, a stocky, brown-haired man about twenty-five, much as Abby described. He was already burning with fever. Abby had cut away his trouser leg and attempted to clean the wound, but dirt and debris were worked too deeply into the skin for her superficial cleaning to be effective. Red streaks were already beginning to surge up his leg. This man was in a bad way. If Rachel did not remove all the foreign pieces of material and bone fragments before she set the bone, he would surely lose his leg or die of infection. His need was immediate.

Jeb came to the back of the wagon. "Rachel, you'll need to get out of the wagon. We need to put on the wheel and we've got to lift this side up. Can we move him?" Jeb pointed to Clem.

"It would be better if we didn't."

"All right. I'll get an extra man to help. How is he anyway?"

"I'll have to operate before I can set the bone."

"Will it take long?" Jeb asked.

"It'll be pretty tedious."

"There's a trading post not too far from here. With the new wheel and a board or two on the side, we can take them there and they can make other arrangements." Jeb glanced at her.

The men repaired the wagon while Rachel tried to relieve Clem's pain and lower his temperature. Soon Jeb told Rachel, "We rounded up Honeycutt's team and the wagon's fixed. So we're ready to go."

"Can Andy drive my team? Let him take the children with him. I'd like to ride with Clem. Tend him what little I can until we get to shelter."

"All right. Mrs. Honeycutt can drive this wagon that far. Remember, though, once we reach the post, our obligation ends." He looked at the sky. "This is the rainy season and the roads get bad and they cave in. Besides, they're expecting us in Garden Grove." He gave Rachel a stern look. "Remember? We need to move on. All of us."

She said nothing in reply to his warning, but rather turned back to her patient.

It was only about three miles to the post; but with every passing minute, Clem's condition worsened. The fever rose. Rachel became increasingly concerned. *If this man lost his leg; or worse yet, if he died, what would happen to his family?* Rachel shuddered at the thought of two young children and a woman alone on the frontier.

Schmidt's Outpost stood atop a small rise in the midst of a small clearing. A large grizzled man came to meet them. "I'm Jacob Schmidt. Glad to see you. Step down and look over my wares. Have a little refreshment or just rest a spell."

The post consisted of only one main building with the store in front and what looked to be Jacob's living quarters in back with a few lean-to outbuildings. Rachel thought to herself, *Small as the place is, some of that space has to accommodate me while I operate on this man.* It's primitive but at least it's out of the weather, the dirt, and the flies.

Jeb followed Jacob inside. "We have an injured man in that wagon out in front. We wondered if you could keep him and his family until you can locate a doctor?"

"Guess I could put him in my quarters, all right. Hope it ain't nuthin' serious 'cause the nearest doctor is a day's ride from here."

Rachel entered then. "That far?" she questioned.

"Yep. A hard day's ride at that."

Rachel turned to Jeb. "He can't wait so long. I'll have to operate now."

Jacob looked Rachel over. "Say, you ain't the woman doctor Henry was a talkin' about?"

"Yes, I'm Rachel Williams."

Jeb interrupted, "She is, but she has to move on with us when the wagon train leaves. We've been on the trail all these months and we need to get to our destination soon. Everyone is worn out. Besides, look at the sky, how cloudy it's getting and I know this country well enough to realize the rainy season will soon start. We had enough mud coming through the Humboldt to last us a lifetime."

"Jeb, come outside I need to talk to you." Outside they stood under the nearest shade tree. "Jeb, I can't leave Clem. If I operate right now, the odds are bad enough for him. He can't wait for a doctor to be sent—he just won't make it."

Rachel reached up and grasped a low-hanging branch. A feeling of déjà vu swept over her. Suddenly it was as if she once again stood with Alfonse under a similar tree with the same amount of tension flowing between them. History was repeating itself, but would the ending be the same? Were they, too, destined to part?

She was tugged back to the present when Jeb grasped her arm. "Rachel, we just can't stay. What if you hadn't come along? How would they have managed? We have already done more than could be expected." Jeb's words were quiet but insistent. "I didn't want to worry you when we were crossing the mountains so I hadn't mentioned what the rains could do to the trails here. Mudslides aren't something to ignore." He kicked the trunk of the tree with a restless movement. "I wish it could be different."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the two children sitting quietly on the porch watching them. Then Abby came out the door, patting the two children, before she crossed over to the tree where she and Jeb stood.

"Oh, Doctor, you ain't gonna just leave us?" Abby begged. "In the name of all that's holy, you ain't gonna leave Clem to die? I beg you." She began sobbing, kneeling on the ground in front of Rachel. Folding her hands in supplication, Abby looked up at her. "Please, please, save him. He's all we got."

Rachel looked at Abby's pale, tear stained face. Her heart wrenched within her as she reached down and helped Abby to her feet. "Go along. I'll be with you in a minute," Rachel promised.

Drawing in his breath, Jeb kicked the trunk again. She's not going with me—I can tell. He shifted his weight and leaned against the tree. Wouldn't it always be like this? We'd have a family, and she'd still have one more emergency. She'd leave us and we'd be alone, waiting. What a decision, but it's not mine alone.

"You're going to stay, aren't you?" Jeb asked in a voice choked with emotion.

Rachel shook her head. "I can't do it. I can't leave. I'm a doctor first and a woman second." Oh how she wanted to reach out to touch him; instead, she dabbed at the tears cascading onto her face.

With pain in his voice and watering eyes, he told her, "I guess we both have our obligations. I, to the people on this train, and you..." He could not continue, for his voice broke, failing him under the burden of his disappointment.

He turned then and headed toward the circle of wagons below. "Jeb, Jeb," Rachel called, but he gave no indication he heard her as he set his shoulders in that determined way of his while pulling his hat down over his eyes.

She shouted again, "Jeb, wait for me in Garden Grove."

Fourteen

The Adjustment

Rachel stood watching the train until its dust disappeared over the far horizon. Glory was driving her wagon with most of her medical supplies since she had kept just what she needed for Clem's operation. Never had she felt so empty or longed for another human being the way she longed for Jeb.

At last, Mary, who had loyally stayed behind to help with Clem's operation spoke to her. "You must go in now. You must see your patient."

Through the haze of her inner misery, Rachel passed Abby and the children, who waited for her on the porch of Schmidt's outpost. "I'm sorry if we caused trouble between you and your mister. But we're so grateful!" Abby gasped.

Rachel turned to Mary. "You know the procedure. We'll begin as soon as you have the instruments ready. Mr. Schmidt," she called. "Will you help me move your kitchen table in front of the west window? I'll have to use it for the operation. I'll need all the light I can get, too."

"It was so good of you to stay, Doctor Williams. I told Jeb I'd see you got on the stage," Jacob told her.

"The stage? When does it come through?"

"Not 'til Tuesday, I'm afraid. This is Thursday so it's almost a week. Out here that's not too bad."

Rachel shook her head, her shoulders slumping with disappointment. She had hoped if the stage arrived in a couple of days she could be in Garden Grove by the time the slower moving wagon train arrived. Rachel pulled herself up short; there was no time for self-pity when a man's life hung in the balance.

Once Rachel had begun the operation she was totally immersed in the process without a thought given to her personal conflict. She considered this to be a combat in which only her skill could vanquish the foe of death and bring the victory of life to Clem and his family.

It was early afternoon when Rachel and Mary began. Evening shadows were lengthening when they finished. Rachel straightened her back, laying her hand in the middle of her lower spine. "We've done all we can, Mary. We've fought the good fight. I just don't know if we've won or not!"

Mary asked, "Will he live?"

"I don't know. He's young and strong, but the rest is up to him. I think he's a fighter! Get Jacob and we'll put him to bed!"

Abby rushed into the room. "How did it go?" she asked, searching Rachel's face for the answer she so desired.

"Well enough." Rachel clasped Abby to her breast. "We won't know for several hours or perhaps a day. But he wants to live, for he has you and the kids. And, that's a powerful incentive. Abby, do you want to sit with him while Mary and I take a break? I'm a little tired."

They went to the porch to watch the sun set while they ate some stew and cornbread that the concerned Jacob had brought them. "Is there anything more I can do for you? I watched you, Doctor, and I never imagined anyone could have such skill. I tell you for sure what California needs is more doctors just like you." Turning to Mary, "And more assistants like you."

"Thank you," they answered in unison. Mary's dusky face flushed with pleasure.

"Those Honeycutts are mighty lucky! You treatin' him and all. Jeb paid for them to get outfitted with new supplies. Out of

his own pocket. You folks are somethin'. Yes, sir, you sure are somethin'. All of ya!"

Rachel was amazed. This was a side of Jeb she treasured, but one he kept hidden from the world. *Oh, Jeb!*

"Are you very tired, Rachel?" Mary asked.

"Yes, very tired." She reached down and loosened her boots. "Look at my feet. They're really swollen. I guess it's the heat."

"You need to take care now. With the little one."

"Little one?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, you know, the baby!" She looked at Rachel with amazement shining from her dark eyes. "You didn't know?"

"You think I'm pregnant?" Rachel uttered in total surprise. "I couldn't be—I—" Then all the signs came rushing to her. The nausea, the tiredness, the swelling of her feet. She counted back to the time of her last cycle and the times she had been intimate with Jeb. She could be expecting and in fact, knew she was.

Mary was smiling at her. "It is nice. Did you tell Jeb?"

"No. I—I didn't know." Rachel was torn between sadness and joy. Whichever emotion applied, she was *dumbfounded!* To think it took the small Indian girl standing beside her to tell her. She had delivered more than a hundred babies and she hadn't even detected her own pregnancy! It was almost like the cobbler's son having no shoes.

"I must go in to check Clem, now!" she told Mary.

Rachel took Clem's pulse, then freshened the cool cloth on his forehead. When she determined he was as comfortable as possible, she sat down beside his bed. Tired as she was, she could not sleep. She was much too excited over the baby she now knew she carried. She was sure it would be a boy—tall with dark curly hair and blue eyes. Her own eyes were brown, which is a dominant trait, but most of her family had blue or hazel eyes. Yes, they would be tauntingly blue like Jeb's. Maybe, just maybe, he would have her cleft in his chin. Oh, what a child he would be! A gift to the world!

Rachel's heart beat with anticipation as she imagined Jeb's surprise over her news. Then like a bolt of lightning, she remembered they were not married and might not be unless she told him of her condition. Surely he would be waiting for her in Garden Grove! Or would he? Doubt began to grip her. How would Jeb react to her news? Suddenly the father of her child became a stranger.

She felt afraid. Afraid for herself and the child and for Jeb. Her child must have a father. Without a father's name, he would be a bastard! Bastard was a word that would never burden her child! She would see to that.

Rachel had chosen a name for her firstborn son years ago. He would be Michael. Now he would be hers and no circumstance or person could take the joy of having him from her. With resolve, she propped her feet against the bottom rail of the bed, leaned back in her chair, and slept soundly.

About midnight Rachel awoke with a start; not from a noise, for the night was silent and cool around her. Rather, her sixth sense had awakened her. Clem, she thought! She righted herself turning up the lamp and placing her hand on his forehead, feeling his body fired with fever. She shook Mary. "Wake up! Get Jacob and have him bring enough canvas to cover the bed. We're going to have to soak him with wet towels to bring his fever down. Hurry!" She called after the retreating Mary, "Bring a fresh bucket of water from the well, too!"

The two women and Jacob soaked Clem with wet towels and blankets. Rachel commented, "It would be easier to put him in a tub of water but we don't dare with that leg of his!"

They worked frantically and finally they could feel the heat recede from his body. "Thank heavens," Rachel told them. "Now, if only he doesn't have brain damage."

"Is it likely?" Jacob inquired with concern.

"Let's hope not, but there's a possibility! We'll just have to wait and see. He should rally tomorrow if things are going to turn for the better." Rachel bowed her head in prayer as the

others returned to their beds. Had she chosen the wrong path by trying to save his leg? she asked herself.

The next day showed little change in Clem's condition. Late in the afternoon Abby was sitting with him when she called out to Rachel, who was sitting on the porch. "Come, come quick!"

Rachel's heart sank. Was the man inside dying? She bolted to his bedside only to find him conscious and complaining. "What did the doctor do to my leg? It's afire, I tell you. Afire! Where is the rascal?" he grumbled.

Clem gazed at Rachel. "Don't want to see no nurse. Want the doctor. Not some confounded woman!"

Abby tried to calm him. "This is your doctor. Meet Rachel Williams!"

"Well. Mr. Honeycutt, I'm glad you decided to be with us! I'm so glad to hear your leg is talking to you even if it seems on fire. That means I didn't damage too many nerves when I operated. Let me check your pulse." She pulled her pa's pocket watch from her apron and began to count. "Well, it's a little fast but under the circumstances that's to be expected." She laughed softly.

Clem eyed Rachel suspiciously as she removed the dressing from his leg. "I can't believe it. The red streaks are gone and the incision is starting to scab over. Clem, you are in excellent health. I do believe the only thing you have to deal with is the break itself. That should be healed in six weeks or so."

"You sure enough have that strapped up. Why I can't even move it!"

"That's the point!" Turning to Abby she asked, "Is he always this way?"

"More than I like to admit, but I can never thank you enough for what you done for us." She grabbed Rachel, embracing her with grateful emotion.

"Clem, if you're legs a hurtin' you just say so, but first you'd better thank this kind lady for savin' your life and that gall-darned leg of yours!"

Like a scolded child, he cast his eyes down and then with reluctance said, "Thank you, Madam Doctor!"

"With all this behind us, Abby, you'd better feed him some of the broth Jacob stewed up for him! I'm going back outside and get some fresh air. Call me if you need me."

The children came running to the porch. "Is it right, Miss Doctor, is Pa gonna be all right?" they asked.

"He's complaining enough so he must be!" Rachel chuckled.

The children grabbed her around the waist. "Oh, thank you!"

Then young Bob looked up at her, "When I grow up, I'm gonna be a doctor just like you. I surely am!"

Rachel looked down at the little freckled face while tears of joy welled in her eyes. She bent down and kissed both children. "Would you like to go in and see him now?"

There was no time for an answer as they dashed inside.

~ * ~

The stage to Garden Grove was to arrive at two o'clock. When there was no sign of it by three that afternoon, Rachel began to pace. "Do you suppose there's been an accident? Why are they so late?" she asked Jacob.

"There's plenty could go wrong, but it ain't unusual for them to run late. Even though you'd think just comin' once a week through here they'd be on time. What I don't like is they think they have to make up the time and they get kinda rambunctious goin' too fast. 'Specially if it's old Charlie drivin'."

It was almost six o'clock when the cloud of dust signaled the coach's arrival. When the wizened driver, Charlie, pulled the stage to a halt in front of Jacob's door, he spat out his cud of tobacco and climbed down. "Now, Schmidt, don't you tell me I got passengers today! Somethin' more to slow me down," he grumbled.

Jacob wasn't put off by this man's banter. "Well, isn't that what you come for? The passengers and the freight?"

"I reckon, but I got plenty of freight. Extry lot. My animals are tuckered out and this ain't a regular way station so you don't have no fresh ones. Guess I'll just call it a day so I don't have to spend the night parked out on the prairie somewheres!"

Rachel heard this. "Not go today?" she demanded.

"No, lady, not tonight. Specially ain't goin' with two women aboard. There is enough danger of ruts and landslides for a man to face, let alone havin' two womenfolk with me."

Rachel started to protest. Jacob raised his hand, signaling her to stop, knowing the futility of her argument.

Charlie withdrew his pocketknife, cutting a fresh "chaw" as he called it. "I'll unhitch now. I'll just put up in the coach for tonight. Don't want to be a bother to you, Jacob. Though I do have a hankerin' for a bowl of that good stew of yorn."

Rachel groaned inwardly. Another day lost and another day to test Jeb's patience if he were waiting for her. "We'll leave first thing in the morning won't we?" she asked the indifferent Charlie.

"Sure, girlie, sure!"

~ * ~

Rachel and Mary rose early the next day. Only Jacob was stirring, preparing their breakfast. "Is Charlie getting ready to leave?" Rachel inquired.

Jacob answered hesitantly. "Guess I'd better go rouse the old coot. Like as not he took him a bottle to bed with him and he won't wake up 'til noon! Worst part of it is, he'll drive like the devil is after him to make up his time. Kinda reckless like!"

"I don't care. We've got to go. Please wake him up. I'll fix him some coffee and get him some headache powder to help him."

Rachel and Jacob finally got the team hitched with the cussing and grumping Charlie up on the driver's seat of the coach. They left in a flurry of dust as Abby and the children stood waving goodbye to them.

Mary leaned across to ask Rachel, "Is this safe? He drives very fast."

"We don't have a choice. I imagine the horses are used to Charlie's antics, so with a little luck we might make it."

Their luck did hold out until early afternoon. By then, the road was getting rougher and filled with more ruts. Rachel, feeling certain Charlie was nodding off to sleep now and then, had decided she would station herself up there with him to keep him on track. She started to open the stage door to call to him when there was a loud crunch. The coach swayed beneath them as one of the back wheels dislodged in a deep crevice at the side of the road. There was a bumping sound as the left side of the vehicle sat down on its body like a wounded duck.

"I'll be damned!" Charlie shouted. "We've lost a wheel. Snapped like a twig. Don't make 'em like they used to." He came to the coach door, "Ain't neither of you hurt none, are ya?"

"No, Charlie. Our backsides might be a little bruised, but we're all right!" Rachel growled. "Now what do we do?"

"Nuthin'! Some folks will wander by and I can send for help. They're sure to miss us sooner or later anyway down to Garden Grove." He pointed to a stand of trees. "Why don't you go over there and set a spell in the shade? Hope you wasn't in no hurry to get to yer destination!"

Rachel felt the taste of a tart reply on her tongue, but she remained silent, knowing it would do no good. It was more than she could stand, though, when she saw him lean against the stage and fish out a bottle of whiskey from his side pocket. She wasn't going to let him drown his sorrow so easily after making her so late to Garden Grove and foolishly risking their lives.

She approached him nonchalantly, asking him, "Do you mind if I have a little nip of that? It'll help us pass the time." Rachel extended her hand for the bottle, which he readily handed to her. With one fell swoop she slung the bottle against the front wheel of the coach, breaking it into a million gleaming pieces.

"Now why'd you do that fer? 'Twas mean," he moaned.

"You're just lucky I didn't swat it on your head after all the trouble you've caused us! The least you can do now is stay sober! If you hadn't been half drunk to begin with we'd never have had this accident. If you get thirsty, there are canteens of water in the coach."

"Water? Girlie, have a heart! Besides it was mighty good of me just to let you bring that Indian squaw along with you on my stage, Miss Smarty!"

That slurring remark enraged Rachel further. She jumped up to the driver's seat and rummaged around in the boot, bringing out one more bottle of whiskey. "Exactly what I thought. Another bottle of your hooch!" She whacked it against the side of the coach as she had the other and it splattered out its contents onto the dusty road at Charlie's feet.

"Damn! My last one! What kind of she devil are ya?" he yelled.

"You can make us late. You can almost kill us, but you *can't insult* my friend!" Rachel, her back arched, marched over to the shade to join Mary.

They had been waiting only about an hour when two wagons approached coming in their direction. Both of them bore signs reading, "Collins Hauling and Delivery, Garden Grove, California."

Rachel could hardly believe their good fortune! The wagons stopped and a pleasant looking, middle aged man came forward. "Well, Charlie, looks like you've had some bad luck today!" He evidently knew Charlie's ways for he was laughing.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Collins I sure 'nuf did!"

"Kind of off the road weren't you?"

"Spect I was. These long runs kind of wear you down. Maybe I wasn't watchin' close enough. Don't have a spare wheel, do ya?"

"Not that would fit. I'll notify your station manager when I get into Garden Grove and he can send some help out for you. It'll be night before we get in but maybe I'll meet a rider on the

road and he can go ahead and get you help faster. I notice you have passengers with you. I'd be glad to take them in with us."

"Don't know. Think it would do them two good to wait with me. The tall one's kinda feisty and all."

Rachel had overheard the conversation. "Oh, Mr. Collins, we would be so grateful to you if we could go with you. I don't relish the thought of spending the night out here. Especially not with him!" She moved the broken glass with the toe of her shoe.

Collins laughed again at her movement. "No, I think you're right. Bring the girl and we'll take you along." He motioned to the other driver, "Get their luggage. Is the box yours, too?"

"Yes, I have a few medical supplies in there."

"Medical supplies?"

"Yes, I'm Dr. Rachel Williams. This is Mary, my assistant. We're on our way to Garden Grove to meet my cousin Martin Williams. Would you happen to know him?"

"Know him? You might say I know him very well! We'll talk later. Right now we'd better get started. Dr. Williams, you can ride up here in the seat with me. Mary can go in the second wagon with my driver if that's satisfactory."

They both nodded.

After they were en route, he turned to Rachel. "I'm Gray Collins. I didn't get a chance to properly introduce myself back there." He smiled broadly, revealing white even teeth and dimples on either side of his cheek.

Gray waited for her response. "As I said, I'm Rachel Williams from Pennsylvania." She eyed him speculatively. "You certainly came along at the appropriate moment."

"I gathered as much. Charlie said you were feisty which I took to mean you were the one who broke his bottle!" They both chuckled.

As the team clomped along, he thought, *Here I am trying to act normal when I can hardly contain myself. The woman who has been the center of my dreams for these many weeks is*

actually sitting beside me and she is prettier than I had dreamed.

Always before when Gray read a play before seeing the performance, he was invariably disappointed by the actors on the stage. No one ever lived up to his pre-conceived expectations. This time was different. The Rachel of his dreams had not lived up to the real Rachel! There she sat, tall and slim with a crowning glory of curly auburn hair. Her eyes were warmly brown and her skin peachy white. He just knew her skin was soft to the touch as her whole body must be. She wore a simple blue shirtwaist and a navy skirt, modest enough, but even her simple attire could not conceal the well-rounded bosom which heaved up and down with each breath.

Gray tore his gaze away from her. He must concentrate on something else for he felt a flush turning his face crimson. He loosened his collar. "It's a little warm for this time of year," he explained.

He had other issues to face. He knew she was part of the marriage pool, but why was she out here alone with only the young Indian girl? He hesitated since he didn't want to appear forward but still he wanted to understand her circumstances. Maybe she would mention the marriage pool herself.

"Miss Williams, uh Rachel, what's bringing you to Garden Grove? Are you visiting your cousin?"

Rachel measured her answer carefully. "We were traveling with the Jeb Morgan wagon train when we came across a badly injured settler. Mary and I stayed behind to operate on him. There at Schmidt's outpost."

"Oh?"

"Clem Honeycutt was his name. His leg was badly crushed and I was afraid there wouldn't be time to send for another doctor. I was afraid I might have to amputate, but I took a chance and was able to save his leg and his life. Thank God!"

"That was quite an accomplishment! You must be a very good doctor." She still had not mentioned the marriage pool so

he tried again. "What brings you to Garden Grove? Are you going to visit your cousin?"

Rachel lowered her head. "I'm part of a venture my cousin started. He called it the California Marriage Pool. If you can believe it, I'm a mail order bride." Rachel turned to him, adding, "But you probably don't know anything about that."

Gray nodded his head sheepishly. "Actually I do but I just didn't know how to broach the subject!"

Rachel laughed, "Nor did I! Guess we have something in common!"

"I think we have a lot in common from what Martin has told me. Both raised in the East, both strong enough to search for a better life. In many ways we're kindred souls. Of course I'm older than you!"

"Aw, not, I'll wager!"

Gray sighed. *I like this woman. I like her very much!* "And the other women, did they weather the trip well? I've been out of town for several weeks and haven't been able to keep up with matters."

"Yes, fairly well. There are three more of us. Iris, my younger cousin; Marie Lyle and her young son, Jimmy; and Glory, who really isn't an original member of the pool, but a widow looking for a new life."

"They sound nice but I'll bet none of them are as outstanding as you," Gray said seriously. "By the way, all of you'll be staying at my house. I have the room and the men and I thought you'd be more comfortable there while you make your decision."

"Our decision?"

"About us." Gray colored a little. "I—well, we thought each of you should choose. There are five of us, but it seemed to me it was too important a choice just to pull a name out of a hat!"

Rachel caught her breath before gently patting his arm. "You're quite right."

Gray looked askance once more at his passenger. How beautiful she was, despite the heat and dust. Tiny droplets of

sweat beaded her brow as damp ringlets of curls escaped her blue hair ribbon coming to rest on the nape of her neck. She exuded a clean scent tinged with a whisper of fresh lavender.

So far this woman was everything he desired. Rachel Williams would be his wife no matter what he had to do to win her. Of this, he was certain. Gray Collins slapped the reins across the horses' backs, urging them forward into a trot.

The trail edged around the side of a high hill and became narrower and more treacherous as it wound forward. "I wish they'd keep this road in better repair! Gray raised his hand signaling to the driver behind to halt. "I'm going to walk up around the bend and check for any rock slides." He took a metal rod from behind the seat. "If I test the upper bank with this, I can tell if the route ahead is safe. If the ground is too unsettled, we'll have to take the detour down that other side and go clear around these hills. It'll take another four hours, but it's best to be safe. When it's too dry the loose dirt sends the rocks down on you. After it rains, there's danger of mud slides! Can't win either way! That's why they call it Widow's Peak, I guess."

Rachel watched Gray until he disappeared from sight, praying they would not have to spend more time on a detour. In spite of her turbulent emotions over her numerous delays and not knowing if Jeb would be waiting for her, she was impressed with Gray Collins. Belying her earlier comments, she realized he must be more than ten years older than she, but he wore his age well. Tall and thin yet muscular, he had a distinguished, almost courtly air, even in the darkly rough work pants and shirt. He was pleasing to the eye with his blonde graying hair neatly trimmed and his blue eyes a surprising contrast to his well-tanned skin. His nose was slightly prominent but offset by a fully rounded mouth. He wasn't handsome in the same way Jeb was, but he was uniquely appealing. A successful businessman as witnessed by his ownership of a freight line, he was self-assured without being arrogant. Even more endearing, he seemed to admire her skill as a doctor.

~ * ~

Rachel jumped from the wagon and went to the edge of the road. Below her lay Garden Grove, arranged much like a town she had erected in her sand table as a child. There was a precision to its design with one main tree-lined street fronted by small shops and businesses. At one end, a white church, bell and steeple, glistened in the fall sun. At the other end of the street lay a barn and corral filled with horses, which at this height, looked much like miniature toys. Close by were several barns and several wagons filled with freight. It must be Gray's delivery business. Next to it, stood a building with a barely visible flickering fire occasionally exuded black puffs of smoke in its yard. I guess that would be Martin's smithy. On a hill overlooking the town was one large gray stone beacon of a house. The only one large enough to accommodate the women. That, then, must be Gray's home. After her continuing long travels, never had she seen a sight more beckoning!

Mary joining Rachel asked, "Is that Garden Grove?"

"Yes, isn't it lovely? So green and lush." Rachel stepped closer to the edge to command a better view. Suddenly she felt the grip of two vise-like hands around her waist, pulling her back onto the road. "Oh, Gray, it's you! You frightened me!"

"And you frightened me! You mustn't get too close to the rim. The ground is too unstable!" Gray warned.

Exhaling slightly, Rachel added, "Thank you for warning me." She leaned against him momentarily.

Gray released her almost grudgingly. "What did you think of Garden Grove from your lofty view?"

"It's lovely. Laid out so neatly! It reminds me of home!"

"Well, let's hope it will soon be just that."

"Tell me, is your house the one on the hill? The one of stone? The sentinel of the town?"

Gray nodded with pleasure. "I hope you'll like it," he added wistfully. "The road ahead is clear, though the longer route might have given us more time to get acquainted!" He grinned shyly at her.

Rachel, in contrast, was silently overjoyed to be moving forward.

The sun was just setting as they entered Garden Grove. Rachel was beside herself with worry. She retreated into a withdrawn state, thinking of nothing else but Jeb. *Had he waited? Surely, oh surely he had! Please, God, please let him be waiting!*

As they drove through the town, Gray turned to Rachel. "I'll need to go by the stage office and tell them about Charlie. Then we have to leave these wagons in the yard at the office. It'll take a while. I thought we'd drop you and Mary off at Martin's blacksmith. I know he's anxious to see you. When I'm finished, I'll bring the buggy by and take you to the house. I'm sure the other women are already staying there."

Absently, Rachel nodded her agreement. In just minutes she would know about Jeb. A wall of worry broke her mental reserve, flooding her mind. Could she withstand the torrent of grief if Jeb had left without her?

When they pulled in front of the smithy, Martin, with his arms spread wide, rushed to embrace Rachel. "Oh, girl, am I glad to see you! I was getting worried. If you hadn't showed up today, I was going to go out and look for you!" Finally he released her from his bear hug and led them into his living quarters. Turning to Mary, he asked, "And who are you, Missy?"

Mary smiled delightedly. "I'm Mary. I help Dr. Rachel."

"Martin, this is Mary, my assistant," Rachel added.

"Glad to meet you. Come in. I was just having a bite of stew. Let me get a couple more bowls." He motioned them to the small table beside the fireplace.

"So Gray Collins brought you in? You were lucky he came by. Glad you got to meet him, too, 'cause he is a prince of a fellow. Yes, sir, he's a real prince of a man!" Martin told her again with emphasis.

"Have you seen Iris and the other women?" Rachel asked.

“Yep, they’re up at Gray’s place. All settled in by now. Just waitin’ on you!”

Then the telling moment was upon Rachel. She began hesitantly. “And where is Jeb? Where is he staying?” Her heart catapulted to her throat.

“Jeb Morgan left yesterday. He waited around a couple of days here, but said he had to be on his way, some problem down at Val Verde. By the way, he left a message for you.” Martin rose, taking a small piece of paper secured behind the clock on the mantel.

Her hands shaking, Rachel grasped the note. Unfolding it, she forced herself to read the words. There in bold certain strokes was the brief, cryptic message:

Dear Rachel,

I could not wait any longer. I had to leave for Val Verde.

Perhaps it is for the best.

Jeb

Fifteen

The Alternative

Tears streamed from Rachel's eyes as she held Jeb's note. Such a small bit of paper to have such a huge impact on her life. She rose, going to the porch where she sat sobbing. In a while Mary came out carrying a bowl of stew. Rachel pushed it away. "I'm not hungry."

"You eat," Mary insisted. "For the little one." She began spoon-feeding Rachel.

Martin joined them. "I'm sorry, Cousin. I didn't know there was anything between you and Jeb. Do you want to talk about it?" He placed his arm around her shoulders.

"Please, not now," she begged.

"All right. I won't say anything to the others. Maybe we can convince you staying with us isn't so bad." He patted her gently.

Rachel never understood how she survived that night. Gray left them at his house, explaining he was staying with Len Smith in his quarters behind the store. Iris, Glory, and Marie greeted them as long lost friends, but Rachel could barely respond. Finally sensing her anguish, the women prepared a hot bath for her and then Mary tucked her in bed after giving her some headache powder. Rachel was so emotionally drained, she slept dreamlessly through the night.

She awoke the next morning with an ache throughout her body. With foreboding she greeted the day, feeling more alone than she had ever been. If only she had been alone. Whatever she did, she had the baby to think about. She moaned slightly.

The warm California sunshine flooded in through the windows, illuminating the room. Despite her depression, Rachel noted the cheerfulness and the richness of her surroundings—the thick blue rug with oriental designs, the comfortable four poster bed, the tall mahogany chest-of-drawers. There was a massive, masculine look to the room except for a mirrored vanity with two small drawers and a rosy pink covered seat placed in front of it. The wooden top was covered with a white starched crocheted runner on which was thoughtfully placed a dresser set consisting of a silver handled brush and matching comb along with a button hook and a hair reticule. A large bottle of lavender toilet water graced the center of the arrangement.

Suddenly there was a crisp knock at the door and Marie entered followed by Iris carrying a breakfast tray. Marie commanded, “Wake up, Rach. Wake up to your new life in Garden Grove. Iris, pour her some coffee.”

“Not yet, please.” Rachel begged.

“Nonsense.” Marie asserted. “We all know how you felt about Jeb. We’re sorry, but you just have a slight touch of Morganitis and we plan to help you rid yourself of the malady, Doctor. Now’s the best time to start your recovery.”

“She’s right, Rachel,” Iris said pouring her a cup of coffee.

“But—”, Rachel protested.

“No buts about it.” Marie emphasized. “Let me show you your wardrobe. Your dresses from the wagon are hanging in the chiffarobe over there. I was able to salvage a couple of your good ones. The lavender and the yellow and two shirtwaists and shirts. The rest were ruined when the medicine spilled on them. You can thank the Sierras. Sorry.”

“Thank you for helping me, Marie.”

"Of course, you are so much a part of us. Anyway, Iris and I picked out some material for a new dress for you from the mercantile here. We've started on a pattern." Marie's green eyes danced with anticipation. "Get up and put on your petticoat and we'll fit what we've made."

Marie spread a light shimmering green taffeta on the bed. When she pinned it together on Rachel, she clucked. "Rachel, after all that hard trip, you've gained weight. Some of it in the right places. Look how bosomy you've gotten. 'Course you're a bit thicker in the waist, too."

Rachel gave no response. She caught her breath when she looked at her reflection in the mirror over the vanity. The green of the dress contrasted so well with the auburn of her hair and the brown of her eyes. The long straight skirt caught up below her breasts accentuated her statuesque beauty.

"Oh, Marie, it's so flattering. You truly are a talented seamstress. Thank you again."

"We women have to look good. Gray told us the gents are planning a private dance for us Saturday night. We want to do ourselves proud." Marie gathered up the dress, saying, "I'll finish stitching this together while you eat your breakfast."

Iris sat beside Rachel while she ate. "You haven't had much of a chance to look around Gray's house. It's practically a mansion and so tastefully furnished. What a view from this hill. It's like looking down on the whole world." She was silent before she added, "Doesn't it remind you of home, Rach?"

Rachel nodded. Somehow, the warmth and caring of her friends and the beauty of her surroundings lifted her mood. She knew, in her predicament she would be leaving soon, but for now she felt a little more at peace. Besides, she did not want to saddle them with her burden and lessen their happiness.

Iris took Rachel's hand, "I feel so much better now since I know you'll be staying here with us. I'm really sorry about you and Jeb, but you can have a good life here in Garden Grove."

All at once Glory burst into the room. "So here's where everybody's hidin' out."

"Come in." Rachel told her. Embracing the older woman, she said, "I've missed you. All of you."

"Us, too. One thing I've been waiting to ask you. Why didn't you tell us what a handsome buck you had fer a cuzin? Martin's enuf to sweep any girlie offen her feet. I tell ya fer sure."

Marie intervened, "No disrespect to Martin, but I'm glad you're here to hear her talk about him. He's all she's had on her mind since we first set foot in this place."

Iris laughed, saying, "Guess our cousin has one admirer. That's for certain. Glory, are you ready for me to arrange your hair?"

"Well, I spose it's a necessary evil. This purtying up's a necessary evil." Glory sighed. "And before you ask— Yes, I've been usin' yer face cream every darned night."

"Gray is a handsome one and nice, but I'm smart enough to see he only has eyes for you, Rach," Marie told her.

When the women had finished their varied activities, they scattered, with Marie going to see about Jimmy, whom Mary was entertaining, and Glory going to her room while Iris went downstairs to help Rosa, Gray's maid, in the kitchen.

Just as Rachel was going downstairs, there was a knock at the front door. "I'll get it," Iris called up the stair well. "I'm down here already."

When Iris opened the door, Rachel stopped on the landing to watch. There stood a tall handsomely dark young man, sombrero in hand. His smile was almost as bright as the silver ornaments on his black velvet caballero's costume. "Pardon me, I'm Jorge Juan Cisneros de la Vega. Your most obedient servant. I sincerely hope I am not intruding, but I have brought some food from my ranch to help make your stay more pleasant." He bowed before Iris and in this gesture almost swept his hat to the floor.

Iris removed the three-cornered dusting scarf from her head. As she did so, the sun's rays played over her blonde hair, burnishing it into a golden halo. Her eyes were the blue of the

California sky and her skin, fair and flawless, was slightly tinged by a warm blush. She was so petite she barely came to Jorge's shoulder. She is a thing of beauty, Rachel told herself.

Iris was almost overwhelmed by this surprise introduction. Drawing herself together, she answered, smiling, "I'm Iris Williams with the Pennsylvania Women."

"Oh, I'm so very glad to meet you." He took her hand in his and kissed it. "Did Señor Martin tell you to expect me?" He spoke in flawless English.

"No. Are you a member of the California marriage pool?"

"Si—yes."

"Please come in." She motioned to a large wing chair in front of the fireplace. "Gracias. First I must send my driver to the back door to unload the provisions. Will you wait, please?"

Iris waited as he proceeded to the very large ornate carriage and instructed the driver about the food. He turned and gracefully mounted the steps in long-legged strides.

When Jorge returned, Iris asked, "May I take your hat?"

Jorge mechanically handed the large black sombrero to her, never once taking his eyes from her face. Then obediently he followed her to the chair she offered, waiting to seat himself until Iris sat gingerly on the wing-backed chair next to his.

Jorge had certainly seen Iris's limp, but he gave no indication anything was amiss.

"Señor, may I offer you some coffee? Or perhaps tea? It wouldn't take a minute."

"Oh, no." Jorge answered as a man in a trance.

"Would you like me to call the others so you could meet them? Rachel and Marie are here."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to bother them." Then blushing slightly he asked, "Señorita Williams, would you like to visit my hacienda? It would be proper because my Madre is there and she could chaperone us. I told her I might bring a guest for a late lunch."

"Please, call me Iris. And yes, I'd love to visit your ranch. Could I please have a little time to freshen up?"

"But, of course. Say in an hour? I have a little business to transact in town anyway."

"An hour it is then."

Iris handed him his hat. Once again he bowed and quickly bounded down the steps to his carriage.

"Rachel, Rachel, did you hear?" Iris called. "He's taking me to show me his ranch? I think he might like me a little."

"More than a little, I suspect."

Rachel summoned the others and for the next hour there was a flurry of activity helping Iris to get ready—drawing a bath, polishing her shoes, and choosing a dress. When they were finished, all were pleased with the finished product. Iris wore a pale blue silk with an overall print of tiny pastel flowers. The full skirt was underscored and extended by a starched lace petticoat. The high neck was held in place by a narrow velvet ribbon traversing a delicate lace collar.

"Iris, do you know what you are?" Marie asked.

"No."

"You're a Dresden doll. Yes, ma'am. A delicate china doll."

"Oh, Marie. What a nice thing to say." Iris hugged her.

Marie pulled away, "Don't mess yourself up before Prince Charming sees you."

They all laughed. When at last they heard the buggy returning, they scattered, each to a hidden vantage point where they could observe Iris's exit.

Jorge knocked. This time when Iris opened the door, he merely smiled, eliminating the other formalities. "Oh, Señorita, forgive me for being so bold. I must say you look enchanting. *So-o* beautiful."

Iris smiled demurely. "Thank you, Jorge."

"The steps, are they difficult for you?"

"Oh, no."

"But the carriage is so high."

Before Iris could stop him, Jorge reached down, sweeping her into his arms and rushing with her down the steps. The

driver held back the carriage door and Jorge set her gently on the seat beside him.

As they drove out of sight, Marie called to the others, "I can see Iris is going to have a hard life as Señora Vega."

The women's laughter rang almost in unison through the house.

On impulse, Marie lifted her skirts waltzing through the room singing in a high monotone. "Tra le la la, Romance is in the air. In the air, in the air. *Romance* is in the air."

~ * ~

A few minutes later, Marie asked, "Would somebody like to walk down to Len's store with me? I'm out of thread and need some more for Mary's new dress. How about you, Rachel? Anyone else?"

"I'll go with ya, too," Glory answered. "Soon as I can fetch a dress on."

Mary added, "I'll stay with Jimmy and Rosa."

Rachel, Marie and Glory started down the hill. The sun shone warmly while a gentle wind cooled the air to perfection. "Isn't California wonderful?" Marie asked. "At home we'd be expecting snow. 'Course I do miss the changing color of the leaves."

"Look." Rachel pointed to a nearby grove of trees covered with yellowish green fruit. So heavy was their load, the limbs hung limply to the ground. "Are those orange trees?"

"Yep, that's exactly what they'll be. Give them a few more weeks and you can pick them," Marie told her.

"My stars, I never thought I'd see oranges growing," Rachel answered in amazement.

They sauntered along, finally coming to Smith's General Merchandise. As they entered, Marie told Rachel, "That's Len himself behind the counter."

A small gray-haired man greeted them. "Len," Marie told him, "This is Rachel."

"How do you do, Dr. Williams." He extended his hand in greeting. "Welcome to our fair valley. We've been expecting

you,” he told her with enthusiasm. “Is there anything I can help you with today?”

“I need some white thread and a couple of those peppermint sticks for Jimmy,” Marie told him while Rachel and Glory wandered through the store.

When Len had wrapped Marie's purchases, he turned to Rachel. “I don't know when you plan to set up practice, but Gray and I were discussing it. I have some spare space upstairs I could partition off. Could put an outdoor staircase to lead to it. Would make a small office for you. It'd be private since I go through the store and up the indoor stairs.”

“That's thoughtful. I haven't really gotten that far with my plans.” She smiled down at the little man.

“Course not. You've got some personal matters to tend to first. I'm putting the cart in front of the horse. Like they say.”

Rachel wrenched inside at his trusting remark. More and more she felt torn between staying in Garden Grove and going on to Val Verde. Regrettably, if her son were to have a name, staying did not seem to be an option for her at this point, even though ties to these people would be easy to develop.

The conversation was interrupted by a buckboard pulling up in front of the store. A lanky red-haired young man leapt to the ground.

“Well, doggone it, if it isn't Jeremy Adams. Knew he'd show up soon. Doesn't miss out on much.” Len told them.

Jeremy entered quietly but with a modicum of self-assurance. “Well, boy, come on in and meet our guests from Pennsylvania,” Len told him. “They been staying up at Gray's house. Don't know if you met 'em yet.”

“Haven't had the privilege,” he told Len with a sly grin, wrinkling his nose, causing it to pool his freckles into small brown clusters.

“Ladies, this is Jeremy Adams. He ranches outside town about five miles. He's the youngest one of our marriage pool.” Len pointed to each woman in turn. “Dr. Rachel Williams, Mrs. Glory Baxter and Mrs. Marie Lyle.”

The women nodded in acknowledgment.

"Well, Ladies, I'm glad to welcome all of you to our fair city." Jeremy smiled broadly

Rachel watched while Marie's eyes wandered over Jeremy's lengthy physique. Then she walked in a seductive, hip-swinging gait to the wall where bolts of dress material were stacked from floor to ceiling. Jeremy stood riveted to the spot, drinking in every undulating motion of her body.

Marie stood on tiptoes, raising her arms enough to pull her dress up revealing lace-trimmed petticoats and two very trim ankles. "Oh, Len, could I please see that bolt of goods? The blue one up on the top shelf? I can't quite reach it."

"Just a minute. I'll get a step stool and help you," Len offered.

"No need." Jeremy rushed forward. "I can get it for Mrs. Lyle. Be glad to." Jeremy easily retrieved the material, handing it to Marie.

"Thank you so very much. You certainly are tall and strong." Marie's green eyes twinkled. She fingered the cloth. "Oh, I guess it isn't something I wanted after all." She smiled up at Jeremy.

"I almost forgot what I came for." Jeremy stammered a little. "I wondered if you would like to ride out with me and see my ranch?" Remembering the others, he turned, asking, "Any of you?"

Glory shook her head. "Thank ya, but I'm goin' over to Martin's. Love to watch him shoe them horses. Never did see a Jasper cud do it like him. Fast and good." She quickly turned and walked out the door.

Rachel told them, "I need to go back to the house in a minute. I have some things to do, too."

"And you?" Jeremy looked imploringly at Marie.

"I think it would be divine." She paused. "Only Jimmy, my son, is at the house with Mary. I'd hate to leave him for very long."

Rachel sensed Marie was testing this young gentleman. She wanted him to be very certain he knew she and Jimmy were packaged together—take one, take both. Marie watched Jeremy's reaction intently.

Without hesitation Jeremy responded. "Couldn't he go with us? One of my mares just foaled and I think he'd like seeing our new colt."

Marie smiled with relief. Jeremy had passed her test. "Oh, I'm sure Jimmy would love it."

Marie handed her small package to Jeremy. Taking his arm, she proceeded with him to the buckboard. Then Jeremy stopped long enough to say to Rachel, "It was nice meeting you, Doctor Williams."

Jeremy boosted Marie up on the buckboard. She said something that was inaudible to Rachel, but they both laughed as Marie patted his arm affectionately. Then the two of them, the large red-headed man and the petite black-haired girl, drove quickly down the main street of Garden Grove.

"They're quite a pair, aren't they?" Len chuckled.

Rachel nodded. "Quite a good pair."

"Well, now. It leaves you afoot and alone. Why don't I close up here and take you home? My buggy's just over at Gray's. I—"

"That's nice, Len, but I really need a constitutional. Thanks anyway."

"But I—"

"Really, no thanks."

Len turned away to hide his disappointment.

Rachel was nearly at the edge of town when she heard a vehicle approaching. *Oh, not Len, I hope.*

"Hey, there, Rachel." She heard Gray's voice.

"Oh, Gray. It's you." she exclaimed in apparent relief.

"I was just coming to the house to see if you'd want to ride out to my farm with me. I'm going out to see how they're coming with the fall planting. We need to get the wheat in before the rains come."

"I don't know. I'd planned to go back to the house now to do a few things."

"Have you eaten? It's already noon."

Rachel shook her head. "Well, I had the cook over at Jinx's saloon fix a little picnic lunch I'd like to share with you, so you might as well say yes."

"If you insist on bribing me, how can I refuse?" Rachel chuckled.

"My fields are east of town. There's a little more rain on the other side of the valley. The ocean winds blow from the west and bring in the moisture; and when the clouds start over the mountains, they force the rain out of them."

"California is quite a place. This morning we walked past an orange grove. First time I'd ever seen that fruit growing. And the flowers are so different."

"We live in the sub-tropics here. I've been meaning to plant a garden and put some of the more exotic plants in it. Banana trees, gardenia bushes."

"That sounds so nice. I'd love to see it."

"Maybe you will," he answered softly.

Gray looked quite different in his navy business suit and white shirt with a blue figured tie accentuating the denim blue of his eyes. Rachel sighed.

"Rachel, tell me about yourself. About your family, about what you really want from life." His eyes seemed to penetrate her very mind so intense was his gaze.

"We were a fairly average family—loving and closely knit. My parents sacrificed greatly to help me through medical school. It wasn't only the money made it so difficult, but there was the ridicule people heaped on them for educating a daughter—let alone in medicine."

"That I can understand, but it was a wonderful choice. I know how proud you must have made them. But, as I asked before, what do you want from life?"

"More than anything, I want someone I can love. And children, lots of children and a chance to practice medicine—even if it's on a limited basis."

Gray smiled. "That seems reasonable. I've spent all my life making myself financially secure, but now I'm forty-five years old and have no one to share my accomplishments with." He paused, drawing a long breath.

Rachel sensed it was difficult for him to express his inner feelings so candidly. She smiled at him and without thinking patted his arm encouragingly.

Gray guided the team to a stop under the shade of an oak. "Let's get out. You can see most of my land from here." He pointed to the far right. Acres of soft black fields extended to the rim of the valley.

"Is all this yours, Gray?" Rachel gasped.

"Yes, all mine."

"Oh, Gray, you must be very proud of all you've accomplished."

"Well, yes," he replied softly. "But without someone like you to share it with, it means very little." He hesitated and then drew her close to him. Rachel leaned against him. The beating of his heart and the warmth of his body were so soothing she reveled in his closeness when he bent to kiss her. The kiss that started as a matter of comfort soon turned to passion in the masculinity of his touch.

Bells of alarm began to clang inside her head. These weren't Jeb's lips. These weren't Jeb's arms. Then a disturbing voice inside chided her, *Rachel Williams, what are you doing? Stop it.*

Rachel wrenched away.

Gray stared at her in amazement. "Rachel, for God's sake, what's the matter?" His voice shook with confusion and pain.

Rachel could barely stand, let alone speak. Slowly, she lowered her head and climbed up to the seat of the buckboard. A veiled silence fell between them.

They approached a group of horses and men gathered at the perimeter of the first field. Gray tried to dispel the chill now engulfing them, but there was an icy tinge to his voice as he said, "I'm going to go talk to my hands and find out how they're getting along. When I get through, we'll go to the stand of trees over there and have our picnic."

Rachel waved him forward. Food was the farthest thing from her mind. She reviled herself for agreeing to come with him. Gray Collins was too fine a man to be associated with the likes of her.

In a few minutes, he returned. "Good news. They're finishing up and are on their way back to their houses to eat. Good thing, too. Look at the sky."

Rachel had been too self-absorbed to notice the dark clouds that now writhed over the face of the sun while the rising wind blew in sharp gusts. "We'd better look for shelter or we might have a very wet picnic. We'll be able to just about make it to that hay barn over the hill." He urged the horses to a gallop.

The first large drops of rain splattered into the dirt just as they drove up to the barn. "Get inside. I'll tie the horses on the other side where they'll be a little protected."

Gray swung the picnic basket inside the door. He was angry and Rachel knew she needed to lighten the mood. Just because she was so unhappy, she didn't need to visit her problems on this good man. He hadn't made her come after all.

The aroma of fresh hay filled her nostrils with a pleasing, earthy scent. It was like being with Pa at haying time. How she had loved playing in the loft with her sister, Nell. They spent hours hiding from each other, forever finding new mounds of hay to conceal themselves from each other. She wondered if this had a loft, too. It did. She climbed the ladder, sending the resident pigeons into frantic flight.

Rachel heard Gray coming in the barn door. Suddenly she had an idea that just might work. She tunneled under a clump of hay, pulling it over herself until she was completely hidden. The clean smell filled her nostrils entirely now and the stubble

chaffed her face while she struggled to keep herself from giggling.

"Rachel, Rachel, where are you?" Gray called.

Only the pigeons responded from the rafters. "Now come on, Rachel, where are you?" He started to laugh as he climbed the ladder. "So you used to play hide and seek, too, did you?"

He began searching through the hay, thrusting his hands first into one pile and then another. "Rachel Williams, you might as well give up. I'm going to find you." He began to whistle. He came within inches of stepping on her when she began to giggle in earnest.

"Well, you scallywag of a girl." He brushed her covering away. "What am I to do with you?" He threw himself beside her in a laughing fit. "Thought I was going to have to call 'olly olly out's in free.'"

"You would have, too, if you hadn't almost stepped on me." They convulsed with laughter. "I'm sorry the way I acted back there. I'm not myself today. It was so kind of you to bring me here to show me some of the valley."

"You're forgiven. I understand. You've hardly had a chance to recover from your grueling trip."

Rachel rose, brushing the hay from her skirt. Gray pulled one long stem from her hair. "Didn't they teach you curly headed girls can't play in the hay loft? Look at this, it was completely embedded in the twist of a front curl."

Gray began to sing: "There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the center of her forehead and when she was good she was very very good and when she was bad she was—"

"Horrid." Rachel added. Again the old barn rang with laughter. "Well, maybe the girl would be less horrid if she could share the contents of the picnic basket with you."

They ate their bread, meat, and cheese and washed it down with a bottle of white wine. Gray opened the door of the loft so they could watch the rain. The wind had died down so now the flow was soft and soaking.

Rachel sat leaning against one of the beams. Suddenly she was very tired, and she found herself nodding off. She stretched out on nature's soft matting and soon was sound asleep.

Gray watched as she slept. Surely, this was the most desirable woman he had ever met. She lay curled up in a fetal position with her skirt pulled high enough to reveal long, shapely legs. Her auburn hair, even more covered with ringlets now from the moisture, cascaded over her forehead. Her face was as innocent and fair as that of a child. A vulnerable child.

Gray thought of the incident on the hillside. How one minute she had encouraged him and then suddenly how she had turned away from him. Maybe it really was too soon. She had just arrived, but she had come to California to marry after all. As a doctor, she certainly had been exposed to the reality of life. In fact, she had been widely known as a midwife, Martin told him. There was something else. Another man? One she had left behind in Pennsylvania? He wondered.

Rachel Williams is a woman torn, but I will know the real nature of her problem. I'll find out. Whatever it takes, I'll make her mine. A mantle of resolve surrounded him.

Sixteen

The Proposal

At the end of the day, the women returned, regaling each other with the joy they had experienced with their escorts. Marie described the Adams' ranch while Glory explained how she and Martin had worked together shoeing horses and mending a wagon tongue in the forge. Iris produced a drawing of the Vega's hacienda as well as a sketch of Jorge himself.

Rachel remained silent, nodding pleasantly until Marie asked, "And what did you do, Rach? I know you rode out with Gray."

"We visited his grain fields where they were finishing the planting. The trip was cut short by the rain."

"Well," Marie insisted, "did you have a good time?"

"Yes. The countryside is very interesting." She tried to sound noncommittal.

Iris interrupted. "I almost forgot the most important part. Señora Vega has invited everyone to a small fiesta she is giving us. It's tomorrow night and I'll be going out in the morning to help with the food and oversee the preparations. Then they'll send the carriage for the rest of you tomorrow afternoon. Isn't it exciting? It's impromptu, but I know the Señora has had it in mind all along."

"Hadn't planned on that," Marie told her. "What'll we wear? We have the gowns for the dance Saturday night, but nothing Spanish or Mexican."

"The Señora says she'll take care of it. That's why she's having you come early. I told Jorge I may not be able to do all of the fast steps in the dances. He told me not to worry; we'd just dance to the slow numbers. It made me so happy I almost died."

"I hope Jeremy knows about it early. It'll take a day for him to comb his red mop of his and get it plastered in place. By the way, did I tell you what he said to me? He was trying hard to put me at ease about Jimmy. Anyway, he was showing me some of his prize horses and he told me he always tried to buy a proven mare. When I asked what he meant, he explained that was a mare with a colt by her side. She had proven she could foal successfully."

The women roared with laughter.

"Well, I didn't know whether to hug him or slap him. I did tell him he needn't think he was my stallion. Not just yet, anyway."

~ * ~

The next afternoon had turned sunny and all of the women were dressed and waiting for Jorge's carriage—all except Rachel. "You'd best hurry up, Rach, they'll be here soon," Marie told her.

"I'm not going. I have a headache and I just don't feel up to it."

"I'll stay with you," Mary told her, with concern.

"You're already dressed and look nice. Go ahead. I'll be fine." She patted the girl's shoulder. "I'll just take some headache powder and rest for a while."

Rachel found it hard to conceal her real feelings; but the less she participated in their activities, the better it was for all. Besides, Gray would be there and she didn't want to face him. She felt inside her pocket, fingering the stage ticket she had purchased. The run for Los Angeles to get her to the ranch, Val

Verde, left at 2:00 P.M. on Monday and she would have to be on it. She had to go ask Jeb to marry her for the baby's sake.

When the others left, she donned her nightgown, putting her wrapper over it. She went downstairs wandering into the library adjoining the living room. It certainly reflects Gray's taste for literature, she told herself. The bookshelves lined the walls and were filled to capacity with all types of titles—Shakespeare, poetry, and business texts. Several overstuffed chairs clustered around the centerpiece of the room, a small mahogany piano whose top was piled with music books.

Rachel drew in her breath. Gray was a man of many talents. A bottle of brandy beckoned her from a small lamp table within easy reach of a comfortable chair. So that is where he reads? She sat down reaching for a copy of *Hamlet* that was turned face down to mark his place. *Hamlet* was just morose enough to fit her mood.

She had begun to pour herself a drink when she heard the front door close and a figure stood gazing at her. It was Gray. "What are you doing still here? Why aren't you at the party?" he demanded.

Rachel was dumbfounded by his sudden appearance. "And why are you here?"

"Came to change into a clean shirt. It explains why I'm here, but what about you?"

She squirmed a little. "I—I had a headache. Didn't feel like going."

"You're all right now?" he questioned. "If you're reading and," he pointed to her filled glass, "taking refreshment."

She looked at him solemnly with the heat of a red blush of guilt spreading over her cheeks. "Well, I—"

Gray laughed. "I know, you've recovered. Just in time to have one of my famous omelets."

"But aren't you going to the party?" she protested.

"Without you? How much fun would that be?" His voice turned serious.

"I'm sorry."

"You go and get fixed up while I work in the kitchen. I saw a yellow dress in the chiffarobe the other day when I came to get some of my clothes. It will be fine."

Rachel was trapped. Nicely trapped, but still trapped. She changed her dress and combed her hair, taking care in arranging it with a new yellow ribbon. She loitered a little because she knew the time of explanation was nearly there. That she dreaded.

While he prepared the food, Gray wondered about Rachel. *What an enigma.* He believed she was not frigid, even though she was unmarried at thirty, but something was terribly wrong. She could be playful as well as intellectual. She spoke lovingly of rearing a family. They valued the same things, so they could easily become compatible. If only he could understand her problem. It was too fast but he knew he was falling in love with this beautiful, strong willed woman. He tried not to transpose his feelings to hers, but he suspected she at least liked him.

He went to the cooling room next to the well and selected a large ham and a crock of butter, which he took to the kitchen. Soon the smell of frying meat wafted through the house. He worked deftly setting the table and washing a bowl of berries for their dessert.

Gray looked up to see Rachel standing there in the shimmering yellow dress with her auburn hair pulled back and tied with a matching bow. She was a vision of loveliness. There was no other way to describe her.

"Don't you look nice?"

"Thank you."

"Just in time, I'm ready to put the eggs in the skillet. My specialty. They're best served warm." He beat milk and eggs and carefully poured them into the skillet where the mixture sizzled as he deftly turned the shapeless mass into two well-formed pockets.

He came to the table drawing out a chair for her before returning to the stove to finish his project. In a few minutes he joined her. "Voila, the feast is ready, Mademoiselle."

He looked at her expectantly.

"This is truly delicious. I hadn't thought I was hungry, but now I am," she answered.

"A bit more nutritious than brandy. Though I want you to try some of our California wine. This is grown and bottled by a friend of mine who has a vineyard near the coast." He poured them both a glass of the clear sparkling beverage.

"How nice." Rachel responded.

"To us and to California." Gray toasted.

Rachel dutifully raised her glass.

When they finished, she rose and began to clear the table, but Gray objected. "Let's leave it. Rosa can clean up in the morning."

He led her into the living room. "I have something I want to show you." He lifted the lid of a large wooden case sitting on the apron of the fireplace. "It's a music box with various cylinders. Some waltzes, some operatic works. One winding lasts a long time. It really calls for us to dance."

"I don't know, Gray, I have two left feet."

"Well, then we'd best practice before tomorrow night."

He wound the box and a waltz lilted through the room as the shadows lengthened around them. He led her gracefully through several different tunes, never missing a beat. "Who said you couldn't dance? You underrate yourself. Of course I'm pretty good at this if I do say so myself. Had a house full of sisters who always had to practice the latest step. I got plenty of practice." He laughed softly.

The evening darkened into night, and he stopped to light the lamp. Looking at the very silent Rachel, he said, "You probably should rest a little. I don't want to bring your headache back. Besides, we can do ourselves proud tomorrow at the big shindig with the practice we've already had."

"Oh, yes, it is tomorrow night."

"We men are calling it the time of the choosing."

"The choosing?"

"Yes, that's when you women make your selections. As if everyone weren't already paired off. Anyway, you ladies will have to officially make your selection from the marriage pool."

Rachel felt his eyes on her. She began to tremble. "Choose? I'm not worthy to choose." Tears streamed from her eyes. Suffocating, she flung herself through the open door to the porch beyond where she stood sobbing.

Gray followed her and gasped in surprise. "Rachel, what is it? What do you mean?"

She sat down on the edge of the porch, lowering her head to her lap and curling her arms over it in a protective clasp.

Gray sat beside her, first raising her hands and then her face until he looked directly into her eyes. "Now, Rachel, once and for all, what is the matter?"

She pulled away and started to rise, intending to flee. He held her arm firmly. "I have a right to know," he insisted. "You must realize how I feel about you. Now tell me. What is all this about not being worthy?"

Rachel lowered her head. "I can't tell you. Please."

"You have to. You've no choice."

The words burned in her throat but finally she answered. "I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant? How in the hell can that be?" he asked in total astonishment. "What dirty bastard caused that? Tell me and I'll straighten him out."

Rachel was silent.

"Tell me, who he is. Who forced himself on you?"

She shook her head. "You give me too much credit. It wasn't like that."

"Well, who?" He thought for a minute. "Jeb Morgan?"

Rachel nodded.

"And he went off and left you?"

"Jeb didn't know. No one besides Mary knows." Rachel stood rigidly beside him. "There was so much conflict between us about my practice and my independent spirit, he thought it

was best we part." The words spilled out, flooding the very air about them.

"Lord, what a situation." Gray sucked in his breath. "Do you love him?"

"I thought I did." Rachel drew her foot nervously across the floor of the porch. "I'm so ashamed. You may not believe it, but he was the first man I ever slept with and—and I used no sense." Then she added in a voice, barely audible, "It doesn't matter now. My child needs a name and a father, so I have to follow him to Val Verde. I leave Monday."

"And accept his terms whatever they might be? You'd even give up medicine?" He raised his hand, slapping his thigh. "Damn!"

Choking with emotion, Rachel answered, "I'd be willing to do anything for my baby." She shivered slightly.

"Let me take you inside. It's getting chilly out here."

He led her to the library and lighted a fire, pulling a chair in front of the fireplace. "Stay there. I have to think," he commanded.

~ * ~

Gray sat down on the piano bench and started to play. He began slowly, then played more rapidly, bringing the music to a crescendo in the darkly morbid fashion of the Nordic tribes. He ground down on the sustaining pedal until the sounds reverberated throughout the room, spilling through the door and raining down on the unsuspecting town below.

What was he to do? Never had he been so frustrated. In the few days he had known this woman, he had come to admire and love her. He was like some schoolboy swept off his feet. He scoffed at himself. A man of forty-five should know better.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She was sitting quietly, her head lowered as the flames played over her hair, bringing out the auburn-red highlights. There was a childlike vulnerability about her. Still, the thought of her alone and naked with another man almost made him hate her. Once

again the keys shook under the rage of his fingers, the music roiling like thunder. It was a time of winter in his heart.

Perhaps even those scenes of passion he could forget, but the child would be a constant reminder of her affair. The only consoling thing would be the babe would be part of Rachel and therefore to be cherished. *Damn*. To love and hate at the same time was a chilling experience.

What was he to do? He could never forget her, and her equal would never cross his path again. It was the crux of the problem.

The music softened. The snows of the north began oh so gradually to melt. There were hints of spring, clumps of flowers began to spring through the receding snow. Forgiveness encompassed him.

He pictured them together reading in the evenings, discussing the events of the day—she telling him of some life she had saved, or some pain she had eased, while he told her of his business and the people of Garden Grove. Or perhaps they would drive out to the fields at harvest time to see the grain being gathered. Then afterwards, in the night, they would mount the stairs together and share their passion.

Children. They could have children. Not just this child, but their own to comfort them in their old age. Yet, without her, he would feel loneliness creeping through his being. Would he be alone for the rest of his life? She was in all likelihood his last chance for real love.

~ * ~

Rachel sat mesmerized by his music. *The pain he must feel, and I've caused this pain. I love my child, but the world I've created for him is so cold, so hard. What is the answer? Dear God, please help me.*

After more than an hour of playing, Gray fled back over the tumultuous fiords of his mind to the calm California night. He had made a decision.

He crossed over to the fireplace and sat on a footstool in front of Rachel. He took her hands in his saying nothing.

Rachel began timidly, "Your music. I've never heard anything like it, Gray. It was extraordinary. A little frightening. I felt your pain. I—"

"It was an emotional journey." He paused, grasping for words to explain. "It's a way I have of sorting out problems. And we do have a problem, don't we?"

"At least I do..." Rachel answered.

"You said you didn't have any choice about going to Val Verde. Maybe you do." Gray searched her eyes. "Maybe you could stay here and marry me. We would raise your child. I know we'd have a good life together. Would you consider that?"

She looked at him incredulously. "You would marry me anyway, knowing my condition? You don't know what you're asking of yourself."

"Yes, I do. I want happiness and I'm asking you to be my wife. We could marry immediately, and I have a friend in Sacramento you could stay with when the baby comes. His birth date could be adjusted." He paused, "But why are we talking of this? I want to be with you and that's what matters."

"But, Gray, do you know me well enough to take on this added burden? It's all happening too quickly."

"I know what I feel and that's enough for me. Besides, there's the momentum of the frontier. Always propelling people forward."

"I'm trying to understand, believe me, but I feel so overwhelmed and so alone."

"You don't have to be alone. I'm willing to face your problems with you."

He rose and picked her up, placing her on his lap. He began to cradle her as a mother would a frightened child, exuding comfort and security.

~ * ~

Rachel felt a warmth within her. What a good father he would be. This loving, sensitive man. I can learn to love him. In fact, it might be one of the easiest things I've ever had to do.

When the clock struck eleven, Gray pulled her to her feet and kissed her tenderly and with passion. This time, unlike before, she returned his affection, yielding to him without reservation.

"You're shivering again."

"I know. But this time it's different."

He placed his arm around her. "Go upstairs and get ready for bed. I'll be up to tuck you in. I'll sleep on the divan down here to watch things. I don't think the gang will be coming back tonight. Company often stays over at the hacienda when it gets late. Jorge has plenty of room and the Señora will chaperone them."

In a few minutes, she heard a rap at the door. "Are you ready?" Gray asked.

"Come in."

"You're looking like you feel better. I brought an extra cover for you." He came to the bed pulling the blanket over her before leaning down to kiss her. "Good night, my dear Rachel."

She patted the bed beside her. "Don't go. Stay with me for a while."

Gray took her hand chuckling, "I'm fresh out of bedtime stories."

"That's all right. Just sit with me for a while." She turned on her side toward him as he began to croon a lullaby. His soothing voice lulled her, filling her with an unfamiliar peace. Rachel fell asleep.

Gray blew out the lamp and tiptoed from the room, closing the door behind him. *Oh, Rachel, I was right to feel resolve—resolve to love you and to build a life together.*

Seventeen

The Choosing

Rachel awoke in the morning, thinking of what had happened. How lucky she was to have someone as caring and sensitive as Gray to care for her and her child. He was in every sense a renaissance man, talented and caring. Even his acceptance of her unborn child set him apart from any other man she had ever known.

She realized she dreaded going to Jeb. Not that she would not always love him, but theirs would have been a union of conflict. He would have married her because he was a man of honor who wouldn't shirk the responsibility of caring for his own child. By the same token, she wondered if he would do it purely out of necessity. Under the circumstances she feared he would have never let her practice medicine again.

She bemoaned the fact all this was happening so quickly. In the scheme of things, it wasn't so fast. Some mail order brides were married to men the very day they arrived. Perhaps Gray was right. It was the new order of the west that precipitated such hasty decisions.

The sun was streaming in the window, reflecting rainbow patterns on the ceiling when there was a soft rap at the door. "Rachel, are you awake? I have some breakfast here for you."

He entered and set a tray on the bedside table handing her a cup of steaming coffee.

"This is so nice. I can't remember when I last had breakfast in bed."

He smiled at her, his face freshly shaven and scrubbed clean. He was, Rachel decided, the neatest and most thoughtful man she had ever met.

~ * ~

Gray paced through the room and then positioned himself at the window to gaze at the town below. He thrust his hands in his pockets, nervously pulling out a key which he passed to and fro from one hand to another. Never had he felt more inadequate. *I own half the blame county and am respected throughout the state, and still I am afraid to ask this woman to marry me again.*

Summoning his courage, he cleared his throat. "You didn't give me an answer last night."

"Yes, Gray, I'd be honored to marry you." She beamed and reached out to him.

Gray came to her side, embracing her and then kissing her. He cupped his hands under her face. "I've been thinking. This is Parson Davis' weekend to be here to preach. Sometimes he performs marriages after church on Sunday. He's a circuit rider and he won't be back for another month. I could talk to him and we could be married tomorrow if you could be ready."

"Tomorrow?" she said in shock. "So soon?"

"Under the circumstances, I really don't think we should wait." He looked at her probingly. "You aren't having second thoughts are you?"

"No, of course not. I can be ready. I have a dress. It's not new but it's nice."

"Wonderful." He bent and kissed her again. "We'll announce it at the dance tonight."

"Gray, something else. I promised Mary she could live with me. She thinks this young soldier is coming to marry her in

three years. I doubt he'll come, but she doesn't have any place to go now. Also, she's been an able medical assistant."

"That'll be fine. We can use her help even around the house. Rosa says she's quitting when I get married."

"Really. Why?" Rachel looked at him with suspicion.

"There wasn't ever anything between us if that's what you're thinking. I confess, though, if you hadn't arrived when you did, there might have been." He flushed slightly.

"Oh," Rachel chuckled. At least he's honest, she thought. And very human.

"Gray, are you sure you don't mind my practicing medicine?" Rachel narrowed her eyes.

"Of course not, especially when we need a doctor so badly. I can hardly expect to have you stay home and iron my shirts while someone dies." He gave her arm an affectionate pat and reached to straighten a curl entangled on her forehead. "Did you really think I'd mind?"

Rachel sighed. "I'd hoped not. With—" she started to say "Jeb" but caught herself. "Some men would have minded."

"Not this one."

If she had ever doubted Gray's understanding or maturity, she did no longer.

~ * ~

It was mid-morning when the women arrived at the house from Jorge's hacienda. "You missed quite a production last night, Rach," Marie told her.

"It was so much fun and so gorgeous," Iris added. "I didn't even have time to sketch. Let me tell you about it," she said breathlessly. "The patio was just filled with flowers and lanterns, and they broke a piñata for the children. You just can't imagine. They even had their own private band to play Mexican and American music. Jorge said the American was for me—especially the waltzes."

Glory laughed. "It was quite a shindig all right. Hey, Rach, how's yer head feelin'?"

"I'm fine. I just needed some rest."

Marie smiled. "We noticed Gray stayed behind to take care of you. Guess that *really* helped. Well, enough of this, we have to get ourselves ready for the dance tonight. Now that's important. The night of the choosing and all."

Amid all the bustle, Rachel drew Mary outside to the porch. "You remember, I promised you could always be with me. Well, I'm marrying Gray so I'll be staying in the house here. Would you like to live with us?"

Mary questioned, "You're not marrying Jeb?"

"No, I think I'm better off with Gray. He'll take care of us. I told him about the baby." Rachel lowered her eyes. "Rosa's quitting. We'd like for you to help with the housework and my medical practice. Would it be all right? We'd pay you, of course."

With tears in her eyes, Mary embraced Rachel saying, "Thank you."

Rachel sighed. She sensed Mary was puzzled about her decision; but she understood for she herself was wending her way through a maze of life changes.

~ * ~

Shortly before seven in the evening, Jinx's cook and two other men from the saloon came to set up the tables for the refreshments they had prepared. Soon after, a small band of musicians arrived and began pushing the chairs back against the wall of the living room, which was ample enough to serve as a dance floor.

Marie tapped on Rachel's door. "They're getting everything ready downstairs. It's going to be oh, so-o nice. One of the drivers from Gray's place delivered these flowers for us. A gardenia for each of us to pin on our dresses." She thrust a flower forward. "Smell, aren't they divine?"

"Nice," Rachel agreed.

"I never thought I could be so excited." Marie literally danced around the room, eyes sparkling she hummed a bright tune.

"I think I hear someone coming." Rachel looked out the window and saw Gray's buggy climbing up the driveway, and soon she heard Mary greet him at the front door. "Excuse me, it's Gray and I want to go down now."

She was just human enough to want to make a grand entrance. *After all the work Marie put into my wardrobe, this creation deserves to be shown off.*

It was a pale sea-foam green satin tightly molded to her figure with a stand-up organdy collar that led to a plunging neckline. The skirt, though straight, was caught up in the back by a small bustle. Rachel's curls were pinned up and held in place by a coordinating lime-colored bow. She wore a small amount of lavender toilet water, but it was overpowered by the sweet scent of the gardenia pinned to her shoulder. Rachel smiled to herself when she remembered Marie's words, "It isn't often I get to sew for a graceful and willowy gal like you. You do a lot for my creations."

Gray stopped stock still when he came through the front door looking up at her. "Come down from the balcony, my beautiful Juliet." He swept forward bowing and raising his arm to her.

Rachel descended the steps, saying, "As my Romeo desires." She smiled as he waited at the bottom of the staircase to lead her into the living room.

Gray looked about. "I see Jinx's men have things under control. Good thing. The other men will be here soon."

He was right, for Jorge and Jeremy arrived just then followed by Martin and Len. One by one the women, hearing the men talking, entered with the same striking impact Rachel had made. Marie was stunning in an emerald gown that highlighted the green of her eyes. Iris wore a pale blue that enhanced her fairness. Most astounding of all was Glory, whose graying hair was swept into a French roll, giving her an air of sophistication in her white gown flowered with pastel hues. Mary, too, wore one of Marie's fashions, a gown of vibrant pink silk.

The men were not to be outdone. All, except Jorge, wore their three-piece suits they had ordered at Len's store months ago. Jorge sported another Mexican ensemble of navy velveteen highlighted by a red neckerchief and adorned with myriad silver conch shells. Gray was the most genteel in his light-weight, beige suit bordered with a dark brown stripe on the lapels and up the sides of his trousers.

Martin turned to the other men and said, "Gents look at us. Ain't we a bunch of dudes? And don't we smell sweet..."

Jorge came by clapping him good-naturedly on the back. "Oh, what a good bath will do for certain people."

The band began playing and the evening was launched. The couples changed partners often though Gray always returned to Rachel, Jorge to Iris, Martin to Glory, and Jeremy to Marie.

Len approached Mary. "Well, we're the odd ones out. How about a dance?"

"Yes, Mr. Len, but you know I'm spoken for."

"I know, but we can dance anyway. No use us just sittin' here."

Around nine Gray stood up signaling the band to take a break. "Rachel and I have an announcement to make." He led her to stand in front of the punch-bowl table and cleared his voice nervously. "Right now, I'm the luckiest man in California because I asked Rachel to be my wife and she said *yes*."

"Hear, hear," someone called. "To Gray and Rachel."

Gray raised his hand to silence them. "Thank you, everybody. Another thing. Since the Reverend Davis is only here once a month, we're going to be married tomorrow after church. He said he'd be glad to marry any other couple that want his services, too. Just show up."

"You mean multiple ceremonies?" Jeremy asked.

"That's right," Gray answered.

There was a buzzing among the three other couples. Jorge and Iris joined Gray and Rachel at the table. Jorge said, "Señor, count us in. The padre can bless our marriage later after Iris takes her instructions for the church. I'll tell Madre tonight."

A ripple of applause broke out. Martin took Glory by the hand. "Might as well make it a threesome. Glory says she's game."

"Count us in," Jeremy grinned. Pointing to Marie he said, "I'd better rope this gal while I'm still on the blindside of her, and she still wants me." Marie reached up as if to slap him, but acquiesced and let him grab her arm, pulling her to him.

"Well," Gray chuckled. "Looks as *if* the Parson has his work cut out for him tomorrow. Believe me, it'll be a red-letter day for Garden Grove and for *us*. As soon as we break up here, I'll go over to the Parson's and tell him the good news."

~ * ~

That first Sunday in November dawned clear in Garden Grove with just a bit of west wind blowing in off the ocean. Had it been a June day, the weather could not have been more appropriate for a wedding.

Rachel was awakened shortly after dawn by Iris. "Are you awake?" She drew the curtains back. "Look," she spun around, "my wedding dress. Ma made it for me before we left home."

The luster of the sateen gown shone in the early morning light surrounding the small woman with a white radiance. It was elegantly simple with a straight skirt and long mutton-style sleeves. The high neck was edged with the same delicate lace forming a vee over her hands. A short veil drawn back with white silk flowers completed the ensemble.

"Oh, Iris, you are so lovely. Your ma did an exquisite job."

"And look, I have satin slippers to match." She kicked one foot forward and raised her skirt. "Look at the petticoats underneath..." Then suddenly Iris began to cry.

"What's the matter?" Rachel rose, going to Iris and placing her arms around her. "Are you afraid? Are you afraid of the marriage night?" She recalled how frightened Iris had been of the unknown when they crossed the Missouri.

"No, not that, I only wish Ma and Pa could be here." She pulled away from Rachel as she continued. "Jorge already talked to me about it. He knows how afraid I am I won't

measure up with my leg and all. Then he told me the story of the beautiful palomino filly.”

Rachel sat waiting. *An allegory of horses? Well, she did say it helped her.* “Go ahead, I do want to hear it.”

“You know, Jorge has many blooded horses and he especially likes palominos. He had this young palomino mare was crippled, an accident of birth. His father, Señor Vega, wanted to destroy her, thinking she had no worth. Both Jorge and his mother begged him to save her. He did. Jorge loved the little filly because she was so beautiful and loving. He named her Ginger for the cookies he loves so much and because of her sweet disposition. All the vaqueros laughed because she followed Jorge around almost like a dog. He gave her special care, feeding her oats and keeping her penned up away from the other horses. Finally, he could tell it was time to breed her. He worried she was not strong so he mated her with a darker, very gentle stallion hoping she would produce another palomino.

“Ginger took all this in stride. When she foaled, her colt, a palomino, was the most beautiful horse the ranch had ever produced. Ginger bore several outstanding colts and established the ranch as a leader in fine, blooded horses. All because he used a little care and understanding.”

Iris paused. “Jorge says he thinks he has the gift of appreciating beauty other people miss.”

Rachel hugged her again. “You know, I think he’s right. Another thing, I think your Ma and Pa would agree he’ll make a very loving and devoted husband.”

~ * ~

The rest of the morning was a beehive of activity as the women prepared for their noontime rendezvous at the church. Mary tried to coax them into breakfast but Jimmy was the only one not too excited to eat.

He fussed about all the confusion and resisted wearing his new blue suit with the buttoned jacket and small tie over the white shirt. “I want to play. Please, Ma, just let me play.”

"You just sit there, Master Lyle, and don't dare get dirty. Or I'll have to scrub you again. How'd you like that?"

Marie proceeded much like an army commander, dressing and redressing each of the women. "Glory, let me fix your hair. You haven't fixed your face yet? You need some rouge. Are you going to wear the same dress from last night? Let me look at your dresses. I like this blue one better. You'd better press it. Hurry."

"Rachel, let me see you. You're wearing the lavender with the amethyst broach. Now that's impressive. Use a little more toilet water, though."

Stroking the lavender dress, Rachel said, "I'd thought about wearing the blue dress the Fosters gave me, but it carries too many sad memories...of Elsie and the past itself."

"There isn't time to be unhappy," Marie bubbled. "Oh, my gosh, I forgot. What about veils or at least a head covering—a *mantilla*? It's only nine o'clock, there's time to get something to wear to mark the occasion. I'm sure I saw some window curtain lace at Len's store. He'll just have to open up for us."

"Whoa," Rachel stopped her. "Slow down. We don't have to have anything."

"How'd it look if Iris wore her wedding veil and we didn't have one? Anyway, Iris, how'd you ever get the wedding dress here under Jeb Morgan's nose?" Marie snapped.

Iris smiled. "I had it wrapped up and pinned in the quilt I kept hanging over the spine of the wagon inside. The quilt I never used even when I had to shiver a little."

"I can't believe our angelic Iris is devious, can you? Not that I blame you any. Well, Mary come with me to the store and I'll measure enough lace for the three of us."

"Marie, aren't you forgetting something? What are you going to wear?" Rachel asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." She ran to her room, bringing out an exquisite gown of a light weight silk covered with a layer of lace net, both in pale ecru.

"It's gorgeous, but when did you make it?" Iris asked.

"Well, I brought the material all cut out. Would you believe, inside my quilt?" She looked at Iris and smiled. "Last night, I stitched it up while Jimmy slept."

"Enough of this, off for the lace curtains."

~ * ~

The attendance at the small white church, built in two days by the congregation less than one year ago, was usually rather sparse, but not today. Several of the miners had ridden to the surrounding farms and mines, spreading the news of the multiple weddings to be held at noon. If getting to see "them mail order brides" wasn't enough incentive to come, rumor had it the people of the town and Jinx from the saloon were giving a lunch for the newlyweds after the ceremonies. What could be more inviting than free food and getting to watch "four suckers get hitched" at one time?

The church bell pealed throughout the town exactly at eleven o'clock calling the worshippers inside to a standing room only attendance. Following tradition, the women had sent word they wanted to come at noon when the bell rang for the dismissal of the services so the grooms wouldn't see them before they came down the aisle. Gray had made arrangements for Tom to drive them to the ceremony. The grooms, though, made their way to the front pew for the sermon amidst snickers and pointing of the miners.

Jeremy punched Jorge in the ribs. "I feel like some derved actor in a second rate play with all these people gawkin' at me."

"I understand, but that's the price you pay, Señor." Looking at his young friend he said, "Button your collar at the neck, it's undone."

"I can't, it's too tight."

"Why didn't you get it bigger?"

"It fit when I got it from Len, but now it's too small and the sleeves are kinda short, too. It shrank," he whispered. "And it's never been washed."

"It didn't shrink, you grew. You are *young*, aren't you?"

Jeremy's face flamed, matching the color of his hair. "I ain't too young. Just you wait and see."

"All right Caliente, just cool down."

"Look at Martin, he's taking his jacket off. Man is he sweating," Jeremy told him.

"Si, but not Gray. He's just as cool as a cucumber. Nothing ever ruffles him."

"My ma used to always say still water runs deep, and I think I know what she meant now."

Jorge turned around and smiled at his madre, sitting a few rows back. She fluttered her fingers at him in a delicate, subtle move. *So beautiful and always the lady even when she was only my father's mistress. I think she approves of this marriage. She was snubbed by the aristocracy in Mexico so she's willing to accept some new blood. She knows how much I love my gentle and beautiful Iris. It will form a bond between our people and the Americans. Maybe it will make it easier for my children to be an accepted part of California. Sometimes the things you do from the heart are the most logical.*

~ * ~

Jeremy tried buttoning his collar again, but gave up and pulled his tie over the noticeable gap in his shirt. *I hate all this folderol, but Marie's worth it. She told me all about Syd Morton being Jimmy's pa and all, but I admire her for having enough spunk to raise her son and come out here. Old Jorge is right. I want this woman more than any other woman I could ever find in this old world.*

Pastor Davis, a tall middle-aged man with a kindly face, entered while his wren-like wife played the processional and the congregation rose. Martin stood with the others and wiped his brow. He didn't know why he was so warm. *I'm not really nervous. Marrying Glory is like getting a business partner in a way. She'll be a companion but then that's not too bad, come to think of it. The way she looked last night showed me a little softer side. Maybe I'll be pleasantly surprised once that bedroom door shuts.*

Gray listened to the sermon. *It's well chosen. The story about Christ's first miracle turning the water into wine at the wedding. Rachel and I have our own miracle. Feeling for each other as we do. I waited so long to find the right woman I was beginning to think I never would. We're facing a problem, but she's worth working through it.*

The service seemed a little long to the grooms-to-be. Finally the collection plate was passed, the sermon ended, and the last hymn was sung. A buggy stopped in front of the church and feet clambered up the steps. Len Smith rose from his seat in the back of the church to open the door and escort the women inside. The four of them stood waiting in the back while Mary with Jimmy were offered a back row seat.

Mrs. Davis once again took her place at the piano. The strains of the wedding march echoed through the small chapel. The four grooms stood expectantly on the right side of the altar, eyes riveted on their intendeds. Then Martin turned and went to the back of the church where he placed Rachel on one arm and Iris on the other, escorting them to the front. Gray stepped forward to meet Rachel and Jorge to meet Iris. Len proceeded from the back and in like fashion led Marie to Jeremy and Glory to Martin.

A hush fell over the people as they turned and stared intently at the women. Someone whispered, "Aren't they lovely? All four of them?"

There was a quiet, though hurried, discussion at the altar as the Parson inquired of the men if they each had rings so he might tailor the ceremonies accordingly. Len overheard the discussion. *Yeah, thanks to my forethought, the men have rings. Sold 'em to 'em this morning at eight o'clock but they got rings. Same with the gals, they came running in to buy lace for them head covers. Course, it was from a bolt of lace window curtain material, but they got mantillas. Made a lot of sales because of this marriage pool, but I wish one of them was going to be my bride.*

Having delivered Marie and Glory to their grooms, Len started to go back down the aisle when he noticed Mary, wearing the same pink dress she had on last night, sitting alone with Jimmy. "May I join you?"

She nodded and picked up Jimmy so he could squeeze beside her just as the music stopped and Parson Davis began to speak. "We are experiencing a most joyous and unique occasion. These men from Garden Grove and these women from Pennsylvania and Missouri are about to take a very important step in their lives. They are about to join together to start new lives and, hopefully, new families. It has taken courage for these women to come so far under such difficult conditions so I do ask all of you to welcome them into our community."

Before we begin, we have a special treat. Mr. Gray Collins will sing for us his rendition of *The Lord's Prayer*. Gray..."

Gray crossed over to the piano where Mrs. Davis sat ready to accompany him. Looking first at Rachel and then the congregation, he began, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." His clear tenor intoned the words with feeling. As he continued, the mellow sound of his voice touched the hearts of this diverse group. When he finished, many dried their eyes.

Gray rejoined Rachel. Parson began the ceremony first with Martin and Glory then moved on to Iris and Jorge, and Gray and Rachel.

The last to be wed were Marie and Jeremy. As they stood hand in hand in front of the minister, there was a noise from the back of the church. Little Jimmy wriggled away from Mary, saying loudly, "Let me go. I gotta do somethin'." He scurried down the aisle to where Marie and Jeremy stood. He pulled on Jeremy's pant legs, "I want to get married, too." The congregation laughed as Jeremy, without hesitation, hoisted the boy to his shoulders, holding him while the Parson performed the ceremony. When the minister said, "You may now kiss the bride," Jimmy joined Jeremy in doing just that.

Pastor Davis regained control by turning the couples to face the congregation saying, "I now present Mr. and Mrs. Martin Williams, Señor and Señora de la Vega, Mr. and Mrs. Gray Collins, and Mr. and Mrs. Jeremy Adams *with Jimmy*." The church reverberated with a spontaneous round of applause.

Eighteen

The Joy

After the women had left for their new homes, taking their trunks with them, a hush filled the Collins' house. Gray and Rachel sat in the library. "We're alone at last." He looked at her and grinned. "What a day this has been for Garden Grove. One everybody'll remember for a long, long time. Four marriages at once. Even the parson seemed impressed."

He scooted his chair closer to Rachel's. "I liked the remark about needing to build a school next to the church. Guess we could figure out what he was thinking."

She reached for his hand.

After a few minutes, Gray asked, "Are you hungry, honey?"

She shook her head as he continued, "Think I might have a brandy. How about some milk for you?"

This time she nodded. Gray went into the kitchen and returned, handing her a glass of milk while he poured himself the brandy. "You're very quiet."

"I'm just resting a little after all the excitement of these past few days." She sipped her milk.

He lit the lamp and said, "I guess I could start a fire."

Rachel asked, "Would you play something for me? Something soothing?"

He went to the piano and began a sonata, light and beautiful.

Rachel listened as she began to think...not of the music but of her situation. Not that she liked it, but she felt Jeb's presence. Here she was married to the kindest, most loving man she had ever met and she was filled with a kind of sadness and longing for another man. The wedding night still lay ahead.

Rachel Williams, you've made a bargain and if you don't keep your part, you'll wound this man deeply and destroy your own future and that of your child. Remember sister Nell and how she was jilted by that dashing Gerald Higgins? She was crushed and yet she's now happily married to Johnathan Hubert, a much better and kinder man. She didn't love John when she married him, but she nurtured her feelings for him, and now she is truly happy with him and their children. Take a lesson from Nell's experience.

The music began to taper off into an even more soothing melody. Soon he would be finished. Rachel stiffened her resolve.

"How was that?" Gray asked. "Did it fill your request?"

"It was beautiful."

"It was dedicated to a beautiful lady." Gray rose from the bench as the clock struck eleven. "It's about bedtime." He flushed with a red glow working up his neck into his face. He stammered a little. "Rachel, if you're not up to it...with your condition and all...we don't have to be intimate right away. I—"

Again she dipped into the well of her determination. "No, Gray, I'm ready. I want to be a wife and I want to make you happy." It was Rachel's turn to blush.

He sighed with relief and then taking her hand, they climbed the steps to their room.

Gray set the lamp down on the bedside table. She sat in front of the vanity brushing her hair, over and over. A short time later she sank onto the edge of the bed and unlaced her white wedding boots, pulling them off, followed by one stocking then the other. She stood to take off her dress, but instead she loitered in front of the wardrobe, straightening the garments inside.

Finally he asked, "Are you going to sleep in your clothes?"

"I have to take care of my wedding dress." She scooted behind the open door of the tall wardrobe.

Gray shook his head. She's a little embarrassed right now. I'll give her a little privacy.

"Rachel, I may have forgotten to lock the doors. I'll go down and check. Be back in a little while."

He descended the stairs. Rachel took advantage of the moment, pulling off her petticoats, her drawers, and her binder and slipping into her blue gauze gown. By the time he came back upstairs she was already covered up in bed.

Gray sat on the opposite side of the bed pulling off his boots and then systematically undressing. For the only time he could remember, he heaped his clothes on the floor beside him. He didn't have time to waste hanging them in the wardrobe.

Noting her almost rigid stillness, Gray blew out the lamp, saying, "Rachel, is it very difficult for you to be with me?" There was a moment of quiet then before Gray reached across and drew Rachel full length against his body.

He was actually there comforting her. *Why am I acting like this?*

She lay with her back against him as he began massaging her body in soothing motions and crooning some long forgotten love song. He turned her towards him and kissed her. She felt the warmth of his body and slowly, slowly she relaxed.

"I don't know why you bothered with this gown." He raised it over her head. The moonlight shone through the window, illuminating her body with a pale, white light. She settled back against him.

Once again they lay there in the stillness of the night. "My God, Rachel, I didn't realize what beautiful was 'till I saw you just now."

He kissed her and felt for the softness of her breasts. She did not resist. She was aroused by the excitement of the moment. Sensing her willingness, he began to caress all of her as his

body expressed its own male firmness. He could no longer wait.

Despite herself, she responded to his passion then. Not in the explosive, all encompassing way she had with Jeb. Still she found pleasure.

When they finished, he once again pulled her body fully parallel against him. He whispered, "Rachel Collins, I love you. Oh, how I love you." He reached down to pull the quilt over them.

Soon she heard his deep even breathing. She stretched silently, trying not to disturb him. *I could never have believed I would like being with him. I really believe I can learn to love this man.* She adjusted the pillow and then she, too, slept.

~ * ~

The next morning Rachel rose and began washing herself at the basin.

Gray was awake. He thought of what had passed between them in the night. *It was a time of ecstasy for me, but was she with me in body only and thinking all the while about Jeb Morgan? Was I the lover she expected? I'm a man of the world, but nothing prepared me for her, so sensuous, so beautiful. More appealing because she is not aware of her own femininity...*

He stretched as if first awakening. "What are you doing, honey?"

"I thought I'd get up early and surprise you with a nice breakfast."

"Come here." He patted the bed beside him.

Rachel returned to his side of the bed. He sat up and kissed her. "I'll make you a deal. If you'll come back to bed for a while, I'll fix breakfast and bring you up hot water for a bath."

"That's an offer no woman could refuse." She stretched out beside him.

"Put your gown on again, didn't you?" He reached over and again pulled it over her head.

There in the early morning the tenderness between them returned and quickened into passion.

~ * ~

They had just finished breakfast when there was a pounding at the door. Gray answered and came back to the kitchen with two young, scruffy looking men behind him. "This is Arvin and his partner, Jake. They had a bit of hard luck."

"I see," Rachel said.

"Yep, I think I broke it." He winced as he pointed to his left side where his arm drooped uselessly. "It's a killin' me."

"Sit down," Rachel told him, pointing to a chair next to the table. "How did this happen?"

"Yesterday we was up at our claim and we decided we'd ride into Little Creek and have some refreshment. I was getting up on my horse when a skunk came out of the brush and my horse reared. Threw me clean off. I tried to catch myself but I ended up on the ground with my arm hooked under me. First I thought it was just sprained, but when it hurt all night and I couldn't move it, I knowed it was broke."

Jake added. "We heard tell Garden Grove had a new woman doctor so we decided to ride here and see for ourselves."

Rachel carefully removed Arvin's shirt and began to gently feel the injury. "It's a clean break, but I'll have to set it and put it in a cast. I'll give you a little something to ease the pain while I get a splint ready."

Mary came into the room. "Can I help?"

"We'll need to make up a splint and a cast. Can you locate my supplies? Most of them are still upstairs in the box we repacked them in after we came across the Sierras. Also, I'll need you and Jake both to hold him when I set the fracture."

"Hey, Doc, it ain't gonna be bad, is it?" Arvin frowned.

"The good thing is it won't take long. Hurts a lot at the time, but it goes fast."

"Oh, Lord," Arvin moaned.

"Better bring him a big dose of laudanum." Rachel winked at Mary.

Rachel was right. The procedure went well. There was little doubt Arvin would mend easily because he was young and strong.

"Doc, can we go back to the claim now? We don't have no place to stay here." Jake said.

"He's pretty weak. Let him stay here and rest for a while. We'll give him some soup and let him recuperate a little."

Rachel grimaced as they helped Arvin to the settee in the living room. His clothes were so dirty that she grabbed a blanket and put him down on it to protect the piece.

"How much we owe you?" Jake asked. He drew out a small pouch filled with gold dust and handed it to her."

"I—I don't know. I've never been paid in gold dust before." She looked at Gray for help.

"What do you usually charge, Rachel?"

"At home, about two dollars for setting a break and two more when I take the cast off if there aren't any complications."

Gray motioned to Jake. "Bring your poke and we'll go to the office and weigh it out there." Turning to her, he asked, "Would you want me to set up an account for you? Tom can do the book work."

"That would be fine. Very helpful."

When Gray returned from the office and Arvin and Jake headed back to the claim, Rachel said to him, "We'd better go ahead with the office over Len's store. Otherwise, we'll end up with a lot of uninvited house guests, most of them in need of a bath."

"That's a good idea. I'll see about hiring a carpenter," Gray said.

"Wait a minute. I need to go upstairs and get something for you." Rachel returned with a small purse filled with silver coins.

"What's this?" Gray peered inside.

"There's about seventy-five dollars in there. Enough to pay for the work on the office. Then I'll need some cabinets and a

table built. I have a little more saved to order my medical supplies.”

“Where did this come from? You know I’d intended to do this for you.”

“The women in Four Corners collected it for me.” Rachel paused and smiled. “They gave it to me to use in case I wanted to go back home.”

“In case you didn’t like any of us gents?” He threw his head back and laughed.

“Exactly. But I do like one, so I suppose it’s safe to spend my return trip money.”

Gray lifted her, dancing her around the room. “If that’s the deal, you don’t know how glad I am to see you spend your money.”

~ * ~

That fall was a golden time for the Collins. The grain-hauling season was over and Gray was able to spend his nights at home. Meanwhile they finished Rachel’s new office. Most of her patients honored her privacy and came for treatment during the day. Sometimes patients did have to spend the night to recuperate; but, in most instances, Mary could stay with them, calling on Rachel only in an emergency.

Rachel’s pregnancy was going well. She was energetic with a good appetite, a glow to her skin, and her curly hair shinier than ever.

My relationship with Gray is developing slowly. It will take time for my love to grow. I have planted the seed; now there is a need to water and care for it to bring it into fruition. It may never be the heady, passionate love I knew with Jeb, but at least I can be a whole person—a woman and a doctor.

One evening Gray sat down at the piano. Rachel had noticed how quiet he was all evening. Often they took different roles and read from Shakespeare, but not tonight. He seemed particularly lost in his own thoughts. When he sat down at the piano, Rachel feared the worst, remembering the night she told him she was pregnant.

Rachel sat in the very same chair as before, wrapped in a quilt. Was this performance to be a form of *deja vu*? She braced herself holding to the chair arms, breathing deeply.

The lamp flickered, radiating a soft glow on his golden gray hair. He flexed his fingers before massaging the keys with a tender embrace, coaxing from them the sweetest of sounds. The sonata began quietly, softly. Lovingly.

Rachel sighed with relief. The music floated through the room, transporting her into a field of flowers. *Daisies. Yes, daisies in a spring garden with the sun beaming down. There are roses, too, the four sisters, for their wondrous scent fills my nostrils. A blue bird sits on a small fence calling to his mate. I am on a path that winds through this glorious field. There a man waits for me with his arms outstretched. I'm not sure...yes, yes, it is Gray.*

As the music began to recede, Rachel rose to stand behind him at the piano bench. She put her arms around him as he finished the piece. "Oh, Gray," her eyes filled with tears.

He turned and faced her. "This is the only way I could make you understand how much I love you."

She pulled him to the chair in front of the fire to sit on his lap. "I know, Gray, I know." She leaned against the warmth and comfort of his body. They sat there in silence.

She laid her head on his neck beneath his chin and felt the pumping of his blood as it coursed through his body. Without speaking, he lifted her, carrying her upstairs to their bed.

~ * ~

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon in early December. Rachel said to Gray, "I can't believe this is winter."

"Not just winter, a California winter. We have many days just like this. Not like New York or Pennsylvania at this time of year."

"Could we go for a buggy ride? I hate to waste such a beautiful day staying inside."

"I was thinking the same thing. Why don't we ride out to see the Adams? Jeremy's been wanting me to look over some

horses he broke. Dray horses I can use for spring delivery. We could combine business with pleasure."

"I'd like that. I haven't seen Marie or Jimmy since our wedding day. Let me get my bonnet."

"Fine. I'll hitch up the buggy and bring it around front. Would Mary like to go, too?"

"I think she's down with Len at the store. She promised she'd help him stock the shelves with the new Christmas shipment you brought in for him."

"He seems to think a lot of her, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but she's still waiting on *her* Ned, though his last letter was full of his social life. I'm afraid he's starting to forget her."

~ * ~

The buggy ride to the Adams' ranch was sunny and pleasant. When they arrived, Marie swooped out the door to hug Rachel, dragging her inside. "I'm so glad you've come. I've missed you."

"Where's Jeremy?" Gray asked.

"He and Jimmy are down at the barn. He can't let a little thing like Sunday stop him from working."

"I'll let you gals visit." Gray headed toward the corral.

Rachel settled herself at the kitchen table. "You look so happy, Marie. I don't have to ask. And look at your house. I can see you've been busy with your needle." The interior of the cabin had bright red chintz curtains at the windows and matching cloth on the rough-hewn table. The cabin was small but she could tell by its shine the interior had been scrubbed within an inch of its life. The pungent smell of lye soap still clung to the air.

"For the first time in my life, I have a home—and someone to love who loves me back." Hearing her own words, she blushed. Then turned her head and said, "I'll heat up the coffee."

Rachel smiled. I never dreamed this girl could be so open. None of the veiled look that always stood like an armed sentry to separate us. If ever anyone deserved happiness, it's Marie.

"And you, Rach, are you happy?"

"Yes, I'm beginning to be. Gray is an exceptional man."

"Good. I just wondered. Anyway, I have some great news. The second best thing ever is about to happen." She raised her hands over her head clapping them together.

"What's that?"

"We're going to start on our new house. Jeremy ordered the lumber last week. We want a really nice one. One big enough for lots of kids and with a good stove and maybe even one of those new cisterns for water. It'll cost a lot." Marie sighed, "I offered to help with what I've saved of the Morton money, but Jeremy said it's for Jimmy's education. You know, I think it kind of made him mad. Me offering."

Marie poured them both a cup of coffee. "Anyway, I can do a lot of the fixing on the inside. Painting and such."

"I'm happy for you, Marie. But if that's the second best thing, what's the first?" Rachel asked.

"I think I'm pregnant. It's a little early to be sure, but I haven't had my period since we've been married and I'm usually very regular. Besides, I feel a little queasy like I did with Jimmy."

Rachel stood and embraced her. "How wonderful. Not the queasiness, of course, but the baby. Come in to see me next month and I'll examine you and we'll know for sure. Incidentally, please don't overdo."

They had just finished their coffee when Jimmy came bursting in. "Hi, Rach, gotta come see my new colt." He grabbed her hand, pulling her out the door and down to the corral where Gray and Jeremy stood talking. A foal with glistening blond coat and shiny mane and tail cavorted around the enclosure.

"Jeremy says he's mine and that when him and me grow up I can ride him. Know what I named him?"

Rachel shook her head. "No idea."

"Prince. That's what. Just like Jeb's big horse. He's gonna be just as big and smart as Jeb's Prince, too."

Rachel was silent. She pictured Jeb, tall and handsome, mounted on Prince, motioning the train to follow him. She felt pain, but she also felt Gray's eyes on her. She reined in her emotions, answering simply, "It will be nice. Take good care of your colt, Jimmy."

Gray turned to Jeremy, "I guess we'd better go now. Bring the horses in sometime next week and I'll pay you."

Marie asked, "Can't you stay long enough for a cup of coffee?"

"Better not. It'll be dark before we know it. Tomorrow will be a full day for both of us. Rachel's patients start coming about seven in the morning, especially on Mondays."

~ * ~

The wind came up and there was a chill in the air on the return home. Rachel shivered and Gray reached into the back of the buggy, bringing up a blanket to cover her lap and pulling her against him. *She handled the mention of Jeb and his horse pretty well. Maybe some day I won't let a little thing like that upset me. After all, I may not be as dashing as Jeb, but I have enough sense to have Rachel sitting here beside me as my wife. That's more than he can say for himself.*

He put his arm around Rachel and slapped the reins across the horse with the other. "Let's go home, Dobbin."

~ * ~

Late one afternoon in mid-December, Rachel had seen her last patient when she looked out the window and saw Martin climbing her office stairs. He bounded up two steps at a time, quite a feat for so large a man, but he had always been agile even growing up.

Rachel met him at the door. "Hello, it's been a long time, and we're just across the street from each other."

"Hi, Rach." He frowned. "Are you alone? I need to talk to you."

"Last patient of the day just left and Mary's down helping Len." She motioned to a chair. "Sit down. Coffee?"

"No thanks." He settled back, his head in his hands.

"What is it, Martin? Are you feeling all right?"

He straightened his shoulders and looked past her. "I'm not sick, if that's what you mean. I—I hate like hell to bother you with this, but I have a problem."

"Oh?" Seeing the jovial Martin upset was a new experience for her.

He shuffled his feet uneasily across the floor in front of the chair.

"Come on, Martin, tell me. You've always been there for me. Now it's my turn." She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"It's about Glory."

"Glory? She's all right, isn't she?"

He held his hand up and shook his head. "Stop being a doctor for a minute and listen. It isn't our health. Its, well, maybe we made a mistake—getting married so soon and all. It's not what I expected..."

"Oh. Not compatible, huh?"

"Not really. She's a great companion and a hard worker but that isn't what I wanted. I needed a wife. Not a female blacksmith."

"Have you slept together?"

"Few times. She works like a Trojan so she's tired a lot. Never fixes up. Doesn't cook much. If I want a decent meal I have to go to Jinx's place to eat. Guess I'm disappointed. I had in mind building a house up next to you and Gray. A place to come home to in the evenings, a loving wife."

She nodded and went to sit in the chair across from him.

"Hell, Rach, if I'd wanted another worker, I'd have hired one."

"Have you told Glory this?"

He shook his head and shuffled his feet again. "How could I?"

"Would you like me to talk to her?"

"Would you? Maybe she'd listen to you. Another woman."

"I will on one condition. Remember, she loves you, worships you so you'll have to give her a chance. She probably thinks helping you shows how much she cares. Work is all she's ever known and it's her way of showing her feelings. That's my bet."

"Can you kind of give her hints? How to fix herself up and make a home. We may be too old to have kids, but at least I want a normal life."

"Have her come over tomorrow evening about this same time."

"What should I tell her?"

"I miss her and want to see her. Just be sure she comes."

He got up to leave and Rachel followed him to the door.

"Martin, things take time to work out sometimes so have patience."

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned and waved at her. "Patience," he called back.

She watched him cross the street. *Patience brings rewards. Remember that when you're dealing with your own situation, Rachel Collins. Patience.*

~ * ~

Glory arrived at the medical office the next afternoon as scheduled.

"Hi, Rach, it's been a while. 'Course you and me both's been powerful busy. Like yer office." Glory wiped soot from her face and ran the toe of her boot over her pant legs, dislodging the dust. Rachel recognized the brown pants and woolen shirt as her driving outfit from the train.

"So good to see you." Rachel poured each of them a cup of coffee. They sat opposite each other at a small table at the end of the room.

"How have you been feeling, Glory? I know you're working hard. I know you."

"You bet. Can't let Martin do it all. Got to put my shoulder to the plow and show him I'm worthy of him. God, Rach, I didn't know there was a man left in this world like him." Her cheeks glowed pink.

"Not working too hard, I hope. You need time to enjoy being together and if you're all tired out, I don't see how you can. With a house to run and meals to cook."

"You know I ain't much on them things."

"But what if Martin is? Had you thought about what he likes?"

Glory put down her cup. "What are ya trying to say, Rach?"

"I've known Martin all my life, and I know he was always used to a nice home life. Nothing really fancy, but his mother was refined and kept a nice house." *Oh, God, help me find the right words. I don't want to hurt this woman. I love her too much.*

"Oh, don't know much about sech things..."

"Well, I could help you. I still have some of the Williams' family recipes. They are coming with my medical books. You could start there."

"And me, do I need fixin', too?" Glory's eyes were filled with tears.

"Maybe a little. Remember how Marie showed you about your hair and clothes?"

"Yeah, but that was just for courtin' purposes, weren't it?"

"I think Martin would enjoy seeing you fixed up now even if you are married." Rachel hesitated. "I still have some warm water in that tub by the stove. You could start with a bath and then I'd like to examine you. You look awfully thin."

"Now, Rach, I ain't sick. Besides what good would a bath do. I ain't got no clothes to put on after I take one."

Glory got up and started edging to the door.

"Glory, stop. You have to win Martin's love. I guarantee this will make him think more of you than all the work you could ever do at the forge."

"For real?"

"Yes, really."

When Glory finished bathing, Rachel handed her a towel and a cotton wrapper. "Come into the back room and sit on the table."

Glory rolled her eyes when Rachel brought out the stirrups she used for her female patients. "Whoa there. What you fixin' to do—some kinda torture?"

"No torture. Just lie back and put your feet in here. I'll be as gentle as I can. You look a little peaked to me. Let's find out what's going on."

Glory started to get up, but Rachel pulled her back. "Either I do it or Martin will have to take you in to Sacramento to a doctor there."

"You wouldn't dare... All right. I didn't think you of all people would humiliate me like this."

Glory stared at the wall while Rachel worked. "Golly derved," she repeated over and over.

Finally the ordeal was over and Rachel began to smile.

"You thought it was funny, didn't you? You ought to be ashamed and me in misery." Glory sniffled.

"I bought a dress for you and some new underthings down at Len's store." Rachel held up a simply cut dress of blue floral print with a wide white collar. "You know, you have quite a figure from all the exercising you do. Let's show it off."

"Rach, is all this *folderol* necessary?"

"Yes, dear, it is."

Glory snorted.

"Get dressed. I'll wait for you out in the front room. I want to talk to you."

When Glory emerged, Rachel had her sit at the table once again. She poured two more cups of coffee.

Glory pushed hers away. "Don't want none. I had enuf. Enuf of everything." She glowered at Rachel.

"I think you'll need it when you hear my news."

"Doubt it. Nuthin' could surprise me after all you put me through."

Rachel reached across taking Glory's hand. "Congratulations Mrs. Williams, you're going to have a baby."

Nineteen

The Joaquin Marriages

After Glory left, Rachel locked her office and started down the street. She saw Martin working at his forge. Pungent black smoke rolled from the hearth across the street filling Rachel's nostrils and making her sneeze. Rachel stopped to watch.

Glory, her face glowing, stood smoothing the skirt of her blue print dress. She pushed up a few gray locks and fastened them under two tortoise shell combs. Drawing a breath, she walked behind Martin, laying her hand on his back.

Martin jumped at Glory's touch and turned to her. "Oh, it's you and don't you look nice. New dress I suspect." He paused. "Looks like you had a great visit."

"Fine." She swiped at the tears forming in her eyes.

She grasped his arm. He dropped the metal he was bending with a resounding clang. Seeing her tears, he allowed her to lead him to the wooden customer bench and pull him down beside her. She leaned against him.

"Whoa there." He pulled away. "You'll get your pretty dress dirty."

"Don't care none. I got news. *Big* news." She caught her breath and let the words spill out. "You're gonna be a papa."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm gonna have a baby."

"No. Can't be. We're too old—you and me." His voice quavered. He mopped his brow with a dirty red kerchief. "But—I can't believe it. Are you sure?"

"Mighty sure. Got Rachel's word on it."

"Then it must be right." He chuckled and jumped to his feet.

"Are ya happy, Mr. Williams? Do ya like the idea of us raisin' a young 'un?"

"Good Lord, yes. I never thought I'd see this day." He pulled her to her feet, twirling her around him as easily as he might a small rag doll. He could not contain himself. He stood stock still and kissed her, staining her collar black and leaving an oily smudge on her cheek.

The smoke from the neglected forge dwindled, no longer making Rachel's nose itch. She walked down the street. *At least here's one marriage that'll last. Thanks to mother nature.*

Rachel hadn't gone far when she heard the familiar creak of buggy wheels behind her and smelled the whispering scent of Gray's pipe tobacco.

"How about a lift, Lady Doctor?"

"It would be fine. I hated the thought of climbing the hill on foot." She smiled while he got out and helped her onto the seat.

"I was a little late tonight. Tom left early and I had to close up. You're running behind time, too."

"Yes, I am." She looked at Gray, "I guess it's ethical to tell you the news—everyone in Garden Grove will know it by tomorrow anyway. Glory and Martin are going to have a baby."

"Was that what all the excitement was about? They were standing outside Martin's place just whooping it up. I thought they'd been drinking."

"I'm not surprised. They seemed awfully happy when I heard them." She looked at Gray. *How I wish I'd made you happy in such a way. After this baby, I'm determined to give you your own child.*

As if he had read her thoughts, Gray said. "Well, we'll soon have a little one to care for, too. A child I'll surely love because I love his mother so."

Rachel snuggled against him. Laying her head on his shoulder, she said, "What wonderful thing did I ever do to deserve you?"

The horse clopped steadily up the grade to their home on the hill.

~ * ~

Christmas day dawned clear and cool. It was nothing like a Pennsylvania day in December, but there was a hint of winter differentiating the season. Rachel had invited all the couples to have dinner with them at noon.

She and Mary had been decorating for days. The scent of cedar permeated the house from the boughs arched across the living room fireplace. Wild poinsettia blossoms filled every nook and cranny, providing background for long white candles ensconced on every available surface. The centerpiece of the house was the Christmas tree decorated with ornaments Mary had fashioned from ribbon and tinsel Len had given her from the store.

Rachel rose early to put the turkey in the oven. When she went into the kitchen, she found Mary had already started the fire and stoked it with an armload of fresh kindling.

"Merry Christmas, dear," Rachel told her.

"Merry Christmas, Rachel. I'm excited. Iris read about baby Jesus' birthday when we were in the wagon, but I didn't know it was so pretty."

"This is your first Christmas, isn't it? Then you know you have the best name any woman could have for today." She hugged the young Indian girl.

"I know."

"I think I'll take a cup of this coffee up to Gray and surprise him."

When Rachel entered their bedroom, she turned up the lamp. "Merry Christmas, sleepy head."

"Are you already up? What time is it anyway?"

"Just about six. Remember, we have guests coming." She set the cup of coffee on the bedside table. "Here, have a sip of this. It'll wake you up."

"Smells good." He drank from the cup. "Just think, this is our first Christmas together."

"I'd never have believed it when I was an old maid back in Four Corners." She stood in front of the wardrobe. "I'd better get dressed now while I have a chance. I can wear an apron so I won't get dirty."

Rachel smoothed her underskirt over her body. She turned sideways to look at her silhouette in the mirror. *Being tall has its advantages, I'm at least four months along and I've not begun to show. I'm glad. Not for my sake but for Gray's.*

She picked out a red gingham dress adorned with a white lace collar and cuffs. "How about this for bright?" She held it up to show him. "Ma always said red didn't do much for me with my hair so brownish red. Did I ever tell you Pa used to call me his auburn girl?"

"No, you hadn't. But you look good to me no matter what color you wear." He rose and dragged her away from the wardrobe and gathered her into an embrace.

She pulled away. "I know what you're up to and none of that, Gray Collins. I have a meal to cook."

"Can't blame a gent for trying, can you?" He laughed. "Might as well get dressed if we can't have a little Christmas merriment together."

~ * ~

When she returned to the kitchen she said, "You know, Mary, I've been fixing turkey for years. Always with bread dressing stuffed inside the turkey. This time I just put the dressing on the side and filled the turkey with cut up slices of oranges and onions to take away the wild taste. I learned it from one of my women patients. She calls it the new California recipe."

"New life. New recipe," Mary answered.

By mid-morning, the aroma of baking holiday fare filled the house. The table was covered with a large snowy cloth and set with enough china for ten places. A small plate was reserved for Jimmy.

"I think we're far enough along with our dinner to take out a little time for a cup of coffee," Rachel told Mary and Gray.

"Good idea," Gray said. "There are a few packages need opening. Ladies, let's go sit by the tree." He ushered them into the living room. "I'd like to do it before the others come. Mary, would you hand out the gifts, please?"

Mary smiled and began working her way through the pile of presents. The first package was a silk turquoise dress for her—one Rachel had paid Marie to sew. There were leather gloves and a frontier jacket for Gray from Rachel. Mary had compiled a book of herbal medicines with illustrations, which she had bound into a notebook for Rachel.

At last there was only one small gold-wrapped box left under the tree. Gray picked it up. "This is for you, honey." He handed Rachel the package. "Merry Christmas."

Rachel felt warmed by a sense of excitement. She shook the box curiously. Her hands trembled as she tore back the paper. Finally she lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in cotton, a golden brooch gleamed up at her. Centered in an oval bed of tiny pearls was a large diamond solitaire that caught the sunlight radiating an arc of rainbows into the room.

"Oh, my." Rachel sucked in her breath. "It's gorgeous. I've never seen anything like it."

"Exactly. One of a kind. Just like you." He kissed her holding her to him.

"I think I need to go and see how the turkey's doing." Mary giggled and left.

"Gray, you shouldn't have."

"Yes, I should. I've waited my whole life for you. And—well, I wanted, somehow, to show you how I feel. A jeweler in Sacramento designed it. He's an artist of sorts."

"Yes, he is. Oh, Gray."

He had just finished pinning the brooch on her collar when they were interrupted by a knock at the door. "Our guests are beginning to come."

Iris and Jorge were the first to arrive. Arrive in style they did with their "footman" holding the carriage door and helping them up the steps. He quickly returned with several bottles of wine and a large plum pudding, still seeping small clouds of steam through the lid of the pan.

Rachel hurried to welcome them. "Iris, how good it is to see you. Merry Christmas." She hugged her small cousin. "You're looking wonderful."

"You, too, Rach. Look at the outfit Jorge had made for me." Iris turned to show, to advantage, a powder blue velvet dress edged with tatted lace and topped with a matching cape trimmed in white fur.

Gray said to Jorge, "You certainly have a breathtaking wife. You can tell she's from the Williams family." He winked at Rachel.

"You are so right, Señor." He bowed slightly, handing Gray his hat. "A family of true ladies." His dark eyes shone as brightly as the silver ornaments on his navy bolero.

Gray asked, "Jorge, can I offer you a little wine. I have some of my friend's California wine chilling in the cooler."

"That would be nice. I also brought you some from my cousin's cache in Monterrey."

"I saw that. Thank you."

"Well, *Feliz Navidad, Señor.*"

Rachel interrupted, "While you men make yourselves at home, Iris and I need to go to the kitchen and check on our dinner."

"Señora, I could have sent someone from the hacienda to help you."

"No, Jorge, this is something I want to do. Iris can sit and watch me. I'm not sure you know this, but she's a good little cook herself."

"I would never ask her to do so much." He drew her to him in a protective stance.

Iris smiled.

Rachel moved toward the kitchen. *I've never seen a more coy smile. And we all worried about Iris. Little did we know.*

Rachel pulled out the turkey to inspect it. Then closed the oven door. "Sit down Iris. I wouldn't want you to overdo." They both laughed.

"Why didn't Señora Vega come with you? She shouldn't be alone on Christmas."

"She's in Mexico visiting her family. She'll be gone several months." Iris blushed. "She says newlyweds need time alone. I overheard her talking to Jorge before she left. My Spanish isn't too good yet; but from the drift of the conversation, I understood her to say something about making a grandchild."

"Ooh-ho."

"I think we already have. I've missed my cycle once so maybe, just maybe..."

"I remember us talking about names. If it's a girl, it'll be Rose after your mother and—"

"A boy will have to be Jorge de la Vega, the third. I can hardly wait for you to confirm it so I can write the folks."

Rachel whistled softly. "There's something about this California air."

"What did you say, Rachel?"

"Oh, nothing. I'd better call Mary to help me get the dinner ready to put on. The others should be here any minute now."

Marie, Jeremy and Jimmy arrived, decked out in matching outfits. She wore a green dress with a red bow at the neck. Jimmy and Jeremy had green shirts, both with red bow ties.

Gray greeted them with, "Aren't you folks dressed for the season?"

Jeremy with Jimmy in his arms smiled. "Once Marie gets going with that needle of hers, there's no stopping her." He hugged her.

Jimmy interrupted. "See the teddy bear Santa Claus brought me and a red wagon and some candy sticks and I forget what else." They all laughed.

Marie said, "I'm going out to the kitchen with the gals and see what smells so good."

Mary, Iris and Rachel all came to hug her.

Marie pulled back from Rachel. "What's that?" She pointed to the brooch pinned to Rachel's collar. "My stars. It's gorgeous."

Rachel smiled. "Thank you. It's my Christmas gift from Gray."

Rachel prodded the turkey with a fork. "It's almost done. We can eat as soon as the others come. Len, Martin, and Glory are still missing."

"I hear Len," Mary announced. She went to the living room door to take his hat and jacket.

Len whispered something in her ear and taking her arm, pulled her out onto the porch. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small package wrapped in red paper and tied with a white yarn bow. "This is for you. I'd like you to open it now out here."

Mary's eyes shone. "For me?"

Len nodded. "Especially for you."

She unwrapped the package. Inside lay two slender gold bracelets. She smiled and impulsively kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you. Wait here, I'll be back."

She dashed through the house and returned with a basket woven from grape vines and lined with scarlet material. It was filled with dried fruit, nuts, and toasted seeds. She thrust it toward him. "You like it?"

He nodded with pleasure. "I do."

The mantel clock struck twelve. Rachel came to the dining room. "Everything's about ready. Is everybody here now?"

Gray answered, "All of us except Glory and Martin."

"I wonder what's keeping them?" she asked.

"Probably had one last horse to shoe," Len said.

"On Christmas day?" Rachel shook her head.

They heard a buggy approaching. "Speak of the devil. Here they are," Gray said.

The Williams came rushing in. "Are we late?" Glory asked.

Rachel hugged her. "Just in time."

Martin guffawed. "Typical woman. Spent all this time fixing herself," he said with a note of pride in his voice."

"Had trouble doin' my hair."

"Looks nice," Rachel told her. "Come help us put the food on the table."

Soon they were all seated at the dining room table, couple by couple, Gray sat at the head and Rachel at the foot, with Jimmy stationed between Marie and Jeremy.

Gray offered grace and then rose, filling a glass with sparkling red vintage for each. "Jorge honored us with this special blend from Mexico." He lifted his glass. "A toast to our brides. The Pennsylvania women."

"Hear, Hear," the others joined in as the glasses clanged together, chiming in unison.

Martin stood, "I have a special toast to my wife who is making me so proud to become a pa." They lifted their glasses in another toast.

Jorge stood. "To finish, I want to say Feliz Navidad to my beautiful Iris."

Jimmy said, "Are we done? I'm hungry."

Jeremy chuckled. "Best idea yet."

And eat they did—turkey, dressing, fruit, vegetables, pies, and pudding until they were stuffed.

The men went into the living room for an after dinner smoke. Rachel and Mary started clearing the table.

Marie stopped them. "Glory, Iris and I'll do this. It's our turn. Go into the library and sit. You two deserve a rest."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," Marie persisted.

The two of them had hardly settled themselves when Jorge appeared. "Señora Collins, can I speak with you alone?"

Mary smiled and went to the porch.

He pulled his chair next to Rachel. "Señora, I hate to bother you on this special day, but I'm worried."

"Oh?"

"Yes, About Iris. I—I think she might be expecting. Can she have a baby or is she too weak?" Beads of perspiration formed on his brow. "I couldn't stand to lose her..."

Rachel took his hand. "I have no reason to think she can't. I have delivered babies to far weaker women—some really sick and everything has gone fine."

Jorge drew a sigh of relief.

"I'd have to examine her, of course, but Iris is a lot stronger than you think. She's always been healthy and I know you and your mother will give her good care."

"Then it's all right she's conceived? Really?"

"Yes, really." Rachel felt his arm relax under her hand.

"Oh, Señora, you have made this such, how do you say it—a Merry Christmas."

After the women finished clearing the kitchen, they all gathered around the piano singing Christmas carols as Gray played. Soon the afternoon was almost over and they began to leave.

"Wait just a minute before you go. I have something for each of you," Marie said. She and Jeremy went to their buggy and returned with gaily-wrapped packages. There were red bow ties for all the men and red printed shawls for the women. "A little something to mark our first Christmas together in Garden Grove."

Rachel went to the kitchen and parceled out the Thanksgiving leftovers to her guests. She divided large portions of turkey, fruit, and pie for their suppers.

Marie took her food package. "Thanks so much for this. It will be just right for our supper. You know Jeremy is always hungry. We wouldn't dare miss a meal even though everyone else is very full."

Jimmy came running into the room. "Rachel, I had a good time. Come on Ma." He pulled on Marie's skirt. When he reached the front door, he turned and said, "Rachel come out and see me and Prince soon. Real soon."

Rachel walked to the front door to wave to her guests while Gray helped them into their buggies.

She walked back into the living room. *Yes, to see Prince. Why did I have to hear him mention Prince? It always reminds me of Jeb.* Rachel shivered. She stood in front of the fireplace, her face flushed with the heat, but still a chill gripped her.

Why did I have to be reminded of Jeb? I wonder how he spent Christmas? Was he alone with Joe or has he found someone to take my place? I hate being reminded of him.

She took a poker and stirred the red coals. How I need Gray to come inside and put his arms around me and shield me from these thoughts.

Rachel heard the door slam and measured steps approaching. Then Gray stood behind her with his hands securing her waist. "Why so pensive, honey?"

"I'm so glad you're here."

"Is it much of a surprise?"

"No, I'm glad you came to me just now." She turned and reached up to kiss him.

"Are you tired after cooking?"

"A little."

"It was a wonderful day. Just the Christmas I always wanted. Felt a little like a king sitting at the head of my own table, carving the turkey, and surrounded by my friends. And most importantly, celebrating with my wife." He slowly exhaled.

"Would you play something for me?" Rachel asked.

They walked into the study and he began a medley of Christmas songs and other light selections. Finally they went into the kitchen to have their own leftovers.

Rachel yawned. Gray looked at her, "It's a little early, but I think it's your bedtime. Go on up and I'll lock the door and check out things and then I'll be up."

By the time Gray arrived for bed, Rachel was curled up under the quilt, breathing softly in a gentle sleep. He crawled in beside her. *I really did have my best Christmas. Rachel has made my life exactly what I'd hoped for. I'm no longer a man alone but one with a purpose—a woman to love and a family, though not exactly the family I had expected.*

He turned towards Rachel and pulled her against him when something rough scraped his hand. He jerked back and then felt for the object again. *It's the pin I gave her. She's wearing it on her nightgown.* He draped his arm carefully over her again. *How I love you, Rachel Collins and I think you're beginning to love me, too.*

Twenty

Belated Sacrifice

It was a blustery day in early January when Jeb Morgan reined in Prince on the bluff and stood gazing down into the town of Garden Grove. He wasn't sure just why he was there; he only knew he had to be. *I've got to see her, to straighten out this mess I made. Never should have left her at Schmidt's Trading Post. Even if it meant I'd risk running into fall rains.* Lifting his hat, he began rubbing his cowlick, flattening it into place. *For once, I should have been impractical. I could have taken a longer route around Widow's Peak if it rained. It would've made us late. But what the heck?*

Placing his hat firmly back on his head, he pulled the brim down over his eyes. *By not taking a chance, I lost the most important thing in my life. Rachel. Something told me I was making a mistake when I didn't wait for her in Garden Grove. It was my second chance, and I didn't take it.*

Reaching down to pat Prince, he said, "Well, old fellow, let's go see if it's too late—if I can mend some fences. Make some compromises."

Ostensibly, he had come to buy horses from Jeremy Adams. It was the excuse he'd given Joe for making the trip; but he hadn't fooled Joe any more than he had fooled himself. *Perhaps if she hadn't been on my mind during Christmas, it*

wouldn't have been so bad.

It was late afternoon when Jeb rode into Garden Grove. There were a few people on the street, but the town seemed to be winding down for the day. Smoke billowed from Martin's forge and several horses were tied in front of Jinx's saloon. When he rode down the street, he noted most of the activity was at Len's General Store, with people buying last minute groceries for their supper. Pulling Prince to a halt, he casually read a newly painted sign posted on the side of the building, *Dr. Rachel Williams Collins*. An arrow pointed up the outside stairs that led to the second story of the store.

She's in practice, but— Then the full impact of the name hit him. *My God, she's married. Collins? Gray Collins? It couldn't be. Two months and she's married?*

Traumatized, he sat motionless, until some of the shoppers came out of the store and started to stare at him and point. He quickly turned Prince and rode him across the street, tying him to the hitching post at the side of a vacant building. His eyes riveted to the medical office entrance, he leaned against the storefront behind one of the supporting posts.

Standing there for several minutes, he decided he must mount those steps and have his questions answered. Just then a light from the overhead window flickered and went out. And there she was, locking the door and standing for a moment, looking down to the street below. A turquoise shawl hung loosely from her shoulders, covering a dark, woolen dress. As she descended, the wind blew back her skirts to reveal her petticoats and a pair of very trim ankles. The last rays of the sun played on her hair, surrounding her with an aura of burnished red and brown.

~ * ~

Rachel's face was slightly flushed and her eyes bright as she stood at the bottom of the stairs with her hand gently grasping the handrail. It felt good to be outside in the fresh air. It had been a long and tedious day with a series of coughs, minor injuries, and a newly confirmed pregnancy.

The street in front of her was almost empty—yet, she sensed a presence. She glanced at the lengthening shadows. Was there someone watching her? *No one I can see.* She shifted her weight to lean against the banister. *Gray will be here soon. He must have been delayed at the office.*

Again the sense of being watched passed over her. Hair began to prickle on the back of her neck. She shivered slightly. She glanced down the street, but there was no one visible.

Turning, she decided to go to Len's store to wait. Before she could, Len came out, locking the door. She started to hail him, to walk with him. *No. I'm just being silly.* Instead, she took to the street, walking briskly toward home.

There was nothing to indicate she was being followed. *Why does this awful feeling cover me?* She walked at an even brisker pace as she passed the places of business. At last, she heard the creaking of a buggy behind her. It was Gray.

Stopping the horse, he said, "Rachel, I'm sorry I'm late. One of the drivers came in at closing time, and I had to check his load." He jumped from the buggy, embracing and kissing her. She clung to him for a moment before she released him and he could help her into the buggy.

She shivered slightly. Turning to her, he asked, "Are you all right?" He pulled the lap robe from the back and covered her.

"Rachel," he repeated, "are you okay?"

"Now I am. Now that you've come."

~ * ~

Jeb watched as Rachel stood waiting at the foot of the stairs. *I ought to go talk to her. How would I begin?* His heart pounded and he tried to propel himself across the dirt expanse of the street, but his feet were of clay, unable to move. After what seemed an eternity to him, she began walking rapidly down the road away from him. *Stop, don't go. I'm not ready for you to go.* Still unable to move, it was as if he were cast in stone.

Suddenly Gray Collins arrived in his buggy. He alighted, grabbing and kissing her.

Look how she clings to him. Jeb's heart fell into his boots as he watched them get into the buggy and drive into the pink and red beauty of the sunset.

If only Gray Collins were some kind of monster, he could save her from a disastrous marriage. But what had Martin told him about Collins? "He's a peach of a fellow?"

Sighing, he knew she'd not seemed unhappy or desolate or thin and sickly. There was no lying to himself. *She's never been lovelier, with a kind of womanly glow, or apparently, happier.*

Jeb left Garden Grove, stopping at Jinx's bar to get a pint of whiskey, which he fully consumed, sitting in front of his campfire. It was the only way he could wipe away the visions of Rachel dancing with him, sitting on the wagon seat talking, or doing a hundred different things. *What hurts the most is the passion and love we shared and now it's gone!*

~ * ~

It was a blustery March day. Rachel and Mary had seen their last patient when they heard someone mounting the office steps. They looked up to see Arvin grinning at them. "Hi, Doc, how you been?" He pulled off his jacket and thrust his left arm toward her. "See it's good as new. Healed perfect just like you said it would. Favor it some, but it's doin' all right."

Rachel said, "I'm glad, but who took off the cast?"

"Oh, this fellow at the mining camp. Sam Watson by name. Had doctor training back in Boston. Come out here like the rest of us with gold fever. Well, anyway he done it."

"I'm glad there's someone that can help you out there."

"That's one reason I come by. You see, Sam would like to work with someone to help him finish his schoolin' and have a practice. Garden Grove's growing and he thought maybe he could throw in with you to help out."

Rachel poured him a cup of coffee. Arvin stirred in a spoon of sugar and took a sip before he continued. "He's got him a gal back in Boston he wants to bring out and marry—settle down and all."

"I could use the help, at least this year. Tell him to bring his papers and come by to talk to me." She reached for Arvin's left arm. "Take your shirt off." She felt the bone. "It's healed nicely. Let me show you some exercises to work on so it won't stiffen up on you."

"Sam already has. Like this." He demonstrated flexing his forearm, then his wrist, and finally raising his arm up over his head. "See?"

"Looks like he did a good job." She chuckled at Arvin's demonstration.

"If there ain't nothin' else, guess I might as well be movin' on. Just wanted to show you my arm. I'll tell Sam to come by to see you." He glanced at Rachel again. When she said nothing, he opened the door. "Sure is rainin' hard. Well, see you, Doc." He swept out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

Closing the door behind him, Rachel said, "Well it was interesting news he brought us."

~ * ~

That evening after supper, with her feet propped up in front of her, Rachel leaned back in her chair while Gray sat next to her in his favorite chair.

She said, "Arvin came by today."

"Oh?"

"Yes, his arm is healing nicely. A young man by the name of Sam Watson took off the splint and prescribed some exercises for him. Did a good job."

"Is he a doctor?"

"Not fully qualified, but he has had some medical training. He sent word he'd be interested in working with me if I could use the help."

"That sounds fine. It couldn't come at a better time."

"I know. I said I'd interview him..."

"If he has any knowledge at all, you'd better hire him. It's getting time for us to go to Sacramento. Time for you and for me."

Rachel looked down at her all-too-protruding stomach. "I understand for me. What about you?"

"I'd planned for a couple of years to put an office over in Sacramento—sort of an end station. Remember I talked about a friend in Sacramento you could stay with? It's Art Hawkins, a fellow I worked with in the gold fields. Anyway, he has a livery business and I thought I'd put my hauling office there with his. I've talked to him about it, and he says he'd be glad to have us stay with him. He's a bachelor still so he has the room. Told me he even knows a doctor to take care of you. I'd been a little worried about someone to handle your patients. Anyway, the problem seems to be solved now."

After a few minutes of silence, Rachel said, "You're right. The baby will be here in two months. I've never had anyone examine me and I need that." She patted her stomach, "Even my medical smock doesn't disguise him any more."

"Exactly. It's time for you to start taking things easy. The stress is just too much for you, I'm afraid." Gray straightened himself in the chair. "I'll make the arrangements and we'll leave next week."

He pulled Rachel to her feet and embraced her. The baby protested, kicking against her stomach. Gray could feel the small flutter against his own body. Gray laughed, "Guess it's a reminder we are no longer alone. He's telling us to get prepared."

Within the next few days, Rachel had remanded her patients to Sam Watson's care. She found him to be caring and capable; whatever he lacked in experience, he made up for by being conscientious. They left Mary to look after the house with Tom and Len as back-ups in event of any emergency.

~ * ~

In fact, Rachel enjoyed the trip to Sacramento. Gray drove them in his buggy over the same route they used that fall to enter the valley. It was a relatively easy trip with a stop-over in the same way station. Once again she was awed by the sight of the valley below as they looked from the height of Widow's

Peak. Gray again stopped to walk ahead and check the road for any rock slide.

When Gray returned, she said, "It hardly seems possible we passed through here in the fall and now spring is already beginning. Such a panorama of vision and time."

"Beautiful all right. But treacherous. If the other route weren't so long and circuitous, I'd never come this way. I don't know why I don't trust this road. I just never have." He fell silent.

She reached over and patted his arm. "I hope my having to go to Sacramento isn't too much of a burden."

"How could you think such a thing?" He turned and shook his head. "You could never be a burden to me. You or the child." He smiled. "Have you ever seen the ocean?"

"The Atlantic but not the Pacific. Coming here, there wasn't time to detour from the trail. I'd like to see it."

"Then we will. I'll be busy setting up the business and you'll be busy becoming a mother, but we'll squeeze in the time somehow."

"What's Sacramento like?"

"Growing into a city. It's amazing how cultured it's becoming. Maybe it's because it's the seat of our government. Of course, it has a different flavor from San Francisco or Los Angeles. But I like it. If we didn't live in Garden Grove, I'd want to live here. Maybe it's because I know the town."

"Is that why you're opening your new office here?"

"Partly, but it's an opportune spot on the coast. By the way, you'll also like Art. I lived with him all those months in that slimy camp, and I always could depend on him. A good friend."

"I hope we won't crowd him."

"Hardly. He has a two story house overlooking the bay. A large comfortable place and well built for a bachelor. I guess he dreamed of this when we were living in a crude mining camp. Anyway, he'll be a gracious host."

~ * ~

Gray was right about everything. She liked Sacramento and Art. For the first time in her life, Rachel felt she was on vacation with trips to the beach and forays into oriental restaurants where she tasted and liked their very different food.

She was able to enjoy this all with the knowledge her pregnancy was going well. She found a young doctor who was clean and efficient with a forward approach to childbirth.

As much as she enjoyed her weeks in Sacramento, she looked forward even more to having her own child. *To hold a newborn babe and know I can keep him is something I've only dreamed about. How I hope I can draw Gray with me into this happy event.*

The days passed and Rachel became increasingly heavy on her feet. They hired Lila Thomas, Art's part-time housekeeper to stay all day with her. Lila was a kindly gray-haired woman of sixty. Grandmother of eight, she took all events in stride.

One morning after Gray and Art had left for the office, they were clearing away the breakfast dishes when Lila eyed Rachel. "Won't be long now, Dearie. Not long at all." She reached over to pat Rachel's stomach. The baby retaliated with a resounding kick to Lila's hand. "My, oh my, you are a lively one. That one's got plenty of spunk. I tell you." She laughed.

Rachel moved away from Lila.

"What would you like to do? It's a mighty pretty day. Good time for a walk."

"No," Rachel answered. "I think we need to clean house. Really give it a good going over. Wash the bedding and all the clothes."

Lila protested. "But I have everything done up proper. Just finished yesterday."

"No," Rachel insisted. "I mean deep clean."

"All right, Mrs. Collins, whatever you say." The older woman turned her head and laughed to herself.

They stripped the beds and hung the washing on the line, then proceeded to mop and dust. As soon as the clothes were dry, Lila built a fire in the stove to heat the flat irons while

Rachel set the ironing board up between two chairs. At last she began her pressing.

"Whew, I'm beginning to wear out, Mrs. Collins. I'm going to stop for some coffee. Do you want a cup?"

"Not yet. I will when I'm finished here. I'm really not tired yet."

"I see." Lila shook her head.

Then a thought struck Rachel. She was acting just like Sophie Meyer, her patient from back in Pennsylvania. Before Sophie delivered, she had this spurt of energy and cleaned her house with a Trojan-like diligence. Whenever Rachel passed by the Meyer's house and saw a preponderance of laundry waving from the line, she knew Sophie was about to deliver.

If I'm anything like Sophie, the baby will be here soon. Very soon."

Twenty-one

The Strength Within

Rachel's labor pains began before noon, at first with a catch in her lower back and then working into full-blown contractions. Lila summoned the doctor soon afterward, and the baby weighing seven pounds came before five without complications.

Rachel had waited her entire life to hear the first lusty cry of life from her child and she was not disappointed.

"He's a lively one, all right, just like I predicted," Lila said handing the squirming red-faced bundle to Rachel.

Rachel pulled the blanket from the baby's face, "My son, my son. How I've waited for you." She snuggled the child against her, running her hands over his thatch of black hair and pulling the covers away to inspect him, counting his fingers and toes as mothers have since the beginning of time.

A buggy stopped in front of the house, followed by footsteps hurrying up the stairs. Gray burst through the bedroom door. "Rachel, Rachel, are you all right? Why didn't you call me?"

He came to the side of the bed and bending, drew her close to him.

"Oh, Gray, look who we have. Michael Williams Collins. Look, just look."

"He's wonderful, but how about you?"

"I'm so happy. See him. He's perfect...a miracle."

Rachel watched as Gray lifted the baby and cradled him in his arms. "He needs a lullaby and you're just the one to sing to him and me. Sit in the rocker and hold him."

Gray did as she instructed, though hesitantly. "Is it all right? I don't know anything about babies."

"He won't break. Just hold him against you and sing." Rachel watched intently. *Please, oh, God, let this man accept my child. I ask you for your help now just as I did the day of the storm. Please.*"

The wrapped bundle felt warm against Gray's hand. Like Rachel, he pulled back the blanket and inspected the tiny child. He traced each minute finger with his own. *Oh, the miracle of life. Whoever first said that wasn't wrong. Nor am I the first man to raise another man's child. I'm not saintly like Joseph but I empathize with his feelings when he first heard about Mary's pregnancy... Once he held the child in his arms I'll bet he, too, felt that being a father is more than just siring a child, much more.*

He lifted the baby to his shoulder and began to pat him, keeping rhythm to the song he began to croon. "Lullaby and good night to cheeks rosy bright."

Rachel felt relief as she saw Gray with Michael. *Everything is going to be all right after all. Not because of favorable circumstances, but because of the strength within me. After being naïve and weak, I have found the woman within. Not a perfect woman but one with the ability to grow and mature—one who is not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them.*

Rachel sat up and reached across and patted Gray's arm. He grasped her hand saying, "I love you Rachel—you and this baby."

~ * ~

It was late July when the three of them returned to Garden Grove. Sam had already delivered Marie's son, Jeremy Adams,

Jr., a lusty, seven-pound redhead. But Rachel was there in time to help both Iris and Glory give birth.

Iris was so pampered and had become so sedentary, only painting and doing little else, that Rachel, much to the Vega's distress, put Iris on a regimen of light exercise. As a result, she gave birth to six-pound Jorge de la Vega, the second, easily enough.

Excited as the Vegas were over their son, nothing compared to the emotions of Glory and Martin Williams when their daughter, Glorianna Baxter Williams, weighed in at five and one half pounds. "Anna" as they called the baby was the light of their lives and the center of their attention forever. So taken was Glory with the baby, she "vowed to change and become womanly so as to set a good example for my gal."

So Garden Grove, the bastion of bachelors, became a family town. Pastor's warning they would soon be needing a school was a sound prediction and happiness reigned supreme in the community.

~ * ~

From the time Michael could toddle, he was Gray's shadow and quite naturally his first word was "Pa". He was a tall child with black curly hair and inexhaustible energy—always quick to learn but also stubborn at times. He tested Gray's and Rachel's patience on a daily basis.

One evening, after putting Michael to bed, they were sitting in the study when Rachel said to Gray, "What he really needs is a brother or sister. Maybe he wouldn't be quite as spoiled."

"We've been trying, haven't we?" Gray grinned, looking at Rachel.

"Yes, but..." She paused. She knew she was about to tread on shaky grounds. *What was it the women in Four Corners called it? Sedition to suggest infertility might be the husband's fault. I don't want to hurt Gray.*

"Remember last month when I went with you to Sacramento?"

"Yes."

"Well, I went to see the doctor for a check-up and he said I was fine and he couldn't see any reason for me not to be able to get pregnant. Then he reminded me of some medical readings I had seen before. It boosts a man's fertility if he doesn't smoke or drink when they're trying for a baby."

"Oh, so I have to give up both my pipe and my evening drink?" He drew in his breath. "Can I keep my piano?" He grinned again.

"One other thing, tomato juice is beneficial in your diet."

"Rachel, this doesn't sound like you, the scientist, talking, but I guess I can make this sacrifice. Can we try a little harder in bed, too?"

She reached over and swatted him. "Now, how about a little music to relieve some of your cravings?"

"Not all of them."

"No, that comes later, upstairs."

~ * ~

One year later, Gray Andrew Collins was born. Rachel would never forget the moment Gray first saw his son. A radiance shone from both of them; and for the first time since she had known her husband, he didn't have just the right words to express himself. She only knew he held her to him so tightly she and the new baby could scarcely breathe.

~ * ~

Time flew and before Rachel realized it, little Gray was beginning to walk and talk. It was fall and most of Gray's busy time was over.

One evening they were once again sitting in the study. Smiling at her, Gray said, "How would you like to take a trip with me to San Francisco? I have some business arrangements to make up there and I'd like to show you that gala city. We haven't gone away together for a long time."

"Sounds inviting, but what about the boys?"

"The boys are big enough to stay with Mary and now Glory and Martin built next door, they're right here, too."

"Well, I don't know..."

"I'll give up my pipe and start drinking tomato juice if that's any indication of my intentions." Grinning he added, "Little girl with your hair and eyes would be nice."

"With such a bribe, how could I refuse?" Rachel reached over and ruffled his hair.

"Good. I have a trip to make to Sacramento with a convoy of wagons, and we'll leave when I get back. Start packing tomorrow." He bent down and kissed her.

Her heart bubbled with love for this man.

~ * ~

Rachel carefully folded the last dress, laid it inside the trunk, and snapped down the lid. She turned to Mary saying, "That does it. I'm all ready. Gray should be here any minute and we'll leave for San Francisco in the morning."

"Are you happy?" Mary asked.

"Very, and very excited, too." She paused, "It won't be too much for you to care for the boys, will it?"

"No, Glory will help and Len, too. We'll be all right."

Afternoon turned into evening and Rachel decided to feed the boys their supper, setting aside a portion for Gray.

"Where's Pa? Why isn't he here to eat with us?" Michael asked.

"I don't know," Rachel answered. "They must have had a delay or a breakdown. I'm sure he'll be here as soon as he can."

Little Gray joined in. "Pa, Pa, I wanna see Pa."

"Boys, how about it? I'll get the music box out and play it for you and then we'll go upstairs and I'll read you a story."

"O.K. If Pa comes, will you wake us up?"

"If it isn't too late."

Rachel tried to hide her concern. It wasn't like Gray not to send a rider ahead if he were detained.

After she had coaxed the boys to bed, she went into the study and pulled out a book to read. The pages remained unturned as she became more and more worried. She began to pace back and forth. *This just isn't right. Gray would never make me worry this way.*

The clock struck nine, then ten, and finally eleven. She knew she should go to bed but now she was genuinely concerned. She decided to go to the office herself to see if they had gotten word. Then she heard a buggy stop in front of the house.

She flew to the front door and opened it. "Gray, why are you so late?"

It wasn't Gray. Rather it was Tom who stood there. "No, Mrs. Collins it's me. I think you'd better come quick." His voice quivered.

"My God, what's wrong? Where's Gray? Tell me." She grasped his arm, demanding an answer.

"He's down at Dr. Sam's office."

Rachel grabbed her shawl, calling back to Mary's room, "Watch the boys."

She clambered into the buggy. Tom urged the horses into a trot down the hill.

"What happened?"

"The other drivers brought him in. He's hurt real bad. There was a rockslide up on Widow's Peak. Unexpected. They had stopped and checked the curve for loose rocks, and the first three wagons had gone ahead without a problem; but, just as Gray passed through, there was this rumble and shaking and the whole side of the hill came down. They dug him out as fast as they could. Killed the team, but he landed under the wagon and it sheltered him some." Tom's voice broke.

Rachel caught her breath. "Is he conscious?"

"Yes, ma'am, but he's hurting awfully bad."

Rachel began to cry, but caught herself. *I must be brave—for Gray. I can't let him see the terror I feel.*

The buggy had hardly come to a stop in front of the office when Rachel jumped off and ran up the steps. She brushed past the drivers, grouped in the waiting room, and into the examining room to Gray's bed.

Sam turned to greet her. "Rachel, I'm sorry..."

Gray, prone and motionless, smiled weakly. "Honey, I'm glad you're here. I—"

"Don't try to talk, dear." She bent down and kissed him.

Rachel heard the shallowness of his breathing and recognized the pallor of his skin. *God, please give me strength.*

When she pulled back the blanket, she noticed one of his legs crooked away from his body. Then she raised the night shirt Sam had put on him and saw the mass of bruises and cuts covering his body. Most frightening of all, blood began to seep from his mouth, running onto and over his shoulder. *My stars, he's hemorrhaging internally.*

Sam shook his head in the way doctors have of expressing the hopelessness of the situation. It was as if the knife of reality had been plunged into her heart. *Gray, my wonderful Gray is dying.*

Rachel looked around the room with its freshly scrubbed floors and glistening whitewashed walls. Usually it was a place where she felt hope with the aroma of antiseptics and rows of shining bottles in ordered array on the shelves. Now there was only an oppressive air.

She shed her shawl, replacing it with her medical smock, which she buttoned and pulled tightly around her. Despite the chill of the night, there was a stifling quality to her surroundings. Fear and emotion clashed with scientific logic within her. Never had she felt more torn while trying to be both a woman and a doctor. She reached for his wrist and felt his pulse, which was becoming increasingly erratic.

"I'm so cold," he moaned. His teeth began to chatter.

In an attempt to give him some of her warmth, she sat on the bed and gathered him into her arms. "Gray, please, Gray, my darling, don't leave me."

He reached for her hand and looked into her eyes. "It's all right, Rachel. I'm not afraid to die. I've had more happiness with you and the boys than most men ever know."

He began to choke and she propped his head against her. *How like him to be comforting me at a time like this.*

"Is the pain unbearable? I have some medicine I could give you."

"No, there isn't time. I need to be alert—to talk to you."

She covered him with her body as if to shield him from the inevitable.

"Sing for me, Rachel."

Rachel choked back the tears. She began to croon as she rocked him slowly back and forth. "Oh, my darling, oh my darling." She broke down, her sobs interrupting the song.

Then Gray rallied. "Don't cry, Rachel, my dear one. Think of the wonderful times we've had. The time we first saw the ocean together. Our wedding night. When little Gray was born. Our first Christmas together. Remember those times."

He coughed again. Clearing his throat, he rasped, "Take care of the boys, but most of all *you* be happy." His eyes searched hers for acknowledgement.

She nodded, unable to speak. She had seen death often, but nothing had prepared her for this and the fact he worried only about her. His bravery and caring overcame her. Despite her resolve, she could not stop the flow of her tears.

Suddenly he gasped for breath and then grew limp against her. "Gray, Gray," she screamed, but no matter how she called him or rocked him, she could not bring him back. The light from his eyes was gone forever. Never again would she know his kindness or caring or his comforting presence. The music of his life was silenced forever.

Her loss overwhelmed her and she fell, distraught, across his body, her sobs resounding in the outer office.

~ * ~

Gray was buried the next afternoon in the cemetery behind the church. The Parson rode in especially to present the eulogy. It was little comfort to her at the time, but all of the Valley was there mourning their loss.

Rachel never knew how she found the strength to survive this time. But as hard as it was for her, Michael took it the worst. On the day of the burial, he lay crying on the covered

grave until Martin had to remove him and carry him home for Rachel.

After all of the people left that evening, Rachel put the emotionally exhausted Michael to bed, but little Gray clung to her. "Mama, play the music box for me and Pa."

She wanted to question the child's statement, but she could not bring herself to explain Gray's absence and death at that moment.

"Please, Ma, play the music box now."

Rachel looked at the small upturned face which had never looked more like his father's than at that moment. She could not refuse him. She came across the disc of Minuets that included *Minuet in G*, one of Gray's favorites, and inserted it into the machine.

Little Gray stood mesmerized while the music filled the house, driving out some of the gloom. When the disc stopped she asked, "Gray, now what would you like?"

"Play it again."

"The same one?"

"Yes, Ma, please."

When it finished the second time, he turned and went to the study and crawled up on the piano bench. Settling himself, he raised the lid over the keys and began to play the minuet. He turned and smiled at Rachel with eyes that could have been his father's.

"Did you like that, Ma?"

Rachel could scarcely speak. "How did you do such a thing?"

"Pa helped me. Didn't you know he was here?"

A book flew off the shelf and crashed onto the floor. When Rachel picked it up, she saw it was Gray's favorite Shakespeare collection. She felt a warmth surrounding her. Suddenly it was gone and there was the sound of the front door closing.

"He's gone, Ma. But he said I'm here. I'll always be with you. To love you."

She lifted the child and sat in Gray's chair, holding him, knowing Gray had come to comfort them in a way only Gray could have done.

"Pa wants you to be happy, Ma."

"Yes, I know."

~ * ~

So it was Rachel and her sons survived their loss. Martin, Glory, and Anna visited often. She and the boys spent Christmas with Iris and Jorge. Even so, it was often an act of courage for Rachel to get out of bed in the morning to face each day alone. Fortunately, Tom managed the business, taking much of the burden from her.

In early January, Art came from Sacramento with a business proposal. He was selling his part of the partnership there to a shipping line out of San Francisco, and the same concern wanted to buy Rachel's part as well.

Art told her, "I've already taken the papers to the lawyer and he says it's all legal. It's a handsome sum, two hundred fifty-thousand dollars, for the service and the buildings. Neither you nor your boys will ever have to worry about money—ever."

"It sounds fine," Rachel said. "Martin wants to buy the rights to Gray's local delivery service so that would take care of everything except the land. Tom can manage the farms for me."

"Well, I guess that's all except for one thing," Art said.

"Yes?"

"The last time Gray was in Sacramento—his very last day—he came by to see me. He told me about your trip to San Francisco and how he was looking forward to it. He also said he was the luckiest man in the world having you and the boys. You had made him so very happy. Happier than he had ever dreamed possible." He paused, "I just thought I ought to tell you..."

Rachel stood at the door watching Art leave. Oh, Gray, thank you for sending me this message. I sometimes worried I hadn't given you enough of myself. I felt guilty. Now I know that your love could overlook my imperfections. Without the

guilt, knowing you were truly happy, I can somehow manage to go on with my life.

~ * ~

One March afternoon Rachel had put the boys down for a nap when she heard a knock at the door. There stood Marie beaming at her. "Hi, I thought I'd stop by for a cup of coffee while I'm in town."

Rachel hugged her and then leading her inside said, "I'm so glad to see you, but where are your babies?"

"We hired a settler woman to come in and help a couple of days a week, so I came into town while she's there. I need to pick up a few things."

"You mentioned coffee. Come into the kitchen while I heat up the pot." Rachel glanced at Marie. "You're looking good. Is that a new dress? I love the print."

"Yes, I have to splurge between babies and wear something that really fits." She grinned at Rachel. "How are you doing?" She took Rachel's hands and stepped back to inspect her.

"I'm all right and the boys seem to be adjusting."

"Rachel, you're awfully thin. Of course black makes you look kind of bleak. How long do you plan to wear those weeds?"

"The usual time is a year."

"A year? My stars this is California where things move faster. Besides, it's not the middle ages." She looked in her shopping basket she had carried into the house with her. "Look at this." She held up a bolt of bright blue gingham.

"It's a pretty color."

"With a large white collar to set off you face, it'd be stunning on you." She tucked the cloth under Rachel's chin and let it fall to the floor. She began measuring and pinning the fabric to Rachel's body.

"I shouldn't, Marie, really."

"You should." She spun Rachel around and began marking the hem. "It isn't like it's scarlet red with a plunging neckline." She spit a few pins out of her mouth. "I'll make it for you and

you can pay Len for the material. I'll have it ready for you to wear to church on Sunday."

Rachel smiled in spite of herself, "What can I say except 'thank you'?"

"It seems about right." Marie laughed. When she finished with the fitting, she rose. "I almost forgot. Len sent something to give you." She searched in her basket, pulling out a square white envelope. "It came for you in today's post. I didn't mean to look, but it's from Jeb. Jeb Morgan."

Rachel could hardly believe it. "Oh, really?" she asked.

"Yes, really. You open it while I pour the coffee. It's starting to smell burned."

"The coffee?" Rachel stared at her with a blank expression.

"Sit down and open it."

Rachel's hands trembled as she carefully raised the flap, trying not to tear the paper. Inside lay an engraved, gilt-edged card that read, "With sincerest sympathy." A personal, hand-written message lay at the bottom. "I had not heard of your loss until I saw an item in an old issue of the Los Angeles paper. Please let me know if I can help you or your boys in any way." "Jeb" was scrawled underneath.

Rachel clasped the card to her bosom and stared out the window.

"Better drink your coffee, it's getting cold."

Rachel mechanically reached for the cup.

"He never married, you know." Marie told her.

"Oh?"

"Jeremy saw him this fall when he delivered a herd of horses down south. He told Jeremy he and Joe, his partner, were still 'batching', doing their own cooking and cleaning." Marie searched Rachel's face, but Rachel gave no response.

"Guess, I'd better go. Jeremy will think I've deserted him and the boys." She laughed. "I'll send the dress in when I'm finished."

"The dress, yes, the dress."

"I'll let myself out. Good-bye."

"Oh, good-bye, and thank you, Marie."

Michael came bounding down the stairs. "Was it Marie? Did Jimmy come, too?"

"No, I'd have called you if he had."

"Jimmy's so lucky. Gets to live on a ranch and have a pony. I wish I could live on a ranch and have a horse. I wish Pa was here."

"Me, too," she answered, hugging him. "You'd really like to live on a ranch."

"Oh, yes, Ma."

"Maybe some day you can."

"Honest?"

"We'll see. Right now go call your brother and we'll make those cookies I've been promising you boys."

~ * ~

One night, a few weeks later, after Rachel had rocked the boys and put them to bed, she went to the keyhole desk and retrieved Jeb's card. She turned the envelope end over end through her fingers. This movement mirrored the thoughts that tumbled erratically through her mind.

What am I to do? Should I move somewhere and resume my practice—they don't really need two doctors in Garden Grove. I need someone to help me with the boys. It's plain to see. There are so many things to consider. Quietly she pleaded, "Oh Gray, if only you were here to advise me."

And then suddenly there he was in her mind's eye, tall and handsome and tender with his blue eyes twinkling. "Rachel, aren't you holding the answer to your dilemma in your own hands? Search within and see if it isn't true."

"Oh, Gray..." But he was gone—she sensed for the very last time.

With inner resolve, she seated herself and reached up to the pigeonhole where she kept her writing materials, withdrawing a crisp, white sheet of her best linen paper. She began the letter, *Dear Jeb...*

Twenty-two

The Reunion

Six Months Later

Jeb Morgan smoothed his cowlick and straightened the collar on his best blue shirt as he sat in his buckboard gazing down the road. He watched for the first cloud of dust that would signal the approach of the Los Angeles stage. He began to perspire under the warm September sun while he tried to quell the rising tide of excitement which had been building since he received Rachel's letter last week. All she said was she and her sons, Michael and Gray, ages four and two respectively, were coming for a visit.

Jeb had read of Gray Collin's death a year ago. He hadn't seen Rachel in almost five years, but he thought of her more than he liked to admit. He tried to bury her memory in the work of building up the ranch and then constructing the house. Nothing had taken her image away. He courted a variety of women, but none suited him. When he compared them to Rachel, they all fell short. She had her own unique beauty, tall and statuesque with warm auburn curly hair and a smile, both deep and understanding. The courage she exhibited crossing the plains was amazing. Even when she defied him and rallied the women around Mary, he had to admire her spunk. Her tenacity

and courage reminded him of Ma, a widow alone, who raised him while still moving west. He concluded that was why he had not forgotten her in all this time.

Jeb grew more impatient in his wait. Was the stage late? He checked his pocket watch. No, it wasn't quite four, the time the agent said the stage would be at the cut-off. Suddenly, a tale tell sign of red rose in a filmy plume over the road. Pounding hooves brought the stage ever closer until they halted next to the buckboard.

Jeb, heart racing, opened the door of the vehicle. He extended his hand, helping her to the ground. There she stood smiling up at him. She was real and she was here. *After the bleak January night in Garden Grove, I never would've believed it.*

Jeb reached inside, lifting first the smaller boy and then the larger one to the ground. He had never been able to visualize her children, perhaps because he did not want to think of her having another man's sons. They were, though, he had to admit handsome little fellows. They were quite different from each other—one shy and blonde and the other dark-haired with bright, mischievous blue eyes.

Jeb held his breath and glanced again at Rachel. She was, as he had prayed, still the same beautiful woman he remembered.

Rachel reached up and hugged him in greeting. "Oh, Jeb, it's been so long. I didn't realize how much time has passed." She turned to the two boys. "Jeb, meet Gray and Michael."

Gray grabbed Jeb's pant leg, looking up at him, hoping to be held. "Pa, Pa," he said expectantly.

Michael chided him, saying, "Gray, he's not your Pa. Baby."

Jeb answered, lifting Gray to his shoulder, "He can call me Pa, can't you, Scout?" He smiled at the younger boy. "Come on, we'd better get this baggage stowed and get to the ranch."

It was only when the boys were situated in the back and Rachel was beside him on the seat that Jeb had a chance to look at her more fully. He had been right; she hadn't changed at all.

She was still slim and lovely just as he had hoped. She wore a form-fitting traveling suit of blue serge and a matching picture hat, framing her slightly oval face. Tendrils of reddish brown curls escaped over her forehead. Her face flushed with excitement while she exuded the familiar and sweet aroma of lavender.

There was an awkward silence, then both said, "How have you been?" They laughed as they interrupted each other.

"You go first, Rachel," he said.

She eyed him speculatively. He was wearing a blue shirt, which highlighted his eyes. Gray hair sprinkled his temples in a glistening effect, but otherwise he was unchanged. Something else that remained the same was the animal magnetism which forever drew her to him.

Rachel began slowly, "It's been a very difficult year. Gray's death was quite a shock. Such a tragic time with the landslide. It was such a freak accident because he hardly ever drove on a delivery." She shook her head sadly. "How about you, Jeb? Has your ranch prospered?"

"I'm fine. Joe and I've done very well with Val Verde." They fell silent again, unable to find words to ask what both of them wanted to know so badly. Had their love for each other survived the years and these circumstances?

Jeb said shyly. "I built the ranch house on the hill with a large porch. Just like we used to talk about when we sat on the wagon seat in the evenings. Remember?"

"How I remember. I often wondered just what it would be like."

"I'm glad you came...to...to visit." Jeb colored slightly as he looked at her.

"Well, I was afraid you wouldn't ask me to come, so brazen woman that I am, I invited myself."

"I'm glad you did." He slapped the reins on the back of the team, urging them forward.

~ * ~

Joe, Jeb's partner, stood quietly waiting for them when they drove up to the house. Though of middle age, he reflected his Indian heritage in his handsome face and easy grace. "Welcome to the ranch. I'm Joe and I know who you three are. We've been cooking and cleaning for a week, getting ready for you." Jeb gave him a dirty look, but Joe continued, unabashed. "You boys change your duds and I'll show you the ranch before we eat a bite."

"Can I see Prince—the one that's so big and pretty? The one Ma says is the most beautiful horse in the world?" Michael whirled around in circles.

Jeb looked at Rachel with surprise. "You told him about Prince?"

Rachel nodded.

Michael continued, "She said you were the handsomest man in the world when you rode Prince at the front of the wagon train."

It was Rachel's turn to blush. "Michael, you can't keep anything to yourself. Now get inside and we'll put your riding clothes on before Joe changes his mind about showing you the ranch."

~ * ~

When Joe and the boys had gone to the barn, Jeb ushered Rachel out onto the porch. He pointed to the view below. "Look at my world. You can see a lot of it from right here."

Rachel gasped, "It is lovely. Just as you described. An oasis in its own right."

"You've got to sit in your chair." Jeb motioned to a large wooden rocker centering on the view of the valley below. "That's your chair. Joe made it when we built the house. We've always called it Rachel's chair." He paused, then continued. "Once I had a woman guest for Sunday dinner. She came on out here while we stayed behind to clean the table. She sat down there. When I came out, I made her move. She never understood why. I didn't either. But it made me mad that she

dared sit in your chair. Since then, I always keep lassos or something in it so no one will do that again.”

“Oh, Jeb.” Tears welled in Rachel’s eyes. “I thought you had forgotten me. I was so afraid.” Before she realized it, the shyness had fled and she was up and in his arms.

“No, I didn’t forget you. I came back after you the first January.” He lowered his gaze. “I came to Garden Grove to see Jeremy Adams about some horses and then I heard you were married...” Shaking his head, he said gruffly, “No, it’s a lie. I went back to Garden Grove to ask you to marry me. I saw your sign with your married name, and then I saw you with Gray.” He choked. “And I knew it was too late.”

Holding her by the shoulders, Jeb pushed Rachel back to look directly into her face. “Why in heaven’s name did you marry so soon? Was it so easy for you to forget me?” He shook her slightly.

“Of course I hadn’t forgotten you, but you left me and there were other circumstances. I—” She was interrupted by a noise coming from the corral.

They looked down at the barn as Joe led Prince with the two boys following along behind. Michael stroked the horse’s side and then spoke to Joe who went back inside and returned with a blanket and saddle.

“I guess Joe’s showing them how it’s done. I know he won’t let them try to ride. Prince would never let them on.”

When Prince was saddled, Michael led the horse around the fence. Jeb whistled, “I can’t believe Prince will let him handle him.” He called, “Joe, be careful down there.” The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the boy climbed the fence and then mounted Prince.

“My God.” Jeb started to run to the corral. He watched in utter amazement while Prince quietly strode around the enclosure with the boy on his back. “I can’t believe it. Prince has never let anyone except me ride him. Not even Joe.”

Rachel took Jeb’s arm. “I’m not surprised. Michael’s a wonderful outdoorsman as young as he is. We’ve never

encouraged him to be a dare devil but its a natural inclination of his.”

Joe opened the gate and Michael came galloping past, waving proudly at them. Jeb murmured, “I just can’t believe it. Prince is letting him ride and liking it, too.” He shook his head again. “Well, it’s getting time to go in and have our supper. Joe, bring the boys to the house and we’ll eat some of the food you’ve been cooking up.”

And the food was scrumptious. Rachel commented during the meal, “I’ve never eaten a more tender steak. Nor one better prepared.”

Jeb answered with a note of pride in his voice, “It’s Morgan-bred, Morgan-grown, and Joe-prepared.”

When Rachel rose to help clean the table, Joe would have none of it. “You go sit on the porch. I’ll clear this away.”

The sun was beginning to disappear into a bank of golden red clouds. A breeze stirred the limbs of the overhanging tree as a Spanish dove called to his mate, adding to the tranquility. An old collie dog came up to the porch.

“Mama, who’s that?” Michael asked pointing to the dog.

Jeb joined them and answered, “That’s Shep. I got him the same time I bought Prince.”

“Gee,” Michael exclaimed. Shep settled between Michael and Gray, slowly thumping his tail on the wooden planks of the floor. He laid his head across Gray’s legs while the boy scratched him behind his ears.

Jeb pulled his chair next to Rachel. “I’d like to show you the ranch. Would you feel up to it tomorrow? Joe said he’d keep the boys for the day and Andy’s here to help, too.”

“I’d like that. Andy’s still with you?”

“Yes, and several more of the drivers from the wagon train. That reminds me. How about the women in Garden Grove? Did all of them stay?”

“Yes, Glory married Cousin Martin. They bought Gray’s local freight service. They also kept the blacksmith shop. They’re doing well. They seem happy. They are so proud; they

have a daughter just younger than Michael." Rachel paused. "I delivered her myself. Then Marie married Jeremy Adams. They already have four boys. The last baby was born this summer."

"Are they all red heads?" Jeb laughed.

"All except the baby and he's dark-haired like Marie."

"How about her Jimmy?"

"He's fine. Already in school. He was related to the Mortons back in Pennsylvania. Well, his so-called father and grandfather were killed in an accident and he inherited a fortune. He's turned out to be a wealthy little boy."

"And Iris?"

"Well, she married Jorge. They have two little boys and another on the way. So far, all of them are healthy. She's doing so well. Jorge and his madre just cherish her."

"Mary. Did her doctor soldier ever come to claim her?"

"No, this summer she finally gave up on him. She plans to marry Len Smith. She had been working in the store helping him."

"Isn't he a bit old for her?"

"Perhaps, but he's very understanding and she needs that."

"I wondered what the ending of all their stories would be. And you, Rachel. Has your practice grown?"

Rachel shook her head. *Still the same old issue between us.* "Not really. I worked until just before Michael was born and then we found a young doctor who took over my practice. I help sometimes if there is an emergency or with a two-man operation, nothing more."

Jeb whistled slightly. "Oh, ho. What about in the future? Are you planning to work again?"

She considered before answering. "It depends on the path I follow in the future. On that I have not decided," she answered. She tried to keep her voice noncommittal, hoping to prevent wistfulness from creeping into her tone.

It began to grow dark. Little Gray yawned. Rachel said, "I'd better take them upstairs and put their night clothes on them. Gray always wants to be rocked a little before bedtime."

"Oh, do you have to go so soon?" Jeb asked. "Bring them back down and I'll help with the rocking."

Rachel returned in a few minutes with the boys in nightclothes and she in her robe. "They always want me to sing now. So bear with me." She laughed.

Michael plopped himself unceremoniously into Jeb's lap, leaning against the large man's chest like a cuddly, warm possum. "Can I call you Jeb?" he whispered. Jeb nodded, drawing the child to him, patting him in rhythm to Rachel's crooning lullaby.

In a few minutes Michael began softly snoring. Jeb chuckled. "My ma always used to laugh about how I was a 'snorer' when I was a kid. Still do some, I expect."

Jeb and Rachel sat in silence with the moon glowing softly on them. "We'd better get these boys to bed now," Rachel told him.

They each carried a child up the stairs to the bedroom, then tucked them into the two small cots set up next to Rachel's bed.

Jeb turned to gaze at her. He wished he didn't have to leave, but he knew it was much too soon to think of intimacy, though his body signaled otherwise. He couldn't deny himself some affection, so he pulled her to him, kissing her. Her lightly-clad body felt soft and appealing against him.

Summoning all his resolve, he released her, saying, "I'm glad you came, Rachel. Goodnight."

After Jeb left, Rachel blew out the lamp and climbed into bed. She lay awake in the darkness. *I can't believe he came back for me in the winter. Could he have been the one I sensed watching me that night? I still remember that feeling after all these years.* She turned on her side. *Jeb still loves me, but it's hard for him to forgive me for those years with Gray, though I know there must have been other women for him.*

As she tried to sleep she heard a wolf wail far off in the hills, calling to his mate. She turned again. *Then there's the problem of Michael. Does he have an inkling Michael is his?*

Most of all, will he wonder if I had planned to forever keep his son from him?

As she continued to lie there, Rachel, despite her uneasiness, chuckled to herself at the low snoring sound coming from Michael's bed and the louder snoring seeping through the wall from Jeb's room. Finally, exhausted from the trip and the emotion of the day, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

~ * ~

Rachel was awakened in the morning by Gray pulling on her arm. "Mama, get up. I'm hungry. Michael already went downstairs. Hurry."

Rising, Rachel glanced out the window to the yard below. There was Jeb headed to the barn, with Michael hard on his heels.

She hurriedly dressed Gray and herself and went down into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Joe welcomed her. "Have a good night?"

"Wonderful," she answered.

"How about you, little brave? Ready for some breakfast?" Joe asked.

"I'm hungry." Gray grinned.

Rachel donned an apron she'd brought with her. The bacon crackled in the iron skillet on top of the stove. "I'll fix the eggs if you'll tell me how you like them." She took up the strips of meat and laid them on a platter. "Or is it too soon? I don't want them to get cold."

"Jeb and Michael just went to give the horses some grain. They should be back any minute."

"I'll fix yours and Gray's first."

"Want a hard one," Gray told her.

"Me, too," Joe agreed as he sliced the bread and set out plates.

"I'll do three hard fried because Michael likes them hard, too."

Just then Jeb and Michael came into the kitchen. "I'm fixing eggs. How do you like yours, Jeb?"

"Two over easy, if you please." He grinned at her with that old familiar crooked smile of his.

Rachel told Michael, "Sit over by your brother. I have yours ready." Rachel set the plate in front of him.

Michael pushed it away. "I want mine just like Jeb's, Ma. Not this old way."

"All right, little mimic. Over easy, just like Jeb's." She gave Jeb a quick glance and he winked at her.

When they had finished eating, Jeb asked, "Rachel, are you still game for a tour of the ranch? That is, if Michael here will let me borrow Prince."

"You can ride him, Jeb. But take care of him. Don't make him tired."

"Michael, that wasn't nice." Rachel scolded.

The boy lowered his eyes, "I'm sorry, Jeb."

"Don't worry, I'll leave Shep here with you and Gray to take care of. Sort of swap out." He smiled at the boys. "Joe, would you cut us meat from last night and fix us a little lunch?"

"Will you be gone long?" Michael asked.

Looking at Joe, Jeb answered. "Good part of the day. I need to check the herd on the east range and look over the Jackson place again." Turning back to the boys, he said, "Joe can show you how to do some chores. Feed the chickens and take care of the baby calves."

"That'll be fun," Michael exclaimed.

"Then everything's settled," Rachel said. "I'll go put on my riding pants, Jeb, the ones you had me buy back in St. Joe for the wagon train trip. Then I'll be ready."

Jeb brought Prince and a mare named Sassy for Rachel to ride. When they reached the end of the lane, they turned to wave goodbye. Joe was walking toward the barn with bucket in hand, followed closely by the excited boys. Rachel laughed, for there was Michael peeking out from under the brim of one of Jeb's old hats he had found somewhere.

Jeb told her, "Believe those little guys might take to ranch life." He chuckled as Rachel nodded her head.

~ * ~

At first Rachel and Jeb traveled through the valley itself. Val Verde was well named for it was an emerald jewel nestled within the brown, dry autumn landscape. Through the center of the land, a crystal clear brook dashed bubbling and cavorting over the rocks.

"It's an oasis, isn't it?" Rachel asked Jeb.

"Exactly. I looked all over and never found a place to equal this. An oasis. That is how I always wanted to describe it. And you've found the word for me."

A large herd of crossbreeds were grazing contentedly along the river bank. "Some day I'll have blooded stock here. I bought a white-faced bull, but he hasn't quite caught up with his work yet."

They began climbing toward the land above over a steeply narrow trail. "We're going up to the table top range. It looks barren now with the grass dry and burnt, but it provides a lot of forage in the late fall and into the spring. It saves the valley grass for the dry times."

Rachel sensed Jeb was showing her the ranch as well as instructing her. She hoped she was interpreting his intentions correctly and this tutoring meant he was considering a long-term commitment. It was not only the boys who would be happy at Val Verde, but she herself. She felt encouraged by Jeb's attention.

A deer, startled by their approach, darted across their path into a cluster of trees and out of sight. Sassy reared and Jeb caught her rein. "Let's stop here under the shade." He helped Rachel down, handing her a canteen of water.

She took a long drink. "It tastes good—so cool and refreshing. As my pa used to say, it's the kind of drink forever calls you back to the source."

"I feel the same, Rachel."

He raised his arm pointing to the far horizon. "Here you can see most of the ranch. It goes from the trail behind us down to

the other side of the valley.” He smiled at her with apparent satisfaction.

“Jeb, you’ve done so much in five years. You should be very proud.”

“I am. But that’s not the best part. It’s having you here to share it with me.” He put his arm protectively around her shoulders, and they stood there savoring the moment.

At last he released her and said, “Back on board.” He lifted her onto Sassy. “I’ve something more to show you.”

They headed toward a ranch house half a mile ahead of them. “This is the Jackson place we’re on now. Tom and Sarah Jackson lived here for forty years. He died last year and she recently moved into town. I’m considering buying this place to add to Val Verde. It needs a lot of work, but it would be an investment for the future.”

He pointed to the wooded hills rising into the horizon. “See the stand of timber, mostly pines, above us? A man could lumber enough wood out of there to pay for the whole ranch. Of course it would be hard, building a road. He’d have to be careful and cut just enough trees not to ruin the land or foul the spring runoff. Still it could be done.”

Rachel listened with rapt attention.

Then he added, “Of course it would depend on what path I might choose for the future.” He chuckled as he paraphrased her words from the night before. “A bachelor doesn’t need such an undertaking, but a married man with sons must take responsibility.”

Jeb is testing me. He’s enjoying it, too. She smiled quietly, saying, “Which path seems more inviting at this point?”

“Well, responsibility has never frightened me.” He glanced at her, his eyes twinkling.

They approached the small rock and wood cabin which blended with the landscape. “We’re here. We’ll have our lunch inside. I’m going to water the horses and put them in the barn for a while. It looks as if one of our afternoon rains might be blowing in.” He arched his arm to the sky. “See those few

clouds? They come up quick this time of the year and always bring a shower."

Jeb was right. He had hardly returned from the barn when the wind started blowing and it began raining in earnest. "Let me get a fire started for us. It's a little cool in here." The flames threw a cheery warmth throughout the small kitchen as they spread out the simple lunch Joe had packed.

"Jeb, this is a homey place. I love the handmade furniture and the checked curtains. All simple, but livable. I know the Jacksons must have been happy here."

"You're right. They were true pioneers. The thing impressed me most was the way Tom loved Sarah. After all those years, every time I saw him in town he squired her around, proudly calling her his bride. They had something few people have—not money, but something much more valuable."

Rachel looked at Jeb. *Do I detect a certain sentimental yearning in Jeb Morgan? And maybe, just maybe, a bit of maturity after five years of separation?*

Twenty-three

Fulfillment

Jeb and Rachel sat finishing their lunch of meat and bread while the rain rattled down on the roof. Jeb put a pot of coffee on to boil while they sat talking quietly of the ranch and Jeb's plans for the future. When they had drunk their coffee, Jeb poured the grounds into the fire. They sat in awkward silence watching the white cloud rise from the coals. The closeness of their morning and the pent-up desire of the moment was like the steam coming from the fireplace. It seemed it could neither be denied nor controlled.

Jeb exclaimed, "I can't wait any longer, Rachel." He drew her to him, first embracing her and then kissing her with her head tilted back under the pressure of his passion.

He lifted Rachel and carried her to the bedroom where he placed her gently on the four-poster. At first she reached for him, but then suddenly stopped. "Oh, Jeb, are we on the right path or are we making the same mistakes as before?"

"I only know I love you."

She remained silent.

Finally, he sucked in his breath, releasing her. "I know this—fate has given us one more chance. I can't lose you again." He cupped her chin in his hand, raising her eyes to meet

his. "Maybe this is too soon," he said, pointing to the bed. Going to the rocker, he sat gazing into the fire.

~ * ~

Rachel sat on the quilt, running her fingers over the small, even stitches sewn with such loving care. *What was it they say about things happening quickly in this new land? New alliances, new relationships?* She picked at a loose thread. *This man has waited for me for five years without abandoning either his ardor or his love for me. Surely, there is enough room in my heart for the memories of Gray and love for this man.*

Glancing at her first, he rose and walked to the window to draw back the curtain. Then he said, "It's slacked off some; I can go bring the horses now." He reached for his coat.

"Wait, don't go. I..."

Crossing the room, he sat beside her, asking, "Rachel, are you sure?" His eyes searched hers.

She nodded.

He rose long enough to remove his trousers and hurl his boots across the floor. Then he returned to Rachel and slowly undressed her. She lay anticipating and naked on the bed. He kissed her fully on the mouth and then on each breast. "My God, Rachel, you're as lovely as ever. Just as you were the first time at the inn." Then there was no more talk, for she pulsated with the same passion she felt coming from his body. Their lovemaking was more beautiful than ever with more tenderness and understanding ripened by five years of separation.

When the loving was over, he covered them with the quilt and they lay there together for a long time listening to the rain, which had begun again, beating its rapture onto the world outside. "How safe I feel here with you—how safe and how contented," she whispered softly.

"I know, Rachel. It's like being in a kind of paradise—away from all the disappointments outside." He kissed her and pushed a stray lock of hair away from her forehead. "Curly head, you are the most special person of my life." Then hesitating, he added, "You *will* marry me now, won't you?"

"Without any strings, any conditions?"

"Without any strings..."

"Of course, Jeb. I'd be honored."

Finally, he sat on the edge of the bed. She scooted up to lean against him when she noticed a small triangular smudge of pink skin on his shoulder blade. She rubbed her finger over it. "Jeb, was this where you took the arrow?"

"No, it's a birthmark. The scar is on the other side."

"I always thought it was from a wound." She traced the outline again. Then she pulled her hand away as if it were on fire. Michael had the same mark. *My gosh, how could I not have known this?*

"Ma used to call it the Morgan brand. She said my pa had the same thing. Does it bother you, Rachel?"

"No," she stammered, "of course not. It's just I'd never noticed it before."

"I'm glad," he told her.

Rachel's thoughts raced as she stared at the mark. Not only did Michael have one just like it, his was even located at the same place on his shoulder. She knew when they returned to the ranch, there was no putting off telling Jeb Michael was his son. Somewhere between here and home she must think of a way.

They dressed and were ready to leave when Jeb said, "We'll tell the boys the good news when we get back. I'll ride in to see Judge Horton in the morning and make the arrangements for him to marry us. I'll see Sarah Jackson and have the papers drawn up for her ranch, too, while I'm there."

He held her once more. "I'm happy. Now we can close the book on the past and start a new life. Five years are gone, but we'll make up for lost time. Knowing us."

"Jeb, there is something I want to tell you when we get back to the house."

"That's all right. Just remember we're not dredging up anything from the past. *Today* is what counts," he told her.

Rachel sighed.

~ * ~

The storm had gone, leaving a clear sky and a cool, soothing breeze in its wake. Although the ground was muddy, they retraced their route with relative ease. Rachel had decided the direct approach would be best in telling Jeb of Michael's birth. She needed only to find the appropriate moment.

When they reined in the horses at the ranch house steps, Andy came to take Prince and Sassy to the barn. Michael, hearing them, came running out the door. "Mama, Jeb, did you get wet?"

"No, we took shelter before it began. Jeb saw the storm coming."

"Oh, Jeb, I knew you would. You're so smart." Michael looked up at his hero.

Looking at Michael, Rachel was shocked. He was wearing no shirt. She almost shrieked, "Michael where's your shirt?"

"I got muddy and Joe washed it. He said I could play without it."

She grabbed his arm. "Come with me. I'll get you a clean one. Hurry—"

Before she could herd Michael into the house, Jeb came up to them. "Hey, Scout, did you have a good day? I guess you did if you played a little in the mud—" Jeb stopped in mid sentence. Michael had turned with his back directly in front of Jeb. Quickly Jeb grabbed him, running his thumb over the boy's skin.

"What's this?" He gazed down at the distinct, pink mark on the small shoulder. He draped the boy upside down over his arm so he could better identify the spot. Raising his voice, he shouted, "What is *this*, Rachel?" He shook the surprised boy again as if to dislodge the mark. Again he demanded in an even louder voice, "*What is this?*"

Michael began to wail. Rachel said, "Stop it, Jeb. Stop it now. You're frightening him."

Jeb released Michael who wiggled away, going to hide his face against Rachel's skirt.

"My God, woman, couldn't you have told me? Didn't I deserve at least that?" Jeb shouted. He glared at them before turning and stomping into the kitchen.

Michael sobbed, "Mama why is Jeb mad at me? Did I do something wrong?" He clung to her.

Rachel bent down, taking the boy in her arms. "Jeb didn't mean anything. We've had a long ride and he's tired."

Rachel was shaking. Why did I let this happen? She bit her lip. *The old saying of truth will out is certainly apt.*

At last she was able to soothe Michael and gain control of herself. "Stay out on the porch and take care of Shep. I want to go into the kitchen and talk to Joe."

Rachel started to push on the kitchen door when she heard Jeb talking to Joe. She paused.

"All this time and she never told me I had a son. What kind of a woman is she?" Jeb slammed his fist down on the table.

Joe laughed softly. "I've known who he belonged to since you first got him down off the buckboard. Even Prince recognized him. I thought you certainly had."

"Well, I hadn't. But why didn't she tell me before now? I would have married her. Didn't she think I would raise my own son?" Jeb growled.

"From what I understand, you didn't give her much of a chance to tell you. You were the one who went off and left her. She doesn't seem to me to be the kind of woman who would want to beg you to marry her. Not Rachel."

Jeb paced back and forth, sweat glistening on his forehead. Joe grabbed Jeb's arm to steady him. "Besides, you're missing the main thing. She's given you the greatest gift of your life, a son. You told me yourself when she was coming you wanted the two of you to have a new beginning. Here it is. In fact, it looks like you have a head start on the future with two sons."

Jeb lowered his eyes. "I'm going to the barn for a while." He turned and went out the back door banging it behind him.

Rachel came into the room. "He isn't leaving, is he?"

"No, he's pretty upset, but he goes down to the barn when he needs to think. He'll be all right. It's pretty hard to become a papa in one day, you know."

Michael stood on the porch watching Jeb retreat to the barn. He couldn't help it. He began running behind him, shouting, "Jeb, Jeb wait for me. Please, Jeb."

Jeb turned. "Get back to the house, boy."

Michael followed him, even more intent on being with him. "Jeb, please wait."

Jeb kept walking ignoring his pleas.

Michael ran to catch up. Then he was directly behind Jeb, who turned, saying in a threatening tone, "Boy, do like I say, go back to the house."

Suddenly Michael tripped, falling into the soft, oozing mud. Tears streaming from his eyes, he cried, "Jeb, Jeb, I'm sorry. What did I do?"

Jeb turned to see the little boy caked with mud sprawled on the ground, crying in utter desolation. "Jeb, Jeb, please, I'll be good. Don't hate me. Don't make us go home."

Jeb's heart wrenched. What in the world was he doing? Then the words gushed out, "Hate you? Never. I love you, son. You can't go home because you are home." He knelt by the boy, picking him up and drying his small swollen face with his handkerchief.

Rachel, having heard the conversation, stood quietly behind them. When Jeb turned and saw her, he shifted Michael to his shoulder and extended his arm to her. "Well?" he questioned. She hesitated. Thrusting his hand to her again, he repeated, "Well?"

This time she moved quickly to him and he embraced the two of them in a kind of all-inclusive bear hug from which came sounds of joy and laughter.

Joe stood on the porch holding Gray and watching the proceedings before him. "Well, little Scout," he told the boy, "guess Rachel's chair won't ever be empty again. Guess, too,

this ranch won't ever be lacking in excitement with those two together."

~ * ~

Rachel hummed while she worked, cleaning the house and putting up her newly arrived possession from Garden Grove. Jeb, Joe, and Andy had ridden off early that morning to the Jackson ranch to look over the herd and get them ready for winter pasture. This was the first time she had really been alone with time to think.

We've been married a month now. How wonderful it is. Not only for me but also the boys and Jeb, too. To reinforce her feelings of happiness, she could hear Gray and Michael playing contentedly in the yard with old Shep. She had bundled them up against the cool, north wind and sent them out while she sorted through the boxes which had arrived only yesterday.

At the bottom of the first box she came across her medical books. She hadn't brought all of them, just the latest.

Picking up the first book, she ran her finger over the gold lettering which read, *A Guide to Human Anatomy*. She sighed. Happy as she was, she knew Jeb was struggling with the thought of her career. As promised, he had placed no restrictions on it, but it was still hard for him to see her prepare an office and make other arrangements for her practice. Since there was no doctor in town and the area sorely needed her help, she had no choice but to proceed. After the ordeal of Jeb's acceptance of Michael, she tried to be especially diplomatic and include him in her decisions. This practice of medicine had been the roadblock that separated them before; she could not let that jeopardize their happiness again.

Rachel walked to the front room and placed her volumes on the shelf next to Jeb's collection, an odd assortment of the classics, agronomy, and animal husbandry. She stood staring at the volumes, trying to think of ways to obtain his whole-hearted support, but she could think of none.

Under her books she found a stack of medical journals, which she received every month. She couldn't find room for

them on the shelves, but she hated discarding them. Suddenly she thought of Betsy McDonald, who lived on the next ranch. She and Betsy had become good friends in just this short time. Betsy had been trained as a surgical nurse before she had married "Mac" McDonald. She was a small, pleasant middle-aged woman and Rachel suspected a competent nurse. Their interest in medicine drew them together and served as an outlet for their now diminished careers. *One thing I like about her is her devotion to a sanitary approach to medicine. Though California trained, she is just as fanatic as I on cleanliness. Yes, I know Betsy would enjoy having these journals.*

The sound of hoof beats intruded into her thoughts. She looked out the front to see Andy swinging himself off his horse and running up the steps. "Rachel, Rachel come quick."

She met him at the door. "What's wrong? It isn't Jeb? Tell me, it isn't Jeb," she screamed.

"No, it's Joe. He's been shot. He's terrible bad. A rifle shot close to the heart. We saw some hunters up in the woods above and they must have accidentally sent a stray bullet down on us. Hurry."

"Next to the heart? Is he conscious?"

"No, but he's breathing. Jeb has him at the Jackson ranch house. He said you'd better bring your operating tools. But hurry."

"Go saddle Sassy while I get my things together. Send Johnny up from the barn to stay with the boys. He's still working down there. One thing more, bring a good horse for Betsy McDonald. We'll swing by and get her. I'll have to have her help."

After they left the McDonald ranch, the wind whistled, chilling the three of them as they rode up the narrow trail to the Jackson ranch. Rachel was filled with foreboding as she thought about operating in such primitive circumstances. A bullet lodged near the heart would have been a challenge even in the best-equipped hospital and with trained assistants. A knot began to work its way into her stomach. Jeb loved Joe as did

she. This affected the objectivity she needed to do her best work. Still, though, she must get a hold on herself. At least she would have Betsy's skill to add to her own.

In what seemed an eternity, they finally bested the trail and came to the top of the ridge and the flat plain leading to the Jackson house. Jeb came out to meet her. Shaking his head, he said, "Oh, Rachel, he's really in a bad way. I have him in on the kitchen table and water boiling if you need it. I scrubbed my hands like you taught me." Then, turning to her, he added, "Betsy, I'm so glad you came, too."

The three of them entered the house. Rachel found Joe's condition to be much as Andy had described it. He was comatose and his pulse irregular and erratic. She cut his shirt away trying to assess the actual location of the bullet, probing his skin gently. She shook with the gravity of the situation.

"Can you operate?" Jeb asked, emotion choking his speech.

"I have to try, but I can't guarantee anything." Tears streamed down her cheeks. She looked at Jeb, "You'd better wait outside. Betsy will help me and Andy can stay and get anything we need."

"But Rachel, I can help," Jeb protested.

"Not this time." She pushed him gently toward the door.

Jeb knew she was right. Joe was like a father to him. He was so upset he would only be in the way. He watched Rachel and Betsy don their aprons and cover their faces with masks. Rachel reached into her medical bag and withdrew her instruments, which she had cleanly wrapped in oilcloth.

As he retreated to the porch, he heard Rachel tell Betsy, "He's unconscious now, but you may have to administer anesthetic if he starts to rouse. You can do it, can't you?" Betsy nodded.

The mantel clock struck one. The ordeal began.

Jeb paced back and forth, creaking over the uneven boards of the porch. Even though the day was cool, he felt perspiration beading on his brow. He couldn't lose Joe—Joe who had been the closest thing he had ever known to a father—Joe who had

helped him turn his life around when he came west after losing Miriam and his newborn son—Joe who had been his partner in the ranch. Jeb must not lose him now just as he, Jeb, had formed a family which Joe surely adored.

There was hope, though. Rachel gave him hope. His wife and lover was also a capable surgeon in her own right. If anyone could save Joe, Rachel could. In the past, the very skill he despised because he could not understand and accept it, was the one thing on which he now pinned his hope.

The clock struck two. Jeb stood at the door watching the proceedings. Rachel bent over Joe with every muscle taut as her hands moved the scalpel with sure, deft movements. Betsy sopped at the pulsing flow of red, trying to clear it from Rachel's view.

Jeb turned abruptly to retreat for he could no longer endure the air of tension. Suddenly he heard an exclamation, "That's it—you got it, Rachel." There was a small metallic ring as the bullet hit the bottom of the china basin.

"Thank God." Rachel raised her eyes heavenward. "Now we've got to stop this bleeding and stitch the wound as best we can. The rest is up to Joe, himself."

In a few minutes, Rachel came to the porch. "Jeb, he made it. He still isn't out of danger, but we got the bullet."

"Oh, Rachel, you've brought about a miracle." He lifted her and swung her about him in a wide circle.

"He's suffered a terrible trauma; but I believe if he can make it 'til morning, he'll live. His pulse isn't strong, but it's steady. No fibrillation now."

She sighed. "Go in and help Andy carry him to the bed. But be very careful. We don't want to aggravate the bleeding."

Rachel returned to the bedroom and stationed herself in a chair by the bed. Andy and Jeb fixed food at the fireplace in the kitchen while Betsy rested on a pallet on the floor nearby. Their activities were cloaked in silence as they waited. The afternoon shadows began to lengthen, giving way to night.

Joe stirred and Jeb, despite himself, came and sat on the edge of the bed, taking the older man's hand. "Joe, Joe, Amigo, come back to me," he pleaded.

Rachel rose placing her hand on Jeb's shoulder. "He can't hear me, can he?"

"Maybe not in the usual way, but I suspect he does with his heart. Love can bridge the deepest of caverns, you know."

The night was interminably long, but finally the first feeble light of day began to filter into the cabin. Almost as if in response to the sun, Joe opened his eyes, rubbing them as if to clear his thinking. "What—what happened? I hurt so much." He clutched at his chest feeling the bandage.

"You were shot. But I believe you'll be all right now. I'll tell you all about it later. For now you must rest," Rachel told him.

Hearing this, Jeb rushed into the room. He would have lifted Joe to cradle him if Rachel had not intervened. The others circled around the bed, half smiling, half crying.

Jeb, overcome with emotion, said, "Joe, Partner, you've come back to us."

"I sensed you were calling me, Jeb," he replied weakly, grasping Jeb's hand.

The group was stunned with the enormity of what he meant by his words. No one uttered a sound.

After a few minutes, Andy brought them back to reality by saying, "How about a little breakfast now? I think I smell the coffee brewing."

As they moved to the kitchen, Jeb drew Rachel aside. "Put on your coat. I want you to walk with me a little. I have something to tell you..."

They stood on the porch gazing toward the rising sun. Jeb pulled Rachel to him, looking directly into her eyes. "I have to tell you how very, very proud I am of you. Never has anyone accomplished anything more important in my life than saving Joe. It was a miracle and your skill made it possible." Then looking away, he continued, "Rachel, I've been so wrong about

your practicing medicine—so selfish. Forgive me for being such a fool. For not really understanding...”

Rachel cupped his chin in her hand, raising his gaze to meet hers. “Oh, Jeb, are you ready to *really* support my work, without resentment? To let me do what I was meant to do?”

“Yes, how could I deprive the world of your ability to save lives? How could I have been so blind and self-centered?”

“Jeb, I love you,” she exclaimed as she reached for his hand.

He folded her to him. She responded as never before, without withholding any of her mind or body, kissing him in an embrace that yielded her total being to him.

~ * ~

She had crossed a continent filled with unspeakably difficult hardships, but she was finally at home in this, the promised land of her heart. A land where she could be the complete woman she was destined to be—wife, mother and skilled doctor.

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