

BlueBeard

Barri Bryan



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By  
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## Chapter One

Once upon a time when the West was young, the world was naïve, and enchantment was still possible, there lived in the city of New Orleans a maiden fair of face and pure of heart. Her name was Mavis Maureen Donovan. Although Mavis's heart was spotless, the same could not be said for her reputation. Mavis was a prostitute in one of the fanciest brothels in New Orleans. This was not, of course, by choice. Circumstances forced Mavis into the world's oldest profession when she was a mere sixteen years of age.

Five years later, on a cold night in December, an unexpected police raid on Madam Fifi's Pleasure Palace landed Mavis in police custody. As fate would have it, that was precisely the night that the Reverend Dennis Douglas chose to visit the downtrodden and pray for the unfortunate souls incarcerated in the New Orleans jail. Dennis took one look at Mavis and fell smack dab in love.

Mavis took one look at Dennis and saw protection and security. Three months after their first meeting, Dennis married Mavis and took her to live in the little parsonage behind his church. None of the parishioners knew about Mavis's past, and she was careful to keep it that way. Life as a preacher's wife was not easy, but it was an improvement over being a prostitute in a bawdy house on Gallatin Street.

Dennis and Mavis had two daughters; well, at least Mavis had two daughters. There were those who believed that the girls were sired by someone other than Dennis and for obvious reasons. Dennis's hair was as red as a turkey gobbler's snout. Mavis's hair was a deep shade of auburn. Neither of the girls 'favored' the Reverend. Come to think of it, they didn't look much like Mavis either. Abigail, the older daughter had hair the color of sunshine and huge cornflower blue eyes. Beatrice, who was a year younger, had hair the color of midnight and eyes like brown velvet. When asked about his daughters' lack of resemblance to either him or his wife, Dennis always replied, "God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." Those words were too profound for the poor parishioners to interpret. After a while they stopped asking.

The years passed in monotonous succession until twenty winters had come and gone. One spring night Dennis went out to pray over an ailing parishioner and never returned. Some said he'd met with foul play. Others speculated he'd decided to move further on down the road.

Shortly after Dennis disappeared without a trace, the elders of the church asked Mavis and her daughters to vacate the parsonage.

Mavis tried to explain that she had no other place to go. The elders assured her that God would provide and booted her into the street.

Mavis hitched her span of mules to her wagon, loaded her few belongings and her two girls inside, tied her cow to the tailgate, and headed west. She opined that if 'Go West' was wise counsel to young men, it couldn't be bad advice for middle-aged women. The three females shook the dust of New Orleans from their feet and drove off into the sunset.

The trio traveled many days, through sunshine and shower, always pushing westward. Days ran to weeks and weeks converted to months, still they pressed on. One night after three months on the trail, they camped beside a running stream. The girls slept while Mavis pondered where the West really began and wondered how long it would take her to get there.

The next day as they rode along, Abbey spied a little cabin not far off the trail. It was nestled in a grove of tall trees. "Look." She pointed. "There's a vacant house. We can camp there for the night."

Closer inspection made Mavis suspect the house was a line shack built and maintained by whoever owned the property. Cowboys and hired hands stayed there when night found them too far from the main ranch house to make the ride back before dark. The cabin was small but comfortable--so comfortable in fact that Mavis and her daughters found themselves staying two nights and then three.

On the morning of the third day of their stay, a wizened little man dressed in a long robe with a hood wandered into the front yard and stared for a few minutes before hurrying onto the porch. "Anybody home?" he called as he rapped on the door with his gnarled fist.

Mavis prepared for the worst, told the girls to hide in the other room, took Dennis's old six shooter from her bag, hid her hands in the folds of her skirt, and opened the door a few inches.

The man on the other side was old and weather-beaten with a long white beard and tobacco juice oozing from the sides of his mouth. "Mornin' ma'am." He slipped his hood from his head, revealing a wealth of long gray hair. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mr. Rump L. Stiltskin."

Mavis was in no mood for pleasantries. "What do you want Mr. Stiltskin?"

"You can call me Rump. Sorry to bother you," the old man apologized, "but I have a problem."

Mavis thought, *don't we all?* She said, "I have problems of my own. I can't be bothered with someone else's woes."

Rump ran his fingers through the sides of his hair. "I'm not asking for your help, at least, not in the way you think." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "I have a herd of sheep over on the other side of that rise."

Mavis opened the door a little wider. This was cattle country. Shepherders were about as welcome in this part of the world as a rattlesnake at a tea party. "If some of these ranchers around here find you with a herd of sheep, they will nail your hide to the barn door."

"I know that," Rump said, "and that's why I need your help. Several of my ewes have dropped lambs. I need a place to stay for a few days before I move on to...."

Mavis interrupted. "But this is not lambing season."

"Tell that to that son-of-a-bitchin' ram," Rump replied before adding in a pleading voice, "All I'm asking is permission to camp near your house for a few days. I'll be glad to pay you for the time I stay on your place."

Mavis had chickens, a cow, and two daughters to feed--and very little money left in her purse. She didn't own this place, and she didn't know who did. She was set to explain her dire circumstances to this wizened stranger and advise him to move on when the words 'your place' registered inside her brain. A clever scheme began to take shape in

her head. "I think we can make a deal, but you will have to sleep outside. My daughters and I occupy my house."

The girls had come from the other room and were standing behind Mavis. "Mamma," Bea said, "this is not your...."

Mavis turned to send her daughters a warning stare. "This gentleman will be staying at *our* house for a few days."

Abbey arched an eyebrow. "Our house?"

Mavis's gaze narrowed and her eyes flashed as she mouthed, "Shut up."

The girls lapsed into silence and hurried back into the next room.

She once more faced the stranger. "How long will you be here?"

"About a week," the old man replied.

"You will have to pay in advance," Mavis told him. And as soon as he did, she went into the nearest town, a quaint little village called Cactus Gulch, and bought much-needed food and supplies.

Over the next week the mysterious Rump proved to be nothing but trouble. He flirted outrageously with Abbey and Bea, made veiled sexual advances toward Mavis, and in general was a nuisance and a pest. She would have told the old pervert to be on his way, but she had already spent a good portion the money he'd paid for rent. And even though she was reluctant to admit it, she was afraid of the old man. There was something intimidating and a little scary about him.

On the morning of the eighth day of his stay, Mavis awoke to discover that he had slipped away during the night. She congratulated herself on being wise enough to demand rent in advance. Waking her daughters, she told them to pack. The money she had left should get them a far piece down the road. She went outside to milk the cow and feed the chickens, only to discover that the old man had left his herd of sheep behind. There they were, safe and secure inside the fence he'd built up to keep them from straying. Fastened to the gate post was an envelope. Inside was another week's rent and a message scrawled in barely legible cursive. It read: *I have been called away unexpectedly. I will return in a week for my sheep.*

This put a different complexion on things. Mavis Douglas, recently poor, itinerant widow, now had money in her pocket and temporary custody of a small flock of sheep. She considered driving them to Cactus Gulch and selling them and then getting out of town as fast as possible. She quickly discarded that idea. Mr. Rump L. Stiltskin had a way of appearing and disappearing unexpectedly. Sooner or later he would catch up to her and then there would be hell to pay. Mavis sat on her milking stool and pondered what she should do.

After carefully considering all of her options, she finally decided to stay another week in the little cabin in the grove and tend the sheep until Rump returned. When she told her daughters her plan, Abbey asked, "What will we do when the owner of this place shows up?"

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it," answered Mavis. Her hope was that the owner would *not* show before she could make good her own departure.

Bea asked, "Are we becoming squatters?"

"Only temporarily."

"Why did Rump leave his sheep?" Abbey asked.

Mavis was beginning to wonder where the old man had come from in the first

place. She shrugged. "I don't know, but it's never wise to question fate."

Bea wondered, "What if he doesn't return?"

Mavis thought for a moment before saying defiantly, "I'll think of something, don't worry." She spoke with much more confidence than she felt.

## Chapter Two

Tobias Perkins was the ugliest son-of-a-bitch in Cross Bone County. He was also the richest. Tobias owned several sections of land and more cattle than he could count and brand. He had a home that was the envy of every rancher in five counties. It was replete with furniture imported all the way from New York City, rugs sent from the Orient, and bone china dishes brought all the way from England. Tobias had more than his share of cash money, too; he owned the bank in the nearby city of Cactus Gulch and most of the real estate in the town was his. What he didn't outright own, he held a mortgage on. You would think Tobias would be content with his lot in life. But that was not the case.

Tobias was a bitter, unhappy man. Why? The answer was simple. Tobias Perkins wanted more than anything in the world to be respected and admired by the citizens of Cactus Gulch and the residents of Cross Bone County. But because he was as ugly as a bucktoothed buzzard and because no amount of shaving could completely eradicate his sinister blue beard, the locals shunned and feared him. In Tobias's mind nothing he possessed in the way of worldly goods could compensate for that glaring lack of honor and respect. All this bitterness and unhappiness made Tobias as cantankerous as a bobcat in a burlap bag. Never to his face--but often behind his back--the locals referred to him as Bluebeard.

One fine fall morning Tobias rode into town to check his holdings and wet his whistle. He was accompanied by his ranch foreman, rugged, resourceful Hank Heartly, and his trusted bookkeeper, charming and clever Wesley Wiseman. After making their appointed rounds, the three men retired to the Rainbow's End Bar for food and drink. Over steaks and beer Tobias asked, as he did on each monthly journey into town, for a report from each of his faithful employees. He nodded toward Wesley. "You first."

Wesley leaned back in his chair. He was a handsome son-of-a-gun with broad shoulders, wavy blond hair, and a most ingratiating smile. He was also smart as a weasel and almost as crafty. He gave a glowing report of Tobias's growing financial empire and ended by quoting the net gain over the last month. Downing a long swallow of beer, he waited, obviously hoping that for once Tobias would be pleased enough to compliment him on a job well done.

The older man only said, "Good report," and turned his attention to Hank. "It's your turn, cowboy."

Hank was tall and ruggedly handsome, with dark hair and a muscular build. He was also honest to a fault--a real square shooter--and tougher than a sow's teat. Beneath that tough exterior Hank was as vulnerable as a laying hen in a hurricane. He was careful not to let anyone get close enough to him to discover that fact. Most of what he had to report was routine; however, he did have one bit of disturbing news. He decided to deliver his routine report first. Speaking in short terse sentences he reported on the ranch's growth over the past month before downing a long swallow of beer and wishing it was whiskey.

Tobias asked, "Is that all?"

Honest as always, Hank replied, "Nope." He sat staring into space and searching for a good way to deliver bad news.

Tobias's impatience was showing. "Speak up, man. What is it?"

Hank fortified himself with another swig of beer before saying, "We got squatters in the line shack on the north section of the ranch."

"Is that all?" Tobias relaxed, obviously relieved. "That's no problem. Take a few of the boys over and run the bastards off. Kill them if you have to."

Wesley asked, "How many squatters are over there?"

Hank frowned. "Three, but that ain't the worst part. They got a little herd of sheep with them."

Wesley scoffed, "A few sheep and three men? I could handle that problem single-handedly, and I don't claim to be a gunslinger."

Tobias agreed and then told Hank, "Get your ass over there and get rid of those sheep and those men."

Hank scratched the side of his head. "I can't do that." The surprised looks he got from his two dinner partners made him add, "The three people in the north section line shack are women."

Wesley's mouth fell open. For once in his life he was speechless.

Tobias gasped. "The hell you say." He signaled to the bartender. "Send over three shots of whiskey."

The bartender delivered the whiskey. As he walked away, Tobias downed his drink in one gulp and set his glass on the table. "I don't reckon we can kill women even if they are squatters." He waited, obviously hoping that one of his employees would disagree.

Hank gulped his drink and wiped his brow. "I reckon we could shoot up the place and scare 'em a little."

Tobias asked, "And what about them damn sheep?" He wondered aloud, "How did three females and a herd of sheep get all the way to that line shack without somebody seeing them?"

Hank shrugged. "Damned if I know."

It was plain to see that Crafty Wesley was not above manipulating this situation into an opportunity to further insinuate himself into Tobias's good graces. He took a sip of whiskey. "Perhaps I can help. After all you do have your good reputation to consider."

He had struck where Tobias was most vulnerable. The older man nodded his head. "Except my reputation ain't that good; I just don't get no respect around here."

Wesley downed another gulp of whiskey. "We sure don't want to make bad matters worse, now do we?"

Hank was no fool. He recognized what Wesley was trying to do. "Just how do you plan to go about savin' Mr. Perkins's reputation?"

Wesley smiled that superior smile that made Hank's skin crawl. "I can talk to those women. Often where force fails, persuasion prevails."

Tobias looked thoughtful. "That just might work. Lord knows you could talk the corset off of a Baptist preacher's wife."

Hank snorted. "And he probably has."

Tobias frowned at his foreman. "I think maybe Wesley has the right idea." He



addressed his bookkeeper. "Go over and do whatever it takes, short of slandering my good character, to send them women packing and then kill every one of them dadburned sheep."

Hank let out a long sigh of relief. This was no longer his problem. He suspected also that Wesley had let his mouth overload his ass. "Good luck to you, friend."

Tobias signaled for another round of drinks. As the bartender set full glasses on the table and collected empty ones, Tobias told Hank, "You'd better go along with him."

Hank knew that a suggestion from Tobias was in reality a command, still he asked, "Why should I?"

"Because," Tobias replied, "if it's necessary, I want you to get a little rough with them females. Let 'em know who's the boss."

Hank Heartly wasn't afraid of any man who drew breath, but delicate little females scared the hell out of him. He wasn't about to admit that. "From a distance those women look kind of frail. Just how rough do you want me to get?"

Before Tobias could answer, Wesley intervened. "I'll take care of this matter. Let's get over there and get this done to Mr. Perkins's satisfaction."

Tobias flipped a coin onto the table and stood. "I'm trustin' you boys to do this right. I can't have no gossip going around Cactus Gulch about how I mistreated some defenseless females."

Wesley stood and took a deep breath. "No problem, Mr. Perkins. Just leave it in my hands."

Hank wasn't nearly so sure or quite so vocal. "See you soon, Boss."

As the two men headed down the trail toward the north section Wesley made plans. "When we get there, let me do the talking. I know how to handle women."

Hank had his doubts about that. He didn't know much about the opposite sex, but he'd always suspected they were way smarter than the male of the species. His mind pursued another train of thought. "What I can't figger out is how them women got them sheep to the line shack without nobody seein' em."

Wesley leaned back in his saddle. "When we talk with them, we will insist that they tell us how they accomplished that feat."

The two men rode for several miles in silence. As they neared the ridge that hid the line shack from view, Hank slowed his horse. "When we get over the hill, we'll have a good bird's eye view of the line shack."

Wesley slowed to keep pace with him. "When we get there, perhaps we should spy out the lay of the land before riding down to tell these females to scram." Looking around him, he asked, "Are you sure there are no men with them?"

"I'm positive," Hank replied.

The two men slid from their mounts and led them over the rise and into full view of the line shack. What they saw stopped them in their tracks.

The three women were in the backyard of the shack. They were all stark naked. The beautiful blonde stood in a wooden tub that was ankle deep in water. The gorgeous brunette was dipping water from the tub and pouring liquid over the blonde's body. The buxom older woman lay on her stomach on a quilt.

An important part of Hank's anatomy jumped to immediate attention. "My gawd," he breathed.

Judging from the bulge in the front of Wesley's pin-striped pants, he was having

the same problem. “Holy shit, what do we do now?”

Hank shook his head. “Don’t ask me. *You* are the one who told Mr. Perkins you could handle this.”

After some thought Wesley said, “I say we leave our horses here and slip up on them.” He waved his hand in a forward motion. “Let’s go.”

## Chapter Three

Even before she turned Mavis knew someone was staring at her. Rolling over, she sat up and told her girls, "Get in the house now."

Bea objected, "I haven't had my bath yet."

Abbey added, "And we need to wash our unmentionables too."

Before Mavis could respond, two men stepped around the far corner of the house. One of them was definitely a cowboy. He wore boots and spurs and had a six gun strapped to his waist. The other man looked like a Philadelphia lawyer with his vest and pin-striped pants and cutaway coat.

A little shiver of fear skipped through Mavis as she pulled the quilt up to cover her ample breasts. In her most commanding voice she said, "You two are trespassing." It was as she'd feared from the beginning. Rump had sent someone to fetch his sheep. Did sending a lawyer along with a sheepherder mean he was going to accuse her of some crime?"

Neither man answered. They were too busy staring at Abbey and Bea.

Mavis stood and slipped into her dress. "Girls, get into the house now!"

As the girls hastened to obey, the blond man stepped forward and extended his hand. "Madam, my name is Wesley Wiseman. I have come here to make a deal with you."

Long ago Mavis had learned to approach men with care and caution. She buttoned the front of her dress, giving her utmost attention to that menial task. He had addressed her as Madam. Did he think...? She could set him straight on that issue in a hurry. "Young man, this is not a bawdy house, and those girls are my daughters. Wipe that lecherous look off your face and get out of here."

The tall, dark cowboy grinned as Wesley sputtered. "I didn't ... I mean ... It's not that kind of a deal."

Mavis slipped her feet into her shoes. "Then what? Speak up, man."

The cowboy came to the dandy's rescue. He removed his hat and, holding it in one hand, extended the other. "My name is Hank Heartly. I'm foreman over at the Hell's Half Acre Ranch." Stepping forward, he grasped Mavis's extended hand and shook it.

Wesley elbowed him aside. "Hell's Half Acre is owned by a Mr. Tobias Perkins. No doubt you've heard of him."

"No, I've never heard of the man." Mavis said. Then she asked, "Are you sure Rump didn't send you?"

When Hank opened his mouth to speak, Wesley held up one hand. "I'll handle this if you don't mind."

Hank grinned. "That's more than you've managed to do so far." He shrugged. "Go right ahead."

Wesley drew himself up to his full height. "The sum of the matter is this, madam...."

Mavis interrupted. She resented being referred to as a Madam. "I am not a

Madam. My name is Mrs. Mavis Douglas. I am the widow of the Reverend Dennis Douglas of New Orleans, Louisiana.” She wasn’t sure she was really a widow, but that sounded better than saying her husband was missing.

Wesley looked impressed. “Your late husband was a minister?”

Late was a good description for Dennis. “My late husband was a Baptist preacher, sir.”

Wesley removed his little black felt hat. “I will come directly to the point. This cabin belongs to Mr. Perkins. He demands that you vacate it immediately.”

Mavis pointed to the two dozen or so sheep that were inside the makeshift pen Rump had constructed before his untimely departure. “What about the animals?” She nodded toward her cow and chickens.

Wesley sneered. “You mean that mangy bunch of sheep?” Before she could answer, he said, “We will have to slaughter them. The chickens and cow you can take with you when you go.”

Mavis blurted out, “But the sheep are not mine. They belong to Rump.”

Hank asked in a puzzled voice, “Who the hell is Rump?”

“He’s the man who brought the sheep here.” Mavis went on to explain, “He showed up the first night we stayed in the cabin and wanted to camp here for a while.” She didn’t think it wise to tell them that Rump had paid her rent to stay.

Dennis looked skeptical. “That’s a likely story.”

Mavis thought it odd that he’d believe her lie about Dennis and doubt the truth about the sheep. There was no accounting for the strange mental machinations of men. “But it’s true. He stayed a week and then he vanished, but he left the sheep.” Her hands rose and fell in a helpless gesture. “So you see, I can’t let you destroy property that’s not mine.”

“Then you can leave them here and go on your way,” Wesley answered, before assuring her, “We will take care of the sheep.”

Abbey and Bea had obviously been listening just inside the back door of the cabin. They came outside protesting in unison as they raced across the yard. “We can’t leave here.” They were a sight to see, dressed now in pretty print dresses, looking young and fresh and altogether beautiful.

Wesley gulped and slapped his hat on his head. “You don’t have a choice.”

Bea’s big brown eyes filled with tears. “Where will we go?”

Abbey asked, “Would you really turn a mother and her two children out into a cruel world with no money and no place to go?”

Mavis added, “And that mother is the widow of a man of the cloth.”

Wesley was looking more puzzled and unsure by the minute. “Maybe we can get in touch with Rump. He can come and fetch his sheep. I’ll charge him for keeping his flock here and give the money to you. Then you can be on your way, and Mr. Perkins will have his line shack back.” He turned to Hank. “What do you think?”

Hank was staring at Abbey with a look of abject adoration on his face. “Huh? Yeah, sure.”

Wesley asked Mavis, “What is Rump’s full name?”

“It’s Mr. Rump L. Stiltskin,” Mavis answered.

Wesley’s smile converted to an angry frown. “Are you telling me that the owner of these sheep is named Rumpelstiltskin?”

Mavis nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you.” It was what she *wasn’t* telling him that had her worried and upset.

## Chapter Four

Hank couldn't take his eyes off the young blonde woman who had come from the house to stand beside her mother. She was a vision of loveliness with her long flowing tresses and her big blue eyes. Her figure was nothing short of divine, small and supple and rounded in all the right places. He wondered what it would be like to hold her in his arms and run his fingers through her long hair and.... Wesley's arguing voice penetrated Hank's dreamy haze. He heard the sounds, but he didn't catch the words. Shaking his head, he tried to clear his mind. "What did you say?"

Wesley swore under his breath before saying, "I asked if you knew anyone around here by the name of Rumpelstiltskin."

Hank scratched the side of his head. That name had a familiar ring. "Seems to me I've heard the moniker but I can't remember where or when."

Mavis corrected, "The old man's name is Rump L. Stiltskin not Rumpelstiltskin." She put her hands on her hips. "If you turn us out into the cruel world, you will answer to God for your actions."

At this moment Hank wasn't worried about what God might do. He figured he could talk to Him later and explain, and even repent if that seemed necessary. Ambivalence played havoc with his thought processes. Tobias would be mad enough to spit if he and Wesley didn't send these women packing. On the other hand, Tobias was concerned about his public image. He wouldn't want it to be noised abroad that he'd turned out a preacher's widow and her children. Killing critters, even lowly ovine critters that belonged to an absent stranger, presented a problem too. He sat on a stump and stroked his chin with his hand. "We got a predicament here."

Wesley pulled his glance from Bea long enough to ask, "What are we going to do?"

"Let me study on this a minute," Hank replied, as he continued to stroke his chin. Regardless of what he and Wesley did, there would be unpleasant consequences, and he would ultimately get the blame for what went wrong. If only Tobias was here, then he could make that decision about what course to take. After all, this was Tobias's problem, not Hank's.

Wesley's demanding words penetrated Hank's dark study. "I'm waiting for an answer."

The answer came from nowhere and slid through Hank's brain and right out his mouth before he had time for second thoughts. "I say we round up these women and all their belongings and take them and the sheep to Tobias and let him make the call about what to do."

Wesley liked the plan. "Good idea. I'm glad I thought of it."

Mavis didn't. "You can't do that. It would be kidnapping. The sheriff will be after you."

Hank calculated that having the sheriff after him was preferable to incurring Tobias's wrath. "Sorry, Miz Preacher, but we ain't got no choice. Load up and let's get

on the road.”

Mavis protested, long and loud, but in the end she loaded her belongings and her daughters into her wagon, hitched her team, tied her cow to the tail gate, and followed Wesley, Hank, and the sheep south toward Hell’s Half Acre.

During the two hour trip Hank rehearsed in his head at least a hundred times what he’d say to Tobias once they reached Hell’s Half Acre. By the time they got to the ranch house his mind was a muddle and his heart was in the pit of his stomach. As they pulled into the front yard, Tobias came onto the front porch, saw the sheep, and roared, “What the hell....” Then his glance moved to take in the three females in the wagon. His voice fell to a husky whisper, “is going on here?”

Wesley slid from his horse. “I’ll see that these dastardly sheep are put in a pen. Hank will explain everything.” He hurried toward the barn.

Hank got off his horse and tied the reins to a post. Hope sparked through his despair as he saw the look on Tobias’s ugly countenance. It was plain as the nose on your face that the older man enjoyed looking at the widow and her girls.

Hank stepped onto the porch and made introductions. “Mr. Perkins, sir, this is the Widow Douglas and her two daughters Abbey and Bea.” He extended his hand in Tobias’s direction. “Widow, meet Mr. Tobias Perkins.”

Mavis climbed from her wagon and tied her reins to the porch rail. Without bothering to acknowledge Hank’s introduction, she snapped, “Mr. Perkins, I want a few words with you in private.”

It was obvious that Tobias was not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. His hackles went up. “Woman, just who do you think you’re talking to?”

Mavis was not one to pull punches once she was riled. “I’m talking to you.” She pointed an accusing finger in Tobias’s direction. “Where do you get off sending your cowhands to kidnap me and my little girls?”

Tobias came down the steps and made angry strides in Mavis’s direction. “Nobody talks to me like that and....” He stopped suddenly. “Kidnapped?” Turning, he narrowed his gaze in Hank’s direction. “Don’t tell me you two sidewinders brought these females here against their will.”

Hank asked, “Had you rather we cast them out on the mercy of the world without a penny to their name and no place to go?”

Tobias roared, “You damn right!”

Hank spoke with more assurance than he felt. “The widow said if we threw her and her daughters out she’d report us to the sheriff in Cactus Gulch.”

Belligerent as always, Tobias replied, “So let her, who gives a damn?” After a moment he asked indignantly, “On what charges? That line shack belongs to me.”

Hank explained, “The sheep ain’t the widow’s. They belong to some gent named Rumpelstiltskin.”

Tobias argued but not very convincingly, “I’m not responsible for these here females, and I don’t care who them sheep belong to. They gotta go.”

Hank knew that his job and maybe his future depended on the answer he gave. He couldn’t lie, but he could bend the truth in his favor. “But the sheep don’t, and they ain’t the property of Miz Widow either. She was threatenin’ to besmirch your good name by telling everyone in Cactus Gulch how you’d mistreated a poor preacher’s widow and her two children. Then she was going to go to Sheriff Brown to complain about how

you'd killed sheep that didn't belong to her but had been left in her care." He studied Tobias's face. The older man had turned a little green around the gills. Encouraged, Hank went on, "After some thinking on the matter, I figured it would be better to let you decide if you wanted to be accused of kidnapping or have this scheming female slander your good name and tarnish your fine reputation, so I brought her and her younguns here." He gestured toward the three women. "You can turn 'em loose and let 'em do their worst, or you can keep them here until you can find a way to shut 'em up."

Tobias growled angrily, "I could shut 'em up permanently."

If Mavis was intimidated, she didn't show it. "Rump will be back for his sheep in less than a week. When he finds them and us gone, he will come looking for us."

"Excuse us ladies." Tobias pulled Hank to one side. Once out of the women's earshot, he asked in a lowered voice, "Is this Rump character a gunslinger?"

Hank shrugged. "I don't know the feller, so I can't rightly say."

Tobias took a plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket. "What the hell am I gonna do?" He bit off a chunk and pushed it into his mouth before extending the plug in Hank's direction. "Would you like a chew?"

Hank shook his head as he breathed an inward sigh of relief. He was off the hook, at least temporarily. "The widow says she's broke. Maybe you could offer her a job--but be careful what you say. She's a might touchy, and whatever you do, don't call her 'madam.'"

Tobias gave Hank a shove in the women's direction. "You make the offer."

Hank dug his heels into the soft sand. "I don't think so. That's not my job."

Tobias spat tobacco juice on the ground. "It's your job if you want to keep on being my foreman. Get this matter settled, do it now and to everyone's satisfaction, or I will see to it that you leave Cross Bone County right along with the widow and her two kids." He gave Hank another shove.

Hank knew when to stop arguing. "I'll do my best." He doffed his hat and advanced in the direction of the three women, wondering as he went what the hell he was going to say to them.

Wesley, who had obviously been watching and listening from a distance, appeared from nowhere and hurried toward Tobias. "I think, Mr. Perkins, that I am better equipped to handle this situation than this," he let his scurrilous glance slide over Hank's muscular frame, "uncouth cowboy." He stepped in front of Hank, effectively barring his forward advance.

Hank didn't know what uncouth meant, but he was sure it wasn't good. He shoved Wesley aside. "Get out of my way, pencil pusher."

Tobias intervened as Wesley stepped in front of Hank once more. "Step aside, Wesley, and let Hank have his say."

Wesley obeyed but most antagonistically. "Whatever you say, Mr. Perkins."

Hank held his hat in his hands and walked slowly toward the three women who stood beside their wagon, wondering with every step he took just what he was going to say once he got there.



## Chapter Five

Mavis was more scared than she'd been in a long time. She had seen men like Tobias Perkins before, men who were lean and mean and ornery, men who could stir up hell with a long spoon.

She made up her mind then and there to tame this ugly, no-good arrogant son-of-a-bitch if it was the last thing she ever did.

As Hank came toward her, Abbey whispered in her mother's ear, "Don't be too mean to him, Mamma. He's only doing what the awful Mr. Perkins told him to do."

Mavis snapped, "Be still and hold your tongue." When Hank came to stand in front of her, she asked, "Are you going to let us go?" She hoped not. She'd heard enough since she'd been here to know that if she played her cards right she had much to gain from this situation.

Beads of perspiration broke out across Hank's upper lip. "No, ma'am, that ain't likely." He swallowed deeply. "Mister Perkins would like to make you a most generous offer." He grimaced and turned toward Tobias. "Wouldn't you, sir?"

Tobias scowled. "What kind of offer?"

Hank hurried on. "Have you seen Mr. Perkins's house? It's really nice."

Tobias interrupted. "Nice? Hell, it's more than nice, it's a splendid mansion of a house."

Perceptive Mavis suspected that these no-good sorry excuses for men wanted to offer her the job of keeping this splendid mansion clean while seeing after their creature comforts. She was not about to let them get away with that kind of an underhanded maneuver. She put both hands on her voluptuous hips. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Well, we was sort of thinkin'...." Hank stretched his neck and frowned. "That you might like to live in that house and...."

Mavis smiled her sweetest smile. "Are you inviting my daughters and me to be your guests here at Hell's Half Acre?"

Tobias exploded. "God damn it, woman, you have some nerve." A disparaging glance from Hank made him close his mouth and run one hand over his blue-bearded chin.

Hank took a step backward. "Well, boss?"

Tobias swore before relenting. "They can stay, but they'd better keep out of my way."

Wesley seized the opportunity and stepped to Bea's side. "Miss Douglas, let me help you inside." He extended his arm.

Bea laid her hand on his sleeve. "You are most kind, and please, call me Bea."

Hank rose to the occasion admirably. Rushing to Abbey's side, he offered her his arm just as he'd seen Wesley do for Bea. "May I help you inside, Miss Douglas?"

Abbey blushed and lowered her eyes. "I'd be most happy to have you help me, Mr. Heartly."

Hank smiled from ear to ear. "The name is Hank ma'am."

Abbey fluttered her eyelashes. "And my name is Abigail, but you may call me Abbey." Arm in arm they headed toward the house, leaving Tobias and Mavis alone and staring at each other.

Tobias fastened his steely gaze on Mavis as his ugly face screwed up into a fierce frown.

Mavis realized that if she let him get the upper hand now she could forget ever bringing this renegade to his knees. She stared him down.

As Tobias shifted his gaze she asked softly, "Would you like to escort me inside, Mr. Perkins?"

"I damn shore would not!" Tobias swung around and walked in the opposite direction, muttering under his breath as he went, "Women, damn 'em all."

Mavis hurried toward the house. Once inside the palatial mansion, she found her two daughters sitting in the huge living room laughing and talking with Hank and Wesley. "Come along," she told the giggling girls. She wanted to find suitable rooms for her and her daughters and get settled in before Tobias had a change of heart. She corrected herself, before Tobias changed his mind. She wasn't sure Tobias had a heart.

Neither of the girls made a move to follow her.

Mavis wasn't surprised. Her daughters were of an age to be interested in the opposite sex. She didn't mind them having a little innocent fun with Wesley and Hank, but she didn't intend to let it go any further than that. She had plans for those girls, and those plans didn't include a bashful cowboy or a smooth-talking bookkeeper.

Mavis scouted the first floor of the two story structure and liked what she saw. The kitchen was big and well furnished. There was a huge formal dining room. She also wandered through numerous other rooms, each one large, decorated in fashionable décor and furnished with style and elegance. She ended her journey by visiting a small study. What a contrast this room was to the rest of the house! It held an ancient rolltop desk, a leather couch, and a big rocking chair. Unlike the other rooms it was cluttered and crowded and had a lived-in look. A shelf of dog-eared books covered one end of the room. A huge brass spittoon stood in one corner.

Upstairs she located two adjoining bedrooms. The girls would have to share a room, she decided. It wouldn't be wise to let them too far out of her sight what with two virile males on the prowl and Bea and Abbey so young and impressionable.

As Mavis descended the circular staircase, an idea jumped full-blown into her head. This was the perfect place to find husbands for her daughters. This house was made for entertaining and parties. She was sure no one in Cross Bone County would refuse an invitation from Tobias Perkins. She would invite the dignitaries from Cactus Gulch and the elite of society in all the surrounding area. It seemed a sure way of securing her girls' futures and at the same time making sure she was safe and cared for in her declining years.

Mavis returned to the living room, unceremoniously ejected Hank and Wesley, and sat in a chair across from her daughters. "Girls, I have a plan."

Bea stared into space. "Oh, Mamma, Wesley is so smart and so handsome."

Mavis thought that he was also as horny as a peach-orchard boar. She said, "Forget about Wesley and listen to me. This is important."

Abbey sighed. "I think that Mr. Heartly is just divine."

Divine was not a word that could be used with any degree of accuracy to describe Hank Heartly. Mavis snapped, "Hank is nothing but a dumb cowboy. Besides that, he's probably poor as a church mouse. Forget about him and listen to what I have to say."

In unison the girls objected, "But Mamma..."

Mavis cut them short. "We have just been given a golden opportunity to find the two of you rich husbands, and I intend to take full advantage of that opportunity."

Bea's bottom lip protruded. "I'm too young to think about marriage."

Abbey took a more devious approach. "Mamma dearest, I don't want to marry and leave you alone in the world."

Mavis didn't intend that either. "Don't worry about me. I'll manage." Standing, she motioned with one hand. "Come along, both of you. I've found rooms for us on the second floor."

As soon as Mavis had her girls safely tucked away in an upstairs bedroom, she set out to locate Tobias. She found him sitting in a chair in the tack room that adjoined the huge barn. Without bothering to knock, she came boldly inside. "Mr. Perkins I'd like a word with you."

She'd expected him to refuse to talk to her. Instead he said, "You ain't been here an hour and already you're complaining."

Mavis assured him that she wasn't complaining, before complaining in a carping voice, "There are no locks on any of your bedroom doors."

Tobias grunted before replying, "I don't like locks on doors."

Mavis projected a boldness she didn't feel. "I do. I have found adequate quarters for me and my daughters. We will occupy the two upstairs bedrooms at the end of the south wing hall. I want locks put on both of those doors immediately, and I insist that I be the keeper of all available keys."

Tobias sat up and sputtered, "You don't give the orders around here. I do." He slumped back down in his chair. "What do you want locks for? Ain't nobody around here going to bother any of you."

Mavis asked, "Can you guarantee that?" Before Tobias could answer, she added, "Never mind. I have a gun, and I'm not afraid to use it. If someone comes snooping around, I'll fill him full of lead."

Tobias turned a shade of pasty white. "Oh, all right. I'll have locks put on the doors. Now git out of here and leave me alone."

Mavis studied his scowling face with its ugly blue beard. She was strangely attracted to this rascal, and she couldn't imagine why. Maybe it was because he presented such a challenge, maybe it was because he refused to respond to her feminine wiles, maybe it was because he was so damned ugly. Maybe it was a combination of all those things. He would succumb in time. She had a few tricks up her sleeve that no man, not even ugly, ornery Tobias Perkins, could resist. She dragged a stool from the corner, set it in front of Tobias, and perched on it. "I have something else to discuss with you."

## Chapter Six

Tobias roared into the bunkhouse shouting loud enough to wake the dead. "God damn it, Hank, them wimmen are drivin' me crazy. You gotta do something."

Hank had no idea what he was talking about. "Relax, Mr. Perkins, if you can."

Tobias paced the length of the bunkhouse before turning to face Hank. "Do you know what that dang fool widow wants now?"

"Nope, I ain't got no notion." Hank had a feeling that he'd be better off if he *didn't* know, but he asked anyway, "What does she want?" He pointed to a chair near the potbellied stove that stood in the middle of the room. "Why don't you take a load off your feet and tell me whatever it is you came here to say?"

Tobias sat in the chair and took a plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket. "She wants me to throw a wingding for her and her girls."

Hank sank down onto the side of his bunk. "You mean like a party?"

Tobias bit a chew of tobacco from the plug he held in his hand. "That's exactly what I mean, only she wants to call it a debut."

Hank scratched the side of his head. "What the hell is a debut?"

Tobias chewed a few seconds before opening the front of the stove and spitting inside. "That's what I come to ask you."

Hank shrugged. "I ain't got no idea." His brain teemed with possibilities. If Mavis was planning a party, that meant she'd be around for awhile, which meant Abbey would be around, too. That hope made him admit to something he'd otherwise have bit his tongue before confessing. "I think we need Wesley's help."

Tobias snapped, "Don't bother. I ain't havin' no social here, not now and not ever."

Hank saw his opportunity to be with Abbey slipping away. "Why not?"

"I gave a party here once, and do you know what happened?"

Hank thought of Tobias's fine furniture and beautiful paintings. "The guests got rowdy and shot up the place?"

Tobias explained in a pained voice, "There wasn't no guests. Nobody came to my party, not a single solitary soul."

Hank felt a twinge of sympathy for the ugly man who sat across from him. "Man, that's sad."

"It taught me a lesson," Tobias said. "Folks liked disrespectin' me, and I ain't about to give 'em that chance again."

This was a side of Tobias that Hank had never seen before. He seemed vulnerable and susceptible to being wounded. He didn't want to see the old man hurt again; neither did he want to see his chance to be with Abbey slip away. Maybe he could find a way to solve this knotty problem so that no one was hurt by the outcome and some folks were downright happy with the results. "Maybe," he offered in a soft, persuading voice, "folks would feel different if they thought you were giving a party to introduce a pretty widow and her two daughters to Cross Bone County society."

Tobias scratched the side of his head and looked skeptical. "Do you think so?" He answered his own question. "Naw, folks just naturally don't like me, and they ain't about to come to no party I'd throw."

Made bold by his need to keep Abbey near, Hank asked, "Then you don't have anything to lose if the plan fails, right?"

Tobias nodded. "I reckon that's right." Then he asked, "What plan?"

"The plan to let the widow have her party and see what happens?" Hank answered.

Once more Tobias opened the stove and spat into the open flames, causing them to sizzle and blaze higher. "What if no one comes to this here wingding?"

"Well," Hank explained, as he struggled to keep a note of hope from creeping into his voice, "then you can figger that folks didn't show up this time because they don't like widows and orphans either." It wasn't a very logical answer or a very convincing argument, but it was the best he could think of on such short notice.

To his complete astonishment, Tobias agreed. "That makes sense." He seemed deep in thought. After several seconds had ticked by he said, "You'll need Wesley's help on this one. Where the hell is he anyway?"

Hank shrugged. "I don't know."

Tobias stood. "Then locate him and find out what the hell a debut is. Then get busy planning this here wingding. Tell Wesley that he's your assistant."

Wesley wouldn't welcome the news that he was number two man in this deal. Hank tried to explain that to Tobias. "I don't think Wesley will cotton to being my helper. Maybe it would be better if he was the responsible person and I was his assistant and...."

Tobias strode toward the door. "I want you in charge."

Hank had talked himself smack dab into a peck of trouble. He called after Tobias, "I got a ranch to run." Then he made a painful admission. "And I don't know nothin' about women and parties and high society."

Tobias waved his objection aside. "Wesley can take care of all that." Pausing at the door, he turned and pointed his finger in Hank's direction. "Your job is to ride herd on the widow and Wesley and see that things don't get out of hand."

Something told Hank that he was knee-deep in shit with no shovel. "What things are you talkin' about?"

Tobias's ugly face shaped into a fierce scowl. "How the hell do I know 'what things?'" He spat toward an open window and hit the sill. "I'm dependin' on you to see that everything goes right with the plans for this here party."

Hank snorted. "It would probably be easier to put butter on a wild cat's ass."

Tobias turned his head to one side. "How long you been workin' for me cowboy, not countin' today?"

Hank got the message. "I'll do the best I can, boss."

Tobias paused at the door. "One more thing. Get over to the shed them sheep are in and shoot every one of the sons of bitches. Be careful where you aim. I'll send Cookie down to pick out some of the young ones for barbeque."

Cookie was a disagreeable little Mexican named Jose Gomez. He'd been Tobias's cook for as long as Hank had been at Hell's Half Acre. Hank didn't cotton to having him underfoot while he was slaughtering someone else's sheep. "Never mind. I'll bring some of the lambs to the kitchen."

Tobias nodded his approval. "I'll tell Cookie to expect you."

Long after Tobias had slammed the bunkhouse door, Hank sat on his bed and tried to collect his disorganized thoughts. From the maze in his muddled brain, one notion emerged to stand positive and clear. He had to find a way to make sure this damn party was a success. It was gonna be harder than picking fly shit out of black pepper and just about as tedious. Standing, he shoved his hat down on his head, picked up his rifle, and headed for the sheep pen.

He had passed the house and gone around the barn when a little man dressed in a long robe with a hood stepped from behind an oak tree and called his name, "Hank, I say, Hank Heartly."

Hank stopped in his tracks. His hand tightened around his rifle. "Who are you? Where did you come from? How do you know my name?"

The little man pushed his hood from his head, revealing a wealth of flowing gray hair. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rump L. Stiltskin. I came from the vast over-yonder. I not only know your name, I know your intentions."

His words sent a chill down Hank's spine. He raised his rifle.

The little man hastened to explain. "I mean you no harm." He used one skinny finger to push the barrel aside. "I come in peace."

Hank wasn't so sure. "The widow said you'd show up sooner or later." He dropped his rifle to his side. "If you've come for your sheep, you'll have to talk to Mr. Perkins first. And you'd better make it fast. My orders are to shoot 'em all." He made long strides in the direction of the barn.

Rump caught up to him and grabbed his arm to pull him to a stop. "I have a proposition for you, and I think it would be to your advantage to hear me out."

Hank's curiosity overrode his caution. "You do? What kind of proposition?"

Rump pointed toward the sheep pen. "Let's go over here and sit down."

Hank followed the strange little man, wondering with every step he took what had brought about this strange turn of events.

## Chapter Seven

Mavis settled on the long leather couch and stared at the self-assured man who sat in the chair across from her. "I don't like being ordered around, Mr. Heartly." Folding her hands in her lap, she made an effort to appear serene and confident. It was difficult. Self-assured men always made her nervous.

Hank's voice carried a ring of authority. "I'm here to speak to you about a very important matter."

The only important matter Mavis could think of was her desire to present her daughters to Cross Bone County society. She suspected Tobias had sent Hank here with an answer to her request. She also suspected that answer was no. Lifting one well-defined eyebrow, she asked, "Do you speak for Mr. Perkins?"

She had expected a quick and firm disavowal. Instead, she got an answer that was as equivocal as it was evasive. "In some matters, yes, in others, no."

Mavis's temper flared, making her forget her resolve to appear confident and calm. She snapped, "What important matter are you here to discuss?"

Hank leaned back in his chair and crossed one booted foot over the other. "How well do you know this feller named Rump L. Stiltskin?"

Surprise took away Mavis's anger. "I don't know the little bastard at all. I only saw him that one week." Belatedly, she wondered why Hank would have this sudden interest in Rump. "Why do you ask?"

Hank smiled. "I have my reasons, none of which have anything to do with why I'm here."

Mavis also detested men who spoke in riddles. "Why the hell are you here, and just who do you think you are ordering me downstairs and telling me to get here on-the-double or else?" She reined in her temper. It wouldn't be wise to mess up a potentially good deal just because some dumb cowboy had suddenly turned arrogant and demanding. Drawing a cleansing breath, she stared down at her hands and patiently waited for an answer.

Hank announced with quiet finality, "Mr. Perkins has put me in charge of your daughters' debut."

Mavis's head came up in surprise. "You?" she asked. "Why?"

"I'm the person best qualified for the job."

Until today Mavis had thought Hank Heartly to be a shy, self-effacing, slightly dense cowboy. Had she read him wrong? Unsure of what to say or how to react, she sat on the couch and waited for him to speak again. When it became evident that he wasn't going to do that, she asked in a subdued voice, "Do you know what a debut is and what it entails?"

"I have a fair idea," Hank answered. "But I'd like to hear what you have in mind."

Mavis decided to take a chance and push to the limit. "I want a coming-out party that befits two beautiful young ladies. I want food and drink and entertainment and...." She waved her arms around in an all encompassing gesture. "I want everything." She

stopped and waited for Hank to begin his bargaining.

He conceded, much to her surprise. "That sounds good." Then he added, as she had expected, an inevitable "But..."

Mavis interrupted. "No 'buts.' I won't take anything less."

Hank asked, "What do your daughters plan to wear to this grand ball?"

Mavis hadn't planned that far. "I ... don't know."

"If there's entertainment, there's bound to be music. If there's music, there's bound to be dancing. Do your daughters know the latest ballroom dance steps?"

That was another eventuality Mavis hadn't considered. "My girls don't know *any* dance steps. Their papa was a Baptist preacher."

Hank shook his head. "How do you expect your daughters to make a proper impression if they lack the social skills to attract eligible men once you get them here?"

Later Mavis would look back and wonder how Hank had suddenly attained foresight and abruptly acquired what would pass for wisdom. Now she was so caught up in the moment that all she could think of was the possibility of finding rich husbands for her daughters. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Oh, yes." Leaning back in his chair, Hank stared at the ceiling. "I suggest that we prepare for this debut by seeing that your daughters are ready for a coming-out before they step out into Cross Bone County society." His head came down. "Don't you agree?"

Mavis did, but she was a little reluctant to say so immediately. Years of living on the edge had taught her to be careful of something that seemed too good to be true, because most of the time it was. Her eyes narrowed. "What did you have in mind?"

Without batting an eyelash, Hank replied, "I'm thinking we should get an instructor out here to teach your daughters how to dance."

Mavis agreed, too readily. "That's a great idea." She stifled her exuberance. "But not just any instructor. He must be the best."

Hank agreed. "Nothin' else would do."

Mavis was nothing if not daring. "And about ball gowns..."

Hank interrupted, "We'll get a dressmaker out here too, and someone to help with the food."

Things were going better than Mavis had dared hope. "I want this to be a debut to end all debuts."

Hank held up one callused hand. "Not so fast."

Mavis was set to argue. "But you said..." It was just as she'd suspected, this was too good to be true.

"I know what I said," Hank replied disdainfully. "And I know what has to be done before there can be a debut."

Mavis imagined the worst. "Don't go gettin' any ideas, cowboy." She hopped to her feet. "I won't stand still for any skullduggery where my girls are concerned."

"Sit down and shut up." Hank impaled her on a stabbing stare. "And listen before you go jumping to conclusions."

Something in the tone of his voice made Mavis obey. She sat and folded her hands in her lap. "Listen to what?"

Hank ran the fingers of one hand through his thick dark hair. "What I'm trying to say is that I think we should have three or four smaller parties before we cut loose with a big bash of a debut."



Mavis's mouth fell open. She shut it and swallowed. "You do?"

Hank shrugged. "It makes sense. That would give you and your daughters a chance to get acquainted with folks a few at a time."

It also made Mavis as suspicious as hell. "What do you expect to get out of all this?"

"That's not your concern." Hank's angular features hardened. "That's my deal. You can take or you can leave it."

Mavis didn't want to appear too anxious. "Can I think about this for a while?"

"Nope, you can't. I need your answer here and now."

Mavis would be a fool to pass up a deal like this even though she was sure there was a catch to it somewhere. "I have some stipulations."

Hank was unyielding. "No stipulations, just your answer. Is it yes or is it no?"

The word labored to find its way out of Mavis's mouth. "Yes." Why did she have this terrible feeling that she'd be sorry later?

Hank stood and extended one hand. "Can we shake on it?"

Mavis rose, grasped his hand, and shook it firmly. As she held on, she said, "My daughters and I will get wardrobes, dance lessons, three parties complete with food and entertainers, and one final debut party, deal?"

Hank's grip was strong and sure. "Deal."

## Chapter Eight

Never before had Hank dared to be so aggressive and demanding. Never before had he felt so masculine and virile. "I gotta go now," he told Mavis as he headed for the door.

She called after him, "Wait just a minute. We need to talk about the plans for our first party. I think it should be a sit-down dinner. We can invite the cream of Cross Bone County society. I'd like...."

Mavis Douglas was one demanding woman. Turning, Hank told her, "Wesley is in charge of all the details for parties. You can talk all that over with him." What he neglected to tell her was that Wesley didn't know yet of his new status as party planner. Once more Hank headed for the door. "I'll find him and send him over."

As he walked down the well-worn path that led from Tobias's mansion to the bunkhouse, words Rump had said to him earlier danced through his head. *To be an aggressive male, all you have to do is act like an aggressive male.*

As if thinking about him had conjured him up from some over-yonder place, Rump stepped from behind a tree and waved to Hank. "Hello, friend. I see that your first encounter went well."

Hank stopped and narrowed his eyes in Rump's direction. "How can you know that?" He headed in the direction of the bunkhouse, thinking as he quickened his pace that this little man was downright scary.

Rump fell in step with him. "Come with me to the grove of cedar trees by the creek."

Hank had work to do and no time to fool around with a little man who appeared out of nowhere to make demands and offer advice. "I ain't got time. I gotta find Wesley and tell him that he's just been appointed head party planner."

Rump caught Hank's arm and pulled him in the direction of the creek. "First things first, friend. You can talk to Wesley later."

Hank asked, as he fell in step with Rump, "Did you get them sheep out of Tobias's pen and on their way to somewhere far from here?"

Rump gave his arm a little pat. "Don't worry about the sheep. They are already far from here and quite safe, I can assure you."

"I ain't askin' how you managed that," Hank responded as he regulated his steps to fit Rump's slower pace.

"It's just as well that you don't," Rump replied before adding, "I also took dressed meat to Cookie for his barbeque." He smiled and shook his gray head. "Don't ask me how I did that either."

Hank Heartly was a practical, level-headed, pragmatic man. At least he'd always considered himself to be all those things, until he met Rump. Now he found himself having second thoughts. This little man possessed magical powers, among them the ability to appear and disappear at will. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to get mixed up with a character like that. "I've been thinkin' that you and me should reconsider the

agreement we made.”

Rump hurried to catch up. “Do you wish to renegotiate?” He stopped and drew a long breath. “Slow down. I’m not used to so much exercise.”

Hank slowed his pace. “I’ve been thinkin....” A rustling in the cedar grove made him stop and stare. “Well, I’ll be....” His voice died away on the end of a caught breath. Ahead, seated on a bench beneath a swaying cedar tree, was Abbey Douglas. She wore a pleasing-to-the-eye dress of soft, clinging material. Her hair was loose and long and flowing in the breeze. Hank’s sturdy heart skipped a beat.

Rump moved a little closer and prompted, “You were saying?”

Hank pointed and whispered, “That’s Abbey.”

Rump’s smile was smug. “She’s waiting for you.” He turned his gray head to one side. “Do you still wish to discuss renegotiations?”

Hank’s heart’s desire was not twenty feet away, and she was alone. Affection for Abbey turned stalwart, strong, trustworthy Hank Heartly into a devious, simpering, stuttering fool. “I-I r-reckon n-not.”

As he spoke, Abbey turned and waved. “Hello.”

Hank swallowed and returned the greeting. “Howdy, Miss Abbey.”

Abbey called, “Come and sit with me.”

As mysteriously as he had appeared, Rump vanished from sight, leaving Hank alone to cope as best he could. Once again, Rump’s words played through his head. *To be an aggressive male, all you have to do is act like an aggressive male.* Hank straightened his shoulders and strode in the direction of the cedar grove and Abbey, saying as he approached, “Imagine seeing you here.” Thinking as he stopped before her, *and all by your sweet little self.*

“I needed a breath of fresh air and some time alone.” Abbey moved to one side of the bench and patted the empty space beside her. “Would you like to sit down?”

“I hope I’m not intrudin’ on your solitude.” The bench was narrow and short. When Hank sat his leg was almost touching Abbey’s. “Seein’ as how you want to be alone and all.”

Abbey lowered her head, looked up at him from under her incredibly long lashes, and smiled. “I welcome your company, Mr. Heartly.”

Hank’s heart picked up an uneven beat. “I’d be much obliged if you’d call me Hank.” He felt hot and then cold, almost as if he was coming down with chills and fever. “‘Cause I’d be powerful pleased if you and me could be friends.”

“I would like that too.” Abbey laid her lily-white hand on his rough shirtsleeve, causing him to shiver and the front of his pants to bulge noticeably. “I could use a friend about now.”

Hank crossed his legs and taking his ten-gallon hat from his head, laid it in his lap. “I’d be honored to be your friend.”

Abbey tossed her head, causing her hair to fly before it settled like silk around her shoulders and down her back. “Then friends we are.” She extended one hand. “Can we shake on it?”

Hank took Abbey’s small hand into his big paw of a hand and shook it solemnly. A lightning jolt of desire traveled up his arm and through his body. He tried to remember what Rump had told him about how to be an aggressive male. His mind was blank. Releasing Abbey’s hand, he drew a long breath. “I reckon that makes it official. We are

friends now.”

Abbey fluttered her long lashes. “I’ve never had a male friend before. You are the first, and I look forward to getting to know you well.”

Hank felt his face grow warm. “I feel like I’ve knowed you for always already, Miss Abbey.”

Abbey sat up as her eyes rounded. “You do?”

“Yes, ma’am. I do.”

“That’s so strange. I feel the same way.” Abbey laid her hand on his leg.

Hank’s heart convulsed, and the skin on his dick pulled so tight that he couldn’t close his eyes. He had to get out of here and fast. “I’m proud to hear that. Now, I gotta go.” If Abbey discovered what was happening, he’d die of shame and embarrassment.

Tears stood in Abbey’s luminous blue eyes. “Please don’t leave.” She wiped at a wayward tear as it coursed down her soft cheek. “Hank, I need your assistance. As one friend to another, will you help me?”

Hank would do anything for Abbey, and he told her as much before adding, “I think the world of you, Miss Abbey. Tell me what your problem is, and I’ll think of some way to help you.”

Abbey dried her eyes on the hem of her dress, sniffled, and lifted her face. “You know about my mother’s plans to marry Bea and me off to rich men?”

Hank knew, more than that, he’d committed himself to being a party to her plot. “Yes, ma’am. I know all about her plan.”

Abbey put her head in her hands and wept softly. “I don’t want to be sold to the highest bidder like I was a prize heifer.” Dropping her hands, she lifted her face. “Will you help me escape a fate that seems to me worse than death? Will you help me thwart my mother’s plan?”

Hank couldn’t say yes, he’d already told Tobias he would help Mavis with her parties. Neither could he refuse to help this fragile weeping woman. How in the world could he keep his word to Tobias, assist Mavis, *and* come to the aid of this fair damsel in distress and still remain honest, upright, loyal, and true?

He thought of the deal he’d made with Rump. Hank had agreed to help the old man rescue his sheep instead of killing them as Tobias had instructed. In turn Rump promised to stay around and help Hank become a dynamic, rough and tough, hell-for-leather cowboy. Hank kept his end of the bargain. He spared the sheep and then watched as Rump, with a wave of his hand, caused them to vanish into thin air.

All Hank got in return for his kind deed was some vague advice about pretending he was aggressive until he *was* aggressive. That seemed unlikely--still, Rump did know about magic and such. Could it be that if he pretended to be dynamic, tough and forceful, he would morph into that person? Since it was all he had, it was worth a try--even though right now becoming even quasi-tough, semi-dynamic, and pseudo-forceful seemed a highly unlikely.

Abbey prompted, “Well, what do you say? Will you help me?”

Standing, Hank squared his shoulders. “Yes, ma’am. I’d be more than happy to come to your assistance. Except I....” He wavered. Then, at the last minute, like a bolt from the blue, Rump’s words returned to run through Hank’s mind. *To be an aggressive male all you have to do is act like an aggressive male.* He sat back down beside Abbey and put his arm around her shoulder. “You can count on me.”

BlueBeard

Barri Bryan

## Chapter Nine

It seemed to Mavis that the whole world, or at least the residents of Hell's Half Acre, had conspired to thwart her best laid plans. Earlier in the day she'd had a terrible fight with her ungrateful daughters. They were protesting against having their mother--as they chose to put it--interfere in their lives. She wasn't interfering, she was helping. She tried to explain that, to no avail. She could have been talking to the wind for all the good it did.

Then she'd quarreled with that jackass of a Wesley. The man was dragging his feet and refusing to cooperate. He'd had a week to find a dancing instructor, and to this day he hadn't come up with even a likely prospect.

Next she'd complained to Hank. He smiled and sympathized and then told her he was helpless to do anything about how Wesley chose to handle the party proceedings.

Mavis paced the floor and fumed. She was so near success, yet at the same time she could feel failure breathing down her neck. Her helplessness added to her frustration. She stopped her pacing. "There has to be some way...." She tapped her toe on the floor. Maybe if she talked to Tobias. After all, he was the boss of this spread. Her chances of getting help from him were small, and the risk of further incurring his wrath was always a possibility. She thought a few minutes before declaring to no one in particular, "So, what the hell, I'll do it."

She should look her best. Mavis washed her face, applied makeup skillfully, combed her hair, and styled it carefully. She chose a dress with a low-cut neckline and put on her only pair of silk stockings. After viewing her image in the mirror that hung over her dressing table, she daubed her best perfume behind her ears, put a drop on each wrist, and poured the remainder between her breasts. She winked at the woman who stared back at her. "Okay, sweetheart. Let's do it."

Ten minutes later, she was knocking on the door of the Tobias's little study.

After a long silence, a masculine voice called out, "Go away."

Mavis rapped again, this time more insistently.

"Damn it, I said...." Tobias yanked the door open. His eyes rounded in surprise when he saw Mavis. "I thought you was Cookie bringing me my supper. What the hell do you want?"

Not only was Tobias as cross as a rooster in an empty hen house, he was hungry to boot. Mavis grimaced, pushed around him, and came into the small study. Her heart beat double time, but she kept her voice calm and steady. "I need to talk to you."

Tobias closed the door and leaned against it. "I ain't got nothin' to say to you."

He was going to be difficult. She had expected as much. Mavis sat on the couch and crossed her legs. Her dress rode up above her shapely knees. The scent of her perfume permeated the room. "I have many things to say to you, Toby."

Tobias sat on the other end of the couch and moved his thumb and forefinger along the blue beard on his chin. His anger seemed to melt away. "How come you called me Toby?"

Mavis decided that she would catch more flies with honey than she would with vinegar. "Toby seems to fit you much better than Tobias." She crossed her fingers and lied with silky ease. "Tobias seems a harsh name, not at all like the man that I suspect lurks beneath your hard façade." Would God strike her dead for telling such a blatant falsehood? She placed her hand over her heart. It was beating steadily. That meant she was still alive. Breathing a sigh of relief, she added, "Toby is more mellow and sweet."

Mean, nasty, cruel, acerbic Tobias Perkins batted tears from his eyes. "My mamma was the only other person that ever called me Toby. She's been dead since I was twenty-one years old, God rest her soul."

So the seemingly invincible Tobias Perkins had a chink in his armor. Insightful Mavis urged, "Tell me about your mamma."

Leaning back, Tobias stared at the ceiling. "Her name was Agatha, and she was beautiful." Lowering his head, he glanced briefly in Mavis's direction. "You'd think that a woman as pretty as her would hate havin' an ugly son like me, but she didn't. She loved me, more than that, she was proud of me, even when I got to be a teenager and grewed this god-awful blue beard." He looked away. "You got no right comin' in here and disturbin' old memories by callin' me Toby this-a-way."

The poor man; he was human after all. Devious Mavis saw a way to capitalize on that small spark of humanity. "You should be proud to remember your mother. Sweet old memories are precious. Had you ever thought of honoring your mamma's memory?"

Tobias huffed. "I do honor her memory everyday."

Once more Mavis crossed her fingers. "I'm talking about publicly honoring the memory of your dear departed mamma."

Tobias turned his head to one side before once more gazing in Mavis's direction. "How would I do that?"

"You could give a ball in her memory." Mavis held her breath and waited.

Tobias shook his head. "Nobody would come, and that would dishonor my sweet, departed mamma even more than ever."

Mavis laid her hand on Tobias's knee and felt him flinch. "You're a very important man around here. No one would dare disrespect you by not coming to your party."

Tobias snorted. "Important maybe, but not respected. I did give a big extravaganza once, and not one person showed up. I ain't never gonna be embarrassed that away again."

Mavis felt a twinge of sympathy for this lonely, ugly man. She declared on a note of authority, "People didn't come because you didn't give the right kind of party,"

Tobias took immediate offense. "I had the best food and the best entertainment and the best place to give a party that could ever be had." His face fell. "Still nobody showed up."

Mavis's nimble brain worked overtime to come up with some plan that would assure that every person in Cactus Gulch, Cross Bone County, and all surrounding areas would show up at Tobias's next bash. "You should ... you should...."

Tobias leaned forward. "I should what?"

Mavis's mind pursued several avenues of thought before she asked, "What about the schools in Cross Bone County? Maybe you could give a party for them."

Tobias shook his head. "They ain't no schools hereabouts."

That came as no surprise. Mavis snapped her fingers. “That’s it. You give the county enough money to build a school.”

Tobias scratched the side of his head. “I cain’t rightly see how that would make people come to my party or how it would do honor to my dear departed mamma.”

Mavis smiled as she spread her hands. “You make the announcement and then give a party to celebrate. Say that people can only come by special invitation. Make those invitations hard to come by.”

Tobias snorted. “What good would that do?”

“It would make everyone want an invitation. People always want what they can’t have.” As an afterthought she added, “And oh yes, the name of the school will be the Agatha Perkins School.”

Tobias frowned. “Do you think that would get me some respect?” Then he smiled. “How come I never thought of that?”

Mavis moved closer. She had come here with the intent to seduce this man. That idea vanished in the warm glow of the sympathy she felt for him. Brushing an unruly lock of hair from his forehead, she whispered, “You poor man. How much you have suffered! I had no idea.”

Obviously Tobias was still caught up in the memory of his mother. “Mamma was the only person who ever saw that--until now, that is.”

“Your mamma would be proud of you for naming a school in her honor.” Mavis moved still closer and put her arms around Tobias’s neck.

He laid his head on her ample bosom. “I should honor Mamma. She was such a fine lady.” He lifted his face. “You smell good.”

Things were going better than Mavis could have hoped. Why then did she feel lower than a snake’s belly? “I’ll help you do that.” While she was helping Tobias, she would also find husbands for her daughters. That should be reason for elation. It wasn’t. Mavis felt deflated and a little depressed. Her conscience must be bothering her. That was strange, considering that until now she’d never thought she had one.

Unobserved by the room’s two occupants, a shadow in a far corner stirred, moved across the floor, and slid through the wall. Once outside it materialized into a little man wearing a hood and a long robe. Laughter echoed across the flat landscape as he walked slowly down the trail toward the bunkhouse. As he neared that structure, he vanished like a puff of smoke as his laughter died away on the wind.



## Chapter Ten

Even as ambivalence tore at Hank, he hurried down the narrow path that led from the bunkhouse to the cedar grove. He'd been meeting Abbey there for the last three weeks. Each night before slipping away to rendezvous with this luscious creature, he'd sworn he wouldn't go. Then he remembered her soft voice and her supple body and her sweet smile, and his good intentions flew right out the window.

As he walked along, he half hoped that Rump would appear. The old man had promised to say around for a while. Maybe he could help Hank unravel the tangled mess of confusion in his head. *To be an aggressive male, all you have to do is act like an aggressive male.* Hank accepted those words as true. The only problem now was that he couldn't quite figure out what aggressive meant. It was apparent, on the one hand, that any aggressive male would take advantage of the opportunity to be alone with Miss Abbey. On the other hand, it seemed a cowardly act to sneak off to some secret place and meet with her behind her mamma's back. Being cowardly just so he could be aggressive didn't feel right somehow.

As he neared the grove, a sweet voice whispered his name, "Hank, darlin', over here."

Hank's heart beat a little faster. Abbey had called him darlin'. "Yes, ma'am. It's me all right." He came around the tall cedar trees and into the grove.

Abbey sat on the rude bench. Moonlight had turned her blonde hair to a shimmering silvery white. A sudden breeze puffed through the cedars and mingled with her sigh. "I've been waiting for you."

Hank sat down beside her. "I got here as fast as I could." Her nearness did strange things to his pulse rate. "Miss Abbey, I don't think..."

"You don't have to think, just hold me." Abbey moved nearer. "I was afraid you had decided not to come tonight."

Hold her? Hank didn't dare. He *was* bold enough to put his arm along the back of the bench. "Would you have been disappointed if I hadn't?"

Abbey laid her head on his shoulder. "My heart would have been broken." She looked up into his eyes. "I so look forward to seeing you at the end of each day."

Hank's insides turned to jelly. He had the feeling he should run. Instead, he dropped his arm from the bench, let it fall around Abbey's shoulders, and spoke the first words that came into his mind. "I look forward to seeing you too, 'cause, Miss Abbey, you are prettier than a red heifer in a bed of petunia blossoms."

He was never sure afterward who kissed whom, but he would remember that it was the sweetest coming together he'd ever known. Abbey's lips were soft under his. She opened her mouth, and he pushed his tongue inside. It was like tasting honey right out of the comb. Hank's head spun, and his heart beat a staccato as the kiss became more demanding. He was swept away on a tidal wave of need and desire. Lights, more bright and beautiful than a Roman candle on the Fourth of July, burst inside his head. His erection swelled and expanded until it pushed and throbbed against his tight pants.

Abbey took his hand and placed it over her left breast. "Just feel how my heart is beating."

Hank forgot everything but the magic of this moment. His hand gently kneaded the soft mound of her breast as his backbone tingled and his breath came in short gasps. "Yes, ma'am." Gasp. "I feel all right."

"See what you do to me?"

Hank swallowed painfully. "Yes, ma'am. I see."

Abbey pushed back and pointed to the bulge in the front of Hank's pants. "Is that what I do to you?"

The tingle in Hank's groin grew to an ache. "Yes, ma'am. It is."

Abbey cooed, "That's not all you do to me." She took his hand from her breast and guided it under her dress and toward the wet spot between her legs.

The head of Hank's erection was wet and aching. Stopping was no longer an option. He slid the leg of her panties aside and tangled his fingers in the hair around her dampness.

Abbey scooted onto her haunches and lifted her legs. "Touch my joy button, Hank."

Hank wasn't sure he knew what a joy button was, but he was more than willing to learn. "Where might I find that little darlin'?"

Abbey instructed, and Hank complied. He moved his fingers to the slit nestled beneath her curly hairs. He felt around until he located the hard little button there and massaged gently.

Abbey squeezed her legs together and moved around as he continued his gentle assault. When she reached orgasm, she yelped and jerked before sighing contentedly. "Oh, yes, that was nice."

Hank pulled her to him. "Not half as nice as it's gonna be." He unfastened his pants and lifted her skirt.

Abbey asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna pleasure you. Have you ever been pleased before?"

Abbey giggled. "Yes, but promise you won't tell Mamma."

"I won't tell." Hank pulled Abbey onto his lap and gently shoved his throbbing erection into the soft warm crevice between her legs. He sat very still, savoring the feel of her tightness and inhaling the odor of her femininity. He was so lost in the rapture of the moment that Abbey called twice before he answered.

"Yes, ma'am. What do you want?"

Abbey sighed. "I want what you have. Are you going to give it to me?"

Hank chuckled low in his throat. "Oh, yes ma'am. I'm gonna give it to you till you scream for mercy and beg for more." He proceeded to do just that, moving his erection in and out slowly at first. This was as near to heaven as he'd ever been. As his movements escalated, his mind detached, and he was hurled into a world of sheer sensation. His body tingled as his brain conjured up images he hardly dared to own-- Abbey naked in the moonlight, Abbey pushing her warm breasts into his chest. He stopped and pulled his erection from her. "Stand up, please?"

Abbey pouted. "Why did you stop?"

"'Cause I want to see you bare and beautiful while I'm makin' love to you."

Abbey giggled. "I want to see you bare, too."

Of one accord, they shed their clothes and stood before each other as naked as they'd been the day they were born. Hank's breath rattled in his chest. The creature that stood before him was a vision of loveliness, all silver and white and gold, with moonlight bathing her face and a soft breeze lifting her hair. "My God, you are beautiful."

Abbey giggled. "You look so hairy and big."

Made bold by passion, Hank replied, "I am hairy and big and horny as hell." He pulled Abbey to him and sank his erection deep into her body.

She shivered. "Yes, oh, yes."

As if embarrassed by what he was beholding, the moon went behind a cloud.

In the warm darkness, the two of them moved in syncopated rhythm to their mounting desire until they were shoving and pushing in a fit of agonized passion.

Hank held on until he felt Abbey convulse and her pelvic muscles tighten. As she relaxed in his arms, he exploded inside her. His orgasm was instant and overwhelming and seemed to last for eons.

Slowly, delightfully, his body relaxed and his mind began to function once more. A dozen conflicting emotions surfaced suddenly and unexpectedly. A part of him said he should repent and run. Another part said he should rejoice and stay. What, he wondered, would an aggressive male do?

Abbey's sated voice pulled him back to the moment. "Oh, Hank you were wonderful."

Without bothering to speculate if it was right or wrong, Hank gathered her into his arms. "Gosh darn it, I think I love you."

Abbey's smile was smug. "Of course you love me, and I love you."

Hank gulped. "You do?"

"Of course I do, and now we can be married, and I can tell Mama to take her parties and shove them."

"Married?" Hank questioned. Maybe he'd been a little too aggressive. "I ... I ... I ... ain't sure...."

Maybe now he wasn't being aggressive enough.

Abbey began the process of getting back into her clothes. "I am. Get dressed. We can find Mamma and tell her the good news."

Hank pushed his arms into his shirt. That pesky Rump had said he would hang around. Where was he now?

Abbey buttoned the front of her dress. "We are going to be so happy, oh Hank."

Hank put on his pants and slipped his feet into his boots. Too late the revelation came. Abbey had planned this from the beginning. He followed after her, pushing his shirt tail into his britches as he hurried to catch up. "Abbey, honey, wait just a damn minute."

## Chapter Eleven

Wesley finally found a dance instructor, and a handsome figure of a man he was, tall and dark with slick black hair and a curling mustache. Wesley conducted him into the dining room where Mavis sat conversing with Hank and Cookie about the upcoming dinner party.

Before Wesley had a chance to speak, the man introduced himself as Pierre Lamont from Paris, France. "And you, my dear, must be the lovely widow I have heard so much about." He lifted Mavis's hand to his lips and, with a flourish, kissed the back of it.

"That's me." Mavis pulled her hand away. She suspected it was more likely that this suave smooth talker came from Paris, Texas, even though he spoke with an accent she couldn't categorize. She doubted Pierre Lamont was his real name. Maybe she had all these misgivings because even before he opened his mouth to speak, she didn't like him. Pierre Lamont was too charming and too smooth for her taste. She asked Wesley point blank, "Where did you find *him*?"

Wesley replied, "I didn't find him so much as he found me."

That was no answer, but Mavis was too relieved to have a dance instructor to pursue the subject further. She barked orders like a top hand. "You Wesley, move that table in the other room. Hank, roll up the carpet. Cookie, move the chairs back against the wall." She lifted her voice to a shout. "Abbey, Bea, get in here, now."

Giggling and laughing, Bea and Abbey appeared in the wide archway that separated the living room from the dining room. When they saw Pierre, they lapsed into immediate silence.

Mavis motioned with her hand. "Get on in here and meet your new dance instructor."

The girls came slowly into the room.

Mavis made introductions and then told Cookie, Hank, and Wesley they could go. "I can manage alone from here."

Cookie scooted away before she'd finished speaking. Hank leaned against a wall, and Wesley loitered near the entrance to the kitchen. Neither man made any effort to leave.

Mavis was set to send them packing when Pierre looked around the room and said, "We can't dance without music."

Mavis waved his question aside. "There's a piano in the parlor." Once more she addressed Hank and Wesley, "Get out of here, both of you."

Pierre put his hands on his hips. "And who, pray tell, is going to play it? Can you?"

Mavis was reluctant to admit that she couldn't. "That's one of the few things I never learned to do." Not to be outdone, she asked, "Can you?"

With an arrogant lift of his head, Pierre replied, "Of course I can, but I can't play *and* teach your daughters dance steps." He turned to the two men. "Can either of you play

the piano?"

Wesley shook his head. "Unfortunately, I can't."

Hank shrugged. "I never learned neither." He straightened and smiled. "I *can* play a guitar; leastways, I know a few chords."

Pierre echoed indignantly, "A guitar?" A few moments ticked by before he relented. "I suppose that will have to do."

Hank sped out the door, calling as he went, "I'll fetch it and be right back."

Mavis turned her gaze on Wesley. "You can go."

Wesley, sly fellow that he was, didn't move an inch. "I will provide the vocals for Hank's playing. Simple chords are hardly suitable for dancing."

Mavis began, "We don't need..."

Pierre intervened. "That would be very nice, Mr. Wiseman. I do hope you know the words to some waltzes."

Mavis could have protested. She doubted that it would do any good.

Hank returned carrying a battered guitar and smiling from ear to ear. "Just let me get this sucker tuned up, and I'll be all set to play."

Pierre asked, "Do you know any waltzes?" Before Hank could answer, he added, "Mr. Wiseman will sing as you play."

Hank impaled Wesley on a knifing stare as he struck a chord. "What key, pencil pusher?"

Wesley cleared his throat. "Strike a few chords and let me listen."

Hank strummed a loud unmusical chord. "You don't know one chord from another. You ain't nothin' but a fraud."

Wesley bristled. "Watch your tongue, cowboy. I take offense to those words."

Mavis wondered what in the world had gotten into Hank. Over the past few days he'd become antagonistic and argumentative. She liked him better when he was shy and easygoing. That was not her problem. Seeing that her daughters learned to dance was. "Shut up," she pointed her finger toward Hank. "And play." Before he could reply, she aimed that same finger in Wesley's direction. "And you stop arguing and start singing."

Pierre proved to be an able teacher, and Bea and Abbey were willing students. Over the next hour and a half they listened and practiced and learned. By the end of the session they had progressed from watching and following to dancing quite adequately to the plaintive strains of Hank's guitar and the clear notes of Wesley's quivering tenor.

As Pierre swung first Bea and then Abbey around the floor, Mavis dropped into a chair and breathed a sigh of relief. Pierre might be a rogue and a scoundrel, but he did know how to teach her girls to dance.

"I need a rest." Abbey sat in the chair next to her mother. "Learning to dance is hard work."

Bea leaned against the wall. "I'm not only tired, I'm hungry."

Pierre's bushy eyebrows met across his Romanesque nose. "You can't rest yet. You have one more task to complete." He motioned for Hank and Wesley to come onto the dance floor. "You must dance with these gentlemen."

Hank laid his guitar aside. "There won't be no music, but I don't mind." He came to stand beside Abbey. "I choose Miss Abbey for my partner."

Wesley sped to stand before Bea. "May I have the honor of this dance?"

Mavis sprang to her feet. "Just a damn minute. I don't think this is necessary."

Pierre argued, "Oh, but it is. It is imperative that your daughters practice dancing with a partner if they wish to master the art of maneuvering around a dance floor."

Mavis countered, "But there's no music. You said yourself that dancing didn't go well without music."

Pierre stepped across the room and picked up Hank's battered old guitar. "That's no problem, madam, I can provide the music."

Mavis was immediately on the defensive. "Don't call me madam. I'll have you know I'm the respectable widow of a Baptist minister."

Pierre struck a few melodious chords. "I meant no disrespect. There is no problem, *Mrs. Douglas*."

He was a glib-tongued fellow, Mavis thought as she watched Pierre strum the guitar and sing the words of a lilting waltz in a deep baritone.

After several minutes of the two couples dancing arm and arm and cheek to cheek, Mavis called a halt. Standing, she whistled through her teeth. "That's enough. No more dancing today."

Hank and Wesley complained, and Bea and Abbey protested, but Mavis was adamant. "No more, I said."

Pierre agreed for once. "We will practice more tomorrow. I will return at precisely ten AM tomorrow morning."

Mavis wondered aloud, "Back from where?"

Pierre laid Hank's guitar on a nearby chair. "Mada ... Mrs. Douglas, my home is in the vast over-yonder."

Mavis asked, "Where is that?"

Pierre strode toward the door. "I will see you tomorrow at exactly ten AM. Be here, all of you."

Without waiting for a reply, he hurried out the door.

## Chapter Twelve

Hank had been suspicious of Pierre from the onset. When the slick dude admitted that that he lived in some place called The Vast Over-Yonder, those suspicions blossomed into mistrust. Grabbing his hat, he slapped it on his head. "Wait, Mr. Pierre, and I'll walk a ways with you." As he hurried out the door, he called over his shoulder, "'Scuse me, ladies."

By the time Hank could get out the door and onto the porch, Pierre was nowhere in sight, and that was quite a feat seeing as how the arid land that stretched around the house as far as the eye could see was as flat as a hoe cake. Hank raced across the porch and down the steps shouting, "Mr. Pierre, Mr. Pierre." Maybe the slippery sidewinder had hidden behind a bush or a tree. He cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed, "I know you're around here somewheres, now come on out." The answer was echoing silence.

Hank sat on the steps and wondered how a man could vanish into thin air. Then he remembered that Rump had disappeared before his very eyes on more than one occasion. Strange and disturbing possibilities collided with the reasoning thoughts inside his head as he stood and walked slowly toward the bunkhouse.

He was a far piece down the path when Abbey caught up to him. "Hank, whatever is wrong with you?" Grabbing his arm, she pulled him to a stop. "I called and called and you didn't answer."

Hank shook his head. "I reckon my mind was someplace else."

Abbey's breasts rose and fell seductively as she breathed deeply. "I ran to catch up to you." She lowered her head and looked up from under her long lashes. "I wanted to tell you how much I enjoy our nights in the cedar grove."

Hank enjoyed those nights, too. Never before had he shared such bliss or experienced such ecstasy. But these clandestine meetings were ripping the fabric of his life apart. Each day he swore to himself that tonight he wouldn't go near that cedar grove. Each night he found his feet taking him there the moment darkness began to fall. He alternately cursed himself for being such a spineless heel and blessed the day he found his wonderful Abbey.

"You ain't told your mamma about our meetings, have you?" Under ordinary circumstances Hank would have wooed Abbey properly and asked for her hand in marriage, for he truly loved her. These were not ordinary circumstances. What did a poor cowboy have to offer in comparison to all the things that a handsome, rich, educated husband could give her? He knew the answer to that question all too well. Nothing.

"Didn't I promise I'd keep our secret until you thought the time was right to tell?" Standing on tiptoe, Abbey kissed Hank's cheek. "I'll see you there tonight." She turned and walked in the direction of the house.

Hank blushed and swallowed. "Abbey, darlin'...." He had to put a stop to this madness, here and now.

Abbey turned, "Yes, my love?"

Hank's resolve melted in the warmth of her smile. "Nothin'. See you then." All the way to the bunkhouse he reprimanded himself for being so weak and indecisive.

Later that afternoon, Hank saddled his horse and rode the five miles to Butte Rock, a huge stone that jutted up like a stalagmite in the center of a grove of spiny mesquites. He tethered his horse to one of those mesquites, took off his boots, and sat down in the shade of the jutting stone. Never before had he felt so sad and at the same time so elated. He was in love with Abbey! He wanted to declare that love to the world. He knew he could never do that. How could he even consider depriving her of the chance to become the wife of a rich man? On the other hand, didn't true love count for something? Maybe .... Amid all those polarizing thoughts and reflections one certainty stood bold and clear--he had to reach some decision and then pursue the course he chose to the end, and he had to do it soon.

He must have drifted off to sleep for when he opened his eyes Rump was standing before him calling his name. "Hank, I say there, awaken, my friend."

Hank blinked and looked around. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"I never left. I said I'd stay until you become an aggressive male, and I will."

"I ain't sure that's ever gonna happen," Hank said. Belligerently, he added, "I ain't sure I want you around no more."

Not the least perturbed, Rump moved Hank's boots to one side and sat beside him. "I am pained by your unkind words. After all I have done for you, how can you utter such slanderous accusations?"

Hank pulled his knees up under his chin and stared at the distant horizon. "What have you done for me except give me bad advice? And that was only after I promised not to butcher your sheep."

Rump laid one blue-veined hand over his heart. "That is the unkindest cut of all. Thanks to me, you are slowly becoming an aggressive male."

Hank shifted his glance to stare at the little man beside him. "I ain't even sure what aggressive is anymore."

Rump lifted one very gray eyebrow. "Were you ever?"

Hank's brain was as muddled as muddy creek water. Over the past few weeks all he had known to be sure and certain had been called into doubt. "I thought I did once, but now I ain't sure. My life's a mess."

Rump stroked his gray beard and looked thoughtful before asking, "Is there anything in your life that is immutable, my friend?"

"You mean like for sure and certain?" Hank scratched the side of his head as he turned the question over in his mind. "All I know to be true and unchangeable is my love for Abbey. That love is true and forever."

Rump pressed his palms together and laid his forefingers over his lips. "And you, of course, wish to marry the idol of your affections?"

"Are you talkin' about Abbey?"

Rump nodded his old gray head. "I am."

"What kind of a fool question is that? Sure I want to marry her, but I ain't stupid enough to think that could ever happen."

"And what," Rump said as he slipped his hands into his long robe sleeves, "would you say if I told you it could happen?"

A spark of hope ignited inside Hank's heart. He extinguished it before it had time



to flicker into the flame of belief. "I'd say you was crazy as a," he almost said sheepherder, but he caught himself just in time, "as a bessy bug," he added lamely.

Rump stretched his legs in front of him and stared at his pointy-toed shoes. "I could make it happen."

Once again a flicker of hope sparked in Hank's breast. It sputtered and died when Rump added, "But it would cost you."

Even before he asked, he knew that he shouldn't. Nevertheless, Hank asked, "Cost me what?"

Rump slanted Hank a sideways glance. "In return for making it possible for you to marry Abbey, I want your word that I, not you, will spend your wedding night with her."

Hank didn't know if he should laugh or punch the little bastard in the nose. "What would an old codger like you do in bed with a pretty young thing like Abbey?"

Rump's reply rode on a chuckle. "That is not the issue."

Hank vaulted to his feet. "The hell it ain't. You're asking me for permission to screw my wife."

"Only she isn't your wife yet, and she may never be." Rump patted the hard ground beside him. "Sit down, my friend, and let's iron out the details of our deal."

Hank's chin jutted. "We ain't got no deal." But he sat back down. "Abbey would never agree to sleep with you."

"We are not talking about what Abbey will or will not do," Rump replied. "What we are discussing is, are you willing to barter your wedding night for the privilege of having and holding Abbey for a lifetime?"

"I ain't sure I am."

Rump's voice was silky smooth. "What are a few hours of misery compared to a lifetime of happiness?"

The thought of another man, even a wizened old codger like Rump, with Abbey, was more than Hank could bear. "I don't want no other feller with my girl, not even for a few hours."

Rump scorned, "You choose instead to lose her to another man who will sleep with her for the remainder of her life?" After a few moments, he emphasized, "That is what will happen if she marries another man."

That thought made Hank's blood run cold. "I'd kill the son-of-a-bitch." He closed his mouth and gritted his teeth before wailing, "What am I going to do?"

"You are going to make a choice. Will it be me for a night, or some other man for a lifetime?"

Pain closed like a fist around Hank's heart. "I reckon you and me need to talk about this here deal."

## Chapter 13

Mavis didn't like being summoned to come to Tobias's study, not even if the note he sent by Cookie was written on beautiful stationary and had a large *please* scrolled across the bottom of the page. She held the paper in one hand and slapped it with the other. "That bastard has a nerve."

Cookie stood before her with his hands in his pockets. He looked as meek as a kitten. Mavis suspected that benign expression hid a clever and devious mind, but then Mavis always suspected the worst of every man. He took a step backward as he asked, "Will the Señora go?"

Mavis had it on the tip of her tongue to say that if Tobias wanted to see her, he would have to come where she was. Then she remembered how sad and dejected he had been the last time she had gone to his study and surprised herself by saying, "Sure, why not?"

Cookie smiled, causing his mustache to giggle. "You come now?"

Mavis didn't want Tobias to think she was at his beck and call. "I'll be there soon."

Cookie didn't move. "You come now."

Mavis impaled the squatty little cook on a stabbing stare. "I will come when I get ready to do so, not before."

Cookie didn't budge. "Señor Perkins will be peesed."

Mavis blinked. "Be what?" Then the light dawned. "Let him be pissed. Who cares? Run along and tell him I'll be there when it's convenient for me to come."

Cookie sat in a chair near the door. "I will wait."

Mavis relented and stood. "On second thought, let's go." The sooner she got this over, the sooner she could get back to completing the menu for her first dinner party. She marched out the door and down the hall with her shoulders squared and her nose in the air.

Cookie followed after her. When they were almost to the door of the study, he dashed around her, opened it, and waited for her to go inside.

Mavis came through the entranceway to see Tobias sitting in a chair near the window. His hands were folded in his lap. His blue-bearded face wore a terrible scowl.

The sight of him was enough to make Cookie slam the door with a resounding thud and take off down the hall.

As Cookie's footsteps died away, Mavis sat on a chair near the desk and waited for Tobias to speak.

After a seemingly inordinate amount of time, he said, "What took you so long?"

Mavis leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. "Mr. Perkins, I have better things to do than to kowtow to your unreasonable demands."

Tobias's bushy eyebrows pulled together in a frown. "I will not have you disrespecting me in my own home."

Mavis Douglas, who was usually so adept at reading others and so clever at

assessing situations, was caught off guard completely. She reacted as she always did when she perceived she was under attack, she struck back, immediately and venomously. "I didn't come here to be interrogated and insulted." She vaulted to her feet. "Goodbye, Mr. Perkins." With her head held high, she started for the door.

Her hand was on the knob when Tobias's booming voice struck her like a physical blow. "Get back here, woman."

Mavis turned on her heel. She was set to give Tobias Perkins the dressing down of his life when he asked on a plaintive note, "Why didn't you call me Toby?"

Mavis was surprised to realize that she had somehow wounded this ugly, uncivil, uncouth little man. She was even more taken aback to discover that was the last thing she wanted to do. She came back across the floor and sat down, this time on the couch near the fireplace. Very softly she asked, "Why did you summon me here, Toby?"

Her honeyed words had the desired effect. Tobias's anger seemed to evaporate into the humid air. "Hank says that Wesley found a dance instructor for your girls."

"I don't know where, but yes he did," Mavis replied in that same soft, sugary tone of voice. "He's a Frenchman. His name is Pierre Lamont."

"Hank says that you and your girls and him and Wesley have been havin' practice dance sessions in the parlor every morning."

Discomfort, like a slow itch, irritated Mavis's equilibrium. "We have. It's a part of the deal I made with Hank." After a brief pause, she added, "I thought you knew."

Tobias catapulted to his feet. "I know. What I don't know is why you're bein' so gol-durn disrespectful to me?"

Mavis was mystified. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tobias stomped across the room and sat on the couch beside Mavis. "How come you didn't invite me to your practice?" Leaning forward, he glared at her. "This here is my house, and I didn't get no invite."

Mavis was too shocked to do anything but blurt out the truth. "I didn't know you needed an invitation." She suddenly realized that beneath Tobias's rough exterior beat the heart of a shy, uncertain man. "And I didn't think you'd come if you were invited."

Tobias drew a deep breath. "I might not have, but I don't like not bein' asked. That's plain insultin' and downright disrespectful."

Mavis announced, "I'm inviting you now."

The corners of Tobias's mouth turned down. "It's too late."

Did he want her to try persuading him? She could do that. "Please come, Toby." She laid her hand on his leg and felt him flinch. "Would you do that for me?"

Tobias's lower lip protruded in a childish pout. "Now after all of you have learned all them fancy steps, you want me to show up when I ain't learnt none of 'em yet?"

He had to be the most insecure man Mavis had ever met. She snapped her fingers as her mind latched onto this golden opportunity. "What if I teach you what I've learned? Then will you come?"

Tobias's look was guarded. "You'd have to put your arms around me. Could you do that?"

Mavis said, "I'd love to put my arms around you." Much to her own amazement, she found that she was looking forward to holding Tobias near to her heart. "Would you like to put your arms around me?"

A patch of red glowed through Tobias's blue beard. "I think so. I ain't never held

a pretty woman before.” After a painful silence, he admitted, “I ain’t never held no woman before.”

Could it possibly be? Mavis swallowed and blinked. Lowering her head, she looked up at him. “Toby darlin’, are you a virgin?”

Tobias bit his lip and hung his head. “I ain’t never done it with no woman, if that’s what you mean.” His head came up as he announced defiantly, “I pleasure myself when I feel the need.”

“I’ve tried it both ways,” Mavis sniggered, “and I can tell you it’s much better with two.” Holy cow! Tobias had never been intimate with a woman. Until this moment she had never dreamed such a man existed. Standing, she motioned for Tobias to do the same. “Let’s dance.”

Tobias stood. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Mavis moved nearer. “You darn tootin’ I’m sure. Hold out your arms.”

Tobias obeyed, and Mavis slipped into his embrace before putting one of her hands around his neck and the other around his waist. “Relax and follow me.”

Tobias shuddered and stuttered as he struggled to follow Mavis’s graceful movements.

After a few bumbling steps, Mavis stopped and stepped back. “Toby, darlin’ you have to relax.”

Her eyes scanned first his face, then his body, and came to rest on the huge bulge in the front of his pants. She gulped and smiled before pulling him into a tight embrace. “Let’s try again.”

Toby broke the embrace and sat on the couch. “This here is most embarrassin’.”

Mavis sat beside him. “Don’t be embarrassed. Everyone is a little stiff at first. You will loosen up and catch right on after a few tries.”

“I ain’t talkin’ about my dancin’.” Toby looked down at the huge bulge in his pants. “I’m talkin’ about this here hard I got on.” He asked, “Are you mad at me for it?”

Mavis found, much to her surprise, that the opposite was true. She was flattered and more than a little aroused herself. “I’m not mad, I’m pleased.” A seductive smile spread across her pretty face. “Get those clothes off, Toby. I’m gonna loosen you up in more ways than one.”

Toby questioned, “You want to touch me when I’m naked?”

Mavis reached for the buttons at the neck of her dress. “I’m gonna do a lot more than touch you when you’re naked. Honey, I’m gonna turn you ever which way but loose.”

Toby jumped to his feet and proceeded to shed his clothes.

## Chapter Fourteen

Hank looked around the crowded room. It would appear that Mavis's first dinner party was well on its way to becoming a success. The huge parlor was decorated with fresh vases of flowers. Incense burned in little containers on the mantle. Candles and lamps blazed in bright profusion, providing abundant light.

She had chosen her guests carefully. Horace Muldoon, the owner and operator of the Cactus Gulch General Store was present, along with his frankly fat wife, Myrtle. Rocky Cameron, the Sheriff of Cross Bone County, was in attendance also. Of course he would be--he was the most eligible bachelor in five counties.

Beau Brimley had made the cut. That was to be expected. He was accompanied by his parents Clarence and Martha Brimley. Clarence owned a huge ranch and herds of prime cattle. Beau was his only son and quite a catch if you liked sissified, citified men, which Hank did not. When he had voiced that thought to Mavis, she'd set him straight in a hurry. "You won't have the pleasure of his company. You and Wesley are waiters. Remember that and don't go mingling with my guests."

Hank had agreed to being demoted to waiter status only after Mavis made it abundantly clear that he would not be included as a dinner guest. Being a waiter was the only way he could be assured he'd be around to keep an eye on Abbey.

Last but not least, Mavis had lured the mayor of Cactus Gulch, Mac Nolan, and his wife Agnes to her dinner. Mac was not nearly as rich as Horace Muldoon or Clarence Brimley, but he held an office of some importance.

Mavis had stationed Hank on the east side of the dining room entrance. He felt like a fool standing there wearing a white shirt, black pants, and a bow tie. To add insult to injury, Mavis insisted that he slick his hair down with pomade and part it in the middle. The crowning indignity was that she made him drape a towel over his left arm. Wesley stood across from him. Except for height and coloring, he could have been Hank's mirror image. He wore identical clothes, had a white towel over his right arm, and his hair slicked down and parted in the middle.

Hank was staring at Abbey, thinking how beautiful she looked and trying to figure out some way to keep her out of the clutches of these predatory men, when Mavis sidled up to him. "Don't forget you are to serve the four guests seated to my left. I will be at the foot of the table. You will serve me also. Wesley will see to the other five guests. And don't forget about serving to the left."

Hank used his fingers to do some swift calculating. "You ain't got but six guests." He held up three more fingers. "Then there's you and Bea and Abbey."

Mavis announced with aplomb, "Toby will be here soon to take his place at the head of the table."

As she waltzed away, Hank snickered. He knew his boss. There was no way Tobias Perkins would show up at a shindig like this. Under his breath, he said, "When donkeys fly."

The words had barely left his mouth when Tobias slipped through the kitchen

door and eased unnoticed to Hank's side. Most of the time Tobias looked like the dogs had been keepin' him under the porch, but not tonight. He was dressed fit to kill in a flashy western suit replete with embroidery and piping. His boots were multi-colored and stitched with seven rows of stitching. Hank gulped. "Lordy, Boss, you look as fancy as a dog with a hemstitched tail."

Tobias grinned and rubbed his hand over his blue-bearded chin. "Mavis picked out these here duds. That woman is somethin' else. Can you believe that every last one of her guests showed up here tonight?"

Hank was astonished himself. He was reluctant to admit that to Tobias. "I ain't too surprised," he said and thought as he spoke that over the past few months he'd become quite adept at making fancy with the truth.

There was a lilt in Tobias's voice when he spoke Mavis's name that made Hank as suspicious as hell. He temporarily forgot his worry about Abbey and shifted his thoughts to his boss. "Have you taken a shine to Mavis?"

Tobias stretched his turkey gobbler neck and turned to stare at Hank. "Maybe I have, so what?" He grinned a silly little grin that said more than any words he could have spoken. "Mavis is quite a woman."

Could it be? Hank wondered before common sense moved in to chase away his suspicions. Oh, no, not Tobias. He was not only ugly as a mud fence, he was also dumb as dirt when it came to women. "She shore seems to be hell-bent once she sets her mind on gettin' a thing done."

That silly grin seemed to be glued to Tobias's face. "She shore knows how to do it all right."

Hank was set to pursue this subject further when Mavis stood and lifted her hand signaling for silence. "Quiet everyone. Before we sit down to dinner, I have an announcement to make."

A titter arose among her guests as they sent each other questioning glances and murmured in speculative tones.

Mavis raised both hands. "Quiet, please."

The tittering stopped, but the questioning glances continued.

Mavis motioned for Tobias to come stand beside her. To Hank's utter surprise, Tobias stepped around him and made his way through the cluster of guests.

Mavis said, as she placed one hand over her heart, "Mr. Tobias Perkins, fine, upstanding, civic-minded gentleman that he is, has decided to erect a school in Cactus Gulch."

Hank thought as Tobias came to stand by her side, that the woman did have a flair for the dramatic. She didn't mind embroidering the truth either.

Mavis hooked her hand through Tobias's arm. "The name of the school will be the Agatha Perkins School, in honor of Mr. Perkins's dear departed mother."

The guests applauded politely.

Tobias stood beside Mavis, blushing beet red and grinning like a possum in a glue pot.

Mavis clapped her hands. "Dinner is served." She held onto Tobias's arm and guided him in the direction of the dining room. As she walked past Hank, she said from the side of her mouth, "Mind your P's and Q's and tell Cookie not to show his face in here."

Hank managed to get through serving the six course dinner without spilling food. That was quite an accomplishment considering that most of the time he was concentrating on watching Rocky Cameron watching Abbey. If that slick-talkin' son-of-a-bitch stepped out of line even once, he would serve the handsome sheriff of Cross Bone County a knuckle sandwich.

Somehow he managed also not to talk back to Mavis, who was puttin' on airs somethin' terrible.

All this tension was a terrible strain on his nervous system. By the time he got the last dish from the table and to the kitchen, he was as tired as a boomtown whore and mad enough to eat rattlesnakes. He was a man, a cowboy, not some sissified waiter who was at the beck and call of some want-to-be uppity society woman. He had shed his apron and was dumping his towel in the garbage when Wesley called from where he stood looking through the slightly open kitchen door. "Hank, come over here and have a gander at who just showed up at Mavis's party."

Hank didn't feel like making the trip across the room. "Whoever it is, she will probably show him the door."

"I don't think so," Wesley argued. "It seems this is an invited guest."

Hank's curiosity made him forget how tired he was. He hurried across the room and looked over Wesley's shoulder. Pierre Lamont was seated at the piano. As his fingers slid over the keys, he asked, "Madame Douglas, what would you like me to play?"

Hank pushed Wesley aside in order to get a better view. "Pierre has done messed up good and proper." He stepped into the dining room and waited for Mavis to cut loose.

It never happened; instead Mavis requested a waltz and extended her hand in Tobias's direction. "Toby, dear, shall we dance?"

Danged if that woman wasn't as unpredictable as a Mason County jury.

And Tobias was no better. He took her hand, led her to the center of the room, put one arm on her shoulder and the other around her waist, and began to waltz her around the room.

The others followed suit. Horace Muldoon danced with his pudgy wife Myrtle, struggling to get his arm halfway around her ample waist as he swung her around in circles. Clarence and Martha Brimley looked like puppets on a string as they hopped around the floor. Mac Nolan and his wife Agnes swayed in perfect rhythm to the tinkling notes of the piano. Sissified Beau Brimley held Bea from him and danced in measured steps

Hank was thinking this was better than a medicine show when Rocky Cameron bowed before Abbey and then took her in his arms.

Wesley came to stand behind him. "It is not to my liking to see Bea in the arms of another man."

For once, Hank was in agreement with his often-adversary. "I don't like seein' Sheriff Cameron dancin' with Abbey neither."

Wesley turned to go. "I can't watch anymore of this."

Hank caught his arm. "Are you gonna let Mavis get away with this?"

Wesley countered, "Are you?"

"Hell no," Hank answered, as he burst from the dining room and rushed into the parlor.

Wesley followed close on his heels.

BlueBeard

Barri Bryan



## Chapter Fifteen

Mavis was mad enough to spit. Yesterday she had the world by the tail on a downhill pull. Today she was on the inside looking out through the bars of the Cross Bone County Jail, charged with assaulting an officer of the law and resisting arrest. How could she know when she doubled her fist and aimed for Hank's jaw, he'd dodge and she'd land a haymaker smack in Sheriff Rocky Cameron's right eye? She paced the short distance across the cell and swore.

It never would have happened if Hank hadn't cut in while Rocky was dancing with Abbey. Before she stopped to consider, Mavis sped across the room and confronted Hank. "Didn't I tell you not to crash my party? Get out of here."

Hank had the impudence to say, "I ain't goin' nowhere, and what's more me and Abbey are getting' hitched as soon as we can get the license." He moved nearer Abbey and put his arm around her bare shoulders.

Mavis rounded on Abbey. "Tell this dumb cowboy that you won't marry him."

Abbey snuggled in Hank's embrace. "No, Mamma, 'cause that's exactly what I'm going to do, marry Hank. He's the man I love."

Mavis stared at the two of them as the truth dawned. "You and Hank have been screwing around." Anger exploded inside her head. That's when she doubled her fist and aimed a punch at Hank. The damn fool ducked. Rocky was standing directly behind him and the rest was history.

The good sheriff didn't take kindly to a middle aged-woman punching him in the eye. His handsome face took on the aspects of a thundercloud. "You can't attack an officer of the law."

That's when Mavis should have apologized. She could see that now, but then she was too mad to see anything except a rich husband for her daughter slipping through her grasp. "You should have ducked too."

The sheriff's eye was puffy and bloodshot. By tomorrow he'd have a humdinger of a shiner. "I had no idea you'd do something as unladylike as throw a punch."

Why hadn't she backed down? Every instinct she possessed told her that she should. Instead, Mavis let go with a few well-chosen words calculated to put the Sheriff in his place. She ended by saying, "You can't be much of a sheriff if you don't even know when to duck."

Rocky put one hand over his eye. "And you, madam, can't be much of a lady if you must resort to fisticuffs to get your point across."

The bastard had called her Madam. Mavis's last ounce of self control vanished. She turned the air blue with expletives that would have done a trail boss proud.

Over her outburst, Rocky shouted, "You are under arrest."

Now, here she was, in jail, and with no money to post bail. God only knew where Bea and Abbey were. She could never remember feeling so depressed and dejected.

The jailor, a rotund little man with jelly belly and a bald head, stuck his head around the door. "You got a visitor."

Maybe one of her daughters had come to rescue her. It was about time. "Show her in."

The jailor chuckled. "It ain't no she, it's a he." He stepped aside. Tobias came through the doorway and hurried to stand on the other side of the bars. "Mavis, are you all right?"

Mavis came across the floor, stuck her arms through the bars, and grabbed Tobias's hands. "Toby?" He was the last person she had expected to see here. Had he come to press charges? She had started a near-riot in his house. "Why are you here?"

Tobias squeezed her hands. "I came to post your bail and take you home."

Good fortune always made Mavis skeptical. "You aren't angry with me for starting a fight and spoiling your party?"

Tobias grinned as he rubbed his hand across his blue beard. "You didn't spoil nothin' for me; I ain't had that much fun since my Aunt Nellie dropped her snuff in the butter."

Mavis's eyes filled with tears as she stared at the man across from her and saw past his heavy features and ugly blue beard and gazed directly into his kind, handsome heart. "Toby, you are wonderful"

Tobias blushed. "I think you're wonderful too. I was kind of thinking ... I've been hoping...."

He dropped Mavis's hands. "You will be out of here as soon as ol' Rocky can process the papers."

Mavis asked, "What have you been thinking? What have you been hoping?"

Tobias hung his head. "I kind of ... that is...." His words trailed away on a sigh.

He would never have the nerve to ask her. She'd have to ask him. Wiping away a tear, Mavis cooed, "Toby, sweetheart, will you marry me?"

Tobias let out a war whoop that could be heard in the next county. "I've been wantin' to ask you that same question for some time now."

Mavis's heart beat a little faster in anticipation. "Is that a 'yes?'"

"Oh, yes ma'am, it sure is a definite yes." The smile on Tobias's face made him almost attractive. "When can we tie the knot?"

"We have to make some plans," Mavis answered. "Maybe in a few days we can find a preacher or a justice of the peace to perform the ceremony."

Tobias shook his head. "No siree, I ain't settlin' for no simple ceremony. This here wedding is gonna be the biggest wingding Cross Bone County has ever seen."

The jailor interrupted as he came through the door saying, "You're a free woman, Miz Douglas, but Sheriff Cameron says you'd better watch your step in the future." He inserted the key in the lock and turned it slowly.

Mavis felt her temper slipping. "And you can tell Sheriff Cameron...."

Tobias intervened. With the skill of a diplomat, he completed Mavis's sentence, "that we thank him very much and we will heed his advice."

Mavis stepped through the opened door and breathed in deeply. Ah, sweet freedom at last. She opened her mouth, set to give the jailor a message he could relay back to Sheriff Cameron. Tobias's stern stare made her reconsider and hurry toward the front of the jail.

They were in Tobias's wagon and far down the road toward Hell's Half Acre before he spoke again. His voice carried a note of loving tenderness. "I can see that I got

my work cut out for me.”

Mavis slanted a sidelong glance in his direction. “How so?”

“Takin’ care of you is gonna be a full time job.” He glanced briefly in her direction. “Keepin’ you in line and out of trouble is gonna be quite a challenge.”

Mavis thought, *you don’t know the half of it*. She said, “Oh, Toby, you are so masterful.”

Tobias turned his wagon off the dirt road and into a clump of trees before yelling “Whoa” to his team.

A tingle ran down Mavis’s backbone. “Toby, you naughty boy, what are you up to?”

Tobias tied the reins around the wagon’s brake before turning to face her. “I can’t wait no longer for some more of your sweet lovin’.”

Mavis’s eyes traveled from the smile on his ugly face to the enormous bulge that distorting the front of his pants. So he didn’t have the handsomest face in the world. What he carried between his legs more than made up for his not so handsome countenance. It was big and hard and beautiful. And she had a lifetime to teach him how to use it to pleasure her. She reached for the top button of her dress.

Tobias leaped to the ground. “Get down here, woman. I can’t wait no longer to get inside you.”

Mavis scooted from the seat, climbed down the wheel, and flung herself into Tobias’s arms. She intended to make this experience one Tobias would remember for the rest of his life. She shed her dress and pulled her petticoat over her head. Her heart was racing and her body ached with need.

Tobias had long ago dispensed with his clothes. He stood before her now wearing nothing but his socks and boots. His erection reached almost to his belly button. Mavis licked her lips in anticipation as she took off her chemise and leaned against a giant oak. The bark pressed into her backside. “Here it is, lover boy, come and get it.”

“I’m comin’, sweet thang, I’m comin’.” Tobias rammed his long, stiff erection into the damp spot between her legs.

Mavis shivered as fiery fingers teased through her groin and her stomach. She threw her head back and moaned, “Yes, oh, yes,” as Tobias thrust in and out with ever-escalating strokes.

Her orgasm triggered his. For what seemed an eon, ecstasy held them in its sway. Then sweetly, gradually, they drifted back to reality. Mavis sighed as Tobias pulled himself from her. “Tobias, you have the most magnificent tool in the world.”

A grin spread across Tobias’s blue bearded face. “You shore bring out the best in that little feller.” He reached for his pants. “We’d best be gettin home before folks start wonderin’ what happened to us.”

Mavis stepped into her chemise. “Yes, dear.”

## Chapter Sixteen

It would be a wedding the likes of which no one in Cross Bone County had ever seen before. Hank was sure they would never see anything like it ever again. In one grandiose ceremony, Hank was marrying Abbey, Wesley was saying his 'I do's with Bea, and Tobias was tying the knot with Mavis. The County Judge was scheduled to perform the ceremony, and Pierre Lamont had agreed to sing a love song and play the wedding march as the three brides came down the aisle.

Hank should be ecstatically happy. He would be except for one little thing. He had made a deal with, and a promise to Rump to let the little bastard spend *his* wedding night with *his* bride. Would Rump try to hold him to it? He hadn't seen hide nor hair of the little man since they'd made this ridiculous arrangement. Maybe Rump had left the country. Maybe he'd never come back. Hank should be so lucky.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. The three blushing brides and the three proud grooms said their vows in a long and very impressive ceremony. Afterward, Tobias threw a lavish reception and invited half of Cross Bone County. Every invited guest showed up, plus a few who were not invited, but came anyway.

It was a long and event-filled day, and Hank anticipated through all the festivities, the time when he could be alone with Abbey and make love to her on a soft bed and with a clear conscience. At long last that moment arrived. The last reluctant guests departed; Tobias and Mavis retired to Tobias's big first floor bedroom, and Wesley and Bea slipped off to a cabin hidden away on the far side of the ranch. "Alone at last," Hank said as he opened his arms and Abbey ran into them.

She nestled in his embrace. "There's a room waiting for us upstairs." Together they walked from the cluttered parlor and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The room was airy and spacious. In a far corner a turned down bed beckoned. Hank took Abbey into his arms and was kissing her passionately when a knock sounded at the door. Reluctantly, he broke the embrace. "Who could that be?"

Abbey shrugged. "I can't imagine." Standing on tiptoe, she blew in his ear. "Ignore them and maybe they will go away."

Having Abbey in his arms made Hank forget everything else. He kissed her again, this time with even more fire and passion.

Again a knock sounded on the door. This time much louder and with a demanding intensity.

Hank reluctantly released his bride, strode across the floor, and opened the door. His heart fell to the pit of his stomach. Rump L. Stiltskin stood on the other side. "Hello, friend, I've come to collect on the promise you made." He pushed his way around Hank and came inside.

Hank threw back his shoulders. "You didn't keep your part of the bargain, so the deal's off."

Rump was wearing that silly long robe with the hood. He slipped his hands into the sleeves. "You're married to Abbey, aren't you?"

"We can discuss this outside." Hank grabbed Rump by the scruff of the neck and pushed him through the door. He didn't want Abbey to hear this. Nodding to his bride, he said, "I'll be right back, honey."

Abbey's bottom lip pushed into a pout. "Make sure you are."

"Don't you worry none, I will be." Hank closed the door and loosened his hold on Rump. "You had nothin' to do with me marryin' Abbey."

Rump was not about to give up so easily. "You don't know that."

After several minutes of arguing, Hank realized this was not the way to handle this situation. He decided to try being devious. "I couldn't let my bride sleep with the likes of you. You're old and wrinkled and prob'ly couldn't raise a hard if you was settin' on a pile of fertilizer."

Rump should have been insulted. Hank was surprised when he wasn't. It was Hank who was surprised when Rump asked, "Is that all that's worrying you?"

Hank shot back, "Ain't that enough?"

Rump shook his shoulders. "Watch this, sonny." Then right before Hank's amazed eyes he morphed into the handsome and dashing Pierre Lamont. The change was gradual, starting at his feet and ending as Pierre's handsome face emerged to take the place of Rump's old gray head. Pierre--or was it Rump, smiled. "In this body I will please and tease your wife all through the night."

For a moment, panic seized Hank. Then a strange calm settled over him. If he intended to defeat this crafty little magician, he'd have to think fast and act decisively. "Son-of-a bitch, that's some trick. I bet you can't do it again."

Pierre lifted on dark eyebrow. "What would you like to bet?"

Hank took a deep breath and gambled on his hunch. "I'll bet another night with Abbey."

"No sooner said than done." The metamorphosis began again, this time in reverse. Pierre began to change back into Rump.

Hank moved a little nearer with each step of the transformation. When this strange creature had Rump's body and Pierre's head, he grabbed its throat in a strangle hold. "Now you listen to me, you lyin' little bastard...." He was set to strangle Rump into admitting defeat and promising to forget their deal when Pierre's frantic cries interrupted him.

Terror shone in the depths of Pierre's eyes as he shouted, "Let me go, let me go."

Hank tightened his grasp. "Why should I?"

"Because, you fool, if you interrupt the process of change and delay it too long, Rump will lose his power to morph from one form to another."

"That would mean," Hank reasoned aloud, "that handsome Pierre's head would forever be stuck on Rump's old body."

Pierre's face contorted. "Please let us go."

"Us?" Hank asked. His fingers pushed into the soft tissue at the base of Pierre's--or was it Rump's?--throat. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"Anything," Pierre's head cried. "Anything, *just let us go.*"

"If I do, will you promise to leave here and never come back again?"

Pierre's eyes rolled back into his head. "We promise."

Hank loosened his grip.

After several minutes, Rump's head replaced Pierre's. The little man shouted as

he emerged, "The fool, the fool, he had no right."

Hank was scared half out of his wits. He was dealing with magic here, maybe black magic. Then he recalled Rump's own words, spoken to him not too long ago. *To be an aggressive male, all you have to do is act like an aggressive male.* "You promised to leave. Now get the hell out of here."

Rump stamped his foot and screamed, "I am undone." Then he flew through the window and streaked like a rocket across the night sky.

Hank went into his bridal chamber and celebrated his wedding night by making love to his wife until dawn.

And now a word about the ever after.... It was a happy one. Wesley and Bea moved to Cactus Gulch where Wesley opened a general store and became a pillar of the Cross Bone County community. Bea became active in church affairs and benevolent causes. The couple had two children, a son who was clever and shrewd and a daughter who was beautiful and kind.

Tobias and Mavis continued to live on Hell's Half Acre. They gave lavish parties and quiet dinners, traveled abroad, and invited dignitaries from all over the state to visit them. The local residents lost their fear of Tobias when he built a school for the children of Cross Bone County.

Hank and Abbey bought a small spread just south of Hell's Half Acre. They built a house and turned it into a home. They were blessed with five stalwart and handsome boys. Hank was happy raising cattle and being a good husband and father. Abbey was contented in her role of doting mother and adoring wife.

What ever became of Mr. Rump L. Stiltskin? Alas, I cannot say, for I do not know. But if rumor is to be believed he fled to a foreign kingdom and became involved in a nefarious scheme that involved spinning straw into gold.

The End