



Gunslingers & Ghostriders

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Gunslingers & Ghostriders

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Gunslingers & Ghostriders

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Dedication

To my husband, Kink.
Thanks for giving me the idea for this story.
I know how much you like the loose ends all tied up.

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Chapter One

Brenna Gérard rode her buckskin gelding east, toward Trinchera Creek where it flowed off the north slope of Johnson Mesa. A series of late June cloud bursts up on the mesa had sent a torrent of flash flood waters rushing down from Trinchera Pass and the water spilled out across the thirsty Colorado plains toward the Purgatoire River.

She shifted her weight in the saddle, trying to find a more comfortable position. Her shoulders ached and her head hurt. It had been a long, hard week of laying rock foot paths between the buildings in the ranch yard, but it was progressing and she was proud of her work so far. When she'd tamped down the last rock for the day and sifted sand between the cracks, the only things on her mind had been supper, bath, and bed.

She glanced at the sky. Weird swirling clouds and the threat of another thunderstorm loomed close. She breathed in the sweet dusky aroma of imminent rain while, out of habit, constantly surveying the soap weeds, cholla, and scrub cedars for rattlesnakes lying in wait for victims.

Reaching her destination, she tugged on the reins and the gelding responded by dropping his head to graze. Impatiently watching the swollen creek, she asked herself again why she'd ridden out here. A sigh escaped her lips. Curiosity, she supposed. When Gregory had suddenly materialized in the kitchen, his voice had resonated in her mind. *Go up the creek to the mesa.*

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It wasn't the first time she'd seen him. He'd appeared to her for the first time about a month after he'd died. She'd awakened to see him standing beside their bed. Though his presence was friendly, it became disconcerting and she'd soon moved to a different bedroom. His visits had ceased until last winter when his empty chair near the fireplace began rocking. She'd asked him why he was there. *I'll watch over you until 'he' arrives*, he'd answered.

She knew who Gregory meant. Years ago, as she'd held Gregory's hands during their marriage vows and looked into his gentle eyes, she'd seen the untamed brown eyes of another man. A man she'd never met, but who stirred a primal memory deep inside of her. *When his need is greater than yours, you will find him*.

She hadn't understood those words at the time, but now that Gregory was gone, she often wondered about the other man. Who was he? What did he look like? Did he even exist, other than in her fantasies? And, more importantly, would she know him when they met?

The buckskin shifted his weight and she patted his shoulder. She relaxed and kicked her feet out of the stirrups, thinking about Gregory and how much he'd loved it here. She loved it too. This land and the ranch compound had been her home and her parents' and grandparents' before that. When she was thirteen, and her brother had been wounded in the third Comanche raid in less than a year, they'd moved to Philadelphia, leaving other family members behind to keep the ranch going.

She turned in the saddle and looked back toward the ranch buildings in the distance. She liked the way the mesa wrapped around it on three sides, as if cradling it in a protective embrace. The buckskin switched his tail at flies and shifted his weight. With a tired sigh, she rubbed her hands over her face and massaged her temples, tucking loose tendrils of her auburn hair behind her ears and lifting the long thick braid off her neck to let the cool evening breeze touch her skin.

A few cold drops of rain hit her face and she looked up the creek, seeing nothing but the thick stands of bushes and trees. She wondered again what she was doing and why she'd ridden so far from the ranch house.

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A noise caught her attention and she craned her neck, looking uphill through the trees and bushes. It sounded like an animal crashing around. Probably an elk or a deer. Her gelding lifted his head and pricked his ears. Squeezing her calves and tapping her heels, she urged the buckskin forward. She heard branches breaking and a man swearing, followed by a loud splash.

Following a narrow game trail, she rode toward the source of the noise. A few minutes more and she spied a horse standing on the opposite bank, mud smeared all over the saddle, his legs and belly. The horse shied away when Brenna and the buckskin appeared.

"It's all right, boy. Where's your rider?" she murmured. The horse answered with a nicker, his head up and ears pricked forward. She stood in her stirrups and peered into the creek through the tangled mess of cedars and deadfall. The bank had caved in, spilling horse and rider down the steep embankment and into the creek.

Dismounting, she threw the reins in a quick wrap around a scraggly branch of creosote, and the gelding dropped his head to munch the lush grama grass. She took several steps along the edge of the bank before she saw him. He was face down on the slope, half-way in the water.

She figured he was dead, but called out anyway. "You, in the water. Show me you're alive." *Nothing*. "Wave an arm or lift your head." *Nothing*. Then he lifted his hand.

The creek wasn't dangerously deep, even at flood stage, except right here where it ran narrow and fast. Scanning the creek again, she frowned. There wasn't an easy way to get to him or get him out. Sliding down the bank wasn't the problem, climbing back up was. Options went through her mind as thunder rumbled. Rain splattered and the wind picked up.

"Hold on, I'm coming over."

She sat on the edge of the nearly vertical bank, hung her legs over, and then eased off the edge, digging the heels of her boots into the dirt to slow her descent. The soft dirt gave way and she slid in a rush to the water, sucking in her breath at the cold dunking.

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She kept her feet, leaning into the current while holding onto whatever vegetation she could reach. She looked to the other bank, twenty feet away, and saw the man's horse looking down at them, head hanging and ears forward, watching intently.

Struggling her way across the creek, she reached the man and grabbed his arm, putting her other hand on his back and rolling him over. "Where are you hurt? Can you move?" He opened his eyes and raised his head. His face was swollen and bloody.

She leaned closer. "Can you stand?"

"Horse rolled on me. Hit my head." His voice was raspy.

"We're going to cross the creek. It's not far, but it's deep."

Maneuvering the man around the deadfall and bushes, while trying to keep on her feet against the force of the current, took effort and time.

After what seemed like hours, she made it to the bank. Pulling and tugging the man's weight, she finally dropped him on his back in the dirt and grass, then fell to her knees beside him. His eyes were closed, and his cowboy hat flopped beside him, hanging by the stampede string around his neck. They were both breathing heavily from the exertion it had taken to drag themselves to dry ground.

"I'll get my horse. You can ride it to the ranch. Yours won't cross the water." She placed a wet, gloved hand on his chest to reassure him.

Leading the buckskin, Brenna returned just as lightning flashed and crackled across the sky, splitting and shaking the evening air with an immediate explosion of thunder. The man jerked upright and she twisted around, following his stare to the ominous dark, billowing clouds rolling along the western lip of the mesa.

He staggered to his feet, weaving and off balance. "No. Not going. They're not taking me."

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Chapter Two

Brenna was transfixed, breathless. The vague shape of cattle took form over McBride Butte to the west as the cloud raced along the rim to the south then curved straight east. As she watched, the indistinct shapes became a massive herd of stampeding, red-eyed cattle swooping down from the top of the butte.

The cloud of cattle followed the ancient stone wall dike that ran low and parallel to the mesa, then raced to the top of the mesa and soared into the sky, doubling back over McBride Butte to run again along the edge. It reminded her of the sinuous motion of a Chinese Dragon, making an undulating journey from the ground to the towering top of the storm bank and down again.

The herd continued racing east along the edge, only to turn and come thundering down over the pass. She flinched and ducked as the lead steer overtook her. The herd pounded overhead on steely hooves amidst boom after boom of roaring thunder headed north, out across the prairie.

Looking up again, she saw the herd circle over Pine Canyon and come charging from the east. The darker blue and black billowing clouds surrounding the herd spilled into lighter gray and white upward into the vast expanse of the storm. The horrifying sky opened up into a sandy ravine and the cattle veered and ran up it, their black horns glistening and their brands flaming with each blaze of lightning. In another flash, she felt their breath in a whoosh of hot wind in her face.

The gelding sensed the eeriness in the air and danced around, anxious to leave. "Go. Get us the hell out of here," the man yelled, over

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the deafening echo of the thundering hooves. He grabbed Brenna, tossed her to the buckskin's back and swung up behind her. He clamped one arm around her waist and grasped the saddle horn with his other hand.

The buckskin wheeled around. The sight behind her made the hair on her arms prick in fear. Leaping out of the maelstrom of churning black clouds, gray ghost cowboys came riding hard and fast after the phantom herd on wild-eyed, fire-snorting horses.

A mournful cry cut through the air as the man slapped spurs to the buckskin. The horse reared and leaped, coming down at a dead run, ears laid back and neck stretched out. Leaning low in the saddle, they raced across the gentle hills to the ranch house.

The clouds opened up in an onslaught of rain, and wind whipped their clothes. Lightning struck the ground near them, rippling the air and setting every nerve on edge. She smelled the sharp acrid stench of sulphur. Thunder boomed again and again.

Brenna's skin tingled. She thought she heard a voice on the wind calling 'Matthew' in a distant, wailing moan. The wailing became indistinguishable and as she turned to look, the clouds swallowed the cowboys in their relentless pursuit of the ghost herd. The man's horse followed them at a frantic gallop, stirrups and fenders flapping wildly.

"Don't look back!" The man tightened his grip around her and they ran ahead of the storm. The ranch came into view and the gelding took them into the yard as if the devil himself was on his tail.

The buckskin slid to a stop and the man threw a leg over his rump. When his feet hit the dirt, his legs gave out and he collapsed. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Brenna looked back at the storm raging over McBride Butte as it disappeared from sight high over Raton and Trinidad. *What was that?*

Jumping to the ground and kneeling beside him, she lifted his shoulders until he was sitting up. "Get up. I can't get you inside the house all by myself." His brown eyes flickered open and he blinked up at her. She put one of his arms across her shoulders and straightened.

He responded, but his weight nearly buckled her knees. They stumbled across the stone porch floor and into the kitchen. She propped

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him in a chair and his head lolled back as he teetered off the seat. She caught him and leaned him against the table, slipping the strap of his hat over his head.

"Water. I need water." His voice was scratchy and he slumped over on the table.

She poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the cabinet counter and lifted his chin. She placed the glass to his mouth. "Drink."

He grabbed her hands and gulped. He indicated more and she refilled the glass.

His hands were swollen and bruised, and his knuckles were skinned and bloody. His dirty, matted hair, and scruffy beard didn't make the deep graze along his left cheekbone any less ugly. There was an egg-sized welt above his eyebrow and the knees of both pant legs were ripped open. She could see raw skin through the gaping denim. None of the injuries appeared life-threatening, but she knew he must have hit his head hard to be this woozy.

She took the empty glass and he leaned back in the chair, eyes closed, head nodding forward. She grabbed his shoulders, shaking him gently. "Here now. I need to see how badly you're hurt and clean your wounds."

He was little help as she unbuttoned his bloody shirt and pulled it off. She noticed what looked like a bullet graze high along his ribs. The wound was seeping, but hardly more than a deep scratch. The point of one shoulder was scraped and raw. His chest, upper arms, and back showed extensive bruising.

"Hang on, cowboy. Let's get you to a bed before you pass out on the floor. Stand up and lean on me." She put his arm over her shoulders again and dragged him to an adjoining room just a few steps away. She attempted to help him sit on the bed, but he fell, taking her with him and pinning her on her back beneath him. His head rested on her breasts, and his breath teased her skin at the top button of her blouse.

"Got to lie down. Clean my wounds. Need to sleep," he muttered.

"Yes, I know. What do you think I'm trying to do?" She heard the exasperation in her voice as she pushed him over and off of her, his legs

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dangling off the side of the bed, spurs jangling. She stood and looked down at him. He was a muddy, bloody mess and out cold. She wondered what he'd look like cleaned up.

She built a fire and placed a pot of water on a stove lid. While she waited for the water to boil, she went outside to the horses waiting in the rain. Leading them to the barn, she unsaddled and rubbed them down, then poured a small can of grain into a feed tub for each horse.

Patting the buckskin's shoulder and carrying the man's gear, she left the barn. She glanced up as she crossed the yard, half-expecting to see the wild, phantom herd above her. She could still picture the cowboys' bleary-eyed, gaunt faces and their sweat-soaked shirts as they raced after the cattle. But only heavy rain clouds hovered, letting a steady, gentle drizzle fall.

When she returned to the house, she changed into dry clothes, then returned to the man with hot soapy water, towels, and the medicine kit. He hadn't moved. She tossed the pillows aside, got his boots and socks off, and dropped them in a soggy, muddy puddle on the floor.

She swung his legs onto the bed and stretched him out so she could sit beside him. She unbuckled his gun belt and untied the rawhide strings holding the bottom of his holsters around his thighs. He must fancy himself a gunslinger. Outlaw more likely.

Rolling him side to side, she freed the gun belt and hung it on the bedpost. With the business-like detachment of a nurse, she unbuckled his belt and the buttons of his pants, tugging them by the waistband over his hips. She stopped in mid-tug and stared. He wore nothing under his pants.

Her cheeks warmed and she averted her eyes, though her pulse increased and she lost her cool detachment. She'd seen naked men before, but never one who was so attractive. Keeping her eyes turned respectfully away, she removed his pants and dropped them to the floor. Modestly covering him with a towel, she grabbed a rag from the hot suds, squeezed out the excess water, and gently cleaned him.

Once she'd taken proper care of his injuries and he was acceptably clean, she wormed the soiled bedclothes out from under him, until he

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rested on a cool, fresh cotton sheet. She draped the top sheet over his chest, then lifted his head and shoulders, resting them on a pillow. She stood back, cocking her head as she studied him.

His face was angular, with high cheekbones, a strong jaw, and wide deep-set eyes. She smiled. He'd look even better with a shave. His arms and upper torso were browned from the sun. His exhausted breathing was even and relaxed. As she folded back the blanket, he groaned and shifted position, exposing a foot and leg as the sheet draped below his waist.

Reaching to cover him, she paused, glancing at his face. Out cold. She traced her fingers from his ankle, over his skinned knee, and along the full length of his bruised and scraped thigh. Her fingertips tingled and her mouth went dry. She licked her lips.

She sat beside him and touched his abdomen where the white skin below his waistband abruptly met bronzed taut skin and muscle. She moved her hands upwards across his broad, smooth chest and brushed a lock of dark wavy hair from his eyes. She reached to touch his mouth, but let her hand fall away. Standing, she watched him sleep, contentment settling over her.

Her gaze traveled from his chest to his feet. His body revealed his familiarity with physical work. Every muscle was lean and well-defined.

She took the sheet and the edge of the towel in her hand, wanting to lift them and shamelessly stare at him. Savor every inch of him. But she found her self-control and dropped it. Closing her eyes, she relived the brief moment when his body had pressed hers to the bed and his breath had warmed her chest.

It had been a long time since she'd been with a man. *Much too long.* Her body felt warm in places she'd nearly forgotten existed.

Brenna, it's him.

She opened her eyes, brushing at her ear as if pushing someone away.

"Who?" she asked aloud, watching the man.

The man you are destined to love for all time. The brown-eyed man in your dreams.

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Other drifters had come to the ranch with injuries, or for a meal and water, before and after Gregory's death. Not a one had so much as turned her head. But this man—

“Yes. He is, isn't he?” she mused, realizing the voice was right.

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Chapter Three

Matt Caddock stared at the open window through bleary eyes. Curtains fluttered across the windowsill in the cool breeze and his mind worked to place the unfamiliar surroundings. Barking dogs and a crowing rooster added to his confusion.

Hell had lace curtains? For a moment he wondered if he was in heaven, but that was impossible with the kind of life he'd led. Hell didn't have curtains or chickens, but it did have a damn big dog guarding the gates.

Blinking, he tried to clear his sight. His head throbbed dully and the large knot on his forehead explained why one eye wasn't focusing properly. His hands ached and he held them in front of him, trying to see the damage.

The mixed aromas of freshly brewed coffee and baking bread made their way to his nose and his stomach growled. He pushed to a sitting position and pain shot from his shoulders to his legs. He lay back on the pillows and breathed in shallow pants.

Fear hit him as he tried to remember what happened. Concentrating, he flexed his fingers until his panic eased. As he worked to clear his mind, he looked around the room. He noticed a hairbrush and hand mirror on the dresser. Colored ribbons draped over a glass drawer knob. There was a yellow dress thrown across the rocking chair in the corner, framed pictures on the walls, and a dressing gown hanging from the hook on the back of the half-opened door.

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He ran his hands over the fuzzy softness of the blanket. Bringing the edge of the sheet to his nose, he inhaled, closing his eyes. It smelled like a woman. Sweet and flowery. Suddenly, he remembered that a woman had pulled him out of the creek. This must be her room.

Soft singing broke into his thoughts. He lifted on one elbow and tilted his head toward the door. He heard the clang and clatter of kitchen noises as a woman's voice waxed and waned with her movements, but he couldn't see her.

He caught a whiff of leather oil and craned his neck around until he found his gun belt hanging over the bed post just above his shoulder, the grips turned toward him for easy grasp. Wincing, he reached for them and found them fully loaded and cleaned.

Feeling more secure with his Peacemakers close at hand, he returned them to the holsters. He looked back at the door, wishing he could get a glimpse of the woman and also hoping she'd keep singing. He liked the clear, melodious tone of her voice. It brought up memories of home and family.

He drank his fill from a pitcher near the bed, then leaned back on the pillows. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept on a real mattress, let alone on clean sheets in a woman's room. And a room with curtains to boot. He pulled the sheet and blanket to his face again and breathed in the woman's lingering scent, then realized he was buck-naked beneath the sheets. *Shit*. He forgot about his aches, bruises, and scrapes at the thought of the woman undressing him. He looked toward the door, a smile creeping onto his face. Curtains, soft bed, and naked in a woman's room. A man could do worse. He just wished he could remember.

He closed his eyes, comforted by his surroundings. The soothing noises from the adjoining room revived thoughts he'd given up long ago. He drifted off to sleep thinking of the home he'd always wanted.

* * * * *

Matt awoke when the sheet lifted and cool air touched his thighs. Trapped in a disoriented twilight sleep, he couldn't quite shake the

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nightmarish dream of being dragged along the edge of a river, hung up in the stirrup of a runaway horse, while a herd of stampeding cattle tried to trample him.

Slowly becoming more aware, he kept his eyes closed, remaining perfectly still as the bed springs squeaked and someone sat at the foot of the bed. A jar lid twisted, followed by the sliding friction of palms rubbing together. Warm hands touched his knees and thighs, rubbing a soothing, creamy ointment into the sore places.

He chanced a peek and saw the top of a woman's head moving to and fro with her rhythmic massaging. She hummed softly, completely absorbed in her task. He smiled at her song. He couldn't imagine he was much of a beautiful dreamer, not the way his face hurt.

He concentrated hard not to move when her hands dropped between his thighs. Warm, tingling sensations fluttered around his groin. Things began stirring and he knew he'd embarrass himself right away if she didn't stop. She made him want to pursue the rubbing from a different position.

Finished, she pulled the sheet over his legs. The mattress lifted as she stood, then indented again as she repositioned herself. A cool, soothing wetness touched his cheek and he caught the faint tang of witch hazel. Then a stronger, medicinal odor reached his nose. Gentle fingers applied a salve to the graze on his side, the point of his shoulder and down his bicep, then to his cheekbone.

The mattress springs creaked again. Her breasts touched his chest as she reached across him. She smelled like the sheets. Sweet and flowery. Taking one of his hands, she began rubbing in the salve. She massaged for several minutes, bending and flexing the joints. The repetitive movements nearly lulled him back to sleep.

She lifted his other hand and repeated the salve treatment with the same care and thoroughness. To keep from falling asleep, he tried to remember the woman who'd pulled him out of the creek, wondering if this was her. He could only conjure up a picture of brownish hair, leather gloves, and a blue shirt.

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Never had he experienced anything as sensuous as her touch and he wondered if she noticed what it was doing to him. He didn't want her to stop, but it was time to take control before he lost control.

Eyes still shut, he closed his fingers around her hand. She abruptly stopped humming. She sat very still and he thought she was holding her breath. With his free hand, he traced the back of hers, stroking his fingers up and down. He spread his fingers out in an invitation. Seconds passed without movement, and then she entwined her fingers through his.

Without opening his eyes, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed her knuckles. They were soft. She must take care of herself. He wondered if she was as pretty as she felt. Hell, with his luck, she was probably sixty years old with a jealous husband. The thought nearly made him smile.

"How long have you been awake?" Her voice was deep for a woman's. She pulled her hands from his, but didn't move away. The warmth and pressure of her hip cradled into the curve of his side reminded him how long it had been since he'd been this close to a woman. His body responded accordingly.

He opened his eyes, no longer able to suppress his smile, and looked into eyes as blue as the night sky when the sunrise chases it into daylight. Her full lips beckoned exploring and she was a far cry from sixty. The splash of freckles over her nose and across her cheeks stood out against her lightly tanned skin, giving her an energetic and girlish appearance. But the low cut of her blouse revealed without a doubt that she was all woman.

"Ever since you started rubbing that salve on my legs. Actually, I was awake when you made coffee, but you sang me back to sleep." The problem under the sheet was getting out of hand. He shifted position and bent his least sore leg to tent the sheet off his body. If she hadn't been rubbing her hands all over between his legs getting him all worked up, then bending so he could see down her —

He cleared his throat, trying to derail his self-antagonizing train of thought. "Coffee and bread sure smelled good. How long ago was that?"

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She wiped the excess salve from her hands on a towel. "Twelve hours. You've slept all night and all day. It won't be long until dark." When she stood, the sheet rearranged, giving a bulging hint to his dilemma beneath. Her smile turned into a Cheshire grin and he realized she knew damn good and well what she was doing to him.

"I wouldn't have given much for you when I found you last evening. You were a miserable sight. But you cleaned up pretty well."

Her smile warmed him all over. He pushed up against the headboard, the sheet wrinkling low on his lap though he kept his knee bent. Her gaze left his face, traveled down his chest, and lingered where his belly and sheet met.

He couldn't hide his self-satisfied smirk when she looked up from her study of the sheets and knew she'd been caught ogling him. He liked that her freckles darkened over the sudden pink blush on her cheeks. Lord, what was he thinking? He didn't even know her name. He'd never acted like this with a woman before. But no other woman had ever paid this much attention to him.

"Well, I do recall you hauling my sorry carcass out of the creek and we rode a mad race ahead of a storm." He was relieved, in a sense of decency sort of way, that she'd moved back a respectable distance, but he was equally disappointed that this wasn't going any farther.

She nodded, frowning. "I have questions about that storm. There was a strange, spectral malevolence about it."

It had scared the hell out of him, too. He'd hoped to never see that herd and those cowboys again. "Well, I appreciate you bringing me here. Probably saved my life. Did my horse happen to follow us?"

"You're welcome, and yes he did. He's in the corral and I brought your gear inside. By the way, my name is Brenna Stirling Gérard. This," she gestured toward the window and all around her, "is my family's ranch. The Rocking Bell S."

"Stirling Ranch. I've heard of it. You're the ones who built the ranch houses like a stockade compound back in the 30s. Didn't the army use it as a fort for awhile?"

"Yes. They still keep us in provisions and ammunition."

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"I know that Goodnight and Loving used to drive cattle across this land to avoid the toll over Raton Pass and because of the water here."

"That's right. Travelers stay here and I occasionally patch-up injured strangers." She gathered up the medical supplies. "Speaking of strangers, do you have a name?"

He hesitated, tempted to give her an alias, but something about her straight-forward manner prompted him to be honest. "Matt Caddock." He watched her, sure he'd worn-out his welcome. But her words surprised him.

"Well, Mr. Caddock. You're welcome to stay around until your hands heal. Gunfighters aren't much use if their hands don't work. Particularly one-eyed gunfighters." Her eyes twinkled and she almost kept a straight face.

"Rumors and reputations travel fast."

"Yes, they do. You're a legend around here. The way you single-handedly blocked a stagecoach robbery south of Raton, at the Clifton House stop. The story goes that you were riding shotgun and saved everyone without firing a shot. Just your reputation as a ruthless gunfighter backed the robbers down."

He eyed her, not liking the way she said 'ruthless', and unsure if she was poking fun at him. Either way, the urge to leave wasn't the only thing still growing in the room. She was a fine looking woman. Classy. Straight-forward, not shy. He liked that. "Stories always get better with each telling."

"Really? My Uncle Pete was a passenger on that stagecoach. He said you put yourself between the outlaws and the children who were directly in the line of fire. You told them who you were and dared them to go for their guns. Apparently, they believed you'd kill them all before they could even get their guns out. No shots were fired and they rode away, empty-handed."

Time to go. Things were going south fast. Soon she'd start preaching about the road to hell being paved with good intentions and telling him he'd better change his no-account ways. It had happened

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before. He looked uneasily around for his clothes, but didn't see them.

"I've handled what's come my way. No more, no less."

"So you're not the 'Cimarron Gunfighter'? The man known for selling his guns for the highest price?"

Chapter Four

He felt cornered and flexed his fingers out of habit. "Ma'am, if I could just have my clothes, it's time for me to go. You're uncomfortable and I'm getting there." In more ways than one. Damn her blue eyes and that blouse.

"You're wrong, Mr. Caddock. I don't judge others on what I hear. I let a person's actions determine my opinion of them." Her expression softened and her smile returned. "Call me Brenna. Besides, I think the stories I've heard about you are exaggerated."

"How's that?"

Her eyes sparkled again. "How tough can you be? You let me take off all of your clothes, and you don't even remember if I let you take advantage of me." She walked to the door, pointing to a chair. "I've laid out clothes for you. I'll start supper." She pulled the door partially shut behind her.

He stared at the door, caught off guard. He liked the way her firm backside filled out the form-fitting contour of her split riding skirt as she walked away from him. He smiled and shook his head, laughing at himself. Well, at least one of them had had a good time.

"Brenna," he yelled.

"What?"

"Call me Matt."

He tossed the sheet back and swung his feet to the floor. His body ached as he stretched to his full six-four. Hobbling and grimacing with

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each step, he crossed the room to the chair. He picked up the pants and a boot. The pants weren't his, but the boots were. And they'd been oiled.

His reflection in the tall dresser mirror stopped him. His body was a purple mass of bruises and abrasions. He couldn't decide which was worse, the fall off his horse or the beating he'd taken before. He leaned closer and touched his swollen eye and cheekbone. He looked like hell warmed over and felt like it, too.

He rolled his shoulders, loosening the stiffness and then probed the graze across his ribs. Any way he looked at it, he'd come close to dying. He looked at the door. Lucky she'd come along.

The clothes fit well enough and he slung the gun belt around his hips, buckled it, and tied the rawhide strings low around his thighs. He ran his hands through his hair, scratched his chin and turned back to look at his reflection. "Well, I'll be damned. She cut my hair and gave me a shave." He combed the tips of his fingers through his mustache, nodding approval and smiling to himself. She was right. He did clean up pretty well.

He looked for his hat, and found it hanging on a hook near the door. The framed photograph of a man propped up on the dresser caught his attention. He picked it up, wondering if it was her husband. He looked around. There was no sign of a man in the room. Divorce was rare. Maybe she was a widow. Either way, it wasn't likely she'd look twice at the likes of him. He'd just as well get any notions of that out of his head right now. But a man could wish, couldn't he?

Returning the picture to the dresser, he noticed another door. He opened it and stepped into the dirt between two buildings. Early evening air greeted him and he relieved himself, then stretched stiff muscles before returning to the bedroom. He grabbed his hat and went into the next room.

He stepped into a large, open area that contained the kitchen and living room. Bookshelves butted up against both sides of a fireplace. He cocked his head to read some of the titles. The variety was impressive. It seemed that she had everything from Greek and Roman mythology to Shakespeare to Blackstone's book on law and democracy.

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Turning away from the bookshelves, he recognized the rectangular openings in the back wall as shooting portals. He nodded in approval at the staggered heights of the portals, which allowed a wide field of vision for firing.

All the walls were a combination of rock and sandstone. The open windows were glass, with thick wooden and metal shutters folded back on each side. The front door was constructed of heavy wood and metal with a portal opening at eye level.

The screen door allowed the breeze to come in and keep out the dogs he saw peering in. Throw rugs were scattered about the clean-swept, cobbled sandstone floor. But what caught his attention were the rifles and shotguns hanging on racks, with shelves of ammunition next to each weapon.

"That's quite a fortification against attack you have set up in here." He nodded toward the nearest rifle.

Brenna, working at the table slicing potatoes, greeted him with a warm smile. "Yes, it is. All of the buildings are designed in a military fashion. The compound has served my family, and the soldiers who have fought here, well for many years." She poured the chunks of potatoes into a pot on the stove. "Although we haven't needed to defend ourselves in a long time. Now the weapons are more to pay homage to a former way of life than a necessity for survival."

Busy at the stove, she looked over her shoulder. "It will be awhile before supper's ready. Is there something you'd like before then?"

"Water would hit the spot."

She waved a wooden spoon in his direction. "There. In the pitcher on the table. Glasses are in the cupboard."

He poured a glassful. "You live here alone?"

"Generally, this place is overrun with people. Two months ago, my brother's wife and children left for Philadelphia to help my parents and younger sister and brother prepare to move here by winter. My Uncle Pete, my brother Jim, and our cowhands are driving a herd of longhorns here. They started out west of San Antonio around the middle of May. I'm expecting them to arrive very late this summer."

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"Still sounds like you're here all alone. It's unusual to find a woman by herself this far away from a town or neighbors."

She faced him and her gaze locked his, serious and piercing. Her voice took on a formal air. "If you're wondering if I can take care of myself, yes, I can. Some drifters stopped in a few months ago. One of them didn't mind his manners. His friends buried him at the insistence of my shotgun." She turned her back on him.

"Besides, neighbors check in every week and my aunt is with my grandfather in Trinidad buying supplies. They'll be back before long. I'm rarely alone very long." When she turned from the stove, he saw the twinkle returned to her eyes. "Are you worried about your virtue?"

"Well, you did take all my clothes off."

She held his eyes, a smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. "Yes, I certainly did."

Old and buried yearnings stirred deep within him. He found himself suddenly thinking about a home, instead of looking down the next trail between his horses' ears. He shook off the feelings. "Ma'am, you're a tease. It could get a man in all sorts of trouble. A man could misread your intentions." He wondered how she did that. She'd gotten him thinking in a permanent sort of way.

"Then I apologize." She was smiling. "I've been told I have a bold nature. Does that bother you?"

He shook his head. "No, I admire that. I just don't want to end up looking at the shooting end of your shotgun, or wind-up buried in the family cemetery like that other fellow."

"Then be sure not to get drunk and try to break into my home. I warned him once. When he shot one of my dogs, I stepped outside and I didn't warn him twice."

Damn. She's got steel in her blood all right. He nodded, understanding there was a limit to her easy going, friendly manner. "I also wouldn't want to offend your husband."

Her demeanor changed and she stiffened. "My husband?"

"In your room. There's a picture of a man and you said your last name was 'Gérard', not Stirling. But you don't wear a ring."

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She looked at her left hand. "Yes, of course. The picture. Well, he *was* my husband."

"Was?"

"He died over a year ago."

"Are these his clothes I'm wearing?"

She chuckled. "No, they're my brother's. My husband was much shorter than you and not nearly so..." her cheeks pinked.

"So what?" He wondered how bold she really was.

"Muscular." She smiled.

He let it go, smiling to himself. He tilted his head toward the book on the table. "What're you reading?"

She handed it to him. "Open it where I have the ribbon."

"Best you read to me." He pointed at his face. "My eyes aren't focusing good enough to read much of anything."

"It's something I was curious about." She opened the book and read aloud. "A folk myth popular in Europe, called the Wild Hunt. It's usually characterized by a spectral group of huntsmen riding horses and surrounded by a pack of red-eyed, slavering hunting hounds often seen pursuing their prey in a mad race across the sky." She stopped and looked at him.

He stared at her, a cold knot tightening in the pit of his stomach. He knew this story first hand. "Go on."

"In the Orkney Islands, the phantasmal sight is accompanied by raging winds, mournful howling, and the thundering hooves of galloping horses driving stolen cows ahead of them. The Wild Hunt, though it can be seen anytime during the year, is most often encountered on Halloween night when spirits of the dead are believed to return and roam among the living.

"In many versions of the myth, mortals in the path of the hunt or who hear their names called, are kidnapped and taken to the land of the dead, always and forever doomed to run with the huntsmen, searching in vain for their souls' salvation."

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She placed the book in front of him so he could see the illustration. He looked at it, then back at her. Her expression was serious and he saw the questions in her eyes.

“Is that what I saw at the mesa? A Wild Hunt?”

Nodding, he let his breath out slowly. The coldness in his belly spread throughout his body.

“At the creek, I distinctly heard you say, ‘No. Not going. They’re not taking me’. And you also warned me not to look back. You’ve seen it before, haven’t you?”

He nodded again. How could he explain that if she hadn’t gotten him out of the creek, he’d be riding with those cowboys chasing that ghost herd? His soul damned to hell for all eternity.

“It was your name I heard called on the wind. They were coming for you, weren’t they?”

Chapter Five

"Why did they want you?" Brenna asked expectantly.

Uneasiness settled over Matt. The walls were closing in on him. He stood. "It's feeling a tad close in here. I need some air."

"All right. The horses are probably heading in for the night. You can tell me what happened while I grain them. And you'll want to check your gelding. He's skinned up a little. I put salve on the deeper scrapes to keep the flies off."

A passel of tail-wagging dogs met them on the porch. She took up a sawed-off Remington 16 gauge shotgun from beside the door and dropped shells into her pocket. "Snakes. And I can reload fast and under pressure," she explained, raising her eyebrows, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She waited beside him as he looked around.

Always careful to know what he was walking into, he did a quick survey to get the lay of the ranch yard. He immediately noticed the ten-foot high rock wall, all the way around the perimeter, that joined with the backs of the buildings to make a solid barricade.

The front doors all faced the common courtyard. In the center stood a windmill and water tank, covered well, and a small grove of trees. He'd seen more and more windmills around the country. He also noticed the Rose of Sharon bushes growing beside the front doors of some of the buildings. *An oasis on the prairie.*

A rock path joined nearly all of the dwellings, extending from her house to the windmill. The heavy, reinforced and hinged gates in the

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middle of all four of the compound walls stood open. He saw the upper part of the barn and corral rails through one of the open gates.

"Aren't the corral and barn at risk being outside the walls?"

"They're new. We built them right after we moved here. The corral can open into the yard if we need to get the animals inside quickly. Do you like what you see?" she asked, breaking into his study of the compound, looking it over herself.

"Good set-up. Easy to defend from the inside and hard to breach from the outside. A man with a rifle could fire from anywhere and be covered. The water is protected. Good plan." He could get to liking it here. Maybe too much. He glanced at her, wondering if it was only her blue eyes turning his head.

He put his hat on, wincing when the sweatband touched the knot on his forehead. He cocked the hat askew as they crossed the yard toward the barn and shot a quick look to the mesa, still uneasy as he remembered the clouds from last evening.

As if she read his thoughts, she said, "Tell me about the wild herd and those cowboys. What does it mean?"

They reached the corral and his bay nickered and came up to him. He crawled between the corral rails and stroked the bay's wide white blaze, then ran his hands over his white-stockinged legs, checking the cuts and scrapes. Satisfied there was no serious damage, he patted him on the rump, and turned back to the fence.

"I've only seen it one other time. Twelve, maybe thirteen years ago. I'd heard stories since I was a kid, but never knew anyone who'd really seen it." He looked down, scuffing the toe of his boot in the dirt.

"Until?"

He looked up at her. She stepped closer to the fence and he saw genuine interest in her expression. He'd never been a hand at talking to women, but he wanted to tell Brenna everything about his life and ask her about hers.

"I was born down on the Cimarron. When my mother died, Pa couldn't stand staying there without her. He joined up with the army as a tracker and took me with him. We fell into scouting for Colonel Carson in

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his hunt to stop the Comanche and Kiowa attacks on the Santa Fe wagon trains.

"We'd made it as far as the Canadian River when Carson dug in for a fight. It was the first battle of Adobe Walls." He stopped talking and looked far over the horizon, reliving the scene. "Pa took a Comanche arrow and died right there beside me. I didn't know what else to do, so I grabbed his rifle and just started shooting."

Her low, quiet voice brought him back from that day. "How old were you?"

He kept looking across the prairie. "Twelve."

"What happened to you after that?"

He focused on her face. "An old scout, named Henry Buckholt, took me on. He must have been about sixty-five or so. He said I'd left the boy in me behind when I took up my pa's rifle, but I wasn't ready to be turned loose on my own yet. He let me tag along until I was."

"Where did you go?"

"All over. California to the Mississippi River and everywhere in between, north to south. Followed a trap line for a few winters. Rode herd on some cattle other times. He worked as a swamper in a saloon once long enough to go to school and get better at reading. He bought some books for me after that and that's how we spent our nights. Me reading to him. Anything I could get my hands on. I got a pretty good education that way."

"Where is Mr. Buckholt now?"

He didn't answer right away. Emotion rose in his chest at the memories. He cleared his throat. "He died when I was twenty-one."

She placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry. How did he die?"

He saw it in his mind as plain as if he was standing in the dust on that Arizona desert stage road. "He was driving for the Butterfield Stage Company and I was riding shotgun. We were known for always getting the stage through on time without a hitch. We'd just plowed through an Apache ambush and were pushing that team hard.

"We'd put the Maricopa Wells station way behind us and had nothing but mail and medical supplies on board when a storm brewed-up.

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I'd noticed Henry was looking pale and sweating more than usual when all of a sudden he grabbed his chest and keeled over on me. I stopped the team and got him to the ground.

"We stared at those clouds and the closer they came, the more they looked like what we saw yesterday." He took a deep breath, stealing a nervous glance at the mesa. "Henry grabbed my shirt and pulled me to him and said, 'Matt, they're coming for me'. He said he'd seen the ghost riders when he was a kid, then again not long before I hooked up with him. He said he'd gone on to do some mighty mean things in his life and now his soul was bound to ride with those cowboys through all eternity, never able to catch that herd, just chasing them forever, paying for his sins."

Matt closed his eyes for a moment before he continued. "I remember his exact words. 'The best I can do to atone for the wrong I've done in my life is to give you the gold I stole years ago. Promise me you'll leave it alone until you know you'll use it for good. Find yourself a good woman and get that home you lost out on when your folks died. Then maybe my worthless soul will find peace. You got to promise me, boy.'"

"What did you say?"

"I promised him. Lightning was striking all around us and he died there, leaning against me. That ghost herd came right down on us with those cowboys calling his name and they took him. There wasn't a trace of him left."

He let out a long sigh, feeling a chill even though the sun was still above the mountains. He looked right at Brenna. "After that, I rode shotgun off and on. Then after a gunfight in a saloon in Santa Fe and another in El Paso, I discovered I could make easy money selling my guns. I was fast with my hands and I was already known as that fighting kid from the Cimarron."

She gestured past his shoulder. "I need to open the gate. The horses are coming in." She propped the shotgun against a corral post and ducked to crawl through the fence.

He held out his hand. She looked at it then at his face. He closed his fingers around her hand, stepping closer as she straightened.

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He leaned toward her, holding her hand longer than was polite. The pupils of her eyes widened and she withdrew her hand, stepping around him. He told himself to slow down and ease up. She obviously needed some distance from the episode they'd had in her bedroom.

"Did you look for the gold?"

He followed her. "No. Never took the time. Didn't have a reason to."

Brenna opened the gate from the fenced horse pasture and half a dozen young horses and two milk cows with calves came through. Closing the gate behind them, she motioned for Matt to follow, talking as they went inside the barn.

"So how did you end up in the creek?" She handed him a bucket and scooped grain into it from a bin. Cats of all sizes and colors rubbed against their legs and got under foot.

He'd told her this much, he might as well tell her the rest. "A couple of years ago, over in Mobeetie, I fell in with a man named Archer. Not long after that, up in the Colorado Rockies, I took a Ute arrow in the leg. Archer cut it out, but I got passing-out drunk to let him do it. Somewhere in my drunken haze, I talked about the old man and the gold."

They walked outside and he carried the bucket while she poured a small can of grain into each of the tubs and troughs spread out in the corral. As he talked, he watched the colts and fillies. They were all good stock and it was time to break them to ride. The thought occurred to him that maybe he should stick around and do just that.

"Archer quizzed me on it and I brushed it off as the ramblings of a stupid, drunken fool. He didn't buy it, but he dropped it. Some more time went by and he started making off-hand remarks about how a little money would make life a lot easier. He'd poke at me about keeping the secret of the old man's gold to myself, instead of sharing it with my saddle partner."

"You still haven't explained how you ended up in the creek."

"Well, a few days ago, down in Maxwell, Archer hooked up with some hard cases he used to ride with and they all got to drinking. Archer

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decided it was time for me to come clean about the gold. He still didn't believe that I didn't know where it was. So he told his buddies that if they could beat it out of me they could have a cut.

"They jumped me and roughed me up until I passed out. I came to and they were still drinking, waiting for me to wake up so they could start in on me again. One of them kept kicking me in the head and another stomped on my hands until I couldn't draw a gun, so they left them on me. But that's where they went wrong. I jumped up off the floor grabbing leather and fanning the hammer. I put lead into a couple of them, including Archer. I busted through a window and lit out of there on a dead run in a pouring rain."

"Why did you go up on the mesa?"

He shrugged. "No reason. My horse's nose was pointed north and I guess he liked the trail." He smiled at her, partial to where that trail ended himself. "I don't remember much. I just tried not to fall off. I wanted to get shut of that crowd as fast as I could."

Putting the bucket back in the barn, they walked toward her house. He reached down and scratched one of the dogs behind his ear. "I do remember thinking I'd better cross the creek and find a place to hole up and sleep. I didn't have a canteen and I hadn't eaten in a while. Before I could find a decent place to cross, the bank gave out and my horse lost his footing. He slammed his head into mine and fell on me as he floundered to get out. I must have blacked out because the next thing I remember is lying on my face in the mud and you calling to me."

She looked at him, shaking her head. "That's quite a story, Matt. It's a wonder you aren't dead. But you still haven't told me why that ghost herd and those cowboys were chasing you."

Chapter Six

Matt held the door open for her as they reached the house. The gesture surprised her. She couldn't remember the last time a man had held a door open for her. "I put your saddle bags, bedroll, and rifle in the back bedroom." She gestured across the room. "You're welcome to stay here, or the bunkhouse is across the yard, if you prefer to be alone."

She saw him look around the room. "No, here is fine. I'm sorry about taking your bed last night."

She glanced at him as she tied an apron around her waist. "I didn't mind. Given the shape you were in yesterday, my room was as far as I thought I could drag you if you passed out." She noticed his uneasiness. "Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll finish supper and make some fresh coffee."

"Thanks." He pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and eased himself into it.

She felt his gaze and she glanced at him. "Now, tell me why they were after you."

"I don't know. It could've had something to do with Henry passing on the story of the gold to me and making me promise to use it right. Since I haven't lived a virtuous life myself, and I haven't done anything with the gold, maybe my time was up."

She came to the table, stirring biscuit dough. "You said Mr. Buckholt saw the riders twice before they finally took him the third time. You've seen them twice now. Maybe this was your second warning to change your ways or you'll have your last encounter like he did."

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He nodded. "It's crossed my mind." He looked around the room again. "You said you put my gear somewhere?"

"Yes, the far door on the right." She turned back to the counter top.

He left the table and she heard his boot steps cross the room. She glanced over her shoulder and watched him, a fluttering feeling in her stomach. Bracing her hands against the counter, she whispered to herself. "What am I doing? I've invited a man I don't know to stay in my house."

A quiet voice spoke to her in her head. *Brenna, you know this man well. Tell him. Don't doubt your heart.* Nodding to herself, she took two deep breaths and busied herself with the meal.

When he came out of his room, she nodded toward the coffee. "It's ready. Cups are in the cupboard on the left. When the evenings are hot like this, I usually eat outside by the trees Please, fill your plate."

They ate in silence across from each other at the large outdoor table. The lyrical music of crickets chirping filled the evening air around them.

"I'm going in for the coffee pot. Can I bring anything else out for you?"

"No, thank you. More coffee will be nice."

She listened to the other evening noises. Coyotes yipping in the distance, toads croaking near the windmill. She watched stars pop out above the skyline of the mesa to the west and picked out Polaris to the north. Matt returned and refilled their cups, placing the coffee pot to the side. He took his seat on the bench across from her.

"It's so peaceful tonight. Look, the moon is rising." The glow of a nearly full moon peeked on the horizon.

His voice broke into her thoughts. "Why were you out riding when you found me in the creek? It seems like too much of a coincidence that you'd just happen to be where I was stranded."

She ran her finger around and around the lip of her coffee cup, not looking at him. She toyed with how to tell him. He'd either accept it or he'd leave. Given his story, she hoped hers wouldn't seem too odd. She continued to trace the lip of the cup.

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She looked him squarely in the eyes and said with the most matter-of-fact voice she could marshal, "My husband told me to go."

She watched his expression go from serious interest, to frowning incomprehension, to skepticism.

"Your dead husband talks to you?"

She nodded slowly, her stomach tightening at his inevitable doubt. "He doesn't actually speak aloud. It's more that I sense his words." Inwardly, she cringed just a little as she continued. "It sometimes coincides with the little voice I hear in my head."

"Voices? You hear voices?"

"I know it sounds incredible, but considering there was a ghost herd and phantom cowboys chasing us yesterday, my story is tame in comparison."

His smile was a crooked grin and he crossed his elbows on the table, leaning toward her. "Point taken. I'm grateful he sent you to find me."

"You're mocking me."

He shook his head, serious again. "Not at all. There's something afoot here beyond our understanding. Whatever it was, or whoever, I can accept it and leave it at that. I've come across some strange sights in my travels that I couldn't explain rationally. This isn't so different."

She pursed her lips. "There's more." She studied his face and he waited. "I'm going to tell you something you will probably find unbelievable."

Night settled around them, the slight breeze cooling the air and rustling the leaves above them. The windmill blades creaked, made half a revolution, and stopped.

Brenna licked her lips and said, "I believe you and I were destined to meet." She paused, allowing him to ponder those words before she continued. "And be together."

His eyes revealed his thoughts before he spoke. "Together as in...?"

She helped him. "Lovers. Perhaps married. I don't know for sure."

His mouth opened and promptly closed. He sat up straight.

"You're right. That's plenty bold. Why do you think that?"

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"Because the day I married Gregory, I saw your brown eyes in his and knew in my heart we would meet. I can't explain it any other way. It was a feeling. Intuition, if you will. It happens to me occasionally and I've learned to pay attention to it."

Wishing for Matt had made him real in an ethereal sense, looking at him now from an arm's length away made him real in the flesh. If she'd had doubts, she didn't now. She held his stare. There. It's done. Now he knows.

He stood and paced along the length of the table, shooting glances at her every few steps. She watched silently until she thought she'd burst from the tension. "What are you thinking?"

He stopped in front of her. "This is, ah..." he looked for the word he needed.

"Unusual, shocking, inappropriate?"

"Any of those will do. We haven't courted. We don't even know each other."

"Matt, I've known you in my head, and my heart, for years. You're why I pushed my family to move back here. In the deepest part of myself, I knew my life was with you. I had to be here, in this place, when you finally came. We've already courted in our dreams. Haven't you ever wished for me?"

He came around to her side of the table and she swung her legs over the bench to face him. When she looked up at him, his eyes were so brown they'd nearly turned black. His expression was prayer serious.

"You're right. I do already know you. You've kept me company for years. Maybe I was looking for you." He held out his hand and she stood. He brought her to his body and she went willingly. He grasped both of her hands and kissed her knuckles. The yellow glow of the moon cast enough light on his face for her to see the depth of emotion in his eyes.

"Brenna, I'm a no-account gunfighter with nothing but a few hundred dollars and what I can carry in my saddlebags."

She slipped one of her hands away and touched his cheek with her fingers, then drew them over his lips. He took hold of her hand and held it there, closing his eyes. He trembled as she moved her fingers from his lips

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and traced the curve of his neck, rolling her hand over his shoulder to rest under his hair at his collar.

"Matt, kiss me."

"You've just met me and you trust me that much?"

She shook her head. "No. More. I trust you with my life."

His breath was warm on her face and his lips tasted like nothing she'd ever imagined. He encircled her in his strong arms and she played her fingers through the ends of his hair. He smelled of tobacco, coffee, and the tell-tale hint of the dust and animal scents a person always picks up in the barn, regardless of how brief the stay.

He raised his head and opened his eyes. When he spoke, it was a passionate, deep whisper. "Wishing for that kiss put me to sleep on many a cold lonely night."

"Then there's no going back now. Not for either of us. Our separate roads have finally brought us to this place, together."

"What happens now?"

"I don't know. I only know this much of our story."

He kissed her lightly. "Then we need some time to think about the next chapter."

She nodded, stepping away from him. They gathered the remnants of supper and walked to the house.

He struck a match and touched it to the wick of an oil lamp on the kitchen table as she put the dishes aside on the counter.

"Brenna."

She turned, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Until ten minutes ago, I was a drifter, headed down the next trail, looking for the next fight. When I woke up and saw those pretty blue eyes I had a powerful wish to stay here. I'll even admit you've traveled the miles of my life with me. In my dreams anyway." He smiled and she returned it, waiting, holding her breath.

"Then I looked this place over and you talked about the cattle coming in and your family moving out here. I felt like I could stay here and never wonder again what fight waited for me in the next town. But I don't know if it's just because I'm tired and beaten up and need a place to

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rest for awhile. Right now, any place but where I've been is mighty inviting."

"You're thinking that this is happening too fast, aren't you?"

"You have to admit that going from strangers to practically lovers over supper is pretty damn fast."

"The moment I saw your eyes in Gregory's, I sensed your strength and sincerity. I knew you were a loner. A man who lived by his own rules. I knew you were a man whose heart lay in the west, in the taming and settling of the land." Her voice dropped and her eyes softened. "Matt, you've been with me for years. We're not strangers."

The flickering lamp light enhanced the silence between them. When she didn't think she could stand another second of waiting, he spoke.

"I'm trouble, Brenna. I sell my guns. I draw at the slightest trouble and don't care who dies. I never walk away from a fight and sometimes I go looking for one. I gave up my chances for a decent life years ago."

"What you've done in your past doesn't have to define what choices you make in the future."

He crossed the kitchen and stopped inches away from her, looking into her eyes. "In the last few minutes, my entire life has flashed in front of me. I relived my gunfights. I rode back down those trails when I hunted men for the bounty. I counted the blood money I took without caring whose side of the fight was right or wrong. I felt the old man dying in my arms and remembered that ghost herd coming for me yesterday—"

She put her fingers to his lips. "Matt. The coincidence that you were stranded in the creek at the precise moment that I rode up is too great to be put aside as happenstance. Fate put us in each other's path. There can be no other way now, but together."

He grasped her shoulders and his troubled gaze searched the deepest parts of her heart. "You're that sure?"

"Yes. I'm that sure. We can have a good life here." She gently touched the graze across his cheekbone. "Matt, I don't expect you to understand this anymore than I do. I'm just asking that you won't ride out of here tomorrow and never look back. Take time to heal and rest. But

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please, give us time to explore our feelings for each other before you say no."

He nodded. "All right. I can do that."

"Thank you." She smiled and dropped her hand. "I'm tired. You've had a few more hours of sleep than I have. I'm going to bed."

He stepped back from her. "I'm going to take a walk around the yard."

"Good night."

He went outside and stood on the porch. He rolled a quirk and she watched the red glow of the ash diminish and intensify with each drag.

Don't worry, Brenna, he'll stay.

She assured the voice in her head that she wasn't worried.

What are you then?

She was as close to love as she'd ever been.

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Chapter Seven

Matt awoke to the sounds of chickens clucking outside his window and a cow mooing in the distance. He rolled over and squinted toward the window. It was hardly light outside. He got out of bed, dressed, threw the gun belt around his hips, and stomped his feet into his boots. He crammed his hat on his head. "Damn," he complained when he bumped his forehead and rubbed the knot. It had gone down some overnight, but still hurt like hell.

He poured a cup of coffee and stepped outside to the porch. Stretching out sleepy muscles and flexing his fingers to get smooth movement going, he admired the eastern horizon lightening in anticipation of the sun. Dogs ran in and out of the gate to the barn. He refilled his cup, filled another, and crossed the yard.

He stopped at the barn entrance as Brenna came in through a side door. She saw him and her face broke into a smile.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," he replied, coffee cup extended.

"Thank you. How do you feel this morning?"

"Better. My eyes are both working and my hands aren't so stiff."

She glanced at him as they strolled back to the house, the milk pail swaying at her side. "The swelling in your face is going down. But the bruises are an interesting combination of colors. The gash on your cheek will probably leave a scar."

"I did some thinking last night."

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She looked at him, waiting.

"I thought about what it might be like to stay around here. For awhile."

"Awhile?"

He glanced at her, grinning. "Well, it's hard for a man to go from a life of drifting to settling down over night."

"All right. So what did you decide about staying?"

"I'd like to break those colts and be here when the herd arrives, for starters. After that, well, I'll play it as it's dealt."

She smiled and they went inside for breakfast.

By the end of the day, Matt had two colts and a filly used to the bit in their mouths. Two of them had allowed him to put his weight over their backs and hang there. Brenna had made pets out of all of them, so a lot of his work was already done.

He noticed that Brenna divided her work between the rock path and tending the garden. During the hottest part of the day, she called to him to take a break with her under the tree. He sat down to a piece of apple pie and coffee.

"Is this what your typical day is like?" he asked between mouthfuls, trying to remember the last time apple pie tasted so good. Maybe it was just her company.

"Mostly. Since we moved back here three years ago, we've fixed up all the living quarters and made them into quite comfortable homes. My aunt will return with household supplies and bolt cloth for curtains and such. Our plan is to have the family all together by Christmas. We want to make it as nice as we can."

"What about the range land? Is it ready for the herd?"

She nodded, looking over the yard wall across the prairie beyond. "Yes, it's fenced and the water holes were cleared in the spring. We built line shacks and we'll stock them when the cowboys go out for the winter."

"You said the herd's coming in this summer?"

"Yes, by the end of August, if all goes well on the trail. All 4,000 head."

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He nearly choked. "Good God Almighty, Brenna. How much land does your family own?"

She had to stop and think. "I'm not exactly sure, but I believe the original purchase made by my great-grandparents was somewhere around 70,000 acres and my father and uncle doubled it a few years ago. It's over twenty miles across, as the crow flies."

"So, you're family is...wealthy?"

She chuckled at the expression on his face. "No. I wouldn't say that. When we moved back east, my father invested a few hundred dollars and, over the years, it proved to be a substantial return. Then Gregory became a partner and he used his inheritance to help buy more land. I do know money was borrowed to purchase the herd and finance the cattle drive."

Matt thought about their conversation the rest of the afternoon. It was quite a spread here. Good water. Plenty of land to run a good sized herd. The family all sounded like solid folks. He grained the colts, riding horses, and milk cows for the night and paused at the wall gate.

Twilight shadows lengthened along the walls and he watched Brenna walk across the yard from a smaller building. The dressing gown she wore fluttered around her legs in the breeze and she rubbed a towel in her hair. He followed her inside and the screen door banged shut behind him.

She stepped out of her room with her long hair hanging wet and straight over her shoulder to its full length at her waist. Her hair was a dark red when wet. She pointed her comb at the table. "There's bread and meat on the table. Help yourself."

"I need to wash up." He started back outside to the wash basin when she threw a bar of soap at him. He caught it and eyed her with a quizzical expression. She nodded toward a small table between them. He saw a folded towel with a razor and shaving cup and mirror.

"I have three rules in my home that apply to everyone who stays here. Including me."

"And those are?"

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She picked up the folded towel and items on top and held them out. He suppressed a smile and took them. "A bath every night before bed."

He cocked his head at her, not quite certain he'd heard her right. "A bath. Every night?"

"Yes. We have a bath house across the yard. It was the only personal request I made when I returned here."

"You want me to bathe every night?"

"If you want to sleep in any of the beds in this house, yes."

They stood an arm's length apart, their expressions revealing their separate amusement.

"All right. What are the other two rules?"

"Consideration for the needs of others. My parents instilled in all their children the importance of good manners and helping out. It's important to me to continue it here where it is easy to forget those sorts of social mores."

"That's two. What's the third?"

"Ask me another time."

He tossed the soap bar into the air and caught it. "Whatever the lady says."

"There are clean clothes in your room, also."

When he turned to look at her, he saw that she was trying to keep a straight face. With a sigh that was more of a disgruntled moan, he walked back to his room and came out with a change of clothes. He glanced at her as he left the house, shaking his head in good-natured annoyance.

He told himself to buck-it-up. It wouldn't hurt him to do what the lady asked. After all, she'd pulled his drowning ass out of the creek and invited him to stay. He could leave anytime he didn't like the lay of things.

When he left the bath house, she was sitting on the porch, watching him cross the yard. He hadn't buttoned the shirt and the tail hung loose over his pants. He carried his gun belt over his shoulder. He stepped onto the porch and held his arms out wide. "Did I clean up enough for you?"

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She smiled. "Yes, thank you. Drop your dirty clothes on the porch there and I'll wash them."

He leaned against a porch pole and rolled a smoke. The sun was far below the horizon, but the full moon wasn't up yet. "It's too hot inside to go in."

"Isn't it a pleasant evening?" Her voice sounded relaxed and thoughtful.

"You don't seem to miss your eastern life much. There are a lot more conveniences for a woman back there."

"I know. I brought many of them with me and we're bringing in more all the time."

"Do you go into Trinidad much?"

She shrugged. "I go there three or four times a year, I suppose. It's nice to visit, but it's also good to come home. Although I am looking forward to the opera house the Jaffa brothers are building."

"Your love for this place shows." He waved his hand around. "You've fixed it up like a small town. Trees, roses, wild flowers, rock paths. I looked through the houses today. They're homey. You've put a lot of work into making this ranch comfortable."

"Yes, we have, and you're right. I do love it here. At first, I missed music the most, but then I discovered a different kind of music. When the wind rustles the tall grass or hums through the pines on the mesa or the cedars on the flat. The birds singing...well, it's just a different kind of music than what I listened to back east."

He saw the contentment in her face and heard it in her voice. He hadn't thought of wind as musical, it mostly grated on his nerves when it blew day after day, but he rolled it around in his head and decided she was right. There was music around them in the crickets chirping and coyotes howling. Even those damned chickens at daylight. He smiled to himself.

They talked until the moon's light turned from yellow to white. He walked her to her bedroom door and she said goodnight. Lying in bed, he drifted to sleep, trying to recall the last time he'd felt a part of something

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more than his guns, his horse, and an occasional saddle partner. It was too long ago. He couldn't remember...

* * * * *

Matt left the bed in one frantic heart-pounding leap, a revolver in a death grip in his hand. His breath came in rapid gasps. His eyes darted wildly around the moonlit room, searching the shadows and corners. "Brenna!"

His door flew open. "What—" Brenna stopped and stared at him. He stood on the far side of the bed, his back to the wall, stark naked. She immediately whirled around, looking the other way. "What's wrong? What happened?"

He hastily pulled on his pants and made one catapulting step in the middle of the bed as he grabbed her arm and whisked her through the living room in a rush. He hit the porch door so hard it wedged open. He turned her around with his face close to hers, and his words pouring rapidly.

"Someone...a man...was standing at the foot of the bed. Then he was gone. Just gone. What in hell fire was that?"

Her eyes were big and so was her grin. "My husband, Gregory."

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Chapter Eight

Matt dropped Brenna's arm and stepped back, staring at her in wild-eyed disbelief. "This isn't funny. You said he was dead. How can he be in my room?"

"It used to be our bedroom. He died there. A few weeks later, he began visiting me in my sleep. After a few times, I moved to the room I'm in now. He doesn't come into it."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me? And why did you put me in there?"

"It didn't occur to me that he'd continue to visit that room if I wasn't in it. Especially since he began rocking in his chair by the fireplace."

"He does *what*?" He paced barefoot in a circle on the porch, smoothing his disheveled hair out of his face. After several turns around the porch, he walked up to her, waving a finger in her face. "That's plum crazy. I think you've been alone out here too long lady."

"You saw him, didn't you?"

He opened his mouth and shut it, then dropped his hand and shoved the Colt into the waistband of his pants. "Damn, woman." He walked to the edge of the porch and looked out across the yard. "Does anyone else know you hear voices and talk to your dead husband?"

"My brother, Jim. He's my closest friend."

"Has Jim seen him?"

"No, but he has seen the chair rock."

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“Does your brother believe this thing between us? That we’re supposed to be together?”

She nodded. “Without a doubt.”

He ran his fingers through the top of his hair again and turned to look at her.

“Would you like a drink? I have bourbon, rye and brandy.”

“Bourbon. Double.” He breathed in the cool midnight air, trying to settle his nerves. He heard the clink of glass on glass, but not the silent footsteps that came up behind him. When the cool glass touched the back of his bare arm, he whirled around. “What the hell?” She held the whisky glass out to him and he said, “Sorry. Still jumpy.”

She sat on the bench by the door and rested against the house. He downed the bourbon in a gulp. “Here.” She stretched her arm toward him and he took the bottle. He poured an inch into his glass, focused completely on another drink and another after that.

He consciously regulated his breathing and ran a hand through his hair again. Turning to her, he took a drink and stopped abruptly, swallowing hard. Her sleeveless and ruffled nightgown shone white and alluring against the darker color of the rock wall. It draped low over her breasts and was hiked to her knees. The whisky suddenly settled heavy in his stomach and a warm, heady rush washed over him.

He swallowed hard again. A sight like that could make a man forget there was any gentleman in him. He leaned against the porch railing and poured another drink, trying to think of something else. He cleared his throat. “Tell me about him. Tell me about your marriage.”

She took a sip from her glass, and then leaned against the wall and looked at him. “When I received my teaching certificate, my parents sent me on a holiday to Europe to celebrate. I loved music and wanted to attend an opera. As it happened, I attended opening night at the Garnier Opera House in Paris. I had the most glorious time in France. I met Gregory Gérard that night at the opera and he fell in love with me.”

Matt waited, watching as she seemed to reminisce. Finally he spoke. “What about you? When did you fall in love with him?”

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A few seconds passed and she sipped again before she looked at him. She sighed. "I never did. But he possessed the most generous and kind soul. He said the thing he lacked in his life was doing hard work for a good reason. I think that's why America appealed to him so much. He was searching for a purpose. He was a good, steady partner. I loved him in my own way." Her voice dropped, the thought sounding unfinished to him.

"What way was that?"

Her voice was a whisper. "Dearly, but not passionately. Not for all time." She took another sip and stared in front of her. "We married right away. About a year later, the illness he'd struggled with since childhood worsened." She finished her whisky and Matt leaned forward, pouring more for her.

"What was wrong with him?"

"No one knew. As long as he could remember, he'd periodically have a rash that spread over his cheeks. The joints in his bones would swell and hurt so much he could barely move. He'd become so fatigued he'd stay in bed for days at a time. As he grew older, he became extremely sensitive to light." She took another sip.

"We spent months going from one doctor to another and trying treatment upon treatment when we happened to discover a Viennese physician, Dr. Moritz Kaposi. He had only recently identified the illness scientifically."

She looked at Matt. "It didn't matter that we finally had a diagnosis and a name. His health steadily deteriorated and he insisted that we go to America. He wanted me to be with my family when he died. It was important to him that I wouldn't be left alone after he was gone."

"Apparently he lived a while longer."

"Yes. When we reached America, he began to feel better. It was about that time that I became preoccupied with coming back here. Gregory was in favor of it immediately and his health improved proportionately to his enthusiasm. We lived here nearly three years before he died." She closed her eyes, her head back, fingers playing with the lip of her glass.

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"You never had children." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of observation.

She shook her head. "I was only pregnant two times and I couldn't carry the babies to the third month."

He thought he heard deep sadness in her voice. "Are you still mourning him?"

She didn't open her eyes. "No. I let him go a long time ago."

"But he hasn't let you go."

She opened her eyes and met his with a steady gaze. "He will. He's watching over me until he knows I won't be alone."

"Then why was he in my room? I'm here now. You're not alone anymore."

"Somehow, you and Gregory are linked. The day we married I looked into his eyes and saw yours. The three of us merged into one at that moment as if our lives were connected. I believe Gregory still has a part to play in whatever is to come for us. Then he'll leave. There's something still unfinished in his life and something yet to be encountered in yours and mine. I am absolutely certain of that."

"How will we know when it happens?"

"I don't know. I just know."

"Did you ever tell him about me?"

"Yes, but not until he was dying. You can't understand how desperate he was to not leave me alone, so I told him I knew I wouldn't be alone for long after he died."

"That couldn't have been easy, telling your husband there was already another man waiting to take his place."

She met his eyes. "It wasn't, but it actually eased his agony at leaving me. He just smiled and told me he would watch over me until you arrived. He died peacefully a few hours later." She swirled what was left of the whisky in her glass as she talked. "Even when I can't see him or hear his chair rocking, I sometimes know he's nearby. I get a feeling of not being alone, that he's in the room with me. It doesn't happen very often."

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It didn't make sense to him. He grasped for solid ground and something he could understand. "Standing beside my bed isn't my idea of him helping us out."

"You don't have to sleep in that room." Her face was serious, but her blue eyes sent an invitation that reached him deep in his heart.

It was there again. Those blue eyes pulling him right in. "Do you have another bed in mind?"

She didn't respond, but he saw the answer in her face. He didn't know if he did it on his own or if the whisky gave him the boost he needed, but he took three slow steps across the porch. Her legs were drawn up in front of her with her arms wrapped around her shins. He took their glasses and placed them along with his revolver on the rock floor.

He squatted back on his heels in front of her and put his hands on her knees, gently pushing them apart. She hesitated, perhaps resisted, but only for a second before she opened to him, her knees sliding along his ribs. He touched her knees under the ruffled hem of her gown and ran his hands along the top of her thighs, very slowly pushing her gown farther up her legs.

She braced the balls of her feet on the sandstone, spreading her legs as he leaned between them. Her gown bunched up between them, exposing bare skin to her hips and past any sense of modesty.

Trying to control his trembling, he smoothed his hands up and down the top of her thighs, fingers spread wide. He worked his hands to her inner thighs then over the outside and up along her hips and back again. Teasing in and out between her legs with his thumbs and fingers, first gently and barely skimming, he circled deeper with more persistence as he felt the warm, moist invitation to explore farther.

She moaned and pushed her hips against his insistent stroking and probing. She ran her hands over his shoulders, winding the ends of his hair around her fingers.

He knelt, sore knees and bruised legs completely forgotten, as he pulled her hips toward him to the edge of the wide bench. He buried his face in her lap, breathing in her musky scent, testing, then tasting as he

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fleetingly licked and probed with his tongue where his thumbs and fingers had already received a welcome to explore.

Her breath came in increasingly rapid gasps and he felt her shiver when he tentatively pushed two fingers inside her. He leaned forward, pushing his fingers deeper, then withdrew them only to move them in and out, each time probing more deeply than before. She groaned and her hips convulsed against his hand. She clutched his shoulders, and he held her tightly, feeling her body shake, then wind down, and slowly relax against him.

With more effort and control than he'd ever thought he could muster, he removed his hands from between her legs and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, laying his head on her belly. The straining pressure in his groin was as uncomfortable as he'd ever experienced. His breath came in ragged heaves. He struggled to restrain himself from undoing the buttons and releasing himself into her right then. Shit, too much whisky always got him into trouble.

Moving his hands up her back and over her shoulders, he took her face between his palms. He brought her face down to meet his and she wrapped her legs around him. He groaned when he felt the warm wetness between her legs rub against his bare stomach.

He wanted his mouth on hers, but she nuzzled his lips with her nose, then with soft fleeting kisses she touched them with the tip of her tongue. He closed his eyes, holding his breath in concentration not to impale himself inside her. He asked himself what he was doing. Too much whisky or not, he knew she was ready for him.

The better part of him knew this needed to stop, but his driving need thought otherwise. He ran his hands under her hair and brought it over her shoulders to lie between them. He touched the silky softness, then pulled at the ribbon that held the front of her gown together and partially exposed her breasts.

He kissed the inside of each breast, moving in feathery pecks to her neck then to her lips where he delved deeply into her mouth with his tongue. Leaning his weight onto her, he pressed her against the wall as he ran his hand inside her gown and cupped his palm around her full breast.

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She gave a slight moan and arched her hips. Placing her hand over his, she kneaded his hand, her nipple pressing erect against his palm. He shuddered at the sensation, knowing he couldn't hold off much longer. He had to have her.

She broke their kiss. "Matt, we need more of each other than this. You didn't answer me about another place to sleep."

In her eyes, those blue eyes that melted his insides, he saw an emotion that stirred his heart. This had never happened to him before. He'd never held back from sex. The physical sensations of lust were familiar to him, but not the warmth he felt deep within. With stark clarity, he knew these feelings were not from the whisky.

She pushed him back, straightened against the wall and gently touched his face. "Matt, I love you." Her eyes spoke eternally to him and he looked into his own heart, suddenly completely sober.

He took her hands in his, whispering words he'd never been so sure of in his life. Words he'd never said to another woman. Words that flowed easily. "I love you, Brenna Stirling Gérard." She put her forehead on his chest and he rested his cheek on her head. He held her and kissed her hair, taking deep breaths to calm his physical need.

"We should go back to bed." Her voice was low and inviting.

"This has been lover's play between us. Are you positive you're ready to share your bed with me?"

She didn't respond for a moment then she tipped her head to look at him. "How long are you willing to stay in my bed?"

He didn't know the answer. He only knew he wanted to stay forever.

"Maybe we want this so badly we're afraid to take it for fear of losing it before we know what we have."

"Well, let's see what daylight does for the stars in our eyes tonight." With effort, he stood, extending a hand to her.

At her bedroom door, he stopped her. "Brenna, I've come to an understanding about your husband standing by my bed, but that's all he does, right? I mean, he's not going to do, ah, anything else?"

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Her eyes sparkled at his uneasiness and she laughed. "No, you can sleep without worrying about an unwanted bed partner. Good night, Matt."

He laughed at himself and took her into his arms again. "Good night, Brenna."

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Chapter Nine

By the end of another long week, Matt and Brenna had taken all the colts for their first ride outside of the corral. Matt rode the colts and Brenna rode her easy going, stout buckskin that stood fifteen hands at the withers. He was good for snubbing colts by a short rope wrapped around the saddle horn.

Snubbing kept the colts from bolting or bucking, and it dragged them along until they figured out that they were supposed to follow along. They covered enough ground going away from the ranch that on the return trip the colts were tired and Matt rode them independently of the snubbing rope.

On Wednesdays, Brenna made doughnuts and she'd gained wide popularity for having them hot and ready all day long. Because of those doughnuts, word had already spread throughout the area that Matt Caddock, the Cimarron Gunfighter, was breaking horses at the Stirling Compound.

Matt saw the riders coming at the same time the dogs began barking. He grabbed his plaid shirt from the fence and put it on as he walked into the yard from the corral. He also slipped the thongs off the hammers of his Colts, freeing them for quick use.

He watched Brenna meet the riders in the yard. She cradled her shotgun easily in the crook of her elbow, giving the unmistakable impression that she knew how to use the business end, while still presenting watchful hospitality.

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The cowboys tipped their hats and kept their hands on the pommels of their saddles, in plain sight. Matt saw them glance cautiously in his direction as they surveyed the yard. He came up to them as she spoke, staying off to the side.

"What can I do for you gentlemen? If you're hungry, you're welcome to a meal and all the water you need. Get down and cool yourselves in the shade. We never turn a hungry man away." While her words were genuinely welcoming, the shotgun spoke volumes of its own.

The cowboys swung down and walked toward her, leading their horses. "Thank you, ma'am, that would be mighty good. I expect you're Mrs. Gérard."

"Yes, I am."

The cowboy doing all the talking put his hand inside his vest and came out with paper in his hand, extending it to her. "We just come through Trinidad headed to Laramie and the postmaster asked if we'd bring these letters to you."

She stepped quickly to the cowboy. "Thank you. That was very thoughtful. I know it was out of your way."

"Our pleasure, ma'am. It wasn't much more than thirty miles. To be honest, we could have been here yesterday, but we'd heard tell that you make a plate of doughnuts on Wednesdays and we sort of waited." A good-natured, embarrassed grin covered the cowboys' faces and she laughed.

Matt nodded in greeting to the cowboys. "Akins. Myerson."

The cowboys turned to him. "Caddock? Is that you? Damn man." The cowboy blushed and shot a glance at Brenna. "Sorry ma'am." He looked back at Matt. "When did you end up here? Last we heard you'd tangled with some Utes up in the Rockies. Didn't you hook up with Archer and his gang?"

Matt nodded. "For awhile. Got shut of them."

"I hear what you're sayin'. He's runnin' a mean game. Heard he hit a train with dynamite down around Santa Fe a few days ago for the payroll it was carrying. Killed the engineer and fireman for no good

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reason." The cowboy eyed him. "You holed-up here 'cause he's lookin' for you?"

"Maybe. They worked me over down in Maxwell a while back. I left him with a slug in his shoulder and a couple of dead bodies."

The cowboy shook his head. "Better stay shut of him. He's a killer who likes to kill for the fun of it. He's the sort of feller that if you have something he thinks he wants, he just ups and takes it."

They watered their horses and tied them in the shade while Brenna fixed a meal, complete with fresh doughnuts that she wrapped in a tea towel for them to take as they rode off. Matt stood beside Brenna and watched the cowboys leave.

"Keep that shotgun handy, Brenna. Archer's bound to hear that I'm here. When he does, he'll come for me. And the gold."

"How will I know it's him?"

"He'll have two or three hard cases with him and he'll be riding a flashy horse. He's partial to big sorrel paints. Archer's tall. Near my size but his eyes are narrow, sort of pig-eyed and there's not a decent bone in him. And he's fast. Wears his guns backwards for a border draw."

She eyed him. "He doesn't sound like someone you'd ride with."

He looked at her. "Sometimes a man finds himself with strange companions. Henry always told me to take care of my friends, but to keep a closer watch on my enemies, when I know who they are. At the time, it was safer for us to be on the same side than against each other. Besides, I got him out of a tough spot in Mobeetie and he was beholdin' to me. It made him a better risk as a riding partner."

"Until he turned on you in Maxwell."

He nodded. "That's right. Until then." He pulled her into a tight embrace, smelling the sun fresh scent of her hair. He knew Archer would eventually come after him and he felt a pang of guilt for putting Brenna in Archer's path. But he was way past the point of being able to leave her now. He turned her face to his. "If he does show up, you will use that shotgun?"

"If you're asking if I can kill another man, yes. I won't hesitate and I won't think twice about it."

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He nodded. "Good. You may have to do just that." He kissed her and she took his arm.

"I'll watch for him. Come inside with me. I want to read the letters." She sat down at the kitchen table and eagerly opened one. Matt sat across from her, watching her read. She finished and looked at Matt.

"This is from Jim, and it was dated a month ago. He says they started with 4,500 head and should reach here with at least 4,000 by the time some die off and they cut some as payment through Indian Territory and such."

"Did he say when he thinks they'll be here? I'd guess still late August, or the first part of September."

She nodded. "Yes, that's what he wrote." She handed him Jim's letter and opened the other.

She looked at Matt. "Listen to this. It's from my Aunt Mary in Trinidad, just two days ago." She read aloud. "Brenna, Our plans to be home by early next week have changed. The supplies we came to Trinidad to purchase have increased to the point that we will buy another buckboard and team just to bring home the extra. We are awaiting a delayed delivery that will not arrive for at least another two weeks.

"Charles has gone fishing everyday and I don't know if I will ever be able to get him out of the river to come home. It has been a well-needed holiday for him. Do not worry about us, but I am concerned that you are alone at the ranch. If you find someone coming to Trinidad, please send a letter or note with them so I know you are well. We are staying at the Grand Union Hotel. I've found the loveliest cloth for curtains and several bottles of that French wine you like so much. With love, Mary."

She reread the letter to herself, smiling. Matt watched her. She was especially pretty when she smiled. And she smiled a lot. He stood and put his hat on. "I've got colts out in the corral needing tended."

"And I've got lunch dishes and a letter to write."

"What are you going to tell your aunt?"

Brenna looked at him squarely. "I'm going to tell her that all is well here and for them not to hurry home on my account."

"Are you going to tell her I'm here?"

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"Yes. I'm going to tell her Matt Caddock came into my life and I don't ever want him to leave."

"We should talk about what happens next." His eyes held hers.

"Yes. We should."

* * * * *

By five o'clock it was sprinkling and Matt rode into the yard on one of the green-broke fillies. Brenna stood under the shelter of the roofed porch, looking at the sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a cool breeze blew ahead of the storm.

She smiled. "I've been watching you. She has a nice way of moving. Easy, long strides."

He nodded, patting the chestnut's neck. "This one's probably the best of the six. Smartest and most willing to learn of the bunch. She'll make a decent cowhorse in a couple of years." The sprinkles turned into a light shower and Matt plow-reined the filly's head toward the corral. "Time to put her up for the day."

"I'll come out in a few minutes and help you."

Several minutes later, Matt watched from the barn door as the clouds opened up and rain poured down. Brenna was part way across the compound when the rain hit. She stretched her arms out from her shoulders and twirled in circles, smiling with her face to the sky.

He chuckled as he watched her. One of the dogs jumped up and she grabbed his paws and danced him in circles on his hind legs, laughing and singing. The dog answered her with enthusiastic barking.

Lightning flashed, all the dogs took off for shelter, and Brenna sprinted to the barn. Laughing and wet, she stopped beside Matt and they watched the rain pepper down. When lightning flashed again with thunder close behind, they stepped away from the open doorway.

"You looked like a little girl sneaking away to play in the creek in her Sunday clothes. You're soaked."

She looked down at herself and her cheeks colored. He could see through her white blouse and the cloth was stuck to the curve of her

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breasts where they plumped up at the top of her corset. Self-conscious, she grabbed the front of her blouse.

He took her hands and she looked at him. "Don't cover yourself. I've only touched you in the dark. I want to see you in the light." Slowly, she let go of her blouse and lowered her arms.

He moved a step closer, liking the way she looked. *Wet and embarrassed*. Her hair hung down her back, tied at the base of her neck by a soggy ribbon. He reached around her with both arms and untied it, pulling it slowly along her neck until he held it in his hands. Her lips parted slightly and she shivered.

"Shake your hair out for me." She did and it fell over her shoulders, short, curly damp tendrils framing her face. She never dropped her gaze from his face. *Lordy, those eyes and those lips*.

With all his self-control, he kept his arms at his sides. He wanted to bury his hands in the thick softness of her auburn hair and wrap his arms around her. He wanted to pull her to him and taste her full lips, kiss her neck at the base of her throat. He wanted to follow her wet bare skin to the low 'v' of her blouse where her breasts rose and fell with her ragged breathing, teasing and tempting him to release them.

"You are more woman than any woman I've ever known. Just looking at you begs a man to love you."

"You're the only man I want to love me."

"If I kiss you, I won't want to stop there. Might not be able to this time."

"I won't want you to."

He took handfuls of her thick hair in his fists and brought her lips to his. A woman had never gotten to him this way before. Her mouth opened to his and she moaned in a soft whisper. He put his hand under her chin and pushed her head back until the hollow at base of her throat was exposed and he could kiss it. He gently followed the sweet clammy path of her skin to that place he wanted to claim just above the top button of her blouse.

Her hands slid down his hips and he sucked in his breath when her hands went between them and stopped at the bulge in his pants. She

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rubbed him up and down a few times before she slipped loose the ties that held his holsters down. Tugging on the buckle of his gun belt, it came undone and she held an end in each hand.

Looking at her with a half grin, he warned, "Be damned sure you want me because if my gun belt comes off, so do your clothes."

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Brenna returned his grin, letting the gun belt fall to the ground. "If my clothes come off, I'll take that to mean you've decided to make this your home."

In that precise moment, any thought of leaving vanished from his mind. He forgot about his violent past and that all he had to offer her was himself. All he wanted in his life was this woman. He heard the deep husky rasp in his voice. "For you I'd tackle hell with a bucket of water and a bible."

Her grin turned into a smirk. She slowly undid the top button of her blouse, then the next, and the next. He pushed her hands aside and undid the rest of the buttons himself. The fleeting touch of her skin against his fingers sent a tingling reaction through his groin.

He ran his hands inside her blouse and up the back of her arms, bringing the blouse over her shoulders and down her back to drape over the waist of her skirt, pinning her arms at her sides. The swell of her breasts, with the tantalizing hint of brownish nipples peeking over the edge of the corset, begged him to kiss them. He bent and kissed between the soft swells, licking and tasting raindrops. She moaned and he wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her firmly to him, as he wedged his knee between her legs.

She pulled her arms out of her sleeves and leaned her hips into him, grinding against his upper thigh. She kissed his neck under his jaw and moved with little pecking kisses to his ear. He turned his head and

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took her mouth in a frenzy of need, while moving an exploring hand to her breasts.

"Now," she mumbled. She put her hands on his chest and pushed him back. "Now, I want you now."

He backed her up against a stall panel and bent down until he could reach under the hem of her skirt. In one deft pull, her undergarments were around her ankles. As she stepped out of them, he bunched her skirt up around her waist and braced his boots against hers, spreading her legs. He ran his fingers between her legs. Good, she was ready. He didn't want to hurt her.

He leaned his full weight on her, balancing with his hands against the stall, his mouth engulfing her with deep, possessing kisses. She fumbled to unbutton his pants and he pushed her hands away, impatient to open them himself.

She clung to him, arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders. She turned her head from his kiss. "Matt, Matt, I need you in me."

With those words, his primal cravings took over. He put his hands under her buttocks, lifted, then dropped her hips with his first entering thrust. She cried out, grabbing his shoulders to steady herself. As he repeated the motions, she braced her forehead on his shoulder and he heard her tiny little moans.

He put his mouth close to her ear, encouraging her. "Don't hold back." Repeatedly, he raised her to her toes and brought her down hard on him as he shoved his pelvis forward and up. She groaned, weak against the power of his thrusting. Her shoulders banged into the stall with the force of each drive. "Let me feel you, Brenna. Let me hear you."

Time and again he plunged as deeply as he could, until he felt her body shake. She bit her lip and he kissed it. "Look at me, Brenna. Keep your eyes open. I want to see your blue eyes. Let go. Right. Now," he commanded.

She locked her eyes with his as her hips slammed down and he hammered into her over and over, giving her his full length in body-racking shudders. Her scream of release resounded in the barn and he matched it with a deep guttural growl.

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He braced his hands on either side of her and hung his head, breathing hard. She leaned against the stall, eyes closed, breasts heaving to catch her breath. His biceps and legs trembled. He straightened his elbows and kissed her, bringing them both back to the rainy world outside the barn. He pulled out of her and she gave a little moan. He rearranged his pants, slung his gun belt over his shoulder and put his back to the stall beside her.

She turned to look at him and he saw the sparkle in her eyes that he'd come to recognize when she was up to some sort of orneriness. "Well, that was a nice practice run. Now, let's go to the house and try this again for real in a big bed with soft sheets and a bottle of my French wine." She gave him a broad smile and he laughed, shaking his head.

"As long as you can take it. I can give it out."

"Then why are we wasting anymore time in here?"

* * * * *

They ran across the yard and were soaking wet when they reached the porch. They laughed at the dripping sight of the other and she slipped her arms around his waist. He ran his hands up her back and squeezed her against his chest with a deep kiss.

She pushed away, laughing. "Remember, wine and big soft bed."

"I didn't forget. You get the wine and I'll get a towel."

"I'll meet you in my room."

The dim candlelight in the bedroom added to the coolness of the room and Matt pulled the covers back. He stood beside the bed wearing only his pants, the fly gaping open, as he toweled himself dry. Brenna crossed the room and offered him a glass of wine. He took it and they sipped, smiling at each other over the rim of their glasses.

She placed her wine glass on the dresser and unbuttoned her skirt, letting it fall to the floor in a heap. She slipped out of her blouse and let it fall also. "Towel, please," she said, as she grasped the busk at the top of her corset. Matt placed his glass next to hers and turned her to him.

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Without lowering his eyes from hers, he moved her hands away. He unfastened the corset and let it fall with her other clothes. Even when he untied the ribbon at her waist and the half chemise slid down her legs, and she stood in front of him completely naked, he didn't look away. It was only when she backed up to the bed and sat, then laid back across it, baring herself completely to him, that he dropped his gaze to look at her for the first time.

He caught his breath at the sight of her lean, yet curvy form and long slender legs. Her full breasts moved with her quick, shallow breathing and she reached one hand out to him. There was a moist sheen on her skin left from her wet clothes. He picked up the towel and wiped her thighs then between her legs, across her stomach, circled around her breasts, and wiped down the length of each arm.

She held perfectly still until he finished. She sat up and wrapped her arms around his hips, tugging at the back waistband of his wet pants. They stuck to his skin and he had to help her pull them off.

She lay back again and he touched her knees, spreading them gently, but wide enough that he could lower himself bodily onto her. He placed a kiss just below her belly button then another lower. She squirmed and sucked in her breath. He kissed his way to her breasts where he circled her nipples with his tongue and sucked until he felt her hips gyrating under him and her breath coming in little moans.

"Matt, please. It's too much. I'm already too close. Just hold me for a while." She grasped his head between her hands and brought his lips to hers.

He locked his elbows and looked down at her, smiling a devilish smile. "There's nothing wrong with that. I like you right on the edge." He rolled off of her onto his side and pulled her with him. He slipped an arm under her neck and put the other over her, drawing her to lie along the length of his body. She snuggled her head into the hollow of his shoulder and draped her leg over his.

He held her to him, eyes closed, taking in the smell of her damp hair scrunched between them and the smooth satiny texture of her skin. He ran his hand down her back, over her soft rounded cheeks, and down

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the back of her leg and up again, repeating the pattern until he felt her relax. He turned her face to his and kissed her as he continued his soothing massage.

"Brenna."

"Hmm?"

"A few days ago you said you loved me."

"Yes. I do. And you told me that you loved me." She tilted her head back to see his face. "Has that changed?"

He hugged her and placed a light kiss on her lips. "No. It hasn't changed. In fact, I've fallen deeper in love with you everyday."

"Then what's wrong?" She rubbed a finger on the frown wrinkle between his eyebrows. "Why are you suddenly so serious?"

He didn't respond right away. "Do you love me dearly or passionately?"

She propped up on an elbow and looked at him. "Passionately. And for all time." She kissed him gently and stroked his cheek, brushing hair away. "Do you doubt me?"

He shook his head, drawing her to him. "No. I just needed to hear the words."

"Matt, you are the only man in my heart. The only man who's ever truly been in my heart. I will always cherish my years with Gregory. He taught me compassion, patience, and devotion. But it's you I love, and I will always love you, whether you stay here with me or not."

He looked at her and felt her strong spirit pulling him into the depths of her love. "How could I ever leave those pretty blue eyes?" He kissed her and rolled her to her back.

"And I thought we came in here for something other than talking." She teased as he placed tiny kisses on her skin from her neck to her navel.

"We did say something like that, didn't we?" he mumbled as he moved on to taste the inside of her thighs, teasing and tickling until she was giggling and begging him to stop. He retraced his kisses, pausing to play at her breasts, and she wrapped her arms and long legs around him, drawing him down to her.

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Just as their lips touched, he stopped. His face was serious and he frowned.

"Matt, what's wrong?"

Seconds passed before he spoke. "Brenna, I have to ask you something before we go any farther. It's important."

"All right. What is it?" her face was serious and she waited anxiously.

"I have to know," he let out a heavy sigh and she nodded, encouraging him to continue. "Did you take advantage of me when I was unconscious?"

She stared at him, the incongruity of his words evident in her bewildered expression. The smile he fought to suppress won the battle and broke out over his features. She dug her fingers into his ribs, slapping his chest, and pushing him away. "Matt Caddock. I thought you had something important to say to me. That's awful. Of course I didn't take advantage of you."

Laughing, he rolled to his back and pulled her with him. He grabbed her wrists to fend off her mock attack. "But you thought about it, didn't you? Admit it."

Her eyes sparkled and she straddled him. He released her arms and she bent down until her breasts barely touched his chest. She ran her tongue over his lips in a promise of a kiss to come. "That, my dear, will always remain my secret."

He took her face between her hands, demanding the promised kiss, as her auburn hair fell around them in a silky veil. Her Cheshire grin returned and she straightened her legs to lie prone on him. Slowly, she scooted down to place a kiss where tanned and white skin met. In a low husky voice, she said, "But I should warn you. I intend to take shameless advantage of you right now. And as many more times before daylight as I possibly can." He held his breath and tilted his head back with a moan as she kissed her way lower.

Finally resting in an exhausted embrace of arms and legs, Matt reached to the dresser for his wine glass. Ready to go again?" he tried to hide his grin by taking a drink.

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She shot him a `you've-got-to-be-joking-me' look. "I am, if you are." She dared him, leaning over and pressing her breasts to his bare chest while pecking his lips with a kiss.

He laughed out loud and slapped her soundly on the rear. "Later. I need to rest."

* * * * *

He opened his eyes to darkness, instantly aware of a noise in the next room. He held still, tense. Soundlessly, he reached for his revolvers hanging on the bedpost. Slipping one silently from the holster, he listened and scanned the dim room as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The noise continued. He ran the sound around in his head, trying to place it, but he couldn't.

Then he remembered he'd fallen asleep with Brenna in his arms. He smiled, relaxed, and shifted position, returning the Colt to the holster. It might be hard to keep up with her. She'd nearly worn him out already.

When he reached for her, he found her side of the bed empty and surmised she was the source of the noise in the other room. He sat up, pulled on his pants, and went to find her. He searched the room with his eyes, unable to pick out more than shadowy shapes in the darkness. But he still couldn't identify the noise.

Cautiously, he crossed the cool stone floor in bare feet. The high-backed wooden chair that faced the fireplace rocked steadily back and forth. He came up behind it and spoke softly, "Brenna?" He stepped around to the front.

The chair was empty, but it kept rocking in a slow steady pace, the rockers making the wood-on-rock grinding noise he'd been hearing. His mouth went dry, the hair on the back of his neck tingled, and his hands broke out in a sweat. Unconsciously, he reached for his revolvers. *Shit.* They were in the bedroom right alongside his Winchester. Hell's Bells. He couldn't shoot a ghost anyway. Backing up he said more loudly, "Brenna?"

"Out here, Matt."

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He backed all the way, never taking his eyes off the chair. The porch door protested when he opened it. Brenna glanced over her shoulder at him.

"The chair's rocking." He heard the disbelief in his voice.

"I know. That's what woke me." She looked away. "I'd hoped you wouldn't hear it."

"How long does he...how long will it keep rocking?" He couldn't bring himself to admit Gregory was actually rocking in that chair. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, putting his cheek against her head.

"I don't know. Sometimes all night, other times, just a few minutes."

"Maybe you should move out of this house."

She leaned into him, gently shaking her head. "No. I don't really mind. I know there's something keeping him here in this life. He knows when to leave. And when he's ready, he will."

He rubbed her bare arms up and down then hugged her more tightly. "Your arms are cold. How long have you been out here?"

"I don't know. Half an hour perhaps." She breathed deeply. "Doesn't it smell wonderful?"

He tuned his attention to the rain and the other night sounds, trying to ignore the monotonous rocking in the house. He wondered as he held her, who he comforted more. The idea of her dead husband rocking away in the house gave him chills. Slowly, he began swaying side to side. She rested the back of her head on his chest and he noticed that she'd closed her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He turned her around to face him, kissed her lightly, and wrapped her in the warmth of his arms. She laid her head on his shoulder as he moved his feet in small sliding steps on the sandstone floor, taking them across the porch to a soundless rhythm.

"Dancing to the music."

She looked up at him, her eyebrows furrowed. "There's no music."

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His smile was soft and his eyes gentle. "No? Close your eyes and listen to the sounds out here." She did and they continued their slow shuffling dance. "Can't you hear the music in the rain pattering on the porch roof and the sputtering it makes when it splashes into the mud and the tinny plinks on the metal parts of the windmill?"

She nodded against his chest and held him tighter. "Yes. I hear the music now." Her voice was a whisper.

"Brenna."

"Hmm?"

"What's your third rule?"

"Only love is allowed to come into this home and stay." She raised her head and he looked into the blue eyes he'd fallen in love with the first time he'd seen them.

"I need to marry you." His voice was deep and a lump of emotion welled in his throat. Something flickered in her eyes though her expression didn't change. *Was that doubt or reluctance?* "You don't believe me?"

She barely shook her head. "I believe you. But I don't need that from you right now."

He frowned, surprised and a little hurt at her response. "Will you ever need it?"

"When the time is right." She laid her head back on his chest and they continued to sway to their own private music. "When the time is right."

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Chapter Eleven

Three weeks later, as Matt walked across the yard, he stopped to watch Brenna traverse the rock path. He waited on the path for her to intercept him.

Grinning broadly, she stopped beside him and surveyed the yard. "So, what do you think? Does it look nice?"

He put his arm across her shoulders. "You've worked hard on it. You should be proud."

"As a matter-of-fact, I am." She puffed up and he laughed at her put-on self-importance. "I won't be able to start the next project until Granddad and Mary return with the supplies."

Matt pecked her cheek with a quick kiss and walked her to the open gate. "Well, it looks to me like you have about ten minutes to wait."

She shaded her eyes with her hands against the glare of the setting sun. In a rush of wagging tails and exuberant barking, the dogs charged toward the small caravan coming up the last mile of trail to the compound.

"They're back," she whispered.

Matt saw a gamut of emotions in her face. Happiness, relief, love, and surprise.

She grabbed his arm. "Matt. There's a freight wagon and two buckboards—"

He interrupted, teasing her. "Yes. I can count, too."

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She made a face at him and whapped his shoulder with a back hand slap. He laughed and grunted.

“And other people with Mary and Charles.”

Matt was suddenly more interested. “Any idea who they are?”

She grasped his face between her hands and kissed him with a loud smack. She gathered a handful of skirt and took off running, calling over her shoulder to him, “My parents.”

Matt waited, an uneasy feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. It was one thing to think about her family returning to the ranch and having to explain his relationship with Brenna. It was an entirely different situation now. He’d never met a woman’s parents before, but he knew they tended to question a man’s intentions toward their little girls, no matter how grown-up those little girls were.

He decided right then that he’d rather walk down the main street of Dodge City wearing nothing but women’s drawers with no guns than meet Brenna’s parents and explain why he slept in her bed when he wasn’t her husband. *Shit*. He turned back to the yard and moved off to the side to let them pass.

The wagons rolled into the yard and stopped, dust swirling around them. People jumped to the ground and Brenna hugged them all more than once, laughing and chattering.

Matt waited until the dust around the group settled before he joined them. Brenna saw him coming and went right to him. She took his arm as her family gathered around them. He wondered what Brenna was thinking and was grateful that she’d taken her place beside him right off. His instinct to protect her surfaced. They should have talked about this. It was too late to worry now. He had to tough it out. No matter what happened, he wouldn’t let them shame her.

Brenna introduced them. “Matt, these are my parents, James and Ann, my Granddad Charles, my Aunt Mary, my sister-in-law Laney and her children Rose and Sam, and my little brother Drew.”

Matt nodded in greeting, slipping off his hat to the women. Of the men, he extended his hand first to James.

Brenna continued. “This is Matt Caddock.”

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Matt and James locked eyes and Matt saw recognition of his name in James' face. James hesitated for only a moment then grasped Matt's hand in a firm handshake. "Matt's been working here this summer." She paused to look directly at her parents, Mary, Laney, and finally Charles. "And he lives in my house. With me."

Matt watched the different expressions. He could see Brenna's face peripherally and she held his arm casually, but it pointedly demonstrated that she and Matt were together.

Ann stepped forward and hugged Matt affectionately. "I'm pleased to meet you, Matt. James and I certainly appreciate that you stayed with Brenna so she wouldn't be alone."

Matt nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Stirling." He stepped back to Brenna. Immediately, Charles shook his hand in greeting and the other women hugged him warmly.

In the awkward silence that fell over them, Drew voiced what each of them was thinking. "Are you really a gunfighter? Like in the dime novels? Dad says we need to be polite to you because you're Brenna's friend. I think we need to be nice to you because you might shoot us."

Brenna's mouth dropped open and she stared at Drew.

"Drew. That's quite enough—" James chastized.

Matt cut him off with a wave of his hand. He knelt at eye level with the boy. Drew's eyes were big and scared. Matt gave him his most serious look. "I like your honesty, Drew. If you're man enough to say out loud what you're thinking, then always mean what you say and stick by it. And your dad's right. I am a gunfighter, but I'm also Brenna's friend. As a matter of fact, I love your sister and I wouldn't ever hurt her or anyone she loves. I'd do anything I could to protect them."

The scared expression in Drew's eyes disappeared and a big smile broke over his face. "Whew. I was worried all the way out here that you wouldn't like us and I'd have come all the way from Philadelphia just to get shot."

Matt laughed and held out his hand. Drew shook it vigorously. "Let's get the wagons to the barn. It's almost suppertime." Matt stood and faced the group. He was back in control again. "You'll all want to visit and

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catch up with each other tonight. There's plenty of time tomorrow to unload the wagons. Let's get acquainted over supper."

"Brenna, we'll get supper started at your house," Mary offered.

"All right, I'll be right along to help."

Brenna walked to Matt and stood beside him while they watched the wagon and buckboard drive into the barn.

"You handled that well."

He looked at her. "Obviously, they already knew about me. And what I do. What did you tell your aunt in that letter you sent to her?"

"I didn't have to tell her much of anything. I already told you that my uncle was impressed with the way you handled yourself at the Clifton House stage stop. I wrote that you'd been injured and that once you'd healed, you'd stayed on to break the colts and do some other work around here."

"What about me staying in your house? How do we handle that? I can't think that your dad, and granddad especially, will look favorably on us sleeping in the same bed."

A little smile touched her mouth. "You worry too much. My family won't think twice about our sleeping arrangements now that I told them you live with me. Oh, did I mention that I was born here?"

He nodded. "Yes. You said all of you were born here."

"Did I also mention that Jim is my twin brother and that my parents didn't marry until we were two years old?" She kissed his cheek and promptly turned away, laughing out loud on her way to her house.

He stood there staring at her. "No. Brenna. You didn't mention that."

* * * * *

Over supper, Matt listened without comment to the reunion conversation, watching each person to get a feel for their individual personalities and behaviors. He saw Brenna's straight-forward manner in her mother and the same auburn hair, but her blue eyes were her father's.

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There was no mistaking Ann's fine breeding, sophistication, and education and she'd passed on those attributes to Brenna.

He heard about Brenna's twenty-year-old sister, Corrine, who was staying in Philadelphia with friends for a few more months before coming out to join them. Drew interjected periodically with his own stories of the journey west.

But putting all the family chatter aside, what Matt really discovered about them was their devotion to one another and their determination to be together on this ranch. Their single-minded plan over the last three years had been to reunite by Christmas. They'd worked so hard that they were half a year ahead of schedule.

By midnight, Laney and Mary had taken Rose and Sam to their own beds and Charles had retired to the house he shared with Pete and Mary. Brenna offered rooms in her house to her parents and Drew, but they preferred the house that Brenna had been preparing for them, even though it wasn't quite ready.

Finally alone and in bed, Matt held Brenna in his arms. Her head rested in the hollow of his shoulder. He felt her smile against his bare skin. "You're smiling."

She snuggled closer and lifted her face to see his. "Yes. I am smiling. I knew I missed them, but I didn't realize how much. Especially Drew. Laney and Jim's children have changed so much just in the few months they've been gone."

She laid her head back on his shoulder and he squeezed his arm around her, kissing the top of her head. He stared at the ceiling, thinking. "You wish you had children, don't you?" He felt her body tense and she didn't answer right away.

"I used to, but not any more. I've accepted that there won't be children for me in this house."

He pulled his arm from under her neck and leaned up on it where he could see her face. He wanted to see her eyes.

"Have you really accepted that?" He touched the lone tear that escaped from the corner of her eye and trickled toward her ear.

"Yes. I've accepted it."

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“But sometimes you still wish it could happen.”

She only nodded and he brought her back into his arms and held her close, astonished by the realization that he wished for it as well.

* * * * *

Daylight found the ranch compound already busy with the work of unloading the supplies, the many traveling trunks and luggage, and the scores of boxes of personal and household items. Brenna was particularly pleased with the boxes of books and the slate boards she'd asked them to bring. She wanted to continue Drew's education and be prepared to teach Jim and Laney's children when they were old enough.

By noon, only the wooden railroad shipping crate remained in the back of the freight wagon. The wagon had been hand-maneuvered so that the end gate, which let down into a long ramp, was backed up to Brenna's porch.

Everyone gathered around, smiling at Brenna. She looked at them, then at the crate. and back at their faces. She looked at Matt for explanation. He shrugged and shook his head.

“All right. What is this and why is it at my house?”

Ann reached under the wagon seat, picked up a small traveling trunk, and handed it to Brenna. She took it, a bewildered expression on her face.

“Open it,” Ann urged. Brenna glanced around at them, put the trunk on the porch floor and undid the clasps. Lifting the hinged lid up, she stared for several seconds before finally reaching inside and shuffling through the contents. She looked at her mother. “It's sheet music and piano tuning instruments.”

Ann nodded, smiling warmly at her daughter. “Yes. You will need them for the piano.”

Brenna was slow to grasp Ann's meaning. Ann looked at the crate then back at Brenna who followed with her eyes. Realization finally hit her and she saw Matt smile. “You brought a piano with you?”

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"Yes. We brought a brand new piano here for *you*." Ann gave Brenna a hug. "We knew how much you missed music. We've been in Colorado for almost a month, but I insisted we wait until the piano arrived before we came. I refused to come without it."

With effort and care the piano crate made its way safely into Brenna's living room. When James and Matt removed the last side of the crate and the piano stood proudly against the wall, Brenna could only stare at it. She looked at Matt with tearful eyes. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Either way, the feelings were overwhelming.

The thought that her parents would go so far out of their way to bring her a piano touched her deeply. She turned to them. "Thank you. I don't know what else to say." She blinked back the tears and wiped the few that escaped to her cheeks.

"Don't just stand there. Play something," Charles said.

She moved the piano bench into place and ran through different scales and chords, her ear cocked as she listened critically to the sounds. "It's still tuned well. Even after all of the travel."

"Now play a real tune," Charles prodded.

Holding her hands over the keyboard, she closed her eyes for a moment, searching in her mind for music she could play from memory. Opening her eyes she said, "I haven't played in many years, so you'll have to forgive me if I make a mistake."

Several minutes later, the last melodious notes drifted away on the prairie wind. Little hands began clapping and she twirled around on the bench to gather Rose into her arms. She looked over the top of the little girl's head at Matt and smiled.

* * * * *

During the next week, Matt and James rode with Charles to check the fence and water holes in anticipation of the herd. The women busied themselves with unpacking, making each house into a comfortable home, and settling into the daily routine. Brenna stayed busy enough that though she missed Matt, she wasn't lonesome for him.

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But by evening of the sixth day, she found herself watching for his return. She'd left her mother's house and was walking to her own when something prompted her to walk to the gate. She stood there, surveying the horizons and saw dust in the distance. She watched until three riders became visible and smiled to herself. *They're back.*

While she waited she thought about how much she'd missed Matt and how much she was looking forward to having him back in bed with her tonight. When the riders were close enough for her to make out Matt's features, sudden warmth descended from her shoulders to her stomach, and it spread to the tips of her fingers, leaving her tingling all over.

Realization hit her and she did a quick calculation in her head. She heard the voice in her head speak very softly by her ear. *Tell him.*

Aloud, she answered, shaking her head, "I can't tell him, not yet."

You know he's staying, whether there's a baby or not.

"It's too soon. Not even two months. I've never carried a baby past three months."

This time you will. This one is strong enough. She placed her hands over her belly, closing her eyes, accepting in her heart what the voice told her in her head. *Tell him.*

"No, not until I'm sure. I couldn't bear it if he knew and then I lost the baby. Another month, maybe two, then I'll tell him."

She opened her eyes and saw Matt on foot, leading his horse. When he reached her, he wrapped her in his strong arms and kissed her deeply. She clung to him, nearly bursting with what she wanted to tell him, but she kept it to herself and they walked into the yard arm in arm.

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Chapter Twelve

As August drew to an end, Matt noticed Brenna spent all her time looking toward the pass, where the herd would cross from New Mexico into Colorado and be on Stirling land. He found her wandering outside of the ranch walls one evening and joined her. After a few minutes of walking in silence, he said, "Brenna, I've noticed how restless you've been the last few days, waiting for the herd to arrive, and I've been thinking."

She looked at him, eyebrows up. "And?"

"Let's saddle up and go."

"Go where?"

"Ride out to meet the herd."

She gave him a confused glance. He waited, eyebrows raised in mock-disbelief that she didn't want to go.

"Do you mean we should just take off and try to find them?"

"Sure. They shouldn't be more than a week away and they certainly won't be hard to locate. It's not easy to hide 4,000 head of longhorns."

"When would we leave?"

"First light."

She stared at him and her smile broadened. "I'd like that very much."

"I want to do something else, too."

"That is?"

"Take Drew with us."

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"Drew? He's never ridden farther than around the horse pasture on the old mare and the milk cows frighten him. He cried when the rooster chased him. He's afraid of the dark—"

Matt's raised eyebrows with his head cocked stopped her.

"Ohh." It was a drawn-out sound of revelation. "It's just what he needs. He's too much of a city boy, isn't he?"

He nodded, smiling.

"You'll have to convince my parents that he's old enough to go."

"I already did and they said he was old enough to decide on his own."

She smiled with excitement and grabbed his arm. "Let's go ask him right now."

* * * * *

They left the next morning before daylight and topped Trinchera Pass at first light. They rode around the east side of the extinct Capulin volcano and headed across the open expanse of northern New Mexico generally following the Goodnight-Loving trail south where they encountered the herd just outside of Bueyeros a few days later.

The sight of 4,000 head of cattle strung out over several miles was a sight that defied adequate description. It had to be seen and experienced to truly fathom it. They sat their horses on a hill and looked down at the herd. Drew was only speechless for a few minutes before he began tugging on Matt's sleeve and pointing at the cattle, his eyes big with wonder and excitement.

Matt laughed at the boy's exuberance and curiosity. "You look like you're about to bust wide open with questions. What do you want to know first?"

"Well, where do the cowboys sleep?"

"On the ground in their bedrolls. Just like we've been doing since we left the ranch."

Drew frowned. "That's not very comfortable. What about when it rains? Or the wind blows? Or when it gets cold?"

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"Same way. On the ground. There isn't anyplace else for them to sleep."

"So who watches the cattle at night when they're all asleep?"

"They ride night herd in shifts."

Drew shook his head, not understanding. "Shifts? What's that?"

Matt took out a small cigar from his vest pocket and worked on lighting it as he explained. "Taking turns every four or six hours. Once the cattle bed down for the night, a couple of cowboys ride clockwise and a couple more ride counterclockwise around the herd. That way they can check in with each other as they pass. They usually sing or talk quietly the whole time, too. The sound of their voices keeps the cattle calm."

Drew frowned. "I wouldn't like to do that. Sounds scary. Coyotes and Indians are out there at night."

Matt chuckled. "That's true, but most of the time nothing very exciting happens on a cattle drive."

"Do the cowboys have to cook for themselves? Like we did coming here?" He took a drink from his canteen and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"No, there's a cook. He makes three meals a day. The cowboys take turns watching the cattle and eating. But they all eat in a hurry. One of the most important things on a cattle drive is to have an experienced cook who knows how to fix a good meal fast then get the chuckwagon ahead of the herd to set up for the next camp. Every day on the trail costs money. Drives are slow enough without an inexperienced cook hindering the daily progress. Especially when you consider that on a good day, the herd only covers ten or twelve miles."

Drew waved his arm, pointing across the prairie. "So why are they all strung out like that?"

"Well, the cattle naturally spread out as they graze, and the whole herd can't water at the same time so the cowboys stagger groups of them to let the water holes have a chance to fill up for the next bunch."

Matt pointed at the cowboys closest to them. "Now, see how the cowboys are positioned on both sides of the herd?"

"Yes."

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"Those up front are riding point, then about a third of the way back are the swing riders, then the cowboys near the end are riding flank. The ones following the herd are the drag riders. They each have certain responsibilities to keep the herd going and together. Round up strays and such."

Matt pointed to the front of the herd. "Now, you see that longhorn out in the front? Well, that's the lead steer. He sets the pace for the herd and they follow him."

"I'd like that job," Drew said, pointing at the horses.

"That's the remuda and the cowboy taking care of them is the wrangler. It's his job for the entire trail drive."

"Who are those men coming toward us?"

Brenna answered him. "Uncle Pete and our brother, Jim. They're the trail bosses for this drive."

The two men galloped their horses up the gentle slope to them and reined in, friendly grins on their faces. Matt saw Jim shoot a quick glance in his direction and Brenna nodded.

Pete spoke first. "I thought that was you, Brenna. Somehow I'm not at all surprised to see you here." He looked at Matt and Drew. "And who are these fellows?"

"This is Drew."

Pete's face showed his surprise and he looked back and forth from Brenna to Jim then to Drew. "Well, young man. You've grown up some. Glad to meet you again." He held out his hand and they shook. Jim did the same.

Pete and Jim turned their attention to Matt and he saw them size him up. Matt didn't wait for Brenna to introduce him. He held out his hand to Pete. "Matt Caddock."

Pete's expression didn't change, but he spit a long brown line of tobacco juice into an ant hill as he looked at Matt. He took Matt's hand. "Saw you at the Clifton House a while back. Saved a few lives that day, you did. You've got a name as a bad man with a gun."

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"Yes, sir. And I've worked hard to earn it. Nurtured it until it was full grown and old enough to take care of itself, then I turned it loose on about anything that got in my way."

Matt saw Brenna look at him sharply, but he kept his eyes on Pete. Pete squinted, spat again, slapped Matt on the back and laughed a hearty laugh. "You'll do son. I like your sense of humor."

Matt swung his gaze to Jim, who watched him with the same sparkling blue eyes he'd come to know in Brenna. He saw the similarity in body build and hair color, too. There was definitely a twin look between them.

Jim rested his arms on the saddle horn and a sideways grin touched his mouth. "It's about time you caught up with my sister. What the hell took you so long?"

* * * * *

Brenna and Drew rode with Pete ahead of the herd over the pass. Brenna wanted to see the herd as it came onto Stirling land, where it stretched out onto the flat from the foot of the mesa. The lead steer walked on another two miles and stopped. The herd began to spread out behind him. The steer looked back, as if to tell them they'd made it and dropped his head to graze.

Over the next weeks, the cowboys who were staying on for the winter rode herd on the longhorns, watching them as the cattle learned the boundaries of the ranch and discovered the water holes.

Matt did his share and more with riding herd, cutting hay and laying it in for the winter, hauling supplies to the line shacks, and continuing to work with the colts. It was a busy time with the end of September coming and the unspoken urgency to prepare for the winter.

As an anniversary celebration for James and Ann, a special Saturday supper was prepared and the family gathered under the trees in the yard to eat together. By dark, the conversation turned to talk of the cattle and the ranch itself.

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"The cattle market looks good right now. We need it to hold steady for the next two to three years," James said.

"Why's that?" Matt asked.

"We're going to run this stock for at least two years before we sell. There'll be two calf crops by then and we'll keep the good breeding stock, sell off the culls, and weed out the older cattle," James explained.

"That many head will push the grass pretty short," Jim interjected. "Better count on mild winters, wet springs, not too hot summers, and late frost in the fall."

James nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of the risks. Our finances are solid enough that until the cattle are sold, barring excessive unforeseen expenses, we have enough for all of us to live on without scrimping, as well as cover the ranch expenses, including paying the cowboys."

"What happens if the market's down when you're ready to sell?"

James took a deep breath and looked squarely at Matt. "If our venture does not pay off in beef, then it is entirely possible that we will lose everything here and have to sell the land. The expense of the trail drive and the purchase of the cattle were financed through our bank in Philadelphia. The loan comes due in two years."

Matt sat back and lost himself in his own thoughts, the conversation going on to other things. Drew ran up to Brenna at Matt's side and grabbed her hand.

"Play the piano for us, Brenna, please."

She smiled and took his hand. "What do you want to hear?"

He led her to the house. "That loud music. You know, the dah, dah, dah, dah."

Brenna laughed. "Drew, that's a Beethoven symphony, not piano music. Let's choose something else from the sheet music. *Moonlight Sonata*, perhaps." The porch door slammed and in a few minutes, the clear sound from the piano filled the evening air with music.

When Matt moved away from the women to smoke, he noticed Ann watching him. After a few moments, she walked to him.

"Do you mind if we talk for a bit?"

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He shook his head and escorted her to chairs off to the side of the group setting around the table.

"Matt, I know Brenna loves you very much and you've proven you feel the same for her. But I wonder if you realize the depth of her love." Ann had been looking toward Brenna's house and now she turned her eyes to meet Matt's directly.

"If you're wondering why I haven't married her, it's because she more or less told me no when I asked her. I understand how you and James might question my intentions—"

Ann cut him off with a wave of her hand and a kind smile. "No. There is no question in my mind about your devotion to her and we already think of you as a son-in-law. However, there is something I would like for you to understand about Brenna and me. Neither of us could ever live where our men aren't.

"There was no hesitation on my part to leave Philadelphia and return here. You see, it doesn't matter to me where we live, as long as James and I are together. Brenna is the same. She will go with you no matter where you go, regardless of the hardship, and never regret her decision for any reason. As long as you are with her."

"Brenna told me you two didn't marry until she and Jim were two years old. Why? If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind at all. James simply wasn't ready and I understood that. I had to know he didn't need to go over another mountain pass just to see what was on the other side. He has a wild spirit, which is why we've come back here." She looked at Matt again and her eyes were soft, but serious. "We married when we did because it was time. It was simply time."

Matt stared at her, remembering those same words from Brenna. He'd never doubted she loved him, but now he knew she loved him more deeply than he'd ever imagined. Ann's words had made him realize Brenna understood something he hadn't even known himself. He had one more trail to travel before he could settle down with her. In that moment, he saw the road ahead of him. He knew what he had to do.

Chapter Thirteen

Matt was on the porch, staring into the warm moonless October night, when Brenna came up behind him and slipped her arms around his waist, laying her head between his bare shoulder blades. He reached behind and put his arms around her.

"Are you looking for the next trail?" Her voice was soft and comforting.

"I've thought about it a time or two, I won't lie to you."

"I have no hold on you."

"I think that's what kept me from leaving. I know I could."

They were silent for several minutes before Brenna's voice broke into his thoughts. "You're going after the gold, aren't you?"

He turned to face her and slid his arms around her waist, drawing her to him and nodding. "Yes."

Her eyes were indigo blue in the dark, and serious. "I suspected as much. I saw it in your face when my father talked about the cattle after supper the other night. You're concerned about our finances, aren't you?"

He gave her a little grin and a nod. "You know me well, Brenna. This ranch and your family mean everything to me."

She returned his smile, though he saw unhappiness in her eyes. "I've always known you'd go after the gold. You just had to have the right reason."

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He kissed her forehead and she laid her head on his chest, his arms tight around her shoulders. He rested his chin on her head and stroked her hair as it lay long and silky down her back. "I can't come into this family empty-handed, Brenna. As a man, I've got to pull my own weight. Right now, I'm just a drifter. A gunfighter with nothing to show in his life but a reputation I'm not so proud of anymore. Your husband was a partner to your family and they should expect no less of me. And neither should you."

She raised her head and looked at him. "You've proven yourself to my family. They know you as a man of your word. You've shown them integrity, and devotion to the ranch. They don't need more than that to know your worth as a man. And neither do I. You know the gold means nothing to me and they don't know about it."

"You'll need to tell them about it after I'm gone." He took her chin in his hand and leaned closer, looking deeply into her eyes, needing to see that she really understood what he had to do. "Brenna, the gold means something to me and the old man. I owe it to him to finally finish-up his dying wishes. I understand now what he meant when he told me to do something good with it and find me a good woman." He kissed her lips. "I've certainly found the right woman." Her smile warmed him. "You know I have to do this."

She nodded. "Yes. I know, but I don't have to like it."

"Do you trust me to come back?"

She nodded again. "I told you that first night that I trusted you with my life."

"I'll be back. Gold or not. If I don't show, then I'm dead."

She put her fingers on his lips, shaking her head. "Shh. You'll be back. I have no doubt."

* * * * *

Matt laid on his back, holding Brenna along his body, his cheek resting in her hair, drowsy from the aftermath of lovemaking. The light of the candle flame created mesmerizing wavering shadows on the walls and

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ceiling, making his eyes even heavier. Her voice brought him out of his twilight sleep.

"Matt, I want you to take my buckskin. He's stout and sensible. He'll be good in the mountains. Besides, I'll feel like a little part of me will be riding with you. Leave your bay with me. He'll be my reminder that you're coming back."

Matt turned to his side, leaned on an elbow, and looked down at her. He liked the way her hair splayed out on the pillows around her head and draped over her breasts. The yellowish glow of the candle gave her auburn hair a deep bronze-red sheen. He leaned over and sucked each nipple, where they peeked up under her hair, then kissed her lips lightly, breathing in the fresh soap scent of her skin.

He sat up against the headboard. "Come up here." He pulled her onto his lap and settled her over his groin. Then, reaching under his pillow, he pulled out a small gold heart on a golden chain. It swayed gently in the space between them and she touched it.

"This is all I have left of my mother. Pa was holding it when he died." He studied it for several seconds. When he looked at her, his eyes were moist. Hers immediately teared up in response to his emotion. He reached the ends of the chain around her neck under her hair and hooked the clasp. She touched it gingerly with her fingers, looking down at it where it lay on her chest.

"I was going to give it to you in the morning, but now seems more fitting." He took her face in his hands and kissed her with a depth of love he couldn't imagine feeling before this moment. "You wear it and it will keep me close to you. Just like it kept my mother close to my pa."

He laid her gently down to the bed and kissed the heart where it nestled in that special place he loved between her breasts. Then he pulled her so close to him that he was afraid he might break her, but he needed her there, right next to him. She stayed beside him like that throughout the night, until the first light touched their window and it was time for him to leave.

* * * * *

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The morning was heavy with fog as they rode side by side, Brenna on the bay and Matt on her buckskin. When they reached the Trinchera Pass trail, where he'd begin the climb up the north side of the mesa and cross over into New Mexico, he reined in. Turning the buckskin so that he faced her, he butted his knee up against hers. This was as far as she could go with him on his journey. From this point forward, it was his to do alone.

Her eyes were big, but there were no tears. He touched the little heart laying gently between the swells of her breasts. She took his hand and held it there.

"You understand why I have to get the gold?" he asked, validating within himself that he was doing the right thing for both of them.

She nodded and he saw the resignation in her eyes at what he had to do. His voice was soft. "If we had a preacher here, I'd marry you right now."

She shook her head. "No. I want you of your own free will. Once you have the gold in your hands, you might change your mind about what you want to do with it. I won't stand in your way. Gold fever does funny things to a man's thinking. It can make him forget where he's heading."

"It can remind him what he's returning to just as well."

"Then time and fate will be the judge." Her voice caught and she chewed her bottom lip. "You come back to me, Matt Caddock. But don't you come back without that preacher."

His resolve to leave failed him when he saw her force a smile as she struggled to hold in her tears. *Goddamn it, I have to do this.*

He worked to control the emotion in his voice. "Then get yourself a new dress, Brenna Stirling Gérard. I'm going to give you a new last name when I get back. And I'm partial to yellow. Makes those big blue eyes of yours shine and sparkle."

He swallowed hard. "I'll be back before the first snow fall. I promise." He leaned into her and kissed her with a fierceness that she met with an intensity that nearly took his breath.

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With reluctance in his heart, he backed the buckskin away, but he held her hand until their outstretched arms only touched at their fingertips. At last, their hands dropped away in goodbye.

Until he met Brenna, Matt had never looked back. He'd never had anything to leave behind. Now, for the first time in his life, he wanted to see what leaving looked like. He turned in the saddle and looked behind as the buckskin took him up the trail. He watched until she became a dim shape, then the fog engulfed her and she disappeared. The lump that swelled in his throat and the mist that clouded his vision hurt him more than anything he'd ever known.

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Chapter Fourteen

Matt Caddock was a man with a simple plan. Find the gold and return to Brenna. All by first snow on the prairie. Nothing was going to keep him from getting back to her before the first snow.

As he rode across the northern New Mexico plains, he worked it out in his head. The first obstacle was getting the information he needed about the location of the gold. Pushing his pace, he entered Taos late in the afternoon, as the heat of the day waned and dusk prepared to take its place. No one paid much attention to him. He was one of many just like him who passed through every day. Going somewhere, but headed nowhere.

He rode around the outskirts of the quiet adobe town, circling wide around the ruins of the old San Geronimo Church and the graveyard. He continued on, until he reached the back of the church he needed. He tied the buckskin to a short post and walked along the adobe wall to the front. Out of habit, his gaze searched the street, watching every building, window, and person. His guns sat easy in the holsters and he unconsciously flexed his fingers to assure himself of smooth movement.

He hesitated at the church door, looked behind again, and took his hat off. He ran a hand through his hair and stepped into the cool tranquility inside the dim interior. As he paused to let his eyes adjust to the change in lighting, the first detail he picked out was the little bowl of water in the receptacle attached to the wall beside him. Glancing around,

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the surroundings instantly took him back to the one other time he'd been inside. He walked to a front pew and sat, remembering.

Looking around, he went back to his seventeenth year and the day Henry had insisted on stopping. They'd sat in this very spot with hats in hands, silent in their separate thoughts. Matt didn't know what the old man had been thinking, but sitting here now, he recalled his own thoughts clearly.

At seventeen, he'd looked at the serene statue of the Lady of Guadalupe and had questioned his life. Where was he going? What should he do? Why had his life plan left him without family? He also remembered how angry he'd been when he'd left the church that day, feeling even more aimless than before.

As he sat there now, he didn't know what he was looking for. On his left, he saw the table of candles and a closed box nearby. Moving his gaze to the center, he paused on the large shadowed cross hanging high on the wall, before continuing on to the right. He stopped on the white figure of the Lady, nestled into a protective alcove carved into the two-foot thick adobe wall.

He sat there for several minutes, head hanging and eyes closed. Toying with his hat, he tried to recall any hints the old man might have left him during their years together. The nearly inaudible grating noise of a footstep behind him caught his attention. He held his breath. Slowly, he straightened and looked over his shoulder. *Nothing there.* As he settled back on the pew, he caught movement at the corner of his eye. Jumping up, wheeling and crouching in one fluid motion, his guns leaped into his hands.

Shit. I'm not the only one here. His gaze darted, sweeping every part of the church. Letting out an uneasy breath, he holstered the revolvers, retrieved his hat from the floor and put it on. Glancing around once more, he crossed the floor to the statue.

"What did you mean, old man, when you said if I wanted the gold, I had to go back to the Lady Guadalupe in Taos, because she kept watch over the letter you left me?"

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He picked up the statue and turned it every way, finding nothing about the gold. It was just a white wooden statue. He ran his hand along the inside of her alcove sanctuary and knocked the walls with his knuckles. *Solid*. Replacing the Lady, he stepped back and squatted on his heels, studying the area around her from a different viewpoint. "Could have used a better clue, old man," he muttered.

Again, the grating footsteps at the back of the church startled him. Without conscious awareness, he tightened his grip around the butts of the Colts he held in his hands as he looked toward the church door. *Damn it. What's back there?* Again seeing nothing, he put the revolvers back in the holster, his impatience and jumpiness increasing.

He looked at the statue again, thinking out loud. "How are you supposed to help me find the gold?" Exasperated, he let out a long, slow breath and tipped his head back. He stared at the heavy timber crossbeam that supported the ceiling at the front of the church, directly over the statue. The ends of the beam rested on the wide adobe wall ledge and disappeared to the outside. Suddenly, it occurred to him that there might be something hidden up there.

Pulling a pew against the wall, he stood on it and ran his hand across the top of the ledge. He couldn't see over the edge into the dark recess. All he could do was stretch his arm and grope, barely able to touch the outside wall with the tips of his fingers.

Shoulders aching, and legs trembling from the strain of balancing on his toes, his fingers finally touched cool metal. Flipping at the metal with his fingernails, he dislodged a small container wedged. Grabbing it, he stepped off the pew and dragged it back into place.

Sitting, he stared at the small metal, flask-shaped box. *This is it*. He pried the metal plug from the opening with the tip of his Bowie knife and dumped the contents in his hand. A rolled piece of old, yellowed parchment paper was the only thing inside. Carefully unrolling it along the top of his thigh, he scanned the written message and crude map at the bottom.

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The writing was rough and childlike, but he recognized it as Henry's. With an inward smile, he read the letter silently, ignoring the misspellings, but hearing the old man's voice in the words.

"Matt,

Before you go looking for the gold, you need to know the evil way I come to get it. Me and a partner found the gold on Baldy Mountain years before the rush. It was the damndest thing I ever did see. Nuggets was laying on the ground begging to be picked up. Twarn't hardly no digging or mining to it. We just bagged up what we could carry out on two pack horses and lit off that mountain in a snow. We left a goodly share of it behind, thinking we'd come back in the spring for the rest. We got into Elizabethtown and swore an oath not to tell a soul. But we got mighty drunk celebrating and the short of it was he got to running his mouth and I killed him to shut him up. I high-tailed it out of there, but some fellers heard the talk and they come after me. I made it as far as the Spanish Peaks, when my horses give out on me from the run I'd made through the Sangres. So I dropped that gold in a hole. For a bunch of years, I'd go back and get me a nugget or two to live on for a spell. I was scared to show much of it or folks would get suspicious. But they did just that and the talk started that I'd found me a vein up there. I had to quit going back for fear it would be found. Matt, I never did have no family. You was the closet I ever had to a son and I couldn't of had one I was more proud of. As I studied on it over the years I knowed I killed my partner out of plain greed. You got to remember that finding the gold ain't the hard part. Doing right by it is. Well, now that I've said a proper goodbye to you I drawed you a picture of where I dropped the gold.

Henry Buckholt."

Matt wiped away tears with the back of his hand. He hadn't realized how much he missed the old man. Sniffing and letting out a deep sigh to shake off the emotion, he stood, put the letter back into the metal box and slipped it inside his shirt, tucking it into his waistband next to his skin.

He walked down the aisle and stopped to look back at the front of the church at the statue of the Lady of Guadalupe. He understand now

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what he hadn't last time. It had been up to him to determine his own direction and purpose in life. Well, he'd found it. Right here. He tapped the box under his shirt. And all for the prettiest pair of blue eyes he'd ever seen. He tipped his hat to the Lady and stepped to the doorway.

And hit an invisible wall.

His mind couldn't comprehend what he couldn't see. He stepped forward again and the same thing happened. He put his hands in front of him and stretched his arms out, feeling nothing but air.

"What the hell..." he said, eyebrows furrowed and anger replacing confusion.

Determined, he bulled his way toward the clear, open doorway. The invisible wall became two points of pressure on his chest, like hands pushing him back. His skin crawled and a chill washed over him at the realization that something he couldn't see barred his way, trapping him inside the church.

Irrationally, he swung punches in a useless attempt to remove the hands on his chest, but even when he backed up, the pressure stayed with him. Suddenly, his instincts made him jerk his attention to the street across the church yard. A man riding a big sorrel paint horse crossed his view. *Archer. Shit.* Herker, Walt, and that damned crazy Vernon were with him, too.

Matt remained motionless except for the slow move he made toward his guns. Archer looked into the churchyard, but Matt knew he was too far away for Archer to see him inside the dim interior. Matt listened to the receding hoof beats and relaxed. He took a tentative step forward, with no interference. It was gone.

He stepped into the sunshine, breathing in the hot dusty aroma of the hard-packed dirt street. He checked both directions. Archer's paint was tied outside the cantina down the street. It was time to get his ass out of town. Fast. Scanning the street again, he saw a man watching him. He stared back and the man turned, disappearing between two buildings.

That eerie chill came over him again and his mouth went dry. "Son of a bitch. He kept me from walking right out into Archer. He looks just like he did standing beside my bed."

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He took off at a trot and darted after Gregory. He burst through the opening at the back of the buildings and bowled into a man crossing his path. Matt grabbed him by the front of his jacket and slammed him against the wall, his Colt cocked and the barrel in the man's face.

The young man's terrified expression stopped him. Matt blinked, trying to grasp why this blond haired young man didn't look like Gregory. He released the man and shot a nervous glance around. Seeing no one, he holstered the revolver.

The man straightened his eyeglasses and smoothed the front of his jacket. Matt suddenly saw the stiff white collar and dark store-bought suit. The black book in the dust at his feet was a bible. Embarrassed, he hastily retrieved it, brushed it off, and handed it to the man.

"Sorry, Parson. I mistook you for someone else."

The young preacher took his bible, waving him off, attempting to make light of the situation. "Please, it was all my fault for not announcing my arrival as I crossed between abandoned buildings."

Matt heard the sarcasm in the man's words, but saw the kindness in his eyes. Matt gave him an apologetic half grin.

"I'm John Clement. Reverend John Clement." The parson held out his hand.

Matt stared at him and the man's hand hung in the air. Brenna's parting comment about not returning without a preacher came back to him. Matt grabbed his hand. "You setting up a church here, Parson?"

"Why no. Actually, I'm on a pilgrimage of sorts. I'm traveling town to town until I receive direction for the way I'm to go."

"Did you happen to see a man, slight build, dark clothes, light hair, come through here not three minutes ago?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. He went off that way." He pointed toward where Matt had tied the buckskin.

Matt shook his head, the grin on his face widening. He threw his arm across the parson's shoulders and guided him toward the buckskin. "You ever hunt for buried treasure, Parson?"

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Chapter Fifteen

Brenna stepped to the porch door when she heard the dogs barking. Four men on horseback came through the gate. Pete met them and she watched him point and gesture toward the barn and the windmill. They dismounted and led their horses to the barn. As she watched, she focused on the flashy sorrel paint horse.

Frowning, she tried to remember why the paint caught her attention. As the men returned to the yard from the barn and she observed the way they spread out from each other, and the wariness with which they looked around, it hit her. The paint belonged to Archer. Now she noticed their tied down guns, their hard appearance, and the position of Archer's pistols. The grips were backwards in the holsters. Matt had said he was fast with a border draw.

Her pulse quickened and her heart seemed to stop. A cold knot in her stomach made her suddenly nauseated. No one else knew. She hadn't warned them about Archer. Taking deep breaths to calm herself, she picked up her shotgun and walked to meet them as they reached the shade trees.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm just cooking supper and you're welcome to a meal." She indicated the bunkhouse with the barrel of her shotgun. "Make yourselves comfortable in the bunkhouse, if you're staying overnight. I'll bring supper over to you in a bit, or you can eat here, where it's cooler."

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She felt Archer's gaze and she looked directly at him. His narrow, dark pig-eyes made her shiver. They weren't human. They were flat and deadly like a snake's. She forced herself to appear confident and unafraid.

She kept her shotgun pointed in his direction, the muzzle hovering in the area of his belt buckle. Surprised respect flickered in his beady eyes.

"Thank you, ma'am. Supper would be right fine and a place to bunk for the night would be sorely appreciated. We'll be gone at first light."

Not wanting to arouse his suspicions, she nodded and deliberately turned her back on them. She returned to her house, her mind racing with every step. *Stay calm. They're just passing through. It's no different from any other drifters stopping here. You can't assume they're looking for Matt.*

A knock on the door made her jump. She whirled to see James come inside. He immediately saw the distress on her face. "Brenna, what's wrong?"

She nodded her head toward the yard. "Those men out there. Matt used to ride with them. He warned me they might show up someday." She quickly told him the details of Matt's arrival last June.

James glanced out of the window. "We must have a plan. It wouldn't do to appear suspicious. We have no idea of their true intentions."

"I'm going to prepare supper for them and try to treat them as I have every other visitor."

"If they ask about Matt, what then?"

She took a deep breath. "I'll tell them he worked for us during the summer. Winter was coming on and he left. Which is, in essence, the truth."

James contemplated. "I need to keep everyone away from them, but it can't be obvious."

Right then, Drew appeared in the yard and Brenna saw Archer call him over. "Dad, when you leave here, go to Drew and take him in for supper as naturally as you can. When you get inside, send Drew to Jim and Pete's with something he can deliver. Have him tell them to stay ready until they leave."

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Brenna worked on supper, watching through the kitchen window as James casually strolled to Drew, talked to the men a few minutes, then took Drew in the house. She kept her eyes on the men as she cooked, but they gave no indication of being anything other than drifters looking for a meal.

Aware that she couldn't realistically carry the shotgun and plates of food at the same time, she went to her room and opened a dresser drawer. She picked up the small, blunt-nosed .22 Reid knuckleduster, checked the seven loads, weighed it in the palm of her hand, and dropped it into the deep pocket of her skirt where it rested comfortably and hidden from view against her thigh. The small gun was only effective if it was jammed right up against a person when the trigger was pulled. There was no distance shooting to it.

She made three trips to the table and on the last, she stood across from Archer and asked, "Is there anything else you need right now? I'll bring out an apple pie and coffee."

Archer shook his head. "Thank you, ma'am. Food looks good." When she turned to go, the flat tone of his voice stopped her. "Where's Caddock? That's his blaze-faced bay with the white socks out in the corral."

She braced herself and looked at him. Off-hand, she said, "He worked here during the summer."

"His horse is still here. Where is he?"

"He traded for one of our horses and rode out nearly two weeks ago." She leveled her eyes on Archer, every nerve in her body cold. The slovenly, barrel-chested man sitting next to Archer gave her a leering smirk. She felt his gaze travel down her body like the crawling feet of a centipede. His prying eyes stopped and lingered too long on her breasts.

Hoping she appeared casual, she slipped her hand into her skirt pocket, the feel of the cold steel bolstering her courage. She forced herself to face Archer and not back down from the other man's predatory expression. These men frightened her at a level she'd never known. She knew instinctively that she had to protect herself. She feared the big man

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would return just to have her, whether Matt was here or not. Her stomach churned.

“He say where he was going?”

She shook her head and gestured with her free hand to the prairie. “He’s a drifter. Where do drifters go when they need to move on?” His expression didn’t change, but she thought she saw a darker meanness creep in behind his eyes. Curtly, she said, “I’ll be back with pie and coffee.” She gathered a handful of skirt and walked away.

She reached the house, shaking so much she had to sit. The porch door banged behind her and she jumped, twisting in her seat. Instantly relieved, she said, “Drew, you startled me. Did Dad tell you to talk to Jim and Pete?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to come over here because I’m worried about you being alone without Matt.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to have your company.” She stood and hugged him, composed now. Putting coffee on, she took an apple pie from the pie safe and cut it into quarters.

“Brenna?”

“Hmm?”

“Is Matt really coming back?”

She saw the concern in his eyes. “Drew, what did he tell you when he woke you to say goodbye the morning he left?”

“He said he had to go look for some gold and that he promised to come back soon.”

“Then what did he say?”

“That he always keeps his promises.”

“That’s right. We can’t doubt him now.”

“But those men out there are after him.”

She tried to keep the alarm out of her voice. “Why do you think that?”

“I was in the barn when they came in and they talked about recognizing Matt’s horse. I stayed hidden in the tack room. One of them called the tall man ‘Archer’ and he said he’d get Matt’s gold even if he had to wait here until he comes back with it. Then they called me over to them

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when I was going across the yard and asked about you and how many people lived here."

Brenna felt sick again, but she tried not to show her fear to Drew. His eyes sparked in anger. "I don't like them. They're mean."

She walked to him and took his upper arms in her hands. "Did they say anything else?"

He hesitated and she nodded for him to continue. "In the barn, Archer said that he'd heard there was a good looking widow lady living here and that Matt had taken up with her. He said that he was going to look the place over and find out if Matt was still here. Can't you make them go away?"

She dropped her hands. "Right now, the best thing for us to do is to treat them courteously as our guests and be grateful that they said they'd leave in the morning."

"They'll come back though, won't they? To get Matt?"

She couldn't lie to him. "Yes. I believe they will. But we'll have a plan. Don't worry."

"I wish Matt was here. He'd just shoot them. Then it would be over. They'd all be dead."

She almost scolded him and stopped just in time, seeing the terrible fright in his eyes. She took his hands in hers, realizing she had to give him something safe, something he could hold on to in his head. "Drew. Matt isn't here and he expects us to take care of ourselves until he returns. Do you understand? We have to be strong and make him proud of us."

"But what will we do if they come back?"

She thought quickly. "It will be your responsibility from now on to be our watchman. You find yourself a good place where you can see in every direction and if they show up, you warn us. All right?"

"What if I can't warn you?"

"Then you hide in the barn and I'll figure out how to get to you."

Tears welled in his eyes, but he nodded.

Chapter Sixteen

Many legends of hidden or lost gold surrounded the Spanish Peaks. Matt had heard all the stories several times when he'd taken up with Henry. He knew the story of the old miner who came out of the hills every fall with a gold nugget big enough to live on for the coming year. It amused him to think that the old man might have been the source of that legend.

Looking back now, he remembered when he was fifteen and Henry had left him with friends in Tucson for a couple of months. When Henry returned, he'd taken Matt to Chicago for half a year. It must have been the last time the old man had gone for some gold. Matt shook his head as he recalled the good time they'd had in Chicago and the money they'd spent. That's where he'd had his first taste of whisky, women, and gambling.

Now, as he and the preacher rode into Trinidad after leaving Taos, Matt contemplated the map the old man had drawn. He was familiar with the area. He'd taken him there about a year before he died. They'd gone up the trail west from Trinidad to Weston, over Cuchara Pass, and had spent a few days climbing around the north side of the Spanish Peaks.

The old man had probably done it on purpose, just like taking him to the church in Taos. Without leaving him direct clues, both times he'd brought Matt as close as he could to the gold.

But landmarks and the lay of the land change over the years. Trees grow or get struck by lightning, forests burn, rock slides alter the path of trails, and cached gold is found by someone else. He needed that gold to

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be there and he thought of how he and the old man had taken care of each other for many years. Right then, he made a mental bargain with the old man. If the gold was there, he'd do what the old man had asked of him. He'd take off his guns for that blue-eyed woman waiting for him.

It was too late to buy supplies when they reached Trinidad, so they left their horses at the livery and took a room for the night. By afternoon the next day, Reverend Clement had filled the two-week list of supplies Matt had given him and Matt had purchased two pack mules and gear.

On his way back to the hotel, Matt passed a shop with a window display of jewelry. Only casually glancing as he went by, he walked on. Ten steps away, he stopped and stared straight ahead. *Rings*. Turning, he went back to the window. He had the preacher, now he needed a ring.

Stepping inside the store, he asked to see the tray of rings from the window. He pointed to the golden band with two small inlaid sparkling sapphire gemstones. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, tilting it back and forth to watch the gems sparkle in the light. It was the one. As blue as Brenna's eyes.

* * * * *

Daylight found Matt and the parson well on the road toward Weston. Though he didn't know the area well, he knew enough to know he could have taken a less mountainous route than what lay before him, but he'd traveled this road with Henry and wanted to take it again. Once he had the gold, he'd cut straight east out of the foothills and come out on the plains north of Trinidad. From there, he'd angle southward cross country to the ranch.

Impatient though he was, Matt kept to the established trail over the pass. A man usually got himself into trouble when he thought of leaving a known path for a seeming shortcut, especially through the rough mountain country that surrounded them now.

He kept count of the days since he'd left Brenna on that foggy morning. Time was getting away from him. October was nearly over. Not the best planning on his part, he admitted. The Aspens were well into

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their vibrant color change. The first snowfall had already occurred in the high country and would probably fall within a few days at the ranch.

He glanced back at the preacher who led both pack mules on a long rope. Not accustomed to traveling at Matt's fast pace, the preacher had slowed him down considerably. But he didn't begrudge the preacher that nor his own decision to bring him along.

He'd made Brenna a promise and he couldn't go back to her without him. It wasn't only the promise, it was the thought of something happening to him up here before he returned to Brenna. He couldn't stand thinking of her wondering for the rest of her life if he was dead or if he had abandoned her for the gold.

He'd ridden too many trails over the years not to be respectful of the unforeseen and unplanned. Men had died of thirst a few feet from water, trapped under their horses after a fall left one or both with a broken leg. Or the dirt at the edge of a mountain trail gave way, sending a man to his death at the bottom of a steep ravine. Matt needed the Parson to finish this if he couldn't. And there was also the ever present threat that he and Archer still had unfinished business between them.

They followed the trail into the mountains until Matt found what he was looking for. He reined in at his first clear view of the granite stone dikes of Dakota Wall and the Devil's Stairstep at the foot of the north slope of the west Spanish Peak. Too many years had passed to be sure, but when they settled in for the night at the bottom of the majestic snow topped mountain, he was comfortable that he was within a half a mile of where he'd camped with Henry.

After they'd eaten and finished off the coffee, Matt decided it was time to tell the patient parson his story.

"Parson, you haven't asked me much about the gold. Aren't you curious how I got my hands on a treasure map?"

"Yes. I have to admit that I am. But I was confident you'd tell me the details when you felt it was appropriate. Or if I needed to know."

Matt took the letter out of the metal container and handed it to him. "Read this. Then ask your questions. You've followed along with me on faith. I want you to know there's a worthwhile purpose to this quest."

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The parson finished reading and returned the letter. "I assume that if you locate the gold you intend to put it to good use, just as Mr. Buckholt requested."

Matt nodded, replacing the letter inside the container. "There's a woman, Brenna Gérard, and a ranch east of Trinidad waiting for me. I need the gold to help keep the ranch going and to show her, and her family, that I really am finished with my guns." He smiled. "Besides, when I left her, she said I couldn't come back without a preacher to marry us."

The parson listened intently. "I believe our paths crossed because something awaits me at your ranch. Is there a town nearby? Or a church?"

"No. Trinidad is the closest. Thirty miles or so."

The parson nodded, thinking. "But the area is becoming more populated?"

"Yes. Some farmers recently settled up on Johnson Mesa and Brenna's family has returned."

"Then perhaps my purpose for accompanying you is to start a church at your ranch. Maybe it's time to found a town and build a community there."

"Maybe so, Parson, but there's something else I need to tell you."

The parson waited expectantly for Matt to continue.

"There's a man, Archer. He and I have some unfinished business. Gun business. And he wants the gold." He fell silent for a few moments, looking into the darkness. "John, if I don't make it back to her, I need you to finish this for me. You have to tell her I didn't leave her alone by choice. I didn't take the gold and run."

The parson looked at him over his eyeglasses, his face solemn. "I will, Matt. I swear it."

* * * * *

By the passing of four more long days of walking back and forth within a three-mile radius, up hills and down, Matt could walk the terrain in his sleep. He'd listened to the incessant humming of the wind through

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the trees. He'd watched the constant quivering of Aspen leaves and he'd studied the timberline ridge trail on the west peak. The parson had even taken to searching with him, hoping that another pair of eyes might see something he'd missed.

Time and again, Matt checked the map to reassure himself that he was in the right location and each time he was absolutely certain he was. The map clearly indicated the granite dikes and the mountain peak beyond, but he couldn't make sense of the other landmarks, let alone locate anything that resembled them.

By firelight that night, he studied the map again, talking out loud to John. "I've been trying to put my mind back to what this land looked like twenty-five years ago, Parson. I understand Henry's drawing of the hole, or cave, in the dike with two big rocks on each side of the opening and one tall tree concealing it. But I can't make sense out of the circles at the bottom of the map."

John nodded, thinking. "Perhaps you could recreate his state of mind at the time. You said he was being pursued. So he would have had to hide the gold in a hurry and get away from it quickly. The clues he left had to have been objects that were immediately available and would have to survive through years of weathering."

"Well, he was worn out and his nerves were shot. He was feeling guilty about killing his partner and his horses were about to give out on him. He didn't think he had much time, so he wouldn't have cached it too far from the trail." He shook his head, putting the map away and pouring another cup of coffee. "But there isn't a tall tree in front of a cave with two big rocks beside it. You and I have both looked for them."

"Have you tried to envision what it looked like when you were here as a boy compared to now?"

Matt took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He brought up the memories of walking the trails, riding along the dikes, fishing, drinking the cold fresh water from the stream, and reading to the old man at night. Then he remembered something Henry had said.

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"He told me to never get set on looking for the unusual when the obvious is just as good for a hideout. He said most people overlook what's in plain sight in search of the places they make up in their own minds."

"What do you think he meant?"

Matt opened his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe it'll make sense to me in the morning."

* * * * *

They awoke with a heavy dusting of snow on their blankets. The air was still and cold and clouds hung low over the mountain peaks. Matt got a fire going for coffee and the urgency of time running out settled upon him. Not only was he a man hunting gold, but he was a man hunted by snow fall that would send him out of the mountains until springtime. An intuitive feeling told him that if he didn't find the gold now, there wouldn't be another opportunity. He'd known men who had wasted their lives lured by the temptation to look just one more time, eventually dying with nothing to show but the glitter of greed.

He poured a cup of coffee and looked up. It took him several seconds to realize the man standing at the edge of the fire wasn't the parson. At that moment, the parson gasped and jumped up from his bedroll, tripping over the log behind him and rolling end over end. He crawled back to the log and peered over it, readjusting his eyeglasses. Matt smiled at his mouth-hanging-open expression.

John whispered. "Who is that? Where did he come from? He's not moving."

"Don't you recognize him? You saw him down in Taos. He's the man I was following when I bumped into you."

John peered from behind his log barricade at the man who watched them, motionless, at the edge of the camp.

"Yes, but who is he?"

Matt turned to look the parson straight in the eyes. "Gregory Gérard. Brenna's dead husband."

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The parson's face drained of color, revealing his inability to comprehend Matt's words. "You mean, he's a ghost?"

"That's right, Parson. He seems to be trying to help me get back to Brenna. He kept me from getting myself killed in Taos and he put you in my path." Matt looked back at the parson who remained behind the log. "I'd say he's trying to tell me something else right now."

With those words, Gregory turned and walked down the same trail Matt had walked countless times in the past few days. "Like I said." Grabbing his rifle, he looked at the parson. "Get the pack mules ready and follow me."

Matt took off down the game trail after Gregory, who covered the ground in a steady purposeful pace, never looking back. Gregory led Matt straight to the bottom of the hill where the trail abruptly angled up to run parallel to the dike at the point where ground and vegetation quit and the rock wall began.

Matt stood there staring up the sheer vertical wall of the dike towering thirty feet over his head. He could see the unending series of fissures and cracks as they interlocked with the ancient layers of rocks.

Gregory stood immobile farther along the path. Matt watched him, impatient that he was following a ghost down the same path he'd walked time and again, but curious enough to stick it out and see where Gregory led him.

Watching Gregory point to the ground, Matt immediately pinpointed a tall, narrow piece of granite sticking up beside Gregory as his reference point. Matt had to climb around a pile of rocks that had fallen from the dike over the years, and Gregory was gone when he reached his landmark. Looking at the ground, he frowned as he knelt. A single line of small stones placed end to end from a mound of similar sized stones pointed down the trail. Dirt and grass of twenty five years held them securely in place.

Matt reached inside his pocket for the map and compared it to what was in front of him. He realized the small cluster of circles on the map were piles of rocks. The single circles indicated how many rocks were

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placed end to end like an arrow showing the way. The ones he looked at now had four, the same as on the map.

He understood the symbols now. He walked on until he found the next pile with three single stones. Where he expected to find two, there was nothing, but he continued. His heartbeat increased with the anticipation of actually locating the gold. When he found the last pile of rocks the single indicating stone pointed toward the dike, not down the trail as the others had.

He stood there staring, a smile coming over his face. "Well, I'll be damned." He was looking directly at the remains of an old pine where it had broken off, leaving a three-foot stump of trunk with granite boulders perched on either side. Up the slope, in line with the tree trunk, a wide crack stood stark and obvious in the dike wall. The parson came up and stood beside him, staring at the crack.

"The old man was right, Parson. I passed this place ten times and couldn't see what was right in front of me."

A thick cloud of snowflakes descended and Matt slapped John on the back. "Grab the sacks. If it's snowing here, it's bound to snow at the ranch anytime now. Let's load up the gold and get the hell out of here."

Matt turned to the pack mules and saw Gregory standing a few yards away. He didn't know what made him do it, but he stepped toward him. "You can rest easy now. I'll take good care of her. She won't be alone anymore."

Gregory lingered a moment longer, turned, and disappeared into the increasing blanket of snowfall.

Chapter Seventeen

Sunset solitude settled over the Stirling compound. Brenna walked across the yard after shutting up the chickens, completely relaxed and peaceful in the Indian Summer evening. She waved at the two ranch hands who were going into the bunkhouse for the night. Ahead of her, Jim and James crossed the yard to her house for supper.

She smiled as she noticed the carved Jack-O'-Lanterns setting on each of the house porches. She and James had helped Drew carve them yesterday. Drew was excited for Halloween tomorrow night and Brenna had planned a party for him. Halloween festivities were popular back east and Brenna wanted to continue them at the ranch. His friend Billy Everett was coming over in the morning to spend a few days. Frowning, she looked around, wondering where he was. She was surprised he hadn't lighted the candles yet.

As she reached her porch, the evening air shattered into a booming, deafening explosion. The force of the concussion threw her to her back on the ground, amid flying shattered glass from the windows of her house. Jim was beside her, calling her name, before she could gather her senses. He helped her stand and she saw her father running toward the dust cloud billowing at the site of the bunkhouse.

At that moment, three horses raced into the yard, their riders shouting and firing weapons into the air. More dust swirled as the horses stopped and spread out across the yard. Brenna saw James stop in his

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tracks and raise his arms. Jim stepped away from her, backing toward the house.

"Stop it right there, cowboy. Going for a gun will be the last thing you ever do."

Jim stopped and raised his hands. James reached them as Brenna turned her attention to the gate. Another horse and rider sauntered casually into the yard. The sorrel paint gave away the rider's identity immediately.

He stopped directly in front of her, the nasty grin on his face frightening her beyond explanation. "Evening, Mrs. Gérard. Nice night for a social call, wouldn't you say?"

James stepped forward, "What is the meaning of blowing up the bunkhouse? You killed two men in there." One of Archer's men moved his horse to block James, pointing the barrel of his rifle to his chest.

Archer swung his gaze to James. "Just a warning that I mean business."

Archer moved his gaze from James to Jim and then to Brenna. "Who else is here?"

James spoke. "Just the three of us, now that you've murdered our hired hands."

Archer's face darkened.

"My wife and kids went with the others to Denver," Jim offered quickly. "My sister's coming in. They went to spend some time in the city with her."

Archer nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer. He glanced around. "Where's the boy? The older one? Is he here?"

Sending a quieting glance at Jim and James, Brenna shook her head. "No, Mr. Archer, he left this morning for his friend's house. Billy Everett. It's about fifteen miles from here. They have plans for a Halloween party tomorrow night."

Archer nodded as he studied her face. She held his gaze. "You know me?"

"Yes, I know who you are. Matt warned me to watch for a man riding a flashy sorrel paint." With the natural boldness that was in her

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personality and feeling the need for formality, she spoke curtly as she stepped toward him. "This is not the first time you've enjoyed the hospitality of this ranch. You know the routine. You and your," she searched for the right word, "friends, would have been welcome to stay in the bunkhouse, until you so carelessly destroyed it."

Archer's face didn't change, but his eyes narrowed. "Then we'll be staying in your house. You just get yourself inside and fix us something to eat. Get some coffee going. And lots of it. You don't try anything that annoys me, and we'll be on our way in a couple of days."

As he dismounted, he motioned to one of his men. "Herker, take care of the horses then come to the house and keep watch from the porch." He waved for the other two to follow. With guns directing them inside, Archer followed. Brenna reached the door first and Archer's voice stopped her.

"I suspect you've got that sawed-off 16 gauge by the door. Best you leave it alone." Stepping inside, he surveyed the interior and made a pointing sweep with his arm. "Vernon, get those weapons off the wall and stow them somewhere out of reach. Walt, turn those chairs by the fireplace around and tie these two gents in them." He gave Jim and James a shove forward. "And don' be talking to each other. It'll tempt me to use you as target practice."

He turned to Brenna. "You heard from Caddock?"

She looked at him. "Nothing has changed in the month since you were here last. Matt isn't here, nor has he been. Didn't you listen to me before?" She heard the haughtiness in her voice.

He grabbed her upper arm and leaned close to her face, his little black eyes narrowing. "Best you watch how you talk to me."

She held her ground and jerked her arm away, but his grasp tightened. "As I mentioned last time, I don't know where he went and I do not know where he is right now." She didn't try to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She locked her eyes with his and dared him to doubt her. "Nor do I know when or if he intends to return."

He looked into her eyes long and hard, until she could barely hold still and keep her eyes level with his. Finally nodding, he released her.

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"No. I don't believe you've heard from him." He walked a circle around her and sat at the table and propped his boots on the top.

"Well, let me tell you what I know. After my last visit here, I went over to Trinidad and did some checking. I asked around and found out that Caddock rode west into the Sangres from Weston with hardly two week's worth of supplies." He paused and placed a revolver on the table, then took the other one out and rolled the cylinder. "That tells me he expects to come out of the mountains around the first hard snow."

When he looked at her, she felt his deathlike black eyes burning through her. "So I'm letting him do all the work for me. He'll bring the gold with him or he'll know where to find it. Either way, I get the gold."

"You're certainly confident that you know what he'll do."

He grinned, but it wasn't pleasant. "Ma'am, I rode with Matt for nigh on two years. I know what he'll fight for and what he won't. One thing I know for sure is that a man like Caddock doesn't leave a woman like you behind. Not for any amount of gold." He paused, studying one of the revolvers up close before he glanced at Brenna again.

"Curious thing though. Seems like he had him two pack mules and a preacher man with him. Since he also bought a wedding ring before he headed into the hills, I'm banking on him being a man so in love that there's no stopping him from coming back here. Understand me, he'll give me the gold or I'll kill him and take it. It makes no never mind to me."

Brenna hoped the combination of surprise and relief didn't show on her face. *He's coming back.* Conversationally, she said, "You may have to wait quite awhile before he returns. Are you prepared to keep us hostage indefinitely?"

He shook his head, spinning the cylinder again, pointing it toward the kitchen window and looking down the barrel. He peered at her over the revolver. "That's where you're wrong. We just came from Trinidad and I happen to know it snowed hard up about where he is only a day or so ago. I'm betting he's out of those mountains right now, headed here. There won't be much time to wait. A day, maybe two."

She sent a distressed glance to Jim and James, then concentrated on cooking as Archer and his men talked among themselves. She set the table

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and placed the food in the center. Purposely, she filled two plates and poured two cups of coffee.

Archer stopped her. "Where you going with that?"

"I don't turn anyone away from my table. This is for my brother and father."

Archer looked at her a moment, then nodded. "Walt, push their chairs apart and loosen up the ropes on one of their arms." To Brenna, he said, "Keep it straight with me, lady, and I'll keep it straight with you."

She nodded. "Of course." She took the food to the tied men.

"You're doing good, sis," Jim whispered, to encourage her. James nodded his approval.

As she returned to the table and walked behind the big man, Vernon, he grabbed her and pulled her down to his lap, leering with yellow, tobacco stained teeth. Reeling at his touch and the filthy smell of his body, she seized the fork beside his plate and impaled it into the back of his hand between the curve of his thumb and fore finger, pinning his hand solidly to the top of the wooden table.

As she scrambled away, she automatically stuffed her hand into her skirt pocket for the knuckleduster she'd carried there ever since Archer's previous visit, but good sense cautioned her. They couldn't know she had it. She might need it for Vernon later. Instead, she snatched up the carving knife beside the platter of meat and held it in the folds of her skirt.

Vernon yanked the fork out and lunged up, screaming and cursing her, his chair crashing behind him. Blood dripping, he came after her. She watched in awe at the lightning speed with which Archer drew his guns and came to his feet, intervening between them.

"Goddamn it, Archer. Let me have a go at the bitch. Look what she did."

She kept her gaze on Vernon as she stepped right to Archer's guns. Leveling her eyes on Archer, her voice was controlled and her words matter-of-fact. "If he touches me again, I will remove his hand at his neck."

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Chapter Eighteen

Archer lowered his gaze to the knife she held at her side. "I believe you would at that."

She handed him the knife and turned to the stove, trembling. She had to brace herself to keep from falling. She shot a glance at Jim and both men sent her reassuring nods that bolstered her nerves.

"Archer—" Vernon began.

"Shut up. Caddock thinks highly of womenfolk. Why the hell do you think I bothered coming here, instead of going after him? She's our ace for bargaining. As long as Caddock's convinced we haven't messed with her, I guarantee he'll do whatever we want to keep her that way. But if he suspects she's been harmed, all bets with him are off."

He stepped closer to Vernon. "I've seen him walk into gunfire reloading his empty guns as calmly as if it was a cake walk. He doesn't scare on a normal day. And he damn well doesn't scare when he's mad."

Face-to-face with Vernon, he tapped his chest with the barrel of one of his revolvers. "Touch her again, before I say you can, and I'll hold you while she cuts off some body parts you're proud of. Right now, she ain't the reason we're here. Don't forget it."

The helpless, sick feeling in her stomach settled heavily. She struggled to maintain sensible thinking. Suddenly she remembered her conversation with Drew when Archer had shown up the first time. She'd told him to hide in the barn and she'd figure out someday to get to him. She could send him for help.

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"Mr. Archer, now that I've fed you, there are still evening chores to take care of, since your entertaining episode with the dynamite interrupted us. Either let me get about my business and trust that I won't do anything to jeopardize Jim or my father or come with me and make sure I don't." *Please don't call my bluff.*

He considered her proposition. "All right. I believe you're good for your word. Go out and do what you need to. Just don't take so long that I come looking for you. Use your imagination on what you'll find in here if you decide to do something I don't like."

Forcing herself to be as polite as she could, she said, "Thank you." Grabbing up a lantern, she ran across the yard to the barn, working through a plan in her head, but shuddering as she passed the gaping hole in the wall where the bunkhouse used to be.

Once inside the barn, she called quietly, "Drew." Nothing. She called for him again, louder. Nothing. Hastily filling the grain bucket, she went outside and let the animals into the corral from the horse pasture. As she dumped grain into the tubs, she nearly dropped the bucket when Drew whispered to her from the darkness outside the corral fence.

"Brenna, I saw them riding in, but they came in so fast I couldn't get to the house to warn you."

"Drew, where have you been?" She kept her voice low.

His words flooded. "I hid in the barn, just like you told me to. Then I crawled around to the back of your house. I've been watching and listening at the low portal on your back wall. I heard everything they said. I saw it, too. I snuck around here when Archer said you could do chores." His voice cracked. "I'm so scared, Brenna."

"Come around to the back of the barn. I'll meet you there."

When he saw her, he threw his arms around her and she felt his shoulders shaking with fright. She knelt in front of him, smoothing his hair out of his eyes. "You have to ride to the Everett's and tell them exactly what you heard and what's happening. Have Mr. Everett take you into Trinidad as fast as you can and tell the sheriff."

Tears welled in his eyes. "But Brenna, I've never been out at night all alone. I don't know what to do."

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She took his face in her hands. "Remember what Matt told you when you were afraid to go on the cattle drive with us? He said you don't know what you can do until you have to. You heard what Archer said in the house."

Drew nodded. "I heard every word he said. But—"

She grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him harder than she'd intended. She looked into his eyes, trying to mask her own fear. "Drew, listen to me. When Matt was exactly your age, his father was killed right beside him from a Comanche arrow. Matt didn't know what to do then, either, just like you. So he did the only thing he could do. What he had to do. He kept on fighting for his dad. He picked up his father's rifle and started shooting back. That's what you have to do now. You have to fight for us."

She heard the porch door slam and looked over her shoulder in panic. "Drew. Hide until it's well past bedtime then get the chestnut filly and ride to Billy's house as fast as you can. Don't stop for anything, but be quiet until you're at least a half a mile from here."

She kissed his forehead, hugged him tightly and ran to the front doors. She could see Archer coming across the yard. The shotgun beside the door stopped her. She reached out her hand, desperately wanting to use it, but her rational mind reminded her how easily they'd blown up the bunkhouse and killed two of their ranch hands. She also knew with stark clarity that right now, only Archer stood between her and Vernon.

The little voice spoke at her ear. *This is not the time. Remember the baby you carry. Wait for Matt.* She reluctantly admitted that to challenge Archer right now would be certain death for Jim and her father, and likely result in unspeakable brutality for her. But she allowed herself a self-satisfied smile and a promise. She had seven bullets with Vernon's name on them. He'd never touch her again and live. Steeling her nerves, she walked right on through the doors swinging the lantern casually, and met Archer near the windmill.

He eyed her suspiciously. "Took your time."

She gave him a flat, unimpressed look. "Mr. Archer, I said I'd do chores and return. It will take even longer in the morning. If you're in

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such a rush, perhaps you'd like to do the morning milking yourself." She continued walking past him to the house, hoping he wouldn't go to the barn. Several seconds passed before she breathed easier, hearing his boot steps following her.

* * * * *

By midnight, it had cooled off enough for Brenna to close the portal covers and draw the window shutters against the chill. She worried about Drew and prayed he'd gone to Billy's house. She lay on the couch and slept, but her dreams were fitful and the night dragged on interminably. Archer and his men took turns watching them all night and she secretly hoped they were as exhausted as she was.

In her many wakeful hours, she'd thought of little except Matt. She'd never doubted that Matt would return, but when Archer said he had a preacher with him and a wedding ring, any tiny doubts had disappeared. But as eager as she was for his return, she also felt a trepidation and foreboding for what would inevitably result in Matt's confrontation with Archer. She knew that mere days, perhaps only hours, separated life from death for Matt.

At daylight, she put fresh coffee on the stove, listening to Archer talk to Vernon on the porch. Walt still dozed in a chair in the corner, rifle across his legs.

She took a glass of water to Jim and James. "Good morning. The coffee will be ready soon."

"I told you to stay away from them."

She turned at the sound Archer's voice and indicated the water. "We may be your hostages, but that does not preclude my consideration for them."

"Get some breakfast going."

She walked to him. "I'm sorry, chores come first. We'll need milk and eggs."

"All right. I'll go with you."

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She took up the milk pail and egg basket and opened the porch door. Vernon sent her a leering glance, but she ignored him and went to the chicken house. In the barn, she made quick work of milking and turned the animals into the pasture, suppressing a smile of relief that the chestnut filly was gone.

As the morning went on, she noticed that her nerves weren't the only ones on edge. Archer, Vernon, and Herker watched the land all around the compound from outside. Walt kept an eye on them inside the house.

After sitting in maddening silence and immobility as long as she could stand, Brenna took up *A Tale of Two Cities* and began reading aloud to Jim and James, smiling at the irony of the first paragraph. The sound of her own voice calmed her impatience and alleviated some anxiety. Several chapters into the story, she suddenly put the book down. Standing, she turned a slow circle, frowning, as she tried to recall the last time she'd sensed Gregory's presence.

It had been days since she'd thought of him and even longer since she'd been aware of him in the house. Her gaze stopped on Jim, not seeing at him, but staring at the chair he was tied to. Gregory hadn't been here since Matt's last night with her. She remembered they'd fallen asleep to the steady sound of wooden rockers grinding against the sandstone floor.

Jim's voice brought her out of her thoughts. "What's wrong, Brenna?"

She focused on him, unsure of how she knew it, but certain that is was true. "He's gone. Gregory's really gone."

* * * * *

In late afternoon, Brenna convinced Archer to untie James and Jim and let them ease their cramped muscles and legs with the promise that they wouldn't make a move against him. Vernon and Herker kept them covered.

Brenna stood between Jim and James on the porch. Jim wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders as she shivered against the sudden

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cold wind that blew off McBride Butte. Past the butte, dark storm clouds blocked out the Sangres south of the Spanish Peaks. The impending threat of the first snow loomed real and probable within a few hours.

She sent her thoughts on the wind. *Where are you, Matt? Where are you?*

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Chapter Nineteen

Matt and the preacher came out of the Sangres cold, hungry, and barely ahead of the snow. They'd ridden straight through the night, anxious to get back to the ranch. He was bone weary and could only imagine how tired the parson was. The horses and mules needed a long rest and a couple of days of grain themselves.

Daylight touched the horizon and he scratched his scruffy beard, knowing he needed a shave and haircut, not to mention a different set of clothes. The lure of stopping in Trinidad to clean up and eat was tempting. It wasn't that far out of the way. He wouldn't want to show up without a bath. She might not let him in her bed. He chuckled out loud. Hell, nothing would keep him from her bed tonight.

"Parson, we're heading right to the ranch. Can you handle riding on and not stopping in Trinidad?"

"Yes, of course. Please, don't worry about me. I've become quite good at sleeping in the saddle. I know how eager you are to return to her."

Matt chuckled and nodded. The parson had been a tenderfoot when he'd bumped into him in Taos, but he was shaping up to be someone to ride with.

Crossing the Purgatoire east of Trinidad, Matt set his sights on the northern rim of McBride Butte not too many miles in the distance. And just a few miles past that, he'd be home. It was the first time since his mother had died that he'd considered any place home and the first time

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he'd ever had someone waiting for him. The peaceful, contented feeling that settled on him left him smiling and satisfied.

Scanning the land as he always did, the dust of riders caught his eye. He reined in and dug out his binoculars. *Three riders. Moving right along, too.* He continued to watch until he made out a man and two boys.

Jerking down the binoculars, he turned to the parson. "I know them. Something's wrong for them to be riding so hard."

Matt took off at a gallop with the parson and pack mules close behind him. He intercepted the riders on the trail near the north face of the butte. When Drew recognized Matt, he let out a yell, waving his arms frantically. Matt rode up as Drew jumped off the filly and ran to him. Matt hit the ground and gathered the frightened boy in his arms.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

The story poured from Drew. He told Matt everything from Archer's first stop at the ranch to his return and blowing up the bunkhouse then Brenna stabbing Vernon and Archer's plan to kill Matt for the gold. He didn't leave out a single detail.

When he finished, his eyes were big and full of tears. "You're going to go back and kill Archer, aren't you Matt?"

Matt glanced up at Mr. Everett and Billy, and then looked Drew straight in the eye, man to man. "Yes, Drew, I am."

"I want to go with you."

Matt shook his head and put his hand on Drew's shoulder. "Drew. You can't. You have to stay with Billy and his dad. I can't go do what I have to now and be worried about where you are. I'll come and get you when it's over. I promise." He looked into the trust and love he saw in the boy's eyes. "And you know I'm good on my promises."

Matt knelt and took Drew by the shoulders. "You took on a man's heart when you went for help, Drew. I couldn't have done better." Drew's face puckered, but he smiled and nodded. Matt slipped his rifle from the scabbard and gave it to Drew. "A man needs his own weapon." He dug in the saddle bag for a box of shells. "Use it like I taught you. Never point it at anything or anyone you don't intend to kill. It's not a toy."

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Matt turned to John. "I'm headed up the butte, Parson. It'll be a tough go from here on out. This is my fight. I don't expect you to go with me."

John tapped the bible he held in his hands. "I think you'll need both of us now."

* * * * *

Matt sat in the trees where McBride Butte merged into Johnson Mesa and watched the compound through binoculars. He'd observed the activity in the yard all day and both times he'd seen Brenna in the yard, he fought down the urge to storm the compound with guns blazing and take her out of there by force. But he knew better. The compound was well-fortified and he knew Archer enough to know he had no intentions of letting any of them live, even after he had the gold.

He'd considered his options and had eliminated most of them. He knew Archer had dynamite and would use it again and he also had all the weapons in the compound. More importantly, he had no doubt that Archer would use Brenna as leverage to get him to hand over the gold.

Matt wasn't worried about Brenna's personal safety with Archer. It was Vernon who had the reputation of ruining women and then killing them. Archer simply fancied himself a fast draw and some women found that exciting and romantic. He got his share of female companionship that way. Matt conceded that he'd not seen anyone quicker with a border draw, but he also knew Archer wasn't concerned with accuracy when shooting, just drawing first.

As the day went on, the feeling of the coming snow increased. Storm clouds moved across the Sangres to touch the foothills. By afternoon Matt was certain it would snow by dark. That was the one thought he couldn't shake. Dark was too late. He had to go down there now. He had to ride right in and face it.

Matt glanced over at the preacher, who was hunkered down in his heavy wool coat, with the collar turned up around his ears, his shoulders hunched against the cold, biting wind. They were both exhausted from

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pushing so hard to get to the ranch before the first snowfall and time had run out.

Reaching into his pants pocket, Matt pulled out the little velvet box and flipped it open. Looking at the ring gave him the clarity he needed and the determination to make good on his promise.

"Gather up, Parson. We're going in."

"Now? But I thought you said we should wait until dark to surprise them," John countered, although he immediately got to his feet. "You said it was too dangerous to go there in the daylight. Even certain death."

Matt dropped the binoculars into the saddle bag and gave him a wry smile as he tightened the cinch on the buckskin. "Then it's a damn good thing you came with me. You can say some nice words over my grave." Reaching into his saddle bags, Matt pulled out a sack with contents the size of an apple and tossed it to the preacher. "In case I don't make it, here's something for your troubles."

John opened it and took out a gold nugget, his expression surprised.

"You married, Parson?"

"No."

"Maybe when this is all finished, you really should think about staying around and starting a church. Brenna's got a sister about your age coming here who might be looking for a husband." John's cheeks turned red and Matt gave him a sideways grin.

"John, catch." Matt threw the velvet box to him and received a quizzical look in return. "Make sure she gets this."

Matt stepped into the stirrup and swung into the saddle. Tiny snowflakes touched Matt's face and he closed his eyes. He was a ring-tailed idiot and the parson was right. He wasn't getting out of this one with his hide intact. Touching a spur to the buckskin, he led the way down the slope toward the ranch and right through the front gate of the compound with the parson and the gold right behind him.

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Chapter Twenty

By the time Matt reached the compound, he was mad. He was mad at himself for bringing this trouble to Brenna and he was mad at Archer for his greed. By the time he reined in between the windmill and Brenna's house, he felt the rushing surge of deadly adrenaline he always felt just before a showdown. The only thought in his mind was killing.

He decided to play on Archer's ego and challenge him to finally see who was the better man with a gun. Matt could take a slug and keep going. He'd done it before. When he pulled the trigger, his shots counted. Every time. One way or another, Archer and his men were not leaving the Stirling ranch alive, even if he had to die to make it happen.

Sitting light in the saddle, he pulled the toes of his boots to the edge of the stirrups, ready to leave the saddle in a hurry. He kept his hands in sight, acutely aware of the rifles that had followed them for the last half mile to the yard.

Archer waited for him in the yard, a self-satisfied smile on his face. "I knew you'd trade me the gold for your woman."

Matt looked past Archer to Brenna, who stood beside Vernon. Their gazes locked and she barely patted her skirt as she made a gun symbol with her thumb and forefinger. She gave him a slight nod and a little grin touched the corner of his mouth. Good woman. He could count on her to take Vernon out when he blew the lid off this party.

"Parson, unload the gold. Throw it down over there." He indicated the open area toward what was left of the bunkhouse. In his mind, he

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wanted the gold as far away from Brenna as possible to draw Archer into the open and leave her out of the direct line of fire. "Then get up on the porch out of the way. There's going to be fireworks shortly."

Archer walked to the gold and nudged the sacks with the toe of his boot. He looked at Matt. "Must be two hundred pounds here. I'll bet it hurts you something fiercely to have me take it away from you so easy."

Matt dismounted with the buckskin between him and Archer. He kept an eye on Walt and Herker, who had come up behind Archer and spread out on both sides.

Matt stepped away from the buckskin, deliberately removing his leather gloves slowly, one finger at a time. He tucked them into the back of his gun belt and stopped forty feet from Archer, flexing his fingers and rubbing his hands together.

"Take it and get the hell out of here."

"I'd like to do that Matt. I surely would, but I can't have you on my tail the rest of my life. Besides, I promised Vernon he could have your woman after we killed you and took the gold."

Matt's blood ran deadly cold, ready for the showdown. "Then let's see who really is the better man with a gun."

Archer spread his arms in front of him, fingers twitching, ready to make his border draw. Matt calmly opened his duster, and flipped the long sides back, exposing his tied down guns.

From behind him, Brenna suddenly screamed, "Matt. The clouds!" Lightning struck outside the compound and he stared over Archer's head. Amid billowing, dark, churning clouds, the stampeding ghost herd thundered across the sky toward them, the phantom cowboys hot on their tails.

He sensed, more than saw, Archer's hands cross and grab his guns. His own revolvers leapt into his hands as he faced Archer's fire. He took out Walt and Herker with his first two shots and felt one of Archer's bullets tug at his sleeve.

Vaguely aware of a rapid succession of muffled pops from Brenna's direction, he leveled his eyes on Archer and walked toward him, firing with each step. He drilled three bullets into Archer's chest, spinning him

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around. Archer kept his feet, but dropped a gun. Archer swung his arm around and Matt felt his leg buckle under him, but he staggered on, methodically firing into Archer with every step.

Lightning flashed with each squeeze of his triggers and thunder shook the air. Two more shots and Archer lay on the ground, eyes wide to the sky. Matt pulled the triggers on empty chambers. He looked at the sky and saw the racing red-eyed herd on top of them. If they were coming for him, then he'd take Archer along.

Suddenly, Brenna was at his side and his legs gave out. Automatically grabbing reloads, he went to his knees, with her arms around him. The lightning crashed and thunder hammered the air. The wailing call of Archer's name rose on the wind.

Matt threw himself over Brenna as lightning struck in the yard, four times in quick succession. He glanced up as the spectral herd and ghost riders swooped down into the yard, then circled high overhead, turning back over the lip of Johnson Mesa to disappear into the winter storm over McBride Butte.

Thunder rumbled along and became a distant sound. Brenna helped Matt stand. "Matt, look!" He followed Brenna's arm as she pointed to the clouds. A cowboy cut out from the ghost riders and pulled off into the clouds as if falling back from the wild hunt.

He looked in their direction and tipped his hat, and then he and his ghost horse leaped into a cloud and disappeared down the other side of the mesa.

"Henry." Matt whispered.

"You released his soul. His debt to the ghost riders is paid because you kept your promise to him."

Brenna took Matt's weight on her shoulders and together they walked toward the porch, where the others ran to meet them. There was no trace of Archer and his men, only the sacks of gold, broken open in a heap where Archer had died.

Matt whirled, gun drawn at the sound of pounding of hooves coming into the yard. He caught himself at the sight of Drew astride the

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chestnut filly, big eyed and scared, but packing Matt's rifle like he knew how to use it.

"Matt! Brenna! Did you see that storm? Those are the worst clouds I've ever seen. Did you shoot the bad guys, Matt?" Drew fired off excited questions as Matt drew Brenna into his arms. He buried his face in her hair, choking back the swelling emotion rising in his chest.

When he found his voice, he looked into her eyes and said, "That's the third time I've seen them. I guess I changed my ways just in time. You know, if it wasn't for you, I'd be chasing that devilish herd up there for all eternity."

She smiled, tears of relief welling in her eyes. She shook her head. "No. I knew they wouldn't take you. I've known since the day I pulled you out of the creek that you'd stay with me."

He glanced at the others then back at her. "Did you get a new yellow dress?" She gave him a puzzled look and he kissed her.

"You said I'd better bring a preacher with me when I came back, or not come back at all." He nodded his head toward the young man standing on the porch. "Well, there he is."

A little smile touched the corners of her mouth. "Good, I was concerned about what last name to give our child."

His expression was blank, not comprehending. "What child?"

"Ours." She took his hand and placed it on her belly.

Slowly, a sparkle came to his eyes. "I thought you couldn't carry one."

"Apparently, this one is as tough as you are."

His eyes became soft and misty. "No, it's a little girl with your spirit and strength." He kissed her forehead and held her tightly. She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

James walked to them and Matt waved an arm toward the gold. "Didn't seem right she should marry a no account gunslinger. Think of it as a reverse dowry."

He tightened his arm around her neck, bringing her face to his, and purposely kissed her with a loud, teasing smack. Snowflakes floated in the air and Matt closed his eyes, tilting his head back to feel their cool moist

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touch on his face. He looked down at Brenna, touched the little gold heart where it lay on her shirt, and gently kissed her lips.

The Reverend John Clement walked up to them and handed Matt the velvet box. Matt gave him a thank you grin. Then loudly enough for all around to hear him, he said, "Gather around folks, the preacher here's fixing to start a wedding."

The End

A.L. Debran

Author Bio

A native Coloradoan, A.L. Debran began writing stories as soon as she could hold a pencil. In order to realize her dream of living the angst-ridden, romantic life of the tortured writer, she left her secure job as a special education administrator to pursue writing full-time. The western novels of Louis L'Amour, the gunfighter ballads of Marty Robbins, and being raised on a working ranch are the inspirations for her stories. She is a movie fiend, *Phantom of the Opera* buff, and lives in a small town in southeastern Colorado with her husband and several neurotic cats. A.L. Debran welcomes correspondence from readers. Visit her website at www.al-debran.com or send her an email at al-debran@al-debran.com.

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Lonely Places by A.L. Debran

Chapter One

Wrapped in a worn and soiled wool blanket, she rode steadily into the night. She trusted the sorrel gelding to take her away from Greeley and into the obscurity of the vast eastern Colorado plains. The roan packhorse followed doggedly in their wake.

Fading in and out of twilight consciousness with pain and bone-weary exhaustion, thoughts of the Man troubled her foggy mind. *Is he dead? Is he still coming? Why didn't I make sure he was dead when I had the chance? I shot him with his own pistol. Surely, he's dead.*

The cool night breeze ceased with the welcome daylight warmth that touched her face. Realizing the gentle sway of her ride had ceased, she opened her eyes to discover the horses standing at the edge of a river, drinking deeply. With a twinge of guilt, she knew she'd pushed the horses too hard. But getting as far away from the Man as fast as possible had been her first priority.

Turning her head to scan the area for shelter, she caught her breath at the sharp pain. She touched her neck and winced. Her wound needed cleaning and suturing, as did the one on her leg. Nudging the sorrel with her heels, they crossed the river.

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It took all her energy to tether the horses, where they could reach water and graze, and to remove the saddle and packs. She pampered her horses when she could. Her survival depended upon their well-being. This would be a good place to stop for the day. She needed to limit her travel to the protective cover of night. Slumping to the ground beside her packs, she wished for coffee and sleep.

Sensitive to the moods of her horses, she watched them, trusting them to warn her if anyone approached. Yellow-billed magpies squawked in the branches above her and hopped on the ground nearby, ready to snatch away any tidbit of food she might neglect. A woodpecker hammered away somewhere downstream. Feeling safe enough for the time being, but keeping her shotgun and revolver close at hand, she forced herself to build a small fire to heat water for coffee and for cleaning her wounds.

From a well-worn leather Gladstone bag, she took out a small cracked mirror and a pouch of suturing tools. Settling herself on the ground, she took what she needed from the pouch and dropped the items into the heating water. *Hmm. I need something to prop this mirror where I can see in it.* She spied a short piece of driftwood within easy reach and laid it across the seat of her saddle. Leaning the mirror against the stick, she still had to hunch over and cock her head awkwardly to see the cut on her neck. Quickly dipping her fingers into the hot water, she snatched the needle and suturing thread. Then with a deep breath, gritted teeth, and determination, she tied the first of many small sutures.

Thirty minutes later, cursing and sweating from the pain, she washed the blood from the wounds one last time. With no binding cloth available, she tore the sleeves from her flannel shirt and wrapped both wounds. That done, she rested on the blanket, nauseous and shaking.

Coffee. Need something warm to settle my stomach. She poured the dark brew into a tin cup, the aroma making her mouth water, then leaned against her saddle. It was hot and tasted good, but swallowing was difficult. It also took the edge off her cold, empty loneliness.

She watched her horses while sunlight seeped into her battered body, relaxing her. Another cup of coffee wandered into her memory.

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How long had it been? A year and a half? Two years? Though she'd lost track of the time, she could still hear his kind, soft voice as they visited in the lobby of a Chicago hotel while waiting out a blizzard.

She laid her head back, thinking of the green-eyed man she'd known for two snowbound days. She wondered if he was still in London studying law, or back home with his family. *Family*. She savored the word in her mind. He had family and she was alone. She blinked back tears.

The worst part wasn't that she'd never see him again. It wasn't even that they didn't know each other's names. The worst was that they'd fallen in love. He'd asked her to go with him, marry him. They'd both wanted that, but she hadn't gone, and now she'd never know if she'd made a mistake. All she had of him as remembrance was the silver cuff link he'd lost.

She slept the entire day and woke at dusk, stiff from lying on the ground so long. She remained perfectly still, looking immediately to her horses. *Grazing. Good. No one near.* Just as the sun set, she topped a rise and took the time to inspect the horizon through old army field glasses. No detectable sign of pursuit, but she still felt a presence behind her. She wondered if it was fear of the Man or old memories chasing her.

Clouds thickening in the northern sky offered the threat of an early autumn snowstorm. The wind blew with a sudden chill. Instinctively, the horses moved on their own, heading east across the prairie.

She liked the dark, clear nights when she could study the constellations. Even without moonlight, stars normally offered enough light to make night travel uncomplicated. She scanned the sky and found Cassiopeia just off a straight line from the point of the Big Dipper through Polaris.

The increasing cloud cover gradually cast a milky pall over the stars and she huddled further into her coat and blanket. As she topped a rise from a dry creek bottom, she heard the report of the rifle, and her stomach turned with the sudden falling sensation. She grabbed the saddle horn and clamped her legs to keep her seat. The gelding stumbled down the slope and went to his knees in the deep, loose sand. The packhorse

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bolted up the opposite bank and into the darkness.

She tried to kick free of the saddle, but took the impact of the next three bullets in rapid succession. Another shot and the gelding collapsed, pinning her under his inert body.

Out of the cold blustery darkness, the Man loomed above her. The deadly barrel of his rifle hovered over her face. "Now we're even. A life for a life." His words were cold and venomous.

She knew what he meant. The regret for the deaths of his daughter and grandchild hounded her, but she didn't want to die. Yanking the revolver from her coat pocket, she swung it on him. Pulling the trigger as fast as she could, she emptied the weapon. Then the blinding flash and deafening crack of a shot from his rifle, and her world went black.

* * * * *

When Beau Hyatt stepped out of the line shack, the diffused brightness of the cloud-covered sunrise on the snow-covered prairie greeted him. There was no breeze, not a whisper of air. He surveyed the rolling landscape and inhaled the cold, crisp air as he saddled his horse and swung into the saddle, glad that the snowfall hadn't turned into a blizzard overnight.

An hour later, he started down a ravine and pulled up sharply. *Damn it. I'll get myself killed if I'm not more careful.* Ahead of him, a packhorse stood over an unmoving horse on the ground. The packhorse nickered and whinnied, glad to see someone. A distant, answering whinny reached his ear. He cocked his head toward the sound, but heard nothing more.

He sat the gray a comfortable and cautious twenty feet away and contemplated the scene. He took in the dead horse with the gear still in place, the packhorse with the lead line dragging, and that there was another over the hill. Slight movement by the dead horse caught his eye. He frowned and looked around. He stepped down, dropped the reins to ground tie his mount, and walked to the horses.

The free side of a blanket trapped under the dead horse flapped in

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the growing breeze. Squatting on his heels, he lifted an edge of the blanket and snow scattered around him in a swirling gust. He expected to find a body beneath the blanket, but discovering it was a woman caught him completely off guard.

He hesitated. Staying out of other peoples' business had kept him alive. He stuck his neck out for few people, especially strangers, female or not. Scenes of his life with another woman passed through his mind, but he forced them away.

With an uncharacteristically sympathetic decision, he un-cinched the saddle and pulled the woman, along with the saddle, from under the horse. Once more, he hesitated. If he tried to save her life, his own would be forever changed.

He took off a glove and slipped a bare hand inside her coat. *Cool, but warm enough.* Her face, ears, and fingers were pink. Matted brown hair stuck to her face with bloody ice crystals and dirt. There was no telling how long she'd been there, but he knew the blanket and the warmth from the dead horse had kept her from freezing.

Grabbing his glove, he stared at his hand. *Blood.* He pulled her coat open and found her clothing stiff with dried blood while fresh blood trickled from an injury high on her chest or shoulder. Checking further, he found three holes in her coat: two in the upper left shoulder and one on the same side midway down her back.

Antsy and wary, he rocked back on his heels and studied his surroundings, analyzing the situation. *No sign of self-defense.* The holes in her coat entered from the back. He figured the horse had taken a shot to the flank and had gone down with her still in the saddle.

"Who are you? Why the hell are you out here all alone?" The wind shifted, moving the hair, and a puff of snow hit his face. *Time to go. Can't fix her up out here.* Throwing her saddle over the top of the packs on the roan, he took notice of the weapon in the scabbard. A Loomis short barrel 12-gauge shotgun. Reliable enough in close-quarters for defense.

He took up the lead line and threw a quick wrap around the saddle horn. Turning back to the woman, his boot hit a solid object. The grip of a handgun poked up through the snow. Grabbing it, he recognized it as a

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.32 caliber Adams pocket revolver. He broke it open and found only empty bullet casings. She had tried to defend herself.

He stuffed the revolver in his gun belt, then picked up the woman and mounted the gray. He settled her across the saddle in front of him and held her securely against his body. Her head fell forward against his chest, and he tucked the blanket around her to block the wind.

The snow was falling again and the temperature was dropping. Looking behind for signs of another horse, he saw nothing through the increasing snowfall. He pushed their speed for the first few miles, then slowed to a comfortable, rambling walk. His long-legged, raw-boned gelding covered the ground with ease, despite the extra weight.

As they traveled, he studied the woman's dirt and blood smudged face. A crusted, livid gash on the side of her head appeared to be the source of the dried blood on her face and in her hair. He was still curious about the shotgun. "Why didn't you use it?"

When he reached the front step of Mederi's boarding house nearly three hours later, he swung down and dropped the reins, confident the horses would remain there until he returned. Entering the house through the delivery door in the kitchen and purposely kicking it shut, he called, "Moira? Teó?"

"Yes, Beau. In here," a female voice responded from the next room.

Beau sent the pots and pans clamoring to the floor from the top of the long oak table with a sweep of his arm, and laid the unconscious woman on it. He flexed muscles cramped from holding her in his arms.

A slender, stately, attractive woman with cascading reddish-brown hair, despite her fiftieth year, stopped in the doorway. "Beau, what happened? Wherever did you find her?"

"Northwest of here a ways. Is Jake here? Or Teó? Send one of them for Doc Howard."

She turned and left the room in a swirl of skirt, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. Beau tossed his coat and gloves aside and had the fire in one of the cook stoves blazing by the time Moira returned.

"Let us see what we can do for her," she said in her proper English accent as she donned a fresh kitchen apron and rolled up her sleeves. She

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dropped the woman's soiled Hudson's Bay blanket on the floor, and together they removed the woman's heavy wool coat and tall, laced boots.

"Beau, look at this. This bandage around her neck is one of her shirt sleeves."

He cut the material and pulled it from the woman's skin. Moira caught her breath, and Beau swore. "Jesus!" Somehow she had survived, even though her throat had been sliced from her left ear to the base of her neck.

Beau knew the nasty work a knife could do, and it always made him cringe. The woman was either very lucky, or her attacker was inept. It should have killed her. The cut was not only angry red and crusted with dried blood, but several neat sutures kept it together. An abundance of abrasions and blue and purple bruises covered her face and bare arms.

"Jesus," he said again.

Moira unbuttoned what remained of the flannel shirt, checking the woman's upper body where the sleeveless, previously white linen camisole stuck to her skin. "Beau, we need the medical kit. We mustn't wait for the doctor."

It took over an hour to wash the dried blood from the woman's body and tend to the bullet wounds. The graze over the woman's hipbone was superficial and quickly cleaned. The bloody shoulder wound was deeper, but not difficult to wrap and bandage. The gash across her right temple required only a snug bandage to control the bleeding. The chest wound presented a greater challenge, however. The bullet bulged against the skin, ready to pop through.

Moira looked at Beau. "At least she is unconscious for this. It needs to come out now."

He nodded and pressed the woman to the table.

Moira adjusted her bifocal eyeglasses, took a scalpel and lanced the knot. Blood streamed and the woman flinched, crying out. Brown, unfocused eyes fluttered open. Beau held the woman's shoulders as Moira probed the opening with tweezers. She grasped the slippery chunk of lead and dropped it into the washbasin.

When the last wound was swabbed and bound, Moira looked at

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Beau. "Stay with her while I get a gown and prepare the sickroom." As an afterthought, she said, "I wonder what happened. Someone obviously did not like her."

Absently, Beau nodded and glanced behind him. Anytime, day or night, there was a pot of coffee on one of the two matching Glenwood Grand cooking stoves. He poured a cup, feeling the steamy comfort on his face while he studied the woman. Her breathing was shallow and labored, and she was deathly white. He shook his head thinking about how thin she was. *Bony is more like it. Not healthy-looking. And what'd she do to her hair? Looks more like a boy than a girl with those bangs hanging in her eyes and short cut to her shoulders. And what the hell color is it? Blond? Brown?*

He mulled over Mo's comment that someone hadn't liked her. *Christ, someone had meant to kill her. Evidently thought they had.* He pictured the scene where he'd found her. Little sign of struggle, but she had apparently tried to defend herself. Three inches of snow covered her and concealed all tracks except those of the packhorse.

He guessed she was on the run from whoever had beaten and stabbed her. He also surmised that her attacker had caught up with her and shot her in the back. In his black and white world, there was nothing more contemptible. There was no reason to let an ambusher live. As soon as the storm passed, he'd return to where he found her and have a look around.

When Moira called to him, he carried the woman through the adjoining kitchen workroom, past the pantry, and into the sickroom. He laid her on the bed, then left while Moira stripped the woman of the remainder of her soiled and ruined clothing.

Moira finished cleaning her, then dressed her in a gown, dismayed even more at the bruises and injuries on the woman's body. By the time she finished, Beau returned with a cup of hot tea for her.

"How is she still alive? Tell me the story," she said. She listened, observing his mannerisms. Detached though he was in the telling, he didn't take his gaze from the woman. He watched her shallow breathing, her slight head movements, and his eyes narrowed whenever she

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moaned. He was normally emotionally guarded, but Moira saw something in his face that she hadn't seen in a long time. She saw his interest in the woman.

"I wonder why she was traveling alone. And where she was going. Where had she been?" Moira mused.

"I've been wondering the same things."

"Shot in the back. Certainly not very noble."

"Hell, slitting her throat probably wasn't the high point of her day, either."

An imperceptible grin turned up the corner of Moira's mouth. Although serious by nature, Beau always seemed to find the absurd in difficult and uncomfortable situations. She knew people often found his sense of humor callous and unfeeling.

She watched him as he watched the unconscious woman, and she wondered where his thoughts were taking him. "You appear interested in her, Beau. You've not had those feelings for some time, have you?"

His face went hard. "I buried them almost four years ago, remember?" Suddenly, as if the walls of the small room were closing in around him, he moved toward the door. "I'll put up the horses and bring in her gear."

* * * * *

Suppertime came and went before Beau brought the woman's belongings into the sickroom. Taking care with the shotgun, he propped it securely behind the packs, placing the revolver on the top. He'd already cleaned and oiled the handgun then reloaded it with the loose shells he'd found in the woman's coat pocket.

He acknowledged the boarders gathered on both sides of the open, double-sided fireplace between the billiard room and the main room as he walked past them to the bar. He caught bits of conversation as he poured three inches of Scotch whisky. Taking the bottle, he went back to the woman. At the door, he smiled when he heard Moira reading aloud. *Dickens. Her favorite author.*

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Teó greeted him in his quiet, deep voice. "*Buenos noches*, Beau." Beau nodded to him. "Teó." He asked Moira, "What did Doc say?"

She removed her reading glasses and closed the book in her lap. "That she should not be alive and he will be surprised if she survives until morning. She took a terrible beating, though we found no broken bones. I have changed the dressings twice because of the bleeding."

With a wry grin, Beau said, "No doubt with your concoctions and not Doc's?" Smiling, she ignored him and pulled back the blankets and sheet. Beau saw the bulge of the bandages under the nightgown.

"At least the blood has not seeped through the bandages since I changed them last." She covered the woman and looked at Beau. "It is frightening to me to think of what she must have endured, and it worries me that she has not moved nor made a sound."

"I'll stay with her tonight. You two go on to bed."

Teó stood. "We can stay with her. I imagine you had been riding several days and nights when you found her. You need to rest."

Beau shrugged. "You know me. Sleep is for other people."

Moira frowned at him. "Have you at least eaten?" He nodded.

She was obviously reluctant to leave. "We've not seen you in months. Are you any more at peace now than when you left?" It was an invitation to talk, but he didn't take it. The bottle in his hand was a familiar sight to her, but she said nothing. Instead, she put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed affectionately. "Call if you need us."

Beau moved the overstuffed chair closer to the bed, but off to the side to put his back to a wall. The bottle and glass clinked together when he put them on the floor to take a cigar from an inside pocket. He notched the head with a small knife then struck a match and waited for the second it took to burn off the phosphorus. Toasting the foot, he drew gently with his mouth.

Satisfied with the taste, he shook out of the shoulder holsters. He hung the matching Webley Mark I .455 service revolvers on the arm of the chair within easy grasp. Another sip, and he leaned his head back, closing his eyes and letting his body relax.

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Two hours passed before he woke from sporadic dozing. He pulled back the blankets. There was no blood on her gown, but her breathing was shallow and he noticed her cheeks were flushed. He laid the back of his hand on her forehead. "Damn. Fever."

Wetting a towel with cool water from the pitcher, he wiped her face and arms with gentle strokes. Inadvertently, he bumped the side of her head and she gasped in pain. Her eyes flew open, glazed and unfocused, staring intently at him, yet through him. He spoke to her, assuring her that she was safe.

As he raised his hand to wipe her face, she lunged from the bed in a brawling, fierce attack. Her bandaged shoulder hit him full on the chest. The momentum propelled them off the bed onto the hardwood floor. Beau landed flat on his back. She fell on him. Scrambling away with a purposeful knee to his midsection, she eyed the revolver on the top of the packs.

He turned, rolled and dived, sensing the barrel leveling on him. Three bullets in fast succession slammed into the floor where he'd been. He hit her legs and she went down kicking, cursing, and punching. Another shot went wild when he slapped her hand away. She caught him with a sharp, hard kick to his stomach. Then a strong right fist split his chin open.

Amid more punches and kicks, he got his arms around her. She fought viciously with strength he couldn't fathom given her injuries and blood loss. He rested on his back with her body facedown on top of him. He talked to her in a gravelly, out-of-breath voice. "You're all right. Take it easy."

The door flew open. Teó stood in the doorway, his old 20-gauge side-by-side at the ready. He stopped when he saw them on the floor. He lowered the shotgun and waited.

The woman's head nodded forward, and Beau felt the warmth of her blood seeping through his shirt. She went limp, mumbling incoherently. With some effort, he sat up and held her in a protective, tender embrace, as he would a frightened child. She was crying with no sound, shaking and clutching him so hard he was sure he'd see bruises

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tomorrow.

Heat radiated from her body. "Help me here. She's bleeding and feels feverish."

Moira appeared in her take-charge manner. "Lay her on the bed. Teó, bring another gown from our room, please." She stripped off the blood-wet gown to redress the woman's wounds.

Beau told the startled boarders that he'd shot coyotes from the back door. Jake, the caretaker, burst through the side door, armed, but just in time to hear Beau's explanation. Seeing that everything was under control, he returned to his house across the yard.

Beau cleaned himself and changed his shirt before returning to the sick room. She was awake, but unresponsive to their questions. Moira and Teó helped her sip most of a cup of warm, fever-reducing willow bark tea while wiping her skin with moist cloths. All the while, they talked to her, reassuring her that she was safe.

The woman only watched in a detached daze, but her eyes followed them. Half an hour later, Moira was satisfied that the woman was no warmer. Beau pulled aside the window curtains. A light snow fell, but no wind stirred it.

Beau resettled himself in the chair, and Teó and Moira returned to their room. Another hour of dozing and he woke. The woman opened her eyes when he checked her bandages, but there was no recognition in them. He lifted her shoulders and placed a glass of water to her lips. "Drink. It's water."

She automatically swallowed several times then closed her eyes. He eased her onto the pillows, then tossed chunks of coal into the stove to bank the fire. He poured another cup of coffee and returned to the chair. He splashed whisky into the cup and propped his boots on the edge of the small bedside table, checking the Webleys for easy grasp.

As he drank, his pragmatic and unemotional mind fully expected her not to make it through the night. But his concealed, passionate heart willed her to live. "Lady, if you're tough enough to survive whatever happened to you, you deserve to live." He took another drink, uncomfortable that he cared if she lived or died.

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However, in wishing this for her, old feelings buried long ago touched the fringes of his thoughts. Self-protective indifference surfaced instantly. He had cut himself off from emotional ties years ago, specifically those related to women. He knew he was not yet reconciled with his pain and loss and might never be.

Letting himself feel would compromise him, take away his edge, and that was something he couldn't afford. Ever. It would kill him. Watching the woman, he couldn't stop the memories of another woman in another time. A woman he missed every moment of his life.

The woman mumbled. She cried out in a hoarse, scratchy voice, arms reaching for something that wasn't there. "...he's here...he's here...." She tried to get off the bed.

"Damn it," he swore under his breath as he put the cup on the floor. "Hold still. You'll start bleeding again."

Moving to the edge of the bed, he propped pillows against the headboard, and then leaned against it. With gentle care, he pulled the woman to him, cradling her against his chest and along his body, wrapping strong arms around her to keep her from moving. Laying his cheek against her hair and lost in the memories of another woman's arms, he soon fell into the soundest, most restful slumber he'd had in nearly four years.

* * * * *

Well after daylight, Beau reluctantly disengaged himself from the woman and tucked the blankets around her. She was still feverish, but her breathing was relaxed, deep, and regular. He built up the fire then watched her sleep a little longer, remembering another time.

A log crackled, interrupting his thoughts and jerking him back to the room. He shook his head, attempting to rid himself of bittersweet memories. *Stop. That's enough. Leave it alone. Leave her buried in Abilene.*

After breakfast, Moira relieved Beau and stayed with the woman the rest of the day. He returned in late afternoon and settled down to stay with the woman during the night. She slept restfully all night while Beau

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dozed in the chair beside her. By daylight, the clouds were breaking up and the snow had stopped. The woman stirred and shifted position, fever down.

* * * * *

Her eyelids were heavy, but she forced them open. The sunlight playing tag with dancing shadows in the room intrigued her, but she couldn't make her eyes focus properly. She became aware of a voice calling to her from far away. The voice came closer, and she turned her head toward it, seeing an indistinct shape standing over her.

The figure bent down and as it neared, something in her mind snapped. Mustering frantic strength she didn't have, she rolled away, clawing at the side of the bed, desperate to get away. The disembodied voice remained calm while strong hands took hold of her. She struggled against the grasp, but had no strength left to fight.

A vapor of darkness overcame her. When she opened her eyes again, she was looking into the face of a man. She could feel his hand brushing stray hair from her face, and his voice was calm and low. She stared at him, absorbing the reassurance and control in his voice.

As her eyes focused, the man's face became clearer. His mustache moved in amusement and his bottomless, onyx black eyes glinted, and entranced her. He was no longer talking, but seemed to enjoy her intense study. There was a familiar man-scent of leather, horse, and wood smoke on his clothes mixed with the pleasant aroma of fresh coffee and baking bread drifting throughout the room.

"Can you talk?" Her gaze moved reluctantly from his eyes to his mouth. Dark stubble covered his strong square jaw, and brown, nearly black hair hung low and shaggy below his collar. "Can you talk?" he repeated. His voice was deep and commanding, and there was a hint of an accent she didn't recognize.

Barely nodding and waving her hand at her throat, she said, "Hurts to swallow. I'm thirsty."

He filled a glass with water and lifted her with strong arms, gently

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supporting her shoulders while she leaned forward to drink it all. She lay back weakly on the pillows and closed her eyes.

"Where are we?"

"A safe place. A house."

"You brought me here?"

"Yes."

The few minutes of nearly painless awareness went away. Through clenched teeth, she gasped, "Oh, god, it hurts everywhere." Her head pounded and her body ached and throbbed. Consciousness faded again, and his voice became muted and distant.

"Come back. Don't leave me," he ordered, and her eyes flickered open.

"What happened to me?" She asked with difficulty. Her mind worked furiously to verbalize the questions that flooded her head. *Who are you? Where am I? Why does it hurt so much? How long have I been here?* But she couldn't physically form the words.

He shrugged and said off-hand, "It looks like you need some new friends. Someone didn't like you."

"Please. What happened to me?" She asked, saying each word with effort.

His voice turned serious. "Someone wanted to kill you. Shot you four times and left you to die in a snowstorm, trapped under your dead horse. Do you remember anything? Do you know who shot you?"

She closed her eyes, thinking, trying to orient herself. She shook her head, her voice raspy. "I don't know. I can't remember anything right now. I hurt all over. My throat hurts, my head hurts. It hurts to breathe."

"My name is Beau Hyatt. Can you tell me your name?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

The door opened and a woman entered. Beau stood. "This is Moira," he said. "She'll tend to whatever you need." To Moira, he said, "I'll be back later. I have to check on something."

"Well dear. How are you? Let me check your injuries and bring some breakfast. And something to ease your pain. Would you like coffee or tea? I imagine you have questions, because I certainly have questions

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for you.”

* * * * *

It was nearly dark when the woman awoke at the sound of indistinct conversation near her room. A few minutes went by and Moira knocked on her door, entering with Beau behind her.

“We have something to show you. Here, wrap this shawl around your shoulders and step into these slippers. Beau will help you outside.”

The woman leaned heavily on Moira to stand, unable to put her full weight on her swollen knee. Her weak legs gave way, and Beau scooped her into his arms. He carried her through a hallway, outside across a terrace, and down a few steps to the dirt. She noticed a man carrying a lantern walking across the yard toward them. She realized it was Moira’s husband, Teó.

Beau lowered her to her feet, and Moira helped her sit on a step, keeping a steady arm around her. Beau untied the body hanging over the back of one of the horses and let it slide to the snowy ground with a dull, frozen thud. Teó held the lantern close to the dead man. The dead man’s face, flecked with cuts and scrapes, was stern and hard. He was a gaunt, older man with close-cropped, gray hair. Under the open Mackintosh, he wore a long, black, broadcloth frock coat and a white shirt with a high-banded white clergy collar.

“Do you recognize him?” Beau asked.

There was nothing. No recognition. She shook her head and looked at Beau. “No. I don’t know him. Should I?”

“This is the man who shot you. ”

She willed a memory, any memory, but none came. “How do you know? Did he tell you?”

“No. He’s been dead for a couple of days. Probably died a few hours after he shot you. The rifle’s a twenty-two caliber. The same as the slug we took out of your shoulder. It’s been fired six times. You and your horse took six shots.”

He knelt beside the body and pulled the frock open to reveal bullet

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holes in the torso. "He's been shot at close range. He didn't live long after he caught up with you in the snow. Looks like you got him in the liver."

She slowly pulled her gaze from the dead man and met Beau's impassive expression, understanding slowly penetrating her thoughts. "Are you saying that I shot him? That I killed him?"

He nodded, then stood up. "I think you two had quite a battle a few days ago and you ran for your life with him right behind you. When he ambushed you, it looks like you managed to unload your pistol before he shot you the last time."

"But I don't remember. Why would he want to kill me?" She spoke for her own sake, not expecting a response.

"I'll take him into town to Sheriff Lathrop and see if we can identify him. I'll send out some inquiries to see if anyone's seen you."

She looked away from the dead man, shivering, her bone-deep weakness making her sick to her stomach. Teó removed his coat and placed it around her in a fatherly way.

"What happened that was so terrible that I can't even remember it? What would make him willing to die to kill me?"

They offered no words of comfort or answers. They probably wondered the same themselves.