



The Mail Order Bride

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## **Mail Order Bride**

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## **Mail Order Bride**

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-075-9

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Leanne Salter

Excerpt from *Gunslingers & Ghostriders* by A.L. Debran

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## **Dedication**

For Renee Halverson.

Thank you for believing in me, even when I'd given up on myself.  
Thank you for always knowing what to say, even when it wasn't what I  
wanted to hear. Thank you for getting there before me and letting your  
wisdom light the way. You truly are my *anam kara*, the friend of my soul.

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### Chapter One

*Colorado Territory*  
*April 14, 1868*

The loud bang of the heavy brass knocker roused Luke Chandler from a deep sleep. Flinching, he rolled over in bed and buried his face in his pillow, unwilling to acknowledge the disturbance.

When the noise continued, he opened his eyes then slammed them shut again, blinded by a shaft of late afternoon sunlight.

Christ. What time was it?

"Just a minute," he yelled, pressing a hand to his temple. His head pounded relentlessly and his mouth tasted as though something had died in it.

Knowing it was best to start another binge before the effects of the current one wore off, he fumbled for the bottle of whiskey on his nightstand, but it was empty. With a sigh of disgust, Luke tossed the bottle to the floor. He didn't remember finishing it off.

The knocking continued, loud and insistent.

"Hold on, goddamn it. I'm coming." He extricated himself from the tangled sheets and scrambled to his feet, remembering a second too late, as he so often did, that he only had one foot.

He crashed to the floor, banging his head against the corner of the solid oak armoire. Cursing and humiliated, he offered up a fervent prayer that whoever had dared to intrude on his solitude would give up and

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leave him the hell alone.

"Hello?" A woman's voice drifted down the hallway to the library he'd converted into a bedroom. "Is everything all right?"

Everything was definitely *not* all right.

How could he have forgotten, even for a moment, that he slept down here because it was so difficult for him to climb the damned stairs? How could he have forgotten that last night's drunken binge had been an attempt to stave off the depression that came every year on the anniversary of the battle that had rendered him half a man?

He groaned and levered himself to a sitting position. Grabbing his specially fitted wooden boot, he fastened it to his ugly stump with angry, jerking motions. He wasn't about to let some meddling woman find him sprawled on the floor like an invalid.

Ignoring his aching head, he stood and limped down the hall. Flinging open the front door, he surprised the woman on his porch in mid-knock. "What the hell do you want?"

She took a few stumbling steps back, her big green eyes widening in alarm.

He grinned, knowing he'd shocked her. He reeked of whiskey, his clothes were rumpled and stained, and he hadn't shaved in a week.

But the damned church committee had probably sent her here, so it served her right. How many times did he have to tell these people he wasn't interested in coming to their services?

She cleared her throat. "Mr. Chandler?"

He gave an abrupt nod, feeling no urge to put her at ease. Obviously a lady, she was prettier than most of the old bats they'd sent up here to preach at him about changing his sinful ways.

A hell of a lot prettier.

This one was young, maybe in her early twenties. Her hair was trapped beneath her drooping bonnet, but the beguiling tangle of eyelashes, which framed her emerald eyes, were dark gold.

"Mr. Lucas Chandler?" Her voice was soft, with a subtle drawl that brought to mind every proud southern belle who'd cut him during the war.

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"Yeah. I'm Luke Chandler." He shoved an annoying lock of hair off his forehead. "Who are you?"

Her clear green gaze slipped from his face to his bare chest, which was visible between the gaping halves of his unbuttoned shirt. He hoped the sight wasn't too much for her. It would be damned inconvenient if she swooned on his front porch.

The thought made him chuckle. He'd worked hard to cultivate the image of crusty old hermit. Having a virgin faint on his porch could only enhance it.

She jerked to attention, raising her chin. "I'm Sarah Montgomery."

The name meant nothing to his alcohol-soaked brain. He raised one eyebrow in question. Lovely as she was, he wished she'd get to the point so he could send her on her way and go back to sleep.

"Sarah Montgomery," she repeated, her voice rising.

He gave her a blank stare.

Fumbling in her reticule, she pulled out a small stack of letters and handed him the one on top. "Your last letter said Tuesday the fourteenth, at one o'clock, didn't it? You hadn't arrived at the station by four, so I hired a man to drive me out here."

When he remained silent, she cleared her throat. "Should I have waited? Is there a problem?"

Luke glanced down at the letter she'd pressed into his hand. Stunned, he saw his name scrawled across the bottom. And the missive did indeed promise to pick her up at the train station in Milton at one o'clock, on the fourteenth of April.

"What the hell...?" He shook his head, dumbfounded. "I didn't send you this."

"Yes, you did." She shoved the whole stack at him. "We've been corresponding for months. We're to be married."

Despite the girl's obvious distress, an explosive laugh escaped Luke's lips. "Lady, you're out of your mind. I need a wife like I need a hole in my head."

He'd been engaged once, before the war, but Christine had deserted him after they'd amputated his foot. She hadn't wanted to marry

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a cripple.

He couldn't say he blamed her.

The girl flushed. "This isn't funny. I've come a very long way."

"I'm not trying to be funny." With grim determination, he examined the handwriting once again.

"Damn," he muttered, a niggling feeling of dread taking root in the pit of his stomach. He'd recognize that distinctive slant anywhere. His older brother, Matthew, was behind this. "Perhaps you'd better come in."

Sarah Montgomery considered Luke Chandler's invitation with grave apprehension. *Dear God*. He wasn't at all what she'd been expecting.

His tender, funny letters had brought to mind a refined, lonely man. She'd hoped for a kind and gentle man she could raise a family with. She'd thought he might need her.

This man, while obviously alone, didn't appear to need anyone. And there was nothing refined about him. He was much younger than she'd thought, and attractive—tall and broad shouldered, with dark brown hair, smoky gray eyes, and striking features.

On the other hand, his hair was long and tousled, the fine line of his jaw was obscured by a scraggly growth of beard, and he smelled like a brewery.

"Come in." He seemed irritated by her hesitation and opened the door a bit wider.

She swallowed. "May I have your word as a gentleman that you won't harm me?"

"My word as a *gentleman*?" He laughed, a dark rumble of sound that sent shivers up her spine. "Certainly."

She glanced over her shoulder at the road. The driver she'd hired was a mere speck in the distance.

She had two choices. She could brave the dark and try to walk back to town, or she could stay here, with this man who'd lured her over two thousand miles with a few poetic words and now claimed not to know why she'd come.

"Come in," he said again. "I won't bite."

Squaring her shoulders, Sarah took a deep breath and stepped past

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him. She hadn't come all this way to turn tail and run. She'd known the consequences of offering herself in marriage to a complete stranger, and she'd already decided they couldn't be any worse than the alternative.

She found herself in an entrance hall, at the foot of a sweeping staircase that led to an upper floor. An intricate stained glass window on the landing threw the oak floor and carved banisters into multicolored shadows. The house was breathtaking, or would have been, she amended, if not for the air of disuse and the heavy coat of dust covering every surface.

He gestured with exaggerated grace toward an arched doorway to her left. "Shall we take tea in the parlor?"

With an uncertain nod, she entered the room he'd indicated, only to find the furniture covered with dusty white sheets, as though it had been abandoned for years.

She glanced over her shoulder, wondering what kind of madman would choose to live this way. That was when she noticed his halting walk. Her gaze traveled down his muscular thighs to find that while one foot was bare, the other was encased in an unnatural looking black boot.

Stunned, she realized he'd lost a foot.

He stopped abruptly, a deep flush creeping across his sharp cheekbones. His expression was frozen and defensive, as though he expected her to say something hurtful. She wiped her face clean of emotion and sat on the edge a grungy covering that appeared to hide a sofa.

For a moment he remained behind her, his gaze boring into the back of her head. Just when she thought she'd go mad if he didn't say something, he shuffled forward and swept the sheet off a damask chair.

Settling himself across from her, he waved the stack of letters. "Do you mind if I read these?"

She shook her head. Why should she care? He'd written them. Hadn't he?

The only sound in the stifling silence that descended between them was the incessant tick of an ivory clock on the mantle. Sarah sat, her body stiff, every muscle aching from her long journey. Her hands trembled, and



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she locked them together in her lap so he wouldn't notice.

Dear Lord, what had she done? Back in Georgia this had seemed like such a good idea. Luke Chandler's ad for a mail order bride had caught her attention, then refused to let it go. She'd wanted so badly to leave all reminders of her old life behind her.

*Colorado.* The very word had called to her. What better place to raise a family and begin anew?

What would she do if he turned her away? She didn't have enough money to return to Georgia. Even if she did, there was nothing to go back to. Her husband had been killed at Gettysburg, and her home was long gone.

Her entire future lay in the hands of this drunken, brooding stranger. At last, he finished reading. He took an inordinate amount of time refolding the final letter, obviously stalling.

"This is...very embarrassing." He raked a hand through his dark hair, seeming at a loss. "I didn't write these."

She stared at him, keeping her face blank, hoping he couldn't sense her desperation.

"I wrote parts of them," he clarified, handing the letters back. "But not to you."

"I don't understand." She'd never even considered the possibility that he might pretend he hadn't sent for her.

"For some reason my brother has decided I need a wife." He looked away, frowning. "He's the one who corresponded with you, not me. Although, parts of these letters sound familiar. He must have copied some of the passages from letters I wrote to...someone else."

A hundred questions flitted through her mind, but she held her tongue and nodded. "I see."

"I'm sorry about all this." He tapped his fingertips on the arm of the chair. "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? Do you need a ride back to town and a train ticket back to Georgia? Perhaps I could offer you some monetary settlement for your trouble?"

Heat rose in her cheeks, and she blinked back tears of anger and shame. "That won't be necessary. I'm certain I can manage." She surged to

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her feet and headed for the door, desperate to escape.

But he was surprisingly agile despite his disability, and he grabbed her arm before she could go far. "Wait."

Sarah found herself trapped between his large body and the arched entrance to the parlor. Her breath came in harsh gasps, and she turned her face against the plaster, mortified by the tears streaking down her cheeks. She hadn't cried for a very long time, but she'd been on the verge of tears ever since he'd opened the door.

"Christ," he murmured, his voice filled with helplessness. "Don't cry."

He was huge, almost a foot taller than she. The heat of his body seemed to burn through her clothes, making her light-headed with fear.

"Please. Let me go."

"I can't," he muttered, his voice low and rough.

She whirled to face him, terror rising in her throat. She drew in a breath of whiskey-scented air, wondering just how drunk he was.

"I'm leaving," she asserted, hoping he only saw her anger, not her fear. "You can't make me stay."

His gray eyes narrowed. "Don't be a fool. It's nearly dark. You'll never find your way back to town."

She'd been poised to flee, certain she could outrun him, but his wry words made her hesitate. He didn't sound threatening. "What are you suggesting?"

"Stay the night. There's plenty of room. You can sleep in one of the guest bedrooms upstairs. Tomorrow morning I'll hitch up the wagon and drive you into town." He sighed and lifted his broad shoulders in a slight shrug. "It's the least I can do. You've come all this way."

Sarah searched his scruffy face for an ulterior motive, but she found nothing but resignation. She considered his offer for a long moment, drawn in by the prospect of a hot meal and a bed that didn't move. "I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

He brushed a lock of dark hair out of his eyes. "No. Damn my brother's meddling hide, I'm afraid you don't."

"Then yes, thank you. I'll stay."

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He cleared his throat. "I think it's for the best."

They stared at each other for several long moments. Sarah swayed, overcome by frustration and exhaustion. She had a roof over her head for the night at least, but she had no idea what tomorrow would bring.

The faintly annoyed expression on Luke's face gentled. "You look as though you're about to drop," he said, his voice gentle. "Why don't you go on upstairs and rest for a while? I'll see if I can rustle up something to eat."

She nodded, grateful for the reprieve. It would be wonderful to close her eyes for a moment and loosen her stays so she could take a deep, unfettered breath. She would regain her strength. She had to. All she needed was some time alone so she could pull herself together.

Luke glanced at the small, ragged suitcase she'd left by the front door. "Do you have any other bags?"

Heat rose in her cheeks. "No. It's just the one. I can manage."

"All right then. I'll see you in an hour or two." Without a backward glance, her mysterious host strode away, disappearing through a door down the hall.

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### Chapter Two

"Miss Montgomery?" Luke stood at the foot of the stairs, yelling up them like a fool. He dreaded the thought of mounting the steps to find his unwelcome houseguest. Stairs were difficult for him. In an emergency he could manage, but not with any degree of dignity.

"Miss Montgomery? Sarah?"

"Yes?" She stepped through a door on the left side of the landing, rubbing her eyes and looking adorably disheveled.

He'd awoken her, he realized. The husky, sleepy note in her voice sent his pulse racing. He cleared his throat, silently damning his brother once again for putting him in this situation. "Dinner is ready. Are you hungry?"

"Starved." She lifted one hand in a self-conscious motion to her unbound hair. It shone like burnished gold in the flickering glow of the candles he'd lit in the front hall, answering his earlier question about the color. "I'll be down in a few minutes. I need to freshen up."

"Oh. Of course. Come down whenever you're ready."

She nodded and slipped back into the bedroom, closing the door behind her with a decisive click.

Luke turned away, frowning at his reflection in the hall mirror. His freshly shaven appearance mocked him. He felt ridiculous.

It killed him to think his brother had been able to gauge his loneliness; his desperate need to have someone in his life. Was it so obvious? How pathetic he must seem for Matt to go to such lengths.

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But for God's sake, what had Matt expected him to do when he opened the door and found a bride on the front porch? Was he supposed to be grateful?

He sighed and headed toward the kitchen, feeling guilty for Matt's deception. At the very least, he owed Sarah a decent meal.

He just wished he knew what to say to her. It had been years since he'd made any attempt at polite conversation.

The kitchen was warm and brightly lit, redolent of garlic and onions. He set two places at the small, pine table and filled two crystal goblets with wine. He took a sip, wishing it were whiskey, and then lit the candle he'd used as a centerpiece.

He stood back, dismayed to see he'd unconsciously set the scene for a romantic dinner for two. Perhaps he should douse the candle, move the plates further apart. He didn't want her to think he had seduction in mind.

Luke closed his eyes and took a deep breath, struggling to find the strength to get through this evening. Christ, she was exquisite, and it had been so damned long...

Seduction didn't even begin to describe the fantasies he'd entertained since Sarah had gone upstairs. No, his thoughts had been more along the lines of that sweet mouth wrapped around his cock—

"Oh, Mr. Chandler, it smells wonderful."

Sarah's soft drawl broke into his thoughts and he froze, willing his overheated body back into submission. Glancing over his shoulder, he found her standing behind him in the doorway, a small, shy smile curving her luscious lips.

Her golden hair was pinned into a neat chignon, and she'd changed out of the rumpled, dove gray traveling suit she'd worn earlier. This gown looked as though it had been mended a dozen times, but the emerald color suited her, and the low neckline showed off the lush upper curves of her breasts. For a moment his gaze was riveted on that luminous, pale skin. His erection, which had begun to subside, swelled back to rigid attention.

"Call me Luke," he murmured, taking her hand and drawing her

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toward the table. "You look lovely."

"Thank you." She blushed and gave him a quick glance from beneath those thick lashes. "So do you."

It was the first time anyone had ever called him lovely. Ridiculous. But her words, though most likely no more than polite conversation, made him feel better about himself than he had in a long time.

He pulled out her chair, and she sat gracefully. He stood behind her, breathing in her scent, a light fragrance of roses and talcum powder. A few blonde strands had escaped her chignon to curl along back of her neck, and he fought the urge to press his lips to that vulnerable spot.

Shaking his head, he stepped away. His fake foot clumped in the silence, bringing him crashing back to reality. Was he so starved for the sight of a woman that even one sent here out of pity by his brother would do?

To distract himself, he opened the oven and took out a platter of eggs and potatoes mixed with onions and peppers. He put the food in the middle of the table and then took his place across from her. "I'm not much of a cook."

"It's fine," she assured him, taking a small helping.

He served himself, glad that he hadn't fumbled this on top of everything else. "Well, there's plenty, so don't be shy."

She took a bite and closed her eyes, savoring the taste with a look of sensuous pleasure on her sweet face that turned him inside out. "It's delicious."

He shrugged, embarrassed by her praise. "Well, my winning personality has driven away four housekeepers, so I decided I better learn to do things for myself. I'd rather be alone, anyway."

She glanced up at him, sympathy in her eyes. "I find that hard to believe. Everybody likes a little company sometimes."

"Not me." He downed his glass of wine and reached for the bottle. He hadn't asked for this. He didn't need her to feel sorry for him.

Sarah gazed down at her plate, biting her lower lip. "I shouldn't have stayed."

Luke cursed under his breath, instantly contrite. "This is a wild

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place, Miss Montgomery. I may be an ass, but even I wouldn't send a woman out into the woods alone at night. Forgive me. I'm rotten company. I've completely forgotten how to talk to people."

She smiled a bit. "It's all right. My showing up here hasn't been easy on you. You've been a saint, given the circumstances."

"Ah, the circumstances." He frowned, wondering how to breach the subject of her future without insulting her beyond excuse. He felt responsible for her and hoped that wasn't what Matt had counted on. "What made you decide to find a husband in such an unorthodox way?"

Sarah raised her head, her green gaze bright and defensive. "I lost my husband and my home to that cursed war. After my father died, I had nothing. The elderly aunt who took me in could barely afford to feed herself, and I couldn't live off her charity forever. I had to make a new life, and this was the only avenue available to me."

"I wasn't criticizing," Luke said, his tone gentle, surprised by her sudden show of spunk. He also filed away the information that she was not an innocent virgin, but a widow. "I was just wondering what you'd do now, since things haven't worked out the way you'd planned."

"I don't know." The fire in her eyes went out. "Perhaps I can find a teaching position in Milton."

Luke had donated some of the money to build the one-room schoolhouse in Milton, in an attempt to pacify the people who kept trying to get him to take an active part in the community. If he wanted to, he could probably get her the job.

For some reason he was hesitant to do so. He didn't want her so close.

Seeing her on a regular basis would remind him that his brother hadn't thought him capable of getting a woman on his own. He was attracted to her despite that fact; a combination certain to prove lethal to whatever pride he had left.

"Do you have any teaching experience?"

She flushed. "No. But I'm certain I could do it. I'm well educated."

"No doubt." He polished off his potatoes and took another helping. "And what will you do if you can't find a teaching position?"

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"That's really none of your business, Mr. Chandler. I'm sure I'll find something."

Luke had a vivid image of Sarah's lovely face, changed in a month's time into the hopeless mask of a whore. If she didn't find a husband or respectable work right away, that would be her only option.

Colorado was a harsh place. Out here, women were either wives or prostitutes.

*So marry her.*

The thought was sudden and intense, like the thunderstorms that swept across the high, windswept plains he now called home. For a few moments he let himself imagine it.

Sarah. In his life. In his bed. Banishing the loneliness.

"Damn," he muttered. It was a foolish, dangerous dream. He couldn't bear to see the tentative curiosity in her eyes turn to revulsion when she saw what a Confederate bullet had done to his leg.

Sarah frowned and reached across the table, lightly brushing his hand with her fingertips. "What's wrong?"

He forced a smile and extricated himself from the sweet warmth of her touch. "I know the men on the school board. I'll see what I can do."

It would help appease his guilt. Besides, he wouldn't see her that often. He almost never went into town.

"I'd appreciate that." Sarah felt her first shred of hope at Luke's casual promise. She didn't question his assertion that he had the influence to get her a teaching position. Perhaps she'd been too quick to judge him. Right now, he didn't even resemble the drunken lout who'd opened the door a few hours ago.

This new Luke, bathed and shaven, elegant in a perfectly tailored black suit, was dangerously attractive. She hadn't been able to tear her gaze away from him since she'd entered the kitchen.

She wondered anew why his brother had schemed in such an underhanded fashion to procure him a wife. Surely Luke could have captured some woman's heart if he'd wanted to.

He smiled at her, and a dimple flashed in his lean cheek, nearly taking her breath away. Goodness, he truly was handsome.



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"Don't worry, Sarah. I'm sure everything will work out fine."

There was such quiet strength in his words. She longed to lay all her troubles in his lap. That was all she'd ever wanted, the main reason she'd decided to marry again. She'd wanted someone to help ease her burden, just for a little while, until she found the strength to pick it back up again.

Luke was still a stranger, but his shoulders looked broad enough to withstand all sorts of troubles. Too bad he didn't want to marry her.

"You've been so kind," she murmured.

He looked uncomfortable with the praise and glanced away. "I'm not kind, Sarah. Don't delude yourself."

She wondered why he tried so hard to keep people at arm's length. Why did he live alone, without even a servant to do for him, when he could obviously afford one? Did he still love the girl he'd written those beautiful letters to?

"Self-delusion is all that's gotten me through the last few months," she admitted with a strained laugh. "Why should I stop now?"

"I know you need a husband, sweetheart, but use a little common sense next time." He wadded up his linen napkin and tossed it onto the table, signaling that dinner was finished. "I'd hate to see such a smart girl make a stupid mistake twice."

"You needn't see me at all, after tomorrow," she told him, stung by his harsh words.

Luke stood and limped around the table, pausing behind her chair. To her shock, she felt him trace the back of her neck with one warm fingertip.

"Oh, I'll be seeing you for a long time, Sarah," he murmured in a voice so low she wondered if he'd meant for her to hear it. "In my dreams, if nowhere else."

Before she could think of a suitable reply, he left the room. She sank back against the wooden slats of her chair, still tingling from his touch. Heat pooled deep in the pit of her stomach as she realized that if things had gone differently, she might have ended up in Luke's bed tonight.

When she left Georgia to marry a man she'd never met, she never

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expected to find one who was young, virile, and even charming at times. He'd said he didn't want a wife, but it was as plain as the nose on his face that he needed one.

Somehow she had to make him change his mind about marrying her.

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### **Chapter Three**

Luke paused in the kitchen doorway, the ire that had driven him out of bed temporarily cooled by the sight that greeted him. Sarah hummed beneath her breath as she bustled around the kitchen making breakfast. Her golden hair was caught in a neat braid, and her cheeks were flushed from the heat of the stove.

She looked well rested. He assumed she'd gotten a good night's sleep.

His hadn't been nearly as pleasant. He'd tossed and turned, his thoughts filled with lustful images of his beautiful houseguest. He'd finally fallen into a fitful sleep near dawn, only to awaken a mere hour later to the sound of clanging pots and pans and the bracing smell of hot coffee.

Grumpy and disgruntled, he watched her flip an egg onto a plate already heaping with ham and fried potatoes. The last thing he needed this early in the morning was a perfect picture of domestic harmony. It was a mockery of every reality he'd ever known in his sorry life.

"Making ourselves at home, are we?"

Sarah spun around, smiling with what appeared to be genuine pleasure. "Luke! You're awake."

He frowned. She couldn't possibly be that glad to see him. "It was impossible to sleep with all the racket you were making."

Her welcoming smile slipped a bit. "It was so sweet of you to cook me dinner last night. I just wanted to return the favor. I'm sorry. I didn't

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realize you'd planned to sleep in."

He stumped forward, exaggerating his limp in a blatant attempt to remind her he was a bitter old cripple, not a starry-eyed youth. He didn't stop until he was so close she had to back up a step to keep from touching him. "I never do anything without expecting something in return."

Her blush deepened to an almost violent hue. "I didn't think you'd mind if I used your kitchen. I didn't mean to upset you."

Luke gave a nasty laugh. "It upsets me that you thought I was naïve enough to be swayed by this."

He'd made a fool of himself last night, revealing his attraction. It hadn't taken her long to capitalize on his mistake.

"What are you talking about?" Her confusion melted into well-feigned indignation. "All I did was make you breakfast."

"What a proper little *wife* you are." He gestured at the plate of food. "If I wanted a cook, I'd hire one."

The fire went out of her, replaced by soul deep hopelessness. "Perhaps I did hope to change your mind." Biting her lip, she turned around, bracing her hands on the edge of the sink as though she needed the support to remain standing. "I want to stay here with you, Luke. Is that so wrong?"

Luke stared at her, feeling a bit hopeless himself. Keeping her around was sounding more attractive by the moment.

He moved toward her, settling his hands on her hips as he lowered his lips to the delicate shell of her ear. "I need a lover. Not a housekeeper."

Tempted beyond all common sense, he pressed his mouth against the sweet curve where her neck met her shoulder, teasing the delicate skin with his tongue and his teeth. God, she tasted so sweet. He'd give almost anything to taste her all over, her breasts, her belly, and her clit....

He pressed his erection against the soft cradle of her bottom. She gasped, but didn't try to pull away.

Encouraged, he grazed her nipples through the fabric of her gown, pleased to find them swollen into hard little nubs. Catching one between his thumb and forefinger, he gently squeezed.

Her breath escaped in a soft rush.

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"You like that, don't you?" Enflamed, he slid his hand inside the front of her bodice, cupping her naked breast in the palm of his hand, pressing hot, openmouthed kisses along the slim column of her throat. "I want you, Sarah. I want to be inside you."

She went wooden in his arms. "It's a wife's duty to submit to her husband."

A bitter laugh rumbled from him as he withdrew his hand. So that was her game. Marry her, and he could fuck her all he wanted.

Well, she might be willing to prostitute herself for a little security, but he still wasn't quite desperate enough to oblige her.

Did he want her? *Hell, yeah.* But any of the whores he visited on occasion in Denver would suit his needs just as well. Better, because he could remain half-dressed and leave as soon as he was done. No intimacy, no risk of rejection.

"Submit, Sarah? Was that how it was with your first husband? Did you lie there in the dark with your fists clenched at your sides, praying for it to be over?"

She flinched, but he didn't release her.

"Well, you can spare me your martyrdom. I'm not looking for a virgin sacrifice. I want someone wild and willing, someone who wants me just as passionately as I want her."

She turned in his arms, blinking up at him, the uncertainty clear in those big, green eyes. "I'd do my best to please you, Luke. But you'd have to show me."

She flushed and lowered her eyes. "The intimate relationship with my husband was very much as you described. We were only married for three weeks before he went away to war."

He stared at her, nonplussed. Once again, she'd managed to surprise him. Perhaps she was as innocent as she implied and merely needed a little guidance to become the fiery lover of his dreams.

Christ. The things he'd like to teach her....

He wanted to take her right now, hard and fast on the kitchen table, but he was all too aware of the consequences.

Christine's desertion had scarred him too deep.

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He couldn't take a wife without opening himself up to either pity or revulsion. Neither was acceptable.

"Oh, I could teach you things." He fumbled to think of something that might drive her away before he did something incredibly stupid, such as beg her to stay. Sure it would do the trick, he latched upon his favorite fantasy. "If I were to marry you, I'd require more of you than just an occasional fuck."

The vulgar word shocked Sarah, but she sensed that he'd meant it to. The fiery passion she'd somehow inspired in him a few moments ago was now banked. She'd done or said something very wrong, and now he was doing his best to push her away.

"What else would you require?" she asked.

He glanced down at her from beneath those long, dark lashes.

"Have you ever heard the term fellatio?"

She shook her head.

"It's a bit hard to explain. But perhaps I could show you." He gave her his most wicked smile. "Pretend your finger is my cock."

Holding her startled gaze, he took her hand and brought it to his lips, drawing her index finger deep within his mouth. Her eyelids fluttered closed as he demonstrated what he wanted with devastating thoroughness.

His mouth, his tongue, and his warm, wet heat—the feelings he invoked overwhelming. Her finger seemed directly connected to her womb, which throbbed with painful urgency.

Was this how it felt for a man when he was deep inside a woman? Shuddering at the very thought, she slowly pulled her finger away and opened her eyes.

He laughed unsteadily and let her go. "I didn't think you'd be willing to carry your charade quite that far."

It had been a test, she realized. He was still trying to shock her into leaving of her own volition. He'd never meant for her to do such a thing. She had to beat him at his own bluff.

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it."

He froze, and the sudden heat that flared in his eyes incinerated

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her. "Then do it now," he whispered. "If you do, I'll marry you before nightfall."

Holding her gaze, he backed away and sprawled in the nearest chair. Then he lifted his hands to the buttons of his shirt and, with slow deliberation, began to undress.

His powerful, lean chest and belly were sculpted with muscle. Her throat parched, she swallowed dryly as her gaze followed the silky pelt of dark hair that began between his nipples and narrowed to a thin line disappearing beneath the waistband of his denim trousers.

He rubbed his hand across the straining bulge between his legs. "Are you sure you want me to go on?"

"Yes." The sensual, husky sound of her own voice stunned her. "Go on."

Needing no further encouragement, he unfastened his trousers and spread the placket wide, bearing himself to her awed, interested gaze.

Luke's cock.

The nasty word seemed somehow fitting. It thrust huge and hard from a nest of black curls, jutting upward against his taut belly.

She'd never seen anything so fascinating in her life.

"Come on, Sarah," he whispered. "Why don't you get down on your knees and show me how much you want to stay?"

She gasped. If he'd called her a whore flat out, he couldn't have made her feel any dirtier. And she knew that had been his intent all along.

"You bastard." Marching forward, she cracked her hand against his smug cheek. "I wouldn't stay with you now if you begged me."

Luke rubbed his stinging face, surprised at the strength in her slender arm. "I'll beg when hell freezes over."

"Ooh..." Sarah made an inarticulate sound of fury and grabbed the plate of food off the counter. Before Luke could react, she dumped the entire thing on his belly. "There's your breakfast," she snapped, spinning on her heels. "I hope you enjoy it."

He gasped, swiping at the sizzling mess in an attempt to keep it from burning any tender exposed parts. "I'll have the team ready in ten minutes," he yelled. "Get your stuff and meet me outside."

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"Fine," she called over her shoulder. "I can't wait to be gone from here. You disgust me."

Luke sank back down in his chair, battling an intense wave of frustration and dismay. "That's what I was afraid of, sweetheart," he murmured. "That's exactly what I was afraid of."



**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Four**

The two-hour trip to town was made in utter silence. When they topped the ridge that overlooked Milton, Sarah nearly whooped with joy. Only a few more minutes and she'd be rid of the disturbing stranger sitting on the wagon seat beside her.

Embarrassment flooded her whenever she thought of her unwarranted optimism as she'd cooked Luke breakfast this morning. During their pleasant dinner the night before, she'd been lulled into thinking there might be something in this awkward situation worth salvaging.

Now she wondered why she'd even considered it. Her first impression of Luke Chandler had been correct. He was nothing but a drunken lout.

Her gaze shifted unbidden to his beautiful profile, to his thick, black lashes and perfectly formed lips. An incredibly handsome drunken lout, she amended.

The mere thought of him, naked and aroused in his kitchen, was enough to make her weak in the knees. But he was more trouble than she needed.

Luke glanced in her direction for the first time since they'd left his house. She was mortified that he'd caught her staring. His stormy gray gaze shifted away, toward the back end of his horse. "Do you still want me to talk to William Cole about that teaching position?"

"No," she stated, her voice as rigid as her posture. "I don't want

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any favors from you."

"Sarah..." A muscle twitched in his cheek, giving away his frustration. He brought the horses to a sudden halt and turned to look at her. "Ah, hell. I'm sorry."

She stared at him in stunned surprise, betting that apologies didn't come easy for a man like him.

He gave her hand a brief squeeze, leaving behind an impression of warmth and strength. "I feel responsible for you. I know I've behaved like an ass, but I want you to know you can come to me if you ever need help."

He felt responsible for her. Well, that wasn't the response she was looking for, but it was a start.

Sarah swallowed and fought to control her racing pulse. He leaned forward infinitesimally, and for one crazy, heated moment, she thought he might kiss her.

For one foolish heartbeat, she wanted him to.

Strange to think that he'd touched her so intimately, that she'd seen his...cock...for God's sake, yet they'd never shared a kiss.

"I know," he muttered, easing away with a deprecating shrug. "I'm not your average Lancelot."

She laughed, breaking the tension. "White knights are highly overrated."

One corner of Luke's mouth lifted in a rueful, lopsided grin. "I hope everything works out for you, Sarah. You deserve that husband you've come so far to find."

Her earlier fury had faded, and it suddenly seemed very important to establish some sort of connection. "I'll see you again, won't I?" She couldn't bear the thought of being totally alone in a strange town. "I'd like to be friends."

"Friends?" He laughed a bit at that. "I've never had a woman friend before."

"There's a first time for everything."

Luke nodded. "All right, Sarah. Friends." Then he headed the horses into town.

## Diana Bold

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah asked Luke to drop her off at the local bank. He'd informed her that Mr. William Cole, the most influential man on the school board, could usually be found there at this time of day. She'd refused Luke's offer to go along and smooth the way. He owed her nothing, after all. She'd already been enough of a bother. She had to do this on her own.

Despite his eleventh hour offer of friendship, Sarah thought he seemed glad to be rid of her. She watched him guide his team down the dusty street toward the general store and allowed herself a small sigh of regret.

There had been moments when he'd actually been quite likable.

Perhaps she'd see him again soon, but she doubted it. Luke Chandler seemed to like his solitude. It was too bad, because she'd never known anyone who needed someone more than he did. His loneliness clung to him like a shield.

She squared her shoulders and strode up the steps and into the interior of the bank. Pausing on the threshold, she blinked to accustom herself to the dim lighting after the brightness of the street.

A teller's cage sat directly in front of her and a slim, mustachioed man stood behind it. "May I help you, miss?"

"Yes." She forced a smile and crossed the lobby. "I'm looking for Mr. Cole."

The teller gave her oft-mended dress and wind ruffled hair a disdainful look. "Do you have an appointment?"

Sarah flushed, humiliated to the tips of her toes. Obviously he thought she wasn't good enough to take up Mr. Cole's time.

"My name is Sarah Montgomery. Please ask Mr. Cole if he'll see me."

The teller made a disapproving noise under his breath and disappeared behind an intimidating oak door. Several minutes passed before he returned and reluctantly admitted her into William Cole's office.

The room was meant to impress, and it did, from the massive

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mahogany desk to the rich, masculine decor. It even smelled of money.

Mr. Cole stood when she entered. He was a distinguished older man with graying hair and a trim figure. He smiled and held out his hand. "Miss Montgomery. What a pleasure."

"Mr. Cole." She shook his hand gratefully. His smile allayed some of her fears. Perhaps Luke had been right. Everything might work out for the best, after all. "It's so good of you to see me."

"Sit down. Sit down." He gestured to a stiff leather chair that faced the desk and waited for her to be seated before resuming his place behind it. "Did Chandler send you?"

She nodded, clenching her hands in her lap, wondering how he'd made the connection. She'd hoped to omit any mention of Luke. She didn't want to be further indebted to him.

Mr. Cole eyed her with speculation. "I can't tell you how surprised I was to hear Luke Chandler had sent away for a mail order bride. I saw him just three weeks ago, and he never even mentioned it."

Dear Lord. No wonder he was being so nice. Despite his eccentric ways, Luke Chandler was obviously quite wealthy. Mr. Chandler probably assumed she would soon share that wealth.

"We're not getting married," she interjected, intent on stopping this farce before it went any farther.

"Not getting married?" Mr. Cole frowned. "But my dear girl, you spent the night at his home, did you not?"

"Well, yes," she murmured, distressed. How could she have forgotten the way gossip spread in a small town? "It was late and he offered me the use of his guest room, but I can assure you nothing happened."

"If you wish to salvage your reputation, I'm afraid you must marry him." He sighed. "The man needs a wife and a few children. Perhaps then he'd take an interest in this town and come down from that mountain more than once a month. I know the sight of his missing foot must have been a shock to you, but he's financially secure, you needn't worry about that."

Sarah stared down at her tightly clenched hands. "It has nothing to

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do with his disability." She wasn't about to admit that it was Luke who didn't want this marriage.

Mr. Cole seemed surprised. "What other reason could there be?"

"It's a private matter. I'd prefer not to discuss this any further."

Sarah took a calming breath and then plunged ahead, determined to dispense with this talk of Luke. "Mr. Chandler suggested I speak to you about obtaining a teaching position."

"You want to teach?" He shook his head. "I don't think that's an option."

"I'm well educated," Sarah hastened to assure him. "I know Latin and French. I'm certain I could be quite an asset."

"Oh, I don't doubt that you're educated. There simply isn't a teaching position available at this time."

"Mr. Chandler led me to believe there was."

"Well..." Mr. Cole had the grace to look a little abashed. "Currently, my wife holds the position. I'd like to have her at home, but she enjoys working with the children. Until I can find a suitable replacement, I'm sure she's the best one for the job."

"A suitable replacement?" Sarah struggled to keep a tight leash on her anger, but she was losing the battle. "Are you saying I'm not a suitable replacement?"

Mr. Cole steepled his fingertips. "I couldn't, in good conscience, hire a fortune-hunting tart. What kind of example would we be setting for our youngsters if we let a young lady with questionable morals teach them?"

"Questionable morals?" He might as well have slapped her. "How can you say such a thing? You don't know anything about me."

"I know you tried to sell yourself in marriage to a man you've never met. I know you spent the night in his home unchaperoned. That's all I need to know." He stood up, indicating the meeting was over. "I've nothing further to say to you, Miss Montgomery. Please leave."

Words of defense tumbled to Sarah's lips, but she bit them back, knowing they were useless. Mr. Cole had already made up his mind. All she could do was pray the rest of the town wasn't as closed-minded.

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## **Chapter Five**

John Tucker, the town blacksmith, clapped Luke on the back as he left the general store. "Congratulations, Chandler. I just heard the good news."

Luke frowned. John was easily the fifth person who'd congratulated him on his impending nuptials since he'd arrived in town. "I'm not getting married."

"What a pity." John grinned and scratched his groin. "I hear she's quite a looker. Mind if I court her? She's gonna need a man to protect her."

John Tucker was well over six feet tall, burly as a bear, and had a mouth full of rotten, stinking teeth. His late wife had constantly borne marks of his abuse, and he had five or six filthy children at home. The thought of Sarah Montgomery at his mercy sent a stab of protective rage through Luke's gut.

"She's a lady, John. Leave her alone."

"A lady, huh?" John held up his hands in mock surrender. "Hell, Chandler. Either marry her yourself, or let the rest of us have a go at her. You can't have it both ways."

"You're right." Luke set two bottles of whiskey on top of the rest of his supplies, resisting the urge to throw them in the bastard's face. "I'm grouchier than a grizzly today. I don't know what's gotten into me. She's none of my concern. Court her if you like."

John laughed. "It don't take a genius to figure out what's wrong

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with you, son. You've lived up there alone on that mountain for years, and now you're sending away a perfectly good woman? Nope, it don't take no genius." He turned away, shaking his head, still laughing.

Luke glared at his retreating back, then walked next door to the telegraph office. He gave the young man behind the counter his most withering stare, silently daring him to say a single word about Sarah.

The boy swallowed, obviously wondering what he'd done to deserve such a look. "Can I help you, sir?"

Luke nodded. "I need to send a telegram to Denver."

"All right. I just need you to fill this out." The boy handed Luke a pencil and a piece of paper.

Luke stared at the blank page for a moment, trying to think of a way to convey his anger to Matt without being profane. Finally he scribbled a terse message asking for the pleasure of his brother's company, and then handed it back to the teller.

He paid for the telegram and left the office, intent upon getting out of town. He needed to leave before he made an even bigger fool of himself. The gossips already had enough ammunition. Stories would fly tonight about how one-legged Luke Chandler had sent away his mail order bride, and then become furious when another man had mentioned his desire to court her.

Unfortunately, the bank lay between the general store and the edge of town. Sarah stood on the steps, looking rather dazed. Luke suppressed a groan. He couldn't leave without making sure she was all right.

"Hello, Sarah." He pulled his wagon to a stop and stared down at her, wondering how one small woman had managed to disrupt his life. "How did it go?"

She blinked. For a moment there was a hint of quiet desperation in her eyes, and his heart plummeted. She hadn't gotten the job. Damn. What was he going to do with her now?

"Luke," she said with false brightness. "I'm sorry. I guess I was lost in thought."

He frowned. "Is everything all right? Did you get the job? Do you have a place to stay?"



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Sarah nodded. "I'll be fine."

She was lying. It was evident in the rigid set of her shoulders and the rapid blink of her eyes. She was struggling to hold back tears and barely succeeding.

"Sarah..." He hesitated. How could he help her if she refused to admit she needed help? It would be so much easier to take her at her word and walk away.

"Goodbye, Luke." She lifted her chin bravely, taking the matter out of his hands.

He stared at her for one long minute, telling himself again that she was none of his concern. "Goodbye, Sarah." Then he clicked his tongue and headed the team back up the mountain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah bit her tongue against the urge to call Luke back and throw herself on his mercy. Everything had gone wrong, and she couldn't imagine what had possessed her to tell him she was all right.

She opened her reticule with shaking fingers. A few coins rattled around in the bottom, all that stood between her and complete destitution.

Stupid, stubborn pride. After the cost of a night in a hotel and a meal or two, she'd have nothing. What in God's name would she do then?

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke stared at the blank canvas in front of him, his frustration building to a fever pitch. He took a deep swig of whiskey straight from the bottle and then made two angry black slashes across the mocking expanse of white.

It was no use. He'd been sitting here for hours in his makeshift studio, trying to tap into the creative energy that had once been so much a part of him. But it was gone, lost with the rest of his hopes and dreams.

There had been a time when painting had been as easy and natural as breathing. His father had sent him to a military boarding school to

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purge him of the affliction, but it hadn't worked.

No cruel, biting comment of his father's had ever managed to dissuade him from his goal of being an artist. The war had been yet another excuse to polish his craft. He'd sketched the horror and the occasional beauty, and dreamed of returning home to his fiancée, Christine.

When he'd returned, sick in body and spirit, minus a limb, he'd thought Christine's gentle touch would heal him. But she'd fainted upon seeing his damaged body and had sent his ring back by messenger the next day, along with a trite little note of apology.

That was when he'd lost his joy in creating. Hell, that was when he'd lost his joy in living.

He would have put his service revolver to his temple and pulled the trigger long ago, if his brother Matt hadn't stepped in, coaxing him to leave his ravaged home in Virginia and join him in the Colorado Territory.

Luke had hoped he'd be able to find some peace and inspiration in the natural beauty of the mountains, but it hadn't happened. In the two long years he'd lived here, he hadn't so much as sketched a leaf.

Who would have thought his inspiration would come in the form of a lovely, green-eyed girl? The urge to paint Sarah had come upon him with frightening intensity.

It was strange and disconcerting to feel so strongly about something after so many years of apathy, but he'd known enough to grab hold of the emotion with both hands. Painting Sarah might lead to other things, and he desperately needed to find a reason to drag himself out of bed every morning.

He cursed and struck out, sending the easel toppling to the floor. Who was he trying to fool? The artistic ability he'd once taken for granted had vanished.

Sinking into a nearby chair, Luke took another long swallow of whiskey and closed his eyes, searching for calm. It didn't work. All he saw when he closed his eyes was Sarah.

He imagined her naked beneath him, sobbing his name as he buried himself in her tight, wet heat.

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Christ. The mere thought aroused him to a fever pitch. His cock strained against the confining wool that encased it, begging for release.

Setting his whiskey on the floor with slow precision, he leaned back in his chair and unfastened his trousers. The relief was immediate, but fleeting.

He needed more. He needed Sarah.

Defeated, he wrapped his hand around his swollen shaft, gasping in sheer pleasure. It had been months since he'd allowed himself even this poor satisfaction. He hated the emptiness that invariably followed such self-gratification, but right now it seemed a small price to pay.

Closing his eyes again, he let the images of Sarah flow through his mind. So much better to pretend it was her hand on his cock, her hand pumping him to completion.

With a muffled groan, he gave in to the fantasy, spurting his hot seed across his belly, shuddering with the force of his orgasm. But as he'd feared, loneliness flooded him the moment his body cooled and his mind cleared.

The urge to go after Sarah and beg her to come home with him, to turn his fantasies into reality, was intense. Only pride kept him in his chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah stared at her reflection in horrified fascination. The flame red dress revealed the tops of her breasts almost to her nipples. She was afraid to move, lest they pop out of the plunging neckline, leaving her completely exposed.

Dear God. Every man who saw her dressed this way would think she was a prostitute. Jack Clark, the man who'd hired her today, had promised the job only entailed serving food and drinks to the customers in the saloon. She hoped he kept his word.

"Damn," she whispered, trying out one of Luke's swear words. She turned away from the smudged mirror and sank to the edge of the narrow bed. Her skirts settled around her in a swish of scarlet satin. For some

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reason, even that soft sound seemed vulgar. She'd dreamed of a new dress for years, but this wasn't what she'd had in mind.

Her gaze was drawn to the rusty lock on the scarred wooden door. It was all that stood between her and the attentions of the drunken men who roamed the upper floor of the building. The girls, who slept in the rooms on either side of the small chamber Mr. Clark had given her, did a lot more than serve drinks.

How long would Jack Clark give her to get used to the idea before he started expecting her to do the same? She buried her face in her hands, praying for the strength to get through this. She couldn't bear the thought of some stranger putting his hands on her body, gagging her with his stench as he thrust painfully between her thighs....

Sarah brushed away an angry tear and squared her shoulders. Someday she would find a man who was good and kind, who would love her no matter what. Her first marriage had been like that, and she was determined not to settle for anything less.

Despite the passion that had flared between them, Luke Chandler was not the husband she'd hoped for. But she refused to give up. Somewhere in this town there had to be a man who was worthy of her respect.

She'd already received two proposals of marriage. The first had come from a huge, ugly man who seemed to be looking for a mother to take care of his half-dozen children. The second came from a widower old enough to be her grandfather.

She'd refused both, but her attempts to find honest work had met with complete and utter failure. During the last three days, she'd had a dozen doors slammed in her face. Everyone in town thought she'd been intimate with Luke. Worse yet, the general consensus seemed to be that he'd found her lacking and that was why he'd sent her away.

This morning she'd run out of time. Her money was gone, and the stern woman who owned the boarding house wouldn't let her stay another night. She'd been left with two choices, either accept Jack Clark's shady offer of employment or run back to Luke Chandler and beg him for help.

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Luke was her first choice, of course. She'd hoped to see him again, prayed he'd drop by to see how she was faring. He had to have known she was lying to him that day in front of the bank.

But he hadn't come, and there was no reason to expect that he would. He'd told her he didn't want a wife. It was foolish to keep hoping he'd change his mind.

She was utterly alone in the world. No dashing prince was going to come save her. She had to make it on her own. There was no other choice.

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### Chapter Six

Luke was slumped on his front porch swing, drinking and staring morosely at the setting sun, when he saw a wagon crest the hill from town. He straightened, his eyes narrowing on the familiar face of the man behind the reins.

At last, his meddling brother had come to see what his interference had wrought.

Matt and his wife, Rebecca, were the only people in the world Luke gave a damn about. But he was hard pressed to find a smile for them today.

He'd been betrayed in the worst possible way. Matt had made him see his life for the pitiful shambles it was. He'd never forgive the bastard.

He stood as Matt bounded up the porch steps and pulled him into a crushing embrace. "Luke," he exclaimed. "God, it's good to see you. It's been too long."

Luke stiffened and disengaged himself. "Not nearly long enough."

Matt exchanged a glance with Rebecca. "I told you he'd be angry, sweetheart." To Luke, he said, "Come on, let's go inside. Then you can yell at us all you want."

"Us?" Luke glared at Rebecca. "You had a hand in this, Becky?"

She took his hand, leading him into the house. "I'm sorry, Luke. We only wanted to help. We never thought things would turn out this way."

Luke followed his sister-in-law into the parlor. "What did you

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think would happen?" He whirled to face his brother. "And you, Matt. How could you? You chose me a wife like you'd pick a new stud for the ranch. This is my life! Don't you think I should have some say in the matter?"

Matt flushed and pulled the sheet off the sofa where Sarah had sat the day she arrived. A cloud of dust flew up and he grimaced. "Christ, Luke. You've lived here for two years. Don't you think it's time you took the damned covers off the furniture?"

"You're changing the subject," Luke fired back. "Don't you think I could have found a wife if I'd wanted one?"

Matt shook his head. "You don't know *what* you want. This house is a perfect example. How can you live like this? What are you hiding from?"

"I'm not hiding." Luke ran his hand through his hair in agitation. He was too incensed to sit. "God. Why are you doing this to me?"

Rebecca's dark eyes filled with tears, but Matt's face was grim and relentless. "We're worried about you. I can't bear to watch you waste away in whiskey and self-doubt." He blew out an exasperated breath. "Maybe sending that girl up here wasn't the wisest thing I've ever done, but at least it made you angry. At least now you're feeling *something*."

"You don't have the faintest idea what I feel. You still have both of your legs, you son of a bitch." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Luke regretted them. He sounded pathetic.

Matt turned away, shaking his head in disgust. "I'm tired of feeling sorry for you, Luke. After all this time I hoped you'd finally pull yourself together."

Luke flinched as though he'd been struck with a fist instead of mere words. Matt had always been his champion, his hero.

"Christ," he whispered, staggering back a step. "Is that what you think of me?"

Rebecca shot her husband a withering look and rushed to Luke's side. "Oh, Luke. He didn't mean to hurt you. Neither of us did. We just want you to be as happy as we are. You're so alone up here, and you never even try to meet anybody. We hoped you'd like this girl, like her

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enough to forgive our meddling and start a family."

Luke sighed and stared down at the floor, unable to look at either of them. "I don't need a wife, Becky. Don't you think Christine put me through enough hell?"

"Of course. I'm sorry." Rebecca took his hand and squeezed it. "Matt and I feel terrible about what's happened to Miss Montgomery, but you mustn't worry. We'll take care of it."

Luke pinned his brother with a fierce stare. "What is she talking about? What happened to Sarah?"

Matt glanced at Rebecca, and a telling look passed between them. They were so connected to each other they could carry on an entire conversation without ever saying a word. God, he envied them.

Clearing his throat, Matt stepped forward. "We stopped in town before coming up here. Everyone was talking about Miss Montgomery."

Rebecca nodded. "That poor girl. After you sent her away, everyone assumed she'd been your lover and no one would give her a job."

Luke didn't know what shocked him more, the word 'lover' out of Rebecca's sweet lips, or the small town hypocrisy that had been unleashed on Sarah. "She told me she'd be all right, that she'd been offered a teaching position."

"Today she accepted a job from Jack Clark," Matt informed him.

"Jack Clark?" Luke sank into the nearest chair. He should have known this would happen. Hell, he *had* known it would happen. The three of them had seen to it that Sarah had no choice but to work in a saloon.

Rebecca took the chair across from him, her dark eyes expectant. "What should we do, Luke? You know her best. How can we make this up to her?"

"Sarah has no family, no home. She left everything she knew behind, because you two promised her a better life." He shook his head. "I don't know how you can make this right."

Sarah wouldn't like being the object of Matt's charity. Against his will, he recalled the fire in her eyes when he'd tried to pay her off that first day.



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Matt stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe we can find someone else to marry her. Is she pretty?"

"Pretty doesn't begin to describe her," Luke muttered.

"I knew it." Matt gave him a triumphant smile. "I knew you'd like her."

"Go to hell."

Matt laughed. "Go after her, Luke. You know you want to."

If he wasn't so angry, Luke might have found humor in his brother's attempt to manipulate him. As it was, he didn't see anything funny about Matt trying to enflame him into a jealous rage. Worst of all, Matt was right. He did want to go after her.

He threw up his hands in defeat. "All right. I'll go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah tried to navigate her way through the maze of tables without spilling the heavy tray of drinks in her hands. Her hair had long since come loose from its chignon and hung in limp tendrils down the back of her neck. She was hot and sweaty, the smoky air burned her lungs, and she was tired of dodging the men who grabbed at her skirts.

Three hours to go. Lord, she didn't know if she could make it. She'd already been on her feet for seven, running back and forth to the bar while trying to keep the orders straight in her head. How naïve she'd been this morning, thinking this job would be easy, that her main function would be to stand around and look pretty.

A trickle of sweat dripped down her forehead, stinging when it slid into her eye. She set the drinks down at the appropriate table and tried to smile when one of the three men seated there made a suggestive comment. She turned blindly, swiping her face with the back of her wrist.

"Sarah?"

She froze, and then slowly lowered her arm. Luke Chandler stood in front of her. He wore a long black cloak and a wide brimmed hat, but she would have known him anywhere.

She'd never been so glad to see anybody in her life.

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His gray eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Luke." Her chin rose in proportion to the censure in his voice.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No," he snapped, grabbing her arm and propelling her across the room. Again she was amazed by how fast he could move when he wanted to.

As soon as they were outside, he let her go. He took a step back and let his gaze travel over her body, lingering for a moment on the low neckline of her dress.

Then he looked into her eyes. "Is this what you want? Would you rather work in a place like this than come to me for help?"

Sarah took a deep, calming breath of the crisp night air, trying to think of a suitable reply. She wouldn't shame herself by admitting just how much she needed him.

"I don't want your help. I'm not your responsibility."

He made a noise of exasperation and glanced away, gazing through the open door at the merry chaos inside the saloon. "Well, goddamn it. I feel responsible for you."

"So you've said." She hugged her arms across her chest in an effort to ward off a chill. The breeze had cooled the perspiration on her skin, and she was freezing. "I should probably go back in."

"You're not going anywhere," he said, his expression grim. "I want you to tell me why you lied about getting that teaching position."

"Isn't it obvious?" Sarah asked. "Mr. Cole said such terrible things to me. He accused me of being your mistress and called me a fortune-hunting tart. I didn't know what to do."

The look in Luke's eyes gentled, and he reached forward to brush her cheek with his fingertips. "You don't have to resort to this kind of work. Not when you have a friend who's willing to help you. Come home with me. We'll figure something out."

Sarah swallowed, fighting back tears of relief. He'd come for her. He was offering her a way out of this mess. She'd be a fool not to take it.

Before she could reply, Jack Clark burst out the door. He was tall, lean and elegant, with golden hair and cold eyes. He stared at the two of

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them, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Get the hell out of here, Chandler. You had your chance. The lady belongs to me now."

Luke stepped forward, putting himself between Sarah and her irate boss. "Miss Montgomery has changed her mind, Jack. She doesn't want to work for you."

The gambler shifted his gaze to her. "Is that true? You're gonna run out on me now, after I took you in?"

"I'm sorry," Sarah whispered. "I can't do this. I just can't."

"You owe me for that dress, and for letting you stay in that room all day."

"She'll leave the dress behind, and she's already worked several hours. Long enough to pay whatever you think she owes you." Luke's eyes glittered with anger, and he took another aggressive step forward.

"Fine." Jack threw Sarah a seething glance. "Just remember. I took you in after he threw you out. I might not be so generous next time." He shook his head and backed away. "Good riddance. Clear out your things." He gave them another angry glare, then turned and stalked back inside, the double doors swinging shut behind him.

Luke squeezed her shoulder. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Sarah shook her head, knowing it would be hard for him to mount the rickety stairs. "I'll only be a minute."

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### Chapter Seven

Luke watched from just outside the swinging saloon doors as Sarah skirted the rickety wooden tables and the outstretched, booted feet of her former customers. His fists clenched with fury when he saw the lustful stares that followed her every step.

When she reached the stairs, he turned away, leaning against the side of the building to wait.

He'd prepared himself for a battle, but it had been surprisingly easy to get her to agree to come home with him. Her eyes had sparkled with happiness in that first moment before he'd started berating her.

Had she expected him to come for her all along? Was she part of Matt's manipulative schemes, or just a pawn like himself? He seemed to be the only one who didn't have the faintest idea what he was doing here.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the rough plank siding of the saloon. Lord, there was no hope for it. He was going to have to marry the girl.

Sarah returned in less than ten minutes, modestly clad in her worn gray dress. He took her battered bag and was shocked to discover how light it was.

The poor thing. So few belongings, so much pride. "Did you get everything?"

She nodded and gave him a faint smile. "Let's get out of here."

He took her arm and led her toward the side of the building, where his bay gelding, Shiloh, waited. "I only brought one mount. We'll have to

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ride double."

"That's fine."

Luke secured her bag to the back of the saddle and then hesitated with one hand on the pommel. Mounting with only one leg was an awkward maneuver at best. He was afraid he'd fall flat on his ass and regretted the haste that had made him decide against hitching up the team.

Sarah averted her eyes, fixing her gaze on the quiet street behind them. Luke blessed her for her astuteness, even though it shamed him.

Taking a deep breath, he used his upper body strength to balance precariously on his bad leg while he put his good one in the stirrup and pulled himself into the saddle. Occasionally he fell before he could gain his balance, but tonight he managed the trick with ease.

"Give me your hand," he instructed, kicking his foot free of the stirrup so she could swing up in front of him. As she settled sideways in his lap, her soft little bottom nestled against his heated crotch. Giving the gelding a quick squeeze with his thighs, he turned toward home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah slowly relaxed against Luke's broad chest, feeling safe for the first time since the beginning of the war. Closing her eyes, she pressed her cheek against him, allowing herself to revel in the guilty pleasure she found in being held by him.

His body was so pleasing; hard and substantial without a hint of softness.

Luke brushed her temple with his warm lips. "Are you all right? That bastard didn't touch you, did he?"

Sarah shook her head, shivering with revulsion. "No, but he would have. I could see it in his eyes."

His mouth curved into a smile against her hair. "Have you ever heard the saying, 'Out of the frying pan, into the fire'?"

The horse chose that moment to step in a hole, jarring her against Luke's lap in a manner that left no doubt what he was talking about. He

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was huge and hard against her hip, and she melted in response.

She turned her head so she could look up at him. Tentatively, she reached up and brushed a lock of silky dark hair from his brooding eyes. "Perhaps I want to be burned by your fire."

He shook his head. "You told me I disgusted you. That day in the kitchen."

"You tried to make the passion between us into something ugly." She met his gaze, throwing all caution to the wind. "If you'd just held your tongue for a few more moments, I would have done that thing you asked of me. Not because I wanted to stay with you, but for the pure pleasure of touching you."

Luke sucked in a startled breath. "Christ. I can't believe you mean that."

"Why don't you kiss me and find out?" It was a bold request, but she was determined to prove how much she wanted him. Him, not just any safe harbor.

Burying one hand in her hair, Luke pulled her toward him, fastening his mouth upon hers with passionate ferocity. Hot, wet, open-mouthed. It was all Sarah had dreamed it would be.

Luke tasted of mint and whiskey, of all the dark, dangerous things no good girl was ever supposed to think about.

He pulled away, his breath coming fast and hard, his broad chest heaving as though he'd run for miles. She suffered from the same affliction. She'd never been kissed like that in her entire life.

He stared at her, and then slowly ran his thumb over her kiss-swollen lips. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course." A shudder ran through her as she realized she'd better, because she'd just placed herself at his mercy.

He fingered the bodice of her dress, making her nipples swell to a painful peak. God, how she wanted those large, calloused hands on her naked breasts.

"I really hate this dress," he murmured, his voice rough with passion. "If you let me cut it off you, I'll buy you a dozen new ones."

"Cut it off?" She stared up at him, wide-eyed.

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He nodded and produced a large knife from somewhere underneath his voluminous coat. "Have you ever been pleased, Sarah? Have you ever shattered in a man's hands?"

She shook her head, heat burning her cheeks.

"Well, you're about to." Apparently the discussion was over, because he put the dull edge of the blade against her chest and proceeded to make short work of her gown and undergarments.

Sudden fear replaced her longing and she clasped her hands over her bare breasts, only to feel a chill on her belly and thighs.

"It will be all right." He pulled her arms free of her sleeves as though he were undressing a doll. Then, with a small, satisfied sound, he pulled the dress from beneath her hips and let it fall to the ground behind them.

When she was naked, he sat back and stared at her, his pale eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "God, you're so beautiful."

She shivered, both from the cold and from the husky emotion in his voice.

"Turn forward," he instructed. "I want you astride the horse in front of me."

She did as he'd asked, but the new position spread her legs wide, leaving her vulnerable. His heat pressed all along her back, but she was even colder now, her nipples aching.

He moved awkwardly behind her. A moment later, his heavy cloak settled around her, shielding her from the cold mountain air.

"Is that better?" His breath was hot and moist against her ear. "Are you warm enough?"

As he spoke, his hand closed over her bare breast, cupping her in his palm. He flicked her nipple with his thumb and she gasped, unable to answer his question.

Every time the horse took a step, the hard leather of the saddle rubbed between her thighs, making her yearn with the need to have Luke there instead. He held the reins with one hand, while the other made a leisurely exploration of her breasts, a gentle stroke of his fingertips one moment, a near painful squeeze of her nipple the next.

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She let her head fall back against his shoulder, stunned by the passion that surged through her. She felt like a stranger in her own body, as though this gasping, moaning wanton must be someone else.

Luke's mouth made a heated foray from her ear to the exposed column of her throat, sucking gently as his hand slid across her belly and then parted the crisp nest of curls at the junction of her thighs. She cried out as he penetrated her with one long finger.

"God," he whispered. "You're so wet, Sarah. So wet for me."

He plunged two fingers inside her, then three. She gasped at the exquisite fullness, unable to control the urge to thrust her hips in rhythm, riding his hand just as surely as she rode the horse.

"That's it," he murmured, his voice rough with passion. "Cry out if you want to. Let yourself go."

Something was building within her, a dark, frightening tide she was powerless to hold back. His breath came harsh and fast in her ear, making her shudder and moan as she drove herself harder against his hand.

Letting the coat fall away from her breasts, Luke flicked one tender nipple with the stiff leather reins, while his other thumb worked deft magic upon the tender, slick nub at the apex of her thighs.

The potent combination of so many different sensations crashed over her. "Oh God," she sobbed, convulsing around his hand. "Oh, Luke."

For long moments she was aware of nothing but her own pleasure, riding the last shattering contractions in mute wonder. After a time, she was aware of Luke's hand still toying with the downy tuft of hair between her thighs, of his harsh, labored breathing.

"Imagine how it will feel when I'm deep inside you," he whispered, brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes with a shaking hand. "Christ, I don't know if I can wait to get home."

She turned in his arms, pressing her bare breasts against the soft flannel of his shirt. "Is it much further?"

"No. We're almost there." His thighs flexed, urging the horse to a faster gait. "The barn is right behind those trees."

They arrived at the large building in moments, and he helped her



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dismount. He swung down awkwardly, and again she averted her eyes, wrapping his coat tighter around her nakedness, sensing he didn't want her to watch him. She wondered why he was so self-conscious. His strength amazed her. He managed so well with his missing limb.

Luke lit the lantern that hung on a post inside the barn door and then guided the horse into the shadowy interior. The barn was filled with fine looking horses. Both the animals and the building showed signs of tender care. She wondered at the contrast, having witnessed firsthand the sorry condition of his house.

He led the gelding to a stall toward the back, unsaddling him with a swift economy of motion. Then he beckoned her forward with a coaxing flick of his hand. "Come here."

She made her way toward him, her heart pounding in her chest. As she approached, he stripped off his shirt, displaying acres of golden skin and muscle.

His gaze met hers, heated and impatient. "I can't wait, Sarah. I want you now."

"I want you, too." She reached out and brushed her knuckles across his flat, male nipples. He was hot to the touch, as though lit by some internal furnace. His low, masculine sound of pleasure was the most erotic sound she'd ever heard.

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her deeply and peeled his heavy cloak from her body. Breaking away, he spread the fabric over a pile of loose hay.

"Get on your hands and knees for me, sweetheart." He ran his fingertips down her back, making her quiver with awareness as he guided her toward the makeshift bed.

She glanced over her shoulder, shocked by his request. He pressed her down into the straw and knelt behind her, kissing the back of her neck, her shoulders, and the curve of her spine.

He ran his hands over her buttocks, and then slipped his fingers inside her, groaning against her skin. "Spread your legs wider," he instructed, and she felt him unfastening his trousers, felt the hot, silky heat of his cock rubbing against her wet, swollen flesh.

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"Do you want me?" He pushed against her, tantalizing her with the hint of fullness, and then leaving her empty and wanting. "Tell me you want me."

"Yes," she moaned, bucking back against him, desperate for his possession. "Now, Luke. Please."

Laughing with dark pleasure, he sheathed himself in one fierce thrust, impaling her. She cried out, stunned by the size of him, bracing as he rammed into her again and again.

He bent over her, gently biting her shoulder like a stallion in heat. "Come with me," he demanded as the pleasure built within her, reaching an even higher plateau than before.

She sobbed his name, breaking into a million pieces as wave after wave of excruciating pleasure pulsed from her core to her every limb. He stiffened behind her, thrusting one last time. Then he collapsed against her, holding her as though he never meant to let her go.

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## Chapter Eight

Luke held Sarah in his arms upon their makeshift bed of hay, content and at peace for the first time since before the war. He knew reality would intrude soon enough, but for now, for this magical moment, his future looked bright.

He'd been careful to keep Sarah from seeing his missing limb. While he'd been buried deep inside her, he'd felt whole. She hadn't feigned the pleasure he'd given her, of that he was certain.

She stirred against him, her soft buttocks sliding enticingly against his still-hard cock. "I never knew lovemaking could be like this," she whispered, her voice hesitant. Turning in his arms to look up at him through the flickering light of the lantern, she said, "God, Luke. The things you make me feel...."

*Lovemaking.* Christ. Was that what this had been? He ducked his head and hugged her, unable to speak. Things were happening so fast. This morning she'd been a fantasy, and now he'd irrevocably bound himself to her.

It scared the hell out of him.

She sighed and returned his embrace, obviously unhappy with his lack of response. He felt terrible for not being able to offer her the reassurance she was seeking, but he still didn't know what he felt for her.

"Should we go inside?" she asked after an uncomfortable silence. "I have hay poking me in the most unmentionable places."

He gave a mental groan. "Yeah. I suppose we should, but there's

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something I should tell you. My brother and his wife stayed the night."

She stiffened, and then drew away. "The brother who wrote me the letters?" Sitting up, with her knees drawn to her chest, she looked so very young and vulnerable.

He nodded. "I know how angry you must be with him, but he's not a bad man. In fact, he told me where you were this evening."

Her laugh was filled with bitterness. "Well, I suppose I should be grateful he didn't leave me there to become a whore." Her gaze flew to his. The look of horror which flashed across her face left no doubt she was thinking she'd become one anyway.

Now that the passion between them was spent, she must doubt her choices as much as he did.

"It will be all right." He handed her the cloak, sensing she needed the scant protection it offered. "I'm sure they're sleeping."

She wrapped herself in the cloak and then got to her feet, looking lost and alone. "That's good. I don't think I could bear to face anyone tonight...not after everything that's happened."

He wanted to take her in his arms once again, but didn't trust himself to let her go. Instead he pulled on his clothes, glad he'd left his trousers down around his knees and hadn't bared his ravaged leg.

There seemed to be nothing else to say, so he took her hand and led her up to the house, entering through the back door. The house was dark and silent except for a lone candle someone had left burning at the foot of the stairs.

"Shall I sleep in the same room I stayed in before?" Sarah met his gaze in the candlelight, a wealth of meaning in her simple question.

The mere thought of holding her in his arms all night and waking to her beautiful smile did something strange to the pit of his stomach. But he knew Matt was liable to barge into his bedroom unannounced, and he still wasn't ready for the forced intimacy of sharing a bed.

"Yeah. I guess that would be best."

Pain flickered across her features before she managed to hide it. "Goodnight, then." She brushed past him, her shoulders stiff with hurt.

Unable to let her leave this way, he caught her hand and spun her

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around, pulling her into his arms and kissing her. She resisted for a moment, but then relented, melting into his embrace.

"Thank you," he whispered, as he let her go. "Goodnight."

She touched her lips with her fingertip then managed the ghost of a smile. "Goodnight, Luke."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Luke, wake up."

Luke moaned in protest and rolled onto his side, pulling the blankets over his head in an effort to escape the insistent voice.

"Get up. I need to talk to you." Someone jerked at the blankets, dislodging them despite Luke's sleepy attempts to keep them in place.

"Go away." Luke groped for the edge of the quilt; unsurprised to discover his tormentor was Matthew.

Matt plopped down on the edge of the bed. "Did you find her?"

Luke squinted and regarded his brother through bleary eyes. "Do you have any idea how late I got to bed last night? What time is it?"

"Half past eight," Matt informed him in a much too cheery voice. "So you did find her."

Luke yawned, trying to focus. "She's upstairs."

Matt smiled. "I knew everything would work out. She'll make you a good wife."

Luke sat up. Last night's events washed over him with cold clarity; the intense passion, the awkward aftermath. "Oh, God," he muttered. "What have I done?"

Matt shook his head, obviously dismayed. "You seemed to feel something for her last night."

"If you knew anything about how I feel, you wouldn't have sent her here." Luke glared at his brother for a long moment, and then relented. "She's going to stay on for awhile, but we haven't talked about marriage."

"You haven't talked about it?" Matt surged to his feet, staring down at Luke incredulously. "You can't keep her here as your mistress. If

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you don't want to marry her, let me take her to Denver. I'll find her a teaching position, if that's what she wants."

"She wants to stay here." Luke wasn't ready to commit to marriage, but he wasn't about to let Matt take her away. "Besides, she's furious with you. She doesn't want your help."

Matt looked dumbstruck. "What do you want me to do?"

"You don't have to do anything. Go back to Denver. Leave me alone. Believe it or not, I can manage quite well without you."

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Matt grinned. "I think you're right." He leaned forward, slapping Luke on the back. "Maybe you don't need me at all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah took a deep, steadying breath at the top of the stairs. She tried to smooth the ingrained wrinkles in the skirt of her emerald gown, but it was a futile attempt. Heat suffused her cheeks when she remembered how Luke had cut her faded gray dress from her body. She still couldn't believe she'd allowed him to bring her back here, or that she'd acted so wantonly in his arms.

How would she face him after everything that had passed between them during the night?

The house was quiet, and she cursed herself for sleeping so late. She couldn't imagine what Luke's brother and sister-in-law must think of her lazing the entire day away.

She descended the stairs and peered into the parlor. The room was empty, but someone had stripped the covers off the furniture and they lay in a dusty white heap in the corner. Sarah made a mental note to begin her cleaning here. It wouldn't take much, just a mop, a bucket of soapy water, and some elbow grease.

Across the hall from the parlor was a large room occupied by a piano. There were some art supplies spread out on a table near the window, and an easel was turned toward the wall.

A door led from the music room to the adjoining dining room. The

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massive oak dining table was covered with a thick layer of dust. Shaking her head in dismay, she pushed open the door to the kitchen. It was spotless, a complete contrast to the rest of the house.

Her lips curved into a smile as she surveyed the well-stocked, organized pantry. So much food! At one time, her family had been blessed with this kind of plenty, but the war had turned them into paupers. For years, she'd done nothing but worry about where her next meal was going to come from.

She took a deep breath and inhaled a hundred different scents. Cinnamon, pepper, yeast, and other things she couldn't even name. Food meant safety on a more primitive level than what she'd felt last night with Luke. Despite the distance that had fallen between them after their lovemaking, she wanted to stay here, wanted it with fierce intensity.

There was no sign of Luke's brother, and for that she was grateful. It would have been difficult to be nice to the man after what he'd done.

She drifted back into the hall and stared at the door to the only downstairs room she hadn't yet explored. Luke's bedroom.

She was wildly curious. The rest of his home hadn't given many clues to his character. Would this, his most private sanctuary, be any different?

The door was ajar, and she glanced over her shoulder to make sure she was alone before peering inside. Her breath caught when she discovered Luke still sound asleep in his big, comfortable-looking bed. Towering piles of books lined the walls.

He lay on his stomach, a shaft of afternoon sunlight gilding his dark hair to gold and highlighting the bare curves of his shoulders and upper back. Her gaze roamed down the expanse of sun-kissed flesh, until she reached the tangled sheet around his waist.

Dear God, he was more beautiful than any man had a right to be.

He'd kicked the sheet off his good leg and she stared hard at his well-muscled, hair-roughened calf and long, slim foot. His other leg remained covered, hidden even in sleep.

She backed away, wondering again how he'd been injured. Perhaps he'd slipped with an axe, or tangled with some wild mountain creature.

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Heart aching, she closed the door.

She went to the kitchen and gathered some cleaning supplies. Perhaps if she stayed busy enough, she wouldn't think of Luke and how much she wanted the safety and security a marriage to him could provide.

He'd said he didn't want a wife. But he'd rescued her from the saloon and made such sweet, fiery love to her. She'd been foolish to allow it, but she didn't truly believe he intended to make her into his whore.

But how could she make sure he wanted to marry her?

She kept remembering his fury when she'd cooked him breakfast that first morning. He'd accused her of trying to trick him into marriage.

Could it be that simple? Was he worried he might fall prey to the temptation of a well-cooked meal and a clean house?

If so, she intended to domesticate him to death.



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## **Chapter Nine**

Luke awoke disoriented and out of sorts. His room was dark, and he had no idea how long he'd been sleeping. With a lazy stretch, he contemplated going back to sleep. He closed his eyes, but a soft, repetitive thwack caught his attention, and he remembered he was no longer alone in the house.

With a smile, he let his head fall back against the headboard. He pictured Sarah bustling around in his kitchen, that charming, distracted look on her face. The thought filled him with a strange contentment, one he was careful not to analyze.

He sighed and scooted out of bed, struggling to attach the boot to his stump and get dressed in the dark. Following the noise, he found Sarah in the parlor, standing upon a chair, beating at the heavy, dark green drapes with furious determination.

"Pretending those curtains are my brother?"

Sarah spun around and his heart skipped a beat as she tilted precariously before regaining her balance. "Good morning," she said with a bright smile. "Did you sleep well?"

This was one of the reasons he liked her so much. She always seemed so glad to see him.

He grinned, giving a pointed glance out the window at the darkness. "It's hardly morning. You should have awakened me."

She shook her head and carefully stepped off the chair. "You were exhausted. Besides, I slept until late afternoon myself."

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"Oh, that's good." He skirted the sofa, noticing as he moved closer that her face was flushed and her skirt had black spots on the front, as though she'd been kneeling on the floor. Something smelled delicious. Fresh bread, he guessed, and his stomach growled, reminding him how long it had been since he'd eaten. Sarah had been very busy, indeed. "You didn't have to do all this."

"I won't accept your charity. If I'm going to stay here, I intend to earn my keep."

He had a sudden, unbidden vision of her body twined with his, her skin flushed from his lovemaking. His body sprang to immediate, rigid attention. God, he already wanted her again.

"You're my guest," he muttered. "Not my housekeeper."

She stared at him, her green eyes shadowed with uncertainty. "Perhaps it would be best if you told me exactly what to expect from this arrangement."

He thought of the dark times, when he'd drunk himself unconscious, only to wake up and start all over again. He'd raged against God for taking his leg, the woman he'd loved, and his belief in himself. His despair had seemed bottomless, and he still wasn't certain he'd conquered his demons.

Sarah had brought a little light to his life, but it wouldn't last. It never did.

"I don't know," he told her helplessly. "Perhaps we should just play it by ear for a while."

She frowned, and he knew his swift change of mood hadn't gone unnoticed.

"I made some soup for dinner," she murmured, changing the subject. "It's almost ready."

He nodded. "Thanks, I'm starving."

Sarah left the room, and he went to the window, staring up the hill at the barn. This was a mistake. He liked having Sarah here. He liked it too much. He knew he was hard to live with and wondered how long she would stay before he drove her away, too.

The house already felt alive in a way it hadn't since he'd moved in.

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It embarrassed him that he'd left it in such a state of disrepair. He wasn't sure why he had. Perhaps because he'd loved the house on sight and thought it deserved a family, not a crippled old ghost rattling around within its walls.

Pressing his forehead against the cool glass, he thought of the horses and blessed his two hired hands, Joe and Hank, for taking care of them when he was too incapacitated to do it himself.

He needed to pull himself together. He needed to make some changes. It was unbearable to know that people pitied him.

"Luke?"

At her call, he left the parlor and made his way into the kitchen.

She put a few slices of bread on a plate and set it on the table, gestured for him to sit down and then took her place across from him. She'd made a rich, creamy potato soup swimming with bits of bacon, and the bread was still warm from the oven.

She watched him anxiously, her shoulders relaxing when he made a soft sound of approval.

"This is good."

"I didn't know what to make," she told him, taking a bite herself. "I didn't know how to cook until the war. All our people ran off and someone had to learn how. But there was never much to eat, so I'm afraid my menu will be limited."

*Our people.* Her words disturbed him, reminding him that they were worlds apart in some ways. He also disliked the reminder of the hardships she'd faced, in part because of what he'd fought for.

Even during his worst days in the Union Army, he'd never gone hungry. But he'd seen the people of the South suffering. He'd seen the barren fields and looted houses.

He cleared his throat, trying in vain to push the images away. "Just make a list of everything you need that isn't already here. I'll send one of the men into town to pick it up."

"There are others on the ranch?"

"Yeah, I have a few men living in the bunkhouse down by the river. They help me take care of the horses."

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"Horses? Is that what you do here?" She sounded doubtful, and he realized he'd shown damned little evidence of his profession since she'd arrived.

He trusted the men. They could run the ranch without his help, but he loved the work. It had been his salvation at times.

"Did you think I spent all my time drunk in bed?"

Sarah glanced away, color rising in her cheeks. "No. Of course not."

He took a deep breath, struggling not to get angry. If he wanted her to believe he was more than a self-absorbed drunk, he'd have to show her with actions, not words. "I'm trying to breed some good mountain horses. The men I hired have forgotten more about horses than I'll ever know, but I'm learning."

"I'm sure you'll do very well," Sarah murmured. "You're an extraordinary man."

He frowned. It made him uncomfortable to think she was talking about his foot. He wished she'd pretend not to notice.

"It must have been nice to live out here during the war," she murmured after a lengthy silence. "Away from all the death and fighting. You didn't have to worry about the damned Yankees destroying everything your family worked so hard to build, killing everyone you ever loved."

Matt had told her he hadn't fought in the war, and he wanted to strangle the bastard all over again. How could he tell her he'd fought for the Union? He didn't want to see the light in her eyes turn to hatred. She was such a ferocious little Confederate; she'd surely see him as the enemy. She'd never understand his views. He'd gone against most of his family and friends, lost almost everything he loved because of his fierce beliefs.

"There were troops out here from both sides. There were even a few minor skirmishes. I don't think anyone in the entire country remained unscathed."

There. It wasn't exactly a lie, but he'd managed to evade the truth quite well.

Sarah toyed with her soup, a far away look in her eyes. "Union marauders came to our plantation just before the end of the war. They

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stole everything we had left and raped my sister, Rachel."

"God, sweetheart. I'm sorry." He reached across the table and took her hand, offering whatever comfort he could.

She blinked away the sheen of tears in her eyes. "You can't imagine the way people treated her after that. Our neighbors shunned her. They all seemed to think she'd done something to deserve it."

"That's ridiculous," Luke said. "Those people should be shot."

"Do you really think so?" Sarah looked at him with undisguised gratitude. "I thought so, too."

"What happened to your sister? Where is she now?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "In the family cemetery back in Georgia. She hanged herself rather than face any more humiliation."

Luke's heart went out to poor Rachel, but he also felt a spurt of anger at her for not being stronger, and most of all for leaving Sarah all alone. "I'm sorry," he whispered again, rubbing his thumb along her wrist. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Me too." She gave a shaky laugh and pulled her hand away. "Forgive me. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"There's nothing to forgive," Luke insisted. "You can tell me anything, Sarah. We're friends, right?"

"Of course," she murmured, biting her lip. "Of course we are."

A heavy silence descended between them for the rest of the meal. When he finished eating, he cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. "I'll be working outside tomorrow, so you needn't worry about breakfast or lunch. I'll eat with the men."

She glanced up from her bowl, and he saw she'd been toying with her food. She'd hardly eaten a thing. "What would you like for dinner?"

"Whatever you feel like making." He attempted a smile. "I'm not particular."

She stood and started cleaning off the table. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

Luke helped her clean up, even though he sensed she wasn't happy about it. She seemed so eager to please him, as if her place here depended

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on her cooking skills. He wished he'd handled things better last night. He should have bowed to the inevitable and asked her to marry him.

Instead, he'd made her feel like the whore he'd tried to rescue her from becoming. He wanted to spend the evening making love to her instead of dancing around each other in the kitchen, but he'd given up all right to do so.

He wasn't at all tired, having slept the day away, but his nerves couldn't stand much more of her company. "I'll see you in the morning. I'm going back to my room to read for awhile."

She finished putting away the last clean bowl and nodded, not looking at him. "Good night, Luke."

**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Ten**

Even though he'd been awake all night, Luke managed to make it out to the bunkhouse at the crack of dawn the next morning. Neither Hank nor Joe seemed surprised to see him.

They took his help, or lack of it, without comment. Hank poured him a cup of the thick, dark swill that passed for coffee and nodded to a place at the warped, rickety table. "You working with us today, boss?"

Luke sat down, and Joe handed him a plate of eggs and bacon. "Yeah," he muttered, taking a bite. He fought the need to explain why he hadn't worked all week. The crotchety old pair had no patience for weakness, and he hated the pitying looks on their faces whenever he admitted to going on a binge.

Neither of the old coots had ever married, so he doubted they'd be any more sympathetic if he told them about Sarah.

"Seen your brother come for a visit." Hank sat down beside him and started wolfing down his food.

"Yeah." Luke glanced up at Joe and caught a glimpse of a smile poking through the old man's thick gray beard. Shit. He should have known nothing he did ever stayed a secret from these two for long. "I guess you know about the girl?"

Hank grunted and shoveled in another mouthful of food while Joe's smile widened.

Luke shook his head. "That damned Matt sent away for her. A mail order bride. Can you believe it?"

## Mail Order Bride

Joe's smile faded. "You need a woman, boss."

Hank chortled his agreement. "Hell, there's been many a time I told ol' Joe what you needed was a good poke. Ain't right for a man your age to live up here with only a couple ol' geezers like us for company."

Luke stared at the two of them in stunned disbelief. "I'll tell the two of you what I told my brother." He shoved his plate away and stomped toward the door, determined not to stick around and listen to any more of this. "Stay out of my business."

"Sure thing, boss." Joe's laughter followed him out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah ate her solitary breakfast quickly, trying to keep her glance from straying too often to Luke's empty chair. She'd been alone for most of the last few years, so it was silly to feel this sense of loss over having to eat by herself.

Luke's company had spoiled her. He was the only man she'd ever met who treated her as though she had something worth saying. Even her father and brothers had never listened to her the way he did.

She finished her meal, rinsed off her plate, and then left the kitchen to concentrate on the rest of the house. She'd finished the parlor last night, after Luke retired for the night. Pausing in the doorway, she admired the results. The room fairly gleamed. The heavy drapes were open, and sunlight bathed the wooden floors. She took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet perfume of furniture polish instead of must and neglect.

She turned around, her gaze resting upon the music room across the hall. She would begin there, she decided, and work her way from the front of the house to the back.

Hurrying back to the kitchen, she returned moments later with her cleaning supplies. She scrubbed layers of dirt from the room for over half an hour. When she reached the corner where the scattered art supplies lay, she found something completely unexpected.

A leather case, filled with paints and various art supplies, was open on the table, and the piano stool had been placed in front of the lowered



## Diana Bold

easel. Everything was just the right height for Luke to reach without having to stand on his bad leg.

The canvas showed signs of having been the recipient of a temper tantrum. Slashes of color marred the surface in a surreal jumble of angry color. One end was bent and ragged, as though the whole thing had been thrown across the room in a fit of rage. Obviously, it was Luke's doing, and she wondered what had made him so upset.

What had he been attempting to paint? And what had made him so angry? It all hinted at the depth of character, the seething passion she'd experience in his arms. There was more to Luke than met the eye.

She didn't know whether to be intrigued or terrified.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke and his mount, a fiery sorrel he'd named Loco, came out of the trees in a burst of speed and topped the ridge overlooking his land. The stallion wasn't even breathing heavy, and Luke gave his powerful shoulder an affectionate pat. "You'll do," he murmured. "You'll do just fine."

Matt had brought him the fine stud horse the day before yesterday, but in all the commotion had neglected to mention it. Or perhaps he'd decided not to push his luck after the comment Luke had made about picking him a wife like he picked stud horses for the ranch. On this trip, Matt had decided to do both.

It wasn't that he didn't trust his brother's judgment. Matt knew his horseflesh. Women, too, he admitted, letting his gaze stray to his house. It just annoyed him that Matt didn't think he could make decisions like this for himself.

With a sigh, he turned the horse away from the bluff and headed back down the hill. If he wanted Matt to leave him alone, he was going to have to take charge. Somehow he was going to have to find the courage to ignore the whispers and stares that invariably followed him everywhere he went.

If he needed a new stud horse, or anything else, he would have to

## Mail Order Bride

venture out into the world. He couldn't hide up here on this damn mountain for the rest of his life.

As soon as he and his mount were down off the hill, he dug his heel into the stallion's side and coaxed him toward home. He'd given the fine animal a good workout this afternoon. Despite the exhaustion that was starting to creep up on him, he felt better, more in control, than he had in a long time.

Loco's powerful muscles bunched beneath him, and he closed his eyes, letting his body meld with the animal. Wind stung his face and whipped at his hair, and for now, for this moment at least, he was whole.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke noticed the changes Sarah had made to his home the moment he opened the front door. First of all, it smelled different. A fresh, clean scent had replaced the dust and mildew. A riot of fresh-cut tulips, in hues of red and yellow, filled a huge crystal vase on the elegant table in the entry, and the wood shone in the late afternoon light.

The parlor sparkled, as did the music room. He froze, seeing that his work area in the corner was spotlessly clean. Good Lord. He'd never intended for her to see his pathetic attempts to get something down on the canvas.

"Oh good, you're home." Sarah came rushing down the curving flight of stairs, her green eyes full of welcome. "Dinner's almost ready."

He returned his gaze to the destroyed canvas, and her steps slowed.

"I didn't realize you were an artist." Her voice had lost its exuberance and was now tempered with hesitation.

Luke gave her a suspicious glance. "And I didn't realize you'd be snooping through my private belongings."

She flinched at his sharp tone. "I'm sorry." The ferocity in her eyes belied her meek words. "But I had no reason to believe you didn't want me to see it. You left it in plain sight."

Of course, she was right, which fueled his anger and

## Diana Bold

embarrassment. He shook his head, trying to dispel a sudden sense of panic. "Don't be sorry. It's my fault. I overreacted." He tried to smile at her, but she was still looking at him as though he'd lost his mind.

Perhaps he had. "I'll get cleaned up," he murmured, hurrying past her to the relative safety of his messy room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah had dinner on the table by the time Luke joined her in the kitchen.

He pulled out her chair, his handsome face grim. "Forgive me for snapping at you." His breath was warm and tickled the back of her neck as he seated her. "I haven't tried to paint anything in years, and I was embarrassed when you saw my pathetic attempts."

"It's all right," she assured him, surprised he'd admit such a thing to her.

He took the place across from her, giving her a rueful smile. "Living with me won't be easy, Sarah. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind?"

She caught her breath and held his brilliant blue gaze for a long moment. "I won't change my mind. Are you sure you haven't changed yours?"

"I haven't." He sighed and filled his plate. "I like having you here. I just don't want you to feel trapped. Matt said he was more than willing to find you a job in Denver."

She picked at her food, trying to read between the lines. Was he telling the truth, or was he trying to get rid of her? It would probably be best to take Matt's offer, no matter how much she hated to do so. She had a feeling her relationship with Luke could only lead to heartache.

But if there was a chance, even a small one, that they could find happiness... Well, she was willing to take it.

"I like it here."

"Good." He grinned at her, and her worries vanished. "It's settled then. We won't speak of it again."

## Mail Order Bride

For the rest of the meal he kept her entertained with small talk about the ranch and the two men who worked for him. Sarah let herself imagine he was truly hers, that they'd spend the rest of their life together, talking over dinner.

"Am I boring you?" Luke was staring at her, and she wondered how long she'd been lost in thought.

Heat burned her cheeks. "I'm sorry. My mind wandered for a moment."

"That's all right. I just asked if you'd like me to draw us a hot bath after dinner. I usually bathe down in the creek, but it's a little nippy this evening."

"Yes. That sounds wonderful."

**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Eleven**

Luke dumped one last kettle of boiling water into the deep brass tub, then reached in and tested the temperature with his hand. Ahh, just right. He smiled, recalling the pleasure on Sarah's face when he'd mentioned a hot bath.

She'd looked so wilted this evening. She must have worked like a slave all day to accomplish everything she'd done. He'd wanted to do something nice for her, and a bath seemed the perfect solution.

"Is it ready?"

He turned and found Sarah standing behind him in the cramped little room he'd renovated into a bathroom when he'd bought the house. "Yeah, it is. Let me get out of your way."

What he'd like to do was stay right where he was and watch her.

Clearing his throat, he moved to step around her, but she laid her hand on his arm, stopping him. "Would you go first, Luke?"

He raised a brow. "Are you sure?" Perhaps she hadn't been as eager to take a bath as he'd thought.

She flushed, a delicate pink heat creeping up her cheekbones. "I like to take my time. Besides, I want to put rose perfume in the water."

"Of course I'll go first. I'd hate to smell like a rose." But he loved the scent on her. Just the thought of her, lovely and bare, the fragrance of roses filling the room, was enough to bring him to his knees.

She tossed him a few fluffy towels, fresh from the clothesline, and took the empty kettle. "I'll heat one more kettle, and I have to go upstairs

## Mail Order Bride

and gather my things, so don't hurry."

He nodded, and she closed the bathroom door with a click. He stripped, tossing aside his fake foot and climbing into the tub.

Women were such a mystery. A simple thing like a bath became some strange ritual, which involved things like rose perfume and scented soap.

He sighed as the heated water enveloped his aching body. He'd worked hard today, too, and it was a rare indulgence to simply relax in the tub.

After a few minutes he reached for the soap and began to scrub, knowing Sarah was probably getting impatient, despite her words to the contrary.

As he scrubbed his mangled left leg, he paused, really looking at it for the first time in years. From the knee down, what remained of his leg was scarred and wasted; very unattractive. They'd hacked the rest of it off at his ankle, like a piece of meat gone bad.

The Confederate bullet had gone through his boot, shattering his ankle. There had been dozens of times, looking at the mess left behind, when he'd wished the bullet had found its mark somewhere more fatal.

In shock, he realized those days were over.

He was no longer unhappy with what life had dealt him. In fact, he knew he'd been far luckier than most. If his younger brother, Mark, dead at the age of twenty, had been given the choice of merely losing a foot instead of his life, Luke was sure he would have taken it.

Sarah had something to do with his improved attitude, and he wondered what she'd think of his leg if she saw it. Would she be as horrified as Christine had been? Somehow, he doubted it, and the thought was liberating.

His life stretched before him, no longer an empty, barren desert, but a place of light and happiness. He wanted Sarah, wanted her as more than a friend, even more than a lover. With her, he could have the kind of marriage he never would have had with Christine.

Maybe it was time to take a chance.

## Diana Bold

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah was sitting at the kitchen table when Luke opened the bathroom door fifteen minutes later. His bare chest gleamed with droplets of water. There was a towel draped around his broad shoulders, and his trousers rode low on his lean hips.

She stared at him, her mouth gone dry with the sheer beauty of all that dark, supple skin. The patch of ebony hair between the flat coins of his nipples narrowed to paint an intriguing arrow down the washboard ridges of his stomach.

"Do you need help with that kettle?"

She started and pulled her gaze from his body to his face. "No," she told him, hoping she didn't sound as breathless as she felt. "I can get it."

"Good. I didn't want to put this damned thing back on." He held up his hand, and she saw that his fake foot dangled from his fingertips. "Would you do me a favor and grab that crutch over by the back door?"

"Yes, of course." She hurried over to the door and grabbed the carved oak crutch, her heart swelling with gratitude. He'd taken a big chance, letting her see him in such a vulnerable state, and the fact that he trusted her enough to do so filled her with hope.

He took the crutch from her outstretched hand, and his fingers brushed hers for just a second too long. "Thanks," he murmured, searching her face. "Would you like to meet me in the parlor when you're done? We could play a game of chess."

"I'd love that," she replied. "But you'll have to teach me how."

"I'll teach you." His gaze settled on her mouth, and she knew he wasn't talking about chess.

She turned away and gathered up her bundle of clothes and towels. "I won't be long."

He gave a soft laugh and made his way out of the kitchen with painful slowness. She watched him maneuver down the hall with the crutch and his good leg, and was touched again that he'd let her see him with his left pant leg empty.

She forced her gaze away, then lifted the heavy kettle of hot water

## Mail Order Bride

off the stove and carried it into the bathroom.

A moan of pure pleasure escaped her lips as she lowered herself into the steaming tub. How long had it been since she'd had the luxury of a hot bath? Not since the first days of the war. She'd made due with a basin of tepid water each morning, and before she went to bed at night, alternated with an occasional dip in the river.

Among her things were a sliver of finely milled soap and a small bottle of rose perfume. She reached for them almost reverently. They were the only luxuries left from her life in Georgia, and she'd used them sparingly, knowing that once they were gone, there would be no more to replace them.

She held the rose perfume above the water, deciding to use it all, and be truly decadent. She wanted to smell good for Luke, somehow seduce him into bridging the distance that had existed between them since that heated encounter in the barn.

The flowery scent filled the air and she closed her eyes, breathing it in. She was so relaxed it took her a few moments to realize the soft music she heard wasn't in her mind.

Lifting her head, she turned toward the sound. A sweet, soft tune drifted to her on the night air. Luke, she thought, a pleased smile curving her lips. He was playing the piano, a beautiful melody she remembered from her childhood.

Her eyelids felt heavy, and she yawned, wondering what other wonderful surprises Luke had in store for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke closed his eyes, letting the music flow through his soul and out his fingers. The soft, haunting lullaby consumed him, chasing away the lingering lust that pulsed through his veins.

It had been months since he'd played, and he wasn't certain why he did so now, other than the fact that he desperately needed something to occupy his hands. If he let himself think about Sarah, alone in that deep tub, wearing nothing but the scent of roses... Lord, it was driving him



## Diana Bold

insane.

He didn't know how long he played before it occurred to him that Sarah was taking an awful long time in the bathroom. Longer than even a leisurely soak in rosewater warranted. He glanced at the clock on the mantle. Almost an hour had passed since he'd left her in the kitchen.

His hands stumbled over the keys, and he ceased playing, listening for any sounds from the bathtub. The house was eerily quiet, and he was filled with sudden disappointment. She must have decided to go straight to bed.

With a sigh, he reached for his crutch and stood up. It had taken more courage than he'd thought he possessed to leave the boot off after his bath. But it would be impossible to live in such close proximity to Sarah without ever having her see him this way, and he'd wanted to know how she'd react.

His trust in her had been well founded. She'd been so busy looking at his bare chest she barely seemed to notice his missing foot. He'd wanted to kiss her for that more than he'd ever wanted anything in his whole life.

He shuffled into the kitchen and saw a sliver of light beneath the bathroom door. Was she still in there?

Pressing his ear against the wooden panel, he listened for the telltale sounds of splashing water or rustling clothes, but heard nothing. "Sarah?" He knocked quietly, but there was no answer.

Thinking she'd forgotten to blow out the lantern, he pushed the door open. He froze, his heart thundering in his chest, as he stared at the angel asleep in his tub.

Her golden hair spilled over the back of the headrest in a wet tangle, almost touching the floor. Her lovely face was sweetness incarnate, a soft smile curving her beautiful mouth. From his vantage point he could see the long length of one bare leg, and the gently rounded mounds of her breasts, wet and erect, peeking through the water.

Luke's mouth went dry and he tried to swallow, his hands clenching into fists at his sides as the need to reach out and touch her buffeted him. He wanted to cup her breasts and lick the beads of moisture from her nipples. He wanted her to wrap those long legs around his waist

## **Mail Order Bride**

while he thrust deep inside her.

Pulling the door closed and blocking out the erotic sight of her was the most difficult thing he'd ever done. He pressed his face against the wood, struggling to control his ragged breathing.

He couldn't let her know he'd walked in on her, or she'd never trust him again. But he couldn't let her sleep in the tub all night, either. He hobbled over to the kitchen table and sat down, staring at the small clock on the wall. He'd give her fifteen more minutes. If she didn't wake up on her own, he'd rap on the door and call her name until she did.

**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Twelve**

Sarah jerked awake, causing a wave of cold water to slosh over the rim of the tub and splatter on the floor. She glanced around, disorientated, until she heard Luke's voice.

"Sarah? Are you all right in there?"

She nodded then realized he couldn't see her. "Yes," she called, her voice raspy with sleep. "I'm fine. I just fell asleep. I'll be out in a moment."

"All right. I'll be waiting for you in the parlor."

She didn't move until she heard him move away from the door. Then she dunked her head in the lukewarm water, rinsing her hair, in case she'd forgotten to do so before she fell asleep.

She toweled off, and then donned her heavy flannel nightgown and robe. Twisting her wet hair in a towel, she left it piled atop her head. As much as she'd like to spend more time with Luke, she was too exhausted. She'd just pause outside the parlor and wish him goodnight.

But when she saw him, still gloriously bare-chested, setting up a chessboard before the fire, she couldn't resist his hopeful smile. She patted her towel-covered hair in chagrin. "I have to do something with my hair. I'll come back down after I'm done."

She was halfway to the stairs when Luke's voice stopped her. "Let me do it, Sarah. Let me brush your hair."

"All right," she murmured, turning back toward the parlor. She knelt on the plush carpeting in front of his chair and handed him her silver hairbrush.

## Mail Order Bride

"Turn around," he whispered, pulling the towel free and allowing her golden tresses to spill down her back in a wet tumble. The faint scent of roses grew stronger.

He inhaled deeply, his pulse quickening despite his best intentions to control it. "You have such beautiful hair. I've been dying to touch it."

"Really?" She cast him a startled look over her shoulder and then settled Indian style on the floor, presenting him with the back of her head.

He gathered her hair in his hands, spreading it in a golden fan over his knees. The silky strands clung to his fingertips and trousers, spinning a web like the one she'd used to capture his heart. He imagined her poised above him in the throes of passion, her hair offering tantalizing glimpses of her beautiful breasts and tickling his bare chest.

Clearing his throat, he picked up the brush and began to work out the tangles. After a while, she began to relax. Ten minutes later, her arms were resting against his calves and soft sighs of pleasure were escaping her lips.

"I had a maid who used to do this for me when I was a child. I'd forgotten how soothing it was." Sarah's voice was husky and low, the way she'd sounded when they'd made love.

He set the brush aside and separated three thick blonde skeins at her crown. "Would you like me to plait it?" He was reluctant to let her go. He'd never imagined he could get so much enjoyment out of touching a woman's hair.

"You know how?" Sarah glanced over her shoulder, her green eyes lit with an impish glow. "You're a man of many unexpected talents."

He grinned. "My mother used to read to me while I brushed her hair. She said it was the perfect way to wind down after a long day."

"She was absolutely right," Sarah declared. "I had a bit of a headache before, but now it's gone."

"Good," he murmured. Her silky hair slid repeatedly through his fingertips, refusing to be tamed. "I'm out of practice. It's been a long time." His mother died when he was fourteen, and he'd never gotten over it. She'd been the one to encourage his artistic pursuits. Once she was gone, his father had done everything he could to beat such sissified ideas

## Diana Bold

out of his head.

She lifted her hands, brushing his away and braiding the entire length of her hair in mere moments. She handed him a ribbon to bind the end, then turned around, bracing her palms on his thighs as she stared up at him. "Thank you. This has been a wonderful evening."

His gaze drifted to the sweet curve of her mouth, then back up to her eyes. She went so still he wondered if she'd stopped breathing.

"I want to kiss you." He covered her hands with his own, gently imprisoning her in the lee of his thighs. "Will you let me?"

She let her gaze slip to his chest, heat rising in her cheeks. Then she nodded and a tremor swept her slim body as he leaned forward, brushing her mouth with his.

It was a chaste, tentative taste, and it wasn't nearly enough. He slid his hands up her arms and then cupped her face, tracing her fine-boned features with near reverence. Her skin was satiny soft, and the scent of roses made him dizzy with longing.

He lowered his lips to hers again. This time the kiss was longer, deeper. She opened for him with a little gentle urging, and then he was drowning in the hot, heady taste of her.

Sarah put her hands on his shoulders, as though to steady herself, but a moment later she began molding the contours of his upper chest. He shuddered, releasing her mouth to explore the tender shell of her ear with his tongue and his teeth.

"God, I've missed this." She trailed her fingertips across his bare stomach, and then lower, fingering the loose waistband of his trousers. "You've been so distant the last few days. I was afraid you didn't want me any more."

He pulled away a bit to gaze down into her troubled eyes. "I want you, sweetheart. Never doubt it."

His answer chased away the shadows. She smiled and unfastened his trousers, freeing his cock to the cooler air of the room.

"Ah, Luke. How could I doubt *this*?"

He caught his breath, stunned that she'd taken such brazen initiative. He gripped the arms of his chair, afraid to move. Afraid to

## Mail Order Bride

speak for fear he'd scare her away.

Sarah stared down at Luke's thick cock, amazed by her own daring. Ever since that first morning in the kitchen, she'd longed for this. Truth be told, she wanted far more. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to do that thing he'd shown her with her fingertip.

Giving into temptation, she ran her palm up the length of him, from base to bulbous tip. Silky soft, yet incredibly hard. He was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

He released his breath in a shuddering sigh, letting his head fall back against the chair. "God, I've dreamed of this."

She wrapped her hand around his shaft, but couldn't close her fingers completely around his girth. His steely heat singed her palm as she tentatively stroked him.

He bit his lip, the muscles in his throat standing out in sharp relief.

Encouraged by his powerful response to her touch, she leaned forward, breathing in his clean, masculine scent. She pressed her lips to the bulbous head of his cock, then ran her tongue along the crown.

Luke moaned and thrust his hands into her hair, his big body trembling like a branch in the wind. "You don't have to do this, Sarah. I never meant to make you think you did."

"*I want to do it,*" she assured him. Then she drew him deep into her mouth, trying to mimic what he'd done to her finger.

"Ah, Christ. That feels so good." Luke gripped her hair tighter, his hips seeming to move of their own volition, thrusting his thick length further down her throat.

She gasped and opened wider, trying to take more of him. She loved having him at her mercy, knowing he was in her thrall. The last time they'd made love, he'd remained a bit detached, but tonight he was utterly in the moment.

"That's it, sweetheart," he rasped, thrusting with deep, uncontrolled strokes. "That's so fucking perfect."

He stiffened and wrenched away, cupping his cock in his hands as he spurted his seed across his flat stomach, tremors of completion wracking his big body.

## Diana Bold

Sarah brought her hand to her mouth, swiping the back of her wrist across her lips as she watched her lover come undone. God, he was so beautiful. She could easily spend the rest of her life looking at him.

After a long moment, he subsided against the chair, looking totally spent. He brought his forearm up to cover his eyes, his breathing harsh and labored. Sarah caressed his thighs, overcome with the depth of her emotions.

Impossible to believe she hadn't even known this man a week ago. How had he come to mean so much to her so quickly? All she wanted to do was hold him, please him, love away his obvious pain.

When he lowered his arm, she knew she wasn't the only one who'd been affected by what had transpired between them. "You didn't have to do that," he reiterated. "But I'm glad you did."

"I liked it," she admitted. "I wanted to make you feel good, Luke."

"Well, you succeeded. Nothing in my life has ever felt that good. *Nothing.*"

Holding her gaze, he grabbed the discarded towel and wiped his seed from his stomach. Then he slid to his knees on the floor in front of her. Burying his hands in her hair, he kissed her deeply, releasing the braid as his tongue danced with hers.

Fanning her damp hair across her shoulders, he fumbled with the tiny buttons of her nightgown. Impatient, she brushed his hands away and shed the heavy fabric.

He broke the kiss and guided her down to the soft carpet, bracing himself on one elbow as his other hand made a slow sweep down her body. He skimmed her breasts, belly and thighs, gazing at her with appreciation.

She closed her eyes when he parted her thighs, content to let herself feel. She was already soaking wet for him; his pleasure had aroused her to an unbearable level. He parted her damp curls and slid two fingers inside her, flicking her most sensitive flesh with his thumb.

She moaned and thrust against his hand, desperate for a shattering climax like she'd experienced before. He gave a soft laugh and leaned forward, circling her nipple with his tongue while his fingers continued to

## Mail Order Bride

work their magic.

God, the feel of his mouth at her breast was incredible. She buried her hands in his silky hair, wantonly offering herself. He turned his attention to her other breast, teasing it to rigid attention with his lips before lashing it with his tongue.

When he moved lower, pressing light kisses across the sensitive plain of her belly, she wanted to protest the loss. But then she realized where he was heading.

Moaning in mingled shock and dismay, she pushed up on her elbows. Chest heaving, she watched as he knelt between her thighs, spreading her wide.

"So pretty," he whispered. "I want to drown in you, Sarah."

Then he pressed his mouth to her core, the sensation ripping through her very soul. She cried out, arching against him as he plunged his fingers deep inside her pussy, thrusting in rhythm to the hot lash of his tongue.

It was too much. The tension built within her, cresting in waves until it burst, shattering her entire world. Ecstasy streaked through her, leaving her weak and trembling in its wake.

Before she had time to regain her senses, Luke moved back over her, rubbing the thick head of his cock against her wet heat. He buried himself to the hilt in one swift, deep plunge.

She wrapped her legs around his lean hips as he began to pump deep within her, his lack of control sexier than anything she'd ever known. Within moments, she was coming again, crying out in sheer bliss as he moved faster and harder, the slap of skin echoing her sobbing disintegration.

And then he shuddered, every muscle in his body standing out in sharp relief as he spilled his seed and joined her in heaven.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke propped himself on one elbow, watching Sarah in the candlelight. After their earth-shattering lovemaking, she'd fallen asleep in



## **Diana Bold**

his arms. He'd held her for a long time, still drifting in the pleasant aftermath.

But after a while, he'd grown restless, and a burning need to capture the moment had sparked within him. This time, he knew he could draw her. He slipped away and grabbed a sketchpad and some charcoal out of the desk on the other side of the room.

Within moments, he'd sketched her likeness, from the unselfish purity of her sleeping face to the perfection of her lush, welcoming body. She lay on her side, one hand folded beneath her cheek, the other reaching for him even in sleep.

He couldn't look at her sweet mouth without getting hard. God. He still couldn't believe what she'd done for him. He'd never had such a giving, generous lover. Never known a woman so unafraid to show her passion.

He didn't ever want to let her go. Sighing, he decided he needed to get away from her. He needed to get some perspective.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to her temple then left his small sketch where she'd be sure to find it. He only wished he could give her more.

## **Mail Order Bride**

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Sarah spent the next day immersed in cleaning the years of neglect from Luke's home. She found it strangely satisfying. With every passing day, the big house felt more like a home.

It was a far cry from the Greek Revival mansion where she'd grown up, but within its walls she could envision a far cozier type of life. Luke's house fairly cried out to be occupied by a large, happy family.

Unfortunately, she and Luke hadn't made any more steps in that direction. After the blissful hours they'd spent in the parlor last night, she'd expected him to offer to share his bed. Instead, she'd awoken cold and alone. He'd left a small sketch of her, and she'd found it beautiful, yet disturbing. He'd been more than flattering, making her look like a sleeping angel, but it made her uncomfortable to think that he'd stared at her nudity long enough to draw it. She'd hidden it in her room, wondering what she was supposed to do with a naked picture of herself.

He'd been up at dawn, and had spent the entire day out on the ranch. She'd been waiting for him to return all afternoon, but didn't know what she would say to him when he did.

She didn't know how she could go on like this, giving herself to him so completely without any real indication that he intended to make their relationship permanent. He probably thought she was a whore and who could blame him, given her recent behavior.

When she was with him, her base instincts took over. She couldn't look at him without wanting to touch him, without wanting to feel him

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inside her. It had never been like this with her husband.

With a sigh, she finished straightening Luke's room and then closed his door behind her. She was on her way to check on dinner when she heard a commotion at the front door. A woman's laughter echoed down the hall, followed by Luke's deep murmur.

"Sarah," Luke called, freezing her in her tracks. "Come here. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

She walked down the hall, dreading what she'd find. Luke stood in the doorway, and he smiled with apparent pleasure as Sarah approached. For a moment, she was too lost in the depths of his smoky gray eyes to pay much attention to the woman beside him. Knowing she was being rude, she wrenched her gaze away and glanced at his guest.

The woman was gorgeous and dressed in the very latest fashion. The smile she bestowed on Luke was full of affection.

Sarah was achingly aware of her own oft-mended gown, unkempt hair, and the smudges of dirt on her arms and face. With reluctance, she joined the pair, wondering why she'd ever thought she could make Luke care for her.

"Sarah, I'd like you to meet my sister-in-law, Rebecca. Becky, this is Sarah."

Sister-in-law? A rush of relief swept through her, startling in its intensity. Rebecca was married to Luke's brother. Therefore, she was no threat. But then she realized if Rebecca was here, Luke's brother couldn't be far behind.

Rebecca gave her a nervous grin. "It's nice to meet you, Sarah."

Sarah's fleeting good humor disappeared. She glared at Luke and saw that his smile had slipped as well.

"My brother, Matt, is still outside talking to Hank. He'll be in shortly." Luke shrugged, an apology in his eyes. "I invited them to stay for dinner. That is, if you've made enough."

Sarah nodded. "There's a roast in the oven. It should be done soon."

"Are you sure it isn't an inconvenience?" Rebecca asked. "I told Matt we should send word ahead."

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"It's no bother," Sarah told the other woman, but she knew her voice was unwelcoming.

Rebecca paled and cast a desperate look at Luke.

He shrugged and turned toward the door. "I'm going to visit with Matt. Why don't you see if you can help Sarah in the kitchen, Becky?"

Then he left and the two women were alone. Sarah couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to thrust this woman's help upon her. He had to know how much she resented his brother's interference in her life.

She hurried down the hall, leaving Rebecca to follow, or not, as she chose. Unfortunately, she heard Rebecca's high-heeled shoes clattering on the wooden floor behind her as she reached the kitchen.

"What can I do to help?" Rebecca smiled, obviously determined to make friends.

Sarah spared her a scathing glance. "You're not dressed for kitchen work," she muttered. "If you'll wait in the parlor, I'll bring you something cool to drink."

Rebecca flushed then reached out to touch Sarah's arm. "I know you're angry with us. You have every right to be. But please, give me a chance to explain."

Sarah stared at Rebecca for a long moment and then sighed. "I think an explanation is the least of what you owe me."

Rebecca nodded and pulled out one of the kitchen chairs, seating herself at the table. "Sit down and talk with me for a moment."

Sarah took the seat across from her, a frown tugging on the corners of her mouth. "I wasn't the only one you and your husband hurt. Luke was devastated by your actions."

Rebecca steepled her fingertips and stared at Sarah. There was no mistaking the speculation in her eyes. "So you do care for him."

It was Sarah's turn to blush. She looked away, unable to meet the other woman's steady gaze. "We've become friends. He's a good man."

"Yes, he is," Rebecca agreed. "And that's why his brother and I couldn't bear to watch him stew in his misery any longer. He's been lonely for so long."

"He's a very attractive man," Sarah admitted. "I'm sure he'll have

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no problem finding someone to love, once he's ready."

Rebecca glanced over her shoulder, as though to make sure they were still alone, and then lowered her voice. "Luke was in love once, to a woman named Christine."

Rebecca's words caused Sarah's heart to sink. Even though she'd known there was a woman in Luke's past, it pierced her to hear the name. "What happened?" she asked, unable to pretend she wasn't dying of curiosity.

"Christine never loved Luke," Rebecca told her. "She was horrified when he lost his foot. She told him she'd never share his bed because she found it so repulsive."

Sarah caught her breath. Luke's embarrassment and defensiveness made sense now. "Poor Luke."

Rebecca reached across the table and squeezed Sarah's hand. "I didn't tell you any of this because I wanted you to feel sorry for him. I just wanted you to understand why he's so angry and bitter. I don't want you to give up on him. He's worthy of your love, Sarah. He'll realize you're not like Christine. Everything will work out, just give him some time."

Sarah snatched her hand away, determined not to give in to Rebecca's friendly overtures so easily. "I'm not in love with Luke Chandler."

But she knew it was a lie. She'd cared for Luke ever since the first time they'd had dinner together. And despite all the problems they were having, she knew she wouldn't be happy until he loved her, too.

Rebecca gave her a knowing look. "He cares for you, Sarah. And he's changed since you arrived. There's a spark of life in his eyes that hasn't been there in years."

Sarah stared down at her clenched hands, wanting to believe Rebecca's words, but afraid to allow herself to hope once again. "He doesn't want a wife. He's told me so repeatedly."

Rebecca laughed. "Well then, we'll just have to find a way to change his mind, won't we?"

Sarah smiled, warming to Rebecca's unabashed optimism. "If you could help me do that, Rebecca, I could forgive you for deceiving me in

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the first place.”

“Call me Becky,” Rebecca insisted. “And that’s a deal I’m anxious to take you up on.”

\* \* \* \* \*

That night, Luke entertained his guests in a house that sparkled with cleanliness. As he seated himself at the head of the dining room table, watching Sarah and Rebecca bring in steaming platters of roast and mashed potatoes, he realized the extent of the transformation she’d made in his life.

Sarah had made him proud of his home, unashamed to offer Matt and Rebecca the use of one of the spare rooms for the night. She’d given him so much, and he’d offered damn little in return.

Matt entered the dining room, and Luke gestured to the foot of the table. “Have a seat, Matt.”

Sarah threw him a scathing glare before returning to the kitchen. Becky hid a smile and seated herself to Matt’s right. “Sarah’s going to eat in the kitchen,” she reported. “She doesn’t want to join us.”

Luke cursed under his breath and pushed back his chair. “I’ll go get her,”

He found Sarah frosting a chocolate cake, humming beneath her breath. “You don’t belong in here by yourself.”

“It’s one thing for me to dine with you when we’re alone, quite another when you have guests.” She refused to meet his gaze, and continued to frost the cake.

Frustrated, he grabbed her hand, startling her into dropping the knife on the kitchen counter. There was a glob of frosting on one of her fingers, and he drew it to his mouth, licking the sweetness away. “Come on, Sarah. I want you to have dinner with me. I want you to meet my brother. After all, if it wasn’t for him, you wouldn’t be here.”

Her eyes widened, and she stared at his lips with an intensity that made him dizzy with desire. Then she sighed and looked away. “I look a fright. I’ve been working all day, and I don’t have anything else to wear.”

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“You look beautiful to me.” It was true, she always looked lovely in his eyes, but he understood her reluctance to dine with his family. Women took quite a store in outshining each other, and Becky was always immaculately turned out.

Sarah should never have to feel she didn’t measure up. He wished he had the right to buy her some new clothes. He wanted to spoil her rotten, give her all the things the war had taken from her. He could do so much for her, if only she’d let him.

She met his gaze and must have read some of his thoughts, because she relaxed. “All right. I’ll join you for dinner.”

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### **Chapter Fourteen**

Sarah followed Luke into the dining room. She met Becky's wide grin with a small one of her own and slipped into the empty chair at Luke's side.

"Have you met Matt yet?" Luke inquired.

Sarah shook her head and lifted her gaze to the man who sat at the foot of the table. He really didn't look that much like Luke, she thought uncharitably. Luke was by far the more handsome of the two. Matt's eyes were warm and brown, instead of Luke's stormy gray, and his hair was lighter and much shorter.

"I'm Luke's brother, Matthew. I hope you can forgive me for bringing you here under false pretenses."

Matt was undeniably charming, and Sarah found herself returning his smile. She couldn't be angry with this man, after having talked to Becky. She didn't approve of his methods, but they wanted the same thing, after all. Luke's happiness.

"It's good to finally meet you," she told him, and was surprised to find that was the truth. "I'm sorry I missed the two of you the last time you were here."

"Well, Luke was being less than civil, so we thought it would be best if we let him cool down."

Luke snorted and passed Sarah the platter of mashed potatoes. "My brother is a master of understatement."



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"Let's talk about something else, shall we?" Matt gave Sarah another smile. "The meal looks wonderful, Sarah. It's a welcome relief from the slop Luke usually feeds me when I come to visit."

Sarah frowned, her ire instantly roused by Matt's condescending tone. "I like Luke's cooking. The first night I arrived, he cooked me dinner."

Matt raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps he cared more about impressing you than he does me."

Becky cleared her throat. "I love what you've done with the house, Sarah. I never dreamed such beautiful rooms were hidden under all that dust."

Sarah wondered if Matt and Becky realized that everything they said was in some way a subtle criticism of Luke. Did they do it on purpose, or were they simply trying to make conversation in their bumbling, well-meaning way?

Sarah reached beneath the table until she encountered Luke's strong, wool-covered thigh. She squeezed, and his startled gaze flew to hers. "It wasn't that bad," she assured Becky without looking at her. "Just a little neglected and in need of some tender care."

Luke covered her hand with his, a wry grin turning up one corner of his beautiful mouth. "Sarah's quite an optimist. She thinks a bucket of water and a little elbow grease can cover up any flaw."

"Maybe she's right," Matt murmured. "Or maybe she realizes that nothing in this house is broken beyond repair."

Luke stiffened and deliberately removed Sarah's hand from his leg. He gave his brother an angry glance. "Give it a rest, Matt. I'm not in the mood to listen to this tonight."

Dinner was a strained affair after that. Becky and Sarah kept up a steady stream of small talk, but neither Luke nor Matt spoke more than a handful of words.

At last it was over, and Sarah busied herself with clearing the table. Becky offered to help and between them, they managed to do the dishes in record time.

"You'll have to excuse the two of them," Becky murmured as she

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put the last of the dishes away. "They've been this way as long as I've known them, arguing and bickering. I know you think Matt goes too far, but he's only trying to help."

"Luke doesn't need Matt's help. He's doing just fine on his own."

Becky shook her head. "Oh, Sarah, you don't know. You can't imagine, how it was. After he lost his foot he laid in his bed for months, refusing to move, barely eating, and staring up at the ceiling like he was already dead."

"It doesn't matter," Sarah replied, refusing to listen to any more. "He's changed. He's doing fine. All he needs is a friend, and that's what I intend to be."

"You're much too involved to stop with mere friendship." Becky laughed and hung up the dishtowel. "I've seen the way you look at him. More importantly, I've seen the way he looks as you."

"How does he look at me?" Sarah asked, unable to help herself.

"He stares at you as though he'd like to swallow you whole."

Sarah glanced over at her new friend, startled. "Really?"

Becky grinned. "Absolutely."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So. Have you proposed yet?" Matt's dark eyes snapped with annoyance as he lit one of his expensive cigars and took a seat in the parlor. "It's been almost a week."

Luke poured himself a drink, realizing as he did so that it was the first time he'd felt the need since Sarah arrived. Matt was being a bastard, and he hadn't the faintest idea why.

"It's only been a few days. We're still getting to know each other."

Matt shot him a piercing look. "I think you've gotten to *know* her quite well."

Luke downed his shot and ignored his brother's comment. He hated that knowing glance, hated the fact that Matt was right. He never should have taken Sarah into his bed before he'd given her the protection of his name.

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He was saved from further comment by soft, feminine laughter coming down the hall. Becky and Sarah brightened the room immediately. Luke couldn't tear his gaze away from the woman who had turned his life upside down.

Becky cuddled up next to Matt on the sofa. Luke couldn't bear to watch the obvious love between them for even one more minute. Sarah lingered by the door, as though she didn't want to endure the pleasantries any more than he did.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" The question was out before he could call it back, but when he saw the pleasure in Sarah's green eyes, he found he'd meant it.

"I'd like that very much."

Luke glanced at his guests. "Do you mind?"

Matt raised one eyebrow, his gaze warning Luke to be careful.

Luke ignored him and walked slowly, painfully, toward Sarah. His leg already ached. He'd overdone it today, but to get out of this house he'd gladly walk until his stump bled. When he reached Sarah he offered his arm, and she took it, letting him lean on her just a bit until they reached the front porch.

"I don't really feel like walking. Let's just sit here on the swing for a while."

He glared at her, knowing she'd sensed his weakness. "Don't make allowances for me, Sarah. I can't stand it. If you want to walk, we'll walk."

She touched his face and made him look at her. "Let's go down to the river then. I've been meaning to explore it."

"Good idea," he muttered, feeling like an idiot. It wasn't far, just over a quarter of a mile, but before they were even half way there, he was in agony.

Damn his foolish pride. Sarah had offered him a graceful way out of this, but he'd refused it, and now he must pay the price.

They walked down the path in silence, and Luke concentrated on keeping his balance and ignoring the pain. When they arrived at the river's edge, he lowered himself gratefully to the ground, stretching his poor abused leg out in front of him.

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Sarah sat down beside him, twining her hand in his. "We really should have remained on the porch," she chided. "But it's very peaceful here. I'm glad you brought me."

She looked lovely in the moonlight, and her hand was full of warmth and life. He wanted to bring it to his lips and taste her, but Matt's lecturing had left him feeling guilty as hell. If he couldn't find the courage to make her his wife, then he didn't deserve to sheath himself in her tight, wet heat. So he sat with her on the riverbank, holding hands and listening to the soothing murmur of the river.

"Sometimes I miss the sounds of my childhood," he told her, unthinking. "The sounds of cicadas and night birds. It's so quiet here. Almost too quiet."

"Cicadas and night birds?" Sarah raised an inquiring brow. "Where did you grow up?"

"Virginia," Luke answered, cursing himself for leading the conversation to the past.

"I thought I heard the hint of a drawl in your voice," she told him playfully. "That means you're a Rebel, just like me."

He frowned and stared at the moonlight dancing on the rippling water. "I didn't believe in slavery, Sarah. That's one of the reasons I came out here. In the West it's possible to make a living from the land without the blood and sweat of a hundred men who work for you only because you'll whip them if they don't."

"Did your family own slaves?" She leaned a little closer, peering up at him in the darkness. "You speak so passionately about the subject."

"When I was a kid, my best friend was a boy named Joe. He was my age. My father gave him to me for my tenth birthday, and we did everything together. Played, fought, rode and took our lessons." He smiled bitterly. "Joe was much brighter than I was. But instead of going on to the University with me, my father sent him back out to the fields."

"That must have been hard on you both."

Sarah's soft comment surprised him, and he stared down at her, a flicker of hope blossoming in his chest. Perhaps if she could understand how much he'd loved his friend, she could understand why he'd turned

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his back on his home and gone to war wearing blue instead of gray.

"I told myself I didn't care. I tried to convince myself everything was just as it should be. But then Joe got caught trying to escape, and my father had him shot."

"Is that when you left Virginia?"

"That was part of it," Luke conceded, regretting his loose tongue. This wasn't the time to bare his soul.

She seemed to understand that he didn't want to talk about it any more, because for a while she was quiet again. His tension ebbed away.

"I missed you today," she said at last.

"Did you?" He raised one brow in disbelief. "I can't imagine why."

"There are times when you're actually quite nice." She smiled.

"You should let that side of you show more often."

"I've forgotten how to be nice," he admitted. "It's much easier being alone."

"I'm sorry I've made things so difficult for you," she whispered.

"But if it makes you feel any better, this isn't easy for me, either."

He sighed and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry I've been pushing you away. I know it's hard for you to understand, but I have my reasons for not inviting you to sleep in my room."

"Just tell me you want me here, Luke. Tell me you're not planning to send me away when you grow tired of me."

"I could never grow tired of you, Sarah. *Never.*" He lifted his free hand and brushed his fingertips across the satiny curve of her cheek. Her eyelids drifted shut, and he could feel the rapid rhythm of her heart when he let his hand trail down the slender column of her throat.

Just a kiss, he thought desperately, his pain fading as his passion rose. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against hers with infinite restraint.

She shuddered and tangled her free hand in his hair, pulling him closer, returning the kiss with sweet abandon. Luke groaned at the fire of her response, desire exploding within him, leaving a million nerve endings quivering in its wake. Despite his earlier promises to himself, he wanted to feel her body, naked and warm, against his. He wanted to

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possess her and regain the confidence in himself that he'd lost.

The kiss deepened, and Sarah matched him step for step, participating equally in the passionate embrace. He cupped her face with his hands and then let them drift lower, down her throat and across the upper swell of her breasts.

Sarah shivered when Luke's fingertips brushed her nipples through the fabric of her dress, sending sparks of desire pooling low in the pit of her stomach. He bent over her, his mouth leaving hers to follow in the wake of his hands. She closed her eyes and cupped his beautiful dark head, lost in the magic of his touch.

"Sarah," he whispered, his hands expertly working the buttons on her bodice. "Let me look at you."

Within seconds he had her bare to the waist. He drew back, staring down at her as though she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "I walked in on you that night when you fell asleep in the bath," he admitted, his voice low and rough. "Your breasts were wet, and I wanted to touch them so much I thought I was going to die."

She gasped, flushing under his perusal and the weight of his words. He chuckled. Then he sobered and grazed her nipple with his forefinger. "You're so beautiful, Sarah. I could look at you for the rest of my life."

His elegant hands played over her body with all the skill he'd lavished on the piano, wringing a soft, breathy gasp from her lips. His touch was sheer heaven, and she didn't want this night to ever end.

Lowering her to the grassy riverbank, he ran his lips down the column of her throat, trailing hot, fiery kisses across her skin and igniting a fierce, deep ache in the pit of her stomach. Then he ran his tongue across her nipple, nipping and suckling her until she thought she'd die with the pleasure of it.

With an abruptness that startled her, he rolled away and flopped on his back beside her, his arm flung over his eyes, his breath coming in harsh pants.

She blinked several times, coming back to herself and feeling the chill night air. Trembling, she righted her clothes.

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She turned on her side to look at him, feeling bereft without the warmth of his touch. He seemed to be in physical pain, his big body taut with tension.

"What happened?" she whispered, tentatively touching his shoulder. "Did I do something wrong?"

He groaned and shook his head. "Just give me a minute." His voice was rough and fractured, and she let her hand fall away from him, unsure what to do.

At last, he lowered his arm and met her troubled gaze. He brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "Pulling away from you is the hardest thing I've ever done," he told her. "But I can't kiss you and touch you without wanting so much more."

She flushed and let her gaze wander down the length of him to the straining ridge so lovingly molded by the thin fabric of his trousers.

His laugh sounded a bit unsteady. "Don't look at me that way, sweetheart. I'm doing my best to be noble."

"You're not taking advantage of me," she protested. "I wanted you to kiss me. I love what we do together."

"I *am* taking advantage." His beautiful eyes grew somber. "I've already made so many mistakes where you're concerned. Christ, I'm afraid I've already ruined your reputation."

"Ruined?" She shook her head, willing him to understand what she was feeling. "I've seen what it means to be ruined. And what I felt just now, in your arms, was far from that."

He leaned forward and kissed her. A sweet, tender press of his lips. "I don't ever want you to leave me."

*So marry me.* The answer was so simple, but she didn't have the courage to speak the words out loud. She'd just given him the perfect opportunity to admit that he wanted her for more than just a quick tumble, but he'd made light of it, and now she was lost, uncertain.

It was becoming more and more clear to her that no matter how much he might want her body, he didn't want it enough to make her his wife.

"I think we should go back," she told him miserably, her heart

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shattering. "Matt and Becky will be wondering where we are."

He frowned, looking as though he'd liked to say more, but she turned her head, unable to face him any longer. It was painfully obvious that she'd made a fool of herself tonight, and she didn't want him to read the truth in her eyes.

She'd fallen in love with a man who would never love her in return.



**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Fifteen**

He'd handled the situation badly.

Luke knew he'd done or said something terribly wrong, but he wasn't quite sure how to fix it. Sarah stalked ahead of him, her slim back a rigid line of control.

He wanted to grab her by the shoulder, pull her back into his arms and kiss all her fears away, but he didn't trust himself to ever let her go. She'd become an obsession and, now that he'd tasted her, he couldn't help but want more.

How could she think he didn't want her? He knew that was the root of what was upsetting her. It would have been laughable if not for the tears he'd glimpsed in her eyes when she'd turned away from him.

To add insult to injury, his leg was hurting worse than ever. Every step he took was pure agony. Three quarters of the way to the house, his battered body couldn't take any more abuse. His knee buckled beneath him and he pitched forward, catching himself with his hands as he tumbled forward.

Sarah was beside him in a matter of seconds. "What happened?" She ran her hands over his body, checking for injuries. "Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?" Sick with embarrassment, he wrenched away from her as she closed her hand over his upper thigh.

"We should have stayed on the porch." She glared down at him, hands on hips. "You should have told me how bad it was. I would have

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helped you.”

“My knee gave out. It happens sometimes.” He couldn’t remember ever being so humiliated in his life. He didn’t want her to help him. He couldn’t stand being pitied.

“Stay right here,” she ordered. “I’m going to get Matt.”

Before he could voice his thoughts on the matter, she was gone, leaving him to curse at the shadows. “Stay right here,” he mocked, falsetto. *Shit*. It wasn’t like he could go anywhere else. The only way he was getting back to the house right now was if he crawled there on his hands and knees.

And even that might be preferable to having to deal with Matt and Becky while he was in this condition. He felt utterly drained, both in body and in spirit. How could he ask Sarah to marry him when he couldn’t even walk to the river and back without falling on his ass?

With a groan he levered himself to a sitting position and waited for his rescue party to make it back from the house. They arrived moments later, the whole motley crew. Becky was carrying a lantern, and Sarah wielded his crutch.

Matt was in the lead, wearing that irritating expression of big-brotherly concern. Luke cursed again. This evening was quickly going from bad to worse. The last thing he wanted right now was Matt’s condescension.

To his surprise, his brother managed to keep his opinions to himself. Matt knelt beside him on the grass and slipped one arm around his waist. “Can you make it if you lean on me and Sarah?”

Luke nodded, although he knew it wasn’t going to be easy. He just wanted to get this over with, get home so he could lick his wounds in private. “I’m ready,” he muttered.

Sarah lent him her arm as well, and between the two of them, they managed to get him to his feet, so to speak. The pain in his stump ricocheted through his body and his breath hissed out in a strangled gasp.

“Are you all right?” Matt asked.

“Yeah. Let’s just go.” He leaned most of his weight on his brother, trying to ignore the soft press of the woman on his right.

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It was slow going, and mounting the front steps was sheer torture, but at last he made it inside and down the hall to his room. At the door he stopped, balancing on his good leg and pinning his three helpers with a glare.

"This is fine. I can take it from here."

Matt patted him once on the shoulder, then nodded and nudged Becky down the hall. Sarah, however, wasn't so easy to dissuade.

"I'm not leaving," she stated. "Not until you let me have a look at your leg."

"Please, Sarah. Just leave me alone." He limped across the few feet to the bed and sank down on the edge, releasing a soft groan as the pressure eased.

Ignoring his words, Sarah sat down on the floor in front of him. She held his horrified gaze as she reached for the boot, silently daring him to stop her.

"Don't," he whispered desperately. "I don't want you to see me this way."

"It's part of you," she whispered, lightly rubbing her palm down the front of his calf. "I want to help you. Let me do this for you."

He bowed his head, giving in, yet unable to watch the disgust that was sure to spread across her beautiful features when she saw his wasted flesh. "Go ahead."

She pushed his pant leg up to his knee, and then her warm, gentle hands unfastened the heavy boot, letting it fall to the floor. "Oh Luke," she whispered. "This looks so painful." She held up the boot, pointing at the leather lining. "This thing is barbaric. We should line it with fleece."

"Fleece?" He'd never even thought of that, he'd just taken the pain as part of his due. While he was thinking about her idea, she began examining his stump with calm detachment.

"You've rubbed a terrible blister right here," she murmured, gently circling it with the tip of her finger. "And you have some other places that are red and swollen." She touched him as she spoke, covering every inch of his skin from the knee down, skin that hadn't been touched in years.

Emotion stung his eyes, so he closed them, leaning back on his

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elbows, lost in the wonder of it.

"Am I hurting you?" Her hands stilled, and he could hear the concern in her voice.

"God, no," he breathed. "It's just been so long since anyone touched me there."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his knee, kissing him tenderly. "I need to go get something. Stay here, I'll be right back."

He nodded and then stretched out full length on the bed as he waited for her to return. Sarah Montgomery was truly a remarkable woman. She'd accepted the ugliest part of him as though it was the most natural thing in the world. He had no notion of how to express his gratitude for her behavior tonight.

He lay there for a long time, listening to the house grow silent around him. He was a little surprised Matt had left him alone after the embarrassing episode outside.

Sudden realization swept over him, and he sat up, pressing his hand to his forehead. Was that the kind of man he'd become? A spoiled child who sulked in his room and expected someone to come and ask him what was wrong? Shame heated his cheeks as he thought of all the times he'd acted this way since he'd lost his foot.

And for the first time he had a glimmer of his brother's motives for trying to shake him out of his self-pity. He'd become a burden. Matt and Becky had their own lives to live.

His normal reaction to this sort of emotional upheaval would be to get drunk, but he'd been relying on that sort of escape far too often.

At last, Sarah returned, and he felt nothing but gratitude as she sat down at the bottom of the bed. "Hank gave me some horse liniment. It doesn't smell too good, but it will feel wonderful. I promise."

"You're too good to me."

She laughed and opened the can, filling the room with a pungent, but not unpleasant smell. "I know."

Then she rubbed the liniment on his leg with long, firm strokes. He began to relax almost immediately, the pain vanishing like snow on a warm spring day.

## Diana Bold

And his last coherent thought before he fell asleep was the realization that he'd fallen completely, irrevocably, in love with his mail order bride.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah continued to rub Luke's leg long after he'd fallen asleep. The scar tissue and pale, wasted flesh felt strange beneath her hands. But she was far from repulsed. Instead, her heart bled for the pain he'd suffered.

Earlier he'd told her that he trusted her, but she wished that trust went deep enough for him to explain how this horrible thing had happened. She knew it must have been fairly recent, because it had happened after he met Christine.

Perhaps she'd ask Becky about his accident in the morning. It would be far easier than making him have to relive it. Once had been enough.

He let out a soft snore, and she smiled as she pulled off his other boot and tossed it to the floor. Again she was struck by the sheer perfection of his foot. He was beautiful all over, she admitted, her gaze roaming hungrily over his features, glad for this opportunity to look her fill.

His lashes were as long and lush as a girl's, and he looked much younger in repose. She eyed the empty pillow beside him with envy. What she wouldn't give to have the right to lie beside him every night. She'd like to be able to rub his leg every time it pained him.

With a sigh, she ceased her loving ministrations and slipped off the bed. She'd gotten closer to him tonight than she'd ever imagined and, though it was far from her goal, she felt she'd taken a step in the right direction.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Luke made the practical decision to leave his boot off all day to allow himself time to heal. It wasn't easy for him to face

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Sarah and his family without it, but last night had gone a long way toward making him more comfortable with the loss of his foot.

*"Its part of you,"* Sarah had said, and for the first time he was able to accept the truth of her words. For better or worse, this was what he had become. It was far past time to deal with it.

Everyone had already gathered in the dining room by the time he limped in with the aid of his crutch. For a moment there was silence, and then Sarah came to his side. "How are you feeling this morning?"

He stared into her beautiful eyes, and the memory of her sweet touch passed between them. "Much better," he told her. "Thanks to you."

She flushed and turned away, gesturing to the buffet, where a lavish breakfast was spread. "Help yourself. The rest of us have already started."

He nodded and took a plate, filling it with scrambled eggs, fried potatoes and ham. He was pleased that he was able to do so with relative ease, despite the encumbrance of only being able to use one hand, since he had to hold on to his crutch with the other.

Sarah watched him anxiously, but she didn't attempt to help him, and he made it to his chair at the head of the table without incident. When he was seated, he met Matt's amused gaze. "Still here?"

Matt grinned. "As a matter of fact, despite the gracious hospitality we've received since we arrived, Becky and I have decided to return to Denver today."

Luke didn't bother to hide his relief. He still loved his brother and sister-in-law, but he was glad to get rid of them. He wanted some time alone with Sarah. The last thing he needed was to have Matthew looking over his shoulder, offering friendly advice on how to court a woman.

Becky cleared her throat. When he met her dark gaze, he saw her amusement. The little minx was obviously quite pleased that her scheme to get him a wife was working so well.

"Matt and I are going to be really busy this month. In fact, I doubt we'll see you again until the end of June." She smiled and glanced over at Sarah. "But if you need us for anything before then, just send word."

Luke let his gaze settle on Sarah. "Thanks, Becky. But I think I have

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everything I need right here.”

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### Chapter Sixteen

The glow of Luke's warm look and even warmer words kept Sarah floating on air the rest of the morning. He'd said he had everything he wanted, and she was sure she hadn't misinterpreted his implication that she was what he wanted.

Becky helped Sarah clear the table after breakfast, while the men went outside to get the wagon ready for the trip back to Denver.

"Things seem to be working out between you and Luke," Becky commented as she stacked a load of dishes in the sink. "Goodness, the way that man was looking at you this morning... It's enough to make me blush."

Sarah laughed. "Somehow I don't think there's much that's capable of making you blush."

Becky grinned. "You're right. I'm shameless. But you must admit that my instincts about this were right on the money. You do love him. I know you do."

Sarah sighed, thinking of the way he'd kissed her, the vulnerability in his eyes when she'd rubbed the liniment on his leg. "Of course, I do," she whispered, keeping her eye on the back door in case the men should come back in that way. "I think I have ever since I met him."

"So you're not mad at me any more? You forgive us for scheming to get the two of you together?"

"I forgive you," Sarah told her. "But there's something I've been wondering about, Becky. Do you mind if I ask you a question?"



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"Sure," Becky replied, sitting down at the kitchen table. "Ask away."

Sarah sat down across from her and took a deep breath. Becky was leaving soon, and Luke could return any moment. If she didn't find out now, she might not have another chance. "What happened to Luke? How did he lose his foot?"

Becky's grin slipped. Her gaze grew shuttered, and her sudden tension was palpable. "I'm sorry, Sarah. But I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me?" Sarah stared at her new friend in disbelief. "Why in the world not?"

Becky shook her head. "There are things in Luke's past that might upset you. I really don't feel comfortable talking about it. When he wants you to know, I'm sure he'll tell you himself."

Sarah frowned and turned away. "It's all right, Becky. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." But their earlier closeness had disappeared, and her interest was piqued even more.

What had happened to Luke? What could possibly be so terrible that he felt he must keep it a secret from her?

\* \* \* \* \*

After seeing Matt and Becky off, Luke spent the afternoon in the parlor, teaching Sarah to play chess. His leg was feeling much better, due to Sarah's gentle care. Tomorrow he'd probably be able to bear putting that damned boot back on.

He smiled at Sarah's expression of grim concentration as she stared down at the chessboard. She was very bright, and she'd picked up the rules of the game with surprising ease. He had a feeling that in time she'd make a formidable opponent.

"How would you feel about going to town with me in the morning?" he inquired, capturing her bishop. "I've been thinking about what you said about the sheepskin. I think it would help a lot."

She smiled at him, her first real smile of the afternoon, and he realized how quiet she'd been since their guests had left. He wondered if

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she was regretting anything that had passed between them, or if she was feeling shy now that they were alone. He hoped it was the latter.

"I would love to. I want to get some fabric for a new dress or two."

"Great. We'll leave early then, and make a day of it."

She nodded, but he could see her short-lived enthusiasm fading.

"What is it? Have I done something wrong? You haven't seemed yourself all day."

"It's just something that happened this morning," Sarah replied after a long, tense silence. She looked up, meeting his gaze imploringly. "I asked Becky what happened to your foot. I know I shouldn't have, but I've been so curious, and I could tell you didn't want to talk about it."

Luke's hand froze above the chessboard, his heart hammering in his chest. "What did she say?"

Sarah shook her head. "She wouldn't tell me anything. She said it would upset me."

Luke felt a flood of gratitude for his sister-in-law's unexpected discretion. He'd known this moment would come. It was inevitable. But he wasn't ready to tell her the truth.

He wanted the impossible. He wanted her to fall completely, madly in love with him before he risked telling her all of his secrets.

Pulling his hand away from Sarah's queen, he brought his fingertips to the bridge of his nose and squeezed, trying to obliterate the sudden, intense headache. "I really don't want to discuss this right now."

Sarah leaned forward, staring at him intently. "What are you hiding from me? What must I do before you trust me enough to share this with me?"

"I do trust you." He looked away, unable to meet her earnest gaze. "Please try to understand. It was a difficult time for me."

"Of course," she whispered, sitting back in her chair, looking quite defeated. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

He sighed, knowing the day was ruined, and unable to think of a single thing to placate her. "I will tell you," he promised. "Just give me some time."

She shrugged, turning her attention back on the game. "It's your

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move, Luke.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Can you believe the nerve of that woman? Waltzing in here among us decent folks as if she had every right. Why, she’s little better than a prostitute, and everybody knows it.”

Sarah stiffened, her hand hovering over a bolt of green sprigged muslin, all her senses attuned to the conversation at the front of the store. Luke had dropped her off a few minutes ago, instructing her to buy herself a new dress or two. But her pleasure in the task was decimated by the malicious whisperings of the two women who stood near the cash register.

“It isn’t right,” the second woman agreed. “Back east, hussies like her knew their place.”

Sarah recognized one of them. The woman owned the town’s lone restaurant. She’d flatly refused to give Sarah a job. Now her gaze flickered over Sarah with contempt, and she began whispering to her cohort once again.

This wasn’t the first time Sarah had been the source of gossip. She’d put up with it on a daily basis in Georgia. But it wasn’t supposed to happen here. This was exactly what she’d wanted to get away from.

Her eyes filled with angry tears, and she blinked them away, determined not to let those old bats know they’d gotten to her. Reluctantly, she replaced the bolt of yellow calico she’d already chosen. She couldn’t do this, couldn’t walk up there and ask the balding man who owned the store to put the fabric on Luke’s bill. It would give the women more ammunition to use against her.

She squared her shoulders and turned toward the door, wondering why she’d ever thought things would be different. The people of this town had treated her like a pariah when she’d only spent one night in Luke Chandler’s house. It was logical they’d assume far worse now that she’d lived with him for over a week.

In all honesty, she couldn’t blame them, given the way she’d fallen

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so eagerly into Luke's arms. Perhaps they were right about her.

When she reached the relative safety of the boardwalk in front of the store, she searched for Luke. He was nowhere in sight, and she groaned when she saw John Tucker headed her way.

She turned in the opposite direction, walking fast, hoping he'd get the message and leave her alone. But his heavy footsteps fell in place behind her, and she knew she wasn't going to be so lucky.

"Where you goin', sugar?"

She ignored him, hurrying her steps, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around. "I'm talkin' to you, girl."

Sarah swallowed, glancing down at his beefy hand. "Please. Let me go, Mr. Tucker."

John laughed, exposing his rotten teeth. "Did Chandler get tired of you so soon? Damned shame you'd rather be that cripple's whore than my wife, but you can bet I won't make the mistake of extending that offer again."

"Well, you needn't worry," Sarah exclaimed, her anger at his words outweighing her caution. "I'd rather starve than be your wife."

"Why, you little—"

John's words broke off, and Sarah lifted her startled gaze to find Luke looming behind her.

"Let her go." Luke's voice vibrated with fury. He stepped forward, putting himself between Sarah and the hulking blacksmith.

John released her with a vicious curse, and she stumbled away, rubbing her numb arm. Tears of pain and embarrassment pricked her eyes, and she blinked furiously, determined not to let anyone see how close she was to breaking.

"What the hell is going on?" Luke glanced at Sarah, and she shrugged, too embarrassed to repeat the words John and the other townspeople had thrown at her. *Whore. Prostitute.* Heat crept into her cheeks and she looked away.

John laughed and held up his hands. "My mistake, Chandler. I didn't know you still wanted her. I was just offering my services, in case she was in need of a new protector."

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"The lady doesn't need any protection from you. Not now, not ever."

John gave Sarah one last seething glare and then turned away.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Luke turned to look at her, his handsome face dark with concern. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head, too ashamed to look him in the eye. "He thinks I'm your whore, Luke. They all do."

He skimmed his fingertips over the reddened skin on her arm where John had grabbed her. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. This is my fault. I shouldn't have left you alone."

She loved it when he called her sweetheart. She met his tender gaze, and the look in his beautiful blue eyes took her breath away. "Don't blame yourself. I shouldn't have come with you today. If I'd been thinking clearly, I would have realized something like this would happen."

He moved his hand from her arm to her face, tenderly stroking the curve of her jaw. "It won't happen again, Sarah. I won't let it."

Someone cleared their throat. Sarah stepped away from Luke, only to find herself face-to-face with the women from the store.

"Well, I never..." The one from the restaurant turned up her nose and hurried down the walk, as though it disgusted her to be on the same street as Sarah.

Sarah watched them go and then sighed. "Can we go home now? I really don't think I can bear to stay here another minute."

For the first time, Luke noticed Sarah was empty-handed. "Didn't you find anything you liked at the mercantile?"

A hurt look flashed in the emerald depths of her eyes. "The atmosphere in there wasn't any better than it is out here." She glanced after the two old busybodies who'd just passed them. "In fact it was down right frigid."

The anger he'd so recently released began to simmer once again. "Are you telling me those old bats made you feel unwelcome?"

Sarah nodded, and his gaze was drawn to her clenched fists. "It's all right. I don't mind. I'd just like to go home."

"Not yet," he muttered, taking her arm and steering her toward the

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front door of the mercantile. "You need some new clothes, and we're not leaving here until you get some. Besides, I promised you a meal at the restaurant."

Sarah dug in her heels at that. "Oh no," she said defiantly. "I am not going to step foot in that restaurant. They'll probably refuse to serve me, and then they'll have me tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail."

Luke laughed bitterly, dragging her along. "No they won't. Not while you're with me."

When she continued to resist, he stopped and met her horrified gaze. "I won't let anyone treat you as anything less than the lady you are. We haven't done anything wrong, and I refuse to act as though we have."

"We haven't done anything wrong," Sarah muttered. "*Today.*"

Luke grinned, imagining her in his arms once again. "I don't care what they think," he stated, more at peace with himself than he'd been in years. "I really don't."

He held the door of the mercantile open. After a pause, she preceded him through it. Once inside the dimly lit interior, he guided her toward the ready-made articles in the front window. There was a lilac gown that looked as though it would fit her to perfection.

"Do you like this?" He held it up, but her gaze skittered away toward the bolts of cloth in the back of the store.

"Oh, Luke. I couldn't. I thought I'd just get some calico and make me a few dresses to work in. That's much too fine."

"It's not nearly fine enough." Luke thought of the beautiful gowns Becky ordered from back east, and promised himself that one day Sarah would do the same. "But it will do for now."

The look in Sarah's eyes as she held the dress up to her shoulders was priceless. He'd never realized how pleasurable it could be to buy something for a woman. Christine had never been satisfied with anything he did for her, but Sarah acted as though he'd just given her the moon.

"I think it will fit. But if you buy this for me, those women will be right. I've done nothing to deserve it."

"Nothing to deserve it?" Luke shook his head. "You've made my

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house into a home. Hell, you've made me want to live again. I want to do this for you. Please, let me."

There was a time when he'd been damn near irresistible to women when he used that tone of voice, and he was pleased to see he hadn't lost it completely.

Sarah flushed. "I really love this dress," she admitted.

He grinned. "Go in the back and try it on. I want to do something special this afternoon, and I think this dress will be perfect."

"What are you planning?" she asked, suspicion lacing her voice.

Pulling her close, he bent down and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll tell you in a little while, sweetheart. For now just humor me, all right?"

"All right," she agreed. "I'll go try on the dress."

"Take your time," he told her. "I need to talk to Mr. Bradford."

She nodded, her eyes a little glazed as she looked over the array of feminine frippery. Luke made his way to the front of the store, his smile slipping as he pinned Mr. Bradford with a stare.

"Am I a valued customer in this store?"

Bradford nodded vigorously. "You know you are, Mr. Chandler."

"If I ever hear again that a guest of mine was treated with anything less than the utmost respect in your establishment, I'll take my business elsewhere. Is that clear?"

Bradford swallowed. "Yes, sir. Perfectly clear."

"All right, then. I need a piece of your finest, softest sheepskin."

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### Chapter Seventeen

When Sarah emerged from the dressing room ten minutes later with the beautiful violet gown tucked under her arm, Luke and Mr. Bradford were waiting.

"Did it fit?" Luke asked, giving her a breathtaking smile.

Sarah blushed, very aware of the storekeeper. "I shouldn't let you do this. We'll give those women even more to talk about."

"That's not what I asked," Luke chided. "Come on, sweetheart. Smile for me. Everything will be all right. I promise."

He was fairly beaming with good humor, and she loved him so much she'd face a tar and feathering just to keep that smile on his face. "All right," she murmured, doing her best to match his grin. "The dress fits fine."

Actually, the dress had fit as though it had been made for her. She hadn't had anything so fine since the first days of the war, when Savannah society had thumbed their noses at the blockade by wearing the most beautiful gowns to be found. But that had been eons ago, and the sight of herself in this simple, store-bought dress had brought tears to her eyes.

"Good." Luke took the dress and undergarments from her and handed them to Mr. Bradford. "We'll take it all," he said. "And you might want to think about ordering more dresses in this size."

Sarah looked away as the man rang up the items, giving Luke a total that made her want to sink through the floorboards. Luke paid, took the neatly wrapped package, and escorted her back out to the street.



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"Wasn't that fun?" Luke inquired, his eyes sparkling. "I like buying things for you."

Sarah shook her head in dismay. "Fun isn't the word I'd use to describe it. Have you lost your mind? Everyone will think I'm your mistress now."

Luke laughed. "We're not done. By the time we're through, we'll have given the gossips enough to talk about for a year."

She frowned. "I don't like the sound of that."

Luke took her hand and led her across the street to the hotel. "I'm going to rent a room so you can freshen up and change into your new dress. I have some things to do, but I'll come back in about an hour and we'll go to dinner."

She shook her head. "I'm not up to this. I'd really just like to go home now."

He stopped in the hotel lobby and caught her hands. "Trust me, Sarah. Please."

How could she say no to that? He was so earnest, so intent. "Promise me you'll protect me when they form an angry lynch mob."

Luke grinned. "I promise."

Before she could protest any further, he walked over to the front desk and asked for the best room in the house. The young clerk promised to have a hot bath sent up right away, and then Luke handed her the room key. "I'll be back soon," he told her, then lowered his voice. "I can't wait to see you in that dress."

"Hurry," she urged him, and then watched him leave the lobby. Walking down the hall to their room, dread gathered in the pit of her stomach. What in the world was Luke up to? He'd made certain there would be a huge scandal, but he didn't seem at all concerned about it.

Then of course, why should he be concerned, she thought darkly. It was never the men who bore the brunt of the blame. It was always the woman who paid the price for falling in love with a man who didn't love her in return.

\* \* \* \* \*

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Luke spent the next hour arranging his wedding. He spoke to the preacher, bought an embarrassingly expensive diamond ring, and then charmed a stingy widow out of a dozen brilliant red roses. He returned to the mercantile and bought himself a new set of clothes, and then purchased a bottle of champagne at the saloon.

He hadn't intended to get married when he and Sarah had left the house, but now it seemed the only possible solution. Sarah didn't deserve to be treated as anything less than the lady she was. He'd ruined her reputation, so it was up to him to salvage it.

Not that he minded. He'd been trying to think of a way to convince her she should marry him practically since he'd met her, and now it had fallen right into his lap. He'd be a fool not to take advantage of it.

Now all he had to do was get her to say yes.

He returned to the hotel and walked down the hall to the room where he planned to spend his wedding night. He balanced his packages under one arm and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Sarah's voice drifted to him through the wood panel, and he winced when he heard how lost and afraid she sounded.

He laid his palm on the wood and prayed this would work. Sarah had come to mean everything to him. If she said no to his proposal, he wasn't certain what he'd do.

"It's me," he said. "Luke."

The door opened so fast he almost fell into the room. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "I've been going out of my mind."

He smiled and held out the roses. "I was getting you these."

Her eyes widened, but she made no move to take the flowers. "Oh, Luke," she said on a sigh. "What are you doing?"

That wasn't the response he'd been looking for. "Hasn't anyone ever given you roses before?" he asked, striving to maintain a light tone.

Sarah stared at him and slowly shook her head. "I can't do this. No matter how sweetly you present it, I can't be your mistress."

"My mistress?" Luke shut the door behind him and offered the flowers again. "I'm not asking you to be my mistress. I'm asking you to be

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my wife."

The words burst out of his mouth before he could call them back, and they'd come out all wrong. *Damn*. That wasn't at all how he'd meant to do this.

Sarah plopped down on the edge of the bed. "You can't be serious."

"Of course I'm serious," he said, getting defensive. "I've ruined your reputation. It's the only gentlemanly thing to do."

"So that's what this is all about?" Sarah's voice rose with each word. "You're going to marry me because you feel a sense of responsibility to me?"

She buried her face in her hands, but not before he saw the tears welling up in her beautiful green eyes. "Ah, hell," he muttered, tossing aside his packages and moving to sit on the bed beside her. He put his arm around her waist and guided her head to his chest. "It's not about obligation, sweetheart. I swear it isn't. I just thought that since you were alone, and I was alone..."

She lifted her face and his heart clenched when he saw the tracks of the tears she'd cried. He wanted to tell her he'd fallen hopelessly in love with her, but the words wouldn't come. He wasn't at all certain she felt the same way about him. After all, she hadn't been very enthusiastic about his marriage proposal.

So he decided not to say anything else at all. He'd only managed to make a mess of things so far. Instead, he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her with all the longing and tenderness within him. "Marry me, Sarah," he whispered. "Please?"

She kissed him sweetly in reply, tangling her hands in his hair and pulling him closer. "Yes," she said on a breathy sigh, surprising him. "Yes, I'll marry you."

For a moment, they simply stared at each other, and then Sarah began to smile. "Shall we just figure it out as we go along?"

He nodded, feeling as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Nothing had gone as he'd planned, but she'd said yes, and that was all that mattered.

He gazed at her, taking in her lovely figure and her carefully

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upswept hair. "Have I told you yet, how beautiful you look in that dress?"

She blushed. "No, but I wanted to thank you again. I love it."

"I hope so," he whispered. "After all, it's going to be your wedding dress."

She smoothed her hand over the violet skirt. "You mean we're going to get married today?"

"Is that all right with you? I've already spoken with the preacher, and he said we could do it whenever we're ready. But if you need more time, I'll understand."

"No," she answered quickly. "The sooner we do this, the better."

"Then if you don't mind, I'll just take a quick bath and get changed, and then we'll head over to the church."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah nervously paced the hotel room as Luke got undressed near the tub. Impossible to believe that in less than an hour he would be her husband.

Her husband.

She'd schemed and dreamed of this since he'd come after her at the saloon but somehow, Luke's proposal hadn't made her as happy as she'd imagined it would. A month ago, she hadn't minded the thought of marrying a man who didn't love her, but everything had changed. In the past few weeks she'd glimpsed what could have been between her and Luke, and she hated settling for anything less.

Luke cared for her. She didn't doubt that, but he'd made no mention of love. He was marrying her merely to salvage her reputation because of his misplaced notion of guilt and responsibility.

She couldn't make the mistake of letting herself believe there was anything more to it than that.

Loud splashing told her Luke was getting in the tub, and she tensed even more. Even though she knew he probably didn't want her to look at him, she couldn't resist the temptation. Turning, she was met by the sight of Luke's broad, bare chest glistening with droplets of water. He

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reclined against the back of the tub, watching her with wariness in those smoky-gray eyes.

He was still so self-conscious about his foot, even after all they'd shared. Damn Christine for doing this to him. "Would you like me to bathe you?"

His eyes flared in passionate response. "I'd love it, sweetheart. But I don't want you to get your dress wet."

She smiled and sat down in the chair he'd pulled next to the tub. "I'll be careful."

He gave her a grateful glance, then handed her the soap. Leaning forward, elbows on knees, he presented her his back.

She dipped the soap in the water then rubbed his smooth, wet skin, leaving streams of bubbles in her wake.

Luke moaned softly, letting his head fall forward to rest in his hands. "Ahhh, that feels so good."

Setting the soap aside, she massaged his heavy shoulder muscles, wringing a series of small, appreciative sounds from deep in his throat. It was like stroking a big cat; he practically purred beneath her hands.

Once he seemed relaxed, she asked the question that had been bothering her for days. "Why haven't you let me stay all night with you? Is it because you didn't want me to see your foot?"

He stiffened and then nodded, not looking at her. Sighing, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his temple. "I wish you trusted me more. Don't you know how beautiful you are to me?"

"I believe you. I don't understand it, and I don't deserve it, but I do believe you."

Relief swept through her. Grinning, she handed him the soap. "Then hurry up and finish. We have a wedding to go to."

She stood up and moved to the window, staring down at the street while she gave him some privacy to maneuver himself out of the tub. A flurry of splashes sounded behind her, and then she heard the soft rustle of clothes and the unmistakable thump of his wooden boot.

"Was that quick enough for you?" he asked moments later.

Before she could answer, he put his arms around her from behind,

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pulling her back against his warm, slightly damp body. The crisp, clean scent of him filled her senses, making her dizzy with longing. He pressed his lips to her temple. "Everything will be all right, sweetheart. You'll see."

He was so solid, so strong despite his lost limb, and she wanted to stay in his arms forever. It felt right. More right than anything had felt in a very long time. The last of her doubts dissipated.

Luke might not love her, but he cared for her and desired her. Strong, healthy marriages had been built on far less.

"I think you're right," she whispered. "I hope you're right."

He hugged her tightly before releasing her. "I'm almost ready."

When she finally turned around, he was fastening his cuff links. He was wearing an elegant black suit, and the color suited him very well with his dark hair and stormy eyes.

"Shall we go?" He smiled at her, that breathtaking smile that displayed his dimples, and her knees went weak. He was truly a beautiful man, both inside and out.

"Yes," she told him, gathering her courage around her like a shield. "I'm ready."

**Diana Bold**

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Thirty minutes later, Luke and Sarah held hands at the front of the church, listening as the preacher droned on about love and God. Luke tried to pay attention, but his mind raced.

What in the world was he doing? How could this marriage work when the lie of his past still stood between them? How had he allowed things to come this far without telling her the truth?

If he didn't tell her himself, she'd find out in some other way. There wasn't a soul in this town who didn't know he'd lost his foot during the war. It could happen at any time. One wrong word and she'd never trust him again.

He came back from his musings at the sound of Sarah's sweet voice. She was pledging her vows, and he swore to himself he'd tell her the truth at the next opportune moment. He'd waited too long for this moment. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

Then it was his turn. Determined not to make a mistake, he carefully repeated the words that would bind them together. As he spoke, Sarah's green eyes filled with tears, but he chose to believe they were tears of happiness and not regret.

When he slid the ring on her slim finger, she gave him a blinding smile. "It's beautiful."

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the preacher announced in a bored monotone. "You may kiss the bride."

Luke took immediate advantage of the opportunity, bending to

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capture Sarah's lips with his own. The world seemed to stand still for a moment, and he lost himself in the taste and touch and feel of his wife.

*His wife.*

One of their reluctant witnesses, an old woman who played the piano during church services, coughed. Sarah pulled away, adorably flustered.

The preacher offered half-hearted congratulations, while his wife and the pianist signed the marriage license. The entire thing had taken less than five minutes. Such a short time for an event that would change the rest of his life.

After they left the church, Sarah and Luke made their way to the town's lone restaurant. Luke's leg was bothering him again, and he thought longingly of the soft sheepskin he'd left at the hotel. He should have taken the time to make the changes Sarah had suggested, but he'd been in such a hurry to get this whole thing over with he hadn't bothered.

Now he was afraid he would regret it. Tonight, of all nights, he didn't want to be troubled by the constant pain that plagued him.

When they entered the restaurant, everyone turned to look at them. Dead silence fell across the room. Luke ignored them all and let his gaze fall upon Mrs. Davis, the old hag who had hurt Sarah's feeling earlier.

"Mrs. Davis," he said, making sure his voice was loud enough to carry to the farthest reaches of the room. "My new bride and I would like a table."

The woman flushed crimson, but she hurried forward. "Of course, Mr. Chandler. Right this way." They followed her to a table in the middle of the room. "Will this be acceptable?"

Luke would have laughed at the woman's fawning attitude if he wasn't so damned angry at the way she'd treated Sarah. "This will be fine," he muttered, pulling out a chair for his wife.

"Everyone is staring," Sarah whispered.

"Relax, smile," he said just as quietly.

Mrs. Davis returned with their menus, and then left them blessedly alone. "Are you all right?" Luke asked, realizing this had not been a good idea. He'd wanted to make a public statement about how much Sarah



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meant to him, but he hadn't meant to do it at the expense of her dignity. He didn't like the way everyone was staring at her. "If you'd rather, we could just order the meal sent across the street to our room."

Sarah tried to smile. "I won't let them drive us away. We have as much right to be here as anybody."

"That's my girl." Luke squeezed her hand as pride flowed through him. He couldn't wait to get back to the hotel room. He was looking forward to his wedding night more than he could ever remember looking forward to anything. Just the thought made him shift uncomfortably against his rising erection.

Sarah busied herself with looking at the menu, and he willed his blood to cool. They'd already given the town enough to talk about today. He didn't need to make a further spectacle of himself by getting hard over his new bride in public.

"Everything sounds delicious." There was awe in Sarah's soft voice. "I can't decide."

He smiled. Sarah was so easy to please. Christine would have turned up her nose at this simple country fare. "Get whatever you want."

She nodded and returned to her perusal of the menu. When Mrs. Davis returned for their order, he got a steak and Sarah ordered fried chicken with all the trimmings.

Conversation resumed around them, although most of the diners were probably still listening to them with one ear. "Do you like the ring?"

She glanced down at it, and then met his gaze. "Of course, I do. But you didn't need to go to such expense. I would have been happy with a simple, gold band."

"Sarah," he chided. "You're going to have to stop worrying about money. You're my wife now, and I can afford to buy you nice things." His wife. Damn, he liked the way that sounded.

Sarah flushed, and he was glad to see some color return to her pale cheeks. "I'm sorry, Luke. It's become a habit to count every penny."

"That's one habit I'll be happy to help you break," he assured her. "Would you like to take a honeymoon to Denver? We can tell Matt and Becky the news and then spend a week or so shopping."

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She smiled. "You'll spoil me."

"I'll try," he murmured. "I certainly intend to try."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah ordered banana cream pie for dessert. By now, she didn't mind so much that everyone was staring at her. They were obviously wondering how such a little floozy had managed to trap a fine, upstanding man like Luke Chandler into marrying her. Well, let them wonder, she thought, feeling smug. She doubted any of the straight-laced old bats had ever pleased their men the way she knew she'd pleased Luke.

Luke waited until she'd scraped the last bite of pie from her plate then stood. "Let's go back to the hotel." There was a burning intensity in his gray eyes that thrilled her. The promise of the night sizzled through her veins, igniting a frenzy of desire for the man who was now her husband.

"You're right," she told him. "I need you, Luke."

His eyes flared, and he came around the table to take her arm. She waited as he paid the bill, and then she followed him down the street to the hotel. When he shut the door to their room behind him, she saw that while they'd been away the bath had been cleared and her roses artfully arranged in a cut glass vase. Champagne cooled in a bucket of ice in front of the fire.

Luke poured them both a glass, smiling devilishly as he handed it to her.

"I shouldn't," she murmured. "I'll get tipsy."

"I want you to be a lot tipsy," he told her. "I don't want you to have any inhibitions."

"All right." She took a big swallow and choked on the bubbles. "This is good."

He took a few sips of his own as he casually loosened his tie. Her gaze was drawn to the movement, to the strong, tanned column of his throat. Good Lord. He was so beautiful.

"Do you think the preacher and his wife ever made love the way

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we do?" She took another drink of her champagne, laughter welling within her at the very idea.

He took the glass from her hand, a smile flitting across his lips. "I don't think very many people are lucky enough to ever have even a glimpse of the kind of passion we share, sweetheart."

She held his gaze, her humor disappearing at the truth behind his words. "We are lucky, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we are." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her against him. His eyes were a deep, stormy gray as he lowered his mouth to hers.

She'd expected him to be rough and urgent, but instead his kiss was slow and seductive, the consummate lover. He tasted of champagne and something deeper, richer, and even more intoxicating.

His tongue seduced hers with an exotic rhythm. She wasn't sure how long the kiss went on. It could have been hours; it could have been days. She was drunk with champagne and desire, and she never wanted it to end.

He drew back a bit, staring down at her with fire in his eyes. His breathing was harsh and erratic, and he lifted a trembling hand to delicately trace her face.

"Make love to me, Sarah," he whispered, his voice dark and desperate. "I want to make you mine forever."

*Forever.* Against her will, she remembered her last wedding night and the promise of a lifetime together that had been cut heartbreakingly short.

He peeled off his shirt, exposing his broad chest to her appreciative gaze. Forcing thoughts of her first marriage away, she hurried to get out of her own clothing.

She discarded the beautiful dress and hung it carefully on the foot of the bed so it wouldn't get wrinkled. Then she kicked off her shoes and slid off her delicate lace stockings.

A quick glance at Luke confirmed her wildest dreams. He was completely, gloriously bare. Her gaze drifted down his back and lingered on the taut, rounded perfection of his buttocks. He'd taken off the boot and was steadying himself with one hand on the nightstand, patiently

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waiting for her to finish.

He turned awkwardly, and a bit of humor softened the hunger in his eyes when she discarded her chemise. "I thought you were exquisite in that dress, but I like you this way even better."

"I like you better naked, too," she blurted then looked away as heat suffused her face.

"I'm glad." He put his hand on her chin and made her look at him. "There's no one else I'd trust to let see me this way, Sarah. I didn't expect to ever find someone who would accept the ugliest part of me the way you do."

She attempted a smile. "Thanks to Matt, we both got exactly what we were looking for."

Luke looked a bit startled. "I guess you're right. But let's not tell him that."

He pulled her close and brushed his mouth over hers. But before long, his kisses grew frantic. He guided her to the bed, pressing her down into the soft mattress. Then he rolled onto his back, taking her with him until she was straddling his hips, and he was buried deep within her.

She gasped, taken off guard by this new twist. Until she'd met him, she'd thought there was only one way to make love, but he continued to surprise her.

He smiled wickedly and caught her hips, showing her the way to move. "This time you can set the pace," he whispered. "Show me what feels good to you."

She was awkward and embarrassed at first, feeling his stare on her breasts and face as she moved against him. But soon the magic she always experienced in his arms flared to life, and she forgot about everything but the way he made her feel.

He lifted his head and caught her nipple between his teeth, gently scoring it as she moved frantically, seeking release. He reached between them, stimulating her with his fingertip as he powered deep within her. The combination of sensations washed over her, and she cried out as he surged deep, adding his soft moan to hers.

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\* \* \* \* \*

Luke lay completely still. Even the simple act of breathing seemed to be an effort. Sarah lay atop him, her face pressed into the crook of his shoulder. Never in his life had he known such completion, such peace.

After a long time, he regained enough strength to lift his head and stare down at her. To his shock, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" he asked, wiping her tears away with one fingertip. He'd thought Sarah was enjoying herself as much as he was, but in the end, he'd been so wrapped up in his own bliss he'd ceased to think about hers. He'd pounded into her like a mindless animal.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, spreading kisses of remorse over her lovely face. "I'm so sorry, Sarah. I never meant to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me," she sobbed, returning his kisses with artless passion. "I'm just crying because I'm so happy."

"Happy?" He drew back and read the truth of it in her damp green eyes. Relief flooded him. "I thought I'd hurt you."

"Not at all," she assured him. "It was just so overwhelming. So consuming. Every time we make love I'm convinced it can't get any better, and yet, somehow, it always does."

Relieved, he pressed his lips to her temple. "Make no mistake, sweetheart. This thing between us is special. I've never known anything like it."

"Never?"

He sensed that she was seeking assurances now, wondering about his relationship with Christine. He wanted to tell her she didn't need to worry. He'd never made love to his fiancée. He imagined Christine would have been stiff and unyielding, silently daring him instead of eagerly participating.

"Never." He hugged her tight. "I'm very glad you showed up on my doorstep, sweetheart."

"Me, too," she said on a sigh. "I hope you know how grateful I am for all you've done for me."

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*Gratitude.* He hoped like hell she felt more for him than that. He sighed and rolled to his side, pulling her up tight against him. "Do you want children, sweetheart?"

Until he'd met her, the idea of a family of his own had seemed as unreachable as the moon, but now he awaited her answer with a painful tightness in his throat. He liked the idea of her pregnant with his child. He liked it very much.

"I would love to have your children." Her voice was soft, and her eyes shone with wonder.

"You'd be a wonderful mother," he whispered, letting his hand drift down her body to rest on her flat stomach.

"And you'll be a wonderful father. I love that you're not afraid to show tenderness."

She'd used the word *love* so many times tonight. But she hadn't yet used it in the context he desperately wanted her to. "It will be nice to hold you while I sleep," he told her, changing the subject. "You're so sweet and soft."

She snuggled even closer, her chest pressed against his, her calf thrown across his thigh. "Goodnight, husband," she whispered playfully.

"Goodnight, wife." *I love you*, he added silently, wishing he had the courage to say it out loud.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sarah awoke slowly, savoring the warmth and strength of Luke's body wrapped so casually around her own. They lay spoon fashion, his arm around her waist, his breath soft and gentle in her hair.

If she'd ever been this happy before, she couldn't remember it. No matter how it had come about, Luke was her husband. She would wake up in his arms every morning for the rest of her life. She'd never be lonely again.

He was everything she'd ever wanted. If she ever found the courage to tell him she'd fallen in love with him, he might even reciprocate.

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He stirred behind her and bent to kiss her ear. "Are you awake, sweetheart?"

"Yes." She rolled to face him, taking in every inch of his beautiful, tousled appearance. His smoky gray eyes were warm and slightly unfocused with sleep, his sultry mouth tilted in a lop-sided smile. "Did you sleep well?"

He nodded. "Never better, thanks to you." He brushed her cheek with his fingertip. "Would you mind terribly if I made love to you again?"

Heat suffused her face, but she shook her head, her pulse accelerating just at the thought of it. "Of course not."

Luke's smile widened. "I feel like I've died and gone to heaven, Sarah. I never thought it would be possible to be friends with a woman I desired this much."

Sarah caressed the powerful curves of his chest, gazing into his eyes as they flared with gray fire. "I never knew desire until I met you."

He made a soft, wordless sound and lowered his lips to hers, pulling her closer against him, letting her feel the heat and shape of his need. She reached between them and stroked him with bold confidence, feeling a sense of feminine power as he trembled and throbbed in her hands.

She would never get tired of touching him, never stop wanting him. She couldn't imagine such passion was wrong, not when it was rooted in such love.

The need to tell him, to hear the words in return was overwhelming. She sensed he needed to hear the words nearly as bad as she did.

She straddled his lean hips, sliding along the solid length of his cock, gasping at the exquisite sensation. She cupped his face, gazing into his eyes and hoping she wasn't making a terrible mistake by taking this chance.

"I love you, Luke. You know that, don't you?"

He shuddered as though he'd taken a body blow. "You love me?" Hope and disbelief chased across his face. Then he closed his eyes and groaned. "I don't deserve it, sweetheart. I haven't been honest with you."

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Her heart plummeted as a million possibilities ran through her mind. "What do you mean?"

He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off him, setting her away from him. Cold washed through her and she grabbed the sheet, pulling it up to her chest as she waited for what was sure to be yet another life-altering disappointment.

Sighing, he scrubbed his hand over his face, still not looking at her. "God, sweetheart. I shouldn't have kept this from you. Matt lied to you in those letters, and I was afraid to tell you the truth for fear it would drive you away."

"What are you talking about?" She searched her memory, trying to remember the contents of the letters. They'd been full of lies. She couldn't imagine which one in particular made him think he was unworthy of her love.

He pulled the sheet aside, revealing the wasted remains of his leg. "This." His voice was low and strained. "This happened during the war. I fought for the Union."

She stared at him in confusion. *This* was what he'd been worrying about?

"Say something," he urged. "Tell me you hate me, tell me you want our marriage annulled, but don't just sit there."

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Why do you think this changes anything? I don't care about your past. I love you."

"You love me." He met her gaze. "During one of our first talks, you told me what happened to your sister. I thought you'd hate me if you knew the truth."

"Oh, Luke." She stared at him in dismay. "There were acts of terrible evil committed on both sides of that terrible war. I could never blame you for what happened to Rachel. You told me about your childhood. I understand why you chose to fight for the North."

He pulled her back into his arms, crushing her against his chest, his breath harsh and erratic in her ear. "Sarah. Sweetheart. I thought I was going to lose you."

"Never," she assured him. "You'll never lose me."



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“Oh, Christ.” His big body trembled with the force of his emotion. “I love you, too. From the moment you arrived on my porch, I knew I was lost.”

She clung to him, all her fear washing away. “Then make love to me again. I want to start on that family.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead and she felt him smile. “I love you, wife.”

The End

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### **Author Bio**

Drawn into the happily-after-ever of fairy tales, Diana wrote her first story in elementary school, and has been writing ever since. For the last ten years she's been seriously pursuing a writing career while also juggling a full time job as a police dispatcher. She has won or finalled in over a dozen writing contests, including RWA's prestigious Golden Heart. She lives in a small Colorado town with her wonderful husband and three teen-aged boys.

You can reach her at [diana@dianabold.com](mailto:diana@dianabold.com) or visit her at [www.dianabold.com](http://www.dianabold.com)

**Diana Bold**

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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

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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.*

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

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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.

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.

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"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.

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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