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ANNABELLE'S LEGACY

DIANA PALMER

Annabelle's Legacy

The high rose hedge next door was the first thing Annabelle noticed when she followed the hefty moving men her parents had hired into the huge Victorian mansion on Main Street. El Paso was very far away from her beloved St. Louis, of the green fields and wide rivers. She missed the greenery already, because West Texas was dry and brown and she had been told that the rivers never ran the year around. Instead of the graceful homes and manicured lawns she was accustomed to, she found mesquite with its prickly thorns, and prickly pear cactus, which was even worse.

"Annabelle, don't dawdle, dear," her mother called from the window of the front room. "Help me decide where to put the bookcases."

Annabelle lifted her long skirts and went up the few remaining steps, careful not to show anything but her shoes. The moving men weren't looking, but one must be vigilant, she thought.

Her mother was standing in the middle of the room, fanning herself with a colorful cardboard fan that had *The Last Supper* painted on one side and a funeral home advertisement on the other. "Dear, dear, how hot it is here in the summer!" she moaned.

"Annabelle, we shall fry."

"Perhaps not," her daughter said with a smile. Like herself, her mother was small and blond with pale green eyes. All the Monroe women looked like that, her father had once remarked of her mother and her aunts. She took after that side of the family, rather than her father's, who were Colemans. In almost direct contrast, the Coleman men were tall and dark. Her father's hair was still dark brown, although he was approaching his forty-fifth year. His sideburns and beard and mustache had streaks of silver, which gave him a regal dignity. "It will be a new experience," she added. "We must try to be happy here, for Papa's sake."

Her mother sighed. "Yes, I know. Poor Edwin, he did not wish to take this appointment, but it was difficult for him to refuse. He has only just been given this position with the Texas and Pacific Railway, and of course he must be here to oversee his duties. I think there will be much socializing. That should make our stay here bearable, at least."

Annabelle grimaced. She hated social gatherings. She much preferred her beloved books to the sort of people her parents kept company with.

Absently she glanced toward the house next door. It was older than this nice one they were to live in, rather unique in its design. It was made of rock and it had a neat, small yard with rosebushes everywhere. She was immediately captivated by it, and she wondered who lived there.

"Do you know anything of the house next door?" Annabelle asked one of the movers.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, wiping sweat from his brow with a brawny arm. "John Torrance lives there."

Wouldn't bother him if I was you. He hates people. Cussed a man out just this week, in fact, for asking him to write some answers down for a census. Threw him off the place, he did. He's one tough customer, miss."

"Is he an elderly man, then?"

The mover chuckled. "Nope. But he's got a temper that acts like it took years to cultivate."

"Does he have a family? Is he married?"

The mover shook his head and started to lift the heavy chair again. "Not likely that a woman would go near him. He shocks folks, when they first see him—" A loud voice inquired as to his whereabouts. "I'm coming, Ned!" He excused himself and went on down the hall.

Annabelle was intrigued by their mysterious neighbor. She and her father and mother and two young

sisters, Rose and Jane, settled in, and she found time to sit and read near a gap in the rose hedge in the garden the yardman cared for so lovingly, on a bench under a big mesquite tree with long, feathery green fronds.

She had a special book, an heirloom that her mother treasured, and which she had given to Annabelle when she was just eighteen. Her mother had told her that there were several copies of the book. Annabelle had once seen the original manuscript written by a monk in the Middle Ages in Europe, in Latin, of course. It had been donated almost a century ago to the Library of Congress. At that time Annabelle's great-great-grandmother had given a copy of the book to each of her three daughters. One of those copies had been passed down to her through her own grandmother, Charity Monroe.

Annabelle had first seen the original during a memorable visit to the nation's capital. Her loving hands had trembled as they traced the colorful Latin script. The delicate pages were illuminated, and it was just as well that it was in Latin, for the English of the Middle Ages when it had been written would have been very nearly unreadable in 1900. Its language would have been more akin to the style of *Beowulf* than to the language of Shakespeare. The Latin had not proved difficult, as almost every university student in America studied it, along with Greek. Annabelle had been tutored in Latin, and it was a thrill beyond words to actually read something so old, so priceless, to hold the original book, with its illuminated capital letters: broadswords for the T's and kite-shaped shields for the V's and fiery dragons for the S's.

Her own copy of the book resided in a handmade wooden chest, inlaid with gold. She loved to sit and read it while she yearned to find the wondrous love that the book spoke of. Her fingers would trace the leather binding and her eyes would caress the pages. There were inscriptions in it that ran through generations of women, many in almost incomprehensible Old English, all undoubtedly in quest of the magical feeling called love. One inscription written in the time of Elizabeth I—by one of her ladies!—read, "... with honour comes glo-rie." It was that inscription which had fired Annabelle's imagination and made her thirst for so noble a love that it inspired a great work of literature. And she was not the only one whom it inspired. Her sisters, Rose and Jane, who were still in grammar school, loved to curl up in the porch swing or the bench in the backyard, one on each side of her, to listen as she read from the special book.

It wasn't long after their arrival that she became aware of noises in the brush near where she sat each afternoon reading to the girls, after the noon meal. At first it was distant. Then, slowly, day by day, the noise came closer.

One day, when she sent the girls back inside, she lifted the skirts of her lacy white dress and followed the noise, moving quickly around the crepe myrtle bushes before her unknown audience could get away.

The man she confronted caused her heart to still in her breast. He was tall, very dark, with narrowed eyes the color of peridots. His hair was black as coal dust. He was wearing respectable clothing, a good cotton shirt and tie with cord trousers and a lightweight jacket. But it was his face that would haunt her. She winced when she first saw it, and the man flinched.

"I beg your pardon," he said gruffly. "I was trimming my roses. I did not mean to intrude."

She saw, then, the shears in his left hand. She wondered if her heartbeat, so wild and fluttery, would cause her to faint. The whalebone corset was restricting her breath in the heat and she could feel her lungs straining for air.

"Will you faint, then?" he demanded with a sarcastic smile. "Plenty before you have taken that avenue of escape."

She straightened, pale but resolved. "You must be Mr. Torrance," she said, extending a small hand. "I am Annabelle Coleman. I have just moved here with my mother and father and two young sisters. My father is an executive with the Texas and Pacific Railway."

He ignored her extended hand. The thick white scars down his cheek seemed to grow as his face tightened. He wore no beard to hide them, nor did he look embarrassed or ashamed. But he said nothing.

"What happened to your face, Mr. Torrance?" she asked gently, with concern, not pity.

He blinked. It was an approach that had never been made toward him before. He hesitated.

"If the question offends, I will withdraw it," she added in a conciliatory tone.

"It does not offend. Not when you ask," he said quietly. "I was in Mexico helping to hunt down insurrectionists. Yaquis caught me and another recruit out on the desert."

"Yaquis?" She waited, because the word was unfamiliar.

"You might call them Indians. They were deperate men. They thought I was working for the *Federates*, so

they gave me a going-over. The man with me died."

It was a blunt remark, and it presented a vivid picture of what he must have endured.

"This is only what shows," he added, touching the scarred cheek. He laughed coldly.

She bit her lower lip. "It was a knife, was it not?" she said. "It must have hurt terribly. I am sorry, Mr. Torrance, if I have brought back unpleasant memories for you with my silly questions."

He waved the inference away with a big, tanned hand. His eyes narrowed as they searched hers. "You aren't afraid of me."

She smiled. "Should I be? You grow the most magnificent roses, Mr. Torrance. I have admired them, and your house, ever since we moved here."

The cold eyes twinkled. "You like flowers, Miss . . . ?"

"Coleman. And, yes, I like them very much."

He studied her, from the topknot of blond hair that ballooned into a halo around her oval face to her soft green eyes, so much darker than his own. The high lace collar at her neck fluttered, as if her pulse was racing. The lace at her breast was rising and falling quickly, too, but he had enough gentlemanly instincts not to lower his eyes indiscreetly.

"You are very young, Miss Coleman," he remarked finally.

"Twenty, sir," she replied. "Hardly so young."

"When you are thirty-six, you will not think so."

"At that time, I shall be in my prime," she answered pertly, and smiled.

He lifted the shears. "I must get back to my work."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Longer than I ever meant to," he said. "My brother was an invalid. I came to live with him after . . ." He paused. "He died a few months later and left me the house. I stayed."

"Are you a native Texan?"

He nodded. "But you, I think, are not."

"We are from St. Louis."

"Northerners."

"You need not make us sound like a curse," she returned with mock hauteur. Her green eyes twinkled. "We are good people and neither nosy nor noisy. You will find that we make excellent neighbors, except that we are all inclined to talk too much."

He laughed. The sound shocked his own ears. It 337

had been such a long time since anyone had made him want to laugh.

"There, you look much less ferocious when you are not scowling at people."

He shook his head. "You are too familiar, Miss Coleman. Your parents would not approve. I am no fitting companion for a child of your years."

"I shall say who is a fitting companion," she returned, but she glanced back at the house for a flutter of window curtains, just the same. "If you are trimming your roses at the same hour tomorrow, you might let me introduce you to my sisters."

He averted his gaze. "And shock them, too?"

"It was a momentary shock," she replied. "You expect people to be horrified by you, but once you speak, one forgets that you are scarred."

"By God!" he snapped, irritated.

"Sir!" she exclaimed, shocked that a gentleman would use such language in front of a lady. Outbursts of that sort in a lady's presence, like cursing, were against every convention known to society.

He let out an angry breath. "Very well, excuse me. I must go."

"Then good day, Mr. Torrance."

He inclined his head and turned to walk away. She noticed then that he limped, and her face contorted. The scars on his face were the only ones that showed. She could have wept for him, but she sensed that such a man would abhor pity. So her features were carefully schooled when he suddenly looked back, as she expected him to. He saw no trace of pity in her steady gaze. He laughed mirthlessly at his mistaken certainty that there would be, and continued painfully on his way.

Annabelle wandered back into the house, wondering how long it had been since his terrible experience and if he would ever be able to walk naturally again. The scars on his face were white and thick, which must

denote age. New wounds, such as the cut on her hand from a mishandled knife, were red and raw-looking. She had one old scar, which was white and thick like his. But hers was from a fall at the school she had attended in St. Louis. His were from a much more terrifying source.

She walked into the parlor, and her parents looked up expectantly.

"The girls said that you spoke to that recluse next door," her father said solemnly. "This is not proper behavior, to be seen alone with a man of his sort."

"His sort?" she asked innocently.

"He is a rogue," her father related. "I have heard of Mr. Torrance in the town. He was one of that vicious breed of Texas Rangers. They say that he has killed men, my dear."

"If he was a lawman, that is not surprising. Grandpa Monroe was a lawman, too," she reminded him, hiding her momentary shock. She had not thought of Mr. Torrance as a killer of men, and she did not like to. She smiled at her father. "He is a good man. I feel it. He adores roses. He grows them."

He shifted. "Hardly an occupation for a rowdy border outlaw," he muttered.

"He is not an outlaw."

"You must not contradict your father," her mother said firmly.

"If he were correct, I would not," Annabelle said, and grinned at her father.

"I am a poor father," he muttered. "I spoil you, Annabelle."

"You both do," she agreed. "He is a bitter, hurt man," she added. "A good Christian does not turn away from those who are lost sheep," she reminded them.

Her father muttered something about some sheep faring better as mutton, but he didn't insist that she stop speaking to their neighbor. He knew that it would do no good. Annabelle was as stubborn as he was. And trying to save the lost souls of society was, as his daughter said, every good Christian's duty.

"Do take care not to be alone with him, Annabelle," her mother cautioned. "One does not expect gentlemanly conduct of such a man. I would not have your reputation endangered for all the world."

"Nor would I, Mama," she assured her parent.

"Is he an outlaw, Anna?" Rose asked excitedly.

"Perhaps he's a robber, like that Cassidy man," Jane seconded.

"He was a peace officer," she countered. "A Texas Ranger."

"Oh! Oh!" Rose exclaimed. "How very exciting! Does he have a gun? Do you think he might show it to us?"

"Rose, shame on you!" her mother exclaimed. "You are reading far too many dime novels. Those are not true. Surely you know that it is only fiction!"

"Where there is smoke, there is often fire," Annabelle replied. She grinned at her mother. "Remember Grandpa's stories about desperadoes and lawmen with their guns blazing, shooting it out in a hail of smoking gunfire?"

Her mother flushed. "For shame, Annabelle! I always believed he made most of those stories up."

But Annabelle wasn't fooled. She knew that her mother had loved her papa's tales of the Wild West as much as her children did. Annabelle went out to the backyard with her sisters and her precious book, hoping that her desperado would be there. The violence of his former job she pushed to the back of her mind.

Every day she read aloud, and every day he listened. She knew, and he knew, that pruning the roses was only a pretense. She wondered why, if he enjoyed hearing this story so much, he didn't read books himself. He was a curious man. She introduced him to Jane and Rose, but he was withdrawn and quickly excused himself. After that, she kept her distance.

He fascinated her, though. She noticed that when he left his house, which was rarely, he always rode the horse that he kept at the local livery. He never drove a carriage or a buggy.

One day, when she finished reading to the girls, she clutched the book to her breast and went around the hedge to ask him why.

"What business is my mode of travel to you?" he asked, but not unkindly.

"I am curious."

"My mother was killed in a buggy wreck," he replied simply. "I never ride in one if I can help it."

"Some horses never adapt to pulling buggies," she began.

"I know that, now," he returned.

She smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry."

He searched her face with slow, strange eyes. "How is it that your parents allow you to speak, alone, with a stranger? Are they not concerned that I might mean you harm?"

She lowered her eyes so that he couldn't read too much in them. "They are good parents. They trust me.

"They do not know me," he reminded her.

"They do, after a fashion," she replied. "You are spoken of by people."

"Gossiped about," he flashed irritably.

"That, too. You keep to yourself. People in communities always talk about those who avoid the company of their fellows."

He shrugged. "I have no interest in socializing."

She remembered the census taker he'd thrown out, and the way he listened when she read from her book.

She eyed him with curiosity, hesitant to frame a question she would have to ask one day.

He glanced down at the book in her hands. "What is that book you read from?" he asked abruptly.

"It is a copy of an heirloom," she told him, "handed down in my family from mother to daughter for generations. The original, which is in the Library of Congress, is written in Latin. It is so old that no one alive remembers its origin, although certainly it came from Europe. Legend says that it was written by a monk. Certainly it's a story to inspire reverence."

"The way you read it is invigorating."

"Thank you." She smiled. "Do you have a favorite book, Mr. Torrance?"

His face closed up. "No."

"Not even the Bible?"

His jaw tightened. He didn't answer.

She stepped closer to him. "Mr. Torrance," she said gently, "you cannot read, can you?"

He gave her a furious glare, turned on his heel, and stormed back toward his house. She grimaced, disgusted with herself. She should not have blurted it out like that. She should have waited, led up to it.

Now she had insulted him and he would not come near her again. Oh, her wicked tongue!

She went back into her own house with a morose expression, prompting her mother to ask what had caused it.

She lifted her eyes to her mother's, smiled wistfully, and replied, "It is the part I have reached in my book," she lied glibly. "It is so sad."

"Ah, but there is a happy ending." Her mother, having read the book many times, knew. "Do not let the obstacles impede you, my dear. True love must pass through a difficult course or it is not worthy of the name. Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without struggle and risk."

The words were an adage, but Annabelle realized that she had expected her friendship with John Torrance to progress easily, without risk. It could not. He was a bitter man, and a proud one. If he truly could not read and write, he would not want to admit it, especially to a woman who was a stranger to him. She had imposed on him, rushed him. It would take time to bring him around. But if she could, perhaps she could help him.

How sad that a man could achieve such an age and not know how to read. It was such a waste. Why, what would life be without the joy of exploring another human being through the pages of a book? So many authors had become friends to Annabelle through their words, reaching across the centuries sometimes to find her eyes and her heart and her mind. What a treasure of history was contained in those black markings on white paper. Oh, she must teach Mr. Torrance, somehow, to read. He had no idea what worlds she; could present to him, if he could.

She read to the girls for the next few days in the garden, but there was no more rustling on the other side of the hedge. The house next door stood silent.

Annabelle began to despair, because she could hardly walk up on his porch and demand that he speak to her. But now that she had some inkling of the reason for his bad temper and his reclusiveness, she had to help him. If only he would come back! She would be more patient; she would bide her time until she could win his trust.

When it looked as though he had given up listening to her sessions with her sister, one day she heard again the sharp snip of the shears on the other side of the hedge. She had to fight sudden tears, because it was certainly the answer to a prayer.

"Annabelle, do you hear . . .?" Jane began excitedly.

Annabelle put a finger to her lips, also cautioning Rose, whose eyes were like saucers as she tried to add her comments to her sister's.

"What an exciting book this is," Rose said instead. "I never tire of hearing you read it, Anna."

"Nor do I," Jane added. "Do continue."

And Annabelle did, slowly, enunciating every word. The shears were silent for the duration of the story. Then they began again, more animatedly.

This time, though, Annabelle didn't go around the hedge to find the gardener. She continued on to the house with her sisters. For several days afterward, she read the book until, finally, she finished it.

"What a delightful tale," Jane sighed. "Is such a love possible, do you think, Annabelle? Can a man and a woman care so much for each other that they would risk everything to be together?"

"I think that it is possible," Annabelle said carefully. "I have never been in love. But one day, I shall. And so shall you. Now scoot! Mama will be expecting you to help with the new quilt."

"I hate quilting," Rose muttered.

"Me too," Jane agreed. They continued on to the house, still complaining. Annabelle lingered on the bench, hesitating. She listened for a step, and wondered if he had gone back inside after all.

But a minute later there was a rustle, and he came around the hedge, his shears in his hand. He looked out of sorts.

"Have you always known that I was there?" he asked, nodding toward the hedge.

"Yes," she said simply. She gnawed on her lower lip. "I am sorry to have made you uncomfortable when I spoke to you last. I am sometimes impetuous. I say things that I should not."

He waved it away. "I have been a victim of the written word most of my life. Both my parents were illiterate. I was too busy on our ranch to go to school. I never learned to read and write. Now, it is becoming an embarrassment to me. The census taker insisted that I fill out his form, without bothering to ask if I could read it."

"And that was why you threw him out?"

He chuckled. "I see that my reputation has spread."

"Indeed." She clutched the book closer.

"I have enjoyed hearing you read from that book," he said after a minute. "Is that what it really says, or do you change it as you read it?"

"Oh, no, I read it exactly as it was written so many years ago." Her hands tightened around the book. "This is a translation, of course, and there may be minor differences. But the story is just the same." She hesitated, peering up at him. "When I read the Bible, I learn about the people and places that existed when our Lord walked the earth. When I look at a book of poetry and prose, I hear words that some writer thought up centuries ago. It is ... it is like communicating with people who are long dead. Their thoughts, their dreams, their goals, their heartaches are all there on the paper for me to see and think about and experience." Her eyes gleamed with excitement as she spoke earnestly to him. "I can see into the past through the pages of this book," she said, tracing its leather binding to the tiny brass latch that held it together. "I can hear the thoughts of some of the most famous thinkers and dreamers who ever walked the earth."

"I could ... do that, if I could read?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. And more than that, you could write down what you think and feel. And perhaps in a hundred years, someone might read what you had written and know what sort of person you were, where you lived, what you thought and felt."

He began to smile. "It sounds like magic."

"It is," she said fervently. "It is!"

He hesitated, glancing from his shears up to her flushed face. "Miss Coleman . . . could you . . . teach me ... to read and write?"

"I believe so," she said. She smiled. "Oh, yes, I believe so, Mr. Torrance, if you would like me to!"

He nodded. He glanced toward her house and grimaced. "I would not like my . . . lack of education to become common knowledge. Of course, your family would have to know, otherwise they would not approve." "I know that."

"And we must not be alone," he emphasized. She flushed. "Sir!"

"I do not mean to sound forward. But for the sake of your reputation," he insisted, "your sisters must accompany you if you come to my house."

"I am certain that they would be delighted."

He wasn't. But he wanted to be able to read a book. She made it sound like the end of the rainbow. "Then will you speak to your parents, or do you wish me to?"

"Let me," she pleaded. "It will be easier."

He agreed. "Then . . . you will let me know?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." He moved jerkily back around the hedge, limping more than usual. She watched him go with a peculiar sense of pleasure. It was the beginning of something. Time would tell what the something was. She spoke with her parents that very evening, prepared for a stand-up fight, if that was what it took.

But, surprisingly, her father was astonished at what she told him.

"The poor chap!" her father exclaimed, putting down the paper he was reading. "Annabelle, what a handicap he must suffer in his business dealings."

"Indeed, Father," she said. "I am encouraged that he could admit to such a lack of knowledge. I have the time, you know, and I was best friends with Matilda Hawkins in St. Louis, who was a schoolteacher. I observed, and even helped with her charges when she taught primary school. I am certain that I know how to teach reading."

"In that case, I have no objection. But you must not go to his home alone . . ."

"Rose and Jane can come with me," she said, grinning.

Her father nodded. "Very well. And not at night."

"Certainly not," she agreed.

Her mother, who had been an interested but passive listener, nodded. "I am encouraged by your interest in this poor man, Annabelle. Perhaps we were wrong to judge him so harshly on first appearances."

"And perhaps we were not," Mr. Coleman said carefully. "All the same, it will help him to better himself if he is able to read and write."

That seemed to be the end of the matter. Delighted at having gotten her way, Annabelle went to her room and sprawled on the canopied bed with lace dripping from its high ceiling and, pencil and paper in hand, began to outline a course of study.

A week later, her daily meetings with John Torrance, with her sisters, were beginning to show promise. Impatient at first with his slow pace, Torrance had finally accepted that these lessons would not lead to immediate literacy. He stopped complaining at the snail's pace and began to work hard at tracing each letter of the alphabet until he knew them on sight. From there, they progressed to sounding out the vowels. By the second week, they were ready to begin with simple text from the primer.

He read each word carefully, pausing to ask what it meant. Annabelle was the soul of patience, not rushing him, not demeaning him when he forgot the occasional letter or had to have a vowel sounded out for him. When he could read a whole sentence without help, the brilliance of his smile was startling.

"I never knew it would be fun," he remarked.

"But of course it is," she replied gently. "And this is only the beginning, Mr. Torrance."

"Indeed," Jane said, catching the enthusiasm of the adults. "Why, you can read about other countries and other people, like the Indians."

He pursed his lips and his eyes twinkled. "Which Indians?"

Jane paused. "I do not understand."

"Which tribe?" he persisted.

"Oh, tribe! You mean like the Comanches and the Apaches."

"Very good. Now, do you know how to recognize one from the other?"

"No. Do you?" she asked excitedly.

He did, and took a minute to describe the feathered headbands and the long-feathered headdresses worn by the Comanche warriors and chiefs as opposed to the cloth bands worn by the Apaches.

Not only the mode of dress was different, so was the language and the way they lived. Plains Indians lived in tepees, tall circular tents covered by hides, while Apaches built small round wickiups of wood and grass.

"Even the arrows are different/and the arrowheads bound to them with sinew or rawhide," he continued.

"Back in the old days, you could tell not only which tribe made a certain arrow, but which warrior within a tribe made it."

"That's swell, Mr. Torrance!" Rose enthused. "My, you do know a lot about Indians!"

He smiled coolly. "I do, indeed, Miss Rose."

Annabelle thought it prudent to change the subject, which she did, pointing out that time was running away and they still had much ground to cover in this lesson.

Later, the girls walked ahead to the hedge while Annabelle dawdled behind with John Torrance.

"I'm sorry if Jane embarrassed you with her questions," she said.

"I wasn't embarrassed," he replied. "I like talking about the few subjects that I'm not ignorant about."

She blushed. "If I have made you feel uncomfortable—"

"Don't be absurd," he said curtly. "It is only that I feel ignorant when I see how well-read you are. I know a great deal about Indians and Mexicans and guns. I know very little of polite society."

"I think your parlor manners are extremely well developed," she replied, smiling as she remembered how meticulously he had served them tea, despite the age and condition of his teapot and cups; they were clean, if not expensive.

She glanced at him, fascinated all over again by his elegance of carriage. He was a tall man, but unlike many tall men, he didn't walk stooped over to diminish his height. His back was arrow straight, and his jutting chin was always held up. He had a way of looking at people that would have intimidated a lawbreaker. He didn't blink or avert his eyes. He looked straight at people, and there was honesty in his level gaze. Even on such short acquaintance, Annabelle would have trusted him with her life. It surprised her that he made such a strong impression. Certainly, she told herself, it was because he was an apt pupil.

They paused at the row of hedge bushes, where the path led to her front porch. The gas lamps were on inside, and light spilled out of the long windows onto the green grass and the front porch. Where

Annabelle stood with her student, however, it was pleasantly dark.

"Next week we shall try something harder," she promised.

"Not this weekend?"

"I always go to town with my family on Saturdays, and there is church on Sunday." I see.

"You are not a churchgoer," she guessed.

He made an awkward movement with his shoulders. "I never was. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in God. A man who's seen the things and suffered the things I have must believe in Him or ;: mad. Now, more than ever, I am convinced of a guiding hand in life."

She smiled, delighted. "One day you might consider going to church."

"With this face?" he asked mockingly. "The ladies of the congregation would exit screaming through every door of the building."

She went close to him and laid a gentle hand on his arm. It was surprisingly strong and muscular, firm under her cool fingers. She heard the stark intake of his breath, and a thrill went through her.

"You are not so hideous as you seem to think," she told him. "You are a brave and good man."

He stilled. "You take risks," he said.

His voice sounded strained, and she noticed a tension in his posture that had not been there before.

"I do not understand," she faltered.

He laughed sardonically. "No?" His lean hands caught her firmly by the upper arms and brought her against him. While her mind worked frantically at solutions, he bent, and she felt the brief, hard pressure of his mouth against her soft, untouched lips.

She gasped aloud, but she didn't strike him or speak when he drew back a breath. In fact, she hung there, more fascinated than ever, frozen in time by the unexpected action, which was not at all unpleasant.

His fingers contracted, bruising her arms. "You do not recoil," he murmured deeply. "Am I truly not repugnant, or are you merely curious about this? Have you not been kissed before?"

Her mind managed to curl around one of the questions. "I have not," she whispered. She stood very still in his grasp, afraid that he might withdraw if she moved. Her book spoke of a kiss, but she had never known what one was, not really. This might be the only time she would have to find out. "Mr. Torrance," she continued in a hushed tone, trying to see his lean face in the dim light, "would you . . . could you . . . do it again . . . please?"

His chest rose and fell both visibly and audibly. This was outrageous behavior, and he should be ashamed of himself. She was very young and he knew better. But the lure of her soft lips was more than he could resist.

He bent again, to her secret delight, and she kept her eyes open. She could barely make out his eyes. They

closed and she saw his thick eyelashes as his lips touched hers again. But this time, there was a difference. His lips lingered, brushed and lifted, traced and teased until he made her feel curious sensations that centered in her breasts and her belly. She felt her breath catch and as he continued the tender assault, her body began to tense and tingle all over.

Instinctively, she stepped closer to him, finding that his hands eagerly allowed this familiarity. Indeed, they encouraged it, sliding around her to close around her shoulders and waist and urge her body even nearer his own.

This was magic, indeed, she thought dizzily. She could actually feel his legs touching her through her skirt, his chest crushing her breasts above her corset! She made a soft sound, and her arms reached up to curve around his neck.

His lips lifted once more. She felt the uneven tenor of his warm, coffee-scented breath and she stood on tiptoe, dazed, hungry.

"Miss Coleman," he said in a faint, choked tone, "this is becoming . . ."

What it was becoming never made it past his throat, because her mouth pushed upward against his and his arms contracted, lifting her so that her body fit exactly against his own. He shuddered with pleasure and gave himself up to the sacrifice of her warm mouth.

A long moment later, he forced himself to release her. He was shivering with need. It had been so long, so very long, since he had known a woman's touch. He moved back from her, afraid that she might be offended.

"How . . . sweet," she whispered brokenly. "How very, very sweet! I have read about it, you know, but the reality is . . . devastating!"

'And dangerous," he replied curtly. "This should not have happened. You must go home at once."

She was surprised. "You did not like it?" she asked hesitantly. She wished that she could see his face. "I am sorry. I thought. . . good night, Mr. Torrance!"

She whirled and ran, tears in her eyes. She had been too forward. She had offended him. He hated her!

He had her by the arm before she made it to the porch. He turned her gently, and mopped her face with a pristine white handkerchief.

"You have much to learn about men," he said with black humor. "And I should not be the one to teach you. Suffice it to say that some pleasures are too sweet to remain innocent, and let it go at that. You must not take things so much to heart."

"I thought that you hated me. You have said before that I am too forward," she said, subdued.

"What just happened was not solely your doing," he replied. "If you recall, it was I who started it. I have no regrets, and I hope that you do not. But it must not happen again. We are pupil and instructor. That is all we can ever be to one another."

She listened to him with dismay and had a sudden, terrifying thought. "Are you . . . married?"

"No!"

She relaxed a little.

"Nor do I ever intend to be," he said firmly. "Make no mistake about this. I will take another month or so to heal completely, and then I will return to my job, to the Texas Ranger post in Alpine."

"But. . . but you are in such poor condition!"

"I have seen Rangers in worse condition return to the job," he mused. "We are a tough bunch."

She thought of what he had endured, and what he might yet have to endure, and she was horrified. She could find nothing to say to him.

"You will find a young man," he said, made uncomfortable by her silence.

She still could not speak. She finally found her voice as she heard her father and mother through the open parlor window. "I will see you on Monday, Mr. Torrance. Good evening, and thank you for the tea."

He made a rough sound under his breath as she turned and walked composedly to the porch and into her house. He went back home in a vicious temper. He hoped that she would give up on him now that he had told her what his plans were for the future. He had no right to subject such a young, well-bred woman to the sort of life he led. She was not fit for it. But that one taste of her lips had been sweet. It would last him all his life, he thought as he closed and locked his own front door. Yes, it would last him until he went down into the dark, with her name on his lips.

Unaware of his thoughts, Annabelle muttered until she fell asleep, with tears on her pillow. There would be no younger man in her life, she thought miserably, because she was in love with a scarred, embittered

Texas Ranger who did not want her. For the first time, she loathed her heirloom book. It was a lie, she told herself as she closed her eyes. There was no such thing as true love or glory. It was a pretty myth to read to children, who still had her illusions. After tonight, she was certain that hers were gone forever.

But, oh, the pleasure of his arms and his hard mouth on hers would last her until she was an old woman, she mused. And even then, she would still see his beloved face and hear his deep drawl and be in love all over again.

* * *

The weekend dragged by. Annabelle pretended not to notice the lights going on and off next door. She followed her usual routine with her parents, and after the second Sunday service in the evening, she prepared for bed without any real enthusiasm. Tomorrow was Monday, and she had no idea if she would even be welcome at the house next door.

She opened the chest that contained her precious book and touched it lovingly. If only, she thought, if only it were more than a sweet fiction. She wanted nothing more than to share the hard, dangerous life of their neighbor. She would ask nothing, need nothing, if she only had his love. She closed the chest and put it away. Time would tell, she thought. If it was destined, then she would certainly share his fate. If not, then all the hoping and wishing and dreaming in the world would not transport her one step nearer him.

She gathered her primer and paper and pencils the next afternoon and, with Jane and Rose in tow, started determinedly next door.

But when she knocked, there was no answer. The curtains were all drawn. There was no sound from within. She noticed a fresh bottle of milk beside the door, but it was a day old and unrefrigerated. Out of an icebox, it was certainly spoiled.

"Where is he, do you suppose?" Jane asked.

"He must be away," Annabelle replied loudly. In fact, he was probably hiding on the other side of the door to avoid her. He was making it obvious that he didn't want to see her. "Let us return home, girls," she added, her voice raised.

But instead of leaving, she motioned the girls next door and winked at them. Curious but unprotesting, they took the primer and paper from her outstretched hands and quickly went away.

She put her ear to the door and listened. Sure enough, there was a voice inside. But it was not Torrance's voice. Her heart stopped as she heard it.

"Your posse just took to its heels, Torrance," a rough voice said, laughing unpleasantly. "Too bad. You won't be spared, now. I figured you'd be easy game after the Yaquis cut you up, and so you were. In the old days, I'd never have got the drop on you. Now you're going to pay for shooting my brothers. When the 4:30 train rolls through town and blows its whistle, I'm going to ease a .45 slug right through your hard head, and by the time the train is gone, so will I be, right out the open back window. They probably won't find you for days!"

Horried, Annabelle put a hand to her throbbing heart. She must act, but how? Her father was not at home. There were no men close by except old Mr. James, who could not even hold a pistol in his arthritic hands. Annabelle had no gun.

Her eyes searched frantically for a weapon, and found one easy to hand. It was a big hoe, the one he used to weed his roses. Now, how to save him?

The man inside had said that the back window was open. The windows were very low in this house, and without screens. She dashed around back, keeping low, and discovered the kitchen window raised.

Carefully, heart pounding, she eased off her shoes, and in her stocking feet she climbed through the window. Thank God she had been something of a tomboy back home, and not the proper lady her mother had wanted! She reached down for the hoe and pulled it carefully inside.

Then she made her way, ever so cautiously, down the wide hall to the front room, where she caught a glimpse of John Torrance sitting in a straight chair while a short, wizened man leveled a huge pistol at his chest. Heavens, how would she ever sneak up on the man?

As she stood there, undecided, Torrance's head turned. She never knew if it had been a sound that his sharp ears had picked up, or an instinctive knowledge that she was nearby. Whatever the reason, he saw her. The expression on his face at that moment would haunt her as long as she lived. There was astonishment, delight, joy, and then a sort of horror.

Without giving any indication that his quick glance had found anything out of the ordinary, he lifted his

chin and looked at the gunman. "Go ahead," he challenged. "If you're going to kill me, do it right now. Pull the trigger, damn you! You coward, you fool, shoot!"

Annabelle's heart stopped in her chest. She realized immediately what he meant to do. He was going to force the man to kill him so that she wouldn't put herself at risk on his behalf. It was a sacrifice of unspeakable proportions. And she knew at once why he had done it. She knew that he loved her. From anguish, she felt transported to almost ethereal joy. Did he not realize that she would have no life without him? If he were to die, then so would she. Her jaw tautened and she began to look around the room for a better weapon than the one in her hand.

Torrance, having failed at his gamble, saw the gunman laugh.

"Oh, no, you're not going to trick me into doing anything hasty," he told Torrance. "The train will come any minute. Then I'll do the deed. I'm not going to risk getting caught. It's too bad you weren't on your guard, isn't it?"

Torrance forced himself to remain calm, although he stood right now to lose the thing he loved most in the world, and it wasn't his own life. "It's a pity I didn't have time to get to the loaded shotgun I keep in the corner near the pantry," he agreed. He had no idea if Annabelle could even shoot a gun, but if she could find it and threaten the outlaw with it, that might be enough. If only the man didn't take the risk of trying to shoot her. Dear God, keep her safe!

Annabelle heard the admonition, and with a faint sigh of something akin to relief, she tiptoed to the corner of the dining room where the pantry was and found the shotgun. It was incredibly heavy. But she knew how to use one; her Grandpa Monroe had taught her.

With determination, she hefted the weapon and tiptoed back to the doorway. The gunman was looking at his watch, paying no particular attention to anything except the time. Sure enough, in the distance, the sound of the train's whistle could now be heard. Any minute it would chug into town and that awful pistol would fire, and her John would be dead!

She saw John's body tauten and knew that he was aware of her presence. She didn't look at him. She leveled the shotgun at the gunman.

"Drop it right now!" she yelled, and cocked the shotgun.

The gunman flinched as if she'd struck him. The watch fell from his hand and the gun jerked in anticipation of his next action.

"Don't do it!" Torrance yelled at the gunman. "She's won awards with that shotgun!"

The remark startled the gunman into indecision, and before he could gather his thoughts, Torrance dived for him.

It was over in seconds. Torrance had wrestled the pistol away from him and laid the barrel across his forehead with a sickening thud. The man sprawled unconscious.

Torrance got to his feet and turned. His face was paper white, his eyes terrifying. "Are you all right?" he asked hoarsely.

She was shaking. "No!" she burst out, tears stinging her eyes. "I've never been so afraid in all my life."

He burst out laughing. After that brave show, she'd suddenly become witless. He took the shotgun out of her tense hands, released the trigger gently so as not to discharge the weapon, and put it aside.

She flew into his arms, pressing as close as she could get, her voice breaking as she let all her fears past her tight throat.

He gathered her close and bent to kiss her with such tenderness that she did cry. She clung to him, a second skin, part of him.

"Oh, you shall have to marry me now," she whispered at his hard mouth. "I can be your backup man and carry something smaller and less intimidating, and I shall help you catch outlaws. See? Now I am experienced!"

Her laughing eyes defeated him. He touched her face with a lean hand that trembled. "I can give you so little," he began heavily.

"That is not true," she replied softly. "You love me."

His cheeks went ruddy. "You sound very sure of yourself."

"You would have let him kill you to spare me any risk," she said, humbled by the memory. "But do you not know that there would be no life for me without you?"

That stunned him. "You love me?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and slid closer to him, clinging contentedly. "Terribly!"

His hands smoothed up and down her back absently. He reviewed all the obstacles in his mind, but he couldn't find one that really mattered. Age, upbringing, none of it could stand against the love they shared. "I shall ask your father for your hand in marriage," he said quietly. "But I fear that he will not give it."

"Then we shall elope in the dead of night and live in sin until we can find a circuit preacher!"

He laughed out loud. "Annabelle!"

"He will agree," she promised. "My father loves me. He will want nothing more than my happiness." She traced his scarred cheek with a loving hand. "All the long years I read my wonderful book, I hoped that I would one day find the sort of life it spoke about. I never dreamed that it would be so sweet, or that I would discover it in such a violent way."

He sighed contentedly. "You can read it to our children," he said, smiling. "And perhaps they, too, will find the miracle we have found."

She reached up to kiss him. "Of that, I have no doubt."

Her family was horrified at the risk they had both taken, but no one objected to Annabelle marrying her Texas Ranger. He did return to his job in Alpine, and she went with him, an excited and rapturously happy new bride. And in time, after years of happiness and the birth of two sons, Annabelle had a daughter. She was the delight of her parents and the worst nightmare of her two brothers, but she completed the family circle. She grew into a beautiful young woman and, when she was eighteen, Annabelle's literary legacy was once again passed from mother to daughter. And a new chapter of love began.