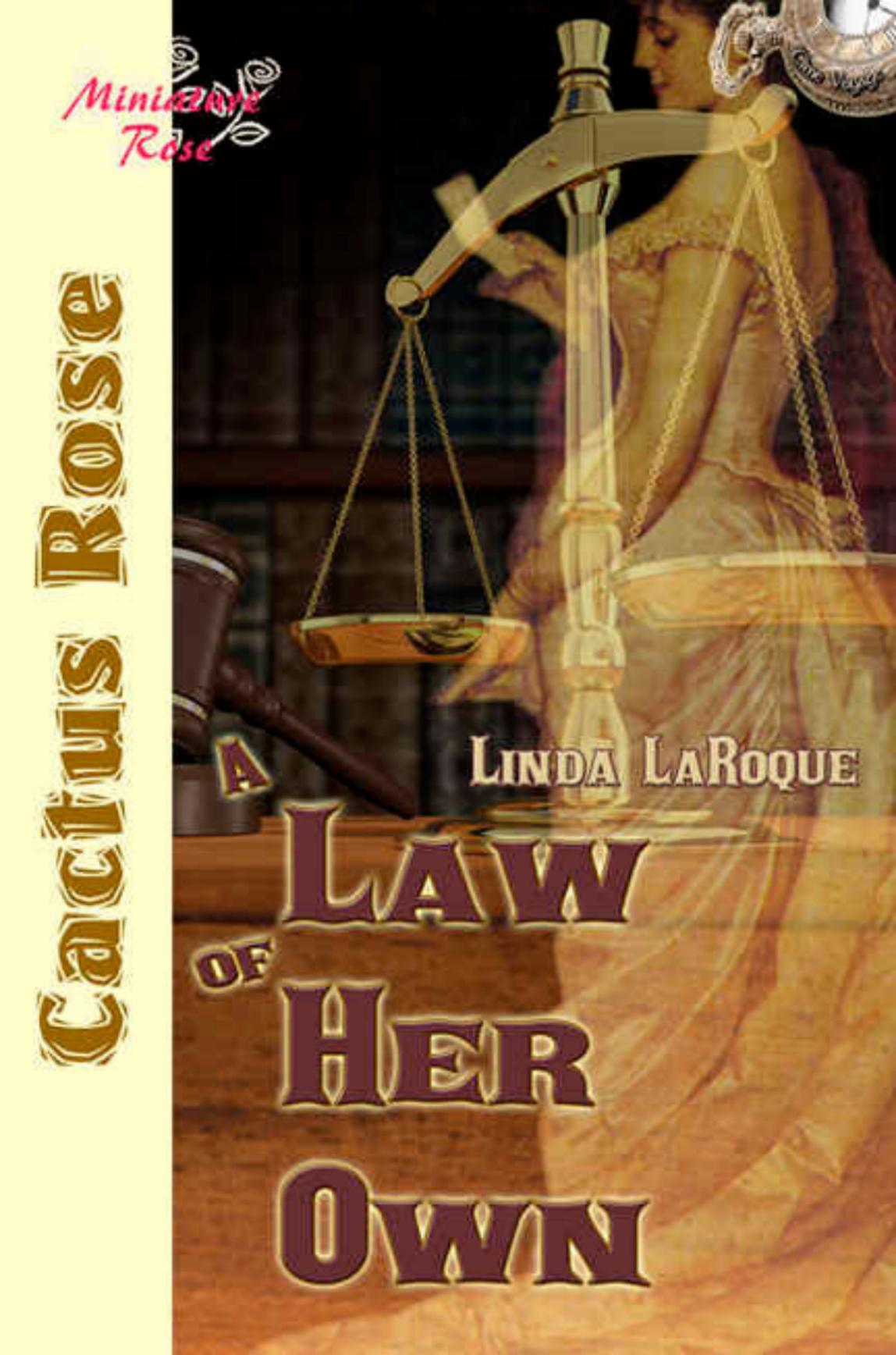


*Miniature
Rose*

Cactus Rose
Cactus



A **LINDA LAROCQUE**
LAW
OF
HER
OWN

A Law of Her Own
by Linda LaRoque

The Wild Rose Press

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Law of Her Own

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Dedication

In loving memory of my mother, Rose. She would have enjoyed this story as she did life. Remembering her laughter makes me smile.

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A Law of Her Own
by Linda LaRoque

Question: What do you get when you cross a New York lawyer with an old fashioned cowboy?

Answer: A rollicking good read with sparks the size of Texas. Linda LaRoque hits the bulls eye dead on in this fast paced story that's sure to please.

Elaine Cantrell—*Purple Heart*

www.elainecantrell.com

A Law of Her Own is a wonderful, fun read. It keeps moving and keeps you rooting for her engaging heroine and compelling hero. Another great tale from Linda LaRoque.

Kristin Lawrence—*The Vicar's Vixen*

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Chapter One

New York, June 14, 2008

"Daddy. I'm quitting."

There, she'd done it. Charity Dawson had been telling her father for the five years she'd worked in his law firm she didn't want to practice corporate law.

Her father's face reddened and he rose from his chair. He strode around the massive mahogany desk. "Now, honey, you're just tired and need a vacation."

Her dream was to be a public defender. She'd had her fill of rich clients needing legal loopholes for their lack of honesty on income tax returns or lawsuits in which they were clearly at fault.

"No, Daddy, I need a life change."

She walked toward him, arms outstretched, intent on kissing him goodbye. He stepped back.

Hands at her sides, she whispered, "Goodbye, Daddy. I love you."

Then she turned and walked from the silent office. The door closing behind her sounded like the lid dropping on her coffin.

* * * *

Texas, June 15, 2008

The morning after her arrival in Austin, Charity arranged to rent a car at her hotel for the short drive to the cabin fifteen miles west of Fredericksburg. She'd slept late, so by the time

she made travel arrangements and ate an early lunch, it was just after noon. Unable to resist the lure of the shops in Fredericksburg, she stopped in the small German town, and strolled through the great selection of merchandise.

By late afternoon she was back in her car headed west to the cabin she'd rented. The owner had given her good directions, so she had no problem finding it. She pulled in the drive, got out, and stood for a minute admiring the view. It was a lovely place made of rough hewn logs. The roof was tin and extended out over a wooden porch held up with cedar posts. Colorful pink and yellow flowers lined the walkway to and across the front of the house.

To the side stood an old footed cast-iron bathtub, filled with lavender, Gerber daisies, and a short green ground cover. It sat regally under a nearly dead Mesquite tree. On the opposite side large boulders served as the backdrop for a cactus garden. The prickly pear cactus was in bloom. Its orange and yellow blossoms were an odd comparison to the steer skull on display. Oak trees, some small, others large and dominating, surrounded the perimeter of the house and as far as she could see.

She smiled in pleasure. The dwelling exuded rest, peace, and quiet. It was just what she needed to gather her defenses and decide what to do.

The key was right where she'd been told it'd be—under the ugly cast iron frog by the step. She opened the door, peeked around inside, then went back for her luggage. Though she'd tried to pack lightly, she'd come with three large bags. Lugging them up the narrow, steep stairway was a chore. She

left them on the landing and went downstairs to close the front door.

Standing in the living area, she surveyed her surroundings. Quaint is the only way she could describe the small house. A stuffed sofa and chair, a desk, and a built-in bookshelf were the only furniture in the room other than a couple of end tables and standing lamps. She loved it and couldn't wait to see the rest of the lodge.

In the kitchen, a wooden table dominated the center of the small room. A vase of silk roses placed in the center added additional color to the blue and white tablecloth. A breakfront with a variety of colorful dishes covered one wall.

She gazed at the vintage appliances—an old gas stove and one of those refrigerators with the rounded sides. A yellow sticky note on its door caught her eye. *Laid in a few groceries for you to make do until you can get to the grocers.*

How nice of them.

On the counter sat a loaf of bread, a box of crackers, and a bottle of Bordeaux wine. She opened the icebox to add the items she'd bought in town and found eggs, milk, cheese, fresh fruit, and butter, just what she needed after her long trip from New York. She was hungry, but a hot bath and her pajamas would come first.

She hurried up the stairs to find the bathroom with its old claw foot tub. Turning on the hot water, she let it warm, adjusting it with the cold before putting in the stopper. A variety of bath salts sat on a small table. She selected one, sprinkled it liberally in the water, and ran to get a change of clothes.

There was only one bedroom. It had a double bed with a cast-iron headboard, an oak chest, and wallpaper with large cabbage roses. In any other house, the paper would have been garish, but it fit the cabin and furnishings perfectly.

She heaved a suitcase onto the bed and retrieved clean underwear, her pajamas, and her comfy flip-flops. Stepping out of her sandals, she stripped off her light gray slacks and pink blouse tossing them on the bed. They were too wrinkled to wear again. Her lacy pink bra and bikini panties joined the stack. With her clothes in her arms, she padded barefoot to the bathroom.

The tub was almost full, so she turned off the tap. Thick Egyptian cotton towels and washcloths were neatly stacked in the cabinet. A variety of fresh bars of scented soaps filled a straw basket. After smelling a few, she picked one that smelled of lilacs. She selected a towel and washcloth and sat the items on the toilet seat. The water was hot. Cautiously, she eased one leg after the other into the fragrant water. Then she slowly sank, bit by bit, until her butt landed on the tub bottom. With a sigh, she gradually leaned back immersing her arms and shoulders.

Her cell phone rang and she ignored it. She'd call them back. Thirty minutes later she stepped from the tub and dried with the thick towel. Her blond hair, cut to fall just below her chin, had curled from the steam. She selected one of the body lotions from the cabinet and spread it on her body generously. The aroma of the thick cream wasn't strong, yet it exuded a subtle floral scent that was pleasant to the senses.

Dressed in her pajamas and sandals, she hung the towel up to dry and rinsed the tub with the dirty washcloth before adding it to the rack. Now for food. Nope, she better check to see who called first. She opened the cell phone to see Daddy's name and number. *Please, Lord. I hope it's not a scathing message.* Keying in the numbers, she waited for his message.

She jerked her ear away from the phone as his voice boomed across the airwaves. "Why the hell haven't you called me, young lady? Don't you know I'm sitting here, worrying, wondering if you made it okay." He paused for a minute. Voice gruff, he added, "I'm sorry, Charity. I didn't realize you were so unhappy. Ah, shit, I did too but was too damn selfish to do anything about it. Things will be different when you get home, I promise. Call me. I love you, baby."

* * * *

After her breakfast of eggs and toast, wearing her sandals and still in her pajamas, Charity took her coffee to the back porch. She'd not noticed when she drove in yesterday, but just thirty feet from the cabin was a pond, tank, or whatever they were called in Texas. Dirt was built up around the sides. She strolled out to a large oak that grew out over the pond casting a shadow on the sunlit water. The water was clear, so much so that through it she could see every indentation in the mud below, tadpoles and small fish catching bugs as they landed on the surface.

There was nothing groomed about the yard out back. Oh, the grass and weeds had been mowed, but the ground was

littered with small fallen oak leaves. Even so, it was picturesque, and didn't detract from the cabin's beauty at all.

She refilled her coffee cup and left the back porch to walk along the path around the small tank. Her sandals slid on some of the loose rocks. Next time out she'd wear tennis shoes or at least something with a closed toe. Behind the berm ran a creek. A small wooden bridge made access to the other side easy. She side-stepped down the embankment, and stopped at the bridge to peer at a small clearing completely shaded by large trees on the other side. In this weather, it might be the perfect place to sit outside on a blanket in the shade and read. At the airport, she'd bought several paperback novels—an interesting change from the law magazines she usually read. She'd bring one out this afternoon, if it wasn't too hot.

She retraced her steps to the path that led back to the house. Upstairs, she dressed in a long, casual floral skirt and a loose thin cotton blouse gathered at the neck. The long sleeves hit just below her elbows and tied with a cotton strap. She stepped into a brown pair of fisherman sandals and plopped a big straw hat on her head. Her set of gold gypsy bracelets clanked as she walked downstairs. She loved this outfit, mostly because it didn't fit her personality, or the persona she should portray. Well, today she didn't have to worry about those things. She was plain old Charity Dawson, blond gypsy, seeker of adventure. In the entry mirror she checked her silver dollar size gold hoop earrings, set the hat at a better angle and with purse in hand, headed for her car.

The drive into Fredericksburg only took fifteen minutes. She parked the car in front of a small restaurant with patrons sitting outside under a canopy. The block around it and across the street was filled with novelty shops—a veritable paradise. She'd spend all morning touring the shops, enjoy lunch at the bistro, and then head back to the cabin for a nap. Her flight had been more tiring than she'd expected.

Two hours later, packages in hand, she sat down at one of the tables under the awning. It had grown warmer outside, but the breeze felt pleasant. She put her packages in an empty chair and stacked her hat on top. With her fingers, she fluffed her hair, lifting the damp blond strands away from her scalp. The motion set her bracelets tinkling and several people looked her way. She smiled politely and turned her attention to the menu on the table. A waiter appeared by her side. She ordered a Reuben and a glass of peach tea. While she waited, she examined the vintage art deco ring she'd bought at one of the shops. Three marquise cut diamonds banked by emeralds were set in an oblong base of platinum. It had put a dent in her savings account, but she'd not bought anything for herself in a while. Hell, she worked twelve hour days. There wasn't time to shop for anything other than the business clothes. She needed a bauble to boost her spirits.

Her sandwich was delicious. It was stuffed with sauerkraut. She pulled some free with her fork and popped it in her mouth. The tartness of the cabbage made her cheeks pucker reminding her of the pinched expression on the jewelry clerk's face when Charity described where she was staying. The older woman mumbled something about, "strange doings out

there." Before Charity could ask what she meant, a man from the back room muttered, "That'll be enough gossip, Mae."

What doings was she talking about? Drat! Charity wished the guy hadn't stopped Mae's talk. Old folks had interesting tales to share. Oh well, maybe she could get back to town and visit with her another day—without her guard.

Charity returned to the cabin, packages in tow, shortly after two o'clock that afternoon.

She'd bought a beautiful handmade shawl in pale blue for the winter and a pair of soft brown leather boots. The heels were low. They zipped up the side, and came halfway up her calf. Kicking off her sandals, she pulled a thin pair of socks from a drawer, slipped them on, and the boots followed. Actually they didn't look bad with her gypsy skirt and blouse.

She found a quilt on the top shelf of the closet and folded it over her arm. Sunhat on her head, paperback book in her hand, she danced downstairs. As she passed through the parlor, she plucked a decorative pillow off the sofa. In the kitchen, she stopped at the refrigerator to get a bottle of water. On impulse, she grabbed one of the red silk roses from the arrangement on the table and stuck it behind her ear and left the cabin by the back door. The weather was really hot, but she hoped in the shade it would be comfortable.

Her stride was full of purpose as she walked toward the path on the embankment. The boots were better protection for her feet and she had no difficulty getting down to the creek and the bridge.

As she stepped onto the bridge, a breeze caught her hat almost ripping it off her head. She caught it before it became

airborne and laughing, ran the rest of the way across and into the small clearing. The entire area was shaded and felt ten degrees cooler. She spread the blanket on the ground, tossed her hat aside, and stretched out on the quilt with the pillow under her head.

Now, for her torrid historical romance novel. The cover of *Taming the Cowboy* showed two half-dressed people in a serious lip lock. From what she'd read so far, it appeared the heroine was the one being tamed. Set in the Panhandle Plains of Texas, the hero, Rafe, was an alpha male, tall, dark headed with black eyes and the shadow of a beard. Julie, the meek little woman had blond hair, blue eyes, and a streak of determination. She wouldn't let the ranch manager take over control of *her* ranch.

Charity became engrossed in the story. The lack of respect for a woman's mind in those days, and the condescending ways of men amazed her. It was a good thing she wasn't born in that time period. She was halfway through the book and the two had sex in the hayloft, but argued about every aspect of running the ranch. She yawned and shook her head at the stupidity of people. Dog-eared the page of the book, she sat it aside and closed her eyes. Just a short nap, that's what she needed. It was so peaceful here, no cell phone, no computers, no ... what would it be like to live in Texas in the old days? Probably not nearly as romantic as her novel depicted. She chuckled at the idea ... nope, she was a modern woman. On that thought, she drifted to sleep.

* * * *

Prairie, Texas, June 15, 1888

Turner Reardon paced the floor in the small, hot, jail cell, anger and frustration eating at his soul. The sound of hammers striking thick nails into boards—boards forming the scaffold for his hanging, pounded against his skull.

Only one person could want Lucinda dead and him to take the blame—Cole Samuels.

Damn his soul to hell. Cole intended to see him hang for a crime he didn't commit. And for what reason? Lucinda Bowers had spurned Cole's advances for those of Turner. It was a known fact the widow had men in at night, but she never favored more than one man at a time. When she'd told Cole to stop coming by, the man had lost all reason. This was the final straw. He'd killed Lucinda, or had her killed, and now tried to blame it on Turner.

Cole was the owner of the town's only bank. An upstanding citizen, one above reproach. He was present at church every Sunday, participated in every charitable event the town sponsored, and had a condescending smile that made Turner want to knock his teeth out of his head.

Oh, he was pleasant enough, until Lucinda told him she was seeing someone else and not to come calling again. Then the devil in the man made its appearance. He'd tried to redirect funds from Turner's account pleading ignorance on the part of a staff member. Then, someone had set fire to a section of hay. If the fire hadn't been caught in time, he wouldn't have enough feed for the winter. He would have been forced to sell off some of his cattle. Though he'd

suspected Cole was the culprit, his hands were tied until he could prove it.

Turner had been the one to find her lying on the floor in a pool of blood. The bastard had gutted her with a hunting knife, *his* hunting knife. It had been missing from his saddlebag for over a week. The wound started below the waist and arched across her belly. They'd found his bloody knife behind her house where he'd tied his horse. He'd never hurt Lucinda. He didn't love the woman, but cared for her in his own way. They enjoyed each other's company in and out of bed.

Turner stopped and leaned against the barred window. As often happened, a good wind passed through their town in the panhandle of Texas and dirt twirled around in the street. Women held their bonnets on and struggled to keep their skirts on the ground. Most tried to avoid looking at the scaffold being built on main street.

Well, it appeared the little jackass had done it, convinced everyone he was guilty. Tomorrow there'd be a trial. The jury would convict him and he'd swing from a rope. He flung away from the window and sat on the narrow cot. Elbows on his knees, he dropped his head into his hands and massaged his scalp. This was one hell of a mess and he didn't have a clue how to get out of it. Oh, he could have his ranch hands come in bullets flying and help him escape, but what would that serve? Nothing. Then he'd be a wanted man and always on the run, as would his men. But, it would give him time to prove his innocence.

Maybe that little pissant of a lawyer he'd hired was smarter than he'd given him credit for and would come up with some kind of evidence to free him. He stretched out on the bed, his feet hanging off the end. Jail furniture wasn't built to accommodate his six-foot, four-inch frame. He went over the scene again in his mind, hoping he'd remember something to help him prove his innocence. Damn if he wasn't in one fine fix.

He wasn't ready to die.

* * * *

The sun beat down with a fury. Charity could see it through the cracks in the straw hat she'd put over her face at some point. Her arms stung as if she were sunburned. Yanking the hat from her face, she sat up and stretched. Man, what happened to all that shade and the cool breeze? It felt a hundred degrees. She glanced at her watch. It was seven o'clock. The sun should be setting soon.

She plopped the hat on her head, stood, and reached down to pick up the quilt. As she shook it out, she froze and her mouth fell open. The terrain had changed. The trees were gone as were the bridge, tank, and cabin. She searched in all four directions, shook her head, blinked her eyes, but she saw the same thing. Miles of wheat waved with the increasing breeze. She stood at the base of a large tree. The ground was covered with a short wild type grass, small rocks, and dirt.

Her breath hitched in her chest, she struggled to keep from screaming in fear and confusion. *Okay, be calm, now. There has to be an explanation for this.* Her advice did little to

calm her and the uncertainty was quickly overtaking her reason. She looked around again. There seemed to be nothing for miles around, no buildings or roads—nothing.

In the distance she heard something, a steady clomp, clomp, clomp, rattling, and the sound of voices—children laughing. She searched the horizon and saw dust stirred up on the other side of the wheat field. There had to be a road over there and a car traveling at a slow speed.

"Help, help!" she screamed. She drew the quilt over her arm, picked up the book, her water and pillow, and started running across the field. Stalks of wheat caught at her skirt as she jogged through the rows, but she didn't care, she yanked the material free. "Wait ... please wait!" She gasped for breath and stumbled out of the pasture. It wasn't a car; however, a wagon pulled by mules had passed. She dropped to her knees in the dirt gasping for breath. *Damn*. Just a minute more and she'd have caught them. Sobs caught in her throat and threatened to erupt. *You stop that right now. You're not helpless. You can follow the wagon. It has to be going somewhere.*

"Hey, lady, you all right?"

She looked up to see a man and a woman rushing toward her. *Thank you, God!*

They stopped several yards away.

The woman wore an old-fashioned sunbonnet and a long gingham dress. She drew closer and knelt beside Charity.

"Miss, are you hurt anywheres?"

Charity shook her head and sucked in air. "No. I'm lost. I don't know where I am, or how I got here."

The man and woman exchanged glances. *They think I'm crazy and Lord, I probably am.*

He shook his head.

"But, Frank, we can't just leave her here on the road." She propped her hands on her hips. "What if it was one of our girls and someone didn't help them."

He removed his ragged hat and slapped it against this thigh. Dust flew everywhere. "Oh hell, Merle, let's get her in the wagon."

They helped her stand. "I won't be a problem, I promise." She stared down at her wrist and took off one of the bracelets. She held it out to the man. "Here, take this. It's twenty-four karat gold. Surely it'll pay for my way to wherever you're going."

The man reached for the bracelet, but he jerked his hand back after seeing the expression on his wife's face.

"Honey, there is no need to pay us. Helping you is the Christian thing to do. This is my husband Frank Smithers and my name is Merle."

"I'm Charity Dawson from New York City, but I...."

Merle took Charity's arm and led her toward the wagon. "We're going into town for supplies. We'll camp for the night and should be there by noon tomorrow. Tonight we'll talk and try to help you get things straight in your mind."

Charity climbed in the back of the wagon with the children. "This is Lucy, Amy, and Polly."

"Hello, young ladies. My name is Charity."

The three little girls giggled and studied her with their sky blue eyes. Finally one got up the nerve to speak. "Pa says there's gonna be a hangin' in a few days."

A hanging? They didn't hang people anymore, did they?

Merle turned around and thumped the girl on the head. "Don't you be talking about such, young lady. The man hasn't even been tried yet."

"Ouch, Ma. That hurt."

"It was supposed to remind you of your manners, Lucy. You don't go around telling tales."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Lucy rubbed the sore spot on her head, leaned over, and whispered. "My Pa says they'll probably hang him. They pretty much caught him red-handed and killin' a woman is worse than killin' a man."

Curious now, Charity couldn't resist. "Mr. Smithers, is it true a man's on trial for his life?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said out the side of his mouth while keeping his eyes on the mules pulling the wagon. "He's accused of killing a widow lady he'd been seeing. I think he's looking at the end of a hangman's noose."

"Frank Smithers, you know Turner is not the type to kill on the sly, and especially a woman," said Merle. "Now, I can see him killing someone in defense, but not like that woman was killed." Merle shuddered.

Charity wanted to ask for more details but hated to ask in front of the children. She watched the wheat fields pass. Occasionally, another crop grew along side the dirt road—one

that looked like hay. As darkness began to fall, Frank pulled the wagon off the road into a small clearing.

The girls scrambled out of the wagon and ran off to play. Merle yelled, "Don't go far and watch for snakes."

"Yes, Ma. We will."

Merle pulled a picnic basket to the end of the bed of the wagon while Frank unhitched the mules and led them a short distance away to water and feed.

"Can I help you, Mrs. Smithers?"

"Sure." She tossed a quilt to Charity. "See if you can find a level space without too many rocks and spread this." She smiled. "And call me Merle."

Charity caught the blanket. "Thank you, I will. And please, call me Charity."

Still smiling, Merle nodded and went about taking things from the basket.

As soon as the quilt was on the ground, Merle laid out the food wrapped in dishcloths. She placed several jars of tea in the center. Straightening, she turned toward the wheat field, stuck two fingers in her mouth and issued an ear splitting whistle.

"Comin', Ma," echoed across the field.

Merle dropped to the ground. "Sit here by me. If you get stuck in the middle of the girls, they'll talk your ear off."

"They're just excited. I imagine I'm an oddity to them."

"I spects you're right," said Merle.

Charity suspected the two adults were curious also, but they were too polite to ask questions.

Frank and the girls dropped to the blanket. He bowed his head and his family followed suit. Charity quickly acted on their example.

"Lord, thank you for the bounty before us. Amen."

Merle uncovered the food. There was a ham, a fresh loaf of bread, and pickles. Two pieces of bread with a thick slice of ham on top was placed in her hand. She covered the ham and took a bite. It was heavenly, absolutely the best sandwich she'd ever put in her mouth. Maybe she was hungrier than she thought or possibly it was the fresh air and excitement. "Merle, this is the best homemade bread I've ever eaten."

"Why I just follow a standard recipe."

"But it's fresh. I'm used to packaged bread. You know, the kind that comes wrapped up in paper and is sold at the grocery store."

Merle glanced at her husband and shook her head. "No, I don't believe I've ever seen packaged bread."

Oh dear, thought Charity. She was really in the boondocks if these people didn't know about store bought bread. "Do you ever have automobiles drive on this road?"

Frank sat up a little straighter. "Nope, but hopefully someday. We saw a picture of one in the newspaper a while back."

"Why, I read they're noisy and always get stuck in the mud," said Merle. "Seems to be a waste of good money to me. A mule and wagon get us where we need to go without all that coughing and belching. Why, the machines even run out of gas out in the middle of nowhere."

Charity's stomach churned with anxiety. "What is the name of the town we'll be in tomorrow?"

"Name is Prairie. The reason being it was all grassland back twenty-five years ago when it was settled by four or five families. There are probably thirty families living in town now, and three to four times that many living on outlying farms and ranches." Frank beamed. "We're right proud of how much our little town has grown in just the past ten years."

She had to know, but didn't want to ask. "You know, I can't exactly remember the date. Is it June or July?"

Merle looked concerned. "Did you get hit on the head?"

Charity touched her head and felt for sore spots. "No."

"It's June 15, 1888."

Her vision blurred and she gasped a lungful of air. *Oh, God! Is this what Mae meant by "strange doings?"*

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Chapter Two

They drove into Prairie at noon. Charity was tired to the bone and on the edge of hysteria. Mr. Smithers stopped the wagon in front of a building with a sign that read Sheriff's Office. He handed the reins to Merle, hopped down, and came around to the back to help her out of the wagon. The man had been much nicer this morning. She didn't know if it was because she'd soon be off his hands or if he'd heard her crying half the night and felt sorry for her.

"Here we go, Miss Charity. The sheriff will know how to help you. Now, if things don't work out for you here, ask anyone in town where the Smithers' farm is and they'll point you in the right direction."

"Thank you, Mr. Smithers. You've been very kind."

He cleared his throat. "It's the least a body could do for one of our own lost souls." He walked on into the sheriff's office.

Hell, the man didn't realize how true his statement was. Lost wasn't half the size of it. She walked to the front of the wagon and bid Merle goodbye.

"When you get settled, come out and visit sometime," said Merle.

"I'll do that."

"Here she is, Sheriff. Name's Charity Dawson. She don't have a clue how or why she's here." Frank Smithers stood on the porch with a large bull of a man. Most of his weight was

muscle, but his belly had begun to turn to fat and hung over his belt. "Miss Dawson, this is Sheriff Elijah Cannon."

With his brow wrinkled he studied her from head to toe. At last he spoke. "Come in Miss Dawson. Let's see what we can do for you."

She waved to the Smithers before going inside. The room was sparsely furnished with a desk and several chairs. A gun cabinet stood against one wall and behind the desk a set of large keys hung from a railroad spike hammered into the wood.

He pulled a chair closer to his desk. "Have a seat," he said. She sat down with the quilt wrapped around her pillow and the paperback book in her lap.

He opened the desk drawer and removed a sheet of paper and a pencil. "All right, little lady, tell me everything you can remember."

She watched his expression as she related just what she'd told the Smithers family—she awoke in a wheat field and couldn't remember how she'd gotten there. His steel gray eyes, that matched his hair and mustache, watched her like a hawk about to close its talons around its prey. He didn't believe her story. Hell, she wouldn't either if she were him. Under the circumstances, it'd be best if she didn't confide she'd been in the Hill Country when she went to sleep.

"How can you know your name and where you're from without knowing how you got to Prairie?"

"I don't have a clue."

He studied her a minute, then shoved his chair back and stood. With his arm at her elbow, he helped her to her feet.

Lord, the man acted like she didn't have the strength to stand on her own.

"Let's get you over to Doc Wilson's and see if you've got a head injury or something."

Running footsteps, coming toward them, pounded on the boardwalk. A voice shouted, "Come on Sheriff, they're resuming the trial." A breathless young man with a star on his shirt slid to a halt just outside the door.

"John, escort this young woman to Doc Wilson's."

A trial? That's right. Mr. Smithers mentioned a murder trial. "Sheriff, please let me go to the trial. I can see the doctor after it's over."

He shook his head. "I don't know. We need to get you checked out."

"I'm fine," she promised.

"All right, come on. The Doc will most likely be at the trial anyhow." He took her bundle and dropped it in the chair, then took her arm and escorted her outside. They walked a block to the square. A brand spanking new courthouse stood majestically in the middle of the large lot. It was made of red bricks with a tall, wide stairway leading to a porch with white colonial columns.

Inside, they took a seat behind the prosecutor's table. Before she was fully settled on the hard bench, a door opened and a guard brought in a tall man wearing a vested suit with a white shirt and tie. His face appeared carved from stone, ready to crack at any minute. He was handsome in a rugged way. Work in the sun had tanned his skin making his eyes

appear robin's egg blue. Dark hair fell in waves to just below his collar and he tossed his head to get it out of his face.

Good grief, he was a handsome man. The thought had no more than cleared her mind when he stopped at the prosecutor's table. He glanced at the sheriff, and then turned those blue eyes on her. They immediately turned glacial and fixed her to the bench like a spear of ice. Gooseflesh broke out on her arms and she shivered. What was wrong with him? She hadn't done anything to him.

Turner couldn't help but stare at the blond haired woman. He'd never seen a woman with her hair cut so short and wearing such large earrings. Who was she and why was she here? His gaze was drawn to her face—blue eyes, brown eyebrows and lashes, and pink lips. She was lovely. When he peered into the depths of her eyes, he felt an electrical jolt. Did he know her?

He mentally shook himself and continued to the table where his skinny inept lawyer sat. The man tried but he just didn't have the backbone to go toe-to-toe with the prosecutor. He might have been better off to defend himself.

The bailiff announced, "All rise for Judge Howell." The judge fluttered in with his black robe flowing and sat down at the desk on the dais. He gave Turner a hard look and then turned to the prosecution.

"Are you ready to finish your charges against the defendant, Mr. Jamison?"

The rotund prosecutor stood and pulled his vest down tightly over his large belly. "Yes, sir, I am. I just have one

more thing to add." He turned to his assistant. "Will you please move the chalkboard around to the other side?"

The young man did so. "Now, Doctor Wilson, will you draw a torso and show us how the woman was cut, and how the fatal wound was delivered?"

Doc stood, walked to the chalkboard, and picked up a piece of chalk. It didn't take him long to show the terrible knife wound that started on the victim's left side and continued over and up under her right breast. The thought of Lucinda dying such a horrible death was nauseating. If he ever got out of this fix, he'd find her murderer and make him pay.

Jamison parroted in front of the jury. "Now, Doctor, would you say that was a good rendering? That's exactly how the wound looked?"

Doc Wilson nodded. "Yes."

"How deep did you say the wound was?"

"Jamison, I've said three times already the wound was three inches deep in places." Doc was livid. He turned to the chalkboard, picked up the chalk, and wrote three inches deep. "There, do you think that's clear enough for you?"

The room roared with laughter. Judge Howell pounded on the gavel. "That'll be enough. Silence or I'll empty this court." The room settled to a low hum and then became quiet.

Jamison's neck was red as he turned to the jury. "Take a good look at that horrendous wound, folks." Then he pivoted and pointed at Turner. Everyone in the room turned toward him. Some glances were sympathetic, others were filled with hate. He continued to doodle on the pad in front of him, and

without luck, tried to ignore their stares. "And that's the man who inflicted it. The state rests, Your Honor."

Turner's attention, along with the audience's, quickly moved to the strange blonde as she struggled with the sheriff. Finally he let her go and she moved to sit behind the defense table. *What could she be up to?*

Judge Howell scowled. "Young woman, you will remain seated in my court."

She stood, nodded, and replied. "Yes, sir, Your Honor." Her voice was warm and scratchy like good rye whiskey. The judge appeared mollified by her dignified answer and nodded back.

Judge Howell turned to Turner's attorney. "Mr. Bailey, are you ready to present your evidence for the defense?"

Bailey stood and voice quaking, stuttered, "Yes ... sir, your ... Honor." He started picking through papers. The woman behind them pulled on his coat tail and he bent down while she whispered in his ear. His faced registered shock and he shook his head, but she leaned over, slapped the rail with her palm, and whispered again. Flustered, he said, "Uh, Your Honor ... I have a surprise witness." Sweat was pouring from his face and he pulled at his collar.

"Well, get on with it, Bailey," said the judge.

Bailey appeared to plea to the heavens, but took a deep breath and announced, "Miss Charity Dawson, please take the stand."

The sheriff and Jamison both jumped up at the same time. "I object, Your Honor," said Jamison. The sheriff, shouted,

"That young woman just arrived here this morning; she can't know anything about the murder."

The judge scowled at the woman. "Is that true, Miss Dawson?"

"Yes sir, it is. But, I'm a lawyer from New York with some skill in forensic science that I think will greatly help this case. I beg your indulgence, Your Honor. Please let me speak."

Sheriff Cannon threw up his hands. Jamison howled, "I object Your Honor. Who ever heard of a woman lawyer?"

Judge Howell scratched his head. "I'll allow it, Mr. Bailey, but it better be good."

"Yes, sir, Judge."

Turner watched in fascination as the young woman was sworn in and took the stand. She sat down in the witness box with no fear as if she did it everyday.

"First, Miss," said Bailey. "Will you define forensic science for the court?"

She smiled and her blue eyes lit with excitement. "It is the study of evidence in cases and how to use those facts to prove or disprove someone's innocence or guilt."

A quiet murmur went through the audience.

"Do you have some information that is helpful in this case?"

"Yes, I do."

Jamison jumped up again. "I strongly object, Your Honor."

"Objection so noted, prosecutor. Now sit down and shut up," ordered the judge. Jamison fell into his chair, and closed his mouth. Turner wanted to chuckle but restrained the urge.

Doing so would just make the prosecutor more determined to hang him.

"Now, Miss Dawson, please continue," said Judge Howell.

"May I move to the chalkboard, Your Honor? I'd like to point out something about the wound that will be helpful."

Turner didn't know what was going on, but he prayed the woman was for real and knew something they didn't. Pencil clenched in his hand, he watched as the bailiff helped her down from the box. Turner followed her progress across the front of the court as did every man in the room. Her hips swayed gracefully under that unusual skirt, and her bracelets jangled with each step she took. The white blouse showed her neck and chest, though her breasts were hidden, and the skin was tanned like she worked in the sun a lot.

She stood before the doctor's diagram and pointed to the wound. "First let me say a man's strength in his arm is here." She put her hand around her bicep, turned to the jury, and then to the courtroom. "Would you gentlemen in the room agree with that?"

Heads nodded and Turner heard several, "yeses," and "that's true."

"Now, if you've been watching Mr. Reardon during the proceedings, you'll have noted which hand he's been using to write on the pad before him. From your observations, what is your conclusion?"

Head tilted, eyebrow quirked, she opened her left palm and waved it toward the audience.

Some peered around trying to see him while others sang out, "He's a lefty," and "Used that southpaw ever since I knowed him."

She smiled. "Now, since we've clarified that, look back at the diagram. There is no way the defendant could have caused this wound. It was inflicted by a right-handed man." She pointed to Turner. "As established, the defendant is left handed. If he'd inflicted the wound it would've gone in the opposite direction."

The courtroom erupted into a round of loud claps and whistles. The defendant's eyes met hers and a slow, lazy smile softened his features. He nodded and she returned the courtesy. God, he was a charmer.

Judge Howell started beating on his gavel and shouting, "Order. There will be order in this court." He turned to the bailiff. "The next man to open his mouth is to be removed from the room." The judge turned and fixed his attention on the courtroom.

"Do you want to cross examine this witness, Jamison?"

"I sure as hell do."

"Watch your language, Mister. There are women present," ordered the judge.

Charity ducked her head to hide her grin as she made her way back to the witness box.

Jamison rose from behind his table and meandered over to her. "Pardon, my rudeness, Miss Dawson." He turned to the court. "Ladies."

Charity merely nodded in acceptance.

"Now, Miss Dawson, you say you're a lawyer. Do you have any identification to prove that?"

"Not with me I don't."

Jamison preened. "Ahem. Well, tell us where you got your law degree?"

"Harvard University in Cambridge." A murmur went through the courtroom. They were impressed.

"Miss Dawson, Harvard does not admit women."

Nose in the air, she spoke through clenched teeth. "They did this one."

Jamison snorted with disgust and waved his hand. "I have no further questions for this witness but I do want to call Sheriff Cannon to the stand."

Oh hell, thought Charity. After the sheriff told his story everything she'd said would be tossed out, even though it was true. She glanced at Turner. As if he knew the outcome of this trial already, he shrugged and turned back to the paper in front of him.

Sheriff Cannon was sworn in and took a seat in the witness box. He didn't look happy.

"Sheriff, I saw you come in with Miss Dawson. Is she your prisoner?"

"No, she's not." Jamison's disappointment showed in his scowl of displeasure.

Charity released the breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"Is she in your custody, Sheriff?"

"Sort of," Cannon replied.

"Now just exactly what does that mean?"

"I don't think it's any of your business, Jamison." He turned to the judge. "Or the court's, Your Honor."

Judge Howell's face scrunched as he pondered the sheriff's statement. "I'm sorry, Sheriff, but on this one I have to side with Jamison. Please answer the question."

Jamison was so pleased she feared he'd jump into a jig at any minute. Might be entertaining, thought Charity.

Sheriff Canon looked at her and then out upon the audience in the court room. "Miss Dawson was brought to town by Frank Smithers and his family. She'd stumbled from a wheat field onto the road near Comanche Crossing. Knew her name and where she's from but didn't have any idea how she'd gotten in that wheat field."

Jamison grinned with victory. "Your Honor, I ask that Miss Dawson's testimony be stricken from the record and the jury to be ordered to ignore what they heard from her today."

Judge Howell muttered, "So ordered."

"I have no further questions," said Jamison as he returned to his seat.

* * * *

The following day, Turner stood before the judge and jury. The foreman read the verdict.

"We find the defendant, Turner Reardon, guilty as charged." The words hit Turner in the chest like a blow from a two by four. For a minute he was unsteady on his feet.

Judge Howell peered down at him, sympathy on his face. "Son, I hate to do this because I don't believe you're guilty, but my job is to administer justice." He hit the gavel. "I

hereby sentence you to hang by the neck until you are dead. Execution will be carried out July 19, 1888, two days from now. May God have mercy on your soul."

Charity thought she'd pass out in a dead faint. The man was innocent. She knew it as well as she knew her name.

Mr. Reardon looked back at her before he was taken away. "I appreciate you trying, Miss Dawson."

Throat too choked to speak, she nodded.

She sat there for the longest time, thinking. There had to be a way to save this man's life.

She'd go to the court house and read every law the city and the state of Texas had trying to find a way to clear him. Turner's lawyer, Mr. Bailey remained in his chair, head down. That man needed help with his court room presence and interrogation skills. Maybe they could help each other.

She stood up and trying not to step on the hem of her new long dress, moved out of the aisle and up to the defendant's table. The dry goods store had taken one of her gold bracelets in payment for several dresses and some undergarments. She'd passed on the bonnets popular at the time and wore her straw sunhat when outside. After leaving the store, she'd gone to the boarding house Sheriff Cannon had recommended. She was paid up for a week, two meals a day included.

"Mr. Bailey, may I speak to you?"

Startled, he quickly rose from his chair. "Miss Dawson, I didn't realize anyone else was here."

"Mr. Bailey, I need some help. I'm going to find some way to keep Mr. Reardon from hanging, and in payment I'll help you with your courtroom skills."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but just like the rest of this town, I can't believe you have a law degree." He blushed at having to admit his mistrust.

She couldn't blame the man. Harvard wouldn't admit women for another eleven years and then it was to Radcliff, a part of the university, for women. "If you'll give me a few minutes, I'll be able to dispel some of your doubt. Is there somewhere we can go to talk?"

"Well, I suppose we could go to my office."

Mr. Bailey's office was across the street from the court house. It sat on the corner and an outdoor stairway led to his living quarters upstairs. The remainder of the block was occupied by a barber shop, the surveyor's office, a cafe, and a bank on the opposite end. Above his office was a nice sign that read Mr. Jonas Bailey, Attorney at Law. His name was also etched into the glass on the front door.

Inside, the walls were lined with law books and Charity itched to get her hands on some of the ancient tomes. But, the books could wait.

"Have a seat, Miss Dawson." He held a straight back chair for her while she sat and then rounded his desk and dropped into his leather chair.

"You have a very nice office. Business must be good here."

He coughed. "Actually, my father paid for all of this. He doesn't know how poor a lawyer I am."

"Don't say that, Jonas. Can I call you Jonas and you call me Charity?"

He nodded. "I'd like that."

She opened the reticule she'd bought with her clothes and withdrew the paperback book. Open to the copyright page, she turned the book around where he could read. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but I'm from the future. I come from the year 2008."

"Now, Miss Dawson, I may not be a good lawyer, but I'm not stupid."

She tapped the page. "Read this."

He glanced down at the page and as he read, his eyebrows gradually rose higher. His finger ran along the binding. She knew he felt for stitching.

"In the future, books are bound with glue." He studied her a minute and returned to the paperback.

Before she could stop him, he'd flipped the book to show the cover. One look and he yanked his hand back like it'd been burned. "Miss Dawson! You could be arrested for having lewd reading material in your possession."

Charity retrieved the book. "No Jonas, the picture is misleading. The story isn't near as *risqué* as the cover." Since she hadn't finished it, she hoped she wasn't lying.

"Well, I should hope not. This is some kind of joke you're playing on me and I don't like it." He pushed his chair back and rose. "I'll thank you to get out of my office."

"Please, Jonas, hear me out. Then if you still don't believe me, I'll leave."

* * * *

It had taken awhile, but Jonas had finally believed her story. Charity and Jonas spent the remainder of the afternoon going through law books, searching for something to help save Turner's life. They'd found nothing. Charity was disappointed and for a few moments considered buying a gun and using it to get the man out of jail.

"I can't believe we've not found one thing."

Jonas had been sitting quietly for several minutes. It appeared he'd given up finding a solution. "There is one more place we can look," he said.

Regaining hope, she asked, "Where?"

"At the courthouse in the County Records Office. We need to go over every ordinance that's been made since this town started back in sixty-eight."

By noon the next day, they'd found what they needed. With permission, Jonas took the paper out on loan for one day. They put it in the small safe in his office and before she knew it, Charity was the proud owner of one hundred acres of land with a rundown shack a mile from town. She was also in debt to Jonas for two thousand dollars, but there was no other alternative.

It was almost five o'clock when they left the law office. Jonas walked her to the boarding house. She was tired to the bone but so stressed she wasn't sure she'd sleep that night.

Jonas asked, "Are you sure you want to do this? It's not something anyone should take lightly."

"I know, but there is no other alternative. We can't let an innocent man hang. I'd never get over it."

He tipped his hat. "All right then. I'll see you in the morning at eight o'clock. The hanging is set for nine."

* * * *

Turner stood when he heard the key in the metal door. He'd welcome anything to get his mind off his dilemma. To think his life would come to an end the following morning wasn't a pleasant thought. If he were an old man, he might feel differently but, hell, he was only thirty-four years old. Sheriff Cannon came in with Aunt Ruby. Red-eyed, she carried a pie plate covered in a dish towel. The smell of cinnamon, nutmeg, and apples filled the air.

"Aunt Ruby, you shouldn't have come. You've got no business in this place."

"You are my business, young man, and don't you forget it." She passed the pie pan through the slot, turned and sneered at the sheriff as he stood watch. "You're favorite, apple, and don't you let Sheriff Cannon or any of the deputy boys have one bite."

Turner took it and sat it on his cot. "Thank you. I'll enjoy it."

"Ruby, it's not like me and the boys sat on that jury yesterday when they sentenced Turner. We're just following the law," said the sheriff.

"Elijah, you should be ashamed of yourself. You were Turner's daddy's best friend. If you were a true friend, you'd be gettin' this boy out of here until the real killer could be caught."

"Aunt Ruby, leave him alone. He's just doing his job. Come here now and let me kiss your cheek one last time."

Elijah stepped between them. "Can't let you do that, Turner."

"Why the hell not?"

"You know why, she could pass you something, a weapon."

"Hell, she just passed me a whole pie"

Elijah had the grace to look embarrassed. "We sliced it for you to make sure there wasn't anything planted inside." He cleared his throat. "We didn't want to search Ruby."

Turner hid his smile at the expression of outrage on his aunt's face. She poked Elijah in the chest with one of her bony fingers. It had to hurt. He oughta know because she'd done it to him enough times.

"It's a good thing too, young man. I'm not a helpless old woman and can still take a plug outta your hide."

"Yes, Ma'am, I know." He put his arms around her shoulders and turned her toward the door. "Now it's getting dark out, visitation is over. You can see Turner in the morning."

She wailed, "Yeah, hanging by a rope. I can't believe I'll never see my boy alive again."

He waited until Elijah had locked the door, and then went to work on the pie. There was no doubt in his mind that a note would be in there somewhere. He carefully went around the pan lifting and peering under slice after slice. Ah, there it was under the fourth wedge. A piece of oil cloth hid a small note folded twice. He opened it and held it beneath the last

rays of sunlight drifting through the bars to read the small words.

Be ready. Will create diversion and come after you before you climb the steps.

Turner smiled at the ray of optimism that rushed through him. He wondered what kind of diversion. Lifting a serving of the spicy pie, he stuffed the wadded piece of paper inside it and started eating. After four slices, he was stuffed and called for the deputy on duty. "Come get the rest of this pie if you want it, else I'll toss it out the window." He chuckled when he heard the key in the lock.

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Chapter Three

Charity and Jonas were in front of the sheriff's office by eight thirty, along with a lot of other towns' people. She'd worked with Jonas on how to conduct himself if he had to face Jamison or someone else down. They'd written up a contract listing what was required for the agreement to be binding.

At a quarter of nine, the door finally opened. Judge Howell came out first, then the sheriff, with a firm grip on Turner, and several deputies brought up the rear. Before they could reach the step down to the street, she shoved Jonas in front of the judge.

"Judge, Miss Dawson is here to buy herself a husband and save Mr. Reardon from hanging." He raised a sheet of paper and waved it in the air, so everyone could see it. "This city ordinance was created in sixty-eight. It says if a woman with property needs a husband to help her with said property, she can choose one from criminals about to be hanged."

Jamison shoved his way in and tried to take the paper from Bailey. "Give me that, you fool. I've never heard such nonsense."

Jonas looked ready to retreat and Charity giggled him in the side. He took a deep breath and stood straighter, shoulders squared. "I'll thank you Mr. Jamison to keep your hands off my person. This is none of your concern. It's the business of Miss Dawson, Sheriff Cannon, and Judge Howell."

"It damn sure is my business." He glared at Charity. She returned it with a grin. "This woman doesn't own property. She just got here."

"I beg to differ, Mr. Jamison," said Charity. "I bought one hundred acres and a small house just a mile from town."

He guffawed. "That's not a house, it's a shack."

"That may be, sir, but it's my shack. I need someone to help me repair it and plant crops, so I don't starve this winter."

His eyes narrowed. "And what pray tell did you use for money, Miss Dawson?"

"That's not any of your concern." Hands on her hips, she glared. "Do you have anymore questions, sir?"

When he didn't say anything else, she added. "I didn't think so."

"Fire! Fire!" A horse flew down the street, its rider waving his hat as he yelled. He skidded to a halt in front of the jail. "Sheriff, that old shack just outside of town is burning to the ground."

Charity stiffened and turned to Jonas. "I guess that would be my property, wouldn't it Mr. Bailey?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it sounds like the place."

Sheriff Cannon jumped off the boardwalk and ran down the street, to the firehouse she supposed. She peered at Mr. Reardon. His expression of guilt told her just what she needed to know, but she didn't blame him. Within minutes, men on horseback or driving wagons were headed out of town. Shortly after, the fire wagon rolled out, with its bell clanging and followed the riders.

The sheriff returned before the dust settled, having dispatched the fire brigade and the men returned to the issue at hand.

"Let me see that, Jonas," said Judge Howell. Jonas handed the ordinance over to him. The judge took a quick glance and turned to the sheriff. "We better go back inside and get this settled."

Turner couldn't believe the talk flying back and forth between Bailey, Jamison, and Miss Dawson. Was it possible she could keep him from hanging by marrying him? If so, he'd agree quick as a lick. Hell, he'd marry old widow Tate if it would save his neck.

He studied the pretty blonde. She had spunk all right. She didn't back down from Jamison or the judge and it appeared she'd added some steel to old Bailey's backbone. Her strength didn't scare him. He'd never met a woman he couldn't bend around his little finger. Given the chance, that is.

Sheriff Cannon found chairs for all of them while the judge read the ordinance. When they were all settled, he explained. "Everything Jonas said is true. This ordinance was adopted to help women with property that'd lost their husbands in the war. All they had to do was pay a price. It doesn't give an exact amount, so I don't know how that's figured." He turned to Miss Dawson. "Are you prepared to pay to claim this man?"

"Yes, sir. I have some money." Actually the money was Jonas's, but they didn't need to know the source. What do you think would be fair?"

The judge scratched his chin. "I don't rightly know. He pondered for a moment while Charity held her breath in

expectation. "I reckon fifty dollars would be enough, don't you think, Cannon?"

"Yep, I do."

"What about you, Turner?" asked Judge Howell. "Are you willing to be this young woman's husband?"

Turner looked at Miss Dawson. She didn't bat an eyelash, just studied him casually as if she could care less what his answer would be. Yes, he'd be willing to marry her, but then there was that paper Bailey had spread on Elijah's desk.

"What does that document say that I'd be signing?"

The judge scratched his chin. "It says that you'll help Miss Dawson work the land that she owns, you'll be a true and faithful husband, and share your wealth with her. You must agree you'll allow her to practice law if she so wants. If after ten years you don't suit, you'll be free to seek a divorce."

Hope pumped though his veins. The request was more than fair. He asked, "Miss Dawson, why would you do this for me?"

"Why, why wouldn't I? It's wrong for an innocent man to hang and I don't have any doubt whatsoever that you're guiltless. And given time, I'll prove it."

The woman had more backbone and character than most men he knew. Being her husband wouldn't be a hardship at all. His body wasn't immune to her and her spunk definitely stirred his interest. Turner watched her carefully and said, "I won't agree to a marriage in name only. I want children."

"So do I, Mr. Reardon."

Sheriff Cannon spoke. "Well, what do you think, Judge?"

"I think we have no choice and if we don't want this ordinance used again, we better revoke it as soon as possible." He shoved his chair back and stood. "Well, gentlemen, we better gather the ladies, so they can set up the church for a wedding tonight. Turner, you'll remain here until after the ceremony."

"May I speak with my bride-to-be privately for a minute?" asked Turner.

"I expect you can," said Judge Howell, "If she's willing."
Miss Dawson nodded.

The sheriff looked from him to her. "We'll be on the front porch. You've got ten minutes."

Charity leaned back against the desk, both hands braced on the edges. He waited for the door to close and moved to stand in front of her. She gazed up at him and he looked his fill—the smooth skin, clear blue eyes, and full pink lips. Lips he didn't doubt would be quite enjoyable to taste. He breathed in her scent and felt his groin tighten in response to the clean womanly smell. If she wore perfumed powder, she'd used it sparingly. He lifted his hand toward her hair, but sought her eyes before he touched the blond tresses. She didn't shrink back in fear. Like corn silk, the strands slid through his fingers.

"Have you seen enough, Mr. Reardon?"

"Well, can't say I wouldn't like to see more."

"You'll have to wait for that until after the ceremony."

He chuckled. "I can wait." His fingers dropped from her hair, his knuckles brushed down her cheek. "Why are you doing this, Miss Dawson?" He asked again.

"You're an innocent man. I'm here in a strange place, a strange time, and I need you to help me. Will that suffice until after the ceremony when I can explain things further?"

"Yes, if you're sure about this."

"I'm sure."

"It's not often a man gets engaged and marries all in one day. I think a kiss might be in order. And I want to hear you say my name, Charity."

"I agree, Turner, a kiss would definitely seal the deal."

Hands at her waist, Turner lowered his head and softly touched his lips to hers. She didn't back away, so he pulled her closer, crushing her softness to his hard length. She moaned and her arms went around his neck. *Oh God she was sweet.*

When the sheriff pounded on the door, they jerked apart just before he opened it. "Ten minutes is up. Come on Miss Dawson, word's already spread and the women are waiting for you right now." He slapped Turner on the back and chuckled. "And your Aunt Ruby is leading the pack."

* * * *

From inside the bank, Cole Samuels peered through the window and wondered what the Sam Hill was happening. It appeared every woman in town was headed for the jail. Surely these gentlewomen weren't going to the hangin'? He grabbed his coat off the rack and slid into it. It was about that time and he didn't want to miss seeing Turner Reardon swing. Excitement curled in his belly and damned if his pecker wasn't rising. He chuckled. The night he'd slit Lucinda open, he'd

been afraid he'd spend himself in his clothes. He'd managed to hold it until he reached the outhouse behind the saloon. It hadn't taken but one jerk and he was firing like one of those rockets at the Fourth of July celebration. A delicious shiver went through him at the memory.

The bell above the door rang and one of his employees came inside. "John, what in tarnation is going on out there? I've never seen a hanging in this town cause such a to-do."

"Ain't going to be a hangin', Mr. Samuels. That Miss Dawson has bought Turner's sentence and they're getting married tonight. All the women in town are rushing about to get things ready. You know how they do love a wedding. And I have to say, every female in town over the age of two is crazy about Turner. They want him to have a fine celebration."

Cole sputtered, "I've never heard of such a thing. I better get down there and make sure they're following the law."

"Most likely it wouldn't do any good. It's a done deal. The judge has witnessed Turner and Miss Dawson sign a contract and she's paid fifty dollars for him. Seems there is an old town ordinance that allows—"

"Never mind, John. Get to work." Damn if Turner hadn't cheated him again. And if he wasn't mistaken, Turner suspected him of the deed. Yeah, he was a smart fellow all right, but not as smart as Cole Samuels. *I'll get you yet, you son-of-a-bitch.*

* * * *

Charity felt like a tornado had hit her. She'd been prodded and poked all afternoon getting fitted for a wedding gown. This was after they decided between the ten they'd brought, which one best suited her. Several women had taken a turn at her hair but unable to get it to stay up, they'd agreed she'd have to wear it down.

At last they were finished and they'd left her alone to rest. It felt wonderful to lie down in her chemise and close her eyes. Images of Turner's kiss earlier kept running through her mind. A streak of desire coiled in her stomach. How could she have the hots for a man she barely knew? When a knock sounded on her door, she shot straight up in bed. In walked Turner's Aunt Ruby. "Your bath is ready. Come along now."

The bathroom, was a modern convenience which Miss Mamie, the boarding house owner, was quite pleased to have in her establishment. Sure enough, the tub was full. She washed and rinsed her hair before going to work on her body. When she finished, she cleaned out the tub. Wrapped in a large bath sheet, she padded barefoot back to her room. She'd just stepped into drawers and a chemise—*My God I can't believe I'm even saying the words much less wearing them*—when the door opened again.

Thank God Ruby and Miss Mamie were the only two allowed to help her dress. Charity sat before the window while Ruby brushed her hair dry. When she was dressed in the long white gown and veil decorated with baby's breath, Ruby burst out in tears. At a loss, Charity patted her on the shoulder. "It's going to be all right, I promise."

Ruby grabbed her in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry child, but I've been so worried about Turner. You're getting him out of this fix is like a miracle, one I'll thank God for the rest of my life." She pulled back and patted her cheek. "Why are you doing this? I know you don't love each other, you'd never seen each other before two days ago."

"It's a long story, Aunt Ruby. In a sense, Turner is helping me almost as much as I'm helping him. I'll explain everything to you later." Her heart twisted a little and she smiled. "And maybe in time, we'll learn to love each other."

"All right, you two. Stop that blubbering," said Mamie. "We've got a weddin' to attend." She took Charity by the arm and led her next door. In her own bedroom, she had a large cheval mirror. "Take a look at yourself, young woman. Print this picture in your mind forever."

She couldn't believe what the women had been able to do in one day's time. Long sheer sleeves were caught at the wrist with white ribbons. A low square neck showed off her cleavage, but wasn't vulgar. Thank God she'd talked them out of wearing a corset. The top was fitted but low waisted. From there the skirt fell in several layers of a sheer fabric over satin.

Charity could only stare. It was lovely. She sniffed. "Thank all the ladies for me. It is absolutely stunning."

* * * *

Sheriff Cannon slapped him on the back. "Don't act so scared, son. Marriage is a lot better choice than having your neck stretched."

Turner didn't answer because the organist started playing and drowned out every sound but the music. Everyone stood, and his bride appeared in the doorway. The last rays of sun streamed behind her making her glow like an angel as she walked forward on the arm of the judge. Then the door closed and he could see her features. His heart picked up in rhythm and his palms grew sweaty. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And she would be his wife. Or would she? He straightened his shoulders. Hell yes, she would. He didn't believe in a married man going whoring and he didn't intent to remain celibate.

Charity couldn't believe she was actually doing this. It wasn't as if she had many options and being married to Turner would be much nicer than being tied to some of the other men in this town. Not only was he good-looking, he was neat, clean, and from what she'd observed, didn't chew that nasty tobacco.

He appeared as nervous as a cat as she approached. Someone had brought him a dark suit. His hair had been cut, and he'd had a shave. Thank goodness they didn't take too much off those curls of his. She liked his hair long. He was a looker, and a charmer. If she weren't careful, she could lose her heart. As if he could read her thoughts, his half smile turned to a frown of purpose. For a moment, she wasn't so sure she was doing the right thing, but it was too late to dwell on the issue.

When she reached his side, he took her hand and placed it on his arm. His smile of encouragement lessened her uneasiness. She could add kindness to his good traits.

How she kept her voice from shaking when she repeated her vows, she didn't know, but when Turner said his and slipped a plain gold band on her finger, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying. How sweet was that? He'd bought her a ring.

The preacher's voice boomed off the rafters. "I now pronounce you man and wife. Turner, you may kiss your bride."

Charity didn't know what to expect, but Turner carefully lifted her veil and settled it back over the head piece. He spoke softly. "You are lovely, Mrs. Reardon." His kiss was a soft touching of mouths, sweet and pure, but it held a promise of more to come.

* * * *

As they left the church, about twenty men stood in line. "These are the men who work for me."

"Why weren't they in the church?"

His face was serious as he looked out at the line. "They're afraid you won't forgive them for burning down your shack. They were trying to create a diversion so I could escape."

Charity shoved her flowers at him and took the two steps down to where the line began. She shook hands with each man as she chatted, and placed a kiss on their cheeks. Some blushed, some kissed her back, and a few grabbed her in a bear hug. But everyone had a smile on their faces. Turner felt something give in his chest and fought the feeling. It was too early to know if this woman was honest in her actions or was putting on a show.

He stepped off the porch and stalked down the line. "All right, men, you've taken up enough of my wife's time. Looks like you've been forgiven, so we'll see you at the community hall for the reception."

They crowded around him and Charity. "We're mighty happy for you boss," said Tom, the man who'd been with him the longest.

"Thank you, boys. I've never gotten married before, so I guess maybe we should have a day off tomorrow."

Tom acted thunderstruck. "You mean not work?"

He clapped the older man on the shoulder. "Well, some things have to be done, but others can wait. I'm leaving it up to you to make those decisions."

"Yee haws," echoed around the church yard.

Turner took Charity's arm and they walked the few blocks to the reception. The town's folk had outdone themselves. A band sat at the far end of the room and when they entered started playing a waltz. He looked down at the woman on his arm. "May I have this dance?"

"Yes, indeed."

Charity was surprised he was such a good dancer, better than her. She didn't have much time for dancing. As a matter-of-fact, she'd not had many men to take her out on the town. Turner moved her smoothly around the dance floor. She laughed with pure enjoyment as he smiled down at her, surprised at the heat that coursed through her veins when their bodies touched. When the music stopped she was breathless.

Aunt Ruby made her way over to them. "Come on now, it's time to cut the cake." She led them toward the table. Charity was amazed at the beautiful three-tiered cake at one end of the table with a large bowl filled with yellow punch to match the tall gladiolas placed in the center. The opposite end was piled with sandwiches, snacks, and more desserts.

A row of ladies stood against the wall, excitement emanating from their faces.

"Ladies, this is so lovely and you did it so fast. I don't know what to say."

Turner put his arms around her shoulders and said, "We thank you, ladies."

* * * *

Charity hadn't thought about their wedding night, where they'd go, but Turner had reserved a room at the hotel in town. They'd arrived to find their room filled with more food, a bucket of champagne, and on the bed waited a frothy night gown. She picked it up and fingered the fine material. "Oh my, Aunt Ruby has outdone herself. I don't know who she's trying to convince to consummate this marriage, me or you?"

Turner picked up the nightgown, held it up to the light, and chuckled. "Must be you, because she knows I won't need to be persuaded." He came up behind her and started undoing the numerous buttons on her dress. "How about you? Will you need to be won over, wooed?"

"Well, all women enjoy a little wooing, but if you think I'll renege on our bargain, you're wrong." She turned toward him. "Making love with you won't be a chore."

"I'm glad to hear it. I must say I find you very desirable and think we should get comfortable."

He made to smooth the dress down her shoulders, but she stopped him. "I need to tell you some things first. Things you need to know about me."

"All right, but put on something more comfortable and I'm taking off part of this suit."

Charity rummaged around in the things Ruby had packed for her and pulled out the long cotton gown. It was either that or put on a dress. She moved behind the dressing screen and stepped out of the beautiful wedding gown. She carefully draped it over the panel. With her undergarments still on, she slipped the gown over her head and came out.

Turner sat in one of the chairs, but stood and pulled one over for her. She curled up in it with her feet tucked under her. "What I'm going to say will make you think I'm crazy, but I'm not."

He listened intently, examined the copyright date on the paperback book, looked at the binding, and when he turned it to see the cover, his eyebrows shot up two inches. "It's common for books to have this kind of cover in your time?" he asked.

"Yes, but usually the covers are more risqué than the story."

"I'll be the judge of that." He tossed the book on his stack of clothes.

Feet crossed at the ankles, he said, "I can't say I completely believe your story, but I know strange things do happen. I know women in this era don't dress like you did the

day at the trial. Not many would stand up to the judge or Jamison the way you did."

He studied her for a long while; so long she grew uncomfortable and felt exposed in her long nightgown. Finally he spoke. "Why did you work so hard to save my life?"

"I'm a lawyer. It's my job to save lives. When I saw the drawing of that knife wound, I knew you'd not killed that woman." She sighed deeply. "And I have to be honest, that day in court when you stopped and looked at me; I was immediately drawn to you." His eyes darkened with passion and her stomach flipped. "And I needed a place. I'm here without anyone and doubt I'll be able to return to my time."

He stood. "Are you going to put that wisp of a gown on?"

"Do you want me too?"

He took her hand and pulled her from the chair. His lips touched her neck and traveled up to her ear. She shivered. "No. I'd prefer to undress you right now and have you in bed with nothing on."

She raised her arms and he lifted the cotton gown over her head and dropped it into a chair. He kissed her, his lips igniting a fire in her belly like none she'd ever known. She opened for him and his tongue slipped inside and twirled around hers. Without releasing her mouth, he untied her knickers and they fell in a puddle on the floor. One swift yank and her camisole joined her gown.

He broke the kiss and stepped back. "I want to look at you."

His eyes, dark as the ocean depths, touched her body, warming her. Her skin tingled and when his hands stroked her

breasts she jumped at the sensation they aroused. "Lovely, you are beautiful, Charity."

Her hands sought his body trying to unbutton his shirt. She wanted to touch his skin, put her lips on his chest and learn his taste. He brushed her hands aside, turned, and quickly removed his shirt, shoes, and trousers. His back was broad, the muscles rippled as he moved. Her eyes moved down to his trim waist and taut buttocks. Then he turned.

Oh, God, he was magnificent. His chest was covered lightly with dark hair that grew in a line down his belly and thickened as it surrounded his erection. *And oh, my, what an erection.* Not that she was an expert, but she had no complaints. Her eyes jerked up to his to see he was watching her. She stepped forward and ran her hands over his shoulder and down his chest. Her lips touched his skin, her tongue flicked out to taste him. He reached for her pulling her flush with his body.

Their hands roamed, discovered, and learned drawing sighs and moans of pleasure. He weighed her breasts and thumbed the nipples making them ache for his mouth. She cupped his buttocks enjoying the tensing of his muscles as she did so. When her hand moved around to circle his erection, his body tensed, he threw back his head and groaned through gritted teeth. Capturing her hand, he lifted her and carried her to the bed.

She helped him toss the covers back and scooted over to make room for him. He dropped down beside her and moved to kneel between her thighs. Leaning forward he took her mouth in a kiss that left her head reeling. She keened low in

her throat and he lowered his head to her breast, nibbling until she begged him to take her nipple in his mouth. He laved each one with his tongue before drawing it in and sucking gently.

Charity couldn't take anymore. She raised her legs and wrapped them around his waist, tugging him closer. "Please now, Turner."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me? Turner, I'm not a virgin." He stilled and watched her face. "I've not been with many men, but in my time, very few women remain a virgin past the age of twenty."

He growled. "When was the last time you were with a man?"

"It's been at least a year."

He took her mouth and in one swift move, entered her. She cried out and he stilled.

"You're so tight. I'm sorry I hurt you." He started pulling away. "We can wait."

She jerked him forward with her heels. "No, don't wait." Her hands grabbed his buttocks. She arched toward him. "Now, Turner." He withdrew and thrust again and again creating a rhythm that made her body scream for release. She thought she'd surely die, but at last her muscles convulsed and she spiraled up and up keening softly as she did so. As her tremors slowed, Turner stiffened, plunged one more time, and then his control shattered. He dropped his head to her shoulder and rammed into her body as he shuddered with release.

Weight on his elbows, he nibbled at her collarbone up her neck to her ear. He nipped it gently and growled. "I think I made a damn good bargain."

She laughed and swatted him on the butt. "Maybe we both did."

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Chapter Four

Turner lay on his side; head propped on his hand, and watched his wife sleep. After the numerous times they'd made love throughout the night, he grew hard again looking at her bare shoulders. He pulled the sheet down to expose her lovely breasts with their rosy pink nipples and smiled. Last night, they'd drank champagne, eaten, and made love twice more before falling into an exhausted sleep. His wife was a passionate woman, one that welcomed his advances and wasn't shocked when he'd touched her in ways many wives would have found distasteful. As a matter-of-fact, she'd returned the favor. He'd been shocked when she'd taken him into her mouth to pleasure him. God, he hoped she shocked him again sometime soon.

He leaned down and kissed her. "Wake up, sleepy head. We've got a long day."

Startled, she sat up and looked around in alarm. Awake and remembering all at the same time, she smiled and lay back down, taking him with her. "Good morning," she said between kisses.

"Yes, it is, and time to get up. I'm ready for my bacon and eggs." His stomach rumbled to prove his point. He was tempted to stay in bed half the day, but he wanted Charity at the ranch before nightfall.

He watched, mesmerized, as she stretched, rose from the bed in all her naked splendor, and walked behind the dressing screen. He started pulling on his drawers and pants. "After

breakfast, we'll borrow you a horse from the stable and ride out to the ranch."

Her head peaked over the screen. "I can't ride a horse. I'm used to driving a car."

"You mean like those contraptions some man over in Germany made?"

She laughed, the sound giving him immense pleasure. "No, much more modern. You turn a key and they start, cool or warm the air inside, and they'll go over a hundred miles per hour."

He couldn't imagine and wasn't sure he wanted to. Was she really from the future? Maybe, but it didn't change the here and now. "Guess you can ride double with me and I'll teach you when we get home."

"I'd really like a bath, but that would take too long."

"By the time we get to the ranch, we'll be caked with dirt anyway. We'll have a bath at home."

They left the room and went downstairs to find a table in the dining room. It was full this morning and Turner didn't doubt folks were all here to see them. The owner had saved them a table in a little hidden alcove. At least someone around here believed in giving them privacy.

By eight o'clock they were ready to leave town. Turner pulled Charity up behind him on Chester, his bay cutting horse. He didn't seem to mind the extra weight. Charity bounced and giggled all the way out of town. Lord, the woman was just like a child about some things. She took a great deal of pleasure in many things. Her situation before

must have been confining as she looked at each new experience as an adventure.

Her arms were tight around his waist, her breasts pressed to his back. Damn, he wished she wasn't wearing that riding skirt. She could've ridden in front facing him. He'd always wondered what it would be like to take a woman, letting the movement of the horse set the rhythm of their lovemaking. Hellfire, he better get his mind on something else.

"You doing all right back there?" he asked.

"Fine. Hey! Is that my shack over there?"

Turner considered the pile of burned rubble and scorched grass. "You mean you bought this place and haven't ever seen it?"

"We didn't have the time to come see it. Jonas had seen it and said it was good land. And yes, he told me the shack was worthless." She squeezed his waist. "Let's stop a minute."

The house was about a quarter of a mile off the road. As they approached the charred remains, he noted that the soil looked rich. It'd be a good place to plant hay for the cattle. He drew Chester to a halt, and taking Charity's arm, he swung her to the ground before dismounting. The horse started chewing on the grass and Turner let the reins drag the ground.

"I think when we rebuild the house, it should be a little closer to the road. We can clear this area off here and put a lean-to for the horses." She whirled to face him. "What do you think?"

Well, hell, at least she asked. "I don't see the need to rebuild here. You don't need it; you'll be living with me."

"I do need it and you agreed." She peered up at him from under her sunhat. "I need to be in town a couple of days a week to help Jonas. It was our deal. I'm now his partner. A place to stay here would be more convenient than riding six miles all the way to your ranch."

"You mean with all that's been going on, you think I'd let you stay out here by yourself?" The idea was ridiculous.

"I know there's a killer out there, but he'll be caught one day, and then it will be safe."

"Safe or not, I couldn't let you do it. If you need to stay here, I'll stay with you. Besides, I've found I like having you sleep beside me."

"Now how do you plan to do that and run your ranch, farm, whatever it is you have?" she asked.

"My dear, I have a spread. We raise cattle but do plant and harvest hay for our beefs."

"Okay, still, how will you manage it?"

"I don't know, but I will."

"How long do you think it would take to build a little two room house? Just a kitchen, eating, and living area with one bedroom."

Hell, she just wasn't going to give up on the subject. Having a place closer to town might be convenient on occasion. But that was a lot of money to spend for a convenience. "With some help, we could have it up in a couple of days."

She clapped her hands. "Good. I want to get started as soon as you get caught up and can spare the time."

"That may be a month or so."

"That's too long. I've got an idea how to snare our killer."
She put her arm around his waist and leaned into his side.

"We'll use me as bait and lure him out here."

"It's not going to happen, Madam."

* * * *

Two weeks later, she and Turner stood in the living area of the small house. They'd found a bed and chest for the bedroom, a table and four chairs, and an old sofa Aunt Ruby had found in the attic. She'd also found an old rag rug. They'd beat it to remove as much dust as they could and it looked quite nice on the floor.

Turner had grumbled through the entire house raising, but with some of his men and a number of people from town that turned out to help, it hadn't taken long to finish the small structure. It had also turned into a social affair. After dark they'd danced until they were tired. Families had camped out in their wagons. Some pitched tents.

"I love it, every little thing about it."

He pulled her into his arms. "Well, just remember, you won't be spending much time here and never alone."

"Yes, sir." She glanced toward the sleeping area. "Don't you think this house needs to be officially initiated?"

He chuckled. "You mean all that loving we did outside didn't count?"

"No, my dear, and I have a surprise for you."

"Really, where is it?" he asked while looking around the room.

"It's under all these layers of clothes." She took his hand and led him into the bedroom. "I think I remember telling you that the future has very sexy unmentionables."

"I'm all eyes, darlin'." He started unbuttoning her dress. "Here, let me help you."

She shoved him onto the bed. "Oh, no. I'm going to undress for you." She'd never done this before, but she wanted to do it for him. Slowly, she unbuttoned her dress down the front humming that old song, *Hey Big Spender*, recorded by Peggy Lee. She couldn't remember all the words but as she shimmied and eased the dress down over her hips to the beat, she did the bump and grind to *Brrr-rump, Hey big spender, spend ... a little time with me*. Her legs were completely bare except for the chemise she'd worn that covered her sheer white lace bikini panties, and matching push up bra.

Turner's glazed eyes were wide as if he might miss something if he wasn't careful. He was sweating and started unbuttoning his shirt. When she slowly eased the chemise up revealing her lacy unmentionables, he froze, his eyes following the ascent of the white lawn fabric. She yanked the chemise off, twirling it in the air over head, while turning around to *Brr-rump, bumpa, bumpa ... bump*, and slung it into the corner.

She danced toward him and sat on his legs straddling him. He tried to touch her, but she shoved his hands away. As she continued humming and gyrating, she unhooked the front clasp of her bra and her breasts sprang free. Giggling, she

shook her shoulders setting the globes in motion inches from his face.

With a growl, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her so his mouth could plunder the soft fullness she'd put before him. She moaned and arched into him. He slipped his fingers inside the crotch of her panties. "Thank, God, you're ready, I can't wait."

She fumbled with the buttons on his pants, freeing him for her touch. His moan of pleasure was a balm to her heart.

Suddenly he stood and shoved his pants down to pool over his boots. With one arm holding her by the waist he pulled the panties carefully from her body. He growled into her ear. "These need extra special care. I think I'll need you to repeat this performance often."

"With pleasure, my dear."

He sat back down on the edge of the bed with her straddling him, her legs around his hips, hands on his shoulders. Lifting her, he barely entered her, and then in one sudden move, fully seated himself. He set the pace, lifting and sliding her up and down his length until they were both shuddering in release.

She dropped her head to his shoulder and kissed the salty skin. When had they gotten his shirt off? She vaguely remembered shoving it off when he'd lifted her to remove her panties. With her in his arms, he stood and dropped her on the bed. Free of boots and pants, he stretched out beside her and pulled her into his arms.

"Where on earth did you learn that?" He leaned up to look down at her, scowl on his face. "You haven't done it before, have you?"

"No dear, only for you."

He lay back down. "Thank, God, for that. And you really wear underwear like that in the future?"

"Honey, I have a set in almost every color of the rainbow. You can imagine how difficult it is for me to wear the awful bloomers, chemises, and corsets of today. They're hot and confining." She curled her fingers in the sprinkling of springy hair on his chest. She loved its texture. "As to where I learned the music, I've always loved that song. It's from the musical *Sweet Charity*."

"Ah," he said as he fondled her breasts. "Makes sense."

"I used to dance to it around my apartment while I cleaned."

He grabbed her butt and pulled her to his arousal. "I don't think that will work at the ranch. Aunt Ruby might have a heart attack. But, I'm sure this little place will need frequent cleaning."

* * * *

Charity closed her small carpetbag and looked around the room to make sure they'd not forgotten anything. She'd bought a few clothes but not enough to be leaving any. Turner waited on the porch, his horse saddled. As soon as they got home, riding lessons would resume. He was determined she become a good horse woman.

Turner strode through the door. "Rider coming."

He took the bag and held the front door for her to step out onto the front porch. She shaded her eyes from the sun and watched for their visitor to arrive. It was Sheriff Cannon. He slowed his horse, stopped several yards from the porch, and dismounted. Hat in his hand, he approached. His face was grim. "Turner, Ma'am."

They stepped off the porch to join him. Turner said, "From the expression on your face, I suspect this isn't a social call."

"Afraid not. Doc sent me." He nodded to Charity. "He thinks Mrs. Reardon can help him with something."

"What's happened?" she asked.

"There's been another murder—a victim with a wound similar to Lucinda's."

"God," swore Turner. Face pale, he bit out, "I don't want Charity to witness a scene like that."

She touched his arm. "It's all right, Turner. If I can help, that's what I need to do."

He nodded. "We'll follow you into town, Sheriff."

Charity knew he needed to get back to work at the ranch. His workers couldn't keep taking up the slack for his absence. It wasn't fair. She turned and placed her hands at his waist. "Turner, if you need to get back to the ranch, I'm sure I can ride with the Sheriff and stay at Mamie's until this is cleared up."

"No," he said. "I'll not leave you in town or anywhere else by yourself. The boys will just have to manage."

He tied her bag to the saddle horn and tossed her into the saddle, and then mounted behind her.

As they rode, Sheriff Cannon explained the situation.

The victim was a woman who lived alone on the edge of town. Her neighbor had stopped by on her way to town to see how her evening had gone. Mrs. Hall had been expecting a gentleman caller last night but didn't give his name. Her body had been taken to Docs for examination before going to the undertakers.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up in front of Dr. Wilson's office where a small crowd was gathered. Sheriff Cannon tried to calm them with little success. Folks were scared. This was the second knifing of one of the town's women, and it was evident now Turner Reardon almost hung when he was innocent.

Charity saw Turner's shoulders relax at the comments passed between the people. She hoped he felt vindicated at last. She noticed his lips quiver and his difficulty hiding his grin when someone said Mrs. Reardon was smarter than the sheriff or Jamison. She was sure neither man liked having his expertise slandered.

Dr. Wilson met them inside. He said, "Turner, you better sit here. I'd like Mrs. Reardon to go in alone with me. For the dignity of the woman, you understand."

Turner nodded and sat in one of the chairs.

Cannon walked to the door. "I'll be in my office if you need me."

Charity wasn't sure what to expect, but Doctor Williams had the woman covered with a sheet. She carefully folded it down. The woman was already in rigor mortis, her lips blue. The knife wound was similar to the one she'd seen in the

court room, but it had been a drawing and this one wasn't near as neat. "Is the wound like to the other victim's?"

"In some ways, but this one is a lot messier, the angle different as if she were struggling."

She noted the purple bruises around the woman's neck. They didn't appear to be caused by hands, but something with padding, maybe an arm. She uncovered the victim's hands and saw blood and skin under her nails.

"Was she clothed when she was found?"

"Yes, we removed her dress and undergarments here."

She carefully pulled the sheet up to cover the body.

"Where are her clothes? Can I see them?"

He scratched his chin. "Well, I had my assistant drop them out back in the trash barrel."

"Do you have a back door?"

"Yes." He pointed toward a hallway.

"We need those clothes, Doctor. There may be evidence on them." She started for the exit then turned back. "Will you get Turner for me?"

Charity had just found the trash barrel when Turner and Doc Wilson joined her. The garment lay at the very bottom rolled into a wad. "I can't reach down that far. We need a stick."

Turner looked around and found a rake. With the forked end, he tried several times to raise the bundle—using the side of the can for leverage. "Be careful. Keep it away from the sides if possible. We don't want to contaminate the material."

Inside they laid the dress on a long table and moved it in front of a closed window so she'd have plenty of light. "I need

a magnifying glass." Doc produced one and she went to work. "Do you have a pair of tweezers?"

Doc handed her the tweezers and with the large magnifying glass, she bent over the fabric.

The dress was dark navy serge, the weave tight. Something terribly heavy and confining to be wearing in this hot weather. With the tweezers, she picked up a different color thread off the fabric. "Now I need some gauze." Doc supplied her with whatever she asked. She lined different color threads on the piece of gauze. She also found pieces of rust and other debris. At least the can was empty when the dress was tossed inside. "We need to move these samples where they won't blow away."

He unlocked a medicine cabinet and she carefully placed their evidence inside and closed the door. Turner stood close and watched, but stayed out of their way. She and Doc returned to the dress. "Now, let's carefully turn it over." On the back, across the shoulders, she found several hairs. Some were gray and others auburn. Those were laid out on a piece of gauze.

She and Doctor Wilson examined a large, light stain on the back of the skirt in which several fibers were stuck. It looked like a concentrated semen stain. She touched it lightly.

"Good, it's still a little wet so the cells won't be dried out. Charity quickly removed the fiber samples and placed them on a fresh piece of gauze. Then, with a pair of scissors, she cut a small piece of the area out of the dress. "Dr. Wilson, do you have a microscope?"

He moved to a table and uncovered a model Charity had never seen before. But if it worked, that was all that mattered.

"Good. Now, I need slides, diluted salt water solution, and a spoon. This will be crude, but it just may work. We've got to work fast."

Using the spoon Doctor Wilson placed in her hand, she carefully scraped some of the white thick secretion onto one of the slides. She dropped several droppers of saline solution onto the slide—placed another piece of glass over it, and then put both under the lens. She focused and studied what she'd found. She nodded to Doctor Wilson. "It's semen all right."

She stepped aside so he could look.

He studied the sample and turned to her in astonishment. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"Biology 101 lab in college."

He turned back to the microscope and adjusted the lens to get a closer look. Charity could understand his awe. This was something he'd never seen before. Though sperm had first been isolated and identified earlier, probably not many country doctors had had the opportunity to actually view them through a lens.

"Doctor, you know what this means. There is a sexual predator out there. He's killed twice now and in less than a month. Based on this pattern, he'll most likely strike again in a couple of weeks."

Turner's face had turned to stone. He said, "I'll go after Sheriff Cannon. He'll need to decide how to warn the citizens of this town."

The sheriff arrived, moments later, with the judge in tow. Turner had obviously told them of the situation.

"Not a doubt in my mind after Mrs. Reardon confirmed my suspicions. Now as far as the thread samples, those will be almost impossible to identify. The hair samples may be useful."

Judge Howell shook his head and said, "Lord, what a sorry mess. How are we going to explain this to the citizens of this town?"

"Simple, Judge," said Charity. "You just call them together and announce though the killer doesn't rape his victims, he gets sexual pleasure from killing them. It's a delicate subject but not near as bad as seeing more women murdered."

"You're right, of course." He turned to Sheriff Cannon. "Elijah, we better get some flyers printed up. We'll have two meetings, one in the church and one in the saloon. That way maybe we'll get the word out to most everyone."

Charity interrupted. "Gentlemen, if you could, I'd put the announcement off until after this woman's funeral. The killer may show up and give himself away."

Sheriff Cannon headed for the door. "I'll talk to the pastor and have him conduct a graveside service at four o'clock. At that time we can announce about the two meetings."

Charity glanced up to see Turner watching her. He looked physically ill. She went to him. "Are you all right?"

He spoke through clinched teeth. "I'm fine." He took her arm. "Come on, let's get some fresh air." Arm around her shoulders, he guided her out the door. He walked at a fast clip down the street, like a man on a mission.

"Slow down, Turner. My legs aren't as long as yours."

He stopped, took a deep breath of air, and released it. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe this is happening. I want to get you to the ranch tonight, before the meetings so you'll be safe."

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Chapter Five

Charity had absolutely refused to leave. He could tie her to his horse, but she'd have found a way back. He'd just have to stick to her every minute. The thought of her getting hurt, especially by the sick bastard they were hunting, felt like a dead weight in his stomach.

"Turner, I appreciate your concern, but I'm needed here. I want to go to the funeral and watch those who come. If I can help, that's what I'd like to do. Thank you for agreeing to stay here tonight." She walked into the hotel room as he held the door for her.

"I can't pretend I'm happy about it, but we'll do what you want. We'll use the time in between to visit the mercantile. I need to order supplies and you need more clothes."

She stood at the window in the room looking out on the street. He'd kicked off his boots and was stretched out on the bed.

"Turner, you know your innocence is proven now. If you want to file for divorce, I'll not fight."

His breath caught in his chest. "What Charity? Do you want a divorce?"

She turned toward him. Her smile hesitant, she said, "I find I rather like being married to you, but I'll abide by your decision."

He could breathe again. He held out a hand to her. "Come here, Charity." When her fingers curled around his, he pulled her down on top of him. Arms around her shoulders and

waist, he rolled them to their sides and threw a leg over hers. "You're mine now, Mrs. Reardon, and the idea of giving you up doesn't sit well with me."

She nestled her face in his neck. A strange sense of completeness washed over him. Hell, he'd fight tooth and nail to keep her right here beside him. Is that what love felt like? The thought scared him to death. All the people he'd ever loved, he'd lost. Except for Aunt Ruby, that is. His brother died of whooping cough the winter of seventy-five. The kid had only been eight at the time. Nine years later, just four years ago, both his folks had died in a flash flood. They'd been to town for supplies when a storm broke. They'd stopped to unhitch the horses and wait out the rain under a tarp. Before his father could get the animals loose, lightening spooked them and they ran. Even with the brake on, they were able to drag the wagon down into a wash. Before his ma and pa could get to safety, water rushed through and whisked them away to their deaths. The next day, a rancher in the neighboring county found their bodies caught in debris.

Charity's hand covered his heart. "Turner."

"Hmmm?"

"What are you thinking?"

He raised her hand and kissed her palm. "I'm thinking my folks would have liked you."

"Oh, God!" she cried.

He pushed up and looked down at her. "What? What's wrong?"

"My father is probably worried sick. I just disappeared off the face of the earth. He'll think I'm dead."

He gathered her close and she sobbed against his chest. Words couldn't ease her heart, he knew that. The man must be beside himself with fear, but there was absolutely nothing he could do to help her. Her body stopped shuddering and he heard the steady breathing of sleep. He closed his eyes. She was worn to a frazzle. He didn't know, but didn't doubt time travel was tiring on a person.

* * * *

Cole stood with the some thirty mourners at Mrs. Hall's gravesite. *Ah, Madam, I did give you a mighty fine send off. Or I should say you gave me one.* He wanted to chuckle at his little joke. She'd struggled so hard he'd had to hold her from behind in a headlock. The bitch had scratched his face with her nails. Thank goodness his beard hid them. When the knife hit her belly, she'd struggled for a minute to still his hand. Then she went limp, her arms at her sides. He was already near the point of exploding. Too late to get outside. Dropping her face down over the back of the sofa, he'd opened his pants, grabbed her hips, and ground against her plump warm buttocks. *Oh, God, the joy of it, the pure ecstasy.*

He held his hat in both hands to cover his erection. That bitch Miss Dawson eyed people from under that sunhat of hers. No, her name wasn't Miss Dawson anymore. It was Mrs. Turner Reardon. She'd ruined everything for him. She wouldn't go unpunished for long. He'd see she paid.

* * * *

"I would almost swear that's our man, Sheriff Cannon., but I can't prove it and if you approach him, he'll run," said Charity. The sheriff sat behind his desk, while Turner and the judge paced the floor.

"Who would've thought it of our distinguished banker?" said Elijah.

Turner stopped. "I've suspected him all along. He didn't like it one bit Lucinda quit seeing him when I started calling on her." His eyes flicked to hers as if he'd been caught cheating. Charity hid her expression from him. He didn't need to see she was jealous of the woman.

"He tried to misdirect funds from my account at his bank and blamed it on an employee—fired the poor young man over it. Then, as if that wasn't enough, I believe he or someone he hired set fire to a field of my hay."

"How come you didn't tell me about this before, Turner?" asked Elijah.

"There wasn't anything you could do without proof and I didn't have any."

Elijah sadly shook his head. "I don't think I could've forgiven myself if you'd died and the murders had continued." He looked at her. "Ma'am, we owe you a debt of gratitude."

Before she could answer, Jamison flew through the door, panting from exertion like he'd run a marathon. "What's ... going on, Judge?" He turned to Turner and offered his hand. Turner took it. "I'm mighty sorry, young man that we almost hanged you over a crime someone else committed."

"You were just doing your job, Mr. Jamison. No hard feelings."

He turned to Charity. "You too, Mrs. Reardon, my apologies."

"They're accepted, Mr. Jamison," she said.

Sheriff Cannon told Jamison all that had happened and how they believed the town's banker was the killer. Aghast, he muttered, "I just can't believe such an upstanding man could do such a thing."

"Son," said Judge Howell, "you'd be shocked at what I've seen supposedly good people do over the years."

"Are you going to arrest him?" Jamison asked.

"We can't without proof. Let's see what happens after tonight's meetings. The word being out may make him more cautious, or reckless."

* * * *

The sheriff and Mr. Jamison had volunteered to conduct the meeting at the saloon. The judge, with the help of the pastor, would handle the one at the church. The room was filled to overflowing. People had to stand around the walls and were squeezed into the pews like sardines.

Judge Howell rose to speak. "Folks, you've heard the rumors. We've got a killer amongst our town folk, a man, we know that. He enjoys the terror he inflicts on the women." He cleared his throat. "He doesn't rape them, but he derives sexual pleasure from the violence."

"Sheriff, I've got a wife and two young daughters to protect. Don't you have some idea who this monster could be?" Charity recognized the man who had brought her to town.

Voices rose to a deafening roar. Questions flew around the room.

"Quiet folks," shouted the judge. "Quiet!" The noise slowly abated. "I assure you, myself, Sheriff Cannon, and with some help from Mrs. Reardon, we are closing in on the depraved man." He raised his hand to stave off questions. "Mr. Smithers, I can't reveal anything I know. We don't want this person to run." He scratched his chin. "Actually, if he did, that would make him even more suspect. Now, this is what you need to do. Men, stay with your women if at all possible. Those of you women who live alone, you might want to find someone to stay with until this is all over."

The meeting broke up with a very subdued crowd. Nothing had happened like this in their town before and they were afraid. Charity wondered what they'd think about the crazy world of 2008.

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Chapter Six

Cole sat at his desk beside himself with frustration. His anger and hate for Turner and Charity Reardon was growing like a festering sore. Yeah, like a boil on his butt. He needed to get rid of them, but the bitch first. Then he'd go after Turner.

The town had stayed on alert. He'd not seen one woman out alone and he'd not dared to court another widow. The demon in his body cried out for release. Sure, he could pleasure himself, but it just wasn't the same as smelling fear combined with a woman's scent and the feel of her body struggling against his swollen sex. He shuddered in response to the desire coursing through his veins.

It started in Galveston when his fiancée Sara Bell broke off with him. He'd wanted to die. When she married someone else a week later, he'd wanted her to die. And she did. Her family never suspected him of the deed. Two years and four women later, he decided to leave South Texas before he got caught. When he arrived in Prairie, he'd been able to control himself until Lucinda had spurned him for Reardon. The devil within him had roared in fury. *Make him pay. Kill his lover.* Gutting Lucinda had given him so much pleasure, he'd needed to kill again, feel that glorious release once more. His blood lust grew stronger with each victim.

Activity at the bank entrance drew his attention. He watched Mamie from the boarding house enter and stop at one of the teller windows. For an older woman, she wasn't

bad looking. He imagined her warm flesh against his crotch and reached under his desk to rub his growing erection. Shocked at his behavior, he scratched his knee and brought his hand to the paperwork on his desk. *Not here, you fool.*

A wagon pulled up out front and through the big glass window in his office he could see it was Tom, Reardon's top hand. He had some woman with him. She turned and smiled at someone on the street. Why it was the beautiful Mrs. Reardon herself. What was she doing in town with Tom? She remained in the wagon while Tom entered the bank and went to stand behind Mamie. From where he sat, he could hear their conversation.

"Tom, what are you doing in town?" Mamie asked.

"We needed some supplies and on the way out of town, I'm to deliver the Missus to the 'little house' outside of town."

She peered around him to stare at the woman in the wagon. "Ah, so Turner will be meeting her there."

"Nope, not this time. He couldn't make it and Mrs. Reardon wants to come back to the law office again tomorrow. Plans to walk in tomorrow morning." He grinned. "She hasn't taken to riding a horse too well."

Mamie drew herself up to her full height. "You mean she's going to spend the night there alone?"

Tom held up a hand. "I know, I know, but not one thing I can do about it. Turner would have to lock her up to keep her from doing what she sets her mind to. At least she's packing a pistol."

"Well, I'll be having a talk with that young lady. Packing a pistol, indeed."

Cole watched through the window as Mamie stopped to talk to Charity. The older woman didn't act happy when she left to cross the street. Tom exited without glancing his way. They drove on out of town. Cole grinned. Tonight the bitch would pay. He'd enjoy this killing more than the other two put together.

* * * *

He didn't leave town until it was completely dark. The knife he'd stolen off a customer's horse tethered outside the bank days ago was tucked in his boot. As backup, he had a .32 caliber pocket pistol in his trousers. Not that he expected to need it.

Hidden in the tall grasses growing around the home, he watched the pretty woman move through the house. She sang but he couldn't make out the words. Once she stopped and swung a towel or something around her head in the air. Didn't look like ladylike behavior to him, but she was alone so guessed she didn't have to worry about what her dear husband would think.

The thought of Turner finding her dead the next morning made him smile. Oh, how he would like to be here to witness his sorrow. Sorrow hell, Turner'd be mad enough to kill. It was obvious to anyone with eyes he cared about the woman. Damn! He should've thought to bring something of Turner's that would tie him to the scene. Too late for that now.

Finally, she carried the kerosene lamp into the bedroom. His body hardened at the thought of her undressing. She disappeared from sight then returned a few minutes later in a

white nightgown. He could see her silhouette through the gown and groaned at the rising desire he felt. *Hurry up woman and turn out that light.* As if hearing his request, she blew out the lamp. He'd give her a good hour to fall asleep then he'd make his move.

* * * *

Charity lay as still as she could and tried to look as if she were asleep. She'd left all the windows open so she'd get a cross breeze. Of course, she also got a lot of flies and mosquitoes. Turner had promised to put screens on next week.

She sighed. It had already been a trying day. They had refused to consider her for the bar exam. As if that wasn't enough, now she was laid up here in bed waiting for a murderer to carve up her body. Butterflies danced in her stomach and she broke out in a cold sweat. She didn't doubt for a minute if Cole knew she was alone, he'd take a chance and try to kill her.

Moonlight cast shadows across the floor and for just a second, she saw something move breaking the light pattern. She stiffened and listened for some kind of sound. A board creaked on the small porch, and then nothing. Several minutes later, a footstep sounded in the room outside her door. She trembled, unable to control her movements. Thru the slits of her eyes, she saw him come in the bedroom. He stood at the door for a moment as if making sure she was asleep. He bent and pulled a large blade knife from his boot. It gleamed in the moonlight. She squeezed her eyes shut,

cutting out all light. His breathing was loud in the small room. She couldn't take much more. Just when she thought she'd scream, she heard the cocking of a pistol.

"Don't move a muscle, Cole. I'd love to have an excuse to shoot you, but the judge and Sheriff Cannon have different plans. I think it has to do with you swinging by your neck."

Cole swung around, knife poised to strike. Charity didn't think. She lifted the .38 revolver she had tucked at her side and fired hitting him square in the back. As he howled in rage and pain Turner knocked the knife from his hand.

Charity jumped out of bed and lit the kerosene lamp. Turner bent over Cole probing at the wound to the sound of Cole's wails. "Looks like you'll live long enough to go to trial, Cole. Mores the pity."

Within minutes, they heard the judge and sheriff stomping through the back door at a run. Both appeared mighty pleased their prisoner was alive. Turner helped carry Cole outside and tie him across the saddle of the extra horse the sheriff had brought. Cole carried on so, Elijah popped him on the head with his gun butt to quiet him.

As they mounted their horses Sheriff Cannon said. "See you two in town tomorrow so I can write up a report. Don't believe we'd have caught him without your help Mrs. Reardon."

"Please, call me Charity. I imagine you'll be seeing a lot of me around town."

"I'm right sorry about you not being able to get your license to practice law," said the judge. "I believe you have skills we could all learn from."

"It's not such a big deal. I'm going to be Jonas's partner and help with all the research and investigation. For the past two days we've been brushing up on his courtroom skills."

"Good, good. The boy needs some serious help." He tipped his hat. "Goodnight to you folks. See you in the morning."

* * * *

Charity and Turner lay in bed with the covers kicked back and a light breeze flowing over their damp bodies sated from lovemaking. With both arms and legs wrapped around her, pinning her to his body, Turner squeezed her. "Woman, you will never do something like this again. Sitting behind that dressing screen, I feared I'd die of a heart attack before Cole ever got here."

"The thought of doing under-cover work again doesn't excite me. I was trembling so hard I was afraid the bed shook."

He growled into her hair. "Hon, I don't care if you have covers or not, no more of this catching killers."

Have covers? Charity started giggling. Unable to stop she howled with laughter.

"What the hell is so funny?" he demanded.

"Oh ... Turner. I'm just so happy." She pulled his face down for her kiss. When she broke contact, she whispered against his neck. "I love you Turner Reardon."

She yelped as he about squeezed the life out of her. He relaxed his hold and pulled her head back to stare in her eyes. "I love you too, Charity."

Later, she lay still as Turner ran his fingers up and down her back so softly, it almost tickled.

She shivered as he whispered against her ear. "What about your father, sweetheart? Are you sure you can be content without him in your life?"

Did she have a choice? No. After loving Turner, no way could she go back to her own time and live without him. She'd miss her father, but if she could get a message to him ... "If I could let him know my whereabouts, it would be a big load off my mind. I want him to know I'm safe and happy."

"Is your father's law firm a family business? When was it established?"

"Daddy's grandfather bought the firm in 1908 from Walter Haygood. He'd been in business for over seventy-five years." She shoved Turner to his back and laughing, straddled his waist. "That's it, that's it." Arms twined around his neck, she planted a loud wet kiss on his mouth. "I know how to let him know where I am."

She explained her plan.

He fanned his fingers through her hair, brushing it back from her face. "I've got one smart wife." This man's every touch made her feel so special.

She scooted down his body and dropped her head to his chest. "I just hope it works."

"No reason why it shouldn't. If anyone can make it happen, it's you. Are you sure you're not too disappointed about not getting your license?"

"No, I'll do what I want and if I get in trouble I'll plead ignorance. Or Jonas will plead for me." She tilted her head up to kiss him. "Heck, I may even make a few laws of my own."

"I wouldn't put it past you. You're a hard woman to keep on a leash."

"Yes, and don't you forget it." She chuckled. "Anyway, I need to spend some of my time being a wife, learning what life is like on a Texas spread."

"Yes you do, darlin', in particular, learning to ride a horse. As for me, I think I need to read *Taming the Cowboy* so I can learn how you women from the future expect me to act."

* * * *

New York, July 15, 2008

Buford "Bull" Dawson stared at the heavy aged brown paper wrapped package he'd removed from the vault. Years ago, he'd wished it would disappear. Now, it was as dear to him as his life. After joining his father's law firm, he'd been going through business items they'd inherited from the former owner and was stunned to see his name written across the old paper wrapping. A note had been attached indicating it be delivered on July 15, 2008, but he'd been unable to resist temptation. Charity had been five-years-old at the time and the contents had filled him with dread. He'd done everything in his power to keep his girl close, to avoid what he feared most in life.

Years ago he'd replaced the string that had broken on one side. His name was written with liquid ink, the kind he'd used in school as a boy until ball point pens had been invented. His

throat closed in panic as he studied the return address and date—the one that had haunted his days and nights for the past twenty-three years—Charity Dawson Reardon, Prairie, Texas, 1888. This time he knew what was happening. This wasn't a joke or a bad dream.

Hands shaking, he took scissors from his desk drawer and carefully cut the string then folded back the edges of the paper, making sure he didn't damage it, to reveal an antique law book. A beautiful tome, he couldn't resist running his hand over the fine cover and breathing in the scent of old leather. The print date was 1880.

The pages fell open to reveal a folded sheet of paper. He lifted it from the book, opened it, and read the words, knowing this time they were indeed true.

Dear Daddy,

I know this will be a big shock, but...

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Acknowledgements

There are several references in history and literature to the custom of "Marrying under the Gallows."

1. *A Sharp Nose and a Thin Lip* Easton, MA *The Easton Gazette*, Saturday, June 21, 1862 (Salisbury University, Nabb Research Center)

2. Andrews, Andrew. *Old Church Lore* London: William Andrews & Co., The Hull Press; London, 1891

3. Hutchinson, Rev. H.N. *Marriage Customs in Many Lands* D. Appleton Co., *The New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art*, November 27, 1897, Wednesday

Though the custom of saving a man or woman from the gallows referenced in the articles above occurs in England, France, and on the East coast of the United States, for my short story I've moved the concept to Texas. The mention of an ordinance or law is strictly a figment of my imagination.

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