



CIRCLE STAR

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After thirteen years in the East, Susanna Talbot stands to inherit the Arizona ranch she grew up on, but only provided she marries Connor McGregor, the young drifter who once forged a bond with her father. Susanna will do whatever it takes to claim her right to the land - even seek a union with a man who believes she ruined his life.

But first she must find him.

Connor McGregor rode into the desert without a backward glance thirteen years ago, believing Susanna had banished him from Circle Star. Now a man of twenty-eight, he has no interest in coming to her aid. Will he bury his bitterness, or leave Susanna on the mercy of the ruthless neighbor Burt Hartman, who covets the ranch and will stop at nothing - including rape and murder.

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Prologue

The boy sprawled over the dusty gravel slope, propped up on one elbow. As he shifted his weight, power rippled along his arm and the muscles that broadened his chest. He glanced at the girl a few paces away, wondering if she'd noticed the changes in his body – the strength – the deepening of voice – the stubble on his upper lip.

She sat very still, her chin resting on her drawn-up knees. Her eyes carried a dreamy look, but they were locked on the rushing water of the river that flowed swiftly after the spring floods.

The boy's brows drew together. She wasn't even looking at him. He'd never figured out if she truly ignored him, or just pretended to.

He allowed his gaze a furtive roam. The girl's body was changing, too. A soft curve had swelled on her bosom, and her hips had flared out, so that the denim workman's pants she wore around the ranch stretched taut over her buttocks.

On Sundays, her father allowed the boy to join them for dinner at the big house. He'd seen the girl in a form-fitting dress, her hair in an upsweep, instead of the single heavy braid that hung down her back. It had given him a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, just like looking at her did now.

A few days ago, her father had said something to him about leaving the bunkhouse, where he slept with the other ranch hands, and moving into the small room by the kitchen. It was used for storage now, but it could be cleared out for him. Since Mrs. Talbot had left Circle Star to live back in Philadelphia, where she came from, Mr. Talbot had more freedom to act on his whims.

The boy's frown deepened. He didn't understand how married folks could live with half the continent between them. It was 1883, and people were free to do what they wanted. Why didn't they just plain divorce, if they could no longer bear to be in the same place? His own folks had lived together, and died together, leaving him to fend for himself at eleven, with nothing but a horse, a saddle, a Winchester rifle, and a pair of Colt revolvers to his name.

For two long years he'd drifted, sleeping rough, scraping a meal anyhow he could.

Then Mr. Talbot had caught him living in a line shack on the eastern corner of Circle Star. Instead of an earful of curses and a kick up his backside, the boy had been given a job. He worked hard. He knew he earned his keep. The toughest part was the newspapers and books Mr. Talbot made him read in the evenings, and quizzed him about in the mornings, to make sure he hadn't skipped pages.

He didn't care, though. For the boy, living on Circle Star was as though he'd died and gone to heaven.

He shifted again, his frustration rising as the girl's eyes stayed stubbornly on the whirling water. She always appeared when he was least expecting it. She'd suddenly be there, leaning against the side of the corral as he worked to break a wild mustang. Reeking with sweat, caked in dirt from the battle with the horse, he'd keep his distance. Or, she would lazily stroll over when he fished by the river, and silently sit down, just like she was doing now.

The only time she saw him properly was at Sunday dinner. Then he wore clean clothes and slicked his unruly sandy hair down with water. He still remembered how he'd blushed the first time he'd walked into the cool dining room, and had felt her eyes linger on him.

"One day, I'm going to have a ranch of my own," he declared to her now, as much to break the silence as to inform her of the fact.

"And how would you achieve that?" she murmured, still not looking at him.

"I don't know." He already regretted the bold statement. "I'll find a way." He knew the words rang hollow, but deep down he believed them. One day he would.

"I'm going to own Circle Star," the girl said. "I'm going to inherit it when my father dies."

"A woman can't run a ranch."

"I will," she told him flatly. "Just wait and see."

He glanced up. She was no longer hugging her knees, but had turned towards him. The way she leaned over, one hand propped along the ground, made her breasts jut against the shirtwaist blouse. She challenged him with a defiant look. He'd noticed the color of her eyes the first time he'd spoken to her, a clear sage green with a dark rim around the iris. From that moment on, every time he heard the name Circle Star, he remembered those eyes.

"If I married you, I'd own Circle Star." The boy froze in horror as he heard his words. They seemed to come out of nowhere. It wasn't something he was planning to do, and even if he did, he certainly wouldn't announce his intention out loud.

"What makes you think I'd agree to marry you?" The girl leaned closer. Her eyes narrowed, in anger or against the sun, he couldn't tell which. A ripple of wind teased the dark tendrils that had broken loose from her braid.

A sudden flame of desire burst through him. The emotion had festered inside him for two years while he'd watched her turn from a gangly child into a slim girl, at the same time as he matured from a boy into a man. "This," he said hoarsely, reaching out for her.

The nape of her neck felt soft under his fingers as he slipped a hand under her braid and pulled her close. Her arm skittered along the ground. She toppled into him, her breasts flattening against the hard muscles on his chest, and he anchored her on top of him with a fierce hold. His mouth crushed against hers, stifling her cry of surprise.

He'd known hunger and thirst, but they meant nothing compared to the yearning now soaring inside him. His loins went hard with a fury that matched the surge of blood through his veins. His heartbeat drummed in his ears, while his lips feasted on her flesh.

It took a few moments before his senses stilled enough for him to pull back a little, and pay proper attention to the girl. She lay on top of him, her legs tangled with his. Her panting

breath brushed a lick of damp heat along his cheek. "This," he repeated softly into her ear.

She stirred, her body tensing against his. Instinctively, he tightened his arms around her. She had been clinging to his shoulders, but now her hands pushed instead, and her motion grew into a struggle. "Let me go," she told him, her voice a husky whisper.

"No," he said. "Never." And he meant it. He'd marry her. She would be his, and so would Circle Star, although the ranch didn't really matter, not when he held the girl's warm and pulsing body against his.

"Let me go," she said again, anger sharpening her voice.

"Why?" he demanded. "Don't you like being kissed?"

She twisted out of his grasp, and he chose to let her go. As she struggled up, her braid dragged down and scraped across his burning mouth. "My mother says ranch hands are not for me," she warned him primly. "I'm going away to school, and I'm going to be a lady."

"A lady?" He frowned at her. "A lot of good that will do when running a ranch."

He could see hesitation pass like a cloud over her face. Wanting to press his advantage, he leapt up and reached for her again. He settled his hands on her hips and pulled her close, the hardness in his groin straining against her soft mound. Of its own volition, one of his calloused hands crept up and curled over a breast.

A fiery blush covered her cheeks when she felt his touch and realized what he was doing. "Let me go," she rasped. When he didn't, she lashed out at him, flailing with both hands.

Startled, he released her. She lowered her arms and glared at him, her breasts rising and falling with urgent gasps of breath. A battle between fear and shame and excitement raged in the green eyes widened into dark pools. He wanted to say he was sorry, to explain he hadn't meant to offend or frighten her. Just as he was about to speak, she whirled around and fled up the riverbank.

"I'm going to tell my father," she yelled over her shoulder as she raced away from him. "I'm going to tell him what you did, and he'll throw you off Circle Star."

"No he won't," he shouted after her, although she was already out of sight. "He won't," the boy muttered to himself, standing rooted, his lungs heaving, his hands knotted into fists.

But he probably would, if she told him. Mr. Talbot was a hot tempered man, and a stickler for family values. It was out of respect for his benefactor that the boy declined to join the other riders when they trooped into the whorehouse on trips to Cedar City. Curiosity had burned holes in him, but he'd said no. Now he wished he hadn't.

He dragged the toe of his boot on the gravel ground, listening to the noise it made. He might just as well pack up for the day. He needed something more than fishing to push the gnawing worry out of his mind. There was a new stallion Mr. Talbot had bought from a breeder in Santa Fe that he could get started on.

* * * *

The boy soothed the quivering horse, gentling his hands over a flank. He murmured soft words, without stopping to consider their meaning. He should have been like that with the girl.

Cosseted and calmed her, instead of just letting his lust and need loose on her. He wanted to find her, but he didn't know how to go about it. He'd never been inside the big house uninvited, although he knew where her room was. He'd spent enough restless nights gazing up at her window, until the lamp fluttered out, and the window turned into a forbidding dark square.

Tomorrow he would know. It was Sunday, his day to join the girl and her father for dinner. If she'd told, the storm would have raged by then. Of that, he could be certain. If he got invited as usual, she hadn't told.

Behind him, someone called his name. The boy whirled around. Pete Jackson, the foreman of Circle Star, was striding up. A small wiry man with legs bowed from a lifetime in the saddle, he made haste across the sun-baked yard. "The boss wants to see you," the foreman grunted. "In the library. I'll take the horse." He scaled the fence into the corral and eased closer, until he could reach for the reins.

"Did he say why?" Fear clutched at the boy's insides as he thought how he'd betrayed the trust that had been put in him.

The foreman reached up to the bridle, moving with caution, preoccupied with the horse, which had grown restless again. Prancing and whinnying, the stallion shied away from both of them. "No," he said, distracted by the task of soothing the animal. "The girl was with him. All he said was that he wants to talk to you. He seemed about to explode. You know how he gets when he's mad about something."

The boy asked no more questions. Rushing the fence, he flung himself over the top and hurried back to the stables.

The saddle resting on the beam by the entrance was his, as was the bay gelding he rode each day. Mr. Talbot had agreed to sell the horse to him, taking a dollar out of his weekly pay. He expected a balance was left owing, but that didn't matter too much. He was no horse thief, but he could accept remaining in debt to a man who had volunteered a loan. One day he would pay back every cent, with interest.

Quick and silent, he saddled the bay and walked out to the yard, where he left the horse tied in the shade of the cottonwood tree while he slunk over to the bunkhouse. His bed was at the far end, on the left by the window. Sunlight filtered in, exposing the dust dancing in the air, and the dirt caked on the floor.

He fastened his gun belt, checking that the two Colt Peacemakers rested secure in their holsters. For riding, he preferred not to tie the leather thongs around his thighs. The scabbard for the Winchester had been lost years ago. He slung the rifle on his back and pulled his two saddlebags from under the bunk. Two years ago he'd arrived with scant possessions – a change of clothing, a blanket, a few cooking utensils, and a photograph of his parents. Now he could add three books, and the suit Mr. Talbot had bought for him to wear for dinner on Sundays.

He didn't have room for everything in his saddlebags. After a brief reflection, he left the suit behind, folded into a bundle under the bedclothes. That way, it wouldn't get dirty on the floor, or alert anyone too soon to his escape.

The books he took with him. The prospect of no longer having them suddenly made reading appear a pleasant pastime, rather than the chore he'd regarded it up to now. Draping the saddlebags over his arm, he strode to the door and swept his gaze over the yard. No movement broke the quiet. Saturday was the day for the men to ride out to Cedar City, for the saloons and the whores and whatever else they managed to rustle up for entertainment.

The boy strolled out, putting on a casual show, in case someone was watching. The gelding greeted him with a soft nickering sound, butting its head against his shoulder as he walked up. He took a few seconds to croon to the animal. Then, with an economical motion, he vaulted into the saddle and was on his way.

Where to, he didn't know.

As the house grew distant behind him, he wondered if he should have stayed, tried to weather it out. With a defeated shrug of his shoulders, he dismissed the thought. This way was better. He could hold on to the good memories, without letting them be ruined by a furious dismissal from the man he worshipped, or by hearing the girl spell out her complaints.

There was nothing for him at Circle Star. He'd forget Susanna Talbot, just as he was sure she'd forget him. Gritting his teeth, Connor McGregor urged the gelding into a canter and leaned low over the neck of the horse, feeling the hot Arizona desert wind whip into his face.

Chapter One

Susanna Talbot shifted her buttocks on the hard seat of the buggy, trying to find a way to soften the battering against her rear. A wry smile twisted her lips as she recalled the words of her best friend Claire. "Of course you get sore from riding," Claire had blurted out. "You have such a bony ass." Then Claire had grinned her infectious grin, and both girls had ridden on, stifling their mirth, delighted in the knowledge that their mothers would be scandalized if they overheard the exchange.

But now Claire was far away, and so was Philadelphia, and the house on Rittenhouse Square which had been the centre of her universe for the past ten years.

Circle Star.

Susanna closed her eyes and let her mind transport her back in time. She could hear the noises, the thundering hooves of the cattle, the whinnying of the horses. The cry of a lonely coyote at night. And inside the house, the clanking of boot heels against tile in the hall, the booming voice of her father.

Her father.

A groan escaped from her throat. Quickly, Susanna opened her eyes and glanced at the driver, but fortunately he appeared not to have heard. She blinked back a tear. Her heart ached at how she'd drifted apart from her father, never once visiting, and now with his sudden death the chance to make amends was lost forever. With a resolute frown, Susanna tightened her mouth.

Grief would find a time and place, and that wasn't now.

If she wanted to make a success of her plan to run Circle Star, she couldn't afford to show weakness. The men had to perceive her as a competent businesswoman. The fact that at twenty-six she was already considered a spinster ought to help. Susanna hoped the advantage of her age wouldn't be outweighed by her slim build, and a feminine face with full lips that trembled when she was upset.

She would just have to toughen up.

The buggy rattled along the dirt road that ran arrow-straight through the fields of towering cacti. Susanna tugged a handkerchief out of her skirt pocket and tied it over her mouth. A layer of dust already covered her elegant clothes, and she could feel grit scraping in her teeth. Despite the discomfort, she was glad that Pete Jackson, the foreman of Circle Star, had sent the open buggy for her. Her eyes darted over the landscape, drinking in the magic of the barren land she realized she'd never stopped missing.

She recalled those last terrible days with her father, before she'd left for school.

"Don't go," he father said. "Your life's here at Circle Star."

"I must go," she insisted. "Mother says I need to go, so that I can be a lady."

They ended up arguing over it, scowling at each other across the big desk in the library, her father's infamous temper barely restrained. Then, with a sudden change of mood, he announced he had something important to discuss. "I'm putting Connor McGregor in my will," he informed her. "He'll share Circle Star with you."

The words hit like a fist in her gut, making her breath catch and her heart hammer. Earlier that day Connor had grabbed her and kissed her by the river, and even now, thirteen years later, she could still remember her violent reaction to his touch. She'd been kissed since, several times, but none of those kisses had rocked her the same way.

That was why none of those other kisses had ever led to marriage, much to her mother's disappointment.

Thirteen years ago, her father had summoned Pete Jackson to fetch Connor, so that he could explain his intentions to the boy. Only Connor couldn't be found. The foreman swore he'd passed on the message. Instead of coming into the library as instructed, Connor had packed his meager belongings and ridden off Circle Star.

Her father had been puzzled, then worried, and finally distraught. "Something's happened to the boy," he had declared, his face dark with concern. "He'd never just leave like that."

But Susanna knew.

I'll tell my father, and he'll throw you off Circle Star.

She'd screamed those words, and Connor had believed her. She had caused his flight. It had never been her intention to tell her father. And then she'd been too afraid to explain that Connor had run off because of something she'd said. Her father would have blamed her.

And, if truth be told, she'd been jealous. Her father fussed over Connor as though the boy was some long-lost son. Just because she was a girl, Susanna was pushed into the background. Part of her was glad when Connor disappeared. Now she would be important to her father again, and she wouldn't have to share Circle Star when her father died.

But she didn't become important to her father again. She was away at school. Her father wrote to her, but as often as not his letters would be about his efforts to track down Connor and find out what had happened to him. He never did manage to trace the boy, and Susanna never confessed to her part in Connor's disappearance.

Then it became clear her mother wouldn't return from Philadelphia. After three years at boarding school, Susanna had to make a decision. It wasn't fair to force a child of sixteen to choose between two parents, particularly when that choice included two completely different lifestyles. Susanna made her choice. As she filled her lungs with the dry desert air, and felt the hot desert wind on her skin, she realized it had been the wrong one.

She had always belonged at Circle Star.

* * * *

Two hours later, Susanna sat in the oak paneled library to receive the hastily summoned lawyer. She recognized Mr. Catterill, who'd dealt with her father, although it surprised her to discover the man was still alive. He'd appeared ancient when she was a child. Now he merely

appeared old. Everything was relative, Susanna accepted with a quiet sigh.

“Thank you for coming out to Circle Star.” She rose from behind the massive mahogany desk and offered her hand.

“It’s the least I could do. I knew you’d be tired after the long journey.” The lawyer briefly clasped her fingers. “My condolences.”

Susanna nodded. “I don’t really know what happened. I understand it was sudden.”

“A seizure. Your father always worked too hard. They were enlarging a well at the north ridge. The heat and the physical strain defeated him.”

Susanna could almost see him, a giant of a man, wielding a shovel, grunting with effort, unwilling to accept the limitations of his body. “That’s the way he would have liked to go,” she said softly.

“But not quite yet,” Mr. Catterill suggested with arching brows.

Despite her anguish, Susanna felt the corners of her mouth curve up. “Thank you for saying that. I’m trying not to wallow in grief.”

“You’re entitled to some grieving.”

“But not to as much as I would if I had lived here with him.”

The lawyer cleared his throat, and it wasn’t lost on Susanna that he said nothing to contradict her. She had expected such reactions. People saw her as a stranger now, someone who chose to leave Circle Star all those years ago. She would have to work hard to be accepted again, but that didn’t worry her. She had plenty of determination mixed with her soft nature.

Sitting down, Susanna gestured at the chair in front of the desk. “I’d like to get on with it. Please don’t think I’m hasty in wanting to find out the facts. I simply think I’ll manage better if I keep my thoughts occupied.”

The lawyer settled opposite her and propped his briefcase on the floor by his feet. Leaning down, he extracted a few sheets of paper. “It’s very simple,” he said as he straightened. “Except for a few small legacies, you are the sole beneficiary in your father’s will.”

Susanna released the breath she’d been holding. “Is it a new will?”

Mr. Catterill contemplated her before he spoke. It was a peculiar look, one that sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. “No, it’s not,” the lawyer said. “It’s an old will, made just before you left Circle Star.”

“But” Susanna stopped and pressed her lips together, then forced her expression to relax. “Please, carry on.”

“You will inherit Circle Star, on the condition that you marry Connor McGregor. If you don’t marry him, the ranch will be sold and the proceeds put in trust for you and any children you may have.”

“What?” Her heart started to pound with such ferocity it seemed to be trying to break out of her chest.

“Unless you marry Connor McGregor, Circle Star must be sold.”

“I understood that. But ... he hasn’t been heard from in years. He could be dead. He

could already be married to someone else.”

The lawyer shrugged. “When your father made the will, Connor McGregor was living on Circle Star. When circumstances changed, your father never got around to making a new will.”

“He should have,” Susanna cried out. Then she realized how callous her words must have sounded. She clasped her hands together in her lap. “I mean, it’s totally impractical” Her voice drifted away.

“I kept reminding him, but he thought there was plenty of time.”

“He never really stopped hoping, did he?” Susanna fixed her eyes on Mr. Catterill, knowing her lips were about to start trembling. “He always thought that one day Connor would come back, and then the sun would shine again.” Her hands twisted apart and clenched into fists. “Well, he didn’t come back. I could have been here, but I was only a girl, which just wasn’t good enough.”

“Miss Talbot.” The lawyer’s voice turned cool. “You father insisted on this clause for your own protection.”

“My protection?!”

“Yes. It’s a hard country. Too often, the law fails to do its job. Your father felt it would be unsafe for a single woman to operate a ranch. If you weren’t married, he wished for Circle Star to be sold.”

Susanna glared at the lawyer across the table. “He also wished to pick out a husband.”

Mr. Catterill shrugged again, and the gesture conveyed no apology. “He felt Connor McGregor was the right man to offer you that protection.”

Susanna stood up so suddenly her chair screeched against the plank floor. Her skirts and petticoats flapped against her legs as she paced the room. “What do we do now?”

“You have three months to find Connor McGregor and marry him. After that, Circle Star will be sold in a public auction to the highest bidder.”

She halted, facing the lawyer. “Until then, I can stay?”

“You can stay, but you cannot dispose of any assets that belong to the ranch.”

Susanna thanked him and bid him good-bye. When the door closed behind the lawyer, she sank in the seat and buried her face in her hands.

For thirteen years, she’d struggled to forget Connor McGregor, knowing he’d hate her now, that he’d never forgive her for being cast out of Circle Star. How could her father do this to her? How could he force her to open ancient wounds?

She had to remain strong. Finally she was back where she belonged, and she’d find a way to stay. Susanna stared ahead, determination stamped on her face as she reviewed the possibilities in her mind.

* * * *

Sitting behind the big mahogany desk in the library, Susanna doodled on a notepad. Her first task was to go through the books and understand her financial situation. Her father had considered accounting a suitable task for a girl, allowing her to help when he paid the bills. With

a careful hand, she had noted down the amounts in the big leather-bound ledgers. It was a long time ago, but she remembered, and she knew what to look for.

She turned to the last completed page and inspected the totals at the end of each column. The ranch prospered. It would give her a good living, if she was able to stay. She had liquid funds, too, enough for what she needed to achieve in the next three months.

Idly leafing back the pages, she scanned entries in the neat columns and studied the explanations on the left. Her brow furrowed, and her finger traced across a line, just to make sure she hadn't made a mistake. With a sinking feeling, she examined page after page.

It was no mistake. Susanna leaned back in the leather chair and lowered her hands into her lap, expelling a long sigh.

Her father had supported their life in Philadelphia. The maintenance of the house on Rittenhouse Square, their clothes, even their daily expenses – food, drink, and occasional domestic help – had been funded by him.

She recalled her mother's scolding explanations over why a household of two women didn't need a maid. Now she knew better. They couldn't afford servants. Without the income from Circle Star, they'd have to sell the house in Philadelphia and live on the proceeds, until the funds ran out, and they would be forced to seek positions as governesses or ladies' maids.

There was no choice. She had to find a way to hold on to the ranch and the income it generated. If the ranch was sold and the money placed into trust as stipulated in her father's will, she doubted the interest from the trust would be enough to support her and her mother.

Susanna fisted her hands in her lap. A moment later, with a slap of the pen against the pad, she got up and left the room. She would unpack while she devised a plan. Doing something practical would soothe her nerves and make her mind more agile.

Gathering her skirts, she scaled the stairs. The house was none too clean. She had discovered the reason when she interrogated Carmen, the sturdy woman around forty who had welcomed her at the door with Pete Jackson when she arrived in the buggy earlier that day.

The housekeeper who had followed her mother from Philadelphia, and remained when her mother went back, had died from a stomach complaint two years ago. Her father never hired another competent woman, instead relying on cooks who came and went.

Carmen seemed both willing and capable, but she had her hands full with feeding thirty hungry men. Cleaning took second place. Susanna entered her father's bedroom and lifted the cover on the big canopied bed. Musty air billowed at her. She crossed the landing into her old room and found her two trunks already hauled up. She strode to the bedside and repeated her inspection. This time the smell was fresh, with a hint of something floral. She made a note in her mind to thank Carmen later.

Kneeling on the ground next to the trunks, Susanna twisted the locks open. A frown lined her face as she surveyed the contents. A few books and ornaments rested on top. The rest of the space brimmed with toilet articles and clothing.

Fine gowns in silk and velvet, which she now knew had been bought with money sent by

her father.

Her mother had never told her how much their comfortable lifestyle depended on his generosity. Susanna had always assumed her mother possessed some wealth of her own, and over the years she'd never expressed gratitude to her father. How could she have? She hadn't known she was receiving gifts from him, since her mother had hidden the truth from her.

It hurt to know that even as an adult she'd been used in the tug-of-war between her parents.

Her mouth tightened. Who was she going to be from now on? The Susanna Talbot who grew up on Circle Star? Or the Susanna Talbot who went to Philadelphia and learned how to be a lady?

The thought of Philadelphia reminded her of Claire, and despite her anxiety, Susanna laughed out loud. Of course! She realized what Claire would do, and although she'd never be as bold as Claire, she was going to try her best.

Still chuckling softly, Susanna scrambled to her feet and rushed to the rosewood armoire in the corner of the room. Inside, she found her old shirtwaist blouses and the rough denim pants she used to wear around the ranch before she went off to boarding school. She kicked off her slippers and bent to tug on the pants beneath her hems. They still fit, although a little tight around the hips. She hurried to shed her skirt and layers of petticoats and her embroidered blouse. The old shirtwaist blouse fit, too, although with the same tightness over the bust as the pants displayed over the buttocks.

All the more for them to ogle at, Susanna thought with unaccustomed ferocity. Then, before her courage failed, she ran to her father's room and picked up his gun belt from the bedside table. It was too long, but if she took off one of the holsters and wore the belt high up, fastening it in the furthest notch, she could wrap it twice around her waist. She'd see a shoemaker in Cedar City about getting it shortened.

Last, she picked up one of her father's guns and checked it. It was loaded. She thumbed back the hammer, finding it a little stiff. Susanna raised her arm. "Boom," she whispered, looking down the barrel, taking aim at the oil lamp on the wall.

With a smile of satisfaction, Susanna brought the hammer down to secure the weapon. She rotated the belt around her waist, until the remaining holster lay positioned over her right hip. She gingerly slipped the Smith and Wesson inside and took a few small steps to test its weight.

Connor had worn Colts. It pleased her to know she had something different. As soon as she could, she'd ride out to the desert to practice. Her father had taught her well, and since shooting at a target was intuitive, she had no doubt her skills remained.

Her steps thudding softly over the floorboards, she returned to her room and searched in the armoire, until she found the snakeskin boots which had been a gift from her father on her thirteenth birthday. Carefully, she tried them on. Thank heavens they didn't pinch. She kicked her feet into the boots, and stomped noisily down the stairs.

She'd been right. The practical chores had soothed her mind and helped her to analyze the problem. There was a solution, an easy one, provided she could find someone trustworthy to help her.

"Where's Pete Jackson?" she called out to Carmen, who was up to her elbows in flour in the kitchen.

"*Señor Jackson* is at the stable," Carmen replied, twisting the dough with strong hands. Then she raised her gaze. "*Madre mia*," she breathed. A trace of flour streaked her ample bosom as she skimmed a hasty sign of the cross.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Susanna offered Carmen a broad smile, lifting her arms and performing a slow turn.

Carmen shook her head and babbled away in Spanish.

"Slower," Susanna ordered. "It's a long time since I last spoke Spanish."

She listened carefully as Carmen repeated.

"No," she replied in the end. "I won't get arrested, but I have a good mind to cause a riot. See you later." She spun with a neat pirouette over her heels, deciding the dance lessons at boarding school had been some use after all. Then she stalked out through the door and went looking for Pete Jackson.

She found two ranch hands loitering in the stable yard. "Howdy," Susanna said, and realized she'd forgotten about a hat.

The burly men stared at her. She stifled her laughter, thinking she could toss a silver dollar into their open mouths. "I'm Susanna Talbot," she said, just to make sure they understood. "I'm your new boss."

"Howdy, Miss Talbot," said the taller man, the first one to recover. The shorter man echoed him a second later.

Before she had time to ask for Pete Jackson, the foreman strode out of the stables. "Miss Susanna?" he blurted out, blinking in the bright sunlight, his wiry body stiffening as he hesitated over how to react.

"I need to talk to you," Susanna told him. "Are you free now?"

"Sure." Pete nodded at her, pausing to give instructions to the two ranch hands. "That's quite an outfit," he commented as he caught up alongside her.

"Do you disapprove?" Susanna gave him a sidelong glance. Their relationship had once been close, but that was a long time ago, and in different circumstances. She wondered if the mutual trust remained.

"Practical," Pete said, but he couldn't hide the sly look, or the amusement in his gruff voice.

A smile tugged at her mouth. "Is that all you have to say?"

Pete's narrow face cracked into a grin. "You gonna ride into town in that getup?"

"That's the plan."

"A bloody riot," he said. "Them pants is tight to bursting."

Heat flared into her cheeks. “That’s not intentional. I’ll get a bigger pair in Cedar City.” She looked down her body. “This is just to make a point.”

“And the point is?”

“The point is that I mean business,” Susanna said firmly. “And you can’t wear a gun belt with a dress.”

Pete shook his head. “Your father will turn in his grave.”

“The exercise will do him good.”

She’d forgotten how Pete laughed, throwing his head back and making a wheezing sound, like a hyena. Susanna averted her face to wipe away a tear.

God, it felt so good to be home.

In the library, she made a show of propping her boots on the desk, crossed at the ankles, just like her father used to do. “Pete, how would you like to own Circle Star?”

“Eh?”

“Don’t play dumb – you must know about my father’s will?”

Pete’s expression grew cautious. “As much as I’d like to marry you, Miss Susanna, I’m not Connor McGregor.”

Susanna grimaced at him. “So my father *did* tell you about the condition in his will?”

The foreman replied with an uncomfortable shrug. “It’s no good out here for a woman alone.”

“I’m not alone. I have you.” Susanna pulled her feet off the table and leaned forward. “Connor’s gone. He’s been gone for thirteen years. We won’t find him. Circle Star is going to be sold in a public auction. I want you to bid for it.”

Pete cast her a puzzled frown. “I don’t have that kind of money.”

“That’s just it,” Susanna explained, her words tumbling out. “You don’t need to. I’ll lend you the money. The same money that I get from selling the ranch.” She gestured, moving her hands between them. “You bid for the ranch. The money would come to me as payment to purchase the ranch. I’ll give that same money back to you as a loan. The whole transaction is on paper, although I’ll need to find enough cash to pay the administrative costs. There’ll be auctioneer’s fees and such.”

Pete rubbed his nose, still looking puzzled, so Susanna pulled out a notepad and took him through it slowly, drawing a diagram to show how the money would change hands on paper but not in reality.

“You sure are smart,” Pete said. “Making all that money out of nothing.”

“Pete,” she scolded him. “It’s not money out of nothing. It’s the value of the ranch. You’ll be the legal owner, but you’ll owe back to me what the ranch is worth.”

The foreman shook his head. “Why don’t you just sell out and go back to Philadelphia? It’s a hard life out here for a single woman.”

Susanna dropped her gaze to the notepad in front of her. “I should never have left. I always missed the ranch and my father. Now he’s dead, and there’s nothing I can do to show my

love for him, apart from protecting Circle Star. Protecting his legacy.” She raised her eyes and gave Pete a solemn look. She had decided not to tell anyone she also needed the ranch to provide for her mother from the income it generated. It would weaken her position if people knew.

“What about your mother?” Pete asked. “You’ll miss her.”

“I’m a grown woman of twenty-six,” Susanna said, her tone firm. “It’s time I had my own life. It’s not easy back East either, getting to my age and being unmarried. The ranch will give me a position in the community, a purpose in life. In Philadelphia, I’d just be another aging spinster.”

Pete gave a hesitant nod. “All right. I’ll bid for you. What happens then? Will you buy the ranch back from me?”

Susanna dragged the pen along the page. “Might be better not to. As you said, it’s not easy for a woman alone. We could keep Circle Star in your name until you die, and then you could leave it to me in your will. Maybe by then, times will have changed.”

Pete chuckled. “Or you might have found yourself a husband.”

The pen rustled against the paper as Susanna gripped it hard. “Don’t count on that.”

After Pete was gone, Susanna remained at the desk, staring at diagram on the pad in front of her. She’d expected Pete would understand, but he didn’t, no more than her mother had understood all those times when Susanna had refused to marry one of the men who’d proposed to her.

She had never wanted to marry anyone other than Connor, but he had ridden into the desert thirteen years ago, full of hate for her.

Chapter Two

The denim pants chafed Susanna's legs as she rode with Pete Jackson into Cedar City the following morning. She was sitting astride on Santiago, the big stallion that had been her father's mount. Her courage faltered as they reached the busy streets. Women whispered and men ogled. Her cheeks burned with a heat so fierce her eyes watered. Perhaps her daring outfit wasn't such a good idea after all. It was something Claire would do, but Claire had the attitude to carry it off.

They dismounted outside the building that housed the newspaper and the barber, and the lawyer's offices on the floor above. Leaving the horses tethered on the beam, they went inside and climbed up the narrow stairs.

Mr. Catterill was free to see them, and Susanna breathed a sigh of relief. The fallback plan had been to wait in the saloon, where she was going to order a shot of whiskey. Not that she would drink any of it, but that went with the image she was trying to create.

Someone who knew what they wanted and how to get it.

She'd caught a glimpse of her reflection in the barber's plate-glass window on the way past, and had been left wondering if her strategy worked. Over her pants and her shirtwaist blouse, she wore a short coat several sizes too large. Her hair wasn't coiled up, but hung in a long braid down her back. Fast riding tended to pull hairpins loose, and the strong sun required a hat, which didn't sit well over an upsweep.

An assistant showed them through, and Susanna's nerves stretched even tauter than they'd been during the dusty ride. She'd never been to Mr. Catterill's office before. When she was a child, the few times they'd met, the lawyer had come to Circle Star.

After a few polite words of greeting, she settled into a seat facing a desk clean of papers. Her gaze drifted over the blotter and the two bottles of ink, one red, one blue. Then she launched into an explanation of her plan, but met no enthusiasm from the lawyer. An uneasy feeling began to churn in her stomach. "Do you understand what I'm proposing?" Susanna prompted, hiding her fear behind a brusque tone.

"I understand." Mr. Catterill pointed at the closed door between his private office and the attached room where his clerk worked. He lowered his voice. "There's a problem."

"A problem?" Pete Jackson grunted, and Susanna flicked him a grateful glance.

"Do you know Burt Hartman? The owner of Deep Valley ranch?"

"Deep Valley?" Susanna frowned. "Where's that? I've never heard of it."

"That's the old De Santis place," Pete put in. "They sold out a year or two back, to a stranger from up north. Some robber baron, with interests in railroads and silver mines, at least that's what folks around here claim."

"What does he have to do with Circle Star?" Susanna asked curtly.

"The lands are adjoining," Mr Catterill pointed out.

"I know who my neighbors are," Susanna snapped, and instantly regretted the rude comment brought on by her nerves.

The lawyer tensed in his seat. "The word is he wants Circle Star."

Susanna forced a smile, believing her outburst had caused offence. "It doesn't matter. Pete will bid more. He can outbid anyone else. It's only a paper transaction."

"The word is Burt Hartman wants no other bidders."

"What?" Susanna cried in alarm. "How do you know that? Is he threatening people?"

Mr. Catterill contemplated her in a silence that grew sinister as it stretched on.

"This can't be true," Susanna exclaimed, no longer able to bear the suspense. "Does the sheriff know?"

"The sheriff is in Hartman's pay," Pete said. "And that's a fact."

"This is barbaric." Susanna stared at the lawyer, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Are you telling me Pete's life will be in danger if he bids for Circle Star?"

Mr. Catterill spread his hands, palms up, and shrugged. "The word is, Hartman wants the ranch, and he wants it cheap."

"And is no one prepared to do anything to stop him?"

Again, it was Pete who supplied the answer. "The last two who tried are lying six feet deep in the ground."

"I see." Susanna got up, desperately holding on to the shreds of her courage. She gave the lawyer a brief nod, but this time she didn't offer her hand. "Thank you for your time. No doubt you'll send me a bill." She jerked her head for Pete to follow.

"It don't matter none to me," Pete said when they were outside. "I'll bid for you."

"No," Susanna said flatly.

"Why not? I'm not scared."

"But I am." She laid a hand on Pete's arm, stopping him from untying his horse. "I need you alive. I'm getting to understand what my father meant when he said Arizona isn't a place for a woman on her own."

"What do you need me alive for, if you've lost Circle Star?" He shook his arm loose from her grip and released the horses.

"I haven't lost the ranch yet," Susanna said as she swung into the saddle. "We have three months before the auction."

Pete mounted and held his horse steady by her side. "What can we do in three months to change anything?"

"We can find Connor McGregor," Susanna told him. Then she kicked Santiago into a canter and rode out, her long braid flying behind her.

* * * *

Susanna decided not to wait. Not sleep on it, not weigh up the risks and benefits. She'd just do it. Listen to her heart, and do it.

Unlike her childhood, when the men ate together at a long table set out in the barn behind the stables, they now ate in three shifts in the kitchen. Carmen told her it made life easier. Susanna agreed, but she also accepted it had turned the kitchen into a cantina only one step up from a saloon.

She waited until the first shift had gathered before she sent for the rest of the men. It took a while to round up all thirty. Her pulse skittered as she stood in the shade of the canopy over the kitchen door. By the time the entire restless knot of ruffians milled in the slanting light of the evening sun, she felt sick with nerves. Some of the ranch hands gave her hooded looks. A few leered openly at her daring outfit.

Taking a deep breath, Susanna stepped forward. When she spoke, she raised her voice to carry. It was fortunate her voice rang deep and resonant. A shrill voice would have ruined the impact.

"I'm not going to ask you if you think my father, Christian Talbot, was a good boss, because I know he was." She paused to let the words sink in. "Not many of you know me, but those who do, know that I'm my father's daughter." She scanned the crowd to locate the two old-timers Pete had told her were still on the ranch. "Jake. Walt." She nodded at each man in turn.

Both touched the brim of their hats, and waited for her to continue.

"I'm sure you've already heard it is my intention to run Circle Star." A sudden movement stirred the crowd in front of her, telling her the rumor had yet to spread. "My father thought a woman can't run a ranch alone."

A few men grinned and nodded, and she heard a hush of muttered comments. Susanna began to relax. At least they were listening to her, rather than looking bored, although she knew it was out of curiosity rather than respect.

"That's why my father left the ranch jointly to me and Connor McGregor, whom he regarded as a son." Susanna had planned what she wanted to say while she waited for the last stragglers to arrive. Now her mind went completely blank. Her eyes scanned the sea of expectant faces.

"Thirteen years ago, Connor McGregor rode out of Circle Star. He's never been seen or heard from since. We have three months to find him. Otherwise the ranch will be sold. The intended buyer is Burt Hartman of Deep Valley."

Voices erupted around her. Burt Hartman might not be a bad boss, but he was an outsider – a city boy playing rancher – and that was enough to alienate him. Susanna knew no man at Circle Star would want to see the two properties joined.

She raised her arms, until the men fell silent and gave her their attention. "I'm asking for your help. I want half of you on the road, searching. The other half will stay back. That means extra work with no extra pay. I can afford the expenses for the men on the road, but that's all."

Then she stepped aside and let Pete Jackson take over. The shift system for eating fell apart since none of the men wanted to move into the kitchen. They nipped inside to fill a plate and ate standing in the courtyard, balancing the food in their hands, locked in a heated debate

over what was the best way to find someone lost.

Susanna saw a cluster of men cast furtive glances in her direction. One of them separated from the rest and edged up to Pete Jackson. Despite straining her ears, Susanna couldn't make out the conversation. The foreman nodded, then ambled over to her.

"The men would like to know why McGregor left. I told them your father didn't know. Do you have anything to add?"

Susanna clasped her hands together, grateful she hadn't been to the kitchen yet and didn't have a plate to hold. The buzz of voices died down, and the men turned to watch her. She held her head high as she faced them.

"I never told my father." Her voice cracked a little, and she stopped to draw a breath. "Connor left because we argued. If you find him, tell him he has inherited a share in Circle Star. Also tell him I'm asking him to come back."

Suddenly, the strain became too much. Susanna spun on her heels and fled through the kitchen, up the stairs, into the sanctuary of her bedroom. Leaning back against the closed door, she wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Fighting for Circle Star might require more courage than she possessed. In the last thirteen years, she had worried about little else but music and dancing and dresses and parties. Now her father was dead, and the responsibility for the ranch and everyone it supported rested with her. And Connor! Susanna burst into desperate sobs. For thirteen years she'd carried her guilty secret, and now she accepted the true reason why she'd remained in Philadelphia. She hadn't been able to bear the thought of coming back to Circle Star with Connor gone.

Shoulders heaving, Susanna threw herself on the bed and cried until she fell into an exhausted sleep, fully clad, the muddy boots still on her feet.

* * * *

Susanna was pale and drawn the following morning, but held her emotions under control as she sat behind the big desk in the library with Pete Jackson at her side.

"Garrett and Murphy. North to Phoenix."

Spurs clinked when the two men shuffled forward, clutching their hats in their hands. Susanna counted out the money and handed it over. She briefly wondered if the men were baring their heads in the house on her account, or if even the roughest of them possessed some basic good manners.

"Ramirez and Morgan. Abilene," Peter called out. The pile of silver and gold on the table continued to shrink.

Absently, Susanna tapped her pen on the pad where she had jotted a list of things to do. The problem was that the entire crowd of men wanted to hit the road. It made sense. Roaming around, checking out whorehouses and saloons was like a vacation for them, at her expense. It certainly was a break from the routine of ranch work.

Pete had picked the men based on the towns they were familiar with. Local contacts would be an advantage. For safety, Susanna insisted the men travel in pairs.

“Don’t forget the sheriff’s office.” She repeated the words each time she handed out the funds. Based on what Pete had said, it would be pointless to rely on the Cedar City sheriff for help.

She would also place advertisements in newspapers. Employing Pinkerton detectives would have been the best, but that was beyond her means.

“You look like hell,” Pete told her when they finished dispatching the men. “Go get some sleep.”

Susanna grimaced. “You sure know how to flatter a lady.”

Pete swept a hand in her direction. “You ain’t no lady no more. Not in that getup.”

“It’s not the clothes, Pete. It’s the blood in my veins.”

“Blue, eh?”

“Blue like the denim over my backside.”

Pete was still chuckling when Susanna grew serious. “Do people think I’m mercenary, putting all my energies into keeping Circle Star, instead of grieving?”

He threw her a startled look. “The men admire you for your courage. You’d be letting them down if you didn’t fight for the ranch.”

“I am grieving,” she told him quietly. “But I hadn’t seen my father in thirteen years. I did my grieving when I left this place.”

Peter hesitated. “It was a shame about your parents.”

Susanna glanced up. “What went wrong? My mother won’t talk about it.”

Silence stretched between them. “I’m not someone who understands the ups and downs of marriage,” Pete said finally.

“But you were here with them, when they first married. What were they like?”

“It was like a storm broke out every time the two of them were in the same room. The air was full of sparks, like that new-fangled electric they use for lamps.”

“Like lightning sparks from storm? A good storm? A bad storm?”

“The right kind of storm.” Pete fiddled with the button on his shirt pocket. “Then your Ma started to get bored and lonesome. She begged your Pa to take a trip once in a while. Go to San Francisco or New Orleans.”

“But he wouldn’t?”

Pete shook his head slowly. “He wasn’t an easy man, your father.”

“Uncompromising. That’s what my mother called him.”

“That’s what I’d say too, if I knew them five-dollar words.”

“Was my father very upset about Connor disappearing?”

“He was more upset because you were gone. He felt he’d lost you completely, so he turned his hopes to Connor. With him, there was a chance he’d come back.”

Susanna pressed her lips together. Was that really how it had been? Everyone misunderstanding each other, believing the worst. Her jealousy of Connor had come between her and her father, but her father had only clung to the idea of Connor because she had turned against

him. "What a mess," Susanna said finally, rubbing her hands over her tired eyes.

"Are you prepared to marry the boy?"

"Why do you think I've never married anyone else?" A tired smile played around her mouth. "And he's no longer a boy. He'll be a man of twenty-eight."

"Goddamn it." Pete scowled at her. "You're as bad as your parents. At least they gave it a fair try first, before breaking up."

"I was only thirteen. He was only fifteen. We were just two dumb kids."

"He'd have come back if you'd have come back."

"And I would have come back if he'd come back," Susanna countered. She frowned and gave Pete a stern look. "And I'll shoot you right between the eyes if you ever tell anyone what I've just told you."

"Including the boy?"

"Especially the boy." She pursed her lips, embarrassed. "Do the men know Connor needs to marry me in order for me to inherit Circle Star?"

"I haven't told them. But things like that have a way of getting out."

"That's what I thought." Susanna rose behind the desk. "I think I'll go up and take that nap now."

Chapter Three

The uncertainty and helplessness of staying at home, waiting for news, turned Susanna into a jittery ghost who roamed the house and lost her temper at the slightest provocation. Time dragged on minute by minute, until it made a complete day, which eventually grew into a week, and finally a month had crawled by.

The men on the road put little store on correspondence. All she received were a few scribbled lines to confirm which town they were leaving, and where they were headed next. The last words were always the same.

Nobody knew nothing about a man named Connor McGregor.

With Carmen's help, Susanna cleaned the house and laundered the linens. Her aim with the gun grew steady and her stamina for hard riding improved. She went through every scrap of paperwork in her father's desk, and she wrote long letters to her mother, describing the life on the ranch. She decided not to ask her mother to come out and visit the hot and dusty land which had made her so unhappy, but even the loneliness couldn't dampen her excitement of being back at Circle Star.

When a sunny autumn afternoon found her sitting in the library, reading a week-old newspaper for the tenth time, Susanna could no longer bear the waiting. She'd go mad unless she did something. Anything. She surged to her feet and rushed out to the stables.

"Pete," she shouted into the dim cavern, pierced with shafts of sunlight from the windows high up on the walls. "Are you there?"

"Stop yelling. You'll make the horses bolt." The foreman strode up, wiping his hands on a rag. His bowed legs were covered by leather chaps and his plaid shirt clung to his wiry frame, soaked through with sweat.

"We're going visiting," Susanna told him. "Saddle the horses while I go and change."

Pete pulled a face. "What? You're going to dress proper?"

She grinned at him. "I'm going to dress like a queen. We're going to pay our respects to Burt Hartman at Deep Valley."

"No." The foreman drew his shoulders back. "That's a fool's errand."

"Connor is dead," Susanna snapped, letting her niggling fear harden into a solid wall of anger. "The ranch will be sold. I want to see the man who's taking it from me."

"I told you, I'll bid for you. I've already made my will. Even if he guns me down on the auction room floor, Circle Star will be yours."

"No it won't," Susanna blustered. "The sheriff works for Hartman. He'll declare your bid null and void, and the auction will go on as if you'd never even been there. Hartman will get the ranch, and you'll be dead."

Pete gave a stubborn grunt. "At least with my bidding, you'll get a fair price."

"Don't be a fool. They'll just declare the bidding flawed, and start again from nothing." Susanna pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. "Come on. Getting to know the enemy is a good strategy."

Pete tossed the rag over a nail in the wall. "Go change into your dress. I'll wash and get the horses."

"You'd better change, too," Susanna told him. "Do you have a suit?"

Pete responded with a somber stare. "Yeah. I have the suit I bought for your father's funeral."

Susanna flinched. "You'd better wear that," she said after a pause. Then she turned and hurried into the house with a heavy heart.

* * * *

Susanna prepared with exquisite care, twisting her hair up and dressing in a green satin gown which rustled as she walked. It was too fine attire for a ride through the desert, but she wanted Burt Hartman to know that no effort had been spared. Flattery was unlikely to stun the man into mercy, but it could do no harm.

Riding astride rather than side saddle spoiled the effect. The dress bunched up around her, exposing her legs, and when she kicked Santiago into a canter her bonnet tore off and dangled down her back. The sun baked from the clear blue sky to the parched earth, turning the air into an oven. By the time they'd covered the ten miles between Circle Star and Deep Valley, Susanna trickled with sweat and itched with dust.

"I want to dismount here," she shouted to Pete as they slowed the horses to a walk. "Cool down, fix my hair."

Pete nodded his agreement. "I'll help you down."

"I can manage." Susanna gathered the folds of her gown and slid off the saddle.

"I'll see to the horses," Pete told her, reaching for Santiago's reins. "Will you wait for me?"

"I'll find water to rinse off the dust. I won't go in without you." She turned and made her way towards the whitewashed ranch house on the other side of the cobbled courtyard.

Her eyes darted, assessing. The shrubs were trimmed and the paintwork glinted fresh in the sun. Whatever could be said about Burt Hartman, he kept the place in shape.

To her left, three men jostled around an open cement tank. One had his shirt off. He splashed water over his arms, the spray flying high. A layer of dirty froth floated on top of the water, and a cake of soap clung to the cement ledge.

"Could one of you gentlemen fetch a bucket so I can have clean water to rinse my face?"

All three turned to inspect her. Susanna's gaze locked in on the man standing furthest back. She opened her mouth for a cry of surprise, but an imperceptible shake of a noble head and a warning glance from a pair of hypnotic black eyes rendered her silent. "You," she said, pointing at him, her finger shaking. "Get me some fresh water."

The man without a shirt strutted up. "Why do you pick the half-breed?" He leaned in with a predatory grin. "I'll get you water."

Susanna took a step back, offering the man her sweetest smile. "Because he looks the least threatening of you."

Her remark earned a roar of laughter, and the tension eased. Susanna bit back a satisfied smirk. The strength of masculine vanity never ceased to amaze her.

The slender man with the black eyes detached himself from the others and set off towards the house, walking with a slight limp. "I'll get you clean water from the kitchen."

"Thank you." Susanna followed him, lifting the hem of her dress from the dusty ground. "Rafael?" she said in a low voice when they had made enough distance not to be overheard.

The man halted his steps and turned to her, pretending to be drawing her attention to a flowering hibiscus. Susanna bent to touch the silky petals. She breathed in the fragrance, but from the corner of her eye she examined him, taking in the dark hair that hung in a curtain, kept in place by a ragged red bandanna tied around his head. The clothes were a mix of tattered denim pants and a beaded native jacket in supple leather.

"I use my Apache name now," the man murmured, his black eyes expressionless.

"You never had an Apache name," Susanna said to her childhood friend Rafael de Santis, whose parents had owned Deep Valley ranch before Burt Hartman. Joy filled her heart like a burst of warm sunlight. She smiled at him, pointing at the flower, knowing the other two men were watching.

"I do now," Rafael told her. "It's Rain Cloud. The men call me Cloud."

"You grandfather was a half-breed who hung around with Cochise and his band of braves, but eventually took up ranching and married a white girl. That makes you a pale one-eighth Apache," Susanna mocked him gently.

She got her reward in the softening of those inscrutable black eyes. "But with my hair long, and a deep tan from not wearing a hat in the sun, I can pass for a half-breed."

"Why?" Susanna asked. Her eyes searched Rafael as she waited for an answer. His features carried only an echo of the devastating beauty she remembered. They'd grown up as neighbors, but the seven-year age gap had been too great to allow for close friendship. When she was thirteen, Rafael had been twenty. Now the difference in their ages seemed greater, as Rafael had grown old before his time.

"You know about my parents?" he asked her.

Susanna shook her head. "All I know is that you were thought dead. That's what my father wrote."

"I was presumed dead, but I survived." Rafael patted his right leg. "This one was left shorter, so I was no good for the army anymore."

"When did you come back?"

"Too late," Rafael said through clenched teeth. "Too damn late." His eyes flickered over Susanna's face. "You don't know?"

She shook her head. "I heard your parents sold the ranch to Burt Hartman around a year ago. That's all I know."

"Sold." Rafael's tone was bitter. "They were cheated out of their property."

"Tell me. Quickly. We don't have much time." Susanna glanced back towards the water tap. The other two men had finished washing, and stood observing them with a lazy curiosity.

"My father was getting old and ill. I had been declared dead. Burt Hartman rode up and started pressuring them to sell. They said no, but things started happening. Water got poisoned, cattle died, a building went up in flames." Rafael shifted his shoulders. "My parents weren't strong enough to fight Hartman. My father sold for a pittance. I came back a few months later and found out, but it was too late to stop the sale."

Susanna stared at him, unable to feel Rafael's pain as her own terror welled through her mind. "My father?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Rafael's hand rose to touch her arm, but withdrew in a fluid gesture that disguised the original intention. "His death was natural. Hartman only prays on the vulnerable." He made a graceful turn and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, he reappeared carrying a metal bucket and a small towel, which he deposited on a long bench by the wall. "The water's cool," he said, preparing to leave.

Susanna nodded her thanks. "Come and see me at Circle Star if you can," she said as Rafael began his retreat across the cobbled courtyard. He made no sign to indicate he'd heard her.

By the time Susanna had finished freshening up, Pete Jackson reappeared. He used the water after her. Then they set off, following the contours of the building to the front entrance. Pete raised the heavy iron knocker and let it fall again.

The door was opened by a neatly groomed man close to fifty, dressed in a formal black suit. Pete shifted on his feet. Thinking he might not have recognized the man as a butler, Susanna rushed to speak first. "I'm Susanna Talbot, the mistress of Circle Star, and this is my foreman Pete Jackson. We've come to call on Mr. Hartman."

"I shall check if Mr. Hartman is free to receive you. Would you please wait inside?" The butler opened the door wide and motioned them into an airy hall. Susanna felt her hands go moist with nerves. If she touched her satin dress, her damp fingers would leave a mark. Then she glanced down her front and almost groaned. Not much point in worrying about moisture marks when streaks of dust spoiled the dress.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor on their left. A tall man, so pale he appeared almost bloodless, strode over to them, beaming with welcome. "Miss Talbot. This is a pleasure indeed."

"The pleasure is all mine," Susanna said, wondering if she sounded as insincere as she felt. She offered her hand, and the newcomer raised it to his lips. "This is Mr. Jackson, the foreman of Circle Star." She retrieved her hand and used it for a gesture towards Pete.

"Mr. Jackson." Their host acknowledged the foreman with a nod. Pete returned the greeting reluctantly. Susanna flashed a sharp look at him. To her dismay, Pete ignored her

reproach, and continued to bristle with hostility.

"Please, come into the parlor." Without waiting for a response, Hartman pivoted on his heels and led the way. Susanna followed, leaving Pete to trail behind. Her curious eyes took stock as they passed open doorways. The opulence of it made her head spin. Why, the furniture in the dining room must be antiques imported from Europe, and the rug in the library was surely priceless. It was not the same rustic homeliness she recalled from the days when it had been the De Santis family home.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Hartman asked, hovering a little too close for her liking. "I have some fine Madeira."

"Thank you, but no." Susanna fanned her hand in front of her face. "The heat ... I'd prefer a glass of water."

"Fresh lemonade?" Hartman raised an eyebrow.

The perfect host, Susanna thought, her heart fluttering. The enemy was confusing her by being not at all what she'd expected. Instead of a barrel-chested savage with a bulldog head and uncouth manners, she faced a handsome man, polished of manner and fine of cloth, even if slightly too flamboyant for her taste. "Yes, please. Lemonade for both of us." Her voice quivered, betraying her unease.

Hartman moved away to bark an order through the open door. "What gives me the pleasure?" he enquired as he turned back, his cool grey eyes sweeping over Susanna.

"Just a neighborly visit," Pete growled, stepping protectively between them.

"Please, sit down." Hartman gestured around.

Before Susanna knew, they were all seated. Hartman's long frame lounged next to her on the padded sofa, while Pete perched awkwardly on a spindly chair. It escaped her how it had happened, but without appearing to do so, their host had manipulated them, getting everyone to sit exactly where he wanted.

"I've heard you are eager to buy Circle Star," Susanna said as her opening gambit.

Hartman nodded. "I've considered it. I understand there is to be a public auction."

"That is not certain at the moment." Susanna kept her voice even. "There were alternative provisions in my father's will."

"Oh yes. So I understand." A smile twisted Hartman's narrow lips.

"I can't see how you would," Susanna retorted. "A will is a confidential document not intended for public disclosure."

Harman coughed into his fist. "Oh dear. You know how it is. People talk." He shook his head, feigning embarrassment. His smile widened, but his eyes remained cold.

"Yes. Indeed." Susanna stiffened her spine. Icy shivers crept over her skin. How could she have thought him handsome at first glance? There was something sinister in the pale skin drawn taut over the angular features. How could anyone live in Arizona and not catch the sun?

"I'm sure you'd rather return to Philadelphia," Hartman said. "Ranching is no life for a lady."

Susanna managed a polite smile. "On the contrary. I never realized how much I missed my life in the West."

She was spared from another inanity by a maid who entered soundlessly and lowered a tray of glasses on the table in front of the sofa. Susanna could hardly believe it. The girl wore a black uniform with a tiny white apron and a starched cap. Susanna had to stifle an outburst of hysterical laughter.

The stilted conversation went on for another thirty minutes. Pete Jackson hardly said a word. Hartman's polish soon began to wear thin. Susanna introduced topics about the culture and history of the West, but her host lacked both knowledge and interest. It seemed a long time before the hour was up, and they could end the visit without appearing rude.

On their way out, Susanna scanned the landscape, but saw no sign of Rafael De Santis.

"What did you think of our neighbor?" Susanna asked as they made their way home, riding side by side, keeping the horses to an easy walk in deference to the afternoon heat.

"The devil himself," Pete spat out. "He'd put a bullet in me and smile."

Susanna slanted him a quick glance. "Yes." A shudder rippled along her skin, like a warning. "I think he's the most ruthless man I've ever met."

When they got home she rushed into the house to change, leaving Pete to deal with the horses. Back in her shirtwaist blouse and her denim pants, she dashed to the stables and exhausted herself by mucking out the stalls. It was a chore she'd taken on due to the shortage of men on the ranch, silencing Pete's protests that shoveling manure was not a fitting task for a lady.

But being physically tired didn't help. Susanna tossed and turned all night. What little she slept, she dreamt of Death, in the shape of a tall man, with pale skin drawn taut over his skull. When the dawn broke, she clenched her hands into fists against the bedcovers, scowling with determination.

She'd spent too many years away from Circle Star, and she wasn't going to lose the ranch now. She needed a place to make a life for herself, and she needed the income to provide for her mother.

She'd find Connor McGregor. Marrying him was her only choice.

* * * *

Burt Hartman leaned back in his seat and swirled the Napoleon brandy in the balloon glass. "I slipped up," he confessed to the lawyer. "I told the Talbot woman I knew about the provisions in her father's will."

"It don't matter none." George Catterill dragged on his cigar and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "You could have heard it anywhere. My clerk. Town gossip."

Hartman glanced up before returning his attention to the drink in his hand. "She's a fine-looking woman."

"Her mother was a Haverhill from Philadelphia. Top drawer of East Coast society."

"You don't say?" Hartman took a careful swallow and savored the smooth taste of the

brandy. His pulse quickened with excitement as he considered the possibilities. He had money and he had power. The one thing he craved was respectability. Susanna Talbot could give him that. Not only was she Arizona ranching royalty, she was a goddamned blue-blood brought up in the East.

With Susanna Talbot as his wife, he'd be accepted anywhere.

"I've been thinking," he said slowly.

"Go on," the lawyer said, rising to attention. "When you've been thinking, it usually means both of us get rich."

"Why pay anything for Circle Star, when I can have it for nothing?"

The lawyer made an impatient circle in the air with his cigar. "What are you talking about? There's no way. Not even if you killed her."

"I'm not talking about killing her," Hartman snapped, surprising himself with his vehemence. "I'm talking about marrying her."

Catterill clamped the cigar between his teeth. Hartman observed closely, fascinated to watch the shifting expressions on the other man's face as the legal mind twisted and turned.

"No," the lawyer said after a long pause. "There's no way in hell. I can't stretch the will that far. Christian Talbot specifically named Connor McGregor." He plucked the cigar from his mouth and reached out to tap the ashes on the floor, missing his host's frown of irritation as the dirt landed on the rug. "Now, if the will had just said she needs to marry, that would be a different story."

"Damn it," Hartman said gruffly. "I could do with a classy wife."

"Of course, there *is* a way." The lawyer squinted, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"Spit it out. You're bought and paid for, so no need to be coy."

"You let her marry McGregor first. Then you turn her into a widow, and *then* you marry her."

Hartman stared at the lawyer, who feigned a lack of concern. The corners of Hartman's narrow lips curled into an icy smile. He didn't have to feign a thing. For him, cruelty and lack of concern for other people came natural. "She'll no longer be a virgin," he said, his voice tightly controlled to hide the lust surging through him.

"Does it matter?" The lawyer shrugged, then puffed out another cloud of smoke. "Hell, women are like horses. Better let some other bastard break them in first."

"I'll drink to that." Harman drained his glass and stood up. When the lawyer didn't take his cue and get ready to leave, Hartman dismissed him with a reference to awaiting paperwork.

"Don't forget," Hartman said as they shook hands. "Make sure they find McGregor. I want the ranch as well as the woman. She needs to marry McGregor before she can be his widow."

"It would be a lot simpler to just buy the ranch at the auction," the lawyer said. "That would give her an incentive to marry you, and you'd get your money back when she becomes your wife."

Hartman grinned, baring his teeth. "I prefer making her into a widow and getting the ranch for nothing. See to it. The usual percentage applies."

"All right, all right." The lawyer bustled into the fading light.

Hartman stood at the door, watching his guest depart in a buggy. He didn't trust the lawyer worth a damn. What kind of a man rode a buggy instead of a horse?

Chapter Four

Neither the ranch hands nor the newspaper advertisements flushed out Connor McGregor – the sheriff in El Paso found him in his jail.

He had hauled a drunken cowpoke out of the Silver Nugget one Saturday night in October. The bastard shot through the ace of hearts in a tossed-up deck of cards on a bet, not realizing he'd also bring down the big mirror behind the bar. The following morning, when the stranger was sober enough to give his name, the sheriff made the connection.

He set out to comb the town, looking for the two riders who'd posted the enquiry, hoping they might stand for at least part of the damages. Luck wasn't on his side, as the riders had moved on the night before.

Back in his office, the sheriff located the piece of paper amongst the clutter on his desk. He studied the address printed in neat hand. His gut told him it had been written by a woman. He glanced at the man asleep on the cot behind the iron bars. A handsome bastard he was, with broad shoulders and a face that a female would notice – and perhaps pay to look at again.

What the heck.

It was worth a try.

He lumbered out to the telegraph office and sent a message to Circle Star.

* * * *

Susanna stood in the big hall, her boot tapping impatiently against the tile floor as she tore open the telegram. She skimmed the single line of text and felt faint. Without a word, she handed the message to Pete Jackson, who'd accepted it from the Western Union rider and brought it into the house. He inspected the telegram carefully before handing it back to her.

"Cutter and Winslow passed that way a few days ago," Pete told her. "They'll telegraph when they get to Santa Fe. They can turn around and pick up the boy."

"No." Susanna clutched the telegram in her hand. A flurry of conflicting emotions choked her chest, and she barely managed to speak. "I don't want anyone approaching him. You and I must go."

"It's a long ride. Two hundred miles."

She looked at Pete, trying to hide her inner turmoil. "Can we do it in two days if we take spare horses?"

"You ain't used to that kind of riding." Pete's brow furrowed with concern.

"The sooner I get used to it, the better. We'll leave tomorrow morning at first light."

"You think the boy might not come back with Cutter and Winslow?"

Susanna pursed her lips. Pete's steady gaze stirred her already fragile nerves. "I don't know what to think." She lowered her eyes, then flicked them uncertainly at the foreman.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “I don’t think he would.”

Pete reached for the door. “Put some padding in them tight pants of yours,” he called over his shoulder. Then he disappeared to the direction of the stables.

Susanna stood motionless in the hall, images of Connor McGregor flashing through her mind. The broad shoulders, the slim hips. Sweat beading on his face as he reached up to unsaddle his horse. The shy smile across the dining table on Sundays. She closed her eyes, and couldn’t hold back a whimper as she recalled the hungry crush of his lips against hers.

In a few days, she’d see him again.

* * * *

Pete led the two spare horses, and Susanna followed a short distance behind. They changed every two hours, keeping up the pace. It was a pity she didn’t have spare buttocks as well, Susanna thought with a wry grimace. Perhaps she should have saddled one of the horses with a side saddle. That way, she could have alternated her riding position and distributed the wear and tear on her skin over a wider area. Her grimace melted into a grin as she considered the likelihood of finding a side saddle at Circle Star. Then her smile faded. Her mother’s old saddle might still be somewhere, gathering dust.

The monotony of the endless hours of hard riding allowed her plenty of time to think about Connor. Thirteen years was a long time. He’d been a boy, and now he would be a man. What would he look like? Did he hate her? Had he forgiven her, even forgotten her? And would he agree to marry her when she offered him a share in Circle Star?

After two hundred miles in the saddle, the skin on her buttocks rubbed raw, Susanna felt almost too exhausted to care.

They arrived in El Paso late in the afternoon, and located the sheriff’s office down a dusty street, between a saloon and the undertaker. They dismounted and tied their horses outside. Susanna rushed ahead, her boots clattering against the wooden sidewalk, the pounding of her heart echoing equally loud in her ears as she stepped through the open door.

The low evening sun slanting in through the dirty window gilded the room, where two men sat facing each other across a desk, engrossed in a game of cards, barely reacting to the noise of someone entering. Her throat closed up. The one with his back to her was young and lean. His hair hung to his shoulders, darker than she remembered, but time had a way of changing things. Just to make sure, Susanna swept her glance over the single cell in the back. It was empty, except for an upturned bucket and a cot with a blanket thrown over.

“Connor?” She took a halting step forward.

The older man stood up. The tin star on his chest glinted in the sun. “McGregor’s next door.”

Susanna stared at him, unable to speak. The placard outside flashed through her mind. It had advertised cheap coffins. The room began to spin, and her vision faded. She was only vaguely aware of Pete stepping forward to steady her.

“Not the morgue,” the sheriff grunted, sounding exasperated. “The saloon. McGregor

wanted a drink, and I don't run to luxuries."

"I thought he was a prisoner," Pete said. He clutched her elbow, and Susanna gratefully leaned against his wiry strength.

"He is." The sheriff twisted his bulk and pointed to the corner behind the desk. "He won't go nowhere without those."

Susanna's gaze followed his finger and her heart stopped. A saddle lay on the floor, with a coiled-up gun belt propped on top. It was still the same, a pair of Colt Peacemakers with plain wooden handles. At the back of the saddle, she saw the embossed insignia of Circle Star. Her eyes misted. She remembered how proud Connor had been when her father made him the gift of that saddle. It had been right after Connor arranged to buy the bay gelding he used to ride.

Connemara. That's what he'd called the horse, after the place in Ireland where his father came from. To Susanna, the romantic-sounding name summed up the sensitive nature of the boy. The way Connor was inside had always been at odds with the harshness of the life he led.

"He's in the saloon next door?" she said, her voice barely a whisper.

The sheriff glanced at the casement clock on the wall. "Unless they've tossed him out on the street by now. He went four hours ago." He turned his attention back to the cards. "Tell him to come back so I can lock him up for the night."

Susanna forced her legs to move. She felt as though she was treading through a swamp, although there was a solid boardwalk beneath her feet. At the door to the saloon, she stopped to draw a deep breath. No music came from inside, just a steady stream of rough voices.

Pete pushed past her and went in first. He swept his gaze over the room before he allowed her to enter.

She spotted Connor at once. He stood at the counter, leaning over, clad in a faded tan leather coat and tall boots that belonged to a colder climate. A hat lay on the counter by his elbow. The bartender strolled up and filled the empty shot glass in front of him. Connor picked it up, tilted his head, and drowned the contents in one strong swallow. He slammed the glass back on the counter and returned to his relaxed pose.

Susanna felt Pete stirring next to her. "No," she murmured. "Wait here. Let me go first."

Pete grunted in protest, but he let her have her way.

Her boots scraped against the floor despite the effort she made to keep her steps silent. The man at the counter didn't turn, although he ought to have heard her approach. Could it be that he was that drunk? Then Susanna saw his right hand creep to his hip, looking for a gun that wasn't there, and she knew he was alert and listening.

"Hello, Connor," she said, raising her voice to overcome the background noise.

He didn't even flinch. Susanna instantly regretted speaking before she could see his face. There was nobody else at the counter, except for a pair of aging cowpokes at the far end. She slipped into the empty space on Connor's right. The men seated at the tables had halted their conversation and were watching her.

Connor stood absolutely still, but she could sense the tension in his broad shoulders. His

hair remained the same sandy brown, long enough to curl over the collar of his leather coat. Susanna leaned in, until she could peer into his face. A cry of shock broke out before she could restrain herself.

The sensitive boy was gone, replaced by a hard man. The amber color of his eyes was exactly as she remembered, but instead of the gaze that had been gentle, sometimes a little shy, their expression was flat, almost dead. Even in repose the full lips conveyed bitterness. When he turned his head towards her, she cried out again. A thin white scar ran along the left side of his face, from cheekbone down to the jaw.

“Little Susanna, all grown up.” His voice rang deeper and a little slurred. “You took your time.”

Her lips began to tremble, and she couldn’t speak.

“You’ve finally succeeded in tracking me down. Are you just going to stand there and say nothing?” Connor lifted a hand to the bartender. When his glass was filled, he picked it up, but didn’t drink.

“You knew I was looking for you?” Susanna forced out the words. Her knees buckled, and she clung to the edge of the counter for support. The storm inside her mind blew with a thousand winds, all whistling different needs and wants. More than anything, she ached to reach out and touch his face, make it come alive again, the way it used to be.

“I can read,” Connor said. “I saw it in the newspaper.”

“But you didn’t come, or telegraph, or write.”

“Why should I?”

Susanna shrugged, feeling helpless against the hard barrier around him. “Curiosity?” she offered.

“I mind my own business and expect others to mind theirs.”

“This *is* your business,” she said deliberately. “My father is dead.”

This time there was a flinch. She wouldn’t have known if it hadn’t been for the glass of whiskey in his hand, full to the brim. Some spilled over the edge, onto his fingers. Connor raised his hand and tossed back the rest in two gulps. “What’s that got to do with me?” he asked as he propped the empty glass on the counter.

“My father had you in his will.” Susanna lifted her chin and fixed her gaze upon his hard face. “That’s what he wanted to tell you that day, when you ran away. That he was leaving Circle Star to both of us together.”

Nothing changed in that stony expression. Not one flicker.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Susanna demanded, suddenly furious. “I hadn’t told him about ... about that other thing. You ran off like a fool, when he was offering to make you his heir.”

“So? I ran off. That’s all in the past.” She could sense a decade of emotion packed into those few words – regret, anger, pain. She was fairly certain that if Connor hadn’t been drunk, his voice would have revealed nothing.

“No, it’s not all in the past,” she told him. “My father never changed his will. You can

still have half of Circle Star.”

“Can have? Is there something I have to do first?”

“Yes.” Susanna lowered her eyes to her clenched hands. She uncurled her fingers and tilted her face up to him. “You’ve got to marry me.”

She could feel him stiffen by her side. Then, with an exaggerated casualness, he reached into his pocket and tossed down a few coins. “Get the lady a shot of brandy,” he called out to the bartender. “She looks a little shaken.” Picking up his hat, he turned and weaved his way across the room to the front door, while Susanna remained by the counter and watched him go.

Pete sauntered up to her. “What did he say? Why is he going and leaving you standing there?”

Susanna shrugged, feeling numb. “He said nothing, and I guess he’s going back to the jail to be locked up for the night.” Emotions fought each other in her heart and she could make no sense of them, but one thing she knew for certain – it wasn’t over. As long as Connor was a prisoner of that hulking sheriff, he’d go nowhere. She could work on him, wear him down.

She leveled her eyes at Pete. “Go and see the sheriff. Find out what Connor is in for, and what it would take to get him released.”

“What? You want me to bail him loose?”

“No.” Susanna’s lips settled into a grim line. “The exact opposite. I want you to make sure he stays there.” Her expression softened, and she rested her hand on Pete’s arm. “I’ll work on him. He’s angry and bitter and hard. I’ll do my best to bring him around.”

“It’s not right, a woman like you having to go begging to a man like him.”

“I don’t mind, as long as it works.” Susanna picked up the drink the bartender had brought over and offered it to Pete. The foreman shook his head. She laid the glass down and moved away from the counter. “Let’s go. I’ll get us checked into the hotel while you go and see the sheriff. We’ll have dinner as soon as you get back.”

Chapter Five

Susanna tossed and turned on the lumpy hotel bed, unable to sleep. During dinner in the smoky parlor downstairs, Pete had told her that upon payment of damages assessed at seventy dollars, Connor would be free to go. To her knowledge, Connor had no means of raising the sum, except for his horse and saddle, and his pair of guns. If he sold those, it would be a measure of his desperation to get away from her.

She shed a few tears over what he'd become, and what he must have gone through to be so altered. The boy she'd carried in her heart for thirteen years no longer existed. She could bury any dreams about a happy reunion.

Then she gave vent to anger. It wasn't her fault Connor had chosen to flee all those years ago. He was wrong to blame her. Circle Star was at stake now, and it was in his interest to marry her and gain half ownership of the ranch.

Had she done her best to persuade him? Perhaps she should have worn a dress. She had brought a change of clothing with her, but she'd been in so much of a hurry to see him that she hadn't stopped to think. Maybe if she presented a more feminine picture, he'd melt a little.

Yes, tomorrow she would try again, and she'd wear the dress she'd brought along, a grey silk with a severe cut that flattered her slim waist.

That decided, Susanna managed a few hours of fitful sleep. She dreamed of a kiss, and a fierce hold of arms around her, and a gravelly voice whispering he'd never let her go, but in her dream it was the man who kissed her and not the boy, and the voice that whispered into her ear was the deep and husky voice she'd heard the night before.

In the morning, she ordered hot water for a bath, partly to get clean, and partly to soothe the skin on her buttocks and inner thighs which had been rubbed raw by the two long days in the saddle. Afterwards she arranged for breakfast to be brought up to her room. When she was ready to leave, she found a message from Pete under the door. He'd gone to meet a breeder who had yearlings to sell, and would see her at dinner.

Susanna stifled her anger. This was no time for Pete to go off and run errands. She suspected he'd arranged it on purpose, to keep out of any confrontation between her and Connor.

As she walked through the hotel lobby, she felt men's eyes following her. Her head snapped up and her shoulders shifted back. It was the right decision to try again wearing the dress.

The sheriff was without a deputy today. He heaved himself up behind the desk as Susanna entered. "I'll be damned," he said, lifting a hand to touch his hat, then grinning awkwardly as he realized he wasn't wearing one. "You sure look different today."

Susanna gave him a gracious nod in her best Philadelphia manner. "May I talk to the

prisoner?”

“Sure, Miss, sure.” The sheriff swept his hand in the direction of the cell. “You go right ahead. I’ll keep an eye on things, just in case.”

Susanna inclined her head. “Thank you. I’m sure that won’t be necessary.” She brushed past the desk until she came flush against the iron bars blocking the alcove at the rear of the room.

Connor lay on his back on the narrow cot, his arms crossed under his head. He wore his tall leather boots, but his coat hung from a hook on the wall. One bare elbow poked through a tear in his faded shirt.

“Hey, McGregor,” the sheriff called out. “Get up. You got a visitor.”

“Thank you, I can manage.” Susanna tried to silence the sheriff with a cool look. He took no notice, but carried on yelling until Connor stirred on the bed.

“What do you want from me?” Connor sat up and directed a grim look at her.

“I want to talk.” Her fingers curled around the iron bars. They felt as cold under her touch as his eyes felt on her skin. She caught her breath, and forced herself to speak evenly. “I’d like to hear where you’ve been, what you’ve done. It’s been thirteen years.”

“Getting closer to fourteen.”

“All the more to talk about.”

His shoulders shifted as he settled more comfortably against the wall. “Go home, Susanna,” he said quietly. “I might have been your Prince Charming once, but I turned into a pumpkin a long time ago.”

“It is the carriage that turned into a pumpkin, not the prince, you idiot.”

The hint of a smile was over in a second, but it was enough to convince Susanna that the old Connor was buried somewhere deep inside the bitter shell. If she worked hard enough, was patient enough, she could find him, bring him out again.

He frowned at her, as though to banish the lingering memory of the smile. “I went up north. Canada. Worked the mines.”

“How did you get the scar?”

“Knife. The other man didn’t live to tell the tale.”

Susanna wanted to touch her fingertips to the thin white line on his cheek, but the distance between them was too great. She reached her hand through the iron bars anyway. Connor didn’t move closer, although her intention must have been clear to him.

“Are you married?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Why will you not come home with me?”

Connor’s face hardened. “Get her out of here,” he shouted to the Sheriff, gesturing at Susanna.

“Can’t see no harm in letting the lady talk to you.” The sheriff let out a gusty laugh. “The iron bars won’t protect you against a sharp tongue or sweet talking, but they’ll sure keep you safe

from any other harm.” He winked at Susanna. “You just carry right on, Miss. I’ll be behind my desk, minding my own business.”

“Please,” she said to Connor. “Can’t we at least talk about it?”

He gave her a bleak stare, but Susanna stood her ground. “All right,” Connor said at long last. “Get me a bottle of whiskey. Then you can talk all you want.”

The sheriff bounced up. “Not here.” He reached for a pair of keys hanging from a hook on the wall and walked over. “Take him to the saloon. Saves me from feeding him. Just see he gets back before dark.”

Connor shrugged into his leather coat and strode out. Susanna had to run to keep up with him.

“Not here,” she pleaded as they reached the saloon door. “I’ll buy you a bottle. We’ll go to the hotel and talk in private.” She expected he’d offer to go inside and make the purchase if she gave him the money, but he didn’t. She was forced to go into the saloon, this time without Pete’s support, and ask for a quart of whiskey.

When she returned outside, Connor took the wrapped bottle from her hand. Without removing the brown paper, he pulled the cork and tipped the bottle to his mouth. “Where do you want to go?” His stare was hostile, but Susanna found that more tolerable than the total lack of emotion he’d shown before.

“We’ll have to go up to my room,” she said. “There’s nowhere else private.”

“If that’s what you want. You’ve bought my company for the afternoon.” His eyes swept over her in a way that made her blush. She understood he was doing it on purpose, trying to hurt her, but the knowledge didn’t lessen the impact.

She collected her key from the reception desk and rushed up the open staircase, listening to his heavy footsteps thudding in her wake. Her hands shook as she inserted the key into the lock. After a few seconds Connor let out an impatient growl and pushed her out of the way. He opened the door for her and followed her in, locking the door again from the inside.

“There’s no need to do that,” she told him, and heard the tremor in her voice.

“You said you wanted privacy.” Connor left the key in the lock. He had no idea why he’d secured the door, or why he’d agreed to talk to her. The bottle weighed heavy in his hand, and he knew where to look for the answers.

“I’ll get you a glass.” Skirts rustling, Susanna rushed to a mirrored dressing table by the wall.

“Don’t bother.” He glanced around, and found the room large and comfortable. White lace covered the wide brass bed, and two padded chairs flanked a small circular table. He knew those chairs would be the proper place to sit, but he didn’t care. He pulled up a pillow, propped it against the bedstead, and stretched out on the bed.

“Your boots will make the bedcover dirty,” Susanna protested.

“They’ll add the cleaning to your bill. I’m sure you can afford it.”

She regarded him evenly. "Maybe not. If you don't marry me, I may end up with nothing."

Connor listened as she explained about the instructions left by her father, and the corrupt auction to sell Circle Star. "I'm sure you won't be left destitute," he said harshly after she'd finished. "Some man or other will want to marry you."

"But you don't?"

The whiskey soothed the ache that had gnawed inside him every waking moment for more than thirteen years. He leaned back on the bed, eyes narrowing. Susanna stood a few paces away from him, reed slender. Her chest rose and fell, just the way he remembered it rising and falling that last time he'd seen her by the river. Her arms hung down her sides, her hands clenched into fists.

It enraged him that she stood there, even lovelier than he'd dreamed during all those lonely years, saying exactly the words he'd always wanted to hear.

Offering to be his.

But not for love. For financial gain. Fury unleashed inside him, fed by the discovery that the long years of hardship had been his own making.

If he hadn't fled that afternoon, he'd have grown up with her. He would have protected her, cherished her. She would have had no choice but to love him then, and Christian Talbot would have stood by, encouraging him, blessing their union.

It was her fault. If she hadn't threatened him, he wouldn't have fled. He tipped the bottle to his lips and took another sip. "I need something to eat," he growled.

Susanna frowned at him. "I'll see if I can get food from downstairs." Her skirts swished as she flounced away.

He watched her leave and lolled on the bed while he waited, already a little drunk because he hadn't eaten since yesterday. Bitterness churned inside him, and he wanted to punish her for making him suffer all those years.

Susanna returned. She pushed the door shut and leaned against it, the key clutched in her fingers. "It will be a while," she told him. "They've only just started cooking lunch."

"The key," he demanded, reaching out. She walked over and dropped it into his cupped hand. He rose and teetered to the door, locking it again. This time he didn't leave the key in the lock, but clattered it down on the dressing table.

Once he was back on the bed, he took a long gulp from the whiskey. The burning liquid down his throat flamed his anger. "Take your clothes off," he said, his hand clutching the bottle.

"What?"

"You heard me."

She raised her head, and met his gaze. "Why?"

He saw her lips tremble, remembered how that tiny tremor had always softened him into giving her whatever she wanted. So she hadn't grown out of it. In other ways, she'd grown. His gaze swept down her high breasts to the slim waist under the shimmering grey fabric that hugged

her body, and heat pooled in his groin. “You’re offering yourself to me so that you can inherit Circle Star. A sensible man inspects the merchandise before striking a bargain.”

She hesitated, conflicting emotions chasing each other across her face. “And if you like what you see, will you marry me?” she asked him quietly.

“I don’t know,” he drawled. His jaw tightened as he caught the flash of pity in her gaze. His demands had nothing to do with her beauty, and she knew it. He wanted to hurt her, to pay her back for the hurt she had caused him, and it angered him that she understood.

She stared at him, her eyes darkening. “All right,” she said quietly. “I’ll do it, if that’s what you want.”

His breath choked in his chest as he watched Susanna standing in the centre of the room, her back straight and proud, clad in a dress finer than he’d ever seen on a woman. In one instant, he was hard, with a throbbing that bordered on pain. “Get on with it,” he grunted, surprised that he managed any sound at all.

Her hands flew to her neck, where they rested a moment. Then her elbows rose high and her breasts jutted out, as she reached for the hooks high up at the back of the dress.

“No. Take your hair down first.”

She paused to look at him before her hands drifted up another few inches, to nimbly pluck a dozen pins from the coiled tresses. When she lowered her arms, a cascade of hair tumbled to her waist, like a black waterfall. She retreated to the dressing table, sliding her feet against the floor to feel her way as she moved backwards, not taking her eyes off him. He heard tingling sounds as the hairpins fell on the marble top.

“Stay there,” he said, his voice so hoarse it hurt his throat. He tried to swallow but found he couldn’t – not until he raised the bottle to his mouth and poured more whiskey inside. Where she stood now was further away from him, but with the mirror behind her, he had a view of her back as well as her front.

“Do you want me to continue with my clothes?” she murmured.

This time no sound would come past his lips. He nodded. His heart pounded with such force it felt as though the entire bed rocked with the beat.

Her hands reached behind, first high up, then at the waist. As she pushed the dress down her shoulders and past her hips, the rustle of silk sounded like thunder in his ears.

A flush covered her cheeks, and her hands fumbled as she unfastened the tapes on the petticoats. Then she stepped out of the froth of white cotton and stood upright. She looked straight at him, and he saw no fear in her green eyes, only pity and shame.

It was wrong.

He shouldn’t make her go through with it.

He wanted to tell her to stop, but his voice wouldn’t obey. Leaning back on the bed he watched, his eyes dark and narrow, as she dealt with the kid slippers and the plain white stockings fastened above her knees with garters.

She stopped, and regarded him with a look in her eyes that angered him – a soft, yielding

look – not a look between two people who were enemies.

“Go on,” he told her, seeking refuge in his bitterness.

She crossed her arms and lifted the chemise over her head. Her body was as slender as he’d expected, but the white globes of her breasts jutted out full and firm. The skin on his fingers burned, as he imagined cupping his hands around them.

Then she lowered her head and untied the knot at the top of her flimsy cotton drawers. Carefully, she slid the delicate fabric down her thighs. Lifting one foot at a time, she kicked the garment away.

In the mirror, he could see the curve of her buttocks. Red welts covered the skin inside her thighs and at the base of her buttocks.

Through the alcoholic haze, rage boiled up inside him like he’d never known before. “Who did that?” he roared. “Who did that to you?” He knew that only part of the fury was for her hurt and pain. The rest was for the thought that another man had possessed her, even if by force.

“What?”

“At the top of your legs.”

“Oh.” A nervous smile flickered over her lips. “That’s from two days of solid riding. Saddle sores. My skin needs to toughen up.” She reached down and gently touched a fingertip to the raw skin at the top of her inner thigh. “It doesn’t hurt that much.”

That tiny gesture was the most seductive act he’d ever known. He’d had scores of women in the thirteen years since they parted, the first one within a week. There had been women who’d pursued him, women whom he’d paid for, and women he’d taken in passing without much interest at all.

But he had never wanted a woman the way he wanted her now. “Would you get into this bed with me if I asked you?” Somehow the words formed on his tongue.

“Would you marry me if I did?”

A trade. Circle Star for her, her in his bed for him. Fury propelled him off the bed. With a few quick strides, he crossed the floor and stood in front of her. He leaned closer, until her naked breasts brushed against his shirt.

“Go home, Susanna,” he rasped into her face. “I have nothing for you.”

“Yes, you do.” She stared at him, her lips trembling. A hint of a floral fragrance drifted up to tantalize him, and heat from her naked skin teased his heightened senses. When he glanced down, he saw the dark pink of her hardened nipples almost touching him.

“No.” With every ounce of willpower he possessed, he backed off, and returned to the bed. “Get your clothes on,” he grunted, picking up the bottle. Morosely, he focused on the whiskey, refusing to lift his eyes again, although he couldn’t stop his ears from listening to every rustle of fabric as she dressed.

He prayed that tomorrow she’d be gone, leaving him alone. One more day, and his resistance would break. Damn her. Damn Susanna Talbot. If she could do this to him now, what

could she do to him if he allowed her to take him back to Circle Star, and awaken all the passion and need he'd spent thirteen years trying to bury.

He didn't want to find out. The risk was too great, the pain cut too deep.

He tipped the bottle to his lips and drifted into a blessed oblivion.

Susanna's hands shook so hard they were close to useless as she tried to fasten the hooks at the back of her gown. Underneath, her chemise bunched twisted, and she was sure that in her haste she'd pulled her drawers on back-to-front.

Shame burned on her face, but it wasn't shame of her nakedness in front of Connor McGregor. It was shame over how every cell in her body had yearned for him to yank her against him, to claim her as his, like he had on that sunny spring day thirteen years ago.

Her skin still tingled in the private places where his eyes had lingered. His gaze had been so intent it had almost felt as though he was touching her, right there on her breasts, and on the thatch of black curls covering the mound at the apex of her thighs.

A strange heat had pooled deep inside her, and then it had become a hot throbbing between her legs. She had barely overcome the horrible temptation to touch her own flesh, to find out what he had done to her.

She knew she should have refused when he demanded that she remove her clothing, but she had no choice. She needed to get him to marry her. That was the only way she could keep Circle Star and provide for her mother. Whatever he asked, she would do, including getting into that bed with him. It might be a sinful thought, but it was the grim truth.

Susanna finished repairing her toilette and gathered the courage to glance over to the bed. Connor sprawled atop the lace cover, his eyes closed, his mouth ajar. The hand clutching the empty bottle dangled over the edge of the bed.

Susanna tiptoed closer. Lowering her ear to his parted lips, she listened. His breathing was heavy and even. "Connor?" she whispered.

He didn't stir.

She poked her finger into his chest. The hard muscle had no give, and the impact jarred her wrist.

Still Connor didn't stir.

She examined his face. Sleep softened the bitterness of the full mouth. Slowly, Susanna lifted her hand, and with infinite care, pried open one of his eyelids. Satisfaction ran like thrill down her spine. Connor was out cold. He'd drunk himself insensible. Fool. Didn't he understand that by doing so he was handing her an advantage? She could do whatever she wanted with him, while he was in no condition to resist.

Quickly, Susanna scanned the top of the dressing table until she spotted the key. She snatched it up, together with her purse. Keeping her steps light, she dashed to the door. As she turned back to look at the bed, she gave in to her longing and crept over to Connor. For a few seconds, she gazed at his face, memorizing its contours. Then she bent down and brushed her

lips against his.

Her heart hammered close to bursting as she unlocked the door, and locked it again from the outside. She knew the flimsy panels wouldn't hold Connor inside if he had a mind to get out, but it was better than nothing, and the way things were going, she'd cling to even the slimmest of chances.

She had to find a way to get Connor to Circle Star. Once he was back at the ranch, he'd feel the pull of the land and want to own a share. If only she could persuade him to come home with her, he would relent. And once they were married, the old Connor would emerge from under the hard and bitter shell, and they would make a future together.

Susanna hurried outside and surveyed the storefronts for inspiration. The advertisement for cheap coffins! She gathered her gown in her hands and burst through the undertaker's entrance. A stout man with an enormous droopy moustache sat at a table, reading a newspaper. Susanna decided he was too well dressed to be anyone but the proprietor.

"I need a coffin," she announced.

The man rose to his feet, carefully folding away the newspaper. His glance was quick, but Susanna knew it had assessed the costliness of her gown.

"I have something very handsome in oak with a satin lining," the man said. "Is the deceased male or female?"

"Male."

"My coffins come in three sizes – large, medium, small."

"Large."

"If you'd like to come this way." The undertaker swayed a little under his own weight as he guided her to the display.

"How does the lid close?" Susanna cast a cursory glance at the oak casket.

"It opens with a hinge. Let me show you the interior." The undertaker lifted the lid and praised the quality of the creamy satin lining.

"And once the body is inside, how does it close?"

"There's a lock, with a very pretty brass key. Let me demonstrate."

Susanna had already stepped away. "No. That's not quite what I had in mind."

"I have a mahogany casket. Very exclusive."

"How does it lock?"

"The key is slightly larger, with room to engrave the name of the deceased, or a proverb, should one so wish."

Susanna eyed the rough pine coffins stacked against the far wall. "And those, how do they close?"

"Ma'am, those are nothing but plain boxes. Once the deceased is inside, the lid must be nailed shut."

"That's what I want. The biggest you have." She opened her purse and paid for the coffin, brushing aside the man's final efforts to direct her to something more expensive. "Do you

do carpentry?" she asked.

"All our coffins are made on the premises," the man replied with evident pride.

"I'd like an alteration. It must be done immediately." She described what she wanted. With a shrewd look, the undertaker suggested a further improvement, to which Susanna agreed. "How quickly can you do it?"

"Not long at all. A half hour." The man twiddled his moustache, regarding her with calculating eyes. "Of course, there is an extra charge for the express service."

"Of course." Susanna nodded, and waited while the man slipped white overalls on top of his black suit, and took out his tools. "I'll go and change," she told him when she no longer worried he'd change his mind about fulfilling her request. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

When Susanna reached her hotel room, Connor remained unconscious. Keeping a wary eye on his inert shape, she quickly changed into her denim pants and her boots and her short coat. Then she went to check the progress on the coffin.

"I made the hole at the bottom larger than the hole at the top," the undertaker explained. "I forgot to ask how tall he body is."

"I'm sure it will do," Susanna comforted him. "Can you deliver it now?"

"My son will be back in ten minutes. A delivery needs two men."

Susanna tapped her boot impatiently. Damn Pete Jackson and his eagerness for the yearlings for sale. Why wasn't he back yet? Ten minutes could make a difference, if it allowed Connor to wake up. "I'll be back in a moment," she called out, already at the door.

When she returned, the undertaker and his son lifted up the coffin, each gripping one end. Susanna led the way, balancing under her arm the six bottles of whiskey she'd purchased. As they made a procession up the steps to her hotel room, she had to stop to reassure the landlord that no death had occurred on the premises. While she was at it, she arranged to check out early the following morning.

"My brother has an alcohol problem," she explained to the undertaker and his son as they heaved Connor's unconscious body into the coffin. "I promised to bring him home, but he will not come voluntarily. This is the best I can think of."

The undertaker's son, a lad of no more than eighteen, crouched down and began to bang the nails into the lid. "The bottom hole is a little too far down," the undertaker lamented. "I wish I'd asked how tall he is."

"He'll manage," Susanna said grimly. "He can bend his knees. The hole over his face is more important. It allows him to breathe and lets me feed and water him."

"A man has his dignity," the undertaker muttered. "I would have refused to do it, if you hadn't put in the hole at the bottom."

Chapter Six

The journey back to Circle Star took four days instead of two, their convoy forced to a slower pace by the hired carriage bearing the coffin. Susanna decided they were the worst days of her life.

Pete Jackson simmered with fury at her over what she'd done. He contained his rage in a cold detachment, barely acknowledging her existence.

Connor alternated between screaming out obscenities and falling deathly quiet. The random silences disturbed Susanna more than the curses. Every now and then she rushed up to peer through the hole in the coffin over Connor's face, to make sure he still breathed. In the end she resorted to plying him with whiskey, a bottle in the morning, and another one half way through the afternoon.

Connor refused food but accepted water. His tongue got particularly vicious every time he had to urinate through the hole at the bottom of the coffin wedged up on blocks to allow drainage. Muffled sounds of a struggle had accompanied the first time, but they hadn't been repeated, so Susanna assumed he'd simply left his pants down.

The driver of the hired cart observed the spectacle with eager curiosity. Susanna was sure he couldn't wait to get back to El Paso, where he'd spread gossip about the scenes he'd witnessed. It troubled her that she had to rely on the man to take the seventy dollars to the burly sheriff, but she was grateful the sheriff had trusted her enough to let Connor out on credit, as she had lacked the foresight to bring adequate funds, or make arrangements with a bank in advance.

Connor's saddle bounced on the cart beyond the coffin. It had cost Susanna another five dollars to settle the stabling fees for his horse, a glossy black stallion called Brutus. The beast had nipped her sleeve, bruising her arm even through the thick material of her coat as she led him from the stables. Now the horse walked behind the cart, casting mean glances in her direction. She hadn't heard Connor talking to the animal, so she could only assume Connor incited hatred towards her in the horse through some spiritual means. Or perhaps the beast had long ago been taught to hate anyone who answered to the name Susanna.

Because she didn't want to field questions or make explanations, they camped out at night instead of going to a hotel. She wouldn't have minded, but they carried no proper equipment, neither blankets nor cooking utensils.

On their first evening under the stars, she broke into Connor's saddlebags. They had been released without payment by the young widow who ran the boarding house. A dreamy look had filled the woman's eyes as she commented how much Connor would be missed, especially now with the winter drawing in and the nights getting cold.

That remark had cost Susanna more than any other aspect of settling Connor's affairs.

His saddlebags contained a skillet, a plate, a cup, a spoon, knife and fork. The man with the cart had brought along supplies to provide their meals. Pete ate from the skillet with the fork, and Susanna used the plate and the spoon. Connor's refusal to eat simplified the arrangements.

At the bottom of the saddlebags she found a few books, so worn they barely held together. Her heart clenched as she opened the cover of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and found her father's name on the flyleaf. Connor had printed his own name underneath. When she leafed through the pages, the back cover fell open. On it "*Susanna*" had been written over and over again, in what she recognized as young Connor's unsteady hand.

It made her burst into tears. Pete gave her a long look, but his anger didn't thaw.

* * * *

Pete finally broke his stubborn silence when their straggly procession came to a halt outside the stables at Circle Star. "Do you want me to send someone for Father Dominic?"

"What?" Susanna frowned at him.

"If you're planning to keep the boy in the coffin until he marries you, you ought to do it quick. He's getting sick from all that whiskey and not eating."

Susanna felt her lips tremble. She hadn't thought about what to do next. Uncertainly, she glanced at the coffin. Connor had grown too hoarse to keep roaring out curses, but he kicked a steady rhythm with his tall boots against the base of the box. Soon the nails would start pulling loose. "I'm not Catholic," Susanna said, utterly confused.

Pete shrugged. "Neither was your mother, but your parents were wed by the Padre. There's not much choice around here."

"Catholics don't recognize divorce."

"Neither did your parents," Pete retorted.

Susanna barely heard him. Her gaze returned to the coffin that vibrated under the blasts from Connor's boots. "Lift him down," she ordered the riders who'd gathered around in a curious crowd. "I'll be back in a moment."

She raced to the house, only stopping to tell Carmen to fix up a bathtub in her father's bedroom. In the library, her trembling fingers struggled to twist open the lock on the strongbox. Despite her nerves, she counted the money twice, to make sure she had seventy dollars. After scrawling a receipt on a piece of paper, she rushed back outside. The cart was empty. The coffin lay on the dusty ground, this time in blissful silence. One of the men carried the saddle into the stables. Others dealt with the horses, and Pete lifted out Connor's saddlebags.

Susanna walked up to the driver. "The fine for the sheriff. Sign here."

The man interrupted his eager gazing and accepted the money, then drew a string of careful letters on the piece of paper Susanna held flat against the platform of the cart. "Thank you for your service. You can go now." She knew she should have offered him food in the kitchen before he started the return journey, but she wanted to be rid of him. The man eyed the coffin with regret while he slowly turned the horse and cart around, and set off along the gravel road.

“Open it,” Susanna ordered the ranch hands.

One of the men disappeared into the stables and came out with a crowbar. He wedged it under the lid and propped his boot over. The wood cracked as he applied his weight.

“Wait,” Susanna yelled. “Make sure his eyes are protected against splinters.”

Another ranch hand glanced around. He spotted a rag hanging from a nail by the stable door. Grinning, he tore it loose and stuffed it down the hole. A muffled curse let them know Connor was awake.

The man with the crowbar carried on. “Be careful,” Susanna cried as the wood split and rose up. She knelt by the coffin. With unsteady fingers she pulled the dirty rag from Connor’s face.

His eyes flamed with fury. One hand shot up, grabbing her braid by the nape of her neck. “You bitch,” he growled. “You’ll pay for this.”

Pete rushed up and caught Connor’s wrist, trying to make him loosen his hold.

“No.” Susanna winced, her head twisted at a painful angle. “Let him rage. He’s entitled.”

Connor scrambled out of the coffin. His stiff legs barely supported his weight, and his back hurt like hell from being cramped for days. As he yanked Susanna’s braid with one hand, he managed to pull up his pants with the other hand. When he straightened, the fabric slid down his hips. He fumbled for the buttons. The choice wasn’t easy. After a moment of hesitation, he released Susanna, and used both hands to do up his pants.

“I’m sorry,” Susanna whimpered. “You gave me no choice.”

He refused to even glance at her, because her voice warned him she had that soft look on her face – the one with misty eyes and trembling lips. “Wrong,” he told her. “It was me who had no choice.”

She didn’t reply.

His jaw tightened. “Where’s my horse?”

Connor heard another voice behind him, a voice he’d listened to during the past four days as he rattled inside the coffin, a voice that brought with it fond memories of the past. “Now, don’t be a fool, boy –.”

He whirled to face Pete Jackson, almost losing his balance, and realized he was mighty drunk. “Shut up. This is between me and her.” Connor steeled himself and turned to Susanna. The instant his eyes focused on her he knew it had been a mistake. The green pools shone bright with tears. When she blinked, a few teardrops broke loose and rolled down her cheek, leaving a pale trail on the dusty skin.

You idiot, Connor raged at himself. *After thirteen years of trying to hate her, you’re shaken by a couple of drops of salty water.* “What do you want from me?” he growled.

“All I want is for you to think about it. Look.” She swept her arm in a graceful arch. “This could all be yours. Ours. My father’s legacy.” The green eyes glittered at him. “The legacy of Christian Talbot, a man you loved and respected.”

He snorted and shook his head. "Little Susanna, smart as a whip. Always knew what strings to pull to get what she wants." He closed his eyes and swayed a little. During the past four days, he'd done nothing but think, trapped inside that stinking coffin. Only it was not Circle Star he'd been thinking about, but the naked body of its mistress, standing proud before him in that hotel room in El Paso.

"What can I do to persuade you to stay?" Susanna asked him.

He opened his eyes and saw her hovering uncertainly a couple of steps away. She looked tired, and sounded defeated. Connor felt the bitter hostility drain out of him. "Outhouse, bath, food, and a bottle of whiskey. In that order."

His resolve to resist her was almost undone by her tremulous smile.

* * * *

Susanna turned over a new page on her notepad. Next to her, a medical encyclopedia lay open on the desk. She had searched, but it contained no information about the impact of alcohol on the body and mind.

Connor had been drunk two solid weeks now. He barely emerged from the pigsty her father's bedroom had become. Food was sent up on trays, but Connor didn't put the empty dishes outside the door, or allow anyone inside. Soon they'd run out of crockery.

Once in a while he took a trip to the outhouse. Susanna was too frightened of his bitter anger to sneak into the bedroom during his brief absences, and she didn't want to ask Carmen to try. The room hadn't been cleaned or aired since he barricaded himself inside.

Her heart ached for him, but she steeled herself. If Connor was determined to ignore her, she had to make her plans alone. It was imperative that he marry her, before the three months were up.

Susanna glanced at the date she'd scribbled on top of her pad. It was ten weeks since her father's death. She was out of time, and she was out of patience. Her movements were calm and deliberate as she got up and walked out. Pete was in the kitchen, drinking coffee and talking to Carmen. He looked a bit sheepish, and Susanna realized it wasn't the first time she'd found him in the kitchen outside meal times. If she hadn't been so preoccupied, she would have noticed sooner.

"Can you send one of the men for Father Dominic?"

Pete snapped to attention. "Has the boy agreed?"

Susanna shook her head. "He's refusing to even talk to me."

"Why the Padre? He isn't ...?" Pete's weathered skin drained of color.

"He's living and breathing, but we're running out of time. I have to try before it's too late."

"Lock him up," Pete grunted. "Stop giving him whiskey."

Susanna clutched her hands together. "I can't. I've interfered enough in his life. I've got to let him do as he wishes."

"He'll drink himself to death."

Susanna blinked back a tear. "We'll all die in the end."

Pete stood up, opened his mouth to argue, and closed it again without speaking. He appeared to shrink in size as his shoulders drooped. "I'll send someone to the mission," he said in a resigned voice. "If Father Dominic is free, he can be here tonight."

"I'll wait in the library."

Susanna spent the afternoon aimlessly snatching books from the shelves and reading random passages. Many of the books had belonged to her mother. Susanna had never realized how much of herself her mother had left behind when she returned to Philadelphia. In a flash of intuition, Susanna knew that if she hadn't gone back East, her mother might have changed her mind. Her mother had stayed away from her father to protect Susanna, without accepting that they were different. Her mother had hated the West, but the harshness of the land around them filled Susanna with a thrill nothing in the East had been able to match.

She replaced the book on the shelf and huddled in the chair, thinking of Connor. For thirteen years, she'd loved the memory of a boy, only to find out he'd turned into a hard and bitter man. Was it wrong to let him carry on drinking? Should she force him to stop? She wanted to, but after accepting it had been wrong to force him to return to Circle Star, she no longer dared to steer the course of his life.

All she needed from him was a brief ceremony to make them man and wife. After that he could leave or carry on drinking, whichever he chose. She would get on with her life, running the ranch and settling into the local community.

The light outside was just beginning to fade when a knock sounded on the library door. Susanna called out a reply. Pete Jackson entered, followed by the padre. It surprised her how young the priest was. The cassock didn't quite hide the strength in his body, but the look in his eyes was the serene gaze of a man of God.

"What preparation do you need for a wedding?" Susanna asked him, puzzled by how calm she felt. She appeared to have no nerves at all, just a sensation of unreality, as though it was all a dream.

"Only the bride and the groom," the priest told her.

"A ring?"

Father Dominic smiled. "Optional."

With a start, Susanna realized her mother had never stopped wearing hers. She rose behind the desk. "Upstairs," she said.

"Ain't you going to change to a dress?" Pete murmured.

"Doesn't matter," Susanna replied. She managed a wan smile. "Could you get Carmen? I'd like the two of you to be witnesses."

She had a notion that Pete flushed with pleasure, but she couldn't be sure. She was only vaguely aware of the others behind her as she knocked on the door to her father's bedroom.

There was no reply. "I have a spare key," she explained, raising her hand. She knelt down and lined her eye with the keyhole. It took her a while to push out the other key on the

inside, so that she could insert hers.

Darkness shrouded the room. "Get some candles," Susanna instructed Carmen.

They waited in silence. When Carmen returned, Pete struck a match against the sole of his boot and lit the first candle, and then the others from the first, sharing them out.

"Watch where you step." Susanna went in first, picking her way through the trays of half-eaten food that sent out a pungent smell.

Connor lay on the bed face down, dusty boots sticking over the edge. The hem of his shirt hung outside the waist of his denim pants. He hadn't bathed or shaved in two weeks. Susanna lowered her candle until she could see the side of his face.

"Connor," she whispered.

There was a grunted response, so she knew he was conscious.

She touched her fingers to his shoulder. "It's Susanna."

The drawn out syllables he slurred might have been her name.

Tipping the candle in her hand, she dribbled wax on the empty plate on the nightstand, and stood the stem in the pool of wax, holding it steady until the wax set.

"Help me turn him on his back," she said.

Pete moved beside her. Together they rolled Connor over, struggling with the dead weight. Susanna sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've got the padre here to marry us."

Connor didn't react, and Susanna assumed he was incapable of rational thought. It bothered her, but she accepted it increased the chances that she'd achieve her aim.

"Do you want to marry me?" she whispered.

He grunted, and the sound could have meant either yes or no.

She reached out and stroked her fingers along the scar on his cheek, almost hidden by the stubbly beard. "Do you remember the day when you kissed me by the river?"

"Susanna. Pretty little Susanna." Now that Connor lay on his back, his words came out clearer, making it possible to decipher their meaning.

"I'm here." She found his hand and clung to it. "That day, you said you'd marry me. You'd marry me, and never let me go. Do you remember?"

"Susanna. I'll never let you go."

"I've got a priest here to marry us. Will you do it?"

The fingers around her hand tightened. "I've never let you go."

"I've never let you go either," Susanna murmured. Then she turned and nodded to the priest.

"Is he in here voluntarily?" the padre asked. "I cannot wed a man who is held against his will."

"You saw that the room was locked from inside," Susanna pointed out. "He can come and go as he pleases."

"The boy's trying to drink himself to death," Pete said. "That's why he's locked himself up."

The padre stared at each of them in turn. Then he opened his book and began to read. Ignoring the chanting voice, Susanna examined Connor's face for any signs that he was breaking out of his stupor.

Pete prodded her shoulder. "Your turn."

She glanced up. "What?"

Pete grinned down at her. "To say, I do."

"I do." Susanna spoke the words solemnly and turned back to Connor. "I love you," she whispered, not caring if anyone heard. "I want to marry you. If you want to marry me, all you have to say is those two words. *I do.*"

She waited as the silence stretched. Tears streamed down her face, but she didn't want to release Connor's hand to wipe them away. "I guess we tried," she said after several minutes had passed. She flexed her legs to rise up from the bed.

The fingers around her hand turned to steel, and she was jerked back down. "I do," she heard Connor say. This time his words were clear. Susanna felt her heart pound as the priest finished the simple ceremony. She tried to speak to Connor, but there was no further response from him. His eyes remained closed and he appeared asleep. They left the room as quietly as they had entered.

"Thank you," Susanna said to the padre. Then she retreated to her bedroom, leaving Carmen and Pete to take care of the priest.

Pete caught her arm. "Do you want me to tell the men?"

Susanna thought a moment. She would have liked to do it herself, to announce that Circle Star wouldn't be auctioned, but she wasn't up to the task tonight, and the men had the right to know at once. "Yes," she said. "And tomorrow we'll have to ride out to Cedar City to see the lawyer. I want everything formalized as soon as possible."

Pete nodded, but his expression remained cool.

Chapter Seven

Susanna leaned against the seat of the buggy, drawing in a deep breath and exhaling slowly, letting the tension drain out of her body. It had been a good idea to get dressed up and stay the night in Cedar City. Pete Jackson might have preferred to hurry back to the ranch, rather than suffer through a theatre show, but she'd been desperate for distraction.

The stream of well-wishers during the interval at the theatre had delighted her. Burt Hartman had been particularly solicitous. The low lights had softened his angular features and pale skin. Once again, Susanna had thought him a handsome man.

Whatever Connor did next, whether he rode off or continued to drown himself in liquor, it no longer mattered to her. She hardened her heart against the memory of the boy she'd once loved. From now on, she would push Connor out of her mind and concentrate on running Circle Star.

In her mind, she saw herself settling down to the task. The burden of her new responsibilities would be tempered by consultations with advisors and neighbors, who would treat her with respect and admiration.

And best of all, soon she hoped to get a visit from Claire. She'd written to invite her, and had posted the letter yesterday as soon as they arrived in Cedar City. She would have asked her dearest friend from Philadelphia to visit earlier, but it hadn't been practical when there was a possibility that she would have lost Circle Star before Claire even got there.

Susanna tugged at the reins, slowing the horse to a walk. The stack of parcels on the seat next to her teetered and she reached out a hand to steady them. She couldn't wait to hear Claire's laughter when her friend tried on the clothes Susanna had bought for her. And the gun belt! Claire didn't know how to shoot, so Susanna would have to insist the gun remain unloaded until she learned, but she knew her friend well enough to realize Claire wouldn't be satisfied without a revolver bouncing at her hip.

Susanna smiled. She hadn't told anyone about Claire yet. That way, if her friend couldn't come, her disappointment wouldn't be sharpened by having to field well-meaning inquiries.

"I guess it was worth getting bored for three hours in that theatre to see you smile," Pete grumbled from horseback alongside the buggy.

"Yes," Susanna replied, feeling serene for the first time in weeks.

"Are you going to keep giving the boy whiskey?"

"Yes." Susanna's tone was firm. "He can do whatever he wants. I don't care. My father shouldn't have forced me to find him."

Pete snorted and spat on the ground. Then he kicked his horse into a canter, leaving Susanna to arrive at Circle Star unescorted, except for a cloud of dust.

She gathered her parcels and ordered one of the men to take care of the horse. Her brows knitted together as she entered the hall and started up the stairs. Pete was getting bold with his disapproval of her. She had to do something about that, but she didn't quite know what.

The door to her father's bedroom stood open. Susanna's heart began to thud as she crept closer. Carmen bustled by the empty bed, shaking out a clean sheet. It billowed in the air, before fluttering down over the mattress. The stacks of dirty plates had been cleared away, and a fresh breeze blew in through the open window.

"Connor?" Susanna managed to murmur.

Carmen beamed at her. "*Señor* Connor ask me to clean the room."

"Where is he?" Susanna's gaze darted around, as if she could find him hiding in some recess.

"*Señor* Connor ride out with two men," Carmen explained with a surly glance at her.

"When? Where to?" Susanna stepped deeper into the room.

"I don't know." Carmen turned away and carried on making the bed. "This morning."

"Did he say when he'll be back?"

Carmen studiously avoided looking at her. "I don't know. He leave no message for you."

Susanna retreated through the open door and continued to her own bedroom. Her eyes misted with tears. She had sensed a growing hostility from Pete, and now Carmen had joined in. Why was everybody blaming her? If Connor was intent on drowning himself in alcohol, it wasn't her responsibility to stop him.

Or was it?

Susanna collapsed on the edge of the bed, the parcels scattering to the floor. Did Carmen and Pete think she wanted Connor to die? Her chest tightened until she couldn't breathe. Had she hoped to be rid of the hard and bitter man, so that she could remember, and continue loving the kind and gentle boy?

Panic propelled her up to her feet. Not stopping to change out of her dress, she ran down the stairs and across the courtyard to the stables. The man she'd left the horse and buggy with was still at his task. Susanna halted. What could she say? Ask the hired hand if he knew where her husband had gone to? She didn't even know the man's name. She'd learned to recognize most of them, but this dark youth wasn't one of the ones she remembered.

Ignoring him, she hurried into the shady stable. Connor's stallion was gone, as was his saddle. Most of the other stalls were empty, so that gave her no clue as to which two men he'd ridden out with.

Behind her came a tingling of spurs, together with muffled footsteps. Susanna whirled. A dark silhouette stood against the light. A small cry of alarm was startled out of her.

"Pardon me, Mrs. McGregor. I didn't mean to scare you." The young ranch hand led the horse inside, coming to a stop in front of an empty stall.

"Do you know where he's gone?" The word "husband" simply refused to form on her tongue.

“He’s gone to the north ridge to see where your father died. Garrett and Ramirez rode with him.”

Susanna calculated. The north ridge was on the edge of Circle Star property, but with an early start it was feasible to make the journey there and back in one day. “Will they get back before dark?”

The ranch hand finished taking the bridle off the horse and bolted the stall door after he came out. He eyed her with what she recognized as pity. “They took shovels, and food for several days. The Boss said he wants to finish the job on the new well.”

“I see. Thank you.” Susanna clasped her fingers together until she thought the delicate bones might snap “What is your name?”

“Gomez, Ma’am.” The man touched the brim of his hat.

Susanna nodded at him. “Thank you.” Then she fled back to the house.

Two things were clear to her. Firstly, the men knew she’d married Connor. Instantly, she’d changed from “Miss Susanna” to “Mrs. McGregor”. Secondly, she could forget about her plan to run the ranch. It was a man’s world, and just like when her father was alive, she’d already been pushed into the background.

In less than forty-eight hours after their hasty wedding, Connor was already “The Boss”. No one, including Pete and Carmen, presumed he was in any way accountable to her for his actions.

And Connor himself did as he pleased, not even bothering to let her know he had ridden out for several days.

Susanna raced up the steps past the bustling Carmen, and threw herself down on her bed with an angry sob.

* * * *

Each night, Susanna retired early, her heart aflutter at the prospect that Connor might ride home after dark. Every morning, she woke with a confusing mixture of relief and disappointment.

Days dragged. Susanna continued to wear her working clothes during the day, but with the men no longer on the road looking for Connor she had no need to get her hands dirty. There were plenty of riders to see to the ranch chores. She tried to help Carmen in the kitchen, but found she didn’t enjoy the tasks. Worse, she felt she got in the way. As the strain between them grew, Susanna gave up the effort, and told Carmen to ask around and hire two maids, one to do the cleaning, and one to help in the kitchen.

She spent her time reading, or riding out alone. It was considered dangerous for a woman to venture unaccompanied into the desert, but once again Susanna was prepared to flaunt the convention. She had tried to tag after the teams of ranch hands, but sensed they were resentful of her presence since it forced them to curb their language.

In the evenings, propelled by some restless instinct, she changed into a gown, favoring the grey silk she’d worn when she found Connor in El Paso. Then she sat alone in the big dining

room, in the same seat she'd occupied as a girl, and picked at the food Carmen had cooked.

Nine days after Connor had ridden out to the north ridge a commotion in the kitchen interrupted the tedium. Susanna had barely sat down for dinner. The hot day was turning into a cold night, with an unusual bite to the wind, strong enough to rattle the shutters over the windows. Upon hearing shouts and laughter from the kitchen, Susanna got up and drifted over. She longed for conversation and wished she could join the men as they dined in shifts, but she knew they would dislike the formality her company would bring.

The kitchen door stood open. Her satin slippers made no sound as she stepped through. It took a while before anyone noticed her arrival, which gave her ample time to take in the scene.

Connor reigned at the centre of a knot of men gathered between the long table and the stove. His hands clutched the arms of a voluptuous dark girl facing him. A chorus of encouragement burst all around. He gave the men a quick grin, then bent his head and pressed a solid kiss on the girl's pouting mouth.

The surge of hurt was so overpowering Susanna felt as though she was drowning. She could draw no air into her lungs, and her head felt light. Dimly she was aware that one of the men glanced in her direction. He poked his elbow into the man next to him and spoke a few words. Like wildfire, the news spread, until most of the men turned to look at her.

Connor was the last to react. His eyes narrowed into watchful slits.

"Please don't let me interrupt," Susanna said, finding her voice, and mercifully managing to keep it strong and steady. She turned to go.

"Wait," Connor called after her. "You'll need to get introduced. This is Miranda, the new maid."

Susanna raced upstairs. Tears of humiliation stung in her eyes. She'd been put in her place regarding the running of the ranch, but was she to have no say even in decisions normally left to the lady of the house, such as vetting maids? Her anger rose as she kept seeing that kiss in her mind. How dare he bring some slut into the house, and flaunt her in front of the men like that.

Susanna had allowed for the possibility that their relationship would be strained. It would take time to establish a trust that would eventually allow for at least some level of harmony. She had even come to terms that their marriage might remain a union in name only.

But never in her worst nightmares had she considered the possibility that Connor would simply ignore her as his wife and install a mistress right there on Circle Star.

Susanna locked her door, and dragged out a chair to make a barricade. She remained awake for hours, alert and listening. Her efforts were in vain. There wasn't a single rattle of the handle, and no footsteps came up to her door.

In the morning, she lingered until she could be sure Connor had finished his breakfast. When she got down, the food laid out in the dining room hadn't been touched. She waited, sipping coffee and nibbling on a piece of toast. When Carmen came in to gather the rest of the food away, Susanna found out Connor had eaten in the kitchen with the men.

"I hear we have a new maid," Susanna said casually. "Where did you find the girl?"

"I don't find her. Ramirez have a girl in Cedar City. *Señor* Connor tell him if he want to marry, Miranda can have job at Circle Star."

Susanna paused. Her brows drew together. "That girl is going to marry Ramirez?"

Carmen beamed. "They already marry, yesterday in Cedar City. Last night we celebrate. You not hear noise in the kitchen?"

Susanna gave a slow nod. "Yes. I heard the noise," she said softly.

"You no join in?" Carmen clucked her tongue. "You miss all fun."

Susanna looked away. "I didn't think I was invited," she muttered, more to herself than to Carmen. Then she dug deep for her dignity. "Is Miranda going to work in the kitchen, or do the cleaning?"

"Cleaning, I think. She is strong girl." Carmen pursed her lips, looking awkward. "Of course, if *Señora* agree."

Susanna managed a ghost of a smile. "That's fine. As long as you can manage in the kitchen until you find another girl. Can you send Miranda in so I can meet her?"

"Miranda is out, getting her things from Cedar City. She is back this afternoon."

Susanna was grateful for the reprieve. She would try her best to be pleasant to the girl, who had done nothing wrong, except to follow the tradition of receiving a wedding kiss from her husband's boss. It wasn't the poor girl's fault that the boss had yet to kiss his own wife.

* * * *

Too restless to read, Susanna went back upstairs and spent two hours writing another letter to Claire, a little more candid this time, begging her to come. She decided to ride to Cedar City and post the letter at once. Eager to find some purpose for her day, Susanna headed out to the stables.

The young ranch hand called Gomez was crossing the yard, leading out a pair of yearlings.

Susanna stopped to let him pass. "When did those arrive?"

Gomez greeted her with a nod. "They were delivered this morning. Six in all."

"Are they what Pete Jackson bought in El Paso?"

"I don't know. The Boss checked them. He only picked six out of the ten and sent the rest back."

"Is someone waiting for payment?" Susanna glanced around, but the courtyard was quiet. Perhaps the men who'd delivered the horses were in the kitchen getting something to eat.

"The Boss already paid. He went into the house to get the money."

Susanna felt cold fingers clasp at her heart. Without a word, she spun on her heels and raced across the courtyard, and carried on through the hall into the library. The strongbox nestled intact in the oak cabinet where it had always been stored. She reached for the key on the shelf behind *Volume Four of Shakespeare's Complete Works*. It had been hidden there as long as she remembered.

Her hands shook as she turned the lock. A receipt for the yearlings lay on top of the pile of money. She counted what was left and opened the account book to compare the amount. Another twenty dollars was missing, but it was matched by a neat entry in the ledger. The expenditure was labeled "McGregor – personal". She slammed the account book shut, staring blindly at the wall in front of her.

Connor knew where the key was kept. She had never considered her father might have told the boy, but he had. With a vicious shove, Susanna replaced the strongbox in the oak cabinet. Was there nothing any more that she had the authority over in her own house?

She slammed the library door behind her and hurried back to the stables. Thank heavens the law had been changed some years ago, and a woman's property no longer automatically passed on to her husband upon marriage. Circle Star was still legally hers, even if the practice was turning out different.

"Saddle my horse," she snapped at Gomez, who had returned from the corral for the next pair of yearlings. It was a point of pride for Susanna to always get the horse ready herself, but she was so badly shaken she knew she would transmit her feelings to the animal.

"Santiago?" The ranch hand stopped, awkwardly tugging at the handkerchief around his neck.

"I only have the one horse."

"The Boss took it. He wanted Brutus to have a rest after the hard riding yesterday."

Red haze shimmered in front of Susanna's eyes. Her horse. Her lovely stallion, so strong and brave, and her closest link with her father. She yanked her head up and glared at Gomez. "Is Brutus lame?"

"No, Ma'am." She heard the hesitation in the man's voice and knew he'd guessed what was on her mind.

"Saddle him," she ordered.

"Now, Mrs. McGregor, that horse –."

"Saddle him," she repeated through clenched teeth.

The man shrugged, and set off to obey her command.

"Gomez," Susanna shouted after him.

"Ma'am?" his tone was low and strained.

"I prefer being addressed as Miss Susanna. I'd be grateful if you mentioned it to the other men."

This time, Gomez touched the brim of his hat before he disappeared into the stables.

Susanna clamped her lips into a tight line as she waited. Her heart thumped, and her hands gripped together so tight her nails dug into her flesh.

If Connor wanted to ignore the fact that they were married, she would do the same.

Gomez led Connor's black stallion into the sunlight. As soon as they came to a stop, the horse began to beat the ground with his front hooves. "He ain't friendly, and he seems to have a dislike for women," Gomez warned her.

"I know. And he bites."

Gomez nodded. "A poisonous bastard he is. You're sure you want to ride him?"

"Hold him still while I mount."

"The Boss will have my hide for this." Susanna heard the man's muttered words as she sprung into the saddle. The instant Gomez let go, the stallion began to weave and circle, trying to crush her leg against the stable wall.

Susanna controlled the horse and fixed a sharp look at the man. "I'm your boss. Connor McGregor is my husband, but only as long as I want him to be."

Without another word, she dug her heels into the sides of the horse and hung on. The stallion shot out through the courtyard. Once they were on the open road, the horse flattened his ears and streaked ahead like lightning. After Susanna got used to the different gait from that of the older and steadier Santiago, she began to feel at ease. Loosening one hand from the reins, she reached out to pat the stallion's neck, and murmured a few soft words.

The horse's ears pricked up and his speed fell.

So Connor still does it, Susanna realized. The horse seemed accustomed to being crooned at, and was intrigued by the pitch of this new voice, and the lighter weight on his back. She continued her murmuring. When they reached Cedar City and she alighted, instead of reaching out with his vicious teeth, Brutus followed her with a curious gaze in his moist eyes.

"I wish your master were as easy to tame as you," Susanna whispered to him before she remounted outside the post office.

She was already halfway back to Circle Star when a group of three riders thundered from the opposite direction.

"You little fool," Connor yelled the instant he was close enough. He forced Brutus to a stop by blocking the way. Garrett and Ramirez circled behind her.

Susanna stiffened in the saddle. "You take my horse, I have to take yours," she shouted back at Connor.

"You're no match for him."

"He's given me no trouble."

Connor lowered his eyes to the stallion. "Brutus, get rid of her."

Susanna sensed the horse tense underneath her and tightened her hold on the reins. The sharp neigh as the stallion tossed up his head sounded like a protest.

"I said, Brutus, get rid of the rider on your back." Connor's voice was steely. Slowly, as if with reluctance, the horse reared up. Susanna threw herself forward over the horse's neck and kept her seat. The stallion arched and kicked up his rear. He corkscrewed and danced, and then he did it all over again, until Susanna slid off the saddle and tumbled down into the dirt.

The stallion stood still, craning his head in her direction. Connor reached over and secured the loose reins into the knob of the saddle. "Brutus, go home," he ordered. The stallion whinnied and set off like a whirlwind towards Circle Star.

"You idiot," Susanna screeched, spitting out fury and dirt. "I could have broken my

neck.”

“I doubt that,” Connor said. “Brutus didn’t really put his heart into it.”

Susanna scrambled up. Dust flew as she patted her hands over her clothes. “What did you do that for?”

Connor looked down at her. “Nobody rides that horse without my permission.”

“You took mine.”

“Santiago is not a woman’s mount.”

“He is my horse.”

Connor’s face went blank and he offered no further argument. “Get up.” He reached a hand down to help her mount behind him.

It was another five miles to Circle Star, and the late afternoon sun was merciless, but pride came before comfort. “I’d rather walk,” Susanna told him. Filled with an icy calm, she turned her back on him and set off at a brisk pace down the dirt track.

Connor rode slowly beside her. “Don’t be a fool. You have no water.”

Gritting her teeth, Susanna ignored him and kept her eyes strained ahead.

“Suit yourself,” she heard him say. Hooves thundered past her, and the three riders vanished into the horizon.

Heat baked down from the sky like a flame. Her mouth had gone bone dry, and her tongue was beginning to feel parched. Susanna tried to find a landmark, but the desert looked the same all around. It had to be at least a mile by now. Maybe a mile and a half. It should be less than an hour from there to Circle Star. The evening was drawing in, and she tried to convince herself that the sun already felt a little cooler.

A blister rose at her right heel. The boots had felt fine before, but she’d never walked far in them, and now her feet had expanded from the heat. She started to limp, but that would only give her relief until her other heel blistered as well.

Ahead, a cloud of dust whirled above the road. Susanna squinted. This time it was just one rider. Connor closed the distance and came to a halt a few paces ahead of her. She ignored him, trying to march past, but he positioned the horse to block her way. This time he was mounted on Brutus, so she knew he’d been to Circle Star and back. She sought to go around him, but the horse seemed to be everywhere at once.

“What do you want?” She scowled up at him.

“I want you to get home alive. There are snakes and scorpions.”

“Some of them on horseback.”

“How did I ever make the mistake of thinking it would be a good idea to marry you?” Connor untied a canteen from his saddle and tossed it down on the ground.

Susanna stared at the container for a second. Then she stepped over it, pushing her way past Brutus. “You didn’t. You were too drunk to know what you were doing.”

She heard a click behind her and froze. “Pick it up,” Connor rasped. His voice was rough and edgy.

Susanna turned slowly. One of the big Colts was pointed at her.

“So shoot me,” she taunted, tilting her head to look at him. “Circle Star is what you always wanted. A ranch of your own. You said that a long time ago.”

“And if I recall right, in that same conversation you said I’m not good enough for you. You changed your mind real quick when Circle Star hung in the balance.”

She stared at him, her mouth trembling a little. “I’ll get a divorce,” she told him quietly. “Then you can be on your way, and I can get on with my life.”

“The marriage hasn’t been consummated. You put in for a divorce, I’ll change it to an annulment. You’ll be right back where you started before you hunted me down.”

“I didn’t hunt you down. You make it sound like you had no choice.”

“Did I?” he said softly. The hammer clicked as he thumbed it off and retuned the gun into the holster. “I want that canteen back. Either you pick it up now and hand it to me, or you bring it back with you.”

Susanna stared ahead, pretending not to hear. Gravel kicked into her shins as Connor executed a tight turn and urged Brutus down the road. She waited until he was gone. Then she gave the canteen a little kick. It sloshed heavy. She could tell it was almost full. Bristling with anger, she bent to scoop it up. Suddenly desperate with thirst, she fumbled with the cap until she got it off and could drink with long gulps. The water was cool. Connor must have stopped to fill the canteen right before he set out to bring it to her.

She marched on, stewing with rage. How could Connor suddenly emerge from his drunken stupor and become “The Boss” of Circle Star? Nothing was going as she’d planned. She’d offered herself to him as a loving companion and a faithful wife, and he had ignored her, preferring to drown himself in whiskey. And then, just when she had resolved to get on with her life and run the ranch alone, he stepped in and stole it from her.

Connor McGregor. How can she ever have believed she loved him?

Her heels were scraped raw when she finally crossed the cobblestone courtyard. Unwilling to suffer a single step more than necessary, she sat down on the hallway floor to yank off the boots.

“Let me help.” The new girl Miranda flounced over, discarding the cloth she’d used to dust the big china pots filled with dried desert flowers.

Susanna leaned back and let the maid help. She couldn’t stifle a groan when the boot rubbed against the blistered skin. Miranda inspected the foot and made disapproving noises. “I have ointment. I’ll bring some up to your room.”

“Thank you.” Susanna stood up gingerly, carrying the boots in one hand. “And congratulations. I understand you have just married.”

The girl blushed a pretty pink. “You too, you only married recently. Is nice, no?”

Susanna closed her eyes for a second and controlled her urge to hurl back a response. The girl should benefit from the presumption of innocence. It was unlikely that anyone who understood how things were between her and Connor would be bold enough to gloat over her

discomfort. She would find out as time went by if her spirit of generosity was misplaced.

When she opened her eyes, Miranda was picking up her dusting cloth. "I'll bring you hot water. *Señor* Connor told me to prepare a bath for you."

"Thank you." Susanna limped up the stairs, feeling annoyed. She'd spent the last hour seething over what a thoroughbred bastard Connor was. He had no right to undermine her by doing something kind.

Chapter Eight

Susanna bathed and dressed. As well as the gifts for Claire, she'd bought clothes for herself. Now she owned three sets of denim pants and six shirtwaist blouses, in a size not quite so clinging.

In the dining room, Carmen was bustling around with steaming dishes. Susanna greeted her, and Carmen replied, but appeared uncomfortable and made a quick escape as soon as her work was done.

Susanna settled down for yet another solitary meal. She'd already started to serve herself, when the sound of footsteps alerted her. Connor strode in, closing the door behind him. He studied the table for a second. Then he walked around and sat, not opposite her, where he'd sat as a boy for Sunday dinners, but on her right, in her father's chair at the head of the table.

Susanna made no comment. Her fingers tightened over the bowl of potatoes, to keep her hand from shaking as she lowered the dish on the tablecloth.

"Did you enjoy your stroll?" Connor asked as he began to fill his plate.

"Yes."

"Did you empty and rinse out the canteen?"

"Yes."

"I hear you met Miranda," he said, glancing up at her.

"Yes."

"Are you a stubborn idiot?"

The tease caught Susanna unprepared, and her lips twitched into a smile before she managed to control her expression. "No," she said, her voice vibrant with suppressed laughter.

"And if you think you can rile me up by not wearing a dress for dinner, you're wrong." Connor paused to run his gaze over her. His eyes narrowed. "I've seen you naked. It doesn't matter to me what you wear. I know what's underneath." He carried on piling food on his plate.

"Thank you for that small liberty, but I don't need your permission to select my clothing," she told him tartly.

"You're welcome to ride Brutus, but you have to ask first." He glanced up again and sent her a stern smile that made her breath catch. "The fool seems to have taken a shine to you. Didn't really want to toss you this afternoon."

"He has better manners than his master."

Connor surveyed her, his eyes so intent they made her skin tingle. "You know nothing about my manners when I ride a woman."

Hot blood washed over her cheeks. Susanna said nothing, but busied herself with pushing food around on her plate.

“Don’t you think we ought to talk about that?” Connor asked.

“About what?” she managed to murmur.

“About what this marriage means to each of us.”

Susanna kept silent, her gaze locked on the tablecloth where she had spilled a drop of sauce.

“You married me for Circle Star,” Connor said bluntly. “I’m not going to put my blood and guts into this place, only to be thrown out one day. Unless you transfer half the property into my name, I’m not staying.”

“I’ll see the lawyer about it when I go to Cedar City next,” Susanna promised, not lifting her eyes from the tiny stain beside her plate.

“Make it quick.”

“I’ll go next week.” She picked up her fork and began to toy with the potatoes, her heart pounding as she prepared to confront him. “You helped yourself to the money in the strong box, and the men no longer take orders from me.” She raised her gaze to him. “How am I supposed to occupy my days if there’s nothing left for me to do?”

Connor shifted his broad shoulders. “Ranch wives have plenty to do: Cooking, cleaning, and dealing with the maids.” The corners of his mouth curved in wry amusement. “You can sew and embroider and paint watercolors and read poetry. Isn’t that why you went away to school all those years ago? To learn how to be a lady?”

An agry huff rose in her throat as she stared at him, lacking the words to ease her turmoil.

“As to the rest, I’m not going to trouble you,” Connor carried on. “What needs I have, I’ll take to the whores in Cedar City.”

Susanna flinched. “What about during the day?” Her voice fell to a whisper, and she fervently hoped Connor would put her agitation down to embarrassment.

“I can’t see why we couldn’t manage to be friendly. It will be easier on everyone around if we’re not at each other’s throats.”

Susanna sat in silence. Then the anguish inside her pushed her to risk another humiliation. “Why?” She flicked her eyes up to him. His face shimmered in front of her through a haze of tears.

“Why what?” Connor said softly.

“Why nothing more?”

She listened to his chair scrape back, and then to the clanking of boot heels against the floor as he scaled the few steps that separated them. He towered in front of her. Lifting his hand, he drew a lazy fingertip along her jaw and then across her lips. “Because I only have one heart, and you’ve already broken it.”

He let his hand drop by his side. The sound of his boots filled Susanna’s ears as he stalked out of the room. On his plate, the mountain of food remained untouched.

* * * *

Over the next few days, Susanna learned the meaning of emotional warfare. Her nerves

were constantly on edge. Every morning, she listened to the sounds of Connor getting up in the next room, and she delayed her own breakfast until she could be sure he was gone.

During the day she lingered around the house. The few times she ventured out riding, she avoided the groups of men she spotted in the distance, in case Connor was amongst them.

In the evenings she had no such luxury. Meals were served at six and she had to either turn up, or wait to fetch leftovers from the kitchen after nine when the men had been fed. She chose to eat at six. Connor sat at the head of the table and made occasional comments over ranch business. Susanna barely managed more than monosyllables.

One night, she got up in the darkness and tiptoed to Connor's bedroom door, wearing only a thin cotton nightgown. The brass knob felt cold under her fingers. She turned it slowly, and found the door locked. Tears burned in her eyes as she hurried back to her own bed.

The following Sunday evening, she dressed in a green velvet gown that matched her eyes. Connor seemed to look at her longer than normal as she entered the dining room, but she was too tense to trust her senses. His inspection of her could have gone on for three minutes, or for three seconds. She no longer knew.

"Are you going to see the lawyer this week?" Connor asked her.

"Yes." Susanna glanced up.

"Do I need to sign anything?"

"I don't think so." She picked at the food in front of her. Lack of appetite plagued her every night when they dined together. "I might stay a few days in Cedar City. Go to the theatre, see a dressmaker. Get introduced to the local ladies."

"You don't have to ask me," Connor said lightly.

"I would expect you to tell me if you were to ride out and stay away overnight."

"I'll have to remember that."

They finished the meal in silence.

* * * *

Susanna remained in Cedar City longer than she'd planned. Finding the hotel too noisy and restless, she rented a room for two weeks with a respectable widow who also offered meals for her guests.

At the end of the first week, a letter arrived from Claire. It was addressed to Circle Star, but Susanna had told the post office to hold her mail. The amusing anecdotes and Philadelphia gossip bolstered her courage, but what filled her with joy was the message that as soon as she could make arrangements, Claire would come. She would telegraph when she set off on her way. Maybe as soon as two weeks. Susanna inspected the date at the top of the letter. It had been written ten days ago. She pressed the rustling sheets of paper against her bosom, blinking back tears of relief.

On Saturday night, she attended a dance at the church hall. Even though nothing much grew in the arid Arizona soil, the tradition of a Harvest Festival had been kept up by migrants from more fertile lands. Susanna prepared her toilette with care. She had a reputation to uphold,

particularly considering her shocking habit of riding astride and wearing men's clothes. She had ordered a new gown in watery green silk, cut a bit lower in the bodice than she was used to.

The church hall was lit by flickering oil lamps, with torches blazing outside. Susanna mingled with the bank manager, the store keepers, and the justice of the peace. She avoided the padre who had presided at her dismal wedding.

Other rancher's wives smothered her with their congratulations and good wishes. Susanna knew it was for gossip as much as for friendship. Time and again, she made excuses for Connor's absence.

"He's too busy with work to leave Circle Star," Susanna repeated, keeping her voice even.

"Not putting time aside to be with his new bride?" The ample bosom of the matron in front of her heaved and the double chin shuddered.

Susanna lost her patience. "I married him for a purpose, and his priority is to fulfill that purpose." She turned her back on the woman and strode off. Everyone knew how things stood between her and Connor, of that she was certain. It was less humiliating to face the facts than to pretend.

"That's it, stand up to them."

Susanna cast a grateful glance over her shoulder and waited for Burt Hartman to catch up. She'd noticed him earlier, cutting a fine figure in the centre of a group of influential men.

Hartman took her elbow and escorted her towards the table laden with food and drink. "I'm not going to offer my congratulations. The only reaction I had to your marriage was disappointment."

Susanna felt her cheeks flush. "That's a kind thing to say. I'm sure you're aware of the circumstances of my marriage."

"I am indeed." Harman nodded at her. "And I confess to a hope that in different circumstances you'd have chosen a different husband."

Susanna offered him a hesitant smile. "Thank you. It hasn't been easy."

Harman lifted her hand and pressed a kiss on the back of it. "Anything I can do to make things easier, you only have to let me know."

"Thank you." Susanna clasped his fingers a little. It was good to have someone fussing over her, flattering her, even if the compliments sounded insincere. Not until now, when other men looked at her with admiration in their eyes, did she realize how much it hurt that Connor seemed to have no trouble resisting her.

Night after night, he was able to sleep in the room down the hall from her, with full knowledge that he had the right to step across the landing and do whatever he wished with her. Unlike most young women from Philadelphia society, Susanna had a good idea of what took place between a husband and wife in the privacy of the night.

Growing up on a ranch surrounded by rutting animals gave you that kind of knowledge. The only person she'd ever discussed the topic with was Claire, who had extracted the sketchy

details from her with wide-eyed fascination wavering between excitement and terror.

When dancing began, Burt Harman claimed her for a waltz. Susanna closed her eyes as they spun over the floor. For one moment, she allowed herself to imagine it was Connor holding her. Instinctively, she arched into her partner. Hartman tightened his hold on her until their bodies brushed. Susanna's eyes flew open. The magic was broken, and she could no longer make believe. Tears misted her eyes. She tried to pull away but stumbled, losing her step. Hartman steadied her, whispering something into her ear. Susanna was too upset to pay attention to the words.

All she wanted was for the dance to stop, so that she could go back to her rented room and cry herself to sleep.

* * * *

At Circle Star, Connor and Pete Jackson worked on the new yearlings, standing side by side in the corral, each holding a horse tethered to a long rope. Pete kept casting angry glances at Connor, making it clear something troubled him. Connor ignored the looks. He knew Pete wouldn't speak his mind until he had found the right words.

"Ain't you going to the dance in Cedar City?" Pete finally said, breaking the long silence.

The direction of Pete's attack took him by surprise, but Connor's composure didn't falter. "I have nothing to wear."

Pete snorted. "That's a woman's line." He gave Connor a quick up-and-down. "The men don't care and with your looks the women don't care neither. Just wear what you always wear."

"I'm not interested in going."

"Most of the men are going." Pete slanted Connor a shrewd glance. "It's bad leadership not to be there. Your riders might get into a brawl."

Connor said nothing, but his shoulders stiffened as he accepted Pete had scored a point.

"Susanna will miss you if you don't go," the foreman said.

"She'll miss me like she'll miss a thunderstorm during a summer picnic."

Pete bristled, no longer able to hold down his temper. "Are you blind, boy? Her heart's bleeding for you. She's lost weight, and she was too thin to start with."

"Change is always unsettling," Connor replied calmly.

"Change, my ass. That girl's pining because she loves you, and you're ignoring her."

"What makes you think that?" Connor kept his voice casual, but he suspected Pete could hear the underlying tension.

"She said as much when the padre married you. Whispered it to you, quiet-like, thinking nobody else would hear."

The yearling at the end of Connor's rope reared up, and Pete turned away to hide his smirk of satisfaction. Connor realized the foreman was chipping away at the icy reserve he'd built around himself, never managing to make it quite thick enough to resist an attack from someone who cared about him.

Pete pressed on. "Why do you think she's never married nobody else?"

Connor raised a wry eyebrow. "Because she's a stubborn mule and no man dares to take her on?"

Pete howled with laughter. "And the sun rises in the west." He turned to Connor, more confident now. "There's been plenty that have asked, but she kept turning them down. Mr. Talbot told me. It was in her mother's letters."

A tumult of emotions churned through Connor, curiosity overcoming the sudden glimmer of hope, and the fierce sting of jealousy. "And what makes you think it had anything to do with me?"

Pete's face furrowed as he appeared to wrestle with his conscience. "I can't tell you that," he said in the end. "She threatened to shoot me right between the eyes if I ever told you."

Connor continued to soothe the restless yearling. He spoke quietly, knowing Pete had to strain his ears to hear. "When we were young, Susanna got used to batting her lashes at me, and having me hand over my heart. She needs to learn it doesn't work that way anymore."

"Is that what this is all about? Some kind of battle for supremacy, like the War Between the States?" Pete's voice shook with anger as the words tumbled out. "Just remember, when there's a war, everybody loses something, even the winner."

Connor kept silent.

"Carmen has Mr. Talbot's old suits put away. Although you carry less weight, you're about the same height." Pete flicked over another glance. "She's a dab hand with a needle, Carmen is. You can tell her I said so."

Connor stepped forward to stroke the neck of the horse, refusing to look at Pete. "I'll think about it."

"You do that, boy," Pete said, and lapsed back into silence as he returned his attention to the yearling.

* * * *

Connor relaxed in the saddle and leaned into the wind. Daylight was almost gone, but Brutus was sure of foot, and the road stretched ahead straight and familiar. He'd hung back when the men set off for the dance, freshly bathed and shaven, whooping with anticipation. He hadn't intended to go, but the maddening restlessness inside him wouldn't ease, until he gave in and got himself ready.

The shirt and pants beneath his leather coat were worn but clean. Not dressing up made it seem as though he was riding out to keep an eye on his ranch hands, rather than to attend a dance with his cultured wife.

The torches outside the church hall were almost burned out, petering to an acrid black smoke. He tied Brutus on the beam at the back. "I know you like her," he crooned, stroking the horse's head. "But it's not as simple for humans. She needs to be broken in a little. Learn who's the boss. Just like you did when we first met."

Music streamed from inside, so he knew the speeches were over, and the dancing had begun.

As he walked through the doors into the crowd, he could feel the burn of a dozen pairs of eyes on his skin. He held his head high. Not looking left or right, he walked up to the bar and collected a glass of the sweet smelling concoction with floating pieces of fruit which was the only alcoholic drink on offer.

He took a sip, grimaced, and carried the glass to the corner where he settled his shoulder against the wall. Couples whirled on the floor. It took him no time at all to pick out Susanna. She was tall, and slimmer than most women. Her breasts shone white in the low cut dress. He recalled what those breasts had looked like without any dress at all in El Paso, when he demanded she stand naked in front of him. He felt his stomach tighten. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to remain calm.

He recognized her dancing partner as Burt Hartman from the descriptions of his men. So this was the man who would have bought Circle Star in the auction, had Connor not obeyed Susanna's command and agreed to a hasty marriage. He saw the man look down at her with greedy eyes. There *would* have been another way for Susanna to keep her home, he realized, and wondered if Susanna had realized it, too. He saw her body arch towards Hartman, who instantly responded by pulling her close. She stumbled, and Hartman clutched her tight, murmuring into her ear.

Connor had his answer. Susanna might have come to understand she had a choice, but by then she had already married him, and now it was too late. He crossed back to the bar and propped the full glass on the table. Then he left the way he'd come, and rode through the starlit desert back to Circle Star.

Chapter Nine

Susanna took another sip of the fragrant tea and lowered the delicate china cup back onto the table. "Thank you for inviting me. I've enjoyed seeing more of your lovely home."

Burt Hartman smiled boldly at her. "Beautiful furnishings are wasted on a man. When I bought this ranch, I was hoping to find a woman to share my home with."

"Why did you move to Arizona?" Susanna asked, her fingers toying with the silver teaspoon.

"The climate. I had some trouble with my lungs. The desert air has cured me, and I'm strong and healthy now." He gave her a meaningful glance. "I've chosen to stay. I think this is an ideal place to bring up a family."

Susanna forced a smile to her lips. "There are many young ladies who would be flattered by that kind of attention from you."

"I'm a patient man. I'll wait to see if the lady of my choice becomes free."

Susanna felt a blush over her cheeks. "Mr. Hartman," she said, and then fell silent.

"Yes?" Burt Hartman prompted.

Susanna faced him, her gaze steady. "I'm married, and I have no intention of changing that."

"Even though it is common knowledge that your husband leads a separate life?"

Her mouth trembled, but she didn't avert her eyes. "I'm hoping we will eventually reconcile our differences."

Burt Hartman shook his head. "He's a lucky man, Miss Susanna. I've never envied a man as much as I envy him."

"I thank you for the compliment." She gathered the books stacked on the table. "I'm afraid I must leave now. I have some chores to take care of at home."

Her host stood up at once. "Please, come again." His actions were those of a perfect gentleman as he accompanied her outside and helped her up into the waiting buggy.

Susanna took the reins from the stooping old ranch hand and set the horse to a slow walk. She was in no rush to get home, and the longer she lingered, the better the chances that she would catch a glimpse of Rafael De Santis.

It was the second time she'd come out to Deep Valley to look for her childhood neighbor, with the pretext of borrowing books from Hartman's library. Her feelings were increasingly confused. There had been no sign of Rafael, and by now Susanna almost believed she'd imagined that first encounter. She had considered asking one of the Deep Valley riders about the half-breed, but her instincts kept her from mentioning his name.

During both her visits, Hartman had been utterly pleasant and hospitable. Surely, the

accusation that he'd stolen the ranch from Rafael's parents must have been a misunderstanding. Hartman was too wealthy to bother with swindles, and he seemed so dedicated to the local community. Often he made vague references to the charitable efforts he was funding.

There were times when Susanna almost felt that if she wasn't married to Connor, she would entertain the possibility of a courtship with Mr. Hartman. And then she would catch an unguarded glimpse of him, see a trace of evil in that bloodless face of his, and she'd shudder with fear.

Susanna snapped the reins and sent the buggy hurtling. Now that she was too far from Deep Valley to have any hope of seeing Rafael, there was no point in wasting time by traveling slowly.

Her thoughts lingered on Burt Harman a while longer. It really was confusing. It was like there were two very different men contained in the same body, and she couldn't tell which one of them was his true nature.

With a deep sigh, Susanna leaned back in the seat of the buggy. Why was she thinking about Burt Hartman at all? If only Connor stopped ignoring her, she wouldn't have to bolster her self-esteem by seeking admiration from other men.

* * * *

Connor sat on a knoll down by the river, snatching a moment's solitude at the end of the day. He needed to clear his mind, to figure out what to do next. The situation had escalated out of his control. He had put up a barrier to protect his heart, and he no longer knew how to knock it down.

Susanna had returned from Cedar City, but she was haughty and distant. Twice she had visited Deep Valley, with the excuse of wanting to borrow books from Hartman's library. The rest of the time, she went through the house, cleaning and polishing as if dust had suddenly become poisonous. When anyone wanted to know why, all they got was a smile and an enigmatic "you'll find out".

Connor had assumed that once he was ready to give their marriage a proper chance, Susanna would welcome him with open arms. Now he believed she'd slam the door in his face. How had they managed to keep so far apart while living under the same roof? He longed to reach out to her, but didn't know how to go about it any better than he had as a clumsy fifteen-year old.

With a muttered curse, Connor stood up and called for Brutus, who stood grazing on clumps of grass by the water's edge. He hoisted himself into saddle. The sun burned low over the horizon. In another hour it would be dark.

He heard the whistle of a bullet and felt the sting in his shoulder in the same instant. Crouching low over the horse's neck he turned around, both Colts at the ready. He could see no rider, but a trail of dust rose across the river.

On Hartman's land.

So that was how far things had slipped out of his control. His heart filled with the blackest rage he'd ever known at the thought that Susanna might be part of it.

Connor dug in his heels. Brutus spun, cleared the bank, and raced over the rocky ground until they reached Circle Star. "Deal with him," Connor snapped at Gomez, vaulting down from the saddle and throwing off the reins.

In the house, he went to the library first. "Susanna!" he roared from the door. The room was empty, although a lamp burned on the mantelpiece. He strode into the kitchen, his steps ringing against the tile.

"Where's my wife?"

Carmen looked up from her pots and pans. "I don't know. Ask Miranda."

"Where's Miranda?"

"I don't know."

Connor shook his head. What was with women, old and young? Contrary shrews, every single one.

"Susanna!" he bellowed. "Where the heck are you?" As he turned to leave, he heard Carmen cluck her tongue.

In the hall, Miranda peered at him, half hiding behind the dining room door. "Miss Susanna is having a bath."

Miss Susanna. Not Mrs. McGregor. He'd noticed it, but he'd let it go. He should have put a stop to it, right at the start. Women. Give them an inch, and they take a mile. "Susanna," he roared, leaping the stairs three at a time.

Outside her bedroom, he moved a few steps back, getting ready to ram the door with his right shoulder. The left shoulder stung like hell. Blood trickled down his arm, but he knew it was only a scratch. He paused a moment to think before he tried the handle. It turned, and he stepped through.

"Connor?" Susanna said. She sat immersed in a big steel tub at the centre of the room, looking at him from under her brows. Foam dripped from her hair and ran in rivulets down her shoulders and over her breasts. She made no effort to cover herself with her arms.

"Why didn't you lock your door?" he asked, his gaze roaming over her exposed skin.

"Because I'm not trying to keep you out."

He strode over and yanked her up to her feet. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub. "I don't know what you're up to, but if you are planning to go to Hartman, you won't go to him untouched."

"What are you talking about?"

He released his grip on her arms, but only to pull off his coat and toss it down on the wet floor. Then he grabbed her again. "I knew you're using me for your own aims, but I had no idea the stakes were so high."

"What are you taking about?" Susanna began to squirm in his hold. The soap made her arms slippery. He slid his hands along them and imprisoned her wrists, twisting them together behind her waist. She arched her back, and her breasts pushed out to him.

The rage inside him exploded into desire. It surged through him, hot and heavy. He felt

cheated, because she was already naked, and he didn't get the chance to tear off her clothes.

"If Hartman's getting a widow, he can't have a virgin." He bent his head and kissed her – harsh, demanding kisses, with years of pent-up hunger in them. Releasing her wrists, he cupped his hands over her buttocks and lifted her against the hard bulge of his loins. Damp heat enveloped him as Susanna raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck. He dug his fingers into her soft flesh, hitching her higher against his erection. With a soft moan, she wound her legs around his hips and clung to him.

"Your clothes are getting wet," she whispered when he lifted his mouth from hers.

"I don't care. That's how I want you, naked and wet. As wet inside as you are out." He walked over to the bed and lowered her slowly on her back, untangling his body from hers only long enough to bunch up his shirt and hook it over his head.

"I hope you aren't expecting me to sew those buttons back on."

"Shut up." He reached for her knees and parted them. There was no resistance, no hesitation. Her eyes shone up at him, the green stars with a dark circle around them he'd dreamed of for so long. He lowered his head and caught her female flesh with his lips and tongue, sucking, teasing, caressing.

He heard her cry out, felt her body strain and arch on the bed. "Connor," she murmured. "Connor." Her fingers tangled in his hair.

He raised his head and climbed up on the bed between her legs. She reached for his shoulders, causing him to flinch when her hands brushed past the bullet wound.

"What's this?" She stared at the red smear on her fingers, and then at the raw gash on his skin.

"It's nothing." His voice was rough and low. With feverish hands, he undid the buttons at the top of his pants.

"Stop. You're hurt."

"Later." He shoved down his pants and covered her body with his.

Susanna skimmed her hands over his shoulders and up his neck, until they cradled his face.

"Stop," she said firmly.

"No. I can't. Not now." He was no longer aware of anything but her soft body that yielded under him, and the hard throbbing of his blood.

She curled her fingers in his hair and jerked his head back, smiling gently at him. "If this is going to be our wedding night, I really would like you to stop long enough to take off your boots."

He stared at her, then gave a low laugh. "Later," he said, but the flash of humor helped to blunt the savage edge of his lust. He needed that, needed to be able to slow down, otherwise he would cause her pain, and despite everything he didn't wish to hurt her.

"I didn't rinse," she murmured at him. "I've got soap all over me."

"I'll rinse you." He crawled down her body, until his mouth found her breasts. One by

one, he licked them clean, tasting the tang of soap, feeling her nipples harden into tight peaks under his touch.

Susanna felt her pulse speed up until her entire body shook with the heavy beat of her heart. Her breasts felt almost unbearably tight. Shockwaves radiated from her peaked nipples every time his tongue flicked over the hardened buds.

“Connor. Connor.” She murmured his name over and over again. Tenderness welled inside her as she watched his head cradled against her breasts. Although he’d come to her in anger, there was no violence in the way he touched her now. There was need and want and care, and she believed he was as concerned for her pleasure as he was for his own.

Whatever had happened to make his frustration boil over to the savagery that had finally propelled him through her door and into her bed, she was thankful for it.

Connor lifted his head and looked down at her, his face hard with lust. A fierce heat burned in his amber eyes. Rising above her on his arms and knees, he twisted away and sat on the edge of the bed. She watched him as he yanked off his boots. Then he stood up and kicked away the pants that had tangled around his ankles.

His expression was grim as he wedged himself between her open thighs. “This will hurt, if it’s your first time.”

She nodded. An arrow of fear pierced the sensual heat he’d wrapped around her. Then it was too late. The pain burst through her as he rammed himself deep into her with one powerful thrust.

Susanna screamed a little, she simply couldn’t help it. Connor tensed his arms and shoulders, his body growing still above her. “Good,” he said, examining her face, his expression unreadable. “I wanted that. I wanted to know there had been no other man.” He lowered his weight over her until he almost crushed her, and began to kiss her mouth. They were harsh kisses, with his tongue probing deep inside her mouth, just as he was beginning to probe inside her body with his hard length.

The sense of penetration was intoxicating, and Susanna felt her insides adjust and stretch to accept him. She had an acute awareness of her body being invaded. The pain lost its sharp edge almost at once and quickly turned to a dull throb, mingling with another throb which made her body shudder, until she could no longer tell where the discomfort ended, and the exquisite pleasure began.

“Are you all right?” Connor murmured, his breath brushing against her cheek.

“Yes.”

“Good.” He raised himself back up on his arms. “Tonight I’m taking what’s mine. What has always been mine.” Slowly, he withdrew from her, paused, and slid back into her.

That smooth and steady stroking inside her was as if every earlier sensation was suddenly heightened a thousand times. Every nerve in her body quivered. Every breath she took was an enormous effort. Nothing seemed to exist but his intent face above hers, the glorious pressure she

felt at the apex of her thighs, and the heat slowly building up inside her.

Then the heat got too much and began to scorch her. Her head thrashed side to side on the pillow. A frantic whimper rose from her lips – short muffled wails, in rhythm with his thrusts into her burning flesh.

“Say it,” Connor rasped. He paused in his motion.

“No,” she moaned. “Don’t stop.” Her hips rose to meet him, trying to reclaim the pleasure he’d been giving her, and was now denying her.

“Say it,” he demanded.

“I love you,” she sobbed. “I love you.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

Then he began to move again, surging in and out of her in a heavy rhythm, until she fell into a hot cauldron of pleasure which melted every bone in her body, and defeated any resistance she might have against his power over her.

At the same time she felt him rear up and bow over her, and she knew he was spurting his seed into her, sealing their union with a physical bond that might tie them together forever.

* * * *

When Susanna awoke, Connor was gone. Daylight streamed in through the window. She realized they’d never stopped to close the shutters. Once her eyes adjusted, she sat up on the bed and stretched. Her hair, still a little damp, hung in a heavy tangle down her back. Her skin itched from the soap dried on it.

With careful steps, Susanna climbed out of the bed and tiptoed across the room to the tall mirror. The secret place inside her was a little sore, but there was no real pain. A smile of pride curved her mouth. She was a wife, and she’d spent the night making love to her husband.

A ragged urchin stared back at her from the mirror, her eyes round as saucers, her lips red and swollen, her body dwarfed inside the huge shirt Connor had bundled her into for warmth as they finally settled down to sleep. She poked her fingers through the tear in the left sleeve. Whatever accident had caused a stray bullet to graze past Connor, she could only be grateful.

Hugging her arms around her, Susanna danced a few steps along the streak of sunlight across the floor. He loved her. He hadn’t said the words, but no man would treat a woman with such passion, with such devastating attention to her pleasure, unless he loved her.

She needed Miranda to bring hot water for another bath. Then she would find Connor and finally their life together at Circle Star could start. They would work the ranch side by side and love each other, sharing the toils of the day, and the magic of the night.

“I’ll never let you go,” she whispered into the empty room.

She hurried downstairs, barefoot, clad only in Connor’s discarded shirt. On her way to the kitchen, she stopped to peek into the dining room, just in case her husband was still eating his breakfast.

At the end of the table, a dirty place setting waited to be cleared away. A sheet of paper lay by the milk jug, unfolded, with a few words scrawled across. Rushing closer, she seized up

the page. Her eyes scanned the text.

It was no tender love note. "Back by Saturday" was all it said. No heading, no signature. For all she knew, it could have been a message for Carmen not to cook for him. Her hands fell down her sides. Connor's note rustled as her fingers fisted over it.

He was gone. Just like that. Without a word. Saturday was five days away.

Susanna bathed and dressed. Then she went to see Pete Jackson. He avoided her eyes as he told her Connor had ridden out with a team of men. They had followed the river to the east, to round up cattle that had strayed too far down the valley.

* * * *

Every day was an ordeal. Susanna was painfully aware the men knew what had happened between her and Connor. Miranda knew, and she would have told her husband, Ramirez, who would have told everyone else. Susanna held her head high, ignoring the curious looks she felt on her back as she went to the stables to saddle Santiago before riding into the desert.

The long solitary roams were her salvation. She raced the wind, and then she turned around to chase the clouds of dust Santiago had kicked up. Sometimes she would scream out her anger and hurt, letting her voice rip through the burning air, until her throat grew hoarse.

Then she would ride home, and try to lull her exhausted body into sleep. Rest never came easy. The moment she closed her eyes, her treacherous mind imagined Connor by her side. She felt his hands stroking her skin, and heard his voice murmuring into her ear. Mornings were both a release and the start of a fresh daily ordeal.

It was a week before he returned, on Monday, two days later than promised. Susanna was sitting down for dinner when Connor strode in, his face dusty. The sun had bleached streaks of gold into his sandy hair. Without a word of greeting, he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Where have you been?" Susanna said.

"Around."

So that was how it was going to be. Two could play that game. Keeping her face serene, Susanna cut another bite from the chicken on her plate and lifted the fork to her mouth. The food tasted of nothing. When she tried to swallow, she felt a hard lump in her chest, and had to spit out the mouthful of food into the napkin she picked up from her lap. "Excuse me," she said, rising to her feet and carefully folding the napkin over her half-empty plate. "I seem to have lost my appetite."

"Good," Connor said. "I prefer it quiet over dinner."

Upstairs, Susanna tried to control the shaking that had seized her entire body. It felt like shivering, but hot instead of cold. She undressed and washed. The fine cotton nightgown reached down to her toes.

She left the lamps burning, but closed the shutters. Then she lay down to wait, straining her ears. She heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, but they didn't come as far as her door. Instead, the door to Connor's room opened and closed. A few muffled sounds came through the wall. She guessed he'd sat down to remove his boots. In another moment, water trickled into a basin,

followed by a splashing sound. Lighter footsteps crossed the room. A bang told her the shutters had been pulled.

Then there were no more sounds. Susanna waited until the last of her lamps ran dry of oil and guttered out, but Connor didn't come to her.

Chapter Ten

The following day, Susanna lingered indoors. Connor worked all afternoon with the yearlings, but came home for dinner. As usual, their conversation was limited to a few strained comments about the ranch. Susanna wished for a confrontation to settle where they stood, but she was too afraid to start something that might escalate to Connor leaving again.

After dark, she waited, taking shallow breaths, listening. When Connor didn't come to her, she got up and crept to his door. Like that other night which seemed a long time ago, she closed her fingers around the brass knob. This time it turned. Susanna opened the door and tiptoed through.

Connor sat up on the bed, leaning against the pillows. A single candle flickered on the nightstand. The flame glittered in his amber eyes as he looked at her. His bare chest made a dark shadow against the white of the bedding. He held his arms out to her.

Susanna ran to him and threw herself against his broad chest. "Why?" she groaned.

"Hush." Connor bent his head and kissed her, at the same time tugging at the knot at the base of her throat, until he had loosened the laces of her nightgown. "Stand up."

She crawled backwards off the bed and got to her feet. He swung his legs down and stood naked in front of her. Gathering the nightgown in his hands, he bared her body inch by inch, until he could lift the garment over her head. Slowly, he dropped it to the floor.

"Are you cold?" he whispered as they stood motionless facing each other.

"A little."

"I'll warm you."

He laid his hands over her shoulders and began a long tortuous travel over her body, covering every inch of her skin. After a moment she lifted her own hands to him and began a similar exploration. It seemed an eternity as they stood there, learning and memorizing each other.

Then he bent his head and kissed the sensitive hollow at the base of her throat. Susanna let out a strangled groan.

"Do you like that?" Connor said.

"I like everything you do to me."

"Good," he whispered, twisting to scoop her in his arms. "Did you miss me?"

"Yes." It came out on a strangled sob.

"Good." He lowered her on the bed. "I wanted you to."

When he kneeled down by her side and began to trace his lips down her body, her breathing turned into quick gasps. "Please," she said, straining her breasts towards his mouth.

"Be patient," he said. "We have all night."

He stroked her with a feathery touch until she was so crazed she fought for more, gripping his wrists, pulling his hands roughly against her breasts. "I want you inside me," she whispered. "Please."

"Are you still sore from before?"

"No. Please." Her body writhed on the bed.

Connor stood up. He towered over her. Nudging her along the mattress, he stretched out next to her, propped on his side. One of his hands slipped between her legs to coax them open. Instinctively, Susanna arched to meet his touch.

"So warm," Connor murmured. "So wet." He rose over her and pushed her legs apart with his knees. Once he was settled in the cradle of her open thighs, he reached for her ankles, one at a time. Keeping his weight on his arms, first one side, then the other, he slipped her legs over his shoulders.

"Can you stay like that?"

Susanna felt a thrill of excitement down her spine. Connor's face above hers was hungry and intent. Her legs over his shoulders tilted her up to him, her thighs open, leaving her totally exposed and vulnerable. She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Tell me if it's too hard and I'll slow down." Then he guided himself into her, slowly inching forward, until he had fully penetrated her.

"Oh God, oh God," Susanna murmured. Her hips begun to rotate, reaching out for him, finding all the distant corners inside her for him to stroke.

Connor withdrew slowly, then pushed back into her. Stroke by stroke, he increased his speed and power, until he was thrusting in and out of her in a steady rhythm that rocked her under him.

Susanna threw her hands up over her head and braced them against the bedstead, anchoring her body to better meet his thrusts. Incoherent cries broke out of her throat, and Connor made no effort to silence her.

Every single nerve in her body seemed to end between her legs. Inside her, the tension coiled tighter and tighter, until it exploded. Her body splintered into a thousand sensations, all of which were Connor. At that moment, he was her entire world. He was the past and he was the future. He was need and desire and love, and her will was no longer her own.

When her body finally stopped convulsing, Susanna opened her eyes. Connor leaned over her, perspiration shining on his brow. Tips of his hair had clumped into damp strands. "Are you all right?" he said hoarsely.

"I think I died," Susanna said. "Or at least my bones melted."

Connor released her feet from his shoulders but didn't slide out of her. "You haven't...?" Susanna rocked her hips, feeling the full sensation inside her that was still new.

"Not by a long way," Connor said. He rolled onto his side, taking her with him. With one hand, he lifted her thigh over his. Angling his hips, he eased deeper inside her. "I want you to touch yourself."

Susanna flicked an alarmed glance at him. "Touch myself?"

"Between your legs, next to where I'm inside you." He let go off her thigh and tugged her hand down between their bodies.

Susanna inhaled a sharp breath. She tried to jerk her hand away from his. "I couldn't."

"You can, and you will." Connor told her. His eyes bored into hers. "If you come into my bed, you're mine for the night. Don't resist." He guided her fingers to the small ridge at the top of her sex.

Susanna gasped. Her body jolted back. She felt Connor slide away a little from inside her, but at the same time there was another sensation shooting through her. "I'm all slippery and throbbing down there," she whispered to him. Tentatively, she rolled her finger around the little nub. Instantly, a thousand shocks ran through her.

"Keep doing it," Connor said. He folded his hand over her thigh again, to hold her steady as he slid in and out of her. The broad tip of his manhood teased her sensitive opening.

"Oh my God. Oh my God," Susanna threw her head back, trashing side to side. Her body quivered like a bow. She felt her legs shake out of control. The friction of her finger grew, as her body demanded a more urgent touch. "Yes," she cried. "Give it to me. All of it."

Connor slammed his entire length into her, over and over, until she heard herself scream. Rippling waves of pleasure washed over her. She felt herself clutching him, milking him as her passage contracted around his shaft. With a guttural cry, Connor arched against her. Together they heaved and convulsed through a little death.

* * * *

In the morning, when Susanna opened her eyes, she lay in her own bed. She was naked. Her nightgown hung in a tangle over the back of a chair. Not stopping to wash, not even where it felt sticky between her legs, she hurried to dress in her denim pants and her shirtwaist blouse, and raced downstairs.

Connor was still at breakfast. Susanna burst in, eager to nestle in his arms, but a cool look stopped her short.

"What are you doing today?" she asked, taking her seat, desperately fighting to sound casual.

"There are some fences down at the east corrals where we drove the cattle last week. I'm riding out to mend them."

"Why are you using the corral?"

"I'm separating some stock for breeding."

"Isn't that Pete's job?"

"Not any more."

Susanna poured coffee from the pot on the table. "Can I come with you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

She tilted her chin. "You can't stop me from going wherever I want."

"No. But I can ignore you when you get there. It's up to you if you want the men to witness that."

"Why?" Susanna slammed down her coffee. It spilled, burning her fingers, and spreading a stain over the tablecloth, but she didn't care.

Connor pushed his chair back and stood up. "Because you need to learn that you can no longer twist me around your little finger. I don't come any more when you whistle. You can't give me that look of yours, with big eyes and trembling lips, and have me instantly offer you everything you ask. Is that clear enough?"

Susanna felt her jaw drop. What did Connor think he was doing? Running a training school for meek and pliant wives? "You're crazy," she blustered. "You've totally taken leave of your senses."

"In that case, you married a crazy man." He strolled to the door. "You know where to find me, if you want me to fulfill my marital duties tonight."

Susanna felt her eyes narrow. She scanned the table. Her fingers closed over the heavy coffee pot. She weighed it in her hand, glaring at the door. Then she lowered her arm and forced out a long breath. It wasn't worth it. She'd lose a good coffee pot, it would cause extra work for Miranda, and the story would instantly spread around that The Boss got his wife so mad she was reduced to hurling crockery.

She'd find another way of dealing with him. For the entire day, Susanna fidgeted around the house, coming up with schemes which were all equally hopeless. Putting a few finishing touches on the guest room for Claire cheered her up a little. The house was gleaming, ready for a visit from her friend.

Unlike Susanna's mother's family, Claire's father's wealth hadn't been depleted by the crash of 1893, and their millions remained intact. Her friend was used to luxury greatly beyond what Circle Star could offer. Susanna fervently hoped Claire would enjoy her visit despite the modest conditions, and would stay a long time.

When the night came, she stubbornly remained in her own bed. Connor didn't come to her. Susanna kept up her resolve for three nights. Then she crept over to Connor's room. Like before, he was waiting for her. He must do it every night, she realized, sitting up on the bed, ready for her. Despite the desire the waiting had to stir up in him, he never came to her.

After that night, Susanna gave up fighting. Each night she waited, until she heard Connor come upstairs. Then she slipped into his room, shedding her nightgown before she climbed into his bed.

Time and again, he drove her into a sensual frenzy that claimed her more completely than anything she had ever thought possible. Every morning, she woke up in her own bed, where he'd carried her through the darkness. Susanna tried to stay awake when they lay together, sated and damp, but she always drifted off to sleep, and she never awoke to find herself transported back to her room in his arms.

Against the feast of physical pleasures at night, the days were an emotional tightrope as she teetered between clinging to her pride and yearning to be loved. The worst of it was that she couldn't forget Connor's comment about taking his needs to the whores in Cedar City. It would destroy her to discover he did to other women those things he did to her.

Chapter Eleven

Claire Vanderfleet gathered her rustling skirts and climbed down the steps of the Pullman railroad car. After hailing a porter and issuing careful instructions about her collection of trunks, she stood still and surveyed the platform, her eyes darting about with eager fascination.

Tucson, Arizona! Southern Pacific Railroad had brought her this far. Now it was down to her own ingenuity to find further transport to Cedar City, and on to Circle Star. What a fine challenge that would be! Claire drew deep breaths as she observed the lively scene, her body tingling with excitement.

Why, there was a man there, lean and tall, not much older than she, with a gun riding low over his hip. Claire's curious gaze followed the man as he sauntered past. The gunslinger noted her interest. A bold smile curled his lips. "Ma'am," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

Claire took a step back, startled by the unexpected familiarity. She looked away, feeling a blush over her cheeks. This was so exciting! Her heart beat with such ferocity she almost felt dizzy.

All her life she'd yearned for adventure, and now she would have it.

Claire doubted Susanna knew about her arrival, but she went into the station office and enquired anyway. She was right. No message awaited her. Claire had suspected her parents wouldn't send the telegram she had written out and left on the parlor table, before sneaking out to the railroad station in Philadelphia.

Her brow furrowed as she recalled how her mother and father had sternly refused to grant permission for such a long and hazardous journey. Claire had yet to decide if she ought to tell Susanna that she had in fact run off.

Through an enquiry with the station master, she learned that the Cedar City stagecoach left in one hour, which barely allowed enough time for a brief stroll up and down the street. Arizona sunlight felt like a living flame. It burned her eyes and scorched her skin. And the dust! Dust flew in a thick cloud every time a horse trotted past. She already suffered from a parched and raspy throat.

The women along the street were few, and their gowns out of date. Claire gave a small sigh of satisfaction. She would shine, just like she always did. At twenty-two, she approached spinsterhood even by East Coast standards. Here in the West, most girls married by eighteen, some as soon as sixteen. A matronly woman on the train had told her so, boasting about her three daughters who'd found good husbands while still in their teens.

Claire had never worried about her age. Even if she didn't have the Vanderfleet name and fortune to draw suitors, her hourglass figure and her tumbling yellow curls would have attracted admirers. It was simply that there had never been a man quite right for her. No marriage proposal

had been tempting enough for her to give up the life of delicious mischief as a wealthy young woman who eschewed society's rules.

And now she was here! The Wild West! Claire rushed up to the waiting stagecoach where she had spotted her trunks in the process of being loaded, and made sure the men covered them properly to keep out the dust. Then she scaled the steep steps with the help of a rugged gentleman passenger, and took her seat on the padded bench. Smiling at her fellow travelers, she settled down by the window, ready for the adventure to truly begin.

By the time they reached Cedar City, Claire had learned the impossibility of looking out of the stagecoach window to admire scenery. When she tried, a shower of grit and dust hit her in the face.

She also learned that solicitous fellow passengers could be a burden as much as a blessing. She tried to hide her impatience as she took her leave from the eager gentleman, who insisted she should keep in touch and visit him on his ranch.

It took her no time at all to discover the only way to reach Circle Star was by hiring a man with a carriage. A carriage! It wasn't a handsome barouche, nor was it like one of the hansom cabs on the streets of Philadelphia. Why, it was just a wooden platform, caked in mud, with a hard bench at the front, drawn by a single bored-looking horse.

"Is there no other transport?" she enquired.

The man pushed his wad of tobacco into the other cheek. "You could take a horse, if you know how to ride."

Claire looked down her smart traveling gown. "Perhaps not today." She lifted her chin, giving the man a haughty stare, once again lamenting the unfortunate fact that she wasn't taller. People never took her seriously. "I can ride," she assured the man. "I'll do that next time, when I don't have luggage."

The man nodded, sucking the tobacco lodged in his mouth. Claire wrinkled her nose. "Let's get going," she said, refusing to let the man help her up.

From now on, she would look after herself, not be cosseted by servants or suitors.

* * * *

Susanna laughed so hard her sides hurt.

"This is wonderful," Claire gushed, striding up and down the room, clanking her boot heels with swaggering steps. "I adore everything." She craned to peer down over her shoulder and patted her rear. "These pants are a bit tight, and the shoes will need two pairs of socks, but everything else fits to perfection."

"The blouse strains over the bust," Susanna pointed out.

"That's my curse." Claire blew away wisps of hair that had escaped from her upsweep. "Anything I wear is too tight over the bust." She raised one eyebrow, a skill Susanna had always envied. "My brother Julius calls them my twin honey pots. He thinks half the men who have proposed to me have done it out of desire to get their hands on my bosom."

Susanna tittered with scandalized laughter. "Your brother talks to you like that?"

Claire grimaced. "You know Julius. He likes to shock."

"It must run in the family," Susanna retorted.

"You just wait!" Claire drew the gun out of the holster on her hip and aimed, with a hunched pose and squinty eyes. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

"Claire!"

Claire returned the gun to the holster. "Don't worry. I'll behave." She flopped down on the edge of Susanna's bed. "I left my clothes on the chair in my room. Will someone press them and hang them up?"

"Yes," Susanna said. "You."

"Oh?" Claire's brow lined. Then she broke into a smile. "I'll just hang them up. If I'm going to wear this outfit all the time, I don't have to bother with pressing gowns." She winked at Susanna. "I don't know how to, anyway."

Susanna grew serious. "How long can you stay?"

"As long as I please." Claire cast a searching look at her friend. "Where's the husband? Is he out tilling the fields?"

"It's not fields out here. It's cattle."

"Yes, I know. Steers, I believe they are called. I got a lesson in ranching from a man on Cedar City stage. He simply wouldn't stop talking."

Susanna clenched her hands together "Connor has gone out to survey the herds. He wants to improve the stock. When he gets back, he is going to Santa Fe to buy another bull for breeding."

"Oh?" Claire nodded slowly. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"My life is in constant turmoil." Susanna kept her voice low. "He torments me on purpose. The nights..." She flicked her gaze up to Claire, feeling blood surge to her face.

"Dear Susanna." Claire laid her hand over Susanna's trembling fingers. "If it's that bad, you must leave. You can come and live with us. My parents would be delighted. They think you're a good influence."

"It's not that." Susanna fell silent for a moment. "It's quite the opposite. It's ... it's the most wonderful thing in the world. I never imagined there could be anything like it."

"Oh?" Claire's eyes grew wide. "What is it like? Tell me." She tightened her grip over Susanna's hand, urging for a deeper confidence.

"It's like the rest of the world no longer exists, but at the same time you feel more alive than you have ever felt before. And you feel such a connection with your mate, like every nerve in your body is tied to his. You drown in love and longing and passion and tenderness, all at the same time." Tears trickled down Susanna's face. "And then the morning comes, and Connor shuts me out."

"I'm sure he loves you," Claire consoled her.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because how could he not? You're the most lovable person I know." Claire squeezed

Susanna's hand and stood up. "Come on. Let's go to the stables. I can't wait to try riding astride. Do we have time before it gets dark?"

Susanna wiped away her tears. It was such a blessing to have a visit from her friend, but it was obvious Claire was too excited by the journey to pay much mind to someone else's marital troubles. She would have to try again later, when the novelty of being out in the West had faded a little, and Claire would pay more attention.

At the stables, men returning from their daily chores milled about, seeing to their horses. A line of ranch hands stood by the well, cranking the pump to fill buckets with water. Spurs jingled and hooves thudded as another group of riders cantered up. The bantering voices died down when the men spotted Susanna approaching with Claire by her side.

"This is Claire Vanderfleet, my dear friend from Philadelphia," Susanna announced as they drew to a halt in front of the crowd. "She has come to stay. We need to choose a suitable horse for her. The new saddle I ordered from Cedar City is for her."

Claire yanked the revolver out of her gun belt and waved it in her hand. The band of men shifted restlessly.

"It's not loaded," Susanna cried out, biting back a smile when she saw Ramirez and Gomez hastily cross themselves.

"Which one of you gentlemen would like to teach me to shoot?" Claire asked in her sweetest voice.

Like a solid wall, the men stepped forward. Pete Jackson, who stood to one side, eyed the crowd. He tipped his hat back and rubbed his fingers over his chin. "I guess I ought to do it, Miss Claire. I'm Pete Jackson, the foreman to these heathens."

Claire dimpled at him. "I thought perhaps one of the younger ones. Like this one." She pointed at Gomez. Susanna could hardly believe her eyes when the man snatched off his hat and blushed furiously.

"No, I reckon I can't let you do that," Pete explained. "If I let you pick one of them, the rest of the boys will start a fight." He shook his head with finality. "I'm sorry, Miss Claire, but it's got to be old and wrinkled me."

Claire gave him a stream of laughter. "Why, Mr. Jackson, you'll do just fine. Can we start tomorrow?" She brandished her gun. "I want to load this with real bullets."

Some of the men shifted back, keeping a cautious eye on the weapon in Claire's hand. Susanna held back another smile.

"Tomorrow will do," Pete said. "And about going out to the desert tonight...." He paused and raised his eyes at the rider who thundered into the yard, vaulting from the horse before it came to a stop.

Susanna recognized him. He was Garrett, one of the men who'd ridden out with Connor. "Get a doctor," Garrett panted, holding on to the reins, fighting for breath. "It's the Boss. He's been shot."

Susanna heard someone scream. She knew the animal sound came out of her own mouth,

but how could she manage to scream, when her body had turned to ice? It felt as though the entire world had stopped turning.

She stood like a statue whilst others rushed around, the frantic crowd skirting away from her like waves wash off a rock on the shoreline. Someone rushing past knocked against her. Susanna restored her balance and resumed waiting, her eyes fastened into the distance, from where Connor would arrive, fit and well, riding proudly on the back of his faithful Brutus.

“Come inside. You need to stay warm,” Claire begged after the sun dropped beyond the horizon and the air turned cool.

“No.” Susanna barely managed the whispered word. Then her eyes returned to the path that led out to the barren desert, and she ignored everyone around her.

After a while, someone got a blanket and draped it over her shoulders.

Then it got too dark to see and she listened, hearing the desert sounds like she had never heard them before.

A chorus of birdsong, while the last rays of the sun disappeared beyond the crest of the hills... a coyote barking in the distance, and another one replying from further down the valley...a soft whoosh in the air that repeated over and over again. It took her a while to recognize the sound as a colony of bats streaming out to hunt.

Then everything else faded as she heard the rhythmic clatter of muffled hooves, made by horses approaching at a slow walk. Two shapes emerged out of the darkness, into the circle of lanterns that someone had lit around the stable yard.

One horse had a rider. The other horse carried an inert shape draped across its back.

“Is he alive?” someone asked.

“I don’t know,” the rider sitting up replied. Susanna heard the soft Spanish accent and knew who it was, although she could no longer think of the man’s name.

“I stopped checking an hour ago,” the rider said as he guided the horses into the courtyard. “The bullet’s still in his chest, and he’s been bleeding a lot.”

Chapter Twelve

Claire touched her heels to the flanks of the grey mare and picked up speed. Estrella, the horse was called. "It means a star," Gomez had explained to her, a little shyly, as he helped her to saddle up and mount.

It felt strange to sit astride. The saddle curved high front and back, holding her in a cradle. In front of her rose a knob. "To tie the reins, in case you need your hands free for shooting," Gomez had explained, with an amused gleam in his chocolate eyes.

Claire had grinned at the young ranch hand, not minding a joke at her expense. She had discarded the gun after the first day, finding the bounce against her hip uncomfortable. There was little point in dragging around an unloaded weapon, and as things stood, Pete Jackson would have no time to teach her.

Three days had passed since Connor returned from the desert, draped over the horse's back, so lifeless it took a while to confirm his heart was still beating. The doctor had been and gone. The bullet had been removed from Connor's left side, where it had lodged on a rib.

Claire's first lesson about life in the West was to learn to pray that if someone got hit, it was not a gut shot. Those killed slowly but surely, with a great deal of pain. Connor was not gut shot, but he had lost a lot of blood, and drifted in and out of consciousness. The doctor thought his chances were good, provided no infection set in.

Susanna refused to leave Connor's bedside. When Claire looked in, she sometimes found Susanna in fervent prayer. At other times, Susanna alternated between crooning out her love, or, when Connor was conscious, threatening him with the horrible things she'd do him if he dared to die and leave her a widow.

Claire tried to offer whatever comfort she could, but Susanna was deaf and blind to everything apart from Connor.

Claire felt she was just getting in the way.

And since she couldn't help, she might as well go out and explore. She accepted it would cause unrest amongst the men if she invited one of the younger ranch hands to accompany her. Out of consideration for Susanna and Pete Jackson, Claire kept her distance, although she itched to know more about the men. How did they live, how did they speak? Could they read and write? Did they love their mothers, did they have sweethearts?

After all the dandies in Philadelphia, every single one of the ranch hands at Circle Star seemed so alive and vital.

Claire planned to only ride out a little, following the course of the river. That way there was no chance of getting lost, even though she was alone in a strange country. The deep saddle felt comfortable, and because she'd taken care to set off early in the morning, the air carried a

wisp of the night-time cool.

Enjoying a heady sense of freedom, Claire cantered on, not realizing that since she headed west, she soon left Circle Star property and was trespassing on someone else's land.

The horse reared up so suddenly Claire never saw what startled it. A rattlesnake, she thought with a shiver, scanning hastily around as she sprawled on the dusty ground. Not a single sign of wildlife disrupted the quiet, not even a rabbit or a bird. She moved her arms and legs, and discovered she would be nothing worse than bruised, both in flesh and pride.

Scrambling up, Claire dusted her clothes. Her hat had fallen off, and her hair had broken loose from the upsweep. A wild halo of curls gathered around her head, with the rest tumbling down her back. She tried to run her fingers through the tangles, but burrs had lodged everywhere. With a sigh, she accepted it would be a long and slow job to comb out her hair tonight. She rubbed her eyes against the blinding sun, but gave up when she realized she was smearing dirt from her hands onto her face.

She propped her hat back on her head and stalked after Estrella, who contemplated her with a lazy interest. "Come on," Claire said as she got close enough to reach for the reins. The horse shied away.

"Stop playing games," Claire cooed. "Good horse."

Estrella neighed, tossing her mane. Then the horse swerved, and set off along the riverside at a steady canter.

"Don't go!" Claire cried, rushing behind, but the horse paid her no attention.

Oh no! Claire swallowed, glancing up at the sky. The sun had suddenly leaped ahead, and the heat seared her skin. It had to be miles back the way she'd come. She tried to keep calm. Shade. She had to find shade. When Estrella returned to Circle Star without a rider, someone would come and get her. She had told Gomez she was only going a little way down the river.

Shade. Claire surveyed the landscape from under the brim of her hat. Flat gravel surrounded her, interspaced with tufts of hard grass, and cacti in different shapes. The tall saguaros would offer a slim shade if she stood erect next to a thick stem. Then she realized soon there would be no shade at all, as the sun would be directly overhead.

But was that not a tree growing a small distance away? Trying not to panic, Claire broke into a run. She brushed too close to a trailing cactus and the leg of her denim pants got caught. When she bent down to release the fabric, her hair got snagged in the thorns, and then the front of her shirtwaist blouse, where her coat had fallen open.

Claire yanked herself free. A few golden curls were left fluttering on the cactus, and the front of her blouse gaped with a long tear.

As she struggled on, Claire discovered to her immense relief that what she'd seen was indeed a tree, and behind it was a house. A lovely white ranch house, all neat and tidy. A hacienda one might call it, Claire decided, since the place had that graceful Spanish look. Flowers in deep shades of purple and red bloomed around the cobbled courtyard.

Along a whitewashed wall a door stood open, and a knot of men gathered around what

looked like a pair of wooden trash barrels, one of them turned over. Claire slowed her steps. There were no women in sight. Then she spotted the man at the centre of the group, tall and fair, dressed in fine clothes. A gentleman. With a sigh of relief, she hastened her pace again.

When she got closer, she heard harsh voices, and the high piping cry of a child. In the middle of the crowd stood a boy and a girl, clad in rags that barely held together. A mangy dog cowered at the little girl's feet.

"I'm sorry, Mister," the little girl pleaded. "Prince didn't mean to spread your trash around the yard."

"Fucking fleabag," one of the men muttered, kicking the dog.

"Don't do that," the little boy shouted, his hands clenched into fists by his sides. "Prince is Mary's dog. Don't hurt him."

"Can we go now, Mister?" the little girl begged.

"You're going nowhere until you've cleaned up the yard." The tall blond man spoke in an icy tone.

"We'll clean it up for you," the boy promised. "But you have to move out of the way."

The men began to scatter, loosing interest. Suddenly the dog pounced up. With a growl, he clamped his jaws around the ankle of the tall man, the only one in the group not wearing boots.

"Son of a bitch," the man cried, shaking the dog loose, and aiming a fierce kick at it.

"Don't." The little girl threw herself down to protect her pet. The man's foot crashed into her side.

"Stop!" Claire cried, hurtling the last of the distance. "Don't kick the child."

The blond man turned. "Well, well, what have we here?" His eyes swept up and down her body, coming to a stop over her breasts. Claire glanced down. She adjusted the tear on her shirtwaist blouse.

"I'm Claire Vanderfleet. I'm –."

"He's not interested in your name, sweetheart," called one of the men.

Claire glanced around. These men possessed the same air of vitality as the men at Circle Star, but were heavily armed and had a roughness to them. Claire was not sure if it was the guns dangling at their hips, or the stubble darkening their chins, or the hard glint in their eyes. Whatever it was, she was suddenly afraid.

"Are these two brats something to do with you?"

Claire glanced at the children, who huddled together against the trash barrel, with the dog shielded between them. "Yes," she said, facing up to the blond man. "I'm accepting responsibility for whatever they did. Please let them go."

"Their fleabag of a dog scattered the goddamn trash around the yard," called the same brutish man who'd spoken before.

"I'll get it cleaned up," Claire said.

"The hell you will," the man shouted. "You've got much better ways to pay up." He took

a step towards her. Claire tried to take a step back, but the circle of men had closed up behind her.

“What do you want?” she asked in a low voice.

“Sweetheart, that shouldn’t be difficult to guess.”

“Stop!” The voice of the blond man lashed out.

The man was so tall Claire had to crane her neck to look up at him. She prepared to thank him for his intervention, when he spoke out again.

“You’ve got the right idea, Matt, but I’m afraid it’s me first. You can go after, and so can anyone else.”

“What are you talking about?” Claire whispered, blood draining from her face.

“Take off your clothes.”

“No.” Claire stood frozen. Her ears roared, as if a storm raged inside her head, and a clammy sweat covered her hands.

The blond man pulled a revolver from under his coat. He pointed it at her. “Undress.”

Claire stiffened her spine and met his cold stare. “No. Just shoot me.”

“It’s not you I’m planning to shoot.” The man turned to aim another kick at the dog.

The animal yelped as it was thrown in the air. A gunshot echoed through the yard and the dog crumbled into an inert heap. A pool of blood began to seep over the cobblestones. The little girl fell on her knees by the carcass. The boy kneeled too, and put his arms around the girl.

“The next bullet goes into a kid,” the blond man warned her. “You can choose which one dies first.”

“You wouldn’t,” Claire whimpered.

“Try me. Now get your clothes off.” The man replaced the revolver under his jacket, then spoke in a light conversational tone that was terrifying in its ordinariness. “Tell you what. Nobody’s interested in your back. You can keep your coat on. Just undo the buttons on your shirt, and take your pants off.”

When Claire didn’t move, he took the gun out again. “Boy or girl,” he said, aiming first at one, then the other. “Make your choice.”

“Please. Put the gun away.” Claire swallowed hard. She bent her head to undo her buttons. She wore nothing but a chemise underneath her shirtwaist blouse. It was too hot for the corset her mother insisted she wore to cinch in her waist.

What these men wanted was to see her bosom, Claire reassured herself. That was what her brother had told her most men wanted, to look and touch the large, firm breasts she was cursed with.

“And the shift underneath?” the blond man rasped in a voice which had lost its smoothness.

“There are no buttons on it,” Claire whispered.

“Matt?” The blond man motioned with his head. “Do it, but don’t touch her. Your turn will come.”

The loudmouthed man stepped forward. He leered as he fisted his hands at the top of her chemise and tore it open, exposing her breasts. She could hear some of the men suck in a sharp breath.

“Now your boots and pants.”

Her breasts hung heavy as she bent over. Too shaky to keep her balance, she had to sit down on the cobblestones to pull off her boots. Around her, bits of leftover food from the trash barrel the dog had tipped over littered the yard.

After she had removed her boots, she stood up and slowly undid the buttons on her pants. She tried to keep her drawers on, but they tangled in the tight pants, and both came off together as she pushed the pants down her legs.

“Good,” the blond man said, his voice barely an audible rasp. “Now lie down on your back.”

Claire obeyed, tugging the coat under her hips to shield her against the hard stones. She knew she would be even more frightened if she possessed a more detailed knowledge of the violent act about to take place.

The tall man crouched down between her legs and fumbled with his pants. Claire closed her eyes just before he exposed his privates. Somehow, it wouldn't be as bad if she didn't look at him. That was her last thought before he stabbed himself into her, and an incredible pain tore at her insides.

Rafael De Santis stood at the back of the group of men. Rage filled his heart to bursting. But he did nothing. If he stepped forward to try and stop it, there were more than enough men to overpower him. The girl would get raped anyway. He couldn't afford to draw attention to himself, not when it would do her no good at all.

The girl lay down on her back with her legs splayed, knees up. Her body rocked back and forth in a steady rhythm while that swine Hartman grunted and heaved on top of her. The coat had creased up under her, no longer protecting her buttocks. Rafael knew her skin scraped raw against the cobblestones.

Her face twisted in a mask of horror and pain, but she made no sound. Rafael had to admire that. The girl might be just a slattern from the band of travelers camped down by the river on the stretch of public land, but she had guts.

Hartman reared back and grunted. A moment later, he pushed up from the girl. After a cursory shake, he fastened his pants. “Son of a bitch,” he grunted. “I think I just had myself a virgin.”

A hush fell over the group of men. A few exchanged alarmed glances. A slut was a slut, there for the taking. This girl had charged up, claiming kinship with the ragged children from the camp. Her hair fell in a wild tangle and dirt streaked her face. She was dressed like a loose woman, her blouse already torn.

What if they had been wrong?

“Matt, what are you waiting for?” Hartman rasped. “You’re next.”

“The girl’s bleeding.” The burly man tensed his shoulders and turned to address the others. “Everyone leaves her alone.”

Hartman shrugged, appearing untroubled. He stepped towards the girl. She hadn’t moved since he pulled away from her. Hartman poked his shoe into her hip. “Get up. Put your clothes on.”

Dry-eyed, the girl drew herself up and slowly dressed, carefully slotting her tender limbs into the legs of the pants. Rafael could imagine the pain that burned her, inside as well as on her damaged skin.

Hartman dug into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of coins, which he tossed on the ground by the girl’s feet. “That should cover the damage.”

She looked at him, and then drew her head back and spat at him. Because of their height difference, she caught him in the chest.

Hartman bellowed out a roar and delivered a hard slap across her face. The girl stumbled and fell. She touched her hand to her cheek, then slowly gathered herself once more. Standing before Hartman, she fixed her eyes at him. Rafael waited, holding his breath. Finally, Hartman turned away. At that moment, Rafael had a premonition. Even in her damaged state, the girl had succeeded in staring Hartman down.

The avenging angel had arrived, and it wasn’t in the shape of a gunslinger, or an incorruptible man of the law. It was a slip of a girl, with a will of iron.

“You,” Hartman called, pointing his finger at Rafael. “Half-breed. Take her back. And the whelps, too.”

Rafael nodded. “Yes, Mr. Hartman.” He walked up to the girl and took her arm. She followed without a protest as he set off, tugging her along. After a few steps, the girl faltered. “I’m dizzy,” she murmured. “I think I’m going to faint.”

He caught her in his arms just before her legs gave. His limp grew more pronounced as he carried her across the courtyard. The two children trailed behind, the boy carrying the dead dog. The little girl was crying. The men had forgotten about the children the instant Hartman had forced the girl to strip off her clothes. The ragged pair had been forced to witness a brutal rape.

Rafael shrugged. There was nothing he could have done about it. “How far is your camp?” he asked the boy.

“‘Bout a half-mile.”

Rafael realized he would have to take a horse. The distance was too great to carry her, particularly with his bad leg.

“She isn’t one of us.” The little girl had stopped crying and spoke up. “That man hurt her. We’ll get her medicine.”

“Is there a doctor with you?”

“We are the Snakebite Medicine Show,” the boy announced proudly. “We have medicine that will cure everything.”

Rafael turned to the little girl who, despite her grief over the dog, seemed to be the brighter of the two children. "You said she isn't one of you?"

"We've never seen her before," the little girl said firmly. Then she looked up at Rafael. "She stopped that man from shooting us, like he shot Prince."

"Yes," Rafael said. "She did that."

The girl hesitated. "That man hurt her."

"Do you want us to take her?" the boy said. "We can give her medicine, and she can come with us and work on the show." He peered up at the unconscious girl. "She's real pretty."

"I'll take care of her. You run along. Don't tell anyone what happened to her. She wouldn't want people to know."

"We won't," the boy promised. He turned to the girl. "Come, Mary. We have to bury Prince."

Chapter Thirteen

Rafael rode without holding the reins, steering the horse with his knees. He would have preferred to ride bareback, so the girl wouldn't have any discomfort from the rim of the saddle, but he didn't want to leave his saddle behind. He tried to hold her high, keeping her in the air, pressed against his chest.

Her lids fluttered open, and she looked into his face. Her eyes were a clear blue, like the summer sky.

It was the first time Rafael understood the Indian expression which meant a man and a woman belonged together.

He had looked at her.

He had looked at this woman, seen her courage, the purity of her spirit, and now she was in his blood. He prayed she would let him make up for what Hartman had done to her. If she didn't, the passion he felt simmering inside her might stay locked up forever. "Who are you?" she murmured at him.

"My name is Rafael De Santis. My parents used to own this ranch. I grew up in the house you saw." He knew he laid his life in her hands, but he wanted no secrets between them. He also wanted her to know he was a man of position and education, although his instincts told him that when this girl fell in love, the background of the man wouldn't matter to her. "Are you hurting?" he asked when she didn't speak again.

"Yes."

"He didn't conquer you," he told her softly. "He may have taken your innocence, but he couldn't take your dignity."

"He took my future."

Rafael asked what she meant, but the girl closed her eyes and refused to answer. They were almost at his barn when her eyes flew open once more. "Those children? Did they get away?"

"They went home. They'd wandered up from the traveling medicine show camped a mile or so down the river."

"A medicine show? I've never seen one."

"I'll take you there when you are feeling better."

"That might be never." She tensed in his arms.

"We are at my place." He gave a command, and the horse kneeled down on its front legs, so Rafael could slide out of the saddle without releasing the girl.

"Did you teach him to do that?"

"That, and everything else."

She kept glancing at him as he carried her into the barn. It was the site of the old homestead where his grandparents had lived, after his parents acquired more land and built the new house closer to the river. Hartman had torched the building during his battle for ownership, but the well remained in working order and provided a supply of clean water. Rafael had fixed up a simple shelter in the barn, which had escaped the flames. Hartman allowed that, as most of the men preferred not to have a half-breed in the bunkhouse.

He lowered her down on the narrow cot in the corner of the cavernous room. "Do you live here?" she asked, looking around the open space.

"Yes. Where do you live?"

"Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia?" He frowned down at her, puzzled.

"Yes. I'm visiting here. Circle Star."

"Circle Star? Do you know someone there?" Alarm stirred in his mind.

"Susanna," the girl whispered. "I know her from Philadelphia. I'm Claire Vanderfleet. My father is Judge Vanderfleet."

Rafael took a step back. His gaze swept over the girl, saw the milky skin under the smears of dust, and the graceful limbs hidden beneath the rough clothing. A well-bred daughter of an affluent home, exposed to a fate many thought worse for a woman than death. The girl's comment that Hartman had taken her future suddenly made sense. He started towards the door. "I'll get you a doctor."

"No," she cried. "No doctor."

"You need someone to care for you."

"No."

"I'll go for Susanna."

"No." She reached out to him with one arm. "Don't leave me alone. He might... someone might come."

Rafael strode across the floor to her. He curled his fingers over hers for a second. He could tell her hand was shaking. "I'll only be gone ten minutes. I'll go back to the ranch and send someone to fetch Susanna."

"Will you come back?" Her blue eyes pleaded at him.

"In just a few minutes."

He hadn't unsaddled his horse yet, so he quickly vaulted up again and raced back to the big house. A few of the men milled about the yard, cleaning up the trash. Luck was on his side. Old Miguel Pereira stood alone, scrubbing the cobblestones with a tall brush.

"Come with me," Rafael said under his breath, leaning down from the saddle.

The old man glanced up. "I'll meet you behind the stables."

"You'll need your horse."

Miguel gave a silent nod. A few moments later he propped the brush against the wall and eased away, appearing in no hurry.

Rafael waited behind the stables until Miguel rode out. The old man gave him a level look. "In case it saves time, I know who you are. I've known since you came back."

Rafael nodded. "I thought you might. I wasn't sure."

"What is it? Is the girl hurt bad?"

"She's all right, but it turned out she's a society girl from back East. A guest at Circle Star. Her father is a judge."

"Son of a bitch!" Miguel rolled his eyes.

"Can you ride out to get Susanna McGregor and bring her to the barn at the old house? And tell her to send for the sheriff."

Miguel crouched low in the saddle. "If we are lucky, Hartman will hang for this," he said before he stormed down the gravel track.

When Rafael got back to the barn, the girl lay curled up in a ball and refused to be drawn into conversation. She wouldn't even acknowledge his presence. He covered her with a blanket. Then he pulled out a chair, one of the two he had in the barn, and settled down to wait.

Over an hour later, he heard horses approach and went outside. Susanna rode up with Pete Jackson and two other men.

"Where is she?" Susanna cried out as she hurried to dismount.

Rafael took the reins and tied the horse to the stake by the barn door. He nodded at Pete Jackson and the other two men whom he didn't know. All three remained in saddle, their horses prancing around as the men scanned the landscape with vigilant eyes.

"She's inside," Rafael said. "She won't talk to me."

He followed Susanna into the barn and stood by the door, leaning his shoulder to the wall. He wasn't sure if the women realized he was there. Neither of them asked him to leave, so he stayed and listened.

"Claire. It's me. Susanna."

Claire felt a soft touch on her back. She huddled her arms tighter around her body, trying to ward off the chill that had settled inside her. "I don't want to talk about it," she murmured.

"You don't have to. I know what happened. One of the men told me."

"They all watched."

"I know." Susanna's voice shook. "I'm so sorry."

"You shouldn't have left Connor."

"Right now, I need to be with you more than I need to be with him." Susanna clutched her arm, offering warmth through the blanket, but it wasn't enough. Claire knew nothing would ever get her warm again, and nothing would break through the strange barrier of unreality that had sprung up between her and the world. As far as she was concerned, her life was over. She would spend the rest of her days waiting for death to release her.

She turned around, carefully guarding the raw skin on her buttocks. "I want you to do something for me."

"Anything," Susanna promised.

"I want you to write to my parents. Tell them there was an accident. I fell off a horse and broke my neck. Tell them that people are buried quickly here, because of the heat. It wasn't possible to delay the funeral to allow them to come."

"I can't do that," Susanna cried in horror. "It would break their hearts."

"Knowing the truth will be worse." Claire frowned at Susanna, trying to make her understand. "Can't you see? I was supposed to make a great match. Now I'm worthless on the marriage market. For all I know, I might bear a bastard child for the man who raped me." She paused, and when Susanna didn't respond, she carried on. "Can't you see? It's better for everyone if they think I'm dead. They'll be spared the shame, and I can start a new life."

"I can't do it," Susanna said softly.

"You must. I can't, because they'll recognize my handwriting."

"We'll get you justice," Susanna told her. "I've sent for the sheriff."

"I don't want it."

"Claire, be sensible. If you are going to start a new life, you'll need money. Burt Hartman is a wealthy man. Make him pay. He will. He'll want to hush things up to protect his reputation."

Claire weighed it up a moment. "No. I will not accept his money. Make him pay something to the children whose dog he shot."

"Can you ride?" Susanna asked.

"I don't think so."

"I'll send the buggy for you."

"No." Claire said curtly.

"You've got to come home to Circle Star," Susanna pleaded.

"No. I want to stay here. I want everyone to leave me alone." She and refused to say anything more. She had made up her mind, and she wouldn't be swayed. She needed to break with everything familiar, to cling to the sense of unreal that cushioned the pain of her lost future.

Eventually Susanna gave up and walked away. A few minutes later Claire heard the clattering sounds of riders departing.

When a single set of smooth footsteps approached the bed, she turned to look. It was the man who had brought her into this strange house.

"Thank you for letting me stay," Claire said to him. "Why do you live here alone, rather than with the other men?"

"I prefer it here. Hartman doesn't know who I am. He hired me because I'm good with horses."

"He called you a half-breed. You look like an Indian."

"My grandfather was half Apache."

Claire reclined on the bed, flinching as her raw skin rubbed against the denim. The half-breed stood up, looking at her. His expression grew gentle. Apaches were supposed to be fierce, but the things he'd told her were all muddled up in her head.

“I can give you something to make the pain go away.” He moved to the table and poured something into a cup. Then he came back and handed the cup to her.

“What it is?”

“Mescal. Alcohol made from a cactus.”

“Is it like whiskey?”

“Much stronger, and it has a narcotic in it. Drink it.”

Claire tipped her head back and swallowed, watching the man over the rim of the cup. The bitter liquid burned in her throat, but she hardly noticed. Her attention riveted on him, mesmerized by the strange way his gaze drew hers. His eyes appeared so black that the iris blended into the pupil, and his skin formed a dark shadow against the red bandanna tied around his head.

“Have you always worn your hair long like that?” she asked.

“No. I used to be in the army. It was cut short then.”

“I didn’t think they took Indians in the army.”

He shook his head and smiled. Claire realized she must be getting it all muddled up, but her mind refused to work properly. She felt a part of it shutting down. She wanted to forget everything that had happened to her, but she knew she mustn’t. It was important to remember.

The man crouched down next to her.

“Rafael?” she said in a tentative murmur, not sure if he had told her his name.

“Yes?”

She nodded. It had been right. She wasn’t losing her mind after all, at least not entirely.

“Can I have some more?” she handed him the empty cup.

“One more cup. No more than that.” He rose and filled the cup again, and Claire drank. Languid warmth spread into her, starting from her belly, and radiating out to the tips of her limbs. The pain started to recede.

“Thank you.” She gave him the empty cup. “It’s helping.”

“I have something else, too. Something for your scraped skin. Lotion that will make it heal. It will also stop the stinging.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You’ll have to take your pants off,” he said softly. “I’ll have to put the lotion on your skin.”

Claire looked up at him. “You saw everything.”

“Yes,” he said. “I saw everything.”

She gave him a small nod. When she climbed up to her feet, he helped her, winding an arm around her waist and holding her steady.

“The fabric hurts when it rubs,” she said. She undid her pants and inched them down her legs.

“It will be easier if you step out of them completely.”

“I can’t sit to take my boots off.”

He crouched down in front of her and lifted her feet up, one at a time, and removed her boots. She propped her hands on his shoulders for balance.

“Lie down on your stomach,” he instructed, helping her back on the bed.

She pressed her face into the covers. Her body felt warm, so warm and relaxed. “I’m floating,” she muttered. “Floating on air.”

“It’s the mescal,” he explained as he bent over her bare buttocks. “I need to wash your skin. You have bits of grit in the cuts.”

“Will it hurt?”

“It might, but it needs to be done. It will keep the scratches from getting infected, and the dirt will leave a permanent mark if the skin heals over it.”

Claire watched the man as he went about his business of heating water on the simple metal stove. He took a clean shirt from the washing line stretched between the walls and tore it into rags. Although his body was erect and lean, with broad shoulders and long limbs that gave an unusual grace to his movements, he seemed quite old. Close to fifty, Claire guessed. Tiny lines crisscrossed his face.

“I’ve made the water quite hot,” he said, lifting the pan from the stove and carrying it over. “I’ll use a lot of it, so that I don’t have to rub so much.”

“It will make your bed wet.”

“It’s only straw. I can change it afterwards.”

He knelt on the floor by her side and began to wash the top of her buttocks where the skin was scraped raw. The soft touch of his fingers felt drugging. A strange heat began to whirl inside her, growing stronger and stronger. Gently, he bathed her for what felt like forever.

“I’ll let it dry before I put on the lotion. Turn over.”

She obeyed him. Her limbs felt liquid and loose, and her breathing had grown light and quick.

“If you open your legs, I can wash between them.”

“I don’t think you should do that,” she whispered.

“It needs to be done, and it will be easier if I do it. I can see where you’re sore.”

Claire swallowed and nodded. “Do you have a wife?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I haven’t met her yet.”

A quick flash of humor pierced her pain. “Aren’t you running out of time?”

He frowned down at her, then brought his hand up to his face and grinned. “I’ll show you a miracle.” He returned to the stove and poured fresh water into another bowl. After he’d scrubbed his face, he dried it with a towel and walked back to her.

The brown skin appeared completely smooth, and twenty years had vanished. Claire held her breath. She’d never seen a face so exquisitely beautiful, neither male or female. “Can you do that for me too?” It amazed her that despite everything that had happened to her, it was possible

to feel mirth, even attempt a joke.

“I will. I’m going to use aloe on you. The plant makes a clear sap that heals damaged skin. I put on a thick layer every morning. It dries on my skin and pulls it into wrinkles, and the tension alters the shape of my face just a little. I do it so that people don’t recognize me from the past, when I grew up around here. For you, I’ll mix the sap with a little olive oil, so that it won’t dry up on your skin. But first I must wash you.”

He resumed his kneeling position. Reaching down, he curled his fingers over her ankles. “It will be easier if you bring your feet up.”

She resisted a little, but he coaxed her feet closer to her buttocks, and automatically her knees fell apart. “That’s good,” he whispered. “Now I can get you clean again.”

“I’m all sticky,” she told him.

“Some of it is blood.” He moved up along the bed so he could look into her face. “But when a man does that to a woman, his seed comes out into her. It leaks out of her again when she stands up. It is on your thighs, mixed with your blood.”

“I didn’t know,” Claire whispered. Her face tightened. “Clean it off. All of it.”

A gentle smile touched his lips and he nodded. “Yes. I’ll clean him off, and he’ll be gone.”

Claire closed her eyes. He started with the inside of her thighs and moved closer, until he was touching the delicate flesh between her legs.

“Say if it hurts.”

“It doesn’t,” she breathed. “Not at all.”

“I’ll wrap my finger in the cloth and slip it inside you. Will you let me do that?”

“Yes,” she whispered. Her heart pounded, and she had forgotten the pain from before. Now there was only pleasure, as though she was drowning inside a dreamy sensation.

She felt his finger explore her opening, and gently pry into her. Her hips jolted on the bed.

He stopped instantly. “Is it hurting?”

“No. Not hurting,” she murmured. “Do it again.”

This time the finger went in deeper. Pleasure radiated through her. Her back arched in an effort to get more of his touch.

“What is this?” Claire whispered. “What’s happening to me?”

“This is how it should be. Will you let me show you more?”

She raised her head to look at him in alarm. “What that man did?”

“No.” His voice was soothing. “Not that. Just for you, what pleasures your own body can bring you.”

“Yes,” she said. “Show me.”

“I’ll do it with the lotion that will help your skin heal.”

He fetched a small jar from the jumble scattered on the table and opened the lid. “This will make you feel better.” His fingers spread a slippery coat of cooling salve all over her

delicate tissues. Then he put the jar away and began to rub her, playing with the soft folds of her sex.

Claire's hands fisted into the thick cotton sheet under her. Small whimpering sounds came out of her mouth. She began to thrash over the bed, unable to stop, even when the motion aggravated the sting over her buttocks.

"I'll put some lotion inside you now."

His finger slipped into her again, but this time without the cover of the abrasive cloth. It slid smoothly against the walls her passage, and she strained to meet it. "Yes," she moaned, the word an incoherent sound on her lips. "Yes."

He caressed and explored. "Has anyone ever touched your breasts?"

"No," she said, with scorn in her voice. "But I'm told everybody wants to."

"It would give you pleasure, too." He leaned over and looked into her eyes. "Will you let me show you?"

"Yes," she said, drugged so deeply with the pleasure he was giving her, and so relaxed with the mescal she'd drunk, that she would have agreed to anything, even if he had asked to get inside her like that other man had.

But instead, he moved up to her breasts and began to stroke them, until the nipples had tightened into sharp points, and her body felt as though it was on fire. Then he took each peak between his forefinger and thumb and rolled them, increasing the pressure, until she whimpered in ecstasy.

"Do it again inside me with your finger," she panted, straining her hips, trashing over the bed.

He did as she had asked, and soon the tension inside her got unbearable. "What is this?" she screamed. "Am I dying?"

"Yes," he told her. "You are dying, and you'll be reborn without the pain and the hurt."

And she did, with the world splintering into light and darkness that were life and death.

Afterwards, he held her until her body stopped shuddering. Then he touched her and stroked her again, driving her from peak to peak, until what had happened in the cobblestone courtyard that morning was only a pale memory.

"What time is it?" Claire asked much later. She lounged on the bed, her knees wantonly apart to allow the cool night air to soothe her tender skin. The room was in darkness, except for the glow from two oil lamps, one on the floor a few steps away from the bed, another on the table. Rafael sat on a wooden chair by the bedside, gazing down at her.

"It's past midnight. You've slept a little. I lit the lamps at sundown."

"It's already tomorrow," Claire said. "A new day. What happened in the morning is now yesterday."

"That's right. It's in the past." Rafael's black eyes glinted in the flickering light as he reached out to touch her cheek. "Go back to sleep. I'll watch over you."

Chapter Fourteen

The following morning when Claire awoke, she didn't remember anything at first. Her eyes explored the cavernous room as she took in her strange surroundings. The ramshackle double doors stood closed, but thin streaks of sunshine blazed through the chinks in the rough plank walls.

She shifted on the bed, and cried out in pain as her damaged skin scraped against the folds of the tangled sheet underneath her.

At that moment, it all flooded back to her. The pain – the terror – the shame. She shrunk deeper into the rustling straw mattress and shut her eyes as tight as she could.

“How are you feeling?”

Claire pulled the blanket over her head and turned away, ignoring the question. Although she refused to look, she couldn't help hearing the light footsteps that approached the bed.

“You've got to face it.”

She wanted to ignore the voice, but instinct told her it wouldn't stop. It would continue to question her, gentle yet insistent, until she replied.

“I don't have to face it. I don't have to do anything I don't want to.” She kept her back turned, and hurled the defiant words into the wall.

“You're wrong.” The blanket was lifted away from her face. When she opened her eyes, they met the opaque gaze of the man who'd carried her from the courtyard the night before. The man who had... she didn't dare to complete the thought.

She wasn't sure which was the greater shame, what the tall man had done to her with such violence in front of the leering crowd, or how wantonly she'd behaved when the mysterious half-breed had touched her intimately after she'd drunk the bitter intoxicating liquid he'd called mescal.

“You need to go on living,” he told her. “You have to do that, whether you want it or not.”

Claire frowned at him. “You heard me talking to Susanna yesterday. She is going to write to my family and tell them I'm dead.”

“Putting that into a letter doesn't make you dead.” He reached out with one hand to stroke the wisps of hair curling around her face. “You'll still have to find a life to live. A life you can make your own.”

Claire turned her head a little, curious now to see more of him. Her eyes drifted over the long black hair, the worn but clean cotton shirt, and the faded denim pants. A sense of peace radiated from the serene expression on his face. It puzzled her. This man had the aura of someone who possessed everything he wanted in life and yet, judging by what she had learned of

him, he possessed nothing at all.

“Rafael?” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t sure if I could remember your name.”

“It doesn’t matter.” A quick smile lit up his serious features for a moment. “Do you remember anything else?”

His fingers stopped playing with her hair, and his eyes searched hers. Somehow, the shame she ought to feel about what he’d done to her turned into a longing. A shiver crept over her skin, and her breath came out a little rushed.

“I remember,” she said. “You got me drunk and took advantage of me.” She heard her voice and knew she sounded like a petulant child. The corners of her mouth quivered as she recalled the comfort he’d given her, how completely she’d offered herself to him. She fought another burst of dreamy longing, and covered up her confusion by scowling at him.

Rafael’s smile faded. “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

His hand drifted up to her hair again, and Claire found her cheek turning to seek his touch.

“I didn’t take anything from you.” Rafael spoke softly. “I only gave. I wanted to show you what magic there is in your own body. I couldn’t bear the thought that you would let Hartman rob you of that kind of pleasure forever.”

“Hartman?”

“The man who raped you yesterday. His name was Burt Hartman.”

Claire swallowed. “Burt Hartman,” she repeated slowly. “I don’t know what to do about it. About him.”

“Nothing,” Rafael said. “Don’t dwell on it, but don’t try to forget it either. Don’t give him that power over you. He took something from you by force. It’s up to you to stop him from taking more.”

“What more could he take?”

“He could take the rest of your life. He could take your peace of mind, your restful sleep at night, your emotional balance during every waking moment. Don’t give him those. He is gone. He isn’t here to take anything more from you, unless you are willing to give it to him.”

“He has already taken my life.”

“He has taken one life. It’s not wrong to close the door on one life, if at the same time you open a door to another life. What’s wrong is to give up on life altogether.”

“Another life?” Her words came out low and hesitant.

“If you are going to kill off Claire Vanderfleet, a society girl from Philadelphia, you need to resurrect yourself as someone else.”

“Who?”

Rafael took her hand and held it between his. “It’s up to you to find out.”

“Will you help me?” Claire laced her fingers into his and gripped tight, feeling the strength of his touch. “Will you let me stay with you?”

“I will help you, but I don’t have the answers. You have to find them inside you.” He stood up and pulled her to her feet. “You can start in little steps.”

Claire frowned. “How do I know what is the first step?”

He smiled gently at her. “It’s the same as every morning. The first step is to get up and have breakfast. Come. I have some fresh fruit prepared for you.”

Like a docile child, Claire allowed him to help her dress, and then she followed him to the table across the room. “Are you trying to tell me that whatever happens, life’s little routines don’t change?”

“That’s right. Focus on those. If you manage to take one small step at a time, soon you’ll realize that you’ve gone further than you ever imagined you’d be able to.”

She gave him a worried glance. “Will you help me?”

“I’ll help you.” Rafael guided her to a chair and pushed a plate in front of her. “Eat.”

Claire reached out for a slice of apple. To her amazement her lips parted, her teeth chewed, and like on any other morning, her body accepted the nourishment, and prepared to live through another day.

* * * *

She was cold, so terribly cold. Susanna sat by Connor’s bedside, kneading her hands together beneath her chin. She wasn’t even aware of her body rocking slowly back and forth. She heard soft whimpering sounds, but she took them for gusts of wind out in the darkness, rather than her own troubled breathing.

Connor might die. The gunshot wound was healing, but a fever had settled in, burning up the body already weakened by the heavy loss of blood.

Apart from the doctor, no one outside Circle Star knew Connor had been shot. Susanna had asked the men to keep it a secret. It was for her protection as much as his. The only reason for anyone to want Connor dead was the ranch. If he died, she’d be a vulnerable widow.

Susanna recalled what Rafael De Santis had said about his parents selling their property to Burt Hartman. She had persuaded herself there had been some misunderstanding. Now she knew Hartman was every bit as evil as Rafael had claimed him to be.

Poor, poor Claire.

Susanna closed her eyes while her lips moved in silent prayer. Claire was always so full of life, so ready for mischief. There was another side to her friend that people noticed less – the defender of the weak, the crusader for lost causes, the girl who stood up for what she believed in.

Claire had believed in her freedom to act impulsively, without restraint by social conventions, and she’d paid a terrible price. Susanna’s face crumpled as the tears of guilt and pity and horror began to fall.

If she hadn’t invited Claire to stay.

If she hadn’t given her friend those daring clothes.

If she hadn't allowed Claire to ride out alone.

If

But time couldn't be turned back.

If Connor died, they would be two defenseless women against Burt Hartman. The more she thought about it, Susanna grew firm in her belief that Hartman had tried to kill Connor.

Once Connor was gone, Hartman would do to her what he had done to Rafael's parents – terrorize her until she was ready to sell Circle Star for a pittance.

Susanna wiped away her tears and reached out to check Connor's pulse, placing her fingers at the base of his throat. His heartbeat felt weak and fluttery, but no worse than the hour before.

"Don't die," she murmured. "Please don't die."

If he did, she would have to do her best to keep it a secret until she'd come up with a plan for her defense. By then, Claire might have returned from her self-imposed exile and could help her.

She tried not to think of the letter her friend had asked her to write. Eventually she would have to do it, she owed it to Claire, but it was a task she wanted to postpone as long as she could.

A knock on the door startled her. She rose to her feet and crossed the room.

"What is it, Carmen?" she asked the sturdy cook.

"It's the sheriff, Miss Susanna. He's here."

"Thank you, Carmen." Susanna glanced back to the bed. "Can you stay with him until I get back?"

Carmen nodded, briefly touching Susanna's arm as they passed each other in the doorway.

Susanna forced her mind to focus as she descended the stairs. Upon entering the library, she nodded at the sheriff who waited with his hat in his hands. She couldn't turn the clock back, but she'd get justice for Claire.

* * * *

Burt Hartman cursed under his breath as he heard the pounding on his front door. Who would be traveling through the desert after dark? The butler had already retired for the night, forcing Hartman to hurry to the door, carrying a lamp in one hand, the flickering light casting ghostly shadows on the walls. .

On the doorstep, the gangly frame of Catterill the lawyer silhouetted against the inky night. "This had better be important," Hartman said curtly. He peered into the darkness behind Catterill, to make sure the lawyer was alone.

"It sure is." Catterill stepped inside without waiting to be invited, but Hartman didn't move out of the way. The two men would have collided, if Catterill hadn't swerved to keep their paths apart.

"Did that bastard McGregor finally have the good sense to die?" Hartman rasped. "He's turning out to be a persistent son-of-a-bitch."

“He’s still breathing,” Catterill replied. “Anyway, if he’d died, it could have waited until morning. This can’t.”

“Spit it out. I was about to turn in.”

Catterill lifted his brows. “That wench you rutted on.”

“Is she making trouble?” Hartman’s mouth twisted in dismay. “The bitch. I already paid her off.”

A gloating smirk crept over Catterill’s face, instantly banished, but the usual expression of subservience didn’t return. “Not enough, it seems,” the lawyer said, attempting to sound casual.

“What?” Hartman raised the lantern higher. “How much does she want?”

“Everything.” Catterill swept his arm. “Your house, your land, your cattle.”

Hartman gave a cackle of laughter. “Is she crazy?”

Catterill puckered his face, as though seriously considering the question. “No,” he said finally. “Not really, considering her father is Judge Vanderfleet, who is personal friends with President Cleveland.”

“But she was just a slut!” Hartman cried, fear crawling up his spine.

“She’s a houseguest at Circle Star. Seems her horse bolted and ran off. She wandered up to your house to ask for help.”

“She was dressed like a whore!” Hartman’s voice became shrill.

Catterill no longer bothered to suppress his contempt. “You know Susanna McGregor, the way she dresses to ride around the ranch?”

Hartman gave a reluctant nod.

“Well, it seems that Susanna had bought her friend similar clothes. These society girls get a thrill from doing a Wild West act.”

“She didn’t say who she was,” Hartman pleaded. “How was I supposed to know?”

“Seems she tried. Gave her name, and tried to explain her business. That big foreman of yours cut her off.”

“Matt Duncan,” Hartman shrieked. “The bastard. It’s his fault.”

“It’s you who raped the girl, Burt, not Matt Duncan. I hear he warned off the rest of the men when he realized she was no whore.” It was the first time in their acquaintance Catterill addressed Hartman by his first name, thus putting them on equal footing.

“What should I do? Does the sheriff know?” Burt Hartman felt his blood congeal in his veins. Everything he had fought for, everything he had sweated and murdered for was going to be in ruins.

“The sheriff has been instructed,” Catterill confirmed. “The girl’s refusing to see anyone, but Susanna McGregor has lodged a complaint on her behalf.”

“I’ll deny everything,” Hartman cried, but his words rang hollow. Goddamn it, how could this be happening to him?

Catterill gave a derisive snort. “That might be an option, if you hadn’t been stupid

enough to do it in front of a dozen men.”

“The sheriff is bought and paid for,” Hartman said belligerently.

“And the girl’s father is friends with the President of the United States.”

The fight drained out of Hartman. “What do you think will happen?” he asked. He heard the panic in his voice and cleared his throat, as though the problem was something he could dislodge with a cough.

The lawyer regarded him with a sinister look. “I think you’ll be hauled in front of a judge and jury, and you’ll be made responsible for this, and for every other evil deed you’ve ever committed. They’ll raze you to the ground.” Catterill’s lips twitched. If Hartman didn’t know better, he would have suspected the lawyer struggled to hold back a smile. “That’s assuming a lynch mob doesn’t get to you first,” Catterill finished, sounding almost cheerful.

Hartman puffed out his chest. “There’ll be no lawlessness. The sheriff must see to that. I’m entitled to protection, and a fair trial. When I tell people how she looked and behaved, how she flaunted herself –.”

“From what I hear, the girl said she’d rather be shot than bare herself in front of you.”

Hartman fell silent. He felt his bladder tighten. Cold sweat trickled down his back. “What should I do?” he asked after a long pause.

Although the lawyer tried to keep his face blank, Hartman could tell the man was bursting with anticipation and greed, like a cat prowling around a bowl of cream.

“Well, there might be a way,” Catterill purred.

“I’m listening,” Hartman said meekly.

The lawyer took his time to reply, and Hartman didn’t dare to hurry him.

“There would need to be some adjustments.”

“Or course,” Hartman agreed at once. “What kind of adjustments?”

Catterill was all business now. “Our usual percentage. I want it doubled.”

Hartman considered. “All right. If I get off without paying a cent, and without a blemish on my character.”

Catterill nodded. Then he spoke in a considering tone. “When a man insults a woman’s honor, what’s he supposed to do to restore it?”

Hartman stared as it all fell into place. “He offers to marry her,” he drawled.

“Correct.”

“Goddamn son of a bitch,” Hartman muttered under his breath. His blood began to pulse again. Then he frowned. “Do you think she’ll do it?”

“Honor’s a precious thing for these society folks. And nobody else will marry her now, nobody important, anyway.” Catterill smiled at his host, appearing to be bestowing his approval. “And you’re an eligible man in these parts. She could do worse.”

Hartman felt a surge through his body. He thought of the girl, the way she’d lain down in the dust, gritting her teeth, refusing to scream as he pounded into her. His hands began to shake as he thought of her milky white skin and her magnificent breasts. He liked being rough with a

woman, and she'd taken it. Hell, she probably liked it that way. His eyes gleamed. Even if she didn't enjoy being molested now, when he'd finished teaching her, she would.

"Take care of it," he told the lawyer. "Put the offer to her. Anything she wants she can have, if she drops the complaint and agrees to be my wife."

After Catterill was gone, Hartman stood still in the darkened hall. What he wanted so desperately could finally be his. Respectability, connections, old money East Coast wife. His groin tightened. All that, and a gold-haired wench with the body of a whore and the face of an angel.

Raping that little bitch might turn out to be the smartest thing he'd ever done.

Groping his privates with one hand, Hartman set out to find one of the servant girls.

* * * *

Susanna waited until Connor opened his eyes. For two days now, he'd been having longer and longer spells of consciousness, and today he'd been awake all day, except for a short period of natural sleep.

They hadn't spoken much, but she was aware of how his eyes followed her around the room whenever she got up from the chair by his bedside. When she went out for her brief forays into the kitchen or the convenience, he watched the door, until she came through it again.

Susanna couldn't tell which feeling ran deeper – the relief of knowing Connor was out of danger, or the joy of discovering his demeanor towards her had softened.

She reached out to smooth his hair away from his face with one hand, and to hold a cup to his lips with the other. "Drink up," she ordered.

"It tastes like piss," Connor complained.

Susanna tried not to smile. "I didn't realize you were familiar with that particular flavor."

"I'm using my imagination."

"Medicine is supposed to taste horrible. It increases the healing effect."

"That's a goddamn lie."

"It is not." Susanna returned the empty cup on the nightstand next to the bottle. "People get better quickly, so they don't have to suffer the horrible taste any longer."

Connor looked around him. "How long have I been in bed?"

"Six days," Susanna told him. "You were shot."

"I remember that, and I remember the men hoisting me up on Brutus to bring me home. Then there's a blank."

"You lost a lot of blood. You were unconscious most of the time until yesterday."

"Every time I opened my eyes you were there."

"That might be because I was here all the time."

Susanna watched as Connor's eyes fluttered shut. The dark lashes made a stark contrast against the skin that looked pale despite the tan.

"I don't deserve that kind of devotion," he muttered.

"But you are getting it, and it's my good luck that you're too weak to fight back."

Connor opened his eyes again. "I'm not going to apologize."

"For what?"

"For the way I've been treating you."

"And what way would that be?" Susanna had thought about it, and had decided pride no longer had a place in her marriage. Whatever wall Connor was hiding his feelings behind, she was going to ram through it, and being subtle wasn't the answer.

"The way I've been ignoring you," Connor said. His tone carried the apology he had just announced he wasn't going to make.

"Oh, *that*," Susanna drawled. "Pretty mean of you, don't you think?"

"I guess I wanted to teach you a lesson."

"I'm a fast learner," Susanna said lightly. "Maybe it's time to call it off."

Connor's hand fumbled to find hers. It frightened her how weak the grip of his fingers felt. "I did it because I'm scared," he admitted.

"Scared of me?"

"Scared of the power you have over me." Connor turned his head, and Susanna could see the tiny dark flecks in the amber of his eyes. "It nearly killed me, missing you all those years. I knew I wouldn't survive, if I allowed you back into my heart and then lost you again."

"You never left mine," she told him softly. "I've waited for you. I would have waited for you till the day I die."

"I thought you were trying to get me killed so you could marry Hartman."

"Him?" Susanna screamed. "That monster?"

"Monster?" Connor frowned at her. "I thought you liked the man. You went out to visit him. You danced with him."

"Danced with him?"

"At the Harvest Festival." He looked embarrassed. "I rode out to Cedar City, just to make sure the men weren't stirring up trouble. I saw you with Hartman."

"I'd rather dance with a rattlesnake than with that man," Susanna said, then clamped her mouth shut. Connor would fly into a rage when he found out about Claire. She had to keep the news from him until he was well again, until he was strong enough to go after Hartman, which is what he would inevitably want to do.

"Is this it then?" Connor said. "No divorce, no annulment?"

Susanna forgot Claire for the moment and cleared her throat. "I guess an annulment might be difficult at this point." Her lips twitched.

"And a divorce is out of the question," Connor peered up at her. His lips curved into a smile to match hers. "I'm a good Catholic. I'm not going to risk my immortal soul."

"Oh dear." Susanna blew out a long sigh. When she spoke, laughter bubbled in her voice. "I guess we have no choice then. We just have to stay married." She hesitated. "You have to promise me one thing, though."

Connor squeezed her hand. "What?"

“What you said about taking your needs to the whores in Cedar City. I never want you to touch another woman like you touch me.”

He stared at her with shock stamped on his face. “You didn’t think....” Closing his eyes, he fell against the pillows. “Goddamn it, Susanna, what do you think I am, a machine that can go at it endlessly?” His mouth pulled into grim line. “The nights you spend with me, I can barely walk in the morning. Another woman is the last thing on my mind.”

“I want you to promise anyway,” she said in a small voice. “I want to hear you say it.”

He was too weak to turn towards her, but the grip of his fingers on hers tightened. “I haven’t as much as smiled at any other woman since the day you walked into that saloon in El Paso. I’ll never be unfaithful to you. Is that good enough?”

“That will do,” Susanna said. “For now.”

As Connor drifted off to sleep, his fingers pulled loose from hers, and Susanna clasped her hands together in her lap.

They had yet to discuss the shooting, and who could be responsible. The unspoken danger made her edgy and tense. It felt as though they were sitting around a campfire, with a predator circling around, stalking them under the cover of the surrounding darkness.

* * * *

“Catterill? What on earth does he want?” Susanna asked Miranda, who’d come to seek her at Connor’s bedside. “Tell him I’m busy.”

“He won’t go, Miss Susanna. He claims it’s very important.”

Susanna sighed. She glanced over at Connor, who slept peacefully. His fever was down and his appetite was up, and his temper had grown increasingly short from the frustration of enforced idleness. Perhaps leaving him for a few minutes wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Can you stay, in case he needs something?”

Miranda tiptoed closer. “What do I do if he wakes up?”

“You yell for me, and you run for cover,” Susanna said grimly. “He’s behaving like a mutinous two-year-old with temper tantrums.”

Susanna left Miranda hovering a cautious distance from the bedside and went into the library, where she found the lawyer waiting. He stood with his back turned, his gaze fixed on the window which gave out to the kitchen courtyard.

“What can I do for you?” Susanna asked, keeping her tone cool. Their relationship had never healed after the earlier rift. If there had been another lawyer in Cedar City, she would have transferred her business at once.

Catterill turned around. “Miss Susanna.”

“It’s Mrs. McGregor now,” she reminded him.

“I thought that since we’re old friends....”

She looked at him without a trace of a smile on her face. “What can I do for you?” she asked again.

“It is really about your friend. Miss Vanderfleet.”

“Did the sheriff send you?” Susanna asked sharply.

“No. Not the sheriff. I’m representing Mr. Hartman in this matter.”

“Get out,” Susanna said though gritted teeth. “Get out of my house.” She pointed at the door, her arm shooting out with such violence her body recoiled.

“Now, Miss Susanna, let’s not get unfriendly. There’s no call for that.”

“How dare you! How dare you come into my house and mention that man’s name in the same breath as Claire’s?”

“Just hear me out. I think I can resolve this little trouble to everyone’s satisfaction.”

“Little trouble!” Susanna shouted.

Catterill stood firm by the window. He clearly intended to say whatever was on his mind before he would be willing to leave, so Susanna reluctantly reined in her fury and listened. Her mouth gaped open, and her eyes drew into hard slits as she heard the lawyer put forward Hartman’s offer of marriage.

“You can’t possibly think I’d tell her that?” Susanna cried out.

“I very much hope you will take the proposal to Miss Vanderfleet, and that you will use your influence to persuade her to accept.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“You’ll see,” Catterill said, smooth as a snake. “It would be the ideal solution for everyone.”

They argued over it for a while, and in the end Susanna was forced to concede Claire had a right to be informed, and make her own decision over what Hartman was offering her.

Chapter Fifteen

The gait of the horse was soft under her as Claire leaned back against Rafael's chest. He was holding the reins with one hand. With his other hand he circled her waist, anchoring her close. His hair brushed the side of her face as he leaned forward to murmur into her ear.

"Is it hurting? Do you want me to pick you up and hold you in my arms instead?"

"No," Claire assured him. "It doesn't hurt at all." Riding bareback, astride, pressed so close to Rafael, feeling every movement of the horse underneath her had a dreamy quality. The same sense of unreal had permeated every one of the three days she'd spent with him at the barn.

They had talked for hours. She had told him about her home in Philadelphia, her frustration with the life she was expected to lead, how she hoped to find something more meaningful, something that would give a deeper purpose to her life.

"It will come," he promised her. "Your destiny will find you, just like mine will find me."

He talked about his childhood on the ranch, and how his parents had lost everything to Hartman. When she was ready to be up on her feet again, he showed her how to load and fire a gun. And in the cool evenings, he guided her on leisurely walks through the desert, telling her about the ways of the Apache. Although Rafael had always lived amongst the whites, his native heritage fascinated him. He had made an effort to find out, had even learned a little of the language from the scouts he'd met in the army.

What Claire would do next, where she would go, they hadn't discussed, and after the intimacy of that first night at the barn, Rafael had never tried to touch her again. Claire wanted him to, but she didn't have the courage to ask. She had no idea if he felt about her the same way she was beginning to feel about him.

As they rode on, Rafael spotted the small encampment in the distance. He pointed it out to her, a few brightly painted wagons scattered along the river's edge. When they got closer, Claire watched two women standing knee-deep in the current, their bodies hunched and their skirts hiked up, strong hands in constant motion as they beat and rinsed clothes in the stream. An array of wet garments stretched out to dry decorated the thorny shrubs that bordered the water.

A band of ragged children racing around with a yapping dog stopped their play and stood alert, keeping a watchful eye on their approach.

"I thought the wagons would be in a circle," Claire said.

"That's on the prairie. By the river, everyone wants easy access to the water. Besides, these people have no cattle to protect. The animals go in the middle when you camp in a circle."

The children edged closer to each other. The largest boy grabbed the dog by the neck and pushed it between his legs. Then the little boy who'd been at the hacienda courtyard recognized Claire.

"It's her, the pretty lady with yellow hair." He raced towards them. Rafael didn't stop the horse. Soon the boy reached them and turned around to skip alongside.

"Have you come to get medicine?" the boy cried out.

Claire smiled down at him. "No. I'm well already. He gave me medicine." She twisted her neck to glance over her shoulder, but the brim of her hat blocked her view. She could only see the edge of Rafael's jaw.

When she turned back to the boy, she felt the touch of something soft and warm at the join of her neck and shoulder. She couldn't be sure, but her heart fluttered when she thought Rafael might have pressed a kiss on her skin where it was exposed by the loose collar of his shirt she wore. Her blouse and chemise had been torn beyond repair.

"Will you come and see Prince's grave?" the little boy asked, bursting with eagerness. "Mary and I buried him, and Johnny made a cross, and we wrote 'Prince' on it."

"Yes. I would very much like to see it."

They pulled to a halt some distance from the wagons, but close enough for Claire to read the signs painted on the sides of the first two. The ornate letters curved in a crescent, spelling out *Snakebite Medicine Show*. The other two wagons were painted in solid color with no advertisements, one a dusty red, the other a deep kingfisher blue.

Rafael made the horse kneel down and they slid off together, his arm tight around her waist. When she was standing firm, he released his hold and stepped away.

"Did you teach him to do that, Mister?" One of the bigger boys ventured to ask.

Rafael nodded.

"Is he an Indian?"

"Does he speak English?"

Claire bent down to the wide-eyed children. "He's only a half-breed, and he speaks perfect English, but he likes to pretend," she whispered to them in a conspiratorial tone.

The two little girls giggled and exchanged a glance, before fixing their fascinated eyes on Rafael again.

"Where's the girl whose dog was shot?" Claire asked.

"Mary? She's gone into town. They'll be back later." The boy who'd been Mary's protector grabbed hold of Claire's hand and tugged her along. "Come. I want to show you Prince's grave."

Claire sent Rafael a helpless look over her shoulder.

He nodded at her. "I'll wait."

Claire winked at the children. "See, he does speak English. Make sure you ask him lots of questions while I'm gone." She heard Rafael let out a resigned chuckle as she departed with a wave and a mischievous grin.

"What's your horse called, Mister?"

"How did you teach him?"

"Do you know how to shoot arrows?"

“Can you do an Indian war cry?”

Claire listened as Raphael’s gentle voice began to give patient replies, and then the distance muffled his words.

The grave had a rough cross made out of two pieces of wood. A few wildflowers were going limp over the small mound of gravel. “It’s lovely,” Claire said.

The boy was still holding her hand. “Where will you go now?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

He gave her a shy look from the corner of his eye. “You could come with us. I could marry you when I grow up.”

Claire crouched down in front of the boy. He gazed at her from under a thick fringe of dark hair. A streak of dirt smudged the skin by his nose. “I thought you’d marry Mary when you grow up,” she told him.

“Mary’s my half-sister,” the boy said dismissively. “I can’t marry her.”

“I see.” Claire reached out, and with light fingers brushed the strands of hair out of the way, so she could see the boy’s eyes. “I was kind of hoping he’d marry me.” She looked back to where the other children clustered around Rafael. “Because he’s been taking care of me, I should really give him the first chance, don’t you think?”

The boy shifted his shoulders reluctantly. “I guess you’re right.”

Claire nodded. “I knew you’d understand.” She carried on stroking his hair. “Don’t mention it to him, though. He hasn’t asked me yet.”

“He will,” the boy said with the absolute certainty of the very young. “Of course he will.”

Claire stood up, taking the boy’s hand. “I hope you’re right. Shall we go back to the others?”

“We’ve got to say a prayer for Prince first.”

They stood side by side while Claire recited a few solemn words about what a brave dog Prince had been, and how he would take his place with other animals in heaven.

The little boy released her hand and raced ahead, leaving her to follow. An aching tenderness filled Claire’s heart. Of all marriage proposals she’d received, this one had moved her the most.

* * * *

When Claire and Rafael got back to the barn, Susanna waited for them. This time she had only brought Pete Jackson with her. The two of them lounged in the open doorway, seeking shade but reluctant to intrude deeper inside. Three horses stood tied to the stake.

Claire frowned, glancing around. Then she recognized Estrella, and she realized the third horse was for her. Her heart began to thud in a heavy beat.

“How is Connor?” she asked as Rafael helped her slide down.

“He is out of danger,” Susanna replied with a relieved smile. “Now he’s just making my life a misery by being the crankiest patient ever.”

Claire reached out to give Susanna a quick hug. “And I bet you are enjoying every

minute of it.”

“I am,” Susanna admitted. “He is helpless, like a child. I can hover and fuss and smother him with love, and there’s nothing he can do to escape.”

“It sounds like you two have reconciled your differences?”

“We have.” Susanna held on to Claire’s arms, not allowing her to pull away. “And you?” She looked into her eyes. “Are you managing to put it behind you?”

“Yes.” Claire stole a quick glance at Rafael, who’d walked over to the well to fetch of bucket of water for his horse. “I’m healing. Emotionally, as well as physically.”

Susanna followed the direction of her gaze. An uncertain look fell over her face as she turned back to Claire. “I’m here on a difficult errand,” she said, hesitation evident in her manner. “Please don’t hate me for what I’m going to say.”

“My parents?” Claire stiffened. “You’ve told them the truth?”

“No.” Susanna shook her head. “I’ll write to them, the way you asked. I’ve been putting it off, because I want you to be absolutely certain. Once I write, there’ll be no going back. You’ll have to stick with the lie. You’ll never be able to see them again.”

“I’m aware of that,” Claire said, her voice strained.

“This is something else.” Susanna’s gripped Claire’s arms so tight it almost hurt. “Burt Hartman is offering to marry you.”

“What!” Claire jerked herself loose and took a step back. “Has he lost his mind?”

“That’s what I told Catterill, the lawyer, when he came to me with the proposal. He insisted that I take it to you, and in the end I agreed.” Susanna lowered her eyes to her boots and spoke awkwardly. “He said you could have access to everything Hartman owns, enjoy a life of luxury travel as much as you like. You wouldn’t be expected to share his bed.”

Claire felt her entire body shake. “That swine! How dare he?”

“I’m sorry. I should have refused to even mention it to you.”

“No.” Claire clenched her fists, trying to control her anger. “You did right. I had to learn what a ruthless monster he is.” She thought a moment. “Did you see the sheriff? Have you made a complaint?”

Before Susanna answered, Claire could read the answer on her face. The words simply filled in the details. “The sheriff says that if you turn down Hartman’s offer, you no longer have a case.”

Pete cleared his throat. “The sheriff isn’t just being corrupt, although that he sure is. That’s the way it is around here. If a man insults a woman’s honor, he’s got to offer to marry her. That’s the expected thing. If she rejects him, he’s free to get on with his life.”

“I see,” Claire said. She could hear the brittle sound of her voice. She thought of Connor, and how he had almost died. When Rafael had told her about how his parents had lost their ranch, Claire had decided Hartman had to be the one behind the attempt to murder Connor. Once Connor was out of the way, it would be easier for Hartman to go after Circle Star. Hartman had failed this time, but Claire expected he would try to kill Connor again.

Unless someone killed Hartman first.

She turned to Rafael, who crouched by his horse, wiping the animal's legs with a damp rag. Although he offered no comment, his shoulders had tensed. Then he straightened, and their eyes met. An enigmatic smile played around his mouth, and his head moved in an infinitesimal nod she couldn't even be sure had been there.

In that instant, the answer came to her in an odd block of complete knowledge that didn't require thinking through at all. Every step was crystal clear in her mind. There was a purpose to her life after all, and it was the same as the purpose of life was for most people – to help and protect those she loved.

"Tell him I'll think about it," she told Susanna. "I'll meet with them. I want all three of them there – Hartman, the lawyer, the sheriff. Some time tomorrow. Get them to come to Circle Star. If you leave Estrella with me, I'll ride over in the morning."

An incredulous look spread on Susanna's face. Claire watched how the other girl's lips moved, but no sound came as Susanna for once was lost for words.

"It does make sense," Claire said slowly. "You'll see."

"But–"

Claire raised a hand to silence the baffled protest. "No. I don't want to hear what you think. It's my life, my decision."

Susanna shrugged, appearing hurt and confused. Claire hardened herself. What she was contemplating was too terrible to put into words, and if she failed, she wanted the responsibility to be entirely hers. She couldn't explain, not to anyone.

Not even to Rafael. He'd said nothing, but she could feel his presence behind her, the calm confidence that always radiated from him. It had helped her through the last few days. If she could remember it, carry it within her, it would help her through what came next – the mortal sin she was planning to commit.

She wanted to kill Hartman, and marrying him was the easiest way to get close enough to make sure she would succeed.

"I'll see you in the morning," Claire said to Susanna and Pete. Then she turned and walked inside the barn.

Silence lay heavy between her and Rafael while they cooked the simple meal of beans and edible plants they'd gathered from the desert. Claire hadn't explained about Connor before, knowing Susanna wanted it kept a secret. Now she described how Connor had been shot, barely escaping death. Rafael's expression hardened. He offered no comment, asked no questions, just gave a tight little nod to indicate he understood, and had reached his own conclusions.

After they had eaten and cleared up, the sun dipped over the horizon, and the air started to cool.

"I'll light the lamps," Rafael said.

Claire was still getting used to how quickly darkness fell in the desert, with hardly any twilight between the blinding sunshine and the inky black night. She sat down and removed her

boots. Rafael busied himself with filling the oil containers and adjusting the wicks.

When the flames were aglow, flickering with their soft yellow tongues, Claire walked up to Rafael. She padded softly in her bare feet over the plank floor, until she stood directly in front of him. "I'm going to marry Hartman," she told him, looking deep into his eyes.

"I know. You have found your destiny."

Claire reached up and brushed her fingertips over his lips. "Before I go to him, I want to belong to you."

Rafael kissed her fingers, drawing one of the tips into his mouth and scraping his teeth over it. "You already belong to me," he said after he released her.

"I want you to brand me with your touch. Make me your own."

"I already have."

"I want more," Claire said, her voice low and husky. "I want everything."

"Then I'll give you everything."

Claire raised her hands and began to unbutton his shirt. When she pulled the collar open, she found a leather thong with a few colored beads hanging around his neck.

"What is this?"

"Apache. From my great-grandfather. It protects against evil spirits."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes not."

She pushed the shirt down over his shoulders, then rose up on tiptoe to kiss the exposed skin. Dragging her lips along the muscled ridges of his chest, she breathed in his scent.

Her pulse quickened, and her hands grew impatient. She wanted to see more, touch more. She wanted all of him. Tugging hard, she rolled the shirt down to his waist. When she felt his body trembling under her hands, she glanced up.

"You can't get the shirt off like that," he told her. "The buttons don't go all the way down. It has to come off over my head."

"Oh?" Claire frowned, turning the folds of the shirt in her hands.

Rafael laughed softly at her confusion. He pulled the shirt back up to his shoulders. With a graceful sweep, he caught her at the waist and behind the knees, scooping her into his arms. The bed made of hard planks was only softened by a thin layer of straw. It had given Claire no discomfort before, but she had worried about Rafael each night when he stretched out on the floor, with nothing but a blanket for comfort and warmth.

Tonight she need worry no more.

Rafael lowered her on the bed. Looking down at her, he straightened and lifted his shirt over his head. He held her gaze as he dropped the garment on the floor. Then he bent, and one by one he released the buttons over her bosom. When they were all undone, he folded the fabric open and lowered his head.

Claire felt the touch of his lips on her breasts and it really was like being branded. It burned, setting a slow fire to smolder inside her. She arched up to him. Between her legs, she

could feel the damp throbbing she remembered from their first night together.

“Tie your hair back,” she told him. “I want to see your face.”

Rafael stood up and pulled off the red bandanna around his head and used it to tie his hair into a ponytail.

“That’s better,” she murmured, reaching out to trace the contours of his face with her fingertips.

“Do you want me to cut it short?”

“No. I like it. But I want to see your face when you are making love to me.”

“Sit up. I want to take your shirt off.”

“I’m smaller than you. You can pull it down past my hips.”

Inch by inch he exposed her, from her shoulders down, always stopping to kiss the skin that was revealed as he pulled the garment away, past her breasts, down her arms, along her soft midriff.

“Lift your hips.”

She rose up on her elbows, and he eased the shirt underneath her and down her legs, until he could pull it away completely.

“My turn,” Claire told him. She kneeled up on the bed, her breasts jutting out proudly, and reached for the buttons on his pants and undid them. He toed off his moccasins and helped her slide the heavy denim pants down his legs. When he stepped out of the pool of cloth, he stood naked in front of her, his erection straining high.

“I’ve never seen a naked man before,” Claire whispered. “I closed my eyes when Hartman opened his pants.”

“Hartman doesn’t count,” Rafael said dismissively.

Claire glanced up to his face and realized he was right. She nodded to him. Then she lowered her gaze again. “Can I touch you?” She lifted her hand but stopped a few inches away from him.

“Yes.” His voice had grown hoarse. “I want you to touch me, more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.”

She curled her fingers around his rigid shaft. “It’s warm. And it’s dry. I thought it would need to be wet and slippery to go inside me without hurting.”

“No. That comes from you.”

She moved her fingers around him a little, exploring. “How can something be so soft and so hard at the same time?”

“How can something be so pure and so tempting at the same time?” He laid his hands on her bare shoulders and bent his head to kiss her, a deep drugging kiss that sent a wave of yearning through her body.

She didn’t resist when he cupped his hands over her breasts and softly kneaded them. Next, he took the tight peaks into his mouth one by one and sucked them, whirling his tongue around the tip. When his teeth tugged at the hardened nipples, she began to moan.

“My pants. Take off my pants.” She hurried to undo the buttons herself and squirmed out of the garment, not wanting to wait for his gentle hands. He picked up the discarded pants and tossed them out of the way.

“What do you like?” she asked. “What do you like the most?”

“I like everything. Looking at you. Touching you. Tasting you.” He pushed her down on the bed until she was lying flat on her back, and then he nudged her legs apart until he could kneel between them.

“I want everything,” Claire said, rising on her elbows to look at him.

“I’ll give you everything.” He lowered his head and pressed his mouth between her legs. When she felt the wet heat of his tongue teasing her sensitive nub, she whimpered, the high keening sound of her cry piercing the dimly lit room.

Rafael straightened. His eyes captured hers and held them as he covered her body with his. With one hand, he took his weight, while with the other hand he positioned his rigid shaft against her opening.

Claire felt the probing pressure between her legs. She remembered the terrible tearing pain, and recalled the ugly grunts she’d been forced to listen to while Burt Hartman rammed into her. Her body began to shake, and her eyes shut tight.

“Look at me,” Rafael whispered.

Claire forced her eyes to open.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He took his weight on his forearms and leaned down to kiss her. “If you are scared, we don’t need to do this.”

“I want to,” she murmured. “I want you to make love to me.”

She felt his body go tense above hers as he began to push into her, filling her, slowly, inexorably, until he was firmly lodged inside her, stretching her. As he penetrated her, he kept examining her face for the slightest change of expression, so he could stop if she showed any signs of distress.

“Tell me if it hurts.” Rafael moved inside her.

She gazed up at him, feeling the first stirrings of the heady pleasure she remembered from when he’d touched her before. “Do it again.”

He began to slide in and out of her in a smooth rhythm.

“It...does...not...hurt.” That was the last coherent sentence from her lips. After that all her thoughts, all her words, turned into a mad jumble of sounds that tore out of her throat as he picked up his speed and strength, until he drove her into heights that surpassed even the ones he’d shown her before.

* * * *

In the morning, Rafael was up before Claire awoke. She watched him for a while, moving around with his quiet grace, peeling and chopping fruit for breakfast. The contrast of the bright sunshine through the open doors made the inside of the barn appear dark. Although she could see his face, the shadows were deep, and his thoughts remained closed to her. Claire sighed and got

up. She lingered as she dressed, hoping he would come to her, hold her, make love to her again.

Instead, he motioned her to the table and they shared the breakfast of fruit in silence.

Claire felt the tension ratchet up inside her as she ate. She would have liked to hear words, to exchange declarations. She wanted to be held in his arms, to be told he understood and forgave her. Anything but this withdrawn indifference. She wanted to feel she wasn't alone when she faced Hartman and prepared for the dreadful deed.

"Are you ready?" Rafael said after he had tidied up.

"There's no hurry."

"I need to get back to work."

"I see." She rose abruptly and strode to the door where Estrella waited, already saddled. The bucket of water in front of the horse rattled empty. With a pang of guilt, Claire understood that Rafael had already looked after the horses, as well as prepared breakfast.

She swirled around, and found him standing behind her.

"I didn't hear you come up," she said, desperate to break the silence.

Rafael reached inside his shirt and pulled out the beaded leather thong, lifting it over his head. Gently, he lowered it around her neck, pulling her tangle of curls through the circle so that the necklace rested snugly against her skin.

"It will protect you," he told her softly.

"You said it doesn't work."

"Sometimes it does."

Her hand crept up. Although she was determined not to discuss her plan, she felt as though Rafael could see into her thoughts. The beads of glass felt cool and smooth under her fingers. "I'll always wear it."

"Then you'll always be mine." He leaned down, resting his forehead against hers, and Claire closed her eyes. She didn't need declarations, after all. She knew he loved her. Loved her so much he was willing to let her go and meet her destiny,

"I need to know when you're marrying him," Rafael told her.

"Why?"

He looked at her, his face serene. "Sometimes the amulet needs a little help to work."

Claire raised her brows, confused. "What? Like a spell?"

A quick smile quirked his lips. "Something like that."

He helped her into the saddle and got on his own horse. For a while they looked at each other, the horses shifting restlessly under them. Then Rafael leaned low, spun his horse around, and set off at a thundering speed. Claire watched the dust fly up until a thick cloud obscured him. After a moment she kicked Estrella into a canter, and started the difficult journey back to Circle Star.

Chapter Sixteen

Susanna pushed the library door open to find Connor sprawled in the chair behind the desk, staring morosely into an empty whiskey glass. Skirts swishing, she rushed up to him. "You shouldn't be drinking. You're a convalescent." Her fingers trembled as she reached to snatch away the empty glass.

Connor laid a hand over her arm. "Leave it."

"What is it?" She swept her gaze over his face, taking in the tired features and the defeated expression. Since Connor had gained enough strength to leave his sickbed, he had developed a habit of retreating into sullen silences Susanna had learned to hate.

Without a word, he pointed at the bottle by his elbow.

"Why do you need to drink?" she pleaded. "The doctor says it's bad for you."

"To forget." He reached for the bottle and filled the glass.

"Are you worried that whoever shot you will try again?"

Connor lowered his face into his hands, absently rubbing a fingertip over the thin white scar on his left cheek. "The present I can deal with. It's the past I want to forget."

"You said..." Susanna paused to draw a breath. "You killed the man who gave you the scar?"

Connor raised his head, meeting her eyes. "Worse. I killed a woman." He picked up the shot of whiskey and downed it in a single gulp.

"But...?" Susanna stared at him, her chest tight as she fought for breath. "How...?"

"How does an honorable man kill a woman?" He shrugged, slumping down in the seat. "Perhaps I'm not the man you think I am."

She took a step closer, realizing she must have flinched from him, and reproached herself for the unconscious act of betrayal. "I'm sure whatever you did was because you had no choice."

Connor rolled the empty glass between his fingers. "That's the devil of it. I *did* have a choice. There's always a choice."

"Tell me." Kneeling down by his side, Susanna gazed up to him and tried to read his closed expression. "Please tell me about it."

"Pretty little Susanna," he said softly. "You have no idea of how harsh life can be when hunger lurks at each mealtime, and every man wants to take advantage of you."

"Tell me," she whispered, reaching up to stroke his scarred cheek. "Help me understand."

Connor locked his gaze on the far wall and spoke quietly. "I once took a woman to share my cabin in the mining camps in Alaska. She'd been living with a big Russian by the name of Boris. He gave her a daily beating. One day she decided enough was enough, and she ran out on him, begging for someone to help."

“And you helped her?” Susanna said. She bit back another question, about what the woman had meant to him, if she had shared his bed.

Connor glanced down at her, and nodded in reply to her unvoiced question, his lips twisting into a grim smile. “I took her in,” he said, as though those simple words explained everything. He paused, the empty glass in his fingers clinking against the tabletop. “One day about a week later, I came home to find her gone. I thought she had returned to the Russian, but the cabin lay in disarray. The signs of a struggle worried me, so I decided to walk over and check that she had gone voluntarily.”

“Did you find her?”

Connor’s face hardened. “I found her all right. She was standing naked outside his cabin, tied to a stake, her feet immersed in a pail of water. It was in the middle of the winter, the temperature forty below.”

“No!”

Connor gave a slow nod. “Yes. I rushed to free her, but Boris appeared out of the cabin wielding a hunting knife. He caught me in the face. He would have killed me, but he slipped over on a clear lick of ice formed where the woman had splashed water while trying to lift her feet out of the pail.”

“Did you kill him?”

“He fell onto his own knife.”

Susanna swallowed, afraid to ask. “And the woman?” she murmured.

“I carried her to my cabin. The water in the pail was frozen solid around her feet. She was a thin little creature. The block of ice attached to her feet weighed more than she did.”

“Was she all right?”

Connor shook his head. “I crammed the stove full of firewood until the metal glowed red. Then I hacked the ice from her feet with an axe, and melted what was left, but it was too late. It didn’t take long before gangrene started to eat at her frostbitten flesh.”

“Did her legs have to be amputated?”

“At midwinter in an Alaskan mining camp?” Connor turned to face her, pain etched into his face. “There were no doctors. She was in terrible pain, and even if she could have been saved, her life would have been unbearable without someone to care for her.”

“What did you do?” Susanna knew better than to suggest Connor should have taken on the task of caring for this unfortunate woman in the northern mining camps.

“I held her in my arms until she fell asleep. Then I put my gun against her temple, and put a bullet through her brain.”

Susanna cried out in anguish, and instantly wished she’d kept silent. “You did it to save her pain,” she said, her eyes intent on Connor as she finally began to understand what caused his dark moods.

“I killed her,” Connor said flatly. “I killed her three times. First I killed her by enraging Boris when I allowed her to move into my cabin. Then I killed her by not finding her a doctor.

Then I killed her by putting a bullet in her head.”

“But you said there were no doctors.”

Connor considered a long moment before he spoke. “It’s not until I found you again that I realized what I had done. Had it been you, I would have moved heaven and earth to get you to a doctor. I didn’t do the same for her. I killed her, because I didn’t love her.” His mouth tugged down in a bitter smile. “How is that for an act of honor?”

Susanna surged to her feet and wrapped her arms around him. “You did the best you could.”

“But my best wasn’t good enough.”

She clung to him in silence, and hated herself for the satisfaction it gave her to know that Connor hadn’t loved this other woman, whatever terrible price there had been to pay for his absence of devotion.

If he lacked honor, so did she.

* * * *

Claire inspected herself in the mirror. Her silver taffeta gown was really evening wear, but she wanted to dazzle Burt Hartman. The low cut bodice exposed the top of her breasts, and although she’d only brought a couple of pieces of jewelry with her from Philadelphia, the pearl choker and the droplet earrings she wore today shouted out Old Money.

Her lips twisted into a grim smile. The presentation she’d put together ought to get the monster’s mouth watering. To achieve her aim, she needed to blind him with lust, to render him careless about what went on around him.

She made her descent regal, just in case the men were waiting in the hall. They were not, so she put on an equally grand entrance as she sailed through the open door into the library.

“Gentlemen,” she said, inclining her head in their direction.

She heard Hartman’s sharp intake of breath, and even the slimy lawyer seemed a little shaken. Good. She directed her attention to the sheriff. He was the one she really needed to win over to her side.

Claire had never met either of the two men flanking Hartman, but it was easy to identify them, since the sheriff wore a tin star over his chest, and the lawyer was better dressed.

The lawyer spoke first. “Miss Vanderfleet, my client wishes you to know that he is very sorry about the misunderstanding....”

She managed to fluster him by simply raising one eyebrow in a disdainful manner. “I don’t think there is any need to dwell on what happened,” she said in a frosty tone. “It cannot be changed.”

Hartman coughed a little, shifting his balance on his feet. Claire recoiled, but managed to keep it to a single short step away from him. Dear Lord, she could hardly believe it, there was a bulge in his trousers. The swine had gone hard between his legs. Nausea filled her. Had there not been so much at stake, she would have willingly retched her breakfast over his immaculate clothes.

She gathered herself. "Now, if I understand correctly, Mr. Hartman has proposed marriage to me."

"Yes, and the financial arrangements are most –."

This time she spoke up to silence the lawyer. "There is only one arrangement I need confirmed." Claire paused for effect. "That he will never, ever touch me again. That the marriage will be in name only."

"My client understands that right now you may feel –."

"No," Claire interrupted. "Never."

She saw the lawyer glance over to Hartman.

"Or course, Miss Claire," Hartman said smoothly. "If that is what you wish."

"Miss Vanderfleet," she corrected. "And yes, that is what I wish."

The sheriff cleared his throat and stood more erect, behaving with the awkward impatience of a man who is used to being in charge rather than listening to others. "Well, this seems to be working out just fine. I guess now we can all forget about that little misunderstanding."

"Forget?" Claire said, lifting her eyebrow again. "Misunderstanding?"

"I mean, well, what I mean is" The sheriff trailed off, searching for words.

Claire silenced him with an icy look.

"Do I take it that you accept?" The lawyer sounded astonished and greedy at the same time.

"Provided I have the assurances which I have demanded. That I shall have my own bedroom, and never in any circumstances will Mr. Hartman intrude in that room." She leaded forward to display her breasts, to remind Hartman of what he so badly desired. Her plan hinged upon extracting that guarantee from him in front of witnesses, and on Hartman breaking his word at first opportunity.

"Yes," Hartman said. "I can promise you that, my dear. But I hope that one day you will change your mind."

Making a point of ignoring him, Claire forced herself to remain calm. "When shall we have the wedding?" she asked, addressing her words to all of them.

"How long will you need to plan and organize?" Hartman enquired solicitously. "Would Christmas be too soon?"

"I'd like to have the wedding on Saturday."

"Saturday?" Hartman exclaimed. "But that will not allow your family and guests to attend. Arrangements must be made, invitations sent."

Claire sent him a haughty frown. She would not be put on display, be used to give him the respectability he didn't deserve. "I'm afraid it has to be immediately."

"May I ask why?" Catterill said.

Claire ignored the lawyer and spoke to Hartman instead. "You are a virile man." She pressed her hand over her stomach. "It's too early to tell, but in case I'm with child, I would like

to maximize the time between the wedding and the child's birth."

Hartman flustered, and then his face swelled into an ugly grin of gloating pride. Claire clamped her lips together. Flattering the monster was a small price to pay, if it got her what she wanted.

"Where would you like the ceremony to take place, my dear?"

She turned to face him squarely. "At Deep Valley. In the courtyard."

Hartman flinched, and triumph surged through her, making her skin tingle. She wanted him confused and ill at ease. She wanted him to suffer the way she had suffered, to feel the same fear and helplessness she'd felt lying down on her back over the rough cobblestones in that courtyard. Her hands clenched into fists. Uncurling her fingers, she forced them to relax.

"The flowers are so pretty in the courtyard," she told him, smiling for the first time since she'd come into the room.

* * * *

Connor sat behind the mahogany desk in the library, his head in his hands. Love for Susanna filled his heart, soothing away the lonely years, but he knew that some of the horrors he'd witnessed would never leave him. He prayed the memories would fade, and that he would learn to control his morose moods.

Why had he been cursed with such deep emotions? Many men waded through life taking what they wanted, and damning the rest. Why couldn't he be more like them? Why did he have to worry about others, and rights and wrongs, and which way his actions tipped the scales?

A deep unease gnawed in his gut, and his gaze strayed to the bottle of whiskey standing on the side table. After a moment's hesitation he turned away. Getting drunk might serve to blot out the past, but it offered no help for the present. Now that he had a wife and home to worry about, he wanted a clear head for the task.

When Susanna had finally revealed to him that Hartman had raped Claire, a red veil of fury had descended over Connor. He didn't even know Claire, he'd been shot before they had a chance to meet, but she was Susanna's friend, and a guest under his roof.

Avenging the attack on her was his duty, but Claire had shocked everyone by agreeing to marry Hartman.

The library door swung with a soft swish, and Connor raised his head.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Claire hovered in the opening, poised like a startled deer. Her dress hung loose on her, as though she'd shrunk inside it. Connor recalled Susanna's comment that Claire no longer wore the denim pants and shirtwaist blouses around the ranch, but struggled to iron her elaborate gowns. Her forlorn air clenched at his heart, but Connor brushed off the instinct to comfort and protect. By accepting Hartman's proposal, Claire had forfeited the right to sympathy.

"Are you looking for Susanna?" Connor asked. "She's talking to Carmen in the kitchen."

"I'm not looking for her." Claire stood still, and then retreated, closing the door between them.

“Claire?” Connor called out, rising behind the desk.

He didn’t have to go after her, as Claire halted, and slowly opened the door again.

“Yes?” Her voice fell to a whisper, and her face settled into a blank mask.

“Why are you doing it?” Connor asked bluntly.

At least she didn’t pretend not to understand. “I have my reasons,” she murmured, looking down at her feet.

“I’d like to know what they are.”

Claire shook her head in silence.

“If it is about your honor, or your marriage prospects, there are other men—.”

“No,” she interrupted him. “Please don’t ask questions. I have to do this.”

Connor gritted his teeth. “Hartman is evil.” He raised his hand to his side where a dressing protected the healing bullet wound.

She startled him by bursting into a brittle laughter. “I’m the last person who needs convincing of that.”

“You think he was behind this?” His hand rested where he’d been shot.

“Of course he was,” Claire said sharply. “He is behind everything. And we all know it, but nobody wants to talk about it.” She lifted her chin, and her gaze captured his, calm and unwavering. “Whatever happens afterwards, please remember that I did what I thought was right. Not just for me, but for all of us.”

“All of us,” Connor said, his anger rising. “This isn’t best for all of us. Susanna is distraught about the way you have withdrawn into yourself. You don’t talk to her any more. You just stay in your room, avoiding everyone.”

He saw Claire’s throat move as she swallowed. “This is what I have to do,” she said, her voice falling to a dull murmur. “Please don’t make it any harder than it needs to be.” She spun on her heels and fled. The door creaked, as it slowly closed behind her.

Connor stood still, staring after her. What right did he have to criticize? For thirteen years he’d cut himself off from Susanna and Circle Star. If Claire was neglecting the duties of friendship, her rejection of Susanna paled in comparison to what he had done, when he had tried to reject her love.

* * * *

“Don’t you want me there?” Susanna fretted. Tears stung in her eyes, but she tried to remain brave for the sake of Claire. Her friend had changed so. The old Claire was full of life, always laughing and joking. Now she walked around with a stony face and haunted eyes.

Last night Susanna had cried herself to sleep against Connor’s broad chest, sobbing how her friend had become lost to her. Connor had held her close. He’d whispered soft words of love into her ear, but even that hadn’t dulled the hollow ache inside her.

She had so hoped something had blossomed between Rafael De Santis and Claire.

When she’d seen them together at Rafael’s barn a few days earlier, she’d sensed that something had, but with Rafael it was always impossible to tell what he felt, and Claire no longer

shared her intimate secrets. How Susanna missed the little whispered talks they used to have in the evenings, telling each other their fears and hopes.

“No,” Claire replied now, sounding terse. “I don’t want you there. I need to do this alone. I’ll see you soon after.”

“Why?” Susanna pleaded. “Why are you doing this? He’s such an evil man.”

“Yes.” Claire bit her lip. She turned to Susanna and reached for her hand. Their fingers laced together, and for a second the stony look on Claire’s face crumpled and her eyes filled with anguish. “Trust me,” she murmured. “Soon you’ll understand.” Then her expression hardened again. She turned back to the mirror and adjusted her gown. “How do I look?”

Susanna made an effort to smile. Claire had left her hair loose, and it cascaded down her back. A few glass beads on a leather thong decorated the curls. Through some trick of nature, her eyes seemed very blue against the silvery sheen of the gown.

“You look lovely,” Susanna said. “You always do.”

“Wish me luck,” Claire asked with no emotion.

Susanna felt a cold shiver down her spine. She stepped forward to hug Claire, doing her best to appear sincere. “Good luck,” she whispered. She had planned to make one final attempt to dissuade her friend from marrying Hartman, but something in Claire’s manner stopped her, and Susanna felt powerless to resist the unfolding events.

“Where is my small travel bag?” Claire asked abruptly.

“I’ve put in the buggy. Pete will drive you to Deep Valley.”

“No.” Claire’s voice rose in alarm. “I want to ride Estrella. I can tie the bag to the saddle.” She turned to Susanna, and again the unfeeling mask cracked, revealing her fear beneath. “Don’t you see? I have to go alone. I have to leave everything familiar behind. Otherwise I won’t be able to go through with it.”

“Then why are you?” Susanna said softly. “Why don’t you just call it off?”

Claire shook her head. “Stop asking questions.” She rushed to the door. “I’ve got to get the bag.”

“I’ll come with you.” Susanna sighed and followed Claire down the stairs. She understood that Claire was nervous, but why was her friend making such a fuss over a bag that contained nothing but her nightgown and a few toilet articles?

They retrieved Claire’s belongings from the buggy and explained to Pete Jackson that he wasn’t needed after all. Then Susanna stood still and watched as Claire walked across the yard to the stables, clutching the little bag like a toddler clutches a favorite toy. It hurt that Claire refused company for the ride out to Deep Valley, and wouldn’t even accept her help to saddle Estrella.

Susanna shook her head in defeat. She had believed their friendship was strong enough to survive anything, but it appeared she’d been wrong.

* * * *

Claire curled her fingers around the fistful of bullets. “Thank you,” she said to the young ranch hand called Gomez. “Some of the men at Deep Valley are a little rough. I’ll feel better if

my gun is loaded.”

“Do you know what to do? Do you want me to show you?”

“No.” Claire shook her head. “I’ll get Mr. Hartman to show me tonight, after the wedding.” She managed a small smile. “Don’t tell Miss Susanna. She doesn’t know I’ve taken my gun. She’ll only worry that I’ll shoot my toes off.” Claire opened the steel jaws of her bag and dropped the bullets inside a little pocket sewn into the lining.

“Miss Claire.” Gomez held on to the reins after he’d helped her up on Estrella. He peered uncertainly at her from under the brim of his hat.

“What is it?”

The young ranch hand snatched off his hat and pressed it against his chest. “You don’t have to do this, Miss Claire. Many men would want marry you, even with what happened.”

Claire reached down and rested her hand on his shoulder. “I’m afraid this is exactly what I have to do.” Her fingers tightened, giving him a tiny squeeze. “Thank you for getting me the bullets. They might save my life.”

Afternoon heat shimmered, but Claire felt a chill inside her as she rode out towards Deep Valley. She made a detour by Rafael’s barn. He probably knew anyway, but she had promised to tell him when the wedding took place.

She dismounted outside. The double doors were closed, and no horse stood tied to the stake. Claire stared at the burnt-out remains of the main house, realizing how totally she’d been absorbed in Rafael during the few days she’d spent with him. She’d paid little attention to the ruins, or to the withered gardens which had once surrounded the house.

Intending to leave a note, she pushed open one side of the double doors. She hadn’t thought of bringing paper and pen, but she remembered seeing both amongst the clutter that covered the long table. At the tidy end, where they had eaten their meals, an envelope stood leaning against an oil lamp. Nothing was written on it. Claire picked up the envelope and ran her fingers over the flat surface. She felt a slim object inside, like a coin, but hollow at the centre.

It had to be meant for her. She tore through the sealed flap, and found a note inside, folded over twice. The paper rustled as she spread it open.

I want you to wear this tonight. Be very careful.

Claire tipped the envelope upside down to shake out the contents. A plain gold wedding band fell out. She listened to it rolling against the tabletop. Then she picked it up and lifted her hand into the light. Nothing was engraved inside.

Claire fisted her hand over the tiny circle. Rafael *did* understand. He *had* forgiven her. He wanted her to know they belonged to each other. She quickly returned outside and closed the doors behind her. Opening her bag, she dropped the ring into the little pocket, where it made a tinkling sound as it fell amongst the bullets.

When she arrived at the white hacienda that had been the scene of the terrible events, the big brute of a man she remembered from before was crossing the cobblestone courtyard. He took her horse, looking troubled. The way he stood back while she gathered her gown and dismounted

made it clear he understood she preferred not to be touched, not even to be helped down. Claire nodded her thanks, but said nothing to him.

The butler appeared, and escorted her to a bedroom at the rear of the single-storey building. He offered to have hot water sent in for her. Claire accepted, and told him she didn't wish to see anyone until it was time for the wedding ceremony to start.

She washed her face and brushed the dust from her dress the best she could. Then she studied the room. There were two doors, one leading into the hall, and another on the left upon entering. She assumed it connected to Hartman's bedroom. The layout was perfect, with the bed on the right, facing the connecting door. A dressing table with a mirror stood by the window, and a massive armoire in ornately carved wood dominated the opposite wall.

Light was fading outside when finally a knock sounded on the door. Claire got up from the chair by the dressing table, the only seat in the room, and turned the knob.

"Are you ready?" Hartman stood outside, dressed in a tailored grey suit with a long jacket.

"Yes." Claire stood facing him. "I'll just unpack my night things." She retreated into the room and lifted her bag from the floor onto the bed. Opening the bag, she shook out a nightgown and spread it over the quilted bedspread, holding up the sheer fabric just long enough for Hartman to see it, to imagine her wearing it.

Then she moved over to the dressing table and laid out a hairbrush and a box of ivory hairpins. "That's it." Looking uncertainly around the room, she turned again to the dressing table. She folded the bag and stuffed it into an empty drawer. "I don't like clutter," she said over her shoulder by way of explanation.

Hartman didn't reply. He seemed barely able to contain himself. Claire followed him, hoping the little charade would keep anyone from peeking inside her bag.

She permitted him to take her arm, but her posture declared it was done with reluctance.

"The men and the maids asked if they could watch. What should I tell them?" Hartman asked with a hesitant glance at her.

"By all means, let them watch." Claire decided it would be very fitting. The men had watched that first time too.

Shadows covered the courtyard. Two ranch hands stood on crates lighting a row of lanterns strung high between the whitewashed wall and the solitary tree. Claire controlled a shiver. Seeing that tree from a distance had brought her to this place on that fateful day.

She spoke sharply. "I don't want any decorations."

Hartman patted her hand, as though she were a petulant child. "We need a little light. It gets dark here so quickly."

She gave him a brief nod, trying to keep calm. It had given her a fright to see something unexpected, even something as simple as a man climbing on a wooden box to take care of a chore.

She needed to calm down. Nerves could ruin everything.

The priest already awaited them, looking solemn. Hartman called out a few words. A crowd of people drifted into the courtyard. At the front, a young girl carried a wreath of purple flowers. She detached herself from the others and timidly walked over, her arms held out. Claire turned her back on the offering, but she caught the girl's stricken expression.

"It's for your hair, miss," the girl explained, her accent soft and lilting.

Claire turned and accepted the gift, placing it around her head, like a crown of thorns.

"It looks lovely." The maid smiled and nodded, and then stepped back to blend in with the others.

Claire took her chosen position and halted there, standing still and erect. Hartman looked puzzled. He gestured at her to move over, to join him in front of the priest.

"The light," she explained, pointing with her hand. "If we stand here, and the priest stands there, the light it will fall upon him. We'll be able to see him better."

Hartman took his place next to her. She wondered if he realized that now they were standing exactly on the spot where he had raped her. Drops of her blood would still be mingled with the sand between the stones under their feet.

The ceremony was over quickly. When it came the time for Hartman to slip the ring on her finger, Claire refused to let him touch her. Hartman offered the ring to her in his open palm, but she refused that, too. Hartman consulted with the priest. When he was told it didn't matter, he dropped the ring in his pocket and the ceremony carried on, until they were declared man and wife.

The priest had understood enough of the situation not to invite the groom to kiss the bride.

"Is it over?" Claire asked, knowing her voice sounded harsh.

"Yes." Hartman appeared frustrated. She could tell he was offended by her curt behavior, which amounted to an open rebellion in front of the household staff.

"In which case, I bid you good night," she said, tilting her face up to him. "Please remember that I do not wish to be disturbed." She spun on her heels and marched into the house, her nose high in the air, as though even the short spell in his company was more than she could endure. The wedding guests hushed to a silence so deep her footsteps broke it like a series of thunderclaps.

Then she was back inside, through the hall, and in the privacy of her room. The lamps hadn't been lit, but a faint glow from the lanterns outside shone in through the window. Claire stopped to lock the door leading into the hallway. There was no key on her side of the door that connected to Hartman's bedroom. When she tried the handle, the door didn't give.

Hurrying, but at the same time trying to be quiet and keep out of the sight of anyone who might peer in through the window, Claire yanked open the dressing table drawer and pulled out her bag. Tucked in at the bottom, folded inside a scarf, was the gun Susanna had given her. She balanced it in one hand, while she counted out six bullets. Her fingers met the wedding band. She'd forgotten. She picked it up, and slipped it into the third finger of her left hand. Then she

returned the empty bag into the drawer.

When she rushed towards the bed, one of the bullets slipped through her fingers and rolled down on the floor. It was too dark to see where it had fallen. Claire crouched on her hands and knees and fumbled, over the floorboards and along the edge of the rug, but she couldn't find it. Rising to her feet, she hid the gun and the bullets in the bed and smoothed the covers over them, in case someone should ignore her wishes and come into the room.

There was no time to open the drawer again and take out the bag once more. Five bullets had to be enough. She drew a few calming breaths and started her evening toilette. First she removed the wreath of flowers from her hair. Then she undressed quickly and slipped into her nightgown. When she tried to hang the silver taffeta gown in the armoire, the door was stuck and wouldn't budge, however hard she rattled the handle. There was no key in the lock.

It didn't matter. She folded the gown on the chair by the dressing table, and washed and dried her face. Then she slid between the covers, fumbling around to find the gun and the bullets. They had rolled around on the mattress when she climbed in.

The lanterns outside must have burned out as the darkness was almost total now, and she had to do everything by feel. Push out the cylinder. Slot in the bullets one by one, checking the shape with her fingertips to hold them the right way. Push the cylinder back in. Cock the hammer.

Then all she could do was to sit back and wait.

If Hartman honored his promise, Claire faced a life filled with terror, a prisoner in a marriage to a man she despised.

If he didn't, she would end up free, or she would end up dead.

Minutes passed. Her hands grew tired from clutching the gun. She wanted to hold the weapon hidden as she kept it aimed at the door on the opposite wall, even if that meant having the weight of the bedcovers pressing against her arms.

Finally footsteps echoed down the hall. A door opened and closed. A floorboard creaked. Again. And again. A thin strip of light appeared under the connecting door. More steps. A few minutes of silence. Steps, softer now. Moving closer. Something rattled.

A tall vertical crack appeared in the darkness. Slowly, it grew wider. Then a shadow blocked the light, and Hartman stepped in through the open doorway. Claire held her breath. She got the impression he was completely naked, although she couldn't really tell, since he was merely a silhouette against the glow of the lamps behind him.

"You promised," she said, surprised that she managed any sound at all.

Hartman laughed a cruel little laugh. "Of course I did. I'd have been a fool not to promise you anything you wanted. You didn't really think I meant it?" He began to move towards the bed, leaving the door open behind him.

Claire took aim and pulled the trigger. A shot rang in her ears. The bedcovers jerked and a burning smell filled her nostrils. Hartman froze, but just for an instant. Then he hurtled into motion, charging towards the bed.

Claire's hands shook and she almost dropped the gun. When she pulled the trigger again nothing happened. Panic rose inside her, filling her mouth with a bitter nausea. Hartman was flying at her in slow motion, like a predator leaping through the air. Cold sweat beaded on her brow. Her throat closed up, choking her.

Then she heard Rafael's voice in her head. *Cock back the hammer for each shot. Like this.* She remembered his fingers strong and warm over hers.

Claire moved her thumbs together the way Rafael had shown her on that sunny afternoon during their dreamy time at the barn. Another shot exploded as she pulled the trigger. An echo of it rang through the room before everything went silent again. Hartman toppled slowly forward. His body landed half on the bed, half on the floor, as though kneeling before her. Claire could feel the weight of his chest and shoulders over her feet.

She waited. Hartman didn't move. His face pressed against the bedding. Slowly, Claire inched away from him, sliding out from under the covers, until she was on her feet and could creep around him. Blood oozed where a fist-sized wound gaped on the side of his skull.

Claire pressed a hand over her mouth, trying not to retch. She tiptoed past his sprawling legs. On the other side of his head, a small round hole punctured the temple.

Entry and exit. She'd read about it in the newspapers once, when a politician had committed suicide by putting a shotgun in his mouth. There had been no wound on his face, but the impact of the bullet had torn off the back of his head.

Footsteps clattered outside. Claire picked up the towel she'd used for her evening toilette and covered her arms and shoulders with the cloth that still felt damp. Then she walked up to the door.

The butler came in first. Claire had no idea of how many people lived in the house. Behind the butler, the big brutal man she knew from before leaned his shoulders into the room, crouching low, a gun in his outstretched hand. Then it became too many people to count. Everyone was fully dressed, and Claire realized the hour couldn't be particularly late.

Hartman simply hadn't been able to wait.

"He is dead," she said in a small fragile voice. "He attacked me, and I shot him. Could someone please go and get the sheriff?"

The man who'd been crouching straightened up. He stepped past the butler and extended his arm. "Ma'am, give me the gun."

Claire looked down at her hand. "Why?"

"We don't want anyone else getting hurt."

She met his eyes. "Since when did you worry about anyone getting hurt?"

The man frowned, looking pained, and then he moved forward. "Come now, Mrs. Hartman. Give me the gun."

"No." She stepped back, her legs colliding against the edge of the bed. She recovered her balance and raised the gun at him. Then she remembered. Lifting her other hand, she pulled back the hammer. "I want you to get rid of the body," she said. "Take him away."

“We can’t do that, ma’am.” He spoke slowly, but although he made an effort to sound soothing, Claire could see his gun aimed at her, his finger steady on the trigger.

Lowering her arms, she pushed the hammer back down. “Why?”

“The sheriff will want to see how it happened. We should leave everything as it is. Just drop the gun and walk away.” His hand made a little circling gesture, beckoning her.

Claire carefully lowered the gun on top of the bed and followed the butler, who held the door open for her. In the hall, she looked back. The brutal looking man with the gun had removed the key and was locking the room from the outside. Then he ushered all of them down the corridor.

Chapter Seventeen

Claire sat on the padded sofa in the parlor, twisting the ring around her finger. The man who had taken charge had guided her down the hall, not touching her, just following behind her at the same slow speed as she stumbled along.

Matt Duncan...that was what he had said his name was. Claire clung to that, but only because it was something to think of, something to focus on, something to push all other thoughts out of her mind.

A command from him had dispersed everyone except one maid, the one who had prepared the wreath of flowers for her hair. The girl hovered in the room now, timidly offering a blanket, a cup of coffee, anything to provide a little comfort while they waited.

Lamps had been lit in the opulent room, and the antique furniture cast deep shadows over the precious carpets.

"Has someone gone to fetch the sheriff?" Claire asked in a whisper.

She hadn't realized Matt Duncan had taken a seat in the corner of the room where the light didn't reach, and his voice startled her. "There's no point in riding out while it's still dark. It can wait until morning."

Claire nodded. She was already waiting. Why hadn't Rafael come to her?

Of course, she realized, the barn was a ride away. It would take him a little while to get to the house.

Later, as Claire sat on the sofa, shivering under a blanket, she told herself the sound of the bullet couldn't have carried that far. Rafael would come in the morning. When it got light, he would arrive.

Throughout the night, she sat on the sofa, staring wide-eyed into the shadows, waiting. When the morning came, it brought the sheriff, and it brought the lawyer.

But it didn't bring Rafael.

The sheriff had been to the bedroom to take care of the grisly business of examining the body. Now he sat next to Claire, sipping coffee, talking a little too loud, as though she had trouble hearing. "How many times did you fire the gun?"

"Two. I shot him twice."

The sheriff pointed at the gun, which he had already inspected. "Three rounds have been fired."

Claire shook her head. "I only shot him twice."

"Three shots. That's what people say they heard."

"Maybe. I can't remember." She closed her eyes, opened them again. "Blood. There was blood."

The sheriff reached over and patted her hand. Claire didn't jerk herself away.

"The first shot you fired must have missed. I found the bullet lodged in the wall. The second got him between his legs, right where it hurts the most." A ghost of a smile passed over the sheriff's face. "That would have bled slowly. The last shot got him on the side of the head. That killed him instantly."

"He kept coming at me," Claire said. "I thought he was going to take the gun away from me."

"He would have, but your last shot stopped him."

She turned, and for the first time she looked straight at the sheriff. "What will happen now?"

"Well, ma'am." The sheriff rubbed his hands over his thighs, as though to wipe his fingers clean of the whole nasty business. "I reckon you killed him in self defense." He glanced at the lawyer, who'd kept silent up to now. "I mean, we were both there, and we heard him clearly say he wouldn't trouble you at night. You might have thought it was an intruder, since you weren't expecting him."

"That is what I would suggest," the lawyer agreed. "It was an accidental shooting, rather than self defense."

"Will it make any difference?" Claire asked him.

"It will make things easier for you," Catterill explained. "Since a husband is entitled to bed his wife, whether she wishes it or not, it would be difficult to justify self defense."

"I thought it was him." Claire pointed her finger at Matt Duncan. "The man who came into my room seemed so big and powerful, I thought it had to be him. I was scared. He was the ringleader on the day I was raped."

Claire saw the man flinch. Good. She wanted him afraid, sharing the fear she'd felt on that day.

"I guess that settles the matter," the sheriff said. "I'll ask the men to bury the body."

"Not here," Claire said quickly. "Not on the ranch."

The lawyer spoke up. "If you agree, Mrs. Hartman, I can make other arrangements." He hesitated a little. "Later on, when you have rested, perhaps I may come over and review your husband's property with you. Assuming that you wish me to continue handling your business affairs."

"Yes," Claire said. "Please come over tomorrow." She stood up, and watched the lawyer and the sheriff leave.

"Ma'am." She turned towards the voice that came from the corner. Matt Duncan stood on his feet, turning his hat in his hands. "I guess you'll want me to go."

She met his eyes. "And I guess you're talking about leaving the ranch, rather than just leaving this room."

"Yes, ma'am. I am."

Claire sat still for a moment before she spoke. "No. You took pity on me when you

realized I was hurt. I do not wish to force you out.”

“I think I’d rather leave, ma’am.” The man glanced up from the hat in his hands. “Seeing you makes me feel bad. It reminds me of what happened that day, and my part in it. I’ll just move on, if it’s all the same to you.”

“And the others?”

“Them, too, ma’am. There’s a group of us that’s been together for a long time, not just here at Deep Valley. We’ll ride out together. As long as you think you can manage.”

“I’ll manage.” She nodded to release him.

When the man was gone, she wondered if it was his conscience that troubled Matt Duncan, or if he feared the next bullet was intended for him.

Claire shrugged. She didn’t care one way or the other. Her revenge was as complete as she needed it to be. Now it was time to get on with her life.

* * * *

When Claire got back to her room, the bed was freshly made with clean linen. The rug that had covered the floor was gone. If there had been any blood on the polished floorboards, it had already been scrubbed away.

Her gown no longer lay draped over the chair. She searched, and found it hanging in the armoire. There was a key in the door, and the lock turned with ease when she tested it.

Claire poked her head inside the armoire and examined the vast space. It contained nothing unusual, except for a few grains of sand scattered at the base, close to the edge.

Her brows came together in a deep frown. Maybe she was getting confused. She hadn’t mentioned to the sheriff the bullet she’d dropped, but only because it had completely slipped her mind. Now she squatted down on her hands and knees and went over each inch of the floor. The bullet wasn’t there. Perhaps it had been thrown away, bundled up with the bloodied rug.

Pushing the question out of her mind, Claire washed and changed back to her silver taffeta gown, which apart from her nightgown was the only garment she had to wear. Then she left the room, intending to ride out to the barn.

At the front door she realized she didn’t know the way. It would stir up gossip if she asked, and instinct made her decide against it. And if she simply rode about in a random search, Rafael might come while she was out. They could miss each other.

The only thing to do was to stay and wait for him. Lifting her chin, Claire walked down the hall, peering into each room as she passed the doors. She found the butler in an office at the front of the house, sitting behind a desk, turning pages in a large ledger.

“Mrs. Hartman.” The pristine man stood up. “I have been preparing to take you through the accounts. The men are waiting to get paid.”

“Who normally does that?”

“Matt Duncan.” The butler’s eyes rested on her. “But I thought you might like to do it yourself. Seeing as you are the mistress of the house now.”

“What is your name?”

“Harrison, ma’am.”

“Do you have a first name, Harrison?”

An imperceptible smile eased his formal expression but vanished instantly. “Just Harrison, ma’am.”

“All right, Harrison.” Claire circled the desk and sat in the seat which the butler had vacated. “Let’s get to work.”

Harrison showed her where the money was kept and handed her a key to the strongbox. “I have one key. Mr. Hartman had the other.”

Claire stared at the key nestling in her palm. “Is this his key?”

“Yes.” The butler’s eyes flickered. “Would you like to take mine instead? We can exchange.”

Claire curled her fingers into a fist, feeling the sharp edges of the key digging into her skin. “No. I refuse to be intimidated by a man who’ll soon be rotting in the ground, and whose soul is already burning in hell.”

“Very good, ma’am.” Harrison bustled with the ledger. He seemed totally unperturbed, as though she had made an idle remark about the weather. Did nothing unsettle him? Now that Claire thought of it, the butler had been utterly calm, even when he’d been the first person to reach her after the shooting.

“Are you always so unflappable, Harrison?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave her a blank look, but she could see the humor hidden beneath. “It’s my job, ma’am.”

“All right, Harrison.” Claire broke into a nervous grin. “Let’s get on with it.”

* * * *

By the afternoon, Claire knew the layout of the house, and understood a little about running a ranch.

There was a cook, and two girls the butler referred to as parlor maids, and another three servant girls for cleaning the house and feeding the men. Out of the twenty riders, only four had offered to stay. Two were old timers who’d been at the ranch since the De Santis days. Miguel Pereira seemed to be around sixty, and the other man had to be close to eighty. Everyone just called him Squint, because his eyes could not focus properly, but constantly strayed to opposing directions.

The other two were a pair of dark young men with lean bodies and quick smiles. Their names were Pedro and Ramon Vega, and Claire learned they were brothers. She suspected the reason they didn’t want to leave with the others had something to do with the two parlor maids.

After she’d paid the sixteen men who shuffled awkwardly through the office, accepting the money they were owed but not meeting her eyes, she sent Harrison to gather them in the yard.

The bright sunshine almost blinded her. The men stood in a loose group, each holding a horse loaded with their belongings, and a bedroll tied behind the saddle. She had to put her hand

up to shield her eyes before she could locate Matt Duncan amongst them.

She walked up to him and held out her hand. After some hesitation, he reached out and gingerly clasped his fingers around hers. Claire lifted her other hand, so that she held the man's big calloused hand between hers.

"I'm speaking to you, because I know you're the leader, but I speak to all of you. Go in peace. I bear no ill will towards any of you. I accept that you wish to go, but should you ever wish to return, I want you to know you'd be welcome."

Matt Duncan's fingers tightened around hers, and to her utter disbelief Claire thought she saw him blink a few times. Then he man nodded and withdrew his hand. He called out to the band of men, who got on their horses and formed into a line that streamed out of the yard in a slow walk. When they were some distance down the road, Claire heard yells, and saw the riders burst into a wild canter.

She turned back and went into the house. Now she could wait no longer. She had to go and find Rafael.

She chose Miguel Pereira rather than one of the young brothers with the flashing eyes, since Miguel had known the De Santis family. "Could you take me out to the half-breed?" she asked him, finding him at the stables watering the few horses left. "I haven't seen him today."

"He keeps his own company."

"I know. However, he is one of my employees, and I need to speak to him."

"He should have got paid yesterday. Payday is Saturday, but because of the wedding we weren't paid until today."

"I see," Claire said. "He hasn't come for his money."

Miguel Pereira pulled down the brim of his hat. "I'll take you out to his place."

By the time they reached the barn, her silver taffeta gown was damp with perspiration and covered in dust. With dismay Claire realized that when the day was over, it would be ruined. It might have been what she wore to her dismal wedding, but it was still an elegant gown, and she wouldn't give Hartman the power of turning her against an innocent piece of fabric. She'd do her best to salvage the garment.

Once she had found Rafael, they would ride out to Circle Star and get the rest of her clothes, including her denim pants and her shirtwaist blouses. And she desperately wanted to see Susanna, now that she could finally let go of the reserve she'd built around herself while she mentally prepared herself to commit murder.

Her heart began to pound as they approached the burnt-out old homestead. She knew the barn was exactly the same, and yet it looked different.

Forlorn. Abandoned.

With a cry of distress, Claire yanked the reins to bring Estrella to a stop. She allowed Miguel to help her down, and then she ran past him and reached the door first.

The bed was stripped to bare boards. The blankets were gone, as was the clutter over the table, and the few pieces of clothing that had hung from the nails beaten into the wall.

“He’s gone.” Claire turned around, sweeping the entire room with her eyes. Her gaze fell on the bed. She bit her lip, blinking back tears. Rafael was gone, with no good-bye, not a single word of explanation.

“He’ll be back, Miss Claire.”

She turned to Miguel. “How can I believe he’ll be back, when I can’t even bring myself to believe he’s gone?”

The old man took her arm and steered her gently to the door. “You’ll have to wait. You mustn’t mention him to anyone, or ask any questions. He must be forgotten. We should only remember him as a half-breed who worked with the horses and went by the name of Rain Cloud.”

“You knew who he was?”

“From the start, but I only told him that I knew when he needed me to fetch Miss Susanna for you.”

“Hartman is dead. It can’t matter any more.”

His grip on her elbow tightened. “It matters. Trust me. It would matter to the sheriff, and to that greedy lawyer.”

Claire pressed him to explain, but he refused to say anything more.

They mounted on their horses in silence. Miguel rode with her as far as Circle Star. Then he turned back without a word, leaving her to arrive alone in her tattered gown.

Gomez abandoned his chores by the stable door when he saw her approach. He hurried over to help her down. “Miss Claire. Did you change your mind?”

“No. I didn’t. It’s Mrs. Hartman now.” She gave him a tired smile. “Thank you for the bullets. They did save my life. And I’m no longer married. I’m a widow now.”

She left him to deal with Estrella and walked up to the house. The young ranch hand stared after her with a puzzled expression on his face, as though not quite knowing what to make of her remarks.

Soon he would understand. Soon everyone would know. Gossip had the tenacity to reach far and wide, and Claire had no doubt she would become notorious as the woman who shot her husband on her wedding night and got away with it.

So be it. The most important thing was that her loved ones were safe.

“Claire? What are you doing here?” Susanna raced to meet her through the courtyard. “I was in the kitchen getting Connor a cup of coffee when I saw you through the window. What is it? Did he hurt you again?”

Claire lifted her chin. She would live with it. What else could she do? Life had to go on. “He didn’t hurt me. He’ll never hurt anyone again.”

Then her courage failed, and the tears came. Susanna wound her arms around her and guided her into the house. Somehow, between the racking sobs Claire managed to tell her story, how she had killed Hartman, and how the sheriff had accepted it as an accident.

“He’s gone,” Claire wept. “I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again.”

“Who is gone?”

“The man who healed me when I was hurt. The half-breed in the barn.”

“The half-breed?” Susanna’s voice was hesitant.

Claire raised her tear-stained face. “He healed me, and now he’s gone.” They looked at each other, each suspecting the other knew more about the quiet man than they were saying, but neither daring to voice their thoughts.

“He’ll come back,” Susanna said. “You’ll see.”

“I’ll wait. I’ll go back to the ranch and wait. He might not come back, but I need to be there in case he does.”

And nothing Susanna did or said could persuade Claire to remain at Circle Star.

Chapter Eighteen

Susanna rode on Santiago, with Connor on Brutus by her side. They had set off at early dawn, so they could make the long trip to the north ridge and back in a single day.

It was too soon for Connor to undertake such a strenuous journey, but he refused to be treated like a convalescent. Susanna kept a cautious eye on him as they cantered through the desert. She was aware that Connor noticed her sidelong glances, because he responded with exasperated scowls.

She didn't care. He could sulk and protest all he wanted. If he showed any signs of fatigue, she'd insist they turn back. If necessary she'd make an excuse, claim that she was feeling unwell herself.

The situation was entirely her fault. She'd made a careless comment about how she would like to see the spot where her father died. Frustrated by the enforced idleness until he gained the strength to get back to work, Connor seized upon her words. He insisted they make the trip the very next day. By now, Susanna had learned not to argue when Connor announced a decision, however trivial.

"Have the men found out how you were shot?" she asked when they slowed down to a walk, and could hear each other over the clattering hoofs.

Connor shook his head. "Ramirez swears the bullet came from behind an outcrop around forty yards from where we camped to cook dinner. He went back the following day but found no tracks. The ground was too hard, and whoever shot me had made sure they left no trace."

"Didn't you see or hear anything before you were hit?"

"We saw no riders. We might have heard something, but we weren't paying much attention. We were only an hour away from the house, so we could have heard any number of riders returning to Circle Star for the night. The desert was full of evening noises, and we saw no reason to be on our guard."

"That was careless. Someone had already taken one shot at you." Susanna felt Connor's gaze on her, and instantly regretted her comment.

"We thought that was a stray bullet," he reminded her calmly. "Someone shooting on Hartman's land and not realizing I was there. I'd been sitting down by the river, and then I rose up suddenly. I would have been out of sight for anyone up on the flat."

"You don't believe that any more, do you?"

Connor shrugged. "I believed it then." He gave her a lopsided grin. "And right after I had other things on my mind."

There was a brief silence as they both dwelled on their memories of that day, of how he'd charged up to her room and yanked her out of the bath tub, making love to her for the first time.

"You know it was Hartman, don't you?" Susanna said hoarsely. "He tried to kill you, so that he could come after Circle Star."

"Yes," Connor replied without emotion. "It wasn't difficult to figure that out. And I would have dealt with him, but Claire saw to it that I don't have to." He gave Susanna a quick glance over his shoulder. "I'm grateful for that, but I would have managed without her intervention, and I would have made it a fair fight, so that the sheriff couldn't have made me hang for it."

"The sheriff," Susanna said tartly. "He can't be trusted."

Connor pulled Brutus to a stop. "He let Claire get away with it. You should be thankful to him for that."

"Claire planned it all," Susanna said quietly. "She played the sheriff, Catterill, and Hartman like pieces on a chess board." Her voice fell to a murmur. "I felt so lost when she didn't tell me why she had agreed to the marriage. I was angry with Claire, and all the time she was protecting me."

"And I resented her because I knew she was causing you pain by suddenly becoming so cold and distant," Connor said. "We both misjudged her. I wish I could do more for her now."

"She doesn't want anyone's help," Susanna said bitterly. "Not even mine."

"Do you feel differently about her now that you know what she is capable of? You haven't seen much of her since she moved to Deep Valley."

Susanna shivered. "How do you feel about a friend who risks her life for you? Your love deepens to worship." She tightened her hands over the reins. "I feel we are drifting apart, and it scares me."

"Claire needs time to come to terms with what happened," Connor said. "You need to leave her alone until she is ready to come out of her shell."

Susanna didn't reply. She was too preoccupied watching Connor dismount, while at the same time pretending her only interest was to climb down from Santiago and take a look around her.

His movements were a little stiff, but he appeared in no pain. With a sigh of relief, she looked around her again, this time taking in the arid landscape surrounding them.

Her eyes came to rest on the new well which had flooded out to make a small pond between the barren hillocks. The anxiety she'd fought so hard to suppress in the last few weeks finally overcame her. Her lips trembled, and she tried to hold back a sob. Connor shifted beside her, and then his arm came around her shoulders and he held her close.

"It's all right," he murmured. "You can cry."

"I miss Claire, and I miss my father so much. I wish I hadn't left him. I wish I remembered him better. I wish he hadn't died."

"Claire will come back, and you carry your father inside your heart. That's all that matters." He reached down to play with the loose tendrils around her face, tucking them behind her ears.

Susanna clung to him. "Do you carry me inside your heart?"

"Always," he murmured. He bent to brush a kiss over her lips. "I'll never let you go."

"I was terribly afraid you'd die."

"But I didn't. I'm here, and you are with me."

"Make love to me, Connor." She tilted her face up to him. "Right here, where my father died."

"What? Down on the ground?"

"Yes." Susanna began to unbutton the heavy coat she wore to protect herself against the fierce sun.

"You'll burn your skin."

"I don't care."

"We're out in the open."

She waved her hand in a big arch. "We can see miles around. We'd know if anyone came."

"I can't take my weight on my arm yet."

"Is that why you've been keeping away from me?"

"Partly." He avoided her eyes.

"And the other part?"

"I'm scared to have so much." He gave her a quick glance, then locked his gaze on the horizon. "In the beginning, I was so intent on fighting against loving you that I didn't really stop to think. Now I'm scared. Every time I find happiness, something goes wrong. My parents were killed. Then I left Circle Star and lost you."

"It was my fault."

"No. It was my fault. I should have stayed."

"I never intended to say anything to my father."

He turned to her. Lifting his hand, he dragged his thumb over her soft bottom lip. "What do you think would have happened if you had? Do you think he would have thrown me off Circle Star like you threatened?"

Susanna sniggered. "Are you crazy? This is a man's country, and he adored you. He wanted us to be together. He would have said 'Son, don't you see that she's a bit too young to appreciate your efforts? Leave it for a year or two and try again.' Then he would have laughed at the pair of us behind our backs."

"I think that's partly what's making me so frightened. It overwhelms me to know that he wanted you with me. That he trusted me enough to make me responsible for your happiness. I'm scared of failing his trust."

"Not as long as you love me." By now Susanna had shed her coat and was spreading it on the hard sand. "I want to make love here. This is where he took his last breath. I want him to know that we are together, just like he wanted us to be."

Holding his arm a little stiff, Connor shrugged out of his coat and laid it down beside

hers. "I want you to keep your hat and shirt on. That way you won't burn." He undid his pants and pushed them down his legs, and then he sat down on top of their coats.

Susanna watched him, her eyes shining in anticipation.

Since Connor had been shot, they had been like two children again, laughing, teasing, arguing—getting to know each other by bridging the gap of the long years apart.

Now that she had found the sweet and sensitive boy again, she also wanted the man who could dominate her, who took her with his urgent and aching need, the man who drove her to a heady sensual madness beyond anything she had ever imagined.

She quickly discarded her boots and pants. She had sewn up the middle seam on her cotton drawers to make them more comfortable for riding, and they had to come off, too. She stood over Connor with her thighs and hips bare, wearing only her chemise and shirtwaist blouse and her wide-brimmed hat, trembling as she waited for him to guide her.

"Kneel down over me." His whisper was hoarse, and in the bright sunlight his hard manhood jutted up from the patch of curly hair between his legs.

A knowing smile spread on her lips as she understood. She lowered herself across his thighs, reaching her hand down to capture him, and to guide him into her wet opening as she relaxed her knees and allowed gravity to sheath him inside her. His arms curled around her, his hands pressing on top of her shoulders to force her deeper down over him.

"Never let me go," she whispered into his ear.

"I'll never let you go."

She began to rise and fall, teasing him all the way to the edge of her opening, then gently nudging him back inside and sliding down until she took all of him inside her.

His hands released her shoulders and gripped her waist, guiding her, lifting her.

"I'm riding," she said. "When I was a child, I always wanted to ride a unicorn. This must be it."

Connor laughed softly. "This unicorn would like you to speed up a little."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Slowly she began to flex and tighten her muscles, milking him with her inner walls.

"What in God's name are you doing to me?" he groaned.

"I'm making love to you." She reared up again and slammed down hard over him, again and again. Heat pooled up inside her, hotter and stronger, lifting her senses until each time she took him into her it felt as though she was flying high at the same time as she was falling down.

"Soon," he told her. "I can't hold off much longer."

Susanna threw her head back. She tensed her inner muscles again, gripping him, stroking him, and then the world exploded as she came down over him one final time.

They held each other tight while their heaving bodies grew still. Susanna leaned back and lifted her chin to look at Connor. His hands supported her back, and he bent to press his lips against her exposed throat.

"Do you think your father was watching?" he asked, his voice a husky murmur.

She grinned at him. "He might have averted his eyes a little. I hope."

"What do you think he'd say?"

She lowered her pitch, imitating her father's booming voice. "'I'll be damned if at that rate I won't have myself a grandchild soon.'" She nestled her face against his shoulder. "That's what I think he would say."

He tightened his arms around her. "You sure know how to put pressure on a man."

She wiggled her hips against him, feeling him already growing strong inside her again. "You just keep at it. The harder you try, the more likely you are to succeed."

Connor laughed out loud. "That's what your father used to say when he made me read all those books."

She gave him an innocent look. "I can't see why that pearl of wisdom couldn't be applied more universally."

Then she flexed her inner muscles again, and began to shift up and down over him. "Time for you to try a little harder, husband of mine."

When they were finally sated, Connor refused to let Susanna linger. "It's too hot. We have a long ride in the sun."

"Why do you think Claire needs to be left alone?" Susanna said as she tugged on her denim pants, standing on top of her coat to keep the baking ground from burning the soles of her bare feet.

Connor didn't want Susanna to know how stiff and sore his left side was, so he struggled to pull on his coat, rather than turn to her for help.

"I wish she'd come and live with us," Susanna continued when he didn't reply.

"She wants to stay at the De Santis place, in case that half-breed you told me about comes back." Connor finally managed to slot his arms into the sleeves. He turned to her. "Isn't that what you told me? That he cared for her after Hartman raped her, and now she's hoping he'll come back. She needs to be where she feels closest to him, where he can find her."

Susanna bent to yank on her boots. Connor stepped over to steady her.

"Strange how everyone started calling it De Santis place again as soon as Hartman was dead," Susanna said. "Like Hartman never existed."

"It had been De Santis place for almost a century. It was Deep Valley just over a year."

Susanna straightened and stamped her feet. "These boots are too small. I'll have to get a bigger pair. I can give these to Claire."

"I'll get the horses." Connor turned to scale down the sandy bank over to the pond where the horses had been resting.

"Wait." Susanna looked at her from under her brows. "There's something I haven't told you."

"What?" Fear gripped him as he searched her eyes, trying to read her guarded expression. He'd known something would come. Some disaster always came and destroyed his happiness.

Susanna reached out and laid her hand over his arm, making Connor realize his reaction had betrayed his panic. He carefully made his shoulders relax and his face blank.

"It's about that half-breed." Susanna tightened her fingers over his sleeve. "Did you ever meet him?"

"No, but I saw him at Circle Star on Claire's wedding day. I was getting back on my feet after the shooting. You were talking to him by the kitchen door. I watched you through the window of my bedroom."

"He is Rafael De Santis."

"Rafael De Santis!" Connor exclaimed. "Can't be. That half-breed was old. Rafael only had five years on me. Anyway, he joined the army and died in some skirmish. Pete Jackson told me."

"No. He lived, but he must have been badly injured. He walks with a limp, and his face is furrowed with lines. He looks like an old man."

Connor knew how Burt Harman had acquired the De Santis Ranch. The story was part of neighborhood gossip, and he'd heard it many times from his men. "Do you think Rafael was hanging around, figuring out how to deal with Hartman?" He glanced at her. "Do you think he was planning to kill Hartman, but Claire beat him to it?"

Connor saw Susanna clasp her hands together, a sign of distress he'd learned to watch out for. "That's just it. I'm not sure she did." Susanna took a deep breath. "On Claire's wedding day, Rafael came to me and asked to borrow my gun. It's the same as Claire's. One of a pair. They used to be my father's guns. The following morning I found it at the stables. It was wrapped in a piece of cotton and tied to Santiago's saddle."

"Had it been fired?"

"It was full, but Rafael could have reloaded before he returned the gun." Susanna's eyes shone bright with tears. "I daren't ask Claire. If she killed Hartman, the sheriff is prepared to let her get away with it. If Rafael did it, the sheriff would make him hang for it. If Rafael shot Hartman, he can never come back."

"If Rafael was the killer, the sheriff wouldn't keep quiet about it," Connor said flatly. "It had to be Claire."

"That's what I don't understand," Susanna said. "All I know is that whoever killed Hartman protected us from him. Claire loves Rafael, but she refuses to talk about it. I know that she is waiting for him, but I don't know if he'll ever return. I feel it's all my doing. It is as though I have broken Claire's life into pieces, and I can't put it back together again. I'm to blame, because I invited her here, and that's been the cause of every evil thing that has happened to her."

"It's not your fault," Connor said. A small voice in the back of his mind reminded him of how for thirteen years he had blamed Susanna for something that wasn't her fault. He hoped that Claire would turn out to be more generous in her forgiveness than he had been.

Chapter Nineteen

Claire held the lantern high for her nightly inspection of the stables. Everything appeared calm. The horses were asleep in their stalls, and the big ginger cat she was convinced had never caught a mouse in its lazy life lay curled up on the floor.

"You spoil that cat," she said to Miguel Pereira, who had finished cleaning a saddle and strolled to prop it back on the beam.

Miguel smiled. "Of course I do. She's the lady in my life."

Claire grinned. "I think ginger cats are usually toms."

Miguel's smile widened. "In which case, I love him like a son."

Claire had promised to herself that she wouldn't ask him about Rafael. She made the same promise every morning, and every night she broke it. "No news?"

"You know that I'd tell you as soon as old Squint is back from the post office." There was a subtle reproach in Miguel's voice.

"Of course," Claire said. "I was just...."

Miguel waited, until he was sure she'd stopped talking. Then he sighed. "I'll write to Mr. and Mrs. De Santis again, if you like. Ask them about the boy, in case he's been in touch."

"Could you do that, please?" Claire pleaded. "I would really appreciate it." She lowered the lantern and walked back through the cobbled courtyard into the house.

Running the ranch gave her an interest that dulled the ache inside her, and Claire had thrown herself into the task. It kept her busy, and she told herself she was doing it for Rafael, making sure everything was perfect for him when he returned.

She discovered old Miguel Pereira had been the foreman during the De Santis days, and to the man's great delight she restored him to that position. Pete Jackson lent them six ranch hands from Circle Star. Miguel tracked down a group of eight competent men riding through Cedar City, and when offered a job, four of them decided to stay. The other four had said they might come back, if they didn't like what they found in California.

The Vega bothers had sent a telegram to a friend in Denver, who wanted to be closer to his aging parents in Old Mexico. The man had ridden down with two others, adding three more to their number along the way.

Little by little, they were building back to full strength.

When Claire learned Miguel Pereira kept in touch with old Mr. and Mrs. De Santis, she asked for their address, and she wrote to them, offering to sell the ranch back to them at the same price Burt Hartman had paid for it. She was still waiting for an answer.

She would write again. This time, she would explain that Susanna would lend them the money, and they could pay back the loan by selling Hartman's furniture and antiques, which

would fetch a good price in San Francisco or San Diego.

Claire waited, hoping each morning that Rafael would come. Each night, she went to bed with an aching heart. Then it got to a point where she could no longer ignore the changes in her body. The suspicion she'd been trying to ignore turned into certainty, and the fear of future overshadowed her longing for Rafael's return.

Although Claire had planned to ride out to Circle Star and tell Susanna first, she met Miguel at the stables when she went to saddle Estrella. Susanna had given the horse to her, calling it a wedding present. When Claire had grimaced in dismay, Susanna had called it a widow present instead, and they had laughed about it until tears streamed down their cheeks.

"I need to talk to you," Claire said to Miguel. "The office would be better than here."

Miguel nodded. He followed her into the house.

Once they were seated, she got straight to the point. "I'm going to have a baby."

The old man stared at her and gave a heavy nod.

"I can keep it a secret for another month. Then it will begin to show."

Claire saw the question in Miguel's eyes, but she knew he would never ask. She chose not to offer a reply.

"I had a letter last night," Miguel said.

Claire leaned across the table, half rising out of her seat. "You promised you'd tell me at once."

Miguel shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "Old Squint stopped by the saloon. He came back late and forgot to give me the letter. I only got it this morning."

"And?"

"Mr. De Santis has written to you. You should receive the letter any day now. He's riding out with the money to buy back the ranch. He's going to Cedar City to make the payment to your lawyer."

"That's good news," Claire said. "Did he mention Rafael?"

Miguel shook his head. "No. But he said he expects you to be gone by the time he gets here. He wants full possession of the ranch as soon as the money is paid over to the lawyer. He's bringing the full amount in cash."

"I see." Claire swallowed.

"I'm sorry," Miguel said. "I'll tell Mr. De Santis."

"No." Her voice was sharp. "I don't want any mention about anyone other than my husband. As far as anyone is concerned, I'm a widow expecting my late husband's child. Is that understood?"

Miguel nodded. Claire looked into his eyes and saw that she had answered his unvoiced question anyway, and he understood either Rafael or Hartman could be the father of her unborn child.

"I'll talk to Mr. De Santis," Miguel offered. "Explain how it was between you and Hartman. All he knows is that you are the widow of the man who ruined him and stole his son's

heritage.”

“No.” Claire rose to her feet and let out a deep sigh. “Thank you for the offer, but no. This way is better.” She hugged her arms around her. “The ranch is just a small part of Hartman’s property. There are railroad stocks, a tenement building in Chicago, shares in a silver mine, plenty of cash. I’m a wealthy woman. I can look after myself.”

“That’s not what you are about, Miss Claire.”

“Then what am I about, Miguel?”

His voice was gruff. “You are a woman who has suffered and needs someone to hold her at night. Someone to stand by you when the baby comes.”

“Even if it might not be his baby?” Claire said lightly.

“I reckon so.”

She sighed again, her shoulders sinking in defeat. “I’m going to stay at Circle Star until the baby arrives. I’ll be there, in case he comes back. Once the baby is born, it will be easier to make a decision.”

“I’m telling you this, so that you know.” Miguel looked troubled. “I saw the boy here on the night Hartman died. And if I saw him, there are others that might have seen him too. The boy knows that.”

“I don’t understand,” Claire said. “If he was here, so were dozens of other people. Why would that matter?”

Miguel’s gaze didn’t waver. “But none of the others were seen climbing out of your window while you were in the parlor waiting for the sheriff to arrive.”

Claire cried out. The room spun and she swayed a little. Miguel grabbed her arms and forced her to sit down. “The armoire,” she said, her voice trembling. “The armoire was locked with no key, and then later it was open, and there was a key in the lock.”

“He was hiding there?”

“I think he must have guessed what I was planning to do. He wanted to make sure I was safe.”

“He didn’t kill Hartman?”

“Of course not!” She stared at him. “Is that what people think?” She fell silent. Then she spoke quietly. “I had planned it all. The only reason I married Hartman was to get close to him. I made sure that the sheriff knew he had promised to leave me alone at night. Then I made equally sure that Hartman wouldn’t keep his promise. And I shot him, just as I intended to.”

“Jesus,” Miguel said. “I thought it was the boy.”

Claire shook her head slowly. “He wanted to protect me. To be there, just in case I messed it up.” She buried her head in her hands. “I wish I had just walked away. Let Hartman live and gloat over what he did. We could have gone away together.”

“What about Circle Star? What would have happened to your friends there if Harman had lived?”

Claire lowered her hands and looked at Miguel. “I had forgotten about that.”

“See.” Miguel patted her hand. “You had to do it. The sheriff has accepted it was an accident. All we need now is for the boy to come back and everything will be fine.”

“Yes,” Claire whispered. “He’ll come back, and everything will be fine.”

They faced each other, and Claire knew that neither of them believed what they had just said.

* * * *

“Oh my God!” Susanna screamed, bouncing up and down in excitement. “Me, too! We can go through it together. Compare how we feel and comfort each other. I was going to tell you earlier, but I wasn’t sure.”

“What does Connor think?”

“He is thrilled. If he wasn’t worried about his manliness, he’d be knitting booties by now.” Then comprehension dawned on Susanna. She clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide as saucers.

“I’m getting to hate that look,” Claire said.

“What look?”

“The look people get when they realize that I’m expecting a baby for the man who raped me and whom I shot dead.”

“I thought it could be Rafael’s. I thought that you and he...you know.”

“Don’t mention his name,” Claire said with a quick glance around.

“I’m sorry. I forgot. You do know who he is, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Claire gave Susanna a sidelong glance. “And we did...you know.” She blushed, pulling a face to conceal her embarrassment. “And it was every bit as wonderful as you told me.”

“The baby?”

Claire shrugged, trying to appear unconcerned. “There’s no way of knowing. It was only three days after Hartman raped me. I won’t know until the child is born.”

“Maybe not even then. You are fair. Even if Rafael were the father, the child might be fair.”

“I know. Maybe I’ll never be able to tell.” Claire attempted a bright smile. “It doesn’t matter. I’m going to love this child, even if it turns out to be green and purple.”

They looked each other, and knew that they were both thinking of the same question. She could love the child, but if Rafael came back, could he love a child fathered by his enemy?

* * * *

“Juana! Juana!” Claire dragged herself down the hall, calling for the new maid. She found the girl standing at the dining room window, staring dreamily through the glass.

“Juana,” Claire said gently. There were times when the girl didn’t seem to recognize her own name. Claire had her theories about that, although she hadn’t shared them with anyone else.

“Miss Claire?” The girl spun around, her face a mask of fear.

“It’s all right,” Claire soothed her. What was it with that girl? Everything sent her scurrying like a frightened rabbit – the sound of a gunshot, a rider arriving after dark, a letter

with her name addressed on it in spindly writing. Claire had her own theories about that too, but she was keeping them to herself.

“I was just getting breakfast ready,” Juana said.

Claire moved to stand next to the girl by the window. “I love the light at this time of day. It makes me think of a painting by Goya.”

“I know,” Juana replied with an absent nod. “And then the sun rises higher and it turns into a Cezanne.”

Claire glanced over, exploring the girl’s face. Servants didn’t usually talk about art with such knowledge. Juana’s skin was light for a Mexican, and her high forehead and high-bridged nose gave her a look of someone who belonged in ancient times. For once, the girl’s expression appeared serene, and there were no dark shadows under her eyes.

Juana had been with them at Circle Star for a month now, and although the girl applied herself diligently to her kitchen chores, it was clear the tasks were new to her and required much practice before she mastered them. She tired easily, but insisted on carrying on until the work was done.

“I was sick in my wash-bowl,” Claire explained. “When you are done here, could you go and clean it up? I’d do it myself, but I’m afraid the smell would just set me off again.”

“Please, Miss Claire.” Juana reached out to lay a hand on her arm, then seemed to realize it wasn’t an appropriate gesture for a kitchen maid. She withdrew her hand and lowered her gaze. “Of course I’ll do it, Miss Claire. I want to help.”

“Thank you, Juana.” Claire glanced at the table behind them and grimaced. “I think I’ll skip breakfast. Maybe I’ll be able to eat something later. I’ll go and sit in the garden.”

Behind the house stood a small sanctuary Connor had prepared for the pregnant women. A canvas canopy had been rigged up to provide shelter from the fierce sun. A table and benches stood underneath, and because of the dry desert climate cushions and shawls could be left out overnight without them getting damp with dew.

Claire waddled over and flopped down on a bench. A little breeze always seemed to blow through the tunnel formed by the canvas canopy and the wall behind. She leaned back, breathing in the fresh air.

With a little sob, Claire huddled down against the cushions. She was fighting so hard not to feel bitter. Connor and Susanna remained cocooned in their mutual love that seemed to grow stronger every day. Compared to their happiness, her life was in ruins.

Her lover had vanished off the face of the earth. His parents had moved back to their old home, but they hated the name she bore through her infinitesimally brief marriage. She was expecting a child not knowing whether its father was the man she loved, or the one she despised.

All that she could have accepted, but when Susanna bloomed like a rose with her pregnancy, and Claire spent much of her time throwing up into a porcelain bowl, it was difficult to remain noble.

Thanksgiving and Christmas had passed in a blur. She wrote to her parents, telling them

about her brief marriage and vaguely referring to a shooting accident which had left her a widow. Fortunately, Susanna had never worked up enough courage to write the letter claiming Claire was dead. At least there was one positive aspect, one piece of good luck. Everything else in her life was as bleak as it could be.

Claire closed her eyes, and mercifully sleep came and gave her a brief respite from her somber thoughts.

* * * *

“Claire! Wake up, Claire.”

Claire fluttered her eyes open. Susanna leaned over her, shaking her shoulder with an impatient grip, her face glowing with excitement.

“What is it?” Claire muttered. “Has your baby moved?”

They had carefully compared each sensation in their changing bodies. Susanna usually experience anything new first, since her pregnancy, upon their own calculation, which they trusted better than anything old Doctor Foster said, was two weeks more advanced.

It was their bad luck that Doctor Foster was the only physician in Cedar City. Claire and Susanna debated whether to trust him, or travel to Tucson for their confinement, or whether to ignore modern medicine altogether and rely upon Carmen, the sturdy cook who claimed to have helped a dozen babies into the world without ever encountering any trouble during the process.

“It’s Mr. and Mrs. De Santis,” Susanna told her, sounding frantic. “They’ve come to visit. Their son is with them.”

The world stood still around Claire. Even the birds seemed to cease their singing, and the strength of the sun faded in the sky. “Rafael?” she whispered.

“They only have one son.” Susanna snatched up a cushion that blocked the way and motioned for Claire to rise. “Remember, you’ve never seen him before. He is a stranger to you. Do you think you can handle that?”

Claire drew herself up. “Do you really think you need to ask? Do you think I wish to bring danger on him? Or embarrass him in front of his parents, if he doesn’t want me any more.” She pressed her hand over her swelling midriff.

“Come.” Susanna took her elbow, and arm in arm they walked through the house into the parlor.

Claire didn’t even have to pretend. Her gaze brushed past the smartly clad young man with short hair and a neatly trimmed beard, until it landed on an elderly couple, sitting side by side on the sofa. Their posture was proud and stiff, in a manner which hinted at their reluctance to be there at all.

Susanna introduced the guests, but Claire wasn’t listening. Her mind appeared to have shut down.

“We are very sorry we haven’t come to thank you before,” Mr. De Santis said, rising to his feet. “First we didn’t know what had happened between you and Burt Hartman, and when Miguel Pereira told us, we were too ashamed to come and see you. We threw you out with short

notice, after you so generously offered to restore our property to us. It was our son who insisted that we must seek your forgiveness for how badly we have behaved. He has just returned home after a long illness.”

Claire listened to his melodic voice and struggled to take in the words. Her gaze carried on past the old couple, but there was nobody else in the room. Slowly, she turned back to the young man. His black eyes captured hers.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her fingers skimmed up to her neck where the beaded leather thong lay hidden under her collar. Suddenly something moved inside her, like a small fluttering. Claire cried out. Her legs gave and the floor tilted up to her. Just like once before, Rafael rushed up and caught her in his arms as she fell.

“The baby,” she whispered, staring up at him, her eyes full of wonder. “I just felt the baby move.” She buried her face against his chest, bursting into tears.

“I’m sorry,” Susanna said, but the words sounded muffled and far away. “These are emotional times for both of us.”

“I remember how it was when I was expecting Rafael,” Mrs. De Santis said. “Everything would send me blubbing, even something as trivial as a sad story in the newspaper.”

Mr. De Santis cleared his throat. “Son, if your mother moves over to the chair, you can put Miss Claire down here on the sofa.”

“I don’t think he wants to put her down.” The old woman sounded pleased. “He looks kind of thunderstruck to me.”

“Why don’t I take her upstairs to her room?” Rafael said. “Susanna, will you show me the way?”

Claire was swept up the stairs, in the soft darkness, her face pressed against Rafael’s warmth, the familiar scent of him sending a yearning through her. Susanna held the door open for them, and then closed it with a quiet whisper that she would wait outside.

“I’m sorry,” Rafael murmured as he lowered her on the bed. “I had to stay away, until I was sure people wouldn’t recognize me.” He stroked his beard. “What do you think?”

“Your eyes are the same.”

“My limp was the biggest problem. I’ve had surgery, and I wear special shoes to equalize the height. Most people don’t notice it now.”

“Why? Why is it so important that no one knows?”

Rafael frowned at her. “I need to go back downstairs. It won’t look proper if I stay too long.” He glanced at her heavy stomach. “Can you ride?”

“I don’t want to take any chances with the baby.”

“Take the buggy then. Meet me at the barn tomorrow morning, as soon as it gets light.”

“I can’t—”

He was gone before she could finish her sentence.

Chapter Twenty

Claire rose at dawn, after a night which gave her little sleep. Today she would find out. Today her future would be settled. Her heart beat frantically against her ribs.

Rafael had said nothing to her yesterday about his feelings. He hadn't told her he loved her. He had made no comment about her pregnant state, apart from the practical question of whether it would prevent her from riding out to the barn.

She dressed in a loose gown of lavender silk, one of the few she'd been able to alter to fit her expanding girth. Through the window, she saw the sun already climbing in the sky. She started down the stairs with her increasingly awkward gait.

Rafael stood waiting for her at the bottom of the steps.

"What are you doing here?" Claire stopped, her hand clutching the banister. "I was supposed to meet you at the barn."

"You can't be seen arriving alone. My mother has gone out there. She has this idea in her head that I'll be getting married soon. She is going to have the old house rebuilt, so that they can live there, and I can have the new house by the river for my family."

Claire stared at him, her brows drawing together. "She is there now, making plans?"

Rafael grinned. "You don't know my mother. She has already had hundreds of gallons of water pumped up from the river to revive the dried-up gardens."

Claire shook her head, feeling a little lost.

"We need to talk," Rafael said. "Where can we be private?"

"I've asked for the buggy to be prepared," she told him. "We could drive somewhere. There's nowhere in the house. There are too many people around."

Rafael took her arm and guided her through the yard, like any polite gentleman would assist a pregnant woman unsteady on her feet.

As they rolled along the gravel track, the motion of the buggy unsettled Claire's stomach. "Stop," she cried, clutching Rafael's arm to make sure he'd heard. "I'm feeling sick."

Rafael halted the horse. Claire leaned away from him, breathing deeply. God, she didn't want to be sick in front of him. They couldn't be many less attractive sights than a woman retching out the remains of last night's dinner.

Rafael watched Claire, trying to hide his concern. Her skin appeared like marble, and despite her advanced pregnancy she looked terribly thin, so completely unlike how her soft curves used to be.

"Is something wrong?" he said. "Is there a problem with the baby?"

Claire shook her head, keeping her eyes closed. Her shoulders heaved as she drew deep

breaths. "It will pass soon," she murmured. "It's the motion of the buggy."

"We shouldn't have come," Rafael said anxiously. "I'll take you back."

"No!" Her eyes flew open and fixed upon his face. "We need to talk. I..."

"What?" he prompted, but Claire didn't reply. He reached out and gently pushed the loose curls away from her brow. Her skin felt cool and moist. That surely was a good sign, an indication that nothing serious could be wrong with her health.

"We'll talk," he promised. "But first I need to know that you are all right. Are you well? Do you have nightmares?" He tied the reins to the front of the buggy, so that he could lift both his hands to cradle her face. "I'm sorry that I couldn't be there for you. I had to disappear."

"I know," Claire said. "You were seen. Miguel Pereira told me."

Rafael paused for a second. He had thought about it a thousand times, trying to decide how much to tell Claire. He released her face and lowered his hands until they rested on his knees. Leveling his eyes on the horizon, he spoke in measured tones. "I had a problem getting out. When I went in, everyone was watching the wedding ceremony. Afterwards, I didn't dare to wait for everyone to go to bed. There was a chance that someone would come into your bedroom to look at the body."

"The armoire?" Claire said.

"Yes."

"Did you kill him?"

Rafael nodded. The decision was only made in that instant. He worried more about her guilty conscience than about his own safety, and he wanted Claire to know that she hadn't committed the mortal sin of murder. "Yes. I killed him. I understood what you were planning, but I couldn't be sure you could do it. I wanted to be there, just in case. I'm glad I was. He would have killed you, or raped you again."

"I was afraid you'd lie to me, to keep me from worrying over what could happen if the sheriff finds out."

"Did you know?" He glanced at her. "Did you know I was there?"

"I was fairly certain I had only fired two shots." A wry smile twisted Claire's lips. "And even now, after six months of practice, I can barely hit the side of a barn. It was unlikely I had shot Hartman cleanly through the temple."

Rafael returned her smile. "You caught him between the legs. At least that's what I've been told. I find it quite fitting."

"I don't understand." Claire's brows knitted together. "The sheriff says I fired three shots. What happened exactly?"

"It was so easy." Rafael shook his head in disbelief. "I fired one shot. I tried to make it simultaneous with yours, so that people would hear it as one, but I was too late."

"I thought it was an echo."

"An experienced gunman would know. Your first shot missed. I had planned to dig the bullet out of the wall, but I knew the sheriff would find out that three shots had been fired. You

saved me by leaving your gun on the bed. I took the spent shell out of mine and put it into yours. You had an empty slot because you had dropped one of the bullets. I searched until I found the bullet on the floor and I put it into mine. It looked like I hadn't fired at all, and you had fired three shots. I was using Susanna's gun. I had borrowed it, so that if I had to shoot, I'd be using a gun identical to yours."

"I'd forgotten that when you shoot something is left behind in the gun, so you can tell it has been fired. I only recalled that later."

"Only the bullet flies out. The empty shell stays in the gun. If people could count three shots, you had to have three empty shells in your gun." Rafael shook his head again. "It was so close. If you had taken your gun with you when you walked out of the room, the sheriff would have known."

Claire stared at him. "What do we do now?"

"We do nothing. No one can prove you didn't shoot Hartman, and even if someone did suspect a half-breed by the name of Rain Cloud, he has disappeared. There is no way people can link me to him. I arrived to stay with my parents a few months after they bought the ranch back from you."

"You will stay?"

"I will stay." Rafael took her hand and examined the wedding ring on her finger. "Is this mine or Hartman's?"

"It's yours," Claire told him softly. "I didn't accept his. No one has ever questioned why I wear a wedding ring despite refusing it during the ceremony. "

"I wanted to you to be wearing my ring in case things went wrong and you died." He gave a bitter laugh. "I allowed you to face death, but I worried about some token to declare that you belonged to me." His grip on her hand tightened. "I should have stopped you. I'll never forgive myself for putting you in danger like that."

Claire shook her head at him, her expression serious. "It was my destiny. You said I needed to go and find my destiny."

"I had pretended to be an Indian long enough to start thinking like one." He stroked her cheek again. She looked so fragile, her eyes a clear blue in the bright sun, and her pale skin so translucent he could see the veins beneath. "Why should you want me to stay?" he asked her gently. "I'm a murderer. You are a beautiful and wealthy young widow. The only thing I own is the ranch, and that's only because of your generosity. I'm an aging soldier with a damaged leg."

"You are my destiny."

Rafael smiled despite the tension inside him. "You can't claim to have a destiny. You don't have a single drop of Indian blood in you."

"Indians don't have monopoly on superstition," Claire said tartly. "And you are only a murderer because I'm such a lousy shot."

"Are you sure?" He bent to kiss her forehead.

"I'm sure," Claire replied, but Rafael felt her flinch away from him.

“Are you sure?” he asked her again. This time he tried to kiss her lips, but Claire turned so that his mouth met her cheek instead. A troubled expression clouded her eyes.

Claire sat beside Rafael in the buggy and fought to remain calm. She turned to him but kept her back rigid, so that she didn’t lean into him. His hands shifted up and with a gentle touch he traced down along her shoulders and over breasts. She jolted, letting out a startled cry.

“Did I hurt you?” Rafael whispered. His mouth pressed against the side of her neck. “What is it?”

“My breasts. They are swollen and tender because of the baby.”

“The baby.” His fingers traveled down to her stomach. “When is it due?”

“End of June.” She avoided looking at him. “You realize, don’t you, that it could be Hartman’s as well as yours? You saw what he did to me.”

“I know.” Rafael stroked her bump in a smooth circle, the way Claire herself did when she was tense. “What does it feel like?” he murmured.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you. How does it feel? Does it hurt? You said the baby moved yesterday. How did that feel?”

Claire leaned away from him. “We need to talk about it.”

His eyes were black, as inscrutable as ever. “What is there to talk about?”

“What if it is Hartman’s child?”

“Any child of yours is a child of mine. I don’t care.”

Claire stared back at him, her shoulders stiffening. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.” He took her hands in his. “Hartman is dead. He cannot hurt you any more, and I’ll be damned if I let him hurt you indirectly through an innocent child. I hope you haven’t spent the last few months brooding about that.”

Claire lowered her eyes.

“You fool.” Rafael caught her chin and lifted it up until he could scrutinize her face. “Whatever this child will look like, there’ll be a cause to rejoice. If it is a blond child, you don’t have to make any excuses or explanations. If it is a dark child, we’ll know it’s mine, but you’ll have to explain to my parents about your little adventure with a half-breed Indian.”

“Oh my God!” Claire pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes going huge. “Do you think they’ll absolutely hate me?”

“They might be angry at first, thinking you’ve deceived everyone, until they realize the child looks like me. Then they’ll just be confused. It will give them something to do in their old age, trying to figure it out.”

“It’s yours,” Claire said. “I know it is.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“The way it kicked yesterday when I saw you. I think it recognized its father.”

“We’ll see,” Rafael said calmly. “Whichever way it turns out, it will be the child’s

destiny.”

“See?” Claire said deliberately. “It has to be yours. You said only Indians are entitled to have a destiny.”

Rafael broke into a grin. “I can see that living with you isn’t going to be easy.”

Claire frowned at him, looking annoyed. “I’m no docile squaw. I’m an independent woman with my own mind.”

“We’ll see about that.” Rafael reached for the reins and snapped the horse to a walk. “Let’s find out if my mother is still at the barn making plans. I want her to get used to seeing you with me.”

* * * *

Wisps of haze hung over the withered gardens of the old homestead as puddles on the ground evaporated in the late morning heat. Claire looked around. Dead plants had been gathered into ragged heaps, ready for burning.

“Your mother has done all this on her own?” she asked in awe. Her heart beat a little unsteadily as she thought what a formidable adversary such a determined woman would be, should she decide that her son had been tricked into an unsuitable marriage.

Rafael gave her a sidelong glance as he brought the buggy to a stop. “Not on her own. My father helped, and he bribed the Vega brothers to come by every morning and every night to operate the pump for an hour.”

“Oh? What did he offer them?”

“An extra day off every week, as long as they keep watering the gardens.” Rafael scaled down the steep step from the buggy. He circled to Claire’s side. She watched him approach and realized she wouldn’t have noticed how he favored his good leg if she hadn’t been paying such close attention.

“That’s how it is with us De Santis men.” Rafael gazed up at her. “We do everything in our power to keep our women happy, to give them what they want.”

When he reached to lift her down, Claire propped her hands over his shoulders and kept her arms rigid to hold their bodies apart. “I don’t have a waist any more for you to put your hands around,” she said wistfully. “I’m like a balloon.”

“It will be over soon, darling. Only three more months.”

She searched his face, wondering if he was aware that it was the first time he had addressed her with a casual endearment. He was changing, she realized. The mystical aloofness of the half-breed Indian had been replaced with the easy manner of an educated man.

“Your mother must have gone home,” Claire said, craning her neck to scan the landscape. “There’s no one here.”

“Maybe she’s in the barn.” Rafael put her down, waiting to release his grip until she was standing firm. “Let’s look inside.”

Claire glanced back at the horse, and determined he wouldn’t walk off, despite being left untied. Head drooping, he nosed eagerly into the nearest puddle of water.

She hurried after Rafael. He pulled open the double doors into the barn and she followed him through. After the bright sunlight, the interior felt like a cool dark cavern.

"He's been here," Claire cried. Her eyes darted around, taking in the clutter on the table, and the bed with a colorful Indian blanket over a layer of straw. Clothes hung from the nails hammered into the wall.

"Not him," Rafael said. He turned to her and cradled her face between his hands, searching her eyes. "Me." He paused for a while as he continued to look at her. "I'm not a stranger. I'm the man who loved you here, who healed your pain after you'd been hurt."

Claire lowered her head. Instead of seeing her feet, she saw the swell of her rounded belly. It reminded her of the enormity of everything that had happened to her in the past six months.

"I know that," she whispered.

"I want to remind you anyway," Rafael told her. He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms, until he could lace his fingers into hers. "Come." He began to lead her towards the bed.

Instinctively, he knew that in some strange way, Claire had detached the past from the present, and held the memory of Rain Cloud in her heart as something separate from him. Unless he could change that, she would never love him the way he wanted her to. Some part of her would always be closed to him, reserved for the memory of the half-breed Indian who had disappeared without a trace.

Rafael couldn't bear the thought of sharing her with someone else, even if the other man was a part of him. He needed her to see the two men as one, to give him now the same love and passion she'd given to him during those three days six months ago. He needed to stop her from drawing a line between the past and the present, between Rain Cloud the half-breed Indian and Rafael De Santis the gentleman soldier and rancher.

Claire took halting steps, allowing him to guide her, until they reached the narrow cot lined up against the wall. He pushed her a little further, so that she tumbled down to sit on the edge of the bed.

"There," he murmured, crouching down to remove her flimsy satin shoes. Then he slipped one arm under her shoulders, one arm behind her knees, and swung her to lie down on the bed.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"I'm reminding you of how it can be between us."

"You can't. Not here." Her hands pressed flat against his chest, pushing him away. He could hear her breathing. It had turned fast and shallow, and alarm flashed in her eyes.

"I can," he told her gently. "We can. I'll close the door. No one will come."

He left her for a few seconds to push the door closed and bar it on the inside with the heavy beam he lifted off the floor and slotted into brackets, anchoring it firmly into place.

“Do you remember,” he asked her softly when he returned to her side. “The light was about the same. It was dark outside, but we had two lamps burning.”

“I was hurting,” Claire whispered.

“You were hurting.” Rafael smoothed the loose tendrils back from her brow.

“You gave me mescal to drink,” Claire said dreamily.

“You don’t need that now. Just think back. Trust your memory.”

He watched as her lids fluttered down, the long lashes dark crescents against the pale skin. “My head was swimming,” she murmured.

“Your skin was sore.”

“I was hurting.”

Quickly Rafael rose and crossed over to the table. He picked up the half-empty jar of aloe salve and twisted open the lid. “Do you remember the smell?” He held the open jar in front of her face. The better he could engage all her senses, the more likely it was that he could bring together the past and the present in her mind.

He watched her breasts rise and fall as she breathed in the scent. The longing inside him grew almost unbearable, a deep ache that made his body shudder, but he knew he had to keep everything slow and dreamy, just like it had been that first time.

“It soothed my skin.”

He closed the jar and walked to place it back on the table and then he returned, kneeling by the side of the bed. “I told you that you had to find a new life if you wanted to close the door on your past.

“You told me I had to meet my destiny.”

“I am your destiny,” Rafael murmured. “When you walked through the door to give up your past, I came with you. I’m your future as well as your past.”

He watched her eyes flutter open, as clear blue as the summer sky. “I’ve been so afraid you wouldn’t come back.”

He gave her a gentle smile. “I could not have stayed away from you.” Leaning over, he kissed her mouth. When he felt her respond, the anxiety inside him began to ebb.

“Do you remember?” he whispered. “You belong to me.”

“I remember.” Her eyes were wide open now, and her lips curved into a dreamy smile. “Rafael.” She reached out and pushed her fingers into his hair. “I remember everything.”

“I’ll give you everything a man can give to a woman.”

Her smile grew wider. “You can start by growing out your hair and shaving off that scratchy beard.”

Rafael De Santis threw his head back and laughed as he recognized he had just experienced the happiest moment of his life.

Chapter Twenty One

“Breathe,” Susanna said. “Breathe. It’s almost over.”

“How do you know?” Claire grunted. “Having one baby a week ago doesn’t make you an expert in childbirth.”

“I can see the head,” Carmen said. “Push. Push.”

Claire tightened her grip around the cotton sheet Carmen had tied to the bedstead. When the next contraction sliced through her body, she tore at the cloth with all her might, screaming at the top of her lungs.

“It’s coming,” Carmen said. “I can see the baby’s head.”

“You already said that.” Claire used the brief respite to take a few puffing breaths. “Is it moving?”

“It’s moving. Push.”

The next contraction started almost as soon as the previous one was over. Claire screamed again.

“Are you all right?” Rafael asked. Claire could see him hovering uncertainly behind Carmen. For once, his calm had been shattered.

“Of course I’m not all right. I’m giving birth.” She let go off the sheet and reached out, until Rafael edged past Carmen and took her hand.

“It will be over soon.” He stroked her fingers. “We’ll love this baby no matter what.”

Claire pushed with every ounce of strength she had left in her exhausted body. She wanted this baby out, she wanted the pain to end, but she was also afraid to know.

“Push,” Carmen urged.

“Stop saying that,” Claire said tartly. “I’m pushing as hard as I can.” She strained, until she felt the blood vessels in her face expand with the pressure. Something moved between her legs, and the pain eased. Claire fell back against the pillows as the urgent wail of a newborn infant filled the room.

Carmen was busy at the base of the bed but Rafael remained beside her. “It’s over, darling. Rest now.” He smoothed her damp curls and leaned in to press a kiss against her forehead.

“It’s a healthy baby,” Carmen declared.

Claire closed her eyes. “Someone please tell me.”

“It’s a boy,” Susanna said. “What do we do now? Two boys. They can’t marry each other the way we planned.”

Claire gave a tired chuckle and opened her eyes again. She found Rafael hovering over her, his gentle face smiling down at her. “Tell me,” she pleaded.

“It’s not important.”

“I know. But tell me anyway.” She tried to rise up on her elbows, but there wasn’t enough strength left in her body.

Rafael released her hand and moved down to the end of the bed. Claire watched as he curled his arms over the bundle Carmen held out to him. Then he turned to her again. His face remained serene as he carried the child swathed inside a blanket. Claire could see nothing past the folds of the thick fabric.

“We’ve got us a little Apache brave,” Rafael told her. He pulled aside the edge of the blanket to reveal a tiny wrinkled creature with olive skin and a damp thatch of black hair. Then the baby blinked, and Claire saw a pair of dark liquid eyes.

“I can’t wait to hear how you’ll explain this to my mother,” Rafael said, shaking his head in tender amusement.

Then he lowered the baby into her arms, and Claire smiled at him through her tears.

The End

About the Author

Tatiana March learned to read at four, and since then no other pastime has matched the thrill of being transported to other worlds. She took up fiction writing six years ago while taking a break from her job as a senior director in a large international corporation.

Tatiana lives in the UK near the river Thames. She loves to travel and has lived in several European countries, as well as spending time in the US. One of her favourite destinations is Arizona, the setting of her historical romance *Circle Star*.

When Tatiana is not reading or writing, she enjoys hiking, camping, and watching old movies on TV. She is hopeless at housework and can barely cook to keep from starvation. She used to like clothes, and fussing about her hair, but the older she gets the more she has realised that good looks matter less than a kind heart.

Circle Star is her first full length novel accepted for publication. She is working on several other manuscripts, both historical romance and contemporary romantic suspense.