

**Denyse M.
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A man with long dark hair, wearing a dark cowboy hat and an open, light-colored shirt, is shown from the chest up. He is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a dramatic sunset or sunrise with warm orange and yellow clouds and a bright sun low on the horizon.

**A
Safer
Haven**

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by Denyse M. Bridger

Amber Quill Press, LLC

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## **A SAFER HAVEN**

They'd been traveling for days, across the vast rolling plains of Kansas and Nebraska, en route to the newly established town of Wind River, in Wyoming. Elizabeth Davis was weary and edgy, a condition that worsened with every mile. Across the small space in the jostling stagecoach sat the only other occupant, his lazy manner an irritation to her on more levels than she could clearly define. She'd been traveling west for arduous, lonely weeks, having begun her journey in Chicago. She'd spent a few days in St. Louis, waiting to go on, and when they'd finally left Missouri, the coach had been full. Each stop saw the departure of another soul, until only she and the stranger, a man named Chris McQuade, remained.

He was dozing now, his face only partly hidden by the fashionable Stetson hat that he'd pulled low on his forehead, and she was able to thoroughly peruse his presence. He was a tall man, well over six feet, and when they'd left St. Louis, she'd also reluctantly admitted he was a truly handsome man, as well. Several of the young women who'd traveled with them earlier in the trip had flirted outrageously with him, and he'd returned their interest with the careless enjoyment of a man well used to the attention paid him by the fairer sex.

He looked slightly scruffier now, not the polished gentleman he'd been at the start of the long journey. He had ebony-dark hair, cut shorter than most men wore it, with the back barely touching his collar. When they were open, his

eyes were a deep, dark soulful brown. She suspected he saw everything around him without effort, and the searching probe of his gaze had fallen on her more than once in the past few days. An air of dangerous alertness surrounded him at all times, a cloak that he wore naturally, invisible to the eye but as solidly in place as the distant range of mountains. She'd hadn't dared to ask why he traveled so far west, and he hadn't spoken much to her since the last couple had left them the previous morning in a small town called Silver Springs.

Dark, well-fitting trousers encased long legs, and were tucked into expensive leather boots trimmed with silver. His coat was of the same fine fabric as the pants, and he wore a plain, white shirt, though again of a cut and quality that spoke of money spent on vanity. At his hip, as if it were part of him, a silver pistol rested, a .44 caliber Peacemaker; the ivory handle looked smooth and well-used.

Elizabeth had thought him a gunfighter when she'd first seen him. After listening to him charm the other women they'd shared the coach with, she'd lost all perspective about him, and now was simply consumed with her own curiosity. The men who had been in the coach with them had been wary of him, watching all he did, careful in all they said in his vicinity. It took her some time to realize they were vaguely afraid of him, not just ill at ease with his arrogance. She blamed the long journey and the lack of companionship for her present preoccupation with him. But part of her already knew that was a lie, designed to keep her safely apart from the deeper reasons for her interest; the more honest voice of her heart knew how deeply attracted to him she'd become.

"Somethin' I can do for you, ma'am?"

She gasped, the reaction beyond her control, as his dark eyes opened and locked with hers. Like everything else about him, Elizabeth's response to his voice bordered on hysterically intense. She shuddered, then, knowing he saw the quiver that rippled her body and shook her fingers, she clasped her hands tightly together in her lap.

"I wasn't aware you were awake, Mr. McQuade," she replied, pretending not to notice the small quake in her tone.

He smiled, and her heart did a pirouette inside her chest. Even, white teeth showed between sensuous lips that were neither thin, nor too heavy. His face was a landscape of planes and contours that were deeply tanned by the western sun, and a network of fine, intricately carved lines fanned outward from the crinkled corners of his amused eyes. Even with the shadow of a beard, she could see the faint cleft that marked his chin.

"It doesn't pay to relax too much in these parts, ma'am," he answered her after too long a pause. She colored deep rose and looked out the window, veiling herself with indifference that he knew was completely false. Fully aware that she'd know what he was doing, he indulged in a little appraisal of his own, cataloging her shape and form as a matter of natural routine.

Elizabeth Davis was of average height, not quite five and half feet tall. She had lush, thick hair of a chestnut hue that caught the fading rays of a sunset and turned it into glorious flaming beauty. He'd seen that on a number of evenings and his dreams had been haunted by it more than once in recent

weeks. The fashionable coil that her hair had been twisted into at the start of their trip had been abandoned in favor of a simple gather tied at her nape with a leather thong. Her eyes alternated between blue and green, depending on how the light caught her. She was curvaceous and utterly female on a level purely intrinsic to who she was, a gift that made men want her in ways her ingrained sensibilities would hardly recognize. He'd seen the interest a few of their fellow passengers had developed, and been surprised by the jealousy it had awakened in him. Some part of him had already decided this woman belonged to him, and he was not happy to discover the newly acquired weakness.

"Who are you, Mr. McQuade?"

He peered more intently at her, measuring the reason for the query, and deciding it was nothing more than what it appeared: polite interest in a stranger with whom she was forced to spend time.

"Just a man doin' his job, ma'am," he answered her softly. It was more truth than most people got out of him, and he laughed inwardly at how easily she inspired trust, even in someone who'd long ago stopped trusting anyone.

She twisted on the uncomfortable seat, rearranged the voluminous skirts of her dress, and looked more directly at him.

"You don't make much effort to have people like you, do you, Mr. McQuade?"

He smiled at the challenge in her tone, and was pleased to see another faint blush of color stain her cheeks.

"It's Chris, ma'am. And, no, as a rule I'd just as soon be left alone."

She nodded and considered the words for a few minutes. Chris watched her, his interest piqued.

"I've been known to be somewhat difficult to get along with myself, Mr ... Chris," she smiled again. "Please feel quite free to ask me not to annoy you," she added.

Chris couldn't miss the humor glittering in her pretty eyes and he laughed, a low rumbling chuckle of pleasure that had been missing from his mood for much too long, he realized.

His laughter was more enchanting than his smile, Elizabeth thought, shocked by the thrill of excitement that churned in the pit of her stomach. She relaxed minutely and dared to speak again.

"Where are you from, Chris?" She had decided almost from the moment she'd heard him speak that he was a Texan. Asking was merely a way to satisfy her inquisitiveness.

"Tucson," he supplied after only a brief hesitation. "I was born in a little town that died years ago, close to the Texas border. I call Tucson home for the most part these days."

It was a veritable wealth of information, and she laughed softly at the slight amazement that he clearly felt at his own words.

"You don't give much away, do you, Chris McQuade," she mused quietly.

He smiled again. "I could say the same about you, ma'am," he pointed out in a voice low with unconscious seduction.



"Elizabeth," she said, almost in a whisper, mesmerized by his dark gaze.

The silence lingered for several peaceful minutes, then it was shattered by the roar of gunfire, and the shriek of terrified horses bolting ahead at break-neck speed. McQuade muttered a colorful curse and pushed aside the curtain at the window. Elizabeth was stunned to note that he held his gun in his hand and she hadn't seen him actually reach for it.

"Stay down, Elizabeth!" Chris ordered sharply. She bit back a scream when he opened the door and took hold of the side of the coach. He hoisted himself upward until he was out of her sight.

McQuade glanced down, saw she'd pulled the door of the lurching coach back into place, then he concentrated on what was happening around them. The driver of the stage had been shot. The reins still dangled loosely in his limp grip. Much as he disliked doing it, Chris reholstered his gun, pushed the man off the bench, and brought the horses under control again. He risked a glance back when a bullet whizzed by the right side of his head. He saw three riders, guns badly aimed for the most part, all with faces hidden behind bandanas.

Slowing the coach a little, Chris drew his gun again and turned, using the seat as a poor shield. He took aim and fired off a single shot. One of the men went down with a howl, his horse veering away the instant the rider was tossed from the saddle. McQuade's second shot was equally careful, but he didn't topple the rider this time. The man hung on, though he was definitely out of the game in terms of presenting further

danger to Chris and the woman inside the coach. Taking a calculated risk, McQuade brought the horses to a slow halt and set the brake on the coach.

"Chris?"

"Stay inside, Elizabeth," he snarled. "And don't do or say anything. No matter what you hear. Is that understood?"

He received no answer and he ground his teeth together in annoyance.

"Elizabeth?"

"I'll do as you ask," she snapped pertly.

He allowed the flicker of a smile to cross his face before he climbed down from the high seat of the coach and walked to the side.

The two riders held back now, waiting. Things had definitely not gone as planned for them.

"What do you want, gentlemen?" Chris called, tone bored and sarcastic.

"You just killed my kid brother, mister," one of the bandits informed him.

Chris recognized the combination of fear and rage that textured the kid's voice. He wasn't more than twenty, if that. McQuade suddenly felt old and very tired.

"You should have advised him to go into a different line of work," he called back, falling into the banter without thought.

The attackers were going to separate and come at both sides of the coach in a rush. He'd only be able to take one of them out; the second might conceivably kill him. He waited until the telltale sound of hooves pounding told him they were charging him. He cleared the side of the coach, sighted the

rider, and fired, all in a single fluid motion of familiar precision. The second boy tumbled free of his horse.

Before McQuade could do more than register the death of the second bandit, another gunshot roared in the afternoon sunshine. A scream and a thud told him the third robber was on the ground. He walked around the coach and looked up. Sticking out the window was the barrel of a Winchester rifle.

"Nice shootin', ma'am," he commented.

"You're welcome, Mr. McQuade," Elizabeth replied quietly.

"Stay put while I see if they're dead, Elizabeth." He smiled when the barrel of the rifle didn't waver but stayed poised on the edge of the window.

"What's your name, son?" he asked when he crouched on one knee next to the fallen boy. He didn't even seem twenty, more in the area of sixteen. Chris held the kid's gun in one hand. His own pistol he tucked back into his holster.

Whatever bravado had possessed the kid, it had been well and truly knocked out of him by the blast of the Winchester. He appeared scared and in pain now. It had taken only a single glance to tell Chris the kid would be dead within the hour. No one survived a rifle shot to the gut, and that's precisely what had taken down this kid.

"Tom Caden," the boy answered. "Who shot me?"

"The lady you wanted to rob," Chris answered honestly.

The kid looked disgusted.

"A woman!" he groaned, the indignity clearly too much for his affronted pride. "Where's Billy and Craig?"

"They your two compadres?"

Tom nodded.

"Dead," McQuade told him evenly. "They both your brothers?"

Another nod.

"You got Billy first shot," the kid said, and coughed. The sound mutated into a groan that made tears spill from the young outlaw's eyes.

McQuade stood and went to get a shovel from the coach's supply trunk.

"Are they dead?" Elizabeth asked when she saw him walking toward the stage again.

"Not yet, but it won't be long before that one joins his brothers." The door started to open and he slammed it shut. "Stay inside, Elizabeth!" he said, voice tight with command. "We'll get moving as soon as I bury the driver and these kids."

"Kids?" It was a squeak of sound, and she paled as she stared at him in shock. "I shot a boy?"

"You did what you had to," he stated, voice devoid of emotion. He didn't have time to comfort her. The odds were these three rather inept bandits were not the only ones in the area, and he wanted to get her to safety, quickly. "Leave it at that, honey," he added, letting his tone soften enough to ease the terror in her eyes. It was all the consolation he could afford to give her at that moment.

He found what he was looking for, then grabbed the reins of Tom's horse, who hadn't strayed when his rider went down. It didn't take McQuade more than five minutes to locate Billy and the horse that had returned. He tossed the body across the bay and led the animal farther back to search

for the body of Gavin Walters, the crusty old stage driver who'd been his poker partner on a number of the nights during the trip from St. Louis. Once he'd located Walters, he put him on the horse with Billy and returned to the stage.

By the time he'd dug out four narrow graves, Tom was as dead as his two brothers. McQuade dumped them and covered the holes quickly and efficiently. When he stood back to mop the sweat from his brow, he saw Elizabeth Davis walking toward him. His annoyance resurfaced instantly.

"Stop scowling at me, Mr. McQuade," she snapped. She knelt at the side of the four mounds of fresh dirt and closed her eyes in prayer.

McQuade stared in combined amusement and astonishment, but he let her take as long as she needed. When she rose, he took her by the arm and they walked back to the coach.

"Do you have any decent riding clothes, Miss Davis?"

She looked up at him for a moment, apparently too surprised to answer.

"If there's anything on this coach you can't live without, ma'am," he said from between clenched teeth, "get it! We'll be going on horseback from here."

"What?"

"Those boys weren't out here alone, Elizabeth," he explained with forced patience. "We need to put some distance between us and whoever will be coming after them. The stage is an easy target."

For a few seconds, Elizabeth felt the world around her begin to gray, then she fought off the fainting sensation and gathered her wits.

"I have very little of value with me," she told him. "Most of my belongings were sent ahead. If you'll get my trunk from the roof, I'll change into something better suited for the rest of this trip." She smiled a little wanly, and was warmed by the reward of his approving smile. "What money and jewelery I have with me is in the stage company's strongbox," she added in afterthought.

He nodded and, once she was inside the coach changing, he went about the business of selecting the best two horses from the team and freeing the others. He shot off the lock on the strongbox, retrieved the contents, and stored them in his saddlebags. His saddle and gear were among the few pieces of baggage still aboard the stage, and after he'd retrieved them and saddled his mount, he took Tom's saddle and put it on the second horse, a spirited chestnut gelding. He checked the contents of the saddlebags and decided to keep the clean spare shirt and pants, as well as whatever food the kid carried. They'd need it before they reached Wind River. He took food from Billy's saddlebags, as well.

"Chris?"

He made a final adjustment to the cinch, then turned to look at her. She was like an angel framed in the aura of the sun, and his heart tightened in his chest. The layers of silk and muslin were gone, and she was even more beautiful for the simplicity of her present appearance. She wore knee high brown leather boots, a dark brown riding skirt that draped to

just below knee level and was cut like pants, a plain blue blouse, and carried over her arm, he saw a tan duster that would cover the whole outfit when it was buttoned. It was both practical and pretty. His respect went up another notch. She was full of surprises. She even carried a proper hat—not a bonnet, but a brown, wide-brimmed felt hat.

"Will this do?" she asked with a smile, knowing full well it was more than he had hoped for in terms of serviceable clothing for a long ride.

"Yes, ma'am." He drawled the agreement to an erotic purr of sound, and she shivered in the late afternoon sunshine. She walked toward him and could tell from his expression the sway of her hips held him entranced. He stared like a love-struck kid, and his response made her feel more alive than she'd ever felt in her life. She reached his side and looked up at him, expectant.

"Is this my horse?" she asked, inwardly shocked by the husky rasp of her voice. This was as close to Chris McQuade as she'd ever been, and it was an overwhelming experience for her senses. Awareness of him filled her; the mixed scents of man and horse, the mesmerizing depth of his dark eyes, the wind-ruffled disarray of his hair, and the sheer masculine strength that emanated from him. She wanted to touch him, to taste him, to feel his hands on her. The very thoughts made her weak in the knees.

Chris lifted his hat off the pommel of the saddle and stepped back to give her room to mount the gelding. She swung into the saddle with natural ease, and the seconds her bottom swayed before his face were almost his undoing. The

next few days were going to be painfully long, some inner voice warned, as he tried to ignore the surge of lust that shot straight to his groin. He pulled his hat low and went to the second horse, settling on the saddle and turning west without another word. By the time she came alongside him, he was reasonably certain he could safely look at her.

"How long before we reach Wind River?" she asked, her eyes drinking in the beauty of the landscape around them. The Wind River Mountains loomed far in the distance and it was difficult to judge just how far away the town might be.

"Likely be a few days," Chris replied, peering intently ahead. "We're going to have to ride hard to get to the foothills, then head north. Town shouldn't be too hard to find from there."

"Have you been there before?" She moved easily with the horse, well accustomed to riding. The gelding was a spirited animal, and she felt an affinity for him already. She suspected if the need arose, he'd move like the wind, and she named him Wind Dancer in her mind, smiling at the whimsy.

Chris obviously caught the expression and she enjoyed the telltale tug at the corner of his mouth as he continued to watch her with open amusement.

"Somethin' funny goin' on, ma'am?" he said, the natural drawl flowing into his voice again.

She shook her head and bit back the grin that wanted to spread over her features. "Nothing funny, Mr. McQuade," she assured him, then urged Wind Dancer into an exhilarating gallop, leaning over the pommel of the saddle and enjoying the movement of the horse beneath her. It was only seconds



later when she heard him closing the distance that had suddenly been put between them. Instead of censure or the anger she'd anticipated, Chris whooped loudly as he passed her and she laughed with pure pleasure, and let her horse's gait open up further. The two animals were well-matched for strength and speed and it was a long while before Chris slowed and pointed to a copse of trees less than a mile ahead of them.

"We'll make camp there for the night," he told her when she'd drawn up next to him.

The sun was sinking rapidly on the western peaks of the mountains and the color was a splendor unlike any she'd seen before. She stared, enchanted and enthralled by the fiery display that crested the snow-capped mountain tops. The orange-gold orb of heavenly fire gradually dipped behind the ridge of darkening mountains, its last searching fingers splaying over the tops, turning everything to purple tinted pink, before it would vanish entirely. Chris nudged his horse forward and she followed, caught between the glory atop the mountains and the magnificence of the man and horse who moved several yards ahead of her.

Less than an hour later they sat in front of a fire, coffee brewing and filling the night air with its enticing aroma. They shared some of the hard tack and jerked beef that had been in Tom Caden's saddlebags, and Elizabeth felt a rare moment of tranquility as she gazed upward at the glittering sky. The moon was making a slow climb into the center of the tapestry of black velvet that draped over them, its silvery crescent growing brighter and brighter.

"What exactly do you do, Chris?" She finally dared ask the question that had been on her mind from the first time she'd glimpsed him back in St. Louis.

"I'm a Federal Marshal, ma'am," he said after considering the query for several heartbeats of time. He eyed her closely for a few seconds, then posed his own question. "What's your business in Wind River?"

She hesitated, and for perhaps the first time in her life, she was tempted to lie outright to someone she barely knew. Honesty won out, and she sighed heavily. "I'm supposed to be meeting my husband," she admitted, and watched the warmth vanish from his eyes. What remained was a dark wall of polite civility.

"I didn't realize you were married," Chris commented, once the unexpectedness of her admission passed through his mind and left him feeling vaguely betrayed.

"I find it difficult to recall myself sometimes," she said with annoying hurt in her tone. "Mark and I were married almost a year ago, but he headed west about two months later. I've only seen him twice in the past nine months," she went on softly, her eyes on the shadowy trees that surrounded them like sentinels. "I don't even know now why I thought I wanted to be married to him."

"Mark Elias Davis is your husband?" McQuade asked, a distinct twist of raw anger roiling in his gut.

She turned to look him squarely in the eye again, and wariness telegraphed from every fiber of her body.

"Yes."

It was little more than an expulsion of air, the single word carried to him more as a breath than audible speech.

"How much do you love him, ma'am?"

She winced at the bone-chilling ice in his voice, and the reaction woke a twinge of guilt inside him.

"Why?"

The word trembled between them and Chris stared at her, drinking in every aspect of her presence as a thirsting man revels in water.

"He's the reason I'm here, Elizabeth," he finally stated, forcing his tone to indifference that had no connection at all to what churned inside him. "He's wanted back in Arizona."

"Wanted," she repeated, irritated by the stupidity that she couldn't seem to shake off. "For what?" She was afraid of the answer. She was more afraid of not knowing. The lack of anguish she felt told her what her heart had known for many months, that whatever she'd felt for Mark Davis in the past had died there. Time and distance had cleared her head of the romantic notions he'd filled her with when they'd been engaged and full of dreams to chase. "Please tell me, Chris?" He'd turned away from her and now she reached out to touch his face, her palm gentle on his cheek as she made him meet her gaze again.

"He killed a deputy during a bank robbery in Phoenix about six weeks ago," he told her, voice cautious, eyes watchful. He didn't know enough about whatever bonds existed between the couple, despite her assertion that she wasn't in love with her husband. The bleak acceptance in her sigh when she closed her eyes assured him it wasn't anger she felt at his

words but utter sadness. Her hand fell away and he was startled by how acutely he felt the loss of her touch.

McQuade watched her for several minutes, saw the emotions racing across her features as vividly as if she spoke every thought she was having. Not one of the shifts of expression resembled shock or surprise, and that made him wonder how much she either knew, or suspected, of her husband's activities since coming west.

"That don't seem to surprise you much, ma'am," he noted softly. She twitched just the slightest bit at the sound of his voice, and he knew for those moments, she'd completely forgotten his presence. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, shutting him out, probably without even realizing she was doing it.

"It doesn't," she gradually conceded. "Mark's changed a great deal since we met a few years back. Especially since he came out here. The rare times we've seen each other, he's been restless and irritable, like he'd rather be anywhere other than with me. I used to think he was just trying to find a way to tell me he'd met someone else." She laughed softly, irony the only discernible emotion in the sound. "A year ago I wouldn't have believed him capable of killing. Now..." She shrugged. "I don't have the right to question you or judge him, because it simply doesn't matter anymore."

The last words caught him well and truly off guard.

"A woman has every right to question a man who tells her that the man's she married to is a killer," he corrected quietly.

"Only if she cares, Mr. McQuade," she said with a sad smile. "The last of my dreams were killed the day Mark gunned down that deputy, he just forgot to tell me about it." She looked into the flickering fire flames that reflected from McQuade's dark eyes, one of the only traces of light in her world at that moment. "I'm sorry we didn't have this conversation a lot sooner," she remarked bitterly. "I would have known not to continue west, but to go back home."

McQuade didn't reply, and she smiled weakly at him, then rose.

"Good-night, Chris."

For a long time after she'd fallen into a weary sleep, McQuade watched the fire and brooded. It was a pattern that would repeat itself over the next two nights, until they reached the foothills of the mountains.

\* \* \* \*

Throughout the day, as they rode, they talked, and McQuade discovered a quick intelligence and humor in Elizabeth that delighted him. She held strong opinions and didn't mind expressing them. He found that a refreshing change, as well. More and more, he discovered things beyond her beauty to admire and respect. Yet, the most powerful allure remained ... the desire that burned between them every hour of the day, creating awkwardness and unease that was becoming impossible to ignore.

Once they'd camped in the relative safety of a foothill clearing, the routine they'd fallen into played itself out again. The tension that had grown between them over the short

span of time since the botched robbery of the stage had become a true annoyance to McQuade. It was based solely on a sexual attraction that neither of them made any effort to confront, and he knew he was in for yet another restless night. They'd been like that a lot lately, and mostly because of the woman who presently lay tucked into her blankets and turned away from him. He watched over her like this for hours, and it was well into the night when he finally doused the fire and went to his bedroll. Despite every sensible instinct he possessed screaming objection to him, this time he settled next to Elizabeth, answering a deeper need to be close to her.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth murmured softly, caught in the warmth of a dream that was already slipping away from her as she woke. The solid wall of heat at her back was heavenly so she pressed tighter to it without thought, and her body shuddered with pleasure when strong arms pulled her closer. Caught in the languor of the moment, she continued to drift in peaceful contentment for several seconds before the arms holding her so gently shifted and she found one of her breasts cupped in a strong hand. Fingers stroked persuasively, then tugged open her blouse and slipped beneath the thin layer of her camisole. A bolt of heat shot through her entire body when Chris's fingers pulled gently on the hardened tip of her nipple, rolling it repeatedly between his thumb and index finger.

She twisted onto her back and stared into the blazing darkness of Chris McQuade's brown eyes. He looked as

startled as she was for a moment, then some inner battle was waged in heartbeats that were an eternity, until he finally muttered something vaguely obscene and began to pull away from her. Elizabeth had fought the same war in those timeless instants, and she'd clearly come out on the other side of the question. She reached up, her hand on the side of his neck, holding him motionless for a minute. His eyes searched her face, found what he needed, then his mouth descended on hers, ruthless, erotic, and unlike any kiss she'd ever experienced.

His tongue traced her lips and licked tenderly until she gasped, permitting him access to the warm cavern of her mouth. The world spun wildly as Chris's mouth closed firmly over hers, his kiss waking too many feelings too quickly. She clung to him, unable to stop the torrent of hunger and need that she'd been denying for what felt like forever. She'd never wanted any man the way Chris made her want him, and while it was terrifying, it was also the most exciting thing she'd ever felt.

He turned, pressed her back to the blankets beneath them, and she arched her body upward instinctively, trying to get still closer to him. Her arms slid around his waist, fingers splayed across the expanse of his back, massaging smooth muscles beneath the fabric of his shirt. The need to touch him had been the bane of her existence for days. Now, it was the answer to a dream long-held in a secret place in her heart; a dream she'd given up on without ever knowing it.

The kiss was endless, and she returned each stroke and thrust of his tongue with the fury of passion that he evoked in

her eager body, tasting the mixture of coffee that lingered, the faint flavor of tobacco from the cheroot he'd smoked sometime during the night, and the unique and distinct essence that was Chris himself. When he finally released her, she stared into his dark eyes, marveled at the fire that sizzled back at her.

Before she could speak and destroy what was happening between them, Chris's hands glided around her waist, then upward to trace the fullness of her breasts. His thumbs brushed indolently over the sensitive peaks, and he rolled hardened tips between his fingers, tugging gently until she shuddered. Her flesh tingled when he fully opened the light blouse, then the camisole she wore, and held one swollen breast as he lowered his head and covered the rosy peak with his mouth. She gasped quietly, and leaned into the caress, moaning low in her throat when he began suckling her ripe nipple.

"Chris..." she breathed, not really certain what she wanted from him ... his release, or his complete possession. His teeth closed on the rigid bud, nipped gently, and she pressed into him, her hands sliding into his thick dark hair as she held him closer. Her husband's hands had never made her feel anything like what coursed through her veins now. Being with Mark had been pleasant and easy, but it had never awakened the kind of savage need that Chris McQuade's every touch did.

When he would have transferred his attention to her other breast, Elizabeth shook her head and eased away from him. His darkened eyes narrowed, faint consternation in their fiery



depths. She smiled, peeled off the blouse and camisole, then reached for the buttons on his shirt, pushing him until he was on his back and she sat across his hips. She kissed his forehead, his cheek, and trembled when his hands ran the length of her thighs and smoothed over her buttocks. He leaned into her, kissed her stomach, then each rounded hip.

Chris tugged her forward and twisted until she lay under him again. He kissed her with the full depth of his passion. Timeless minutes later, he left her long enough to rid himself of his clothes, then he was kneeling on the ground next to her. He reached for the buttons on her skirt, and waited until she nodded her acceptance before he eased her free of the last of the clothes that kept them from complete contact with each other. When she started to sit up, he hooked his hands beneath her knees and watched her eyes widen with confusion. With her lying naked before him, Chris was torn between simply taking her quickly and satisfying the lust-incited madness she'd created in him from the moment he'd met her, and the need to make this experience one neither of them would forget. He wanted her to want him as badly as he wanted her, and to go on wanting long after they'd quenched their passion.

She was incredibly beautiful, he thought, staring down at her. Sprawled naked on his blankets, she was like a nymph from some erotic fantasy. Elizabeth Davis was not willowy thin, but voluptuous and curvaceous, all satiny smooth, lush contours that begged to be stroked and kissed. The deep rose of her nipples cresting the soft mounds of ivory flesh made his throat ache. His eyes continued to drift, taking in every

inch of the woman he'd been mentally undressing night after night since leaving St. Louis. The curve of her stomach flowed downward into the exotic thatch of chestnut curls that dipped between her thighs, and he let his eyes follow the sleek, curving length of her legs. He wanted those shapely limbs wrapped around his waist and clinging to him, often.

"Chris?"

The quiver of her voice made him grin, and she shivered in the growing glow of the sunrise. He stroked the insides of her thighs with slow brushing glides of the backs of his hands and she trembled in response to the caresses. He could see the shimmer of wetness at the enticing juncture between her thighs and he spread her legs wider as he pulled her toward him, ignoring the tiny objection of her hands on his wrists. Tossing aside her light hold, he lifted her hips off the blankets and began to trail hot, open-mouthed kisses along the insides of her thighs, tasting every inch of her satiny skin.

Eyes huge, Elizabeth watched, shaking with excitement and the last, fading traces of doubt and fear. Some part of her knew what he was going to do, and she was caught between the erotic thrill of it, and the certainty that she was behaving like a whore. When Chris's tongue penetrated the most intimate core of her passion, she bit back a scream of pure ecstasy. Her cheeks flamed as he probed deeper, and her back arched in exquisite pleasure, hips instinctively rising to meet his ravaging mouth. No man had ever touched her this way before. She twisted wildly as a storm erupted inside her, and she cried out his name in the face of this paroxysm of sexual surrender. When her hands fell to his shoulders and

she would have pushed him away, Chris's fingers wrapped around her wrists and he held her arms pressed firmly to the ground. Seconds later, Elizabeth did scream, a frenzied, exultant cry of exquisite euphoria.

Chris sat back slowly, his breathing as harsh and rapid as hers as she lay dazed on the blankets, panting loudly. Her skin was flushed, limbs limp, and he wanted nothing more than to crawl on top of her and feel her body convulsing around him.

Elizabeth stirred, stared at him in wonder, then forced herself to move. Her arms went around him and she all but dragged him onto the blankets with her. He lay flat on his back a few minutes later, and she grinned down at him, her gaze caressing the solid lines of his body. He was heavier than Mark, and the slenderness she intuitively knew he'd possessed in his youth had been replaced by the hard muscles of masculine maturity and long hours of work. She enjoyed the unimpeded pleasure of simply looking at him for a long time, letting her fingers skim over the planes and contours of his body. She was drunk with the excitement of finally being this close to Chris, a feeling he obviously shared. She brushed his smooth, rigid arousal with her fingers, the stroke feather-light, and was deeply satisfied when he moaned softly in response. Encouraged, she bent over him and repeated the touch with her tongue.

Her name slipped from him, a whisper of sound carried on the breath of a gasp of pleasure. She took him into her mouth, stroking gently as she teased and sucked, increasing

the pressure of her caress when his hands in her hair demanded more.

"Tell me what you want, Chris?" she asked softly, eyes locked with his a long while later.

McQuade tugged her up over his body until he could kiss her, his arms wrapping tightly around her as they shared a closeness he'd denied himself for much too long. His hands traced the smooth curve of her back, brushed soft touches over her bottom before he probed into her.

Elizabeth eased back and sat astride his hips, then she leaned forward. Her breasts touched his chest, and she glided back and forth, increasing the tickling sensation of her nipples against the fine dusting of silky hair on his chest. Between her legs, his erection strained against the slick, wet entrance of her body.

Chris caught her hips, pushed her back and down, biting back a loud groan as he was finally sheathed in her tight heat. He thought he'd explode when the muscles in her body clutched him, rippling instinctively to hold him tighter and take him deeper into her. His hands shifted, moved to cup the heaviness of her breasts as he molded warm flesh with sensuous pressure. He stared up at her, entranced by the beauty that transformed her as they made love. Her eyes closed, and delicate features softened with the magnitude of her passion. Her mouth opened, lips parted slightly as she fought for breath; a struggle he made more difficult when he carefully squeezed her breasts. He knew no other man would ever see her this way, and guilt woke again. Elizabeth had been his from the moment they'd met. But she was also

another man's wife, and fate had conspired to make him the instrument of that man's death. Before the thought could mutate into something that would end their love-making, she cried out again. His name rushed from her as a low moan of blissful pleasure; the only word she appeared able to force past her lips.

"I love you, Elizabeth," he told her, the words falling from him in a moment of truth that neither of them could ever have anticipated. He knew it was true, because he'd never said those words to any woman he'd ever known. They'd never felt true enough to be uttered before this moment. The twinge of fear and doubt that gnawed his gut vanished as quickly as it had been born when he saw the tears she wept as her head fell forward and her hair obscured her face. She moved against him, increased the rhythm of their lovemaking, and rode him hard in sensual abandonment.

When he felt the first spasm of release begin to build, Chris's fingers slid between them, finding the swollen bud between her wet folds. He stroked with practiced skill and felt her body tighten reflexively. Moments later, her shuddering climax merged with his and his arms held her fiercely when she collapsed on top of him, gasping and spent.

For a long time, Elizabeth wasn't able to move. She wasn't able to think clearly. Then, gradually, reality swam into focus. Chris's arms loosened when she slid off him, but he refused to let her go. She didn't want to question what had just happened between them; didn't want his frenzied words of love to be a lie torn from him in the heat of desire. She felt his hand brushing her hair and caught it in hers, kissed the

calloused palm, then curled tightly to his side. As the sun rose higher in the morning sky of Wyoming, she fell back into exhausted sleep next to the stranger she'd fallen in love with in the space of heartbeats.

\* \* \* \*

When she woke again, the sun was blazing through the trees and she was alone, wrapped snugly in the blankets. She rose on one elbow and looked around, panic choking her for several seconds before she spotted Chris walking from the shield of the trees to the fire, where he placed several more pieces of wood and stirred the flickers into crackling flames.

"I was beginnin' to think you were gonna sleep all day," he said with a grin that made her heart lurch wildly in her chest.

He was only partly dressed, his black pants in place, but his feet bare. A light blue shirt hung over his shoulders. It fell open, offering her an appealing display of bronzed skin and muscle. He was freshly shaved, and had clearly taken a bath in the nearby creek. His hair glistened with water and his skin shone.

Elizabeth looked around for her clothes and saw that he'd gathered them and placed them in a neat pile next to the blankets. She sat up and wondered how she was going to dress with any modesty. She caught his grin from the corner of her eye and glowered at him.

"A gentleman would allow me some privacy," she pointed out.

"Well, ma'am," he replied, tone carefully cultivated to neutrality, "I think you know already that I'm no gentleman."

His eyes fairly danced with mirth, and she found herself grinning back at him in spite of her annoyance. Feeling decidedly wicked, yet incredibly free at the same time, Elizabeth settled onto her back, and tossed aside the blankets that covered her naked body. The sun felt gloriously warm on her skin and she closed her eyes as she stretched sensuously, deliberately arching her back.

Chris's gaze was riveted to her as she squirmed in the blazing noonday sun that filtered through the trees and dappled her flesh with kisses of gold. She was taunting him, and he knew it without doubt when her hands began to move. Slender fingers slid over her body in a casual caress that arrested his gaze. She started the stroking flow of movement at her neck and drifted across breasts that were now clearly outlined by the sun, rigid tips thrusting upward more prominently as she let her fingers twirl around them for a few seconds. A tiny shiver of delight rippled her body, and she took her seductive show further when she skimmed her abdomen, and both hands moved over the curve of her hips before she spread her legs and exploring fingers dipped between them.

Chris stood, his erection painful, as surges of lust pulsed along its length in perfect time with the roar of his heartbeat. He unbuttoned his pants and shed them, letting the shirt fall from his shoulders as he crossed the few feet of space that separated them. Her eyes opened when his shadow stretched over her, blocking out the sunlight that bathed her in golden radiance. She smiled, the faint hint of challenge in her eyes.

He grinned when her gaze caught the movement of his hand closing over his shaft and stroking smoothly, making the rigid length harder still. He continued the easy rhythm until a pearl of moisture appeared on the velvety head and she rose to her knees to lick it away.

His legs threatened to buckle when Elizabeth's tongue twirled around the smooth, shiny head of his cock, the pressure little more than the brush of a feather, until the pink tip began to flick repeatedly at the tiny slit that wept pearly beads of moisture. She continued to lick away.

With a low growl of hunger deep in his throat, Chris gently pushed her and she resettled on her back, legs spread wide in invitation. McQuade shook his head, then quickly joined her, positioning himself between her thighs and entering her in a single, hard thrust. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he held her head between his hands as he began to move, wanting to see every trace of pleasure that he gave her as her features softened with a mixture of agony and ecstasy.

His world became the blue-green blaze of her eyes staring dazedly up at him, as his hips pounded into her in a rhythm that bordered on brutal in its intensity. He wondered if he was hurting her, and then on the heels of that thought, knew he wouldn't be able to hold back if he was causing her pain. The thought vanished the next instant as she loosened her grip on his waist and her legs tangled with his. Her hips rose as she pushed into him, and her voice was a low moan that mutated into the word, "Harder!" He answered the demand and lifted her hips to meet the rapid thrusts of his, groaning loudly when she convulsed violently in his arms, and her teeth sank



into the smooth muscle of his shoulder as she tried to muffle the scream that tore through her with each spasm of the climaxes that rocked her.

Chris felt his own release sweeping over him and he pulled back deliberately, easing free of her as she gasped and stared in shock at him. He sat back on his heels and tried to calm the near-pain in his chest as he fought for control and breath.

"Turn over," he rasped. She moved, and in a moment, Chris was looking at the lovely curve of her backside. He grasped her hips and entered her again, holding her tightly to him as the slap of their bodies grew to a frenzied tempo. When he couldn't hold back the surge of his release any longer, he pulled her tight to his chest and his fingers between her thighs brought her to a climax with him as he finally emptied himself into her willing warmth.

When he let her go, Elizabeth fell forward onto her hands and knees, dragging in air that didn't seem adequate to fill her lungs. Behind her, she heard Chris struggling with the same need, and she sat, twisting around so she could look at him. His chest heaved, and she knew when his eyes opened, she'd see the same incredulous wonder she felt.

She didn't have time to enjoy the moment. The sudden tensing in his body told her something was wrong before thought actually caught up to instinct. By the time she realized what was happening, Chris had grabbed her and pushed her toward the shelter of a massive tree. He was muttering a stream of some of the most colorful and eloquent cuss words she'd ever heard, when understanding came home in the most shattering of ways. A gunshot roared in the

afternoon serenity and chips of wood flew as the bullet lodged in the trunk of the tree mere inches from her head.

"That was quite a performance, Liz," Mark Davis shouted from some point east of their position. "I never knew I married a whore!"

Elizabeth stifled a moan of misery when she heard Mark's voice, dripping with rage and unmistakable contempt. She looked at Chris and saw a different kind of fury glittering in the jet-dark pools of his eyes.

"He's still not close enough to know exactly where we are," McQuade said, certain he was right when another shot struck a tree about ten feet to their left. "But I can't do much from here," he added dismally.

"I can—"

"You can stay right where you are, lady!" He cut her off instantly. "If you think for a minute that he's not going to kill you, too, then you don't know much about Mark Davis or any other man. After what he's just seen..." Chris didn't bother finishing the thought; it was useless and would only frighten her further.

"Well, we can't stay here!" she hissed angrily.

"Decent of you to bury my boys, McQuade," Mark called out. "But it don't make up for turning my wife into your whore!"

Elizabeth looked at Chris, genuinely surprised by Mark's use of his name. A pulse throbbed in McQuade's neck and she knew it was taking all his control not to respond to Mark's baiting. If he spoke, Davis would know exactly where they were, she realized.

"I need to get to my gun, Elizabeth," he whispered fiercely. "He's going to get tired of this and make a rush for us."

She saw the gunbelt a short distance away, next to the crumpled heap of black that was his pants. She'd been truly foolish to distract McQuade, though no part of her imagination could ever have produced this kind of scenario as a potential result of her impromptu seduction. All she'd been able to think about was how much she wanted Chris to make love to her again. Well, she'd gotten what she wanted, and now it might cost him his life. Not an acceptable price to pay for her senseless behavior. She touched the side of his face and made him look at her.

"I love you, too, Chris McQuade," she declared softly. "And you are not going to die because of me."

"Elizabeth..." His tone was filled with warning and regret, but appropriate words eluded him.

"If we separate and I draw Mark's attention, you'll have a chance to get to your guns." She smiled, unable to prevent the expression from lighting her features as she added, "And your clothes."

"I'm not going to risk losing you," he decreed, voice harsh with fear and smoldering anger at the impossibility of their situation.

"My thoughts exactly, Marshal McQuade," she murmured and kissed him softly. Before he could stop her, she flitted through the trees, moving away from him and toward the open space that led to the creek.

Chris watched her go, torn between the desire to chase her, and the undeniable admiration he felt for her courage.

Unable to call out, and unwilling to let her action be for nothing, McQuade waited and watched, occasionally catching a glimpse of pale skin between leaves and brush as she disappeared toward the creek. If Mark and his men were on the other side of it, as he suspected, he'd only have minutes to move into the campsite and clear out again.

"McQuade," Mark drawled in a parody of Chris's Texas accent, "I want my wife back. Send her out and you can leave."

Only an idiot would have bought it. McQuade was not an idiot, something Davis knew well.

"Do I have your word on that, Mark?" Elizabeth's voice answered, and McQuade groaned inaudibly as she stepped from cover and walked to the creek's edge, her stunning, naked body gleaming gold in the afternoon sunshine.

The howls her appearance elicited grated on McQuade's already taut nerves, but he forced his mind to ignore the disgust that was creating nausea in his throat. He made a dive for the campsite, rolling as he scooped up his gun, his pants, and made a final dodging grab for his boots.

Elizabeth's scream warned him in the heartbeat before pain exploded along his left side and the bright afternoon was suddenly smothered by an abyss of black nothingness...

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth twisted in Mark's grasp, kicking and shrieking like a madwoman when she saw Chris go down a few feet from the fire. He didn't move, and she was desperate to get to him. Mark held her firmly, then when yet another blow

connected with his chest, he slapped her across the face, hard, and she stopped tearing at him like a wildcat.

"You bastard!"

He actually looked surprised by the sudden calm that had come into her. She was past fear and anger, and he no doubt knew that she'd just become genuinely dangerous to him.

"That's hardly an appropriate greeting for your husband," he said with snide humor.

"Let me get dressed, at least," she snarled softly.

Mark glanced over his shoulder at the small group of men who'd been riding with him for several months. Every one of them was gaping openly at Elizabeth. Not that he blamed them, she was a vision of rare beauty, something he'd almost forgotten until he spotted her with McQuade the previous day. He'd wanted to wait, to satisfy some perverse curiosity about why she'd be traveling with a Federal Marshal. He'd gotten a helluva lot more than he bargained for once morning's light had given him a clear line of vision into the campsite.

"Bring her clothes, Jimmy," he snapped to one of the men gazing at Elizabeth with leering hunger in his eyes. "And the horse she's been riding. Make sure McQuade's dead while you're at it," he added and hauled her away from the creek and any possible sight of McQuade. He pulled a blanket from his bedroll and tossed it at her. "Get on the horse, Liz," he ordered. "Jimmy will catch up to us and you can get dressed at the cabin."

Giving him a look that could have turned a lake to ice, she wrapped the rough wool blanket around her body and mounted his horse. They'd gone only a couple hundred yards

when she heard a gunshot and her heart turned to stone inside her. Grief paralyzed her and held her in a limbo that made everything around her gray and lifeless. She no longer cared what happened to her. Chris was dead. The brief happiness that had consumed her and lit her world was gone with him.

\* \* \* \*

McQuade waited until the lone figure entered the campsite, and the sound of Davis and the others faded slightly. He didn't move, and the pain in his left side throbbed dully. Through slitted eyes he watched the stranger pick through Elizabeth's belongings and his own, then he drew his gun and walked cautiously toward where Chris lay sprawled on the ground.

McQuade waited until he heard the telltale click of the hammer being cocked, then he rolled and fired directly at the man standing over him. Only another quick roll saved him from being trapped under the dead weight of the body as it pitched forward, shock and surprise the last expression etched into the dirty face of the stranger.

Chris rose unsteadily and went to the edge of the creek once he'd hauled on his pants and strapped on his gunbelt. The gash that had torn a crease along his side had stopped bleeding, but it needed to be cleaned and bandaged before infection and fever made him delirious and useless for a few days. He washed away the blood and went to hunt in his saddlebags for a bottle of whiskey. He wasn't a man who drank often, and he'd resisted the temptation to use the

whiskey to dull his senses to Elizabeth's alluring presence. Now, he poured a healthy dose of it into the seeping red gash in his side, bit back the groan of agony that ripped through him as the alcohol blazed fire into the wound and along the track of every nerve in his body. Once the pain subsided again, he tore Tom Caden's shirt into strips and awkwardly wound it around his torso, tying it tight and secure when he was done.

Within thirty minutes, he rode out of the campsite and began to track the small group of men who'd taken Elizabeth. He'd counted six riders, but there was no way of knowing if that accounted for all of Mark Davis's gang, or if there'd be others at their hideout. Being certain he was dead, they made no effort to hide their passage.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the first shadows of dusk painted the sky with shades of charcoal and purple, McQuade had tracked Davis to a cabin tucked up against the side of a mountain. There was no way to get at the place from behind, and no chance of coming in unnoticed. He had counted five horses in the makeshift corral to the left of the cabin. That meant only four men and Davis remained, along with Elizabeth.

Raised, angry voices drifted outward from the cabin and he strained to hear what was being discussed. He smiled grimly when he caught the tone of the conversation. Apparently the man back at the campsite had a kid brother who was worried about his absence. More shouting, then the door slammed open and two men crossed the small yard and went to the

corral. One of them appeared to be trying to dissuade the other, younger man, to cool his heels. It wasn't working. The young man saddled his paint and was tearing from the cabin's yard in a matter of minutes.

That left three men and Davis, Chris mentally ticked off another body he'd no longer have to contend with before the night had faded into a new day. The one who'd come out of the cabin with the kid looked around. A moment later Davis appeared in the doorway and told him to check the area, just in case.

McQuade smiled. And waited. He wasn't a man who enjoyed killing, and only did so when absolutely necessary. The woman they'd taken that morning had changed that particular aspect of Chris's code of honor, and he knew he'd have no qualms about killing every man present if that's what it took to get her back.

The drifter made a half-hearted walk around the immediate area, and Chris began to backtrack around the lazy guard. It didn't take long to put himself within touching distance of the other man, and he slid his gun free, bringing the barrel up to his quarry's temple as his hand closed over the man's mouth to stifle any shout he might have planned to make. When the man tried to fight, a quick jerk silenced him for good as the telltale crack of bones told Chris he'd broken the man's neck cleanly. McQuade stepped back and over the body as it slid to the ground with an almost soundless thud.

Almost an hour passed with no sound from the cabin, then Davis came out into the moonlight, peering around intently.

"Buzz?"



Silence.

He looked back into the cabin and palmed his gun. "Get out here," he called, and moments later, the remaining two bandits joined him in the yard.

Chris watched, unwilling to shoot and give Davis a reason to go back inside for Elizabeth to use as a shield to make his escape. There had to be a way to eliminate the other two men, then take out Davis when he was alone. He heard Mark give orders for them to split up and find the missing Buzz. McQuade decided to go back to the body and wait for one of them to find him. He changed weapons, pulling out the Green River hunting knife that was sheathed at his waist again. He'd put on his "working" clothes, all black, and very well-worn. His hat rested on the pommel of his saddle, and the horse waited patiently in a thicket half a mile away.

Approximately twenty minutes passed before he heard the approach of another of Davis's men. When he tripped over the body but didn't fall, Chris stepped into view. Before the warning could escape him, McQuade's knife was buried in the man's chest, embedded to the hilt. Chris bent and retrieved the blade, wiping it on the shirtfront of the second man he'd just killed.

He moved closer to the cabin on the right side and, hidden behind the cover of thick evergreens, he heard Davis and the remaining man conferring.

"McQuade is here, Charlie," Mark said, his voice heavy and laced with dread. "I'm going for Liz. He won't shoot through her, no matter how bad he wants me."

"That don't mean he won't kill me," Charlie charged angrily. "He must've got Buzz and Rafe already, or they'd been back by now! You should'a shot that son of a bitch when you had the chance instead of watchin' him—"

McQuade smiled when he heard the solid thunk of a fist striking flesh. Davis was not going to be reminded of watching another man make love to his wife that morning. Let them fight between themselves, he thought, and began to inch toward the cabin. Elizabeth appeared in the doorway and he winced unconsciously. She was dressed in a man's shirt and pants, the clothes hanging off her. Chris wouldn't be able to get to her in the open, and he sure as hell couldn't tell her to go back inside. He held back, and froze when her head turned and she looked toward his place of concealment, zeroing in on his presence as easily as if he'd walked into her line of vision. He forgot to breathe as she stepped out of the cabin and began to head in his direction, watchful of the two men who were beating each other senseless in the small yard.

She was only a few yards away from her freedom when Davis spotted her and made a run for her. The second man staggered to his feet and pulled his pistol, aiming at Elizabeth. McQuade reacted, pure instinct driving him as he shot the would-be killer and cleared cover, taking Davis down in a flying tackle just before he could grab Elizabeth.

Chris's gun went sailing out of his grasp and she ran for it. Turning, she saw the two men flailing and punching, rolling like a tumbleweed caught in a whirlwind.

Davis was tired, but Chris was injured, and he was bleeding again, the telltale trickle of warm blood seeping into the waist of his pants. Mark got a fistful of shirt and felt the slick wetness of the material. He began to punch in earnest, aiming for McQuade's injured side. Chris began to lose ground fast as a red haze of pain poured over him in relentless waves.

A gunshot ripped the night air and penetrated the grunting, heaving gasps of the two tangled men. Mark's attention divided, and in the split-second he took to look at Elizabeth, Chris was able to land a merciless hammer-like blow to the small of Davis's back. He went down with a howl of pain, and McQuade moved, one knee placed firmly against Mark's lower back. He pulled his knife out again and sliced deeply into the back of Davis's knees, two deft strokes that would effectively prevent any escape attempts on the long ride back to Arizona. He fell back, and closed his eyes.

It was the last awareness he had for hours.

\* \* \* \*

Morning light teased McQuade's eyelids and made them flutter, then open. He blinked and looked around. They were inside the cabin. Elizabeth sat at the table in the middle of the room, a gun trained on Davis, who was propped up in a corner, his legs bandaged crudely, bloodstains showing even from across the space that separated Chris from him. McQuade lay on a pallet of straw, and a glance told him he'd been tended to with a great deal more care than Davis had.

Clean white bandages were wrapped around his torso, and blankets had been piled on him to keep him warm.

"How long has it been?"

"Only a few hours," Elizabeth told him, sounding both tired and relieved beyond measure. "The last one of them came back, took a look at things, and lit out like hellfire." She didn't leave her position at the table, but finally dared to look at him, her eyes wide with fear. "Are you going to be all right, Chris?"

The whisper was a plea for reassurance, and despite the multitude of agonies it caused him, McQuade pushed himself upward and swung his legs over the side of the makeshift bed. The room lurched a little, but didn't gray too severely. He smiled and held out his hand to her. "He's not goin' anywhere, darlin'," he said quietly. "Come here."

After several indecisive heartbeats of time, she stood, swayed a little, then ran into his arms, holding onto him so tightly he wondered if she'd squeeze the life out of him without meaning to. When she finally drew back a little, he kissed her gently.

"If you think I'm gonna sit here and watch while you—"

McQuade's glare cut off whatever Davis was going to say, and Chris stood up. He left Elizabeth long enough to check the bonds she'd tied, found they were solid, then he slammed the back of his fist into Mark's chin, knocking him unconscious with the single, powerful blow.

"We're goin' to have to gag him once we get on the road," he commented as he rejoined Elizabeth. He practically fell onto the bed and sighed with contented happiness when she

curled into him, careful not to lean too heavily on his injured side.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Wind River. It's the closest town with a Telegraph office. They can lock him up there, and we'll wait for an escort back to Phoenix."

"We?" she queried with a happy smile.

"Unless you want to live in Wind River," he murmured, one eye opening to gauge her reaction to his wordless proposal.

"I'll live with you anywhere, Chris McQuade," she whispered passionately. "Anywhere!"

He smiled and drifted into a peaceful slumber. Elizabeth snuggled closer, and his arms held her tighter. She kissed his chest, and listened to the steady drum of his heart beating against her ear when she rested her head on the smooth plane of warm skin and muscle. It didn't matter that they were in the middle of nowhere, in an outlaw hideout, as long as McQuade's heart beat and his arms held her, she knew she'd never find a safer haven than the one she'd found in his love.

## **Denyse M. Bridger**

Denyse M. Bridger is the author of more than 300 stories, mostly for media-based small press zines, winner of Three Fan Quality Awards, writing and editing, the Reader's Choice Award in *Bardic Runes*, a small press Fantasy magazine based in Ottawa, and winner in the North American Open Poetry Contest, although she has never published online before. A fantasy novel based on Greek Mythology is presently with Hades Publications in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, final acceptance pending.

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