



Laura E. Reagan

*If You
Only Knew*

A Western Romance

When Cole Pierce rides into dusty Sweetwater to fetch his friend's mail-order bride, he has no idea just how hot the New Mexico town is going to get.

If You Only Knew

By

Laura E. Reagan

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Dedication

For my growing family, the Posse, and
Newt, my muse.

For Donna: sounding board, short-order
cook and best friend.

For Vickie, for all her time, work and
patience.

For Denise. For Bob. And of course,
For Wuerffel.

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Chapter One

NEW MEXICO TERRITORY, 1881

The stage bound for Sweetwater lumbered over the rough, dry road, its team of horses striking hard at the ground and throwing up choking clouds of dust.

Inside the stage, the three passengers were dealing with the arid heat, and the dust was becoming a problem as it seeped relentlessly past the canvas window coverings and the cracks around the doors.

Young Grace Leeanna Byron blinked her eyes against the onslaught of tan particles. She had taken prodigious care in her appearance this day. She wore her best traveling attire for this the last leg of her journey, a journey that would unite her with her father. With the

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deep green of her jacket and skirt, which matched her eyes and contrasted with the red-gold color of her hair, Grace felt she embodied the look of a grownup woman.

Only now it seemed the dust was determined to cover her from the top of her green felt cap to the soles of her high-heeled ladies shoes. And her hair, which she had twisted up into a very grownup chignon, had begun to slip with each jolt of the coach wheels.

Grace braced a gloved hand against the wall of the coach and glanced at the other two passengers, a man and an older woman, to see how they were faring. She was very grateful for the presence of the older woman, who was very pleasant. She could not help smiling at the way the woman's ringlets would bounce with the movements of the coach as she continued to ineffectually fend off the torrents of dust and dirt with her black lace handkerchief. At least the woman had thought to wear a scarf over her head.

She didn't care for the man. He was eerily quiet. He had been since they boarded, after he offered to assist her into the stage. When she turned to thank him, the words died in her throat at the dark expression on his face. His eyes were the color of ice, his jaw sharp, and his lips thin. Her skin crawled as his hand lingered at her elbow, and she was sure the contact he had made with her breast had been deliberate.

Now, he sat across from her, beside the window, not uttering a sound. He just sat there, using the brim of his black hat to cover his face. Grace was glad that he kept to himself and hoped he would for the remainder of her trip. She couldn't stop the prickle of dread from dancing

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across her spine each time she glanced his way.

She moved her gloved fingers over her crocheted reticule, the heaviness of its contents making her feel a bit safer.

Glancing past the dust, Grace gazed through a crack in the window flap at the land, so flat and brown with sparse low brush and hardly any trees. Her thoughts drifted to her mother and the life she had left behind. Growing up in Savannah, Grace could remember a time, long ago, when her mother sang to her, told her stories, and brushed her hair, calling it spun-gold. Grace had been told that her father had gone to fight for Southern Independence the year she was born. As she got older, her mother became bitter and cold and told her that her father had died in that struggle. Although Grace had never met him, she would dream about him: vivid and reoccurring dreams of her father waving to her from the mist.

Now, Grace knew the truth. The awful truth her mother had fought to keep hidden from family, friends, and even Grace. As she lay close to death, her mother had confessed that her father had not died a hero. He had not died at all. He had deserted—so cowardly an act, her mother had felt she had no choice but to declare him dead.

All of her mother's hopes had died with what her mother had seen as that act of cowardice. She had wrapped herself in a cloak of bitterness and watched as the world she loved was lost and everything she believed in crumbled around her. She raised Grace alone, never telling her of the letters that would arrive, letters from

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her father pleading for forgiveness. Letters begging her mother to bring her and join him out west.

Letters that went unanswered, some unopened.

After her mother's death, Grace read the letters, and it broke her heart to realize it was her mother's unwillingness to forgive him that had kept her apart from her father. He wouldn't come home, the letters stated, because he knew his being branded a deserter would cause her mother shame, but, also, because he feared reuniting with them would bring danger to them for reasons he couldn't explain.

Thinking about this, Grace decided it was because certain vigilante groups, now powerful organizations, were still seeking to spill the blood of southern deserters. She was even more certain of this when she read of the plan her father devised for his beloved Agatha to join him secretly. He wrote to her and begged her to travel out west as a mail-order-bride, answering an advertisement he would send himself to the Savannah newspaper under the name 'Lyle Harmon'—Lyle for Agatha's mother's maiden name, and Harmon for hers.

This letter was one that had never been opened. Grace had answered the advertisement printed in the same edition as her mother's obituary. The paper was tucked within her reticule, along with her father's reply. How sad he must have been to read of her mother's death, but his reply spoke only of happy anticipation for her to join him.

The stagecoach wheels skittered into a particularly deep rut, landing with a fierce bounce, jolting Grace

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from her thoughts and threatening to unseat her all together. Gripping the windowsill with one hand, she tightened the grip on her reticule. It certainly would not do for the small handgun hidden inside to go flying across the seat.

Grace wondered how much longer she and the others would have to endure this exhausting punishment, as the driver seemed determined to find every rut, rock and hole in the road. She gave up trying to keep her reticule still on the seat. Instead, she let it dangle on her left wrist, the heaviness of its contents banging into her arm as she shielded her nose and eyes from the tan blanket that seeped in from the canvas shade. Planting her feet firmly on the wooden floor, she braced herself again. Blinking, she fought the overwhelming urge to sneeze as the offending dust tickled her nostrils and clawed at her throat. The next bump caused her to bite her tongue and she squeezed her eyes shut tightly.

As the older woman seated across from her began to voice her displeasure over the rough roads, Grace felt the unmistakable pressure of a man's knee against her leg. She opened her eyes to the owner of the knee only to find he was leering at her. Could he have thought that by planting her feet that she was somehow inviting him to take liberties? Maybe he was only planting his feet in an attempt to hold his seat.

No, she realized as her stomach turned. There was no mistaking the look on his face. She jerked her leg away quickly, her boot heel scraping the wood floorboard.

As if hearing her silent prayers, the stagecoach's

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movements settled, even slowed a bit. Grace tried to relax and try not to dwell on the soreness between her shoulder blades from being jostled in the coach, or the unbelievably wretched behavior of the man. If her father had been with her, she felt certain he would shove that man's face into the dust.

For that matter, so would her mother—that thought made her feel a bit more confident.

Growing up, her mother had taught Grace the importance of taking up for herself, even if that meant using a pocket pistol, and she'd taught her to shoot at the tender age of four. Her mother had told Grace stories of how wonderful life in Savannah had been before Reconstruction, and how horrifying it was under President Johnson.

As far as Grace was concerned, it was nowhere near the horror as the night Savannah fell. One of her earliest memories, the sounds of that night still plagued Grace, to the point that even a loud clap of thunder would send her into a panic. She had been so afraid and her mother had always been so brave. Again, she thought of her father's fear, and wondered if she had been in his shoes, if she would have done the same thing he did? Surely, he must have had his reasons for leaving the Army of the South?

As her thoughts went to him, her fingers slid the well-read letter from her reticule. Just holding it made her feel closer to him. Unfolding it carefully, she observed the handwriting, noting for the first time that the last part of the letter was different, almost as if her father's hand gave out and someone—possibly the friend

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who he mentioned would be meeting her stage—must have finished the letter for him.

The handwriting that followed her father's was a bit on the sloppy side, but the careful strokes showed the writer had made the effort to make his letters appear neater. She reread that last paragraph, which was written in that different hand:



...God keep you until we meet, My Dearest Darling Girl. You can scarcely imagine how anxious I am to finally meet you face to face. I long to see your beauty and touch your porcelain cheek with my lips. I regret that I will not be able to meet you in Sweetwater, but a good friend of mine will meet your stage and bring you to me. Take care and hurry to me.

*All my love,
Lyle Harmon*



Grace sighed, reaching up to touch the antique gold locket pinned to her jacket, a gift from her father to her mother. Given on their wedding day, it contained a lock of his hair. Now, secured near her heart, it contained a lock of her mother's hair as well, a tangible memory of the life left behind.

Only the memories and secrets traveled with her. Soon, she would be able to meet the father she had

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dreamed of all of her life. She wondered about the handwriting and about him. Why was he unable to finish the letter? Was he sick or hurt? Was he still afraid of being discovered by vigilantes? Did anyone else know of his actions during the war?

She prayed that he was safe, vowing that once she got to his side, her father would be safe.

Turning her face away from the other passengers, she gave the appearance that she was shielding herself from the dust, though the tears that glistened in her eyes were from worry.

Bolstering this, a feeling of dread—stronger than dread, a premonition—crept down her spine, forcing her eyes open and her mind to clear. Reaching up, her fingers closed again around the locket.

“My dear?”

The older woman seated across from her brought Grace from her deep thoughts, though her uneasiness lingered.

“Ma’am?” Grace looked at the matron.

“My dear, you fold and unfold that letter much longer and it will more than likely disintegrate,” the woman admonished, with a smile on her cherubic face. “What is your name, child?”

“Grace. Grace Leeanna Byron,” she answered, keenly aware that in doing so, she had garnered the unwanted attention of the quiet man and felt again the icy fingers of dread slither up her back. Tamping down an urge to shudder, she forced her attention on the woman speaking to her, but her fingers sought again the feel of the antique locket she wore pinned on her blouse. It was

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becoming her source of strength.

“My, what a small world, indeed,” the older woman gushed, waving her hanky excitedly. “You see, my name is *Grace* as well. Grace Walters Simpson.” Her northern diction was very precise, indicating wealth and breeding. “I was married to Gregory Walters. Perhaps you have heard of him. He had a very prominent position in Mr. Lincoln’s cabinet, you know.

”Mr. Walters is gone now. Therefore, I married again, a lovely gentleman in the steel business back east. My Charles is so generous. Why, he sent me out here to visit my sister, without my even having to ask. She wrote me a few weeks ago from Phoenix. Poor thing isn’t feeling well. Well, Charles wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Grace felt something slither against her shoe. Realizing it was the silent man’s boot sliding purposefully across her shoe, she jerked hers away. To cover her discomfort, she tried to ignore the rudeness and bestowed her friendliest smile on the older woman, who had noticed none of the man’s boorish behavior.

“It’s nice to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Simpson.”

“Nonsense. You must call me ‘Grace’.”

“Alright then, Grace.”

“Tell me, are you married, Grace?” the older Grace asked.

“No, ma’am,” she answered, continuing to ignore the man, even as he moved in his seat. He appeared to Grace to be squirming and uncomfortable.

Good.

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“Then what brings you out west, child? Where are you from?” the older woman continued her questions.

“I come from Savannah. I’m starting a new life,” she heard herself say.

“How exciting!” the older woman exclaimed. “I applaud your, oh, what does Charles call it, your *pluck*. I fear, though, there aren’t many opportunities for young women in the West. At least none that can be mentioned. What kind of life are you seeking for yourself?”

Trapped now, Grace steadied herself as the lie tumbled across her lips. “I’m going to join my fiancé.”

“In Sweetwater? I do hope to make his acquaintance.”

“Well,” Grace hastened to explain. “He won’t be able to meet me personally. He is sending a close friend to meet the stage and take me to him.”

“Unchaperoned?”

“I, guess I never gave it much thought.”

“The very idea.” The older woman waved her hanky furiously, becoming quite agitated.

“I’ve come this far without a chaperone, Mrs. Simpson. I will be fine.”

Grace was aware of the man seated across from her, how his ice-cold eyes stared at her as she reached over and patted the older woman’s hand. Although she did her best to ignore him, she was aware that he continued to stare at her from under the brim of his hat. She could feel a numbing heat creep up from her neck to her cheeks and found herself fighting back the bile in her throat.

Her feeling of foreboding had a firm grip on her,

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now, making Grace wonder if maybe he was one of those vigilantes she suspected her father was worried about. The man had been rude before, but now that she had let him know that she was southern, his attentions felt sinister to her.

How could she have been so careless as to let him know personal things?

She glanced towards the older woman, with her round face and kind smile. The woman was still talking, waving her handkerchief for emphasis with one hand and clutching her reticule with the other.

Grace looked back at the silent man, and she felt the tiny hairs on her neck prickle as he picked that moment to look up, his icy, blue-gray eyes pinning her to her seat. His thin lips slid into a mocking smile. He winked slowly and deliberately, and Grace swallowed the lump in her throat.

He knows he's being bold, and he doesn't care.

She fumed silently, turning her attention back to the older Grace, who was still rambling non-stop.

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Chapter Two

The man seated across from Grace cleared his throat and let his gentlemen's handkerchief flutter out of the opening that served as a window. "Ladies," he spoke, startling both women. "I believe the stage is going to be robbed."

He leveled his gaze on Grace. She stared into the coldness. The sound of his voice was that of a snake, coiled and ready to strike.

"Sir," the older woman scolded, "if you are trying to frighten us, I suggest that you go back to sleep. The very idea," she huffed, waving her hanky at him furiously.

His thin lips pursed in Grace's direction, causing a horrible chill to course through her. As her gaze froze on the small derringer, peeking out from under his jacket sleeve, aimed at her, her breath caught in her throat and threatened to quit altogether.

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As if bolstering the words of the madman, Grace felt the stagecoach lurch forward. Just as suddenly, she felt it tilt crazily and grabbed the window opening to keep from being spilled into the floor.

The driver yelled down, "They're trying to stop us! Hang on, folks!" Then added, "Mister, you might want to help out here!"

Grace stared at a shining silver barrel suddenly trained on her.

"Oh," the man with the derringer sneered for the benefit of the women, "I intend to."

"What?" the older Grace croaked, holding onto the strap by the window. "Oh, my! What shall we do?"

"I'll tell you what to do, you old bat," the man snapped. "You hand over your valuables, now."

"What makes you think we have any valuables?" The older woman held her reticule closer to her wide girth.

"I've been listening to you the whole way." He spoke to the matron, but looked at Grace. "No chaperone to guard the treasure. *Tsk, tsk*," he jeered. "You know what they say about Southern women, don't you? They're only good for one thing. As a northern soldier, I feel it my duty to find out if that's true."

"Where have you been, you utter fool? The war is over," Mrs. Simpson screeched.

"Not my war," he sneered suddenly at the older woman before he turned his twisted hatred back to Grace. "I never took a hostage before." His gaze traveled the length of her, slowly returning to her eyes. He grinned. "I might even let you go if you give me what I

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want.”

Grace’s heart slammed against her ribcage. Her hands were shaking as she reached into her reticule. “I,” she began, her voice lodging in her throat as she found her own tiny derringer and her fingers eased around the trigger. “I only have this.”

The gun fired, the bullet striking his hand, ripping into his flesh and splintering the bones in his knuckles. The burning pain seared its way up through his arm to his brain. He cried out in anger and torment, his gun clattering to the floor of the stage.

Grace was on it instantly. Then the world seemed to slow down. She pointed his own gun at him, aiming it at his heart, but the stage bounced, tremendously. The force of the jolt slammed her against the seat, the shot firing harmlessly out the window.

Just as suddenly, something connected sharply under her eye, knocking her hat completely off her head and sending her onto the floor.

The older woman was screaming. The man yelled, the driver yelled, and Grace’s eyes closed.



It had been a long time since Cole Pierce had been to Sweetwater, and, as he reined his horse towards the only drinking establishment, he was determined to make this visit a short one. No sign of the stage, yet, he noted as he draped the reins over the hitching rail.

Glancing up and down the dusty main street, his mind went back to a time when he couldn’t wait to get

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to a town and the watering hole. That was a different time and a different Cole, he thought as he absently scratched his mare's forehead. Younger and dumber, he would blaze into town with the other cowpunchers thinking the climb to heaven was a stairwell to the second floor of the saloon.

Shirley.

Life was funny, Cole thought, stepping onto the porch of the saloon. "Welcome to The Globe," he read the painted words on the window aloud for the benefit of his mare. "You want anything?" he asked her.

She shook her big head as if she understood.

"Hopefully, this won't take too long." He walked to the batwing doors.

"Cole? Cole Pierce, son, is that you?" The unmistakable voice of his big friend, Dell, came from inside.

Cole pushed through the batwings only to be greeted with a slap on the back that nearly took his breath.

"Son, get over here and sit yourself down. Neville, bring us something, would ya?"

"Certainly, Sheriff," came the barkeeper's reply, causing Cole's eyebrows to lift questioningly.

"Sheriff?" Cole queried, easing his frame into a chair and his long legs under the table as he studied the tin star Dell wore on his shirt. "Last time I saw you, you were thinking about getting a place and starting a ranch. When did you become a lawman?"

"This town has a funny way of changin' a man's plans," was Dell's answer. "What brings you to town, Cole?"

"You're the sheriff. Figure it out," Cole countered.

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Picking up his drink, Cole tasted the amber liquid fire. It was a habit he'd developed from his cattle drive days. Savor, then swallow. A flick of the wrist and the drink slid down his throat.

"Are you here to meet the stage, perhaps?" the bar-keep asked.

"Are you the sheriff?" Cole returned the question, leveling a hard look at the dandy.

"No, I'm just nosey," Neville said, honestly, poking fun at himself.

"What about it?" the sheriff asked Cole. "Are you here to meet the stage?"

Cole rocked back in his chair and grinned.

Dell took the bottle and poured more drinks. "Who's on that stage, Cole?"

He chuckled in answer, then drummed his fingers on the table and gazed about him. The saloon hadn't changed since he was last here, except for the piano against the far wall. He'd noticed that as soon as he'd come through the batwing doors.

There were tables and chairs of different sizes and shapes scattered about the place, some for drinking and others for gambling. He remembered Neville Hilliard from when he had first taken over the place; at least, he remembered drink prices going up. Just as had the price of the rented rooms.

Hilliard was an opportunist, plain and simple. He had come out west to make his fortune years ago, and judging from the sharp style of his clothes, and the way his hair and mustache were trimmed to perfection, he must be doing pretty well.

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Dell, on the other hand, still dressed like a cowboy. But, then Cole couldn't picture Dell sporting a derby hat.

"Oh, hell, Cole, just spill it," Neville begged, his southern drawl making each word sound like two. He wiped at the scarred table with a rag. He was about the cleanest man Cole had ever seen.

"Nah, I'm enjoyin' this." Cole leaned back further in his seat.

"Now, just hold on." The sheriff put his hands up. "This has something to do with you bein' away so long—why have you been away, anyway?"

"I believe that's his business," Neville interjected.

"Just who's damned side are you on?"

"Oh, well yours, of course. I just had a feeling that that response was floating around up there. I thought it should land."

"Ok, let's be logical about this." Dell smoothed down his mustache.

"You're capable?" Cole asked.

"You know damn well I'm good at figurin' stuff out that don't wanna be figured out. If you'll remember, I'm the one who figured out just who was stealin' all Morton's cattle."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks a lot," Cole's voice dripped sarcasm. "You see what that led to."

It had led to Cole drawing down on another man, and dropping him so quickly, it shocked everyone present. Especially Cole, himself.

He'd had no choice. The man drew first. But the men he rode herd with started treating him differently.

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Men he thought of as friends acted like strangers. Cole left soon after that. He knew any man who was reported to be a quick draw would be sought out by others, and only to prove that they were just as quick or quicker.

After drifting a few years, he'd ended up as partners of a sort with Lyle Harmon, who owned a run-down homestead a good ways outside of Sweetwater. The older man reminded Cole of his own father, and Cole helped him out where he could.

"Okay, that wisecrack did it." Dell gave Cole a look that said now he would fight dirty. "Neville," the sheriff turned to the saloon owner, "you probably never heard this story before...there used to be this one lady upstairs..."

Cole brought his chair down on all four legs. He didn't like having his life discussed, especially that particular chapter. He certainly didn't care to have his nose rubbed in it.

"Oh, Cole wanted next to that every chance he got."

Cole waited for the hurt to grip his heart, but this time it didn't happen. Maybe he was finally over her.

"What happened?" Neville asked, his mouth hanging agape.

"What do you think happened?" Dell grinned.

"She lied to me. She broke my heart," Cole answered, relieved that he could actually say the words.

"Show me a woman who doesn't lie," the barkeep replied.

"She ended up running off with some damn cowpoke," Cole said, amazed that he could speak the words.

"Probably the same fellow that Cole beat the hell

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outta. Some kid, 'bout our age. Poor kid was visiting Shirley. Landed Cole's sorry butt right in jail."

"And your sorry butt, too," Cole reminded Dell.

"What are friends for?" The big man's laughter rang out. "Then, there was the time—"

"Alright," Cole shook his head. "I'm helping out a friend. I'm meetin' somebody for him."

"Who you helpin' out?" Neville leaned forward on his elbows.

"Name's Harmon. Lyle Harmon."

"That codger, who wanders into town 'bout twice a year? What could you be doin' for him?" Dell asked.

"I'm picking up his mail-order bride."

"Are you tellin' me that that old coot is getting' himself a bride?" Dell asked, clearly surprised. "You sure it ain't you gettin' one?"

"What the hell would I do with a wife, Dell?"

"Same thing you was doin' with Shirley."

"If I can be of any assistance," Neville said, indicating the stairwell.

"Hold up, Neville," Dell charged. "You told me you don't sell sins of the flesh."

"I don't. I merely rent rooms. How those lovely ladies parlay goods and services isn't for me to say. As a matter of fact, one of my renters left last night."

"Which one?" Dell asked with marked concern in his voice that surprised Cole.

"Relax, Sheriff. It wasn't the fair Elsie I was alluding to. It was Rosemary."

"The Screamer," Dell supplied the nickname the men used when speaking of the woman. "Funny, I don't

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see a 'room for rent' sign anywhere."

"You won't either," the barkeeper said in a low voice, garnering him a stern look from the sheriff. "A friend of Elsie's is coming to visit. I have it on good authority that she could arrive any day." He glanced at the sheriff, then looked back at Cole. "So, what is this mail-order bride's name?"

"Grace something," Cole answered, reaching into his pants pocket. "I got it written down here. Grace Lee Byron."

"My, that sounds stern," the sheriff said.

"Probably some old schoolteacher," Cole deduced.

"Well, she's obviously a spinster," Neville pointed out.

Cole shrugged. "All I know is ever since ole Harmon latched on to Grace, he's almost a new man." He smiled, happy for him.

Cole had stumbled on Harmon's place by accident. The older man obviously needed Cole's help, and he'd done what he could for him, even placing an add for a mail-order bride when Harmon had asked him to. Cole had even finished a letter to Grace for Harmon, after the older man's arthritic fingers became too painful to write anymore.

"What, was he sickly?" Dell asked.

"Kinda stays that way. Arthritis. I've been helping out around the place, you know, fixing things, built a porch."

"He's always stayed to himself," Dell observed. "Surprised he'd want a woman underfoot. So, what's his story?"

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“Don’t know.” Cole tossed back the shot left in his glass.

“I know. None of your business.” Neville grinned a lopsided grin, making one side of his mustache jump.

“When I came up on Harmon’s place, hell, I thought it was deserted. I’ve been helpin’ him fix the place up.” Cole ran a lean finger over the rim of his empty glass. “I guess Harmon kind of reminds me of my pa. First time I saw him, he was standing on that rickety porch trying to aim his Winchester at me. Then, he about toppled over as the porch started to give way.”

Dell downed his drink, then asked, “So, where does Harmon live?”

“About ten miles out of town,” Cole answered.

“In what direction?”

Cole pointed toward the batwing doors.

“So, its south—what the...?”

All three men rose as a commotion erupted outside and people started yelling and running.

“*The stage has been robbed! Driver’s been shot!*” someone stuck his head through the saloon doors and shouted.

“Aw, hell!” Cole flung the curse out as the three went crashing out of the swinging doors.

At the stage depot, a small crowd had gathered as the stage driver was lowered down gently from atop the high coach. The horses were stomping and blowing hard.

“That’s Horace!” Dell made his way to him. “What happened?”

“They got me again. You’ve gotta go after ‘em, Dell. They took the women.”

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“Aw, son-of-a-bitch!” Cole was already running for his horse.



Grace’s eyes would not open. She knew she was awake. She could hear the older Grace screaming. She felt separated from her body, as if it no longer existed. Slowly, she became aware of a heaviness in her arms and legs making it impossible to move them. Her head felt as if there was a vise painfully squeezing her eyes shut. Her ribs ached. It hurt to breathe. She still felt far away from the noises and screaming.

“I didn’t mean for you to take the old one!” someone shouted.

She recognized the voice—it was the man from the stage.

“We won’t have her for long,” came another voice. “B’sides, you got one.”

Her head hurt, but something was telling her to open her eyes.

She felt her skirts jerked, heard the material ripping, and forced her eyes to open as her skirt was ripped away.

The man was over her, his cold eyes laughing at her as he grabbed her blouse. “I am so glad you could rouse yourself for the unveiling.” His words reached her ears as his fingers clawed at her blouse.

She actually felt his fingernails digging into her skin.

“Did that hurt? Bitch?”

Tears of pain sprung to her eyes. As horror mounted,

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his head cocked suddenly to one side. He was truly insane. A fear she had never known before welled up inside so quickly, she knew she was going to be sick.

“You know, when I first thought about us being alone, I was so hard I was squirming in my seat. Thinking about how good you would feel, and how I would enjoy getting my hands on you. But, something happened, didn’t it? Did I mention that you shot me in the fucking hand?” he spat the words.

To her horror, his words were emphasized by the ripping of her clothing. Then he stopped, his mouth sank down upon hers—and he was humming the tune *Marching Through Georgia*.

He was insane!

But he had actually done her a favor by ripping her skirts away, she realized, and drove her knee deeply into his groin.

His head jerked upwards from the pain, he twisted away, rolling on the ground, screaming pathetically.

Grace got to her knees, and, then bracing her arm on the tree behind her, she pushed up until she was standing.



Cole urged his mare forward, but bitted her back to a slower and quieter gate as they entered the woods. The sheriff and Neville followed closely behind him, each man frantically scanning the ground for the tracks they had been following. As they rounded a bend in the trail, Cole caught a flash of white through the trees. He sawed

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back hard on the reins, then dismounted, taking his Winchester with him at the same instant.

There was no need to wave her off, for the mare hated loud noises, and an ear-shattering scream sent her running for cover.

Just ahead of them, not a hundred feet, were the men they'd been trailing. Cole dove hard, landing against a downed tree, and the sheriff and Neville landed beside him. Cole held up two fingers to signify two men. He aimed his rifle, training it to where he heard screaming. A flash of white caught his eye, and it turned into a woman. One of the two women was free, her clothes ripped away to her under things. She propped on a tree for support.

"What the hell?" A man yelled as he grabbed the young woman by the arms, shaking her roughly. Her hair came loose and fell down past her hips. Before Cole could get a bead on the brute, he saw her reach for the man's gun, pulling it free from his holster.

"Grace! Grace! Get down," she screamed, firing the gun. The bullet struck with deadly accuracy, sending the older woman's assailant to a better place.

The young woman's attacker, at first stunned at her actions, recovered. The young woman's head snapped back as a meaty hand smashed into her world. Her head connected sharply with the huge tree, and she sank limply to the ground.

"You're mine," Cole said, squeezing off the round that would end the life of the man who'd struck her.



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Pugh felt as if his body were plastered to the ground. He had fought a war and had made a name for himself. He had never been laid low by a woman. The last woman who had tried had paid with her life.

Now, this little bitch had crippled him. With a lucky shot, she had obliterated his hand. He had seen wounds like this, so much blood and the bone fragments hanging onto remnants of tendons, it was hard to believe that it was his hand he was staring at. It sickened him.

He would kill her for this.

“You little bitch!” Pugh seethed through his pain, in both his hand and his screaming groin. He crawled into the brush, then got to his feet and lunged into the woods. “Don’t think this is over,” he shouted the hateful threat back through the air.

Cole exchanged looks with Neville and the sheriff.

“Who the hell is that?” Dell asked, peering in the direction of the voice.

“*Shh*. Listen,” Neville said.

“I can’t see a thing,” Cole whispered.

“*I will hunt you down, you bitch!*” they heard from further away. “*I will kill you for what you’ve done! Never think this is over!*”

The threats quieted, leaving Cole with the hair standing on his arms. Neville actually shuddered.



It was getting dark as the three men rode back into town with the two unconscious female passengers. Dell,

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being the biggest of the three, had born the older Grace, and he grumbled the whole way because Cole somehow got the young, brave woman.

Cole had listened to him whine about the situation for a while before asking him to show respect to the woman in his arms.

If there was one thing that separated Cole and the sheriff, Cole thought, it was their manners. Cole had some, at least where women were concerned. He knew to show proper respect. He'd learned that from his ma.

Cole's thoughts turned to the woman he cradled in his own arms. She hadn't moved since he'd picked her up. Her long hair spilled down across his arm and glimmered like sweet fire in the moonlight. He wondered how a woman like this found herself working in saloons.

"How is she?" Neville asked, riding up between the two men.

"Mine's still out. Which means, she's gonna be dead weight when we get there," the sheriff complained.

"Dammit, Dell," Cole barked. "That's Harmon's bride. Now show her some damned respect."

"Well, I'm sorry! You got the pretty one!"

"She is pretty," Neville offered, sounding pleased.

"Dang. And that was the bravest thing I ever saw anybody do, man or woman!" Dell shook his head.

They rode up to the doctor's office, which was just down and across from the saloon. Dell held the portly woman tightly and slid to the ground, almost buckling under the weight.

Cole had no problem with his bundle, and Dell rolled his eyes as Doc Peters came out to greet them.

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He was a barrel-shaped man with gray hair, what there was left of it. He had a kind, intelligent face, and sported a full, white beard. At that moment, his glasses were perched on his bald forehead and he was wiping his hands dry.

“I only got room for one more,” he announced.

“Damn, Doc, move,” Dell said, his voice, as well as his back showing the strain of the weight of the woman.

Cole turned a quizzical look to Neville.

“Rosemary’s room?” Neville offered, shrugging.

“You rent the rooms.”

“I do indeed. And I wager once this dove heals, the men will be flocking to her in droves.”

“You really think she’s a saloon girl?” Cole asked skeptically.

“With hair that color? It’s almost a certainty.”

“What if you’re wrong? Shouldn’t we try the hotel?”

“And how would she pay, hmm? I didn’t see any money lying around, did you?”

“Maybe we should try and find some matron to take her in.”

“Know any? Look, we could tote her all over this town. Besides, even if we found one at this time of night, they would take one look at that hair and slam their pious little doors in our faces.”

“You’re probably right,” Cole muttered, looking back at the doctor’s office. “I hope this sorry town doesn’t ever have an epidemic, or something. You know, if you’re wrong and she wakes up in a saloon...” his voice trailed off, leaving the threat hanging there.

“I’m never wrong about such things.”

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“I reckon waking up in one of your rooms is still better than where we found her,” Cole concluded.

“Now, you are being reasonable.”

Cole carried his burden across the street and into the saloon, which was empty.

“Right in here,” Neville said, opening the door as Cole climbed the stairs.

Cole waited until Neville lit an oil lamp lit, bathing the room in soft light, then laid the young woman on the bed. He wasn’t a doctor, but he didn’t like the bruises on her face and her temple.

“Should we cover her up?” Neville asked.

“Better wait for the doctor.” Cole sat down beside her on the bed.

Dell’s large frame filled the open doorway as he entered, his hat in his hands. “I swear that was the bravest thing I ever saw.”

“What was?” Neville asked. “Oh, you must be referring to the way I offered up my room as if I were running a hospital.”

“The way she took that gun and saved Harmon’s Gracie.”

“Well, don’t cry about it,” Cole barked at his big friend. For some reason, Cole was taking exception to the sheriff’s schoolboy declarations.

“I thought it was careless,” Neville opined, looking to Cole for his input.

“I haven’t decided.” Cole wondered what color eyes went with hair that color. It was like he was staring into a sunset filled with orange and gold shimmers.

“She could have saved her own life,” Dell continued.

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“But no, she saved someone else’s instead.” He came to stand behind Cole, peering down over his shoulder at the young woman. “Dang. She’s pretty.”

“Yep.” Cole smoothed her hair back against the bed covering. “Where is that damned doctor?”

Neville rolled his eyes. “Well, gentlemen, I deserve the best whiskey I own. Care to join me?”

“You two go ahead,” Cole said. “Neville, could you fill that pitcher with water for me?”

“Certainly, Doctor Pierce,” he scoffed, taking up the pitcher and leaving the room.

Cole wrung the water out of the washcloth and eased back onto the bed, placing the cool cloth on the woman’s forehead.

Feeling the coolness against her skin made her stir. She heard a voice, low and soothing: “*Shhh*, you just rest. You’re gonna be fine.”

The sound of the voice wrapped around her like a caress. When she opened her eyes, a handsome face was above her, rugged yet boyish at the same time. His hair was long and brown, resting and curling on his shoulders. He needed a shave, and the pronounced stubble on his upper lip and covering his rugged jaw made him appear almost dangerous.

She continued to stare up at him. His eyes seemed kind, but hard, as if he’d seen a hard life, almost sad. His face was so handsome, she wanted to touch him, just to see if he were real.

She couldn’t breathe with him looking at her like he was. Her heart was beating so loudly, she could feel it in her ears. Then a feeling was uncoiling within her, tiny

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explosions building inside her. She closed her eyes helplessly as it washed over her completely, leaving her shivering within it. She'd never felt anything like it before.

Looking down, Cole found himself being pulled into the deepest green eyes he'd ever seen. As she squeezed them shut, he swallowed hard against the lump that was constricting his breathing.

"You all right?" he asked, alarmed at the shudders in her frame.

She kept her eyes closed, embarrassed, knowing that whatever had just happened to her woman's body, he was the cause.

That knowledge alone was starting another explosion. She was powerless against it as it rolled over her again, sweeping her up with its exquisiteness.

He stroked her hair.

This was it. She was going to die right here.

Cole loved the feel of the strands of red gold that slipped through his fingers. It felt silky against his calluses. She smelled of lemon thyme, or as Cole called it, lemongrass.

She opened her eyes again, seeing him still looking down at her.

Another face appeared directly above his shoulder. An old man with kind eyes smiled down at her, clearing his throat.

Cole pulled his gaze around, then back to her. He smiled down at her—taking what breath she had been holding. "Well," he said, standing and taking her hand. His thumb stroked her fingers.

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She could feel the roughness of his calluses and here came the tiny explosions again.

“The doc’s here.” It sounded like a goodbye, but he wasn’t moving away.

God, her skin was so smooth. Cole had never been this aware of a woman before in his life. And here she was staring up at him, and he couldn’t stop grinning at her. He felt as if she were drinking him in with those eyes. She couldn’t have been more thorough if she’d had a rye grass straw, searching and sucking in every inch of his soul.

Doc Peters said, “Son, this young woman of yours needs my medical attention more than she needs your ardent attention.”

“Oh, sorry,” he said, laying her hand back down on the bed. “I’ll be downstairs.”

She watched him leave, hearing the *‘ching’* of his spurs on the wood floor. He turned back to close the door behind him. His eyes held hers for an instant, and he winked, sending those delicious little shivers exploding within her yet again.



As Cole ambled down the stairs, he saw the saloon was quite busy, now. He found Neville behind the bar, serving drinks and grinning. He was telling everyone about their daring rescue and making money hand over fist in the process.

“Ah. Dr. Pierce,” he greeted Cole. “What will it be?”

“Whiskey.”

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“Very well, just as soon as you pay me for the bottle we downed earlier.”

“Fine.” Cole glanced back up the stairs as he reached into his pants pocket, then laid a coin down on the polished wood bar. Neville poured him a drink, and Cole took a sip, then asked, “Where did Dell scamper off to?”

“Oh, our sheriff? Well, he’s conducting an official investigation. Doc Peters reported Horace is still among the living and is in fact awake.” The saloonkeeper poured out more drinks as he said this, then refilled Cole’s glass.

“Good.” Cole remarked, his eyes still trained on the stairs.

“Cole, perhaps you would rather wait outside her door?”

“What?”

“Oh, please. This just gets better and better.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” Cole tossed the whiskey back, grimacing as it hit the back of his throat, trying to ignore the barkeep.

“What I am talkin’ about is you are fairly smitten with our little patient.” The bartender laughed at the hard stare Cole leveled at him. “Is it possible that we might even witness two old friends competing for the same fair dove?”

Before Cole could answer, Dell came charging through the batwings, his expression serious. As he approached, Neville poured him a drink.

“No time. Cole, I need a favor.”

“Name it.”

“I just came from talkin’ to Horace.” As Dell started

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to explain, his fingers closed around the drink, which Neville was attempting to retrieve, and snatched it up.

Neville rolled his eyes and shook his head. "And just what did Horace allow?"

"Seems there was another passenger on that stage, a man."

The sheriff had Cole's complete attention.

"Yeah," Dell breathed out. "Horace also remembers this same fella bein' on the stage two weeks ago. The last time it was robbed. The man told him he was a surveyor."

"Oh," the barkeep snarled. "I'll say he was surveying alright. He was picking out marks to rob with his gang of cutthroats."

Dell nodded. "Yeah. He must be the man we heard yellin' in the woods."

"So, what does the bastard look like?" Cole asked quietly.

"Horace said he was a well dressed fella, about the same build as Neville, here, with dark hair, a thin mustache, and real cold-looking eyes. I'm going back out in the morning to where we found them. See if I can find some clues. I'll be staying over at Doc Peters' tonight, just in case this jasper shows up. And I need you to keep an eye on that girl upstairs."

"I need to ride out and let Harmon know what happened," Cole thought aloud.

"No, I got a real good chance at catching this son-of-a-bitch. I need you here to protect the girl. Harmon will just have to wait. You heard what the bastard said. That girl upstairs needs protectin', Cole. Don't let her out of

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your sight, in case he comes back to finish what he started.”

Cole nodded.

“Oh, this does get better,” Neville fairly purred. “Fate has delivered that poor girl right into your arms.”

Ignoring the jibe, Cole said, “Neville, I’m going to need a blanket and a pillow.”

“Do I look like a hotel?” the barkeeper sputtered. Turning to the sheriff, he demanded, “Am I going to get reimbursed for this?”

“Probably not.” Dell said and headed for the doors, “Be careful, Cole.”

“Oh,” Neville called out sarcastically. “Don’t concern yourself, Sheriff. You can count on him. He will be the soul of caution!”

“Neville?” Cole poured his own drink. “Go to hell.”

After downing the drink, he tended to his horse, stabling it in the livery stable, then returned to the saloon carrying his saddlebags.

As he pushed through the batwing doors, one of Neville’s women slid up to the saloonkeeper behind the bar. She looked to be about forty. Her face was sweet and hard at the same time, and her hair was almost yellow. She was dressed fancier than others Cole had seen in the saloon, her dress reaching her ankles. If it weren’t for the feathers in her hair, he would have thought her a society matron. Well, the feathers and the cigarette that dangled from her lips.

“Neville,” she said, pouring a drink for a man at the end of the bar. “I heard screamin’ coming from Rosemary’s room, and I—”

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Before she finished, Cole was flying up the steps two and three at a time. He burst in the room, his gun drawn. Seeing the girl was asleep, he pulled up short.

The doctor jumped at his explosive entrance.

Cole holstered his gun. "Lady downstairs said she heard screaming."

"Oh, that," Doc Peters waved him off, putting his stethoscope into his black bag. "One of her injuries required a couple of stitches."

Cole's eyes narrowed. "You didn't give her anything for the pain?"

Moving closer to the bed, he touched her shining hair, which spilled over the blue satin bed coverings.

"I gave her some laudanum, son, and she's sleeping from it now. Unfortunately, it hadn't taken effect when I started." The doctor placed a comforting hand on her temple as she drifted further down into a deep sleep.

The kindness left his face as he walked over to Cole. "Son, I am very concerned about your young woman. I'm positive that this is just a temporary setback brought on, no doubt, by the stress of the stage robbery..."

"What setback?" Cole tried to understand what the doctor was saying, but so far he wasn't making much sense.

"Son, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but she couldn't tell me anything."

"She doesn't remember the robbery, then?" Cole dropped his saddlebags by the wall.

Doc Peters took a deep breath and tried again, "She couldn't tell me her name, where she was from or where she was heading."

Chapter Three

“What? You mean, she can’t remember anything?”
Cole asked

“I’m certain that this is only temporary. She needs to rest for a few days.” The doctor placed a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “She should sleep through the night. However, if she should wake up, it will more than likely be from the pain. See here,” he instructed, pointing to the stitches he applied to the back of her head. “Let me tell you, she wasn’t happy about that.”

“I guess not.” Cole wasn’t too damned happy, either.

“You give her one teaspoon, but no more than that,” the doctor instructed, holding up the bottle of *Stickney and Poors* laudanum. “Under no circumstances do you offer her any information. Anything you tell her could

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manifest itself into an illusion of memory.”

“Mani-what?” Cole frowned.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’ve been reading about it in the medical journals from back east. There have been cases where a person with hysteria can head a suggestion and act upon it. You could tell her anything right now, and her mind would take and accept whatever you say as fact.

“I’ll speak to Dell,” the doctor added. “Unfortunately, he won’t be able to question her. It is imperative that she come to her own realizations.”

“Dell said he’s staying at your office tonight.”

“Why in heaven’s name is he doing that? Are my patients in danger?”

Cole saw no reason to share the threat the robber had yelled as he escaped. Cole said only, “One of the robbers was actually riding on the stage with them. This ain’t the first time he’s robbed good people, and that’s the least we know about him. Except, he got away, and the sheriff believes he’ll try to silence any witnesses, so we’re guarding them in case he tries something.”

“You mean, tries something else,” Doc Peters confided, pulling her camisole top aside, exposing the very top of her left breast and the ugly scratches there.

“Doc, he didn’t...”

“No, but he obviously tried. If you boys hadn’t gotten to them when you did...well, are you two married?”

“No. But, I’m responsible for her.”

“Not married? Then you can’t stay in here with her,” he started to protest.

“I said I’m responsible for her,” Cole repeated, his

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voice sounding like a growl, brooking no argument from the older man.

“Very well,” Doc Peters relented.

“Yeah,” Cole breathed. “Doc, how’s the other woman, Grace, how is she?” He hoped Harmon’s bride would be okay.

“She’s not awake yet. I’m going to keep an eye on her tonight. She has some bumps and bruises as well. I’ll check in on you two come morning.” The doc paused at the door. “Go easy on that laudanum, just one spoon in water. We don’t want her first memory to be her last.”

Cole closed the door, turning the key inside the lock. Leaning his hip against it, his eyes drank in the sight of the girl. Her hair spilled out over the white pillow like a pool of soft fire and her skin looked so soft and silky.

Was Neville right? Could she be a saloon girl? He couldn’t picture her wearing one of those brazen short dresses, but he grinned as he could imagine her smiling up at a man, her dark green eyes sliding shut as she quivered under his touch.

“*Whoee*,” he breathed, shaking himself mentally from the direction of his thoughts and back to the reason he was here.

Dell was right about one thing—she needed help. She needed his protection. Cole sat down, easing his body gently on the mattress. His eyes strayed to the scratches that marred her honeyed skin. Whoever those sons-of-bitches were, they had banged her up pretty good. When he caught up with that third one...

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft rapping on the door and a woman’s voice calling out, “*Knock*,

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knock.”

Cole went to the door, unlocking it. It was the lady from downstairs, and she had blankets and a pillow.

“So, you’re Cole?” Hazel asked, stepping inside, her burgundy satin rustling loudly around her ankles.

“Yes, ma’am.” His voice had a hard edge to it, like gravel or sand.

“I’m Hazel.” She was good at sizing up men, and this one might not be trouble, but he had been through hell. He was certainly handsome enough to turn any woman’s head, with his long hair and well-muscled body. His face sported a full day’s growth of stubble, giving him the appearance of a dangerous man.

She looked down at the sleeping girl. “She your woman?”

“I’m responsible for her.”

“Neville asked me to fix you up a nice bed...on the floor.”

Cole shrugged off the warning. “First damn bawdy house I ever saw to tell a man not to have a good time.”

“Well,” she said, producing a bottle and a shot glass from under the pillow she carried. “Maybe not too good of a time.” She sat the bottle down on the dresser and looked around the room. “Maybe we can fix this room up tomorrow.”

Again he shrugged. “Room’s fine, ma’am.”

“Maybe for you, but what about her?” She looked down at the girl again. “She’s a pretty thing, even through those bruises.”

Cole silently agreed. She was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen.

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“I heard there’s a real sick bastard trying to get at her. Well, son, you can’t stay in here every second of the day. Now, mind you, I’m pretty busy at night, but I’m usually up early and free all day. I have a gun and I know how to use it. And I sure would like a chance to shoot the son-of-a-bitch that did this to her.”

“I believe you.” He smiled at her.

“If you need something, I’m sure all you have to do is ask one of the girls. Course, once they get a gander at you, you probably won’t need to ask.” She winked at him. “I’ll check in on you in the morning.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

“Son, you call me ma’am one more time and I’m liable to shoot you. You call me ‘Hazel’.”

He nodded. He liked her. She was a funny mix with her stylish dress and that cigarette dangling from her painted lips.

He shut the door after her, turning the key. He kept his eyes on the sleeping woman as he undressed to make sure she didn’t wake up. But kind of hoping she would.

Leaving his pants on, he unhooked the waistband and the first button, a habit of his. He took up the bottle and glass from the plain, but sturdy dresser and plopped down on his makeshift bed.

He let out a tired sigh and pulled the cork from the bottle with his teeth, then poured a drink. He set the bottle on the floor and reclined his bare back against the pillow, propped against the wall.

The smell of the night fires, which were burned to light the street, wafted in through the open window, reminding Cole of the nights out on the open range on

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cattle drives. Looking for something to do, Cole retrieved his sketchbook and a pencil from his saddlebag. His fingers drew the pencil across the blank paper, showing in the book what he saw in his mind. Sketching was his release, and had been ever since the death of his parents—first his pa, then his ma.

Cole still missed them, and for a long time after they died, he'd been angry with them. Not for leaving, although that was the end result, but for lying to him about how sick they'd been. He supposed they were trying to spare him, protect him, but they had still left him alone. That had left a mark on him, a chip on his shoulder.

Crossing his bare feet, he sipped from the glass. If he lived to be a hundred, this day would stand out as the strangest, he thought. He started out fetching a bride for Harmon, and now he was in the same room with the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

Prettier than Shirley by far.

Thinking of the first woman he'd made love to, it dawned on Cole, and not for the first time that day, that the memory of Shirley made him feel different than it had when he was younger. Back then, the thought of her had almost consumed him like a fire would and now, it was almost non-existent. No fire, no heat, no burning passion. He didn't yearn to be by her side.

That couldn't be right, he thought. Not if he'd truly loved the woman.

"Young and dumb," he said the words aloud. A boy who had lost everything he'd ever loved reaching out to someone who was as lonely and scared as he was.

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Suddenly, Cole realized something. Shirley hadn't just happened to like younger men—she had been smart in teaching them. Young, untried men were very polite and never hit.

He grinned, shook his head, and offered her up a toast in respect. Wherever she was, he wished her well. He tossed the rest of his whiskey back, letting it burn its path from the back of his throat all the way down.

First, he heard his charge moving around, then he heard a tiny moan. He got up from the floor and sat on the side of the bed, watching her face for some sign of pain.

She let out another tiny moan. Cole leaned over her, stroking her hair. He loved the way it looked in the soft glow of the oil lamp. He liked the way the silky strands felt as his fingers slid into its thickness.



Something was touching her hair. From her sleepy cloud, she turned toward that touch. It made her feel safe and content. She moved closer to the source, her hip touching something hard, and an amazing feeling started building inside her. She smiled sleepily.

Cole watched as the corners of her lips turned up in a slight smile. He pushed her hair across her shoulder, exposing the scratches just above her camisole. He tenderly and quietly touched the scratches, stroking her skin.

He felt like he was under a spell. He watched, amazed as she moaned again, arching her body to feel

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more. Tiny goose bumps appeared on her arms and her pulse jumped under his fingers. Then he bent, kissing her skin gently.

She smiled in her sleep as the handsome face of the man she had met earlier swam before her. So handsome. What was his name? Cole? Yes. She smiled again recalling the way he held her gaze and smiled down at her, the way the lines at the corners of his mouth eased the firmness of his lips into a grin.

Even in her drowsy euphoria, whether it was the whiskey on his mouth stinging the tiny scratches or his hair tickling her skin, she knew it was Cole making her feel this way. Her fingers tangled in his hair trying to pull him closer. The tiny explosions were soaring through her now.

Cole heard her say his name. She was still under the effects of the laudanum.

“Damn,” he breathed out, his entire body beginning to shake. He’d never felt anything like this before, and this tingling was building with intensity until it washed over him. He stood up from the bed and backed away from her still sleeping form.

“Damn,” he said, again. His palms were sweating. What in the hell had gotten into him? Christ, he was no better than that son-of-a-bitch that put those marks on her.

And what in the hell had happened to him when she pulled him closer? A numbing tingle had swept through his body.

He sat back on his bedroll and grabbed the bottle, put it to his mouth and drank deeply. He was twenty-

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seven, for piss sakes, and here he was reacting like a mere boy.

He glanced at the sketching pad and found her likeness staring right back at him. He'd been drawing her the whole time.

He turned the bottle up again, then snaked a hand through his hair.

“Damn.”



She had been dreaming. It was a delicious dream, and the man named Cole had been there. She'd actually felt his hands on her, his mouth on her skin. She felt the roughness of the stubble on his jaw against her neck. Her fingers had actually touched the sleekness of his hair.

She replayed the dream in her mind, and each delicious time it brought her to the brink of something so new to her, it had no name. In her sleep, she rolled to her back, the contact of her stitches on the pillow causing her head to throb painfully.

She rolled away from the pain, hoping it would go away and she could get back to her dreams.

But this was no ordinary headache, and it was getting worse. She closed her eyes against the pain, but it seemed to increase with blinding speed. She flung her arms out against it, fighting it. She kicked out at it, doing nothing more than kicking the bed covers off. As they slid uselessly to the floor, she gave up. Finally, she gave in to it, curling on her side. She hated crying. It meant she'd let the pain best her.

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“Aw, hell!”

The words came from somewhere close.

“Here. Come here. Sit up. Come on, now.”

She recognized his voice. Cole’s voice, his words sweet and hushed.

“Sit up here,” he coaxed, pulling her up beside him.

“It hurts,” she cried to him as she watched him fumbling with a bottle and a spoon. Her tears coursed down her wet cheeks. She tried getting her breath, but it came with a strangled sobbing sound. Her fingers were gripping the first thing they found, his upper arm.

“Come on, swallow this down,” he gently urged, guiding the spoon to her mouth. “That’s a girl.” After setting the spoon back on the side table, he turned her towards him.

Her fingers continued to dig into his arm, her body trembling. She pressed her face into the wall of his chest, her tears still coming. His arms went around her holding her tightly against him. She wanted to crawl inside him. Her legs went around his waist, allowing her to fit even closer.

Cole rocked her slowly, kissing the top of her head. He was saying things, silly things, anything he could think of. He continued to rock her until he heard her calming down.

Then he became very aware of the contact her body was making against his, and he felt her move up against him in a different way.

“No,” he said, his body already answering her movements.

Her hands slid up his chest to his neck.

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“No!” He made his voice stern, and he took her wrists in his hands and pulled her hands away.

She was looking up at him, her face and lips glistening wet from her tears. He cradled her face, cupping it in his palms and fanned his thumbs across her cheeks, wiping away the wetness.

His gaze left her eyes to stare at her lips, moist with her salty tears. She moved against him again. He closed his eyes and lowered his mouth for a taste. His mouth touched her lips ever so lightly. Her body rocked against him again. His kiss deepened, his lips fusing over hers, claiming her. His arms went around her pulling her up against him.

His mouth nuzzled hers, instructing her wordlessly to open for him. She did. His tongue searched inside her mouth, playing against hers. He engaged her in this teasing. He teased the corners of her lips, sliding his tongue across her lower lip. He buried his tongue back inside her mouth and lowered his hands to her hips. He guided her, moving her against him—actually making love to her through their clothes.

He didn't care. She felt so damned good. His stomach clenched as he neared the edge he sought.

Not now. Not yet, he thought, trying to control the urgency he felt.

He lowered her to the bed. As her head rested on the pillow, her body's shaking eased, her breathing trying to return to normal. She smiled up at him and sleep took her down.

Cole couldn't move for a long time, his lips still buzzing from the ferociousness of the kiss. He clamped

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his eyes shut against the gnawing ache he felt clenching his stomach muscles and spreading its exquisite torture throughout his body. The sensation grew a tingle and flowed through his arms and legs, leaving his knees quaking.

He felt helpless as he tried to quell the quivering in his arms and fought to brace his body above her so as not to come crashing down on top of her sleeping form.

Moving slowly, he eased his body to lay beside her. Reaching down, he retrieved the coverlet and settled it over them. His heart was still drumming in his chest.

She must have felt him in her sleep. She turned toward him, her arm and cheek resting against his chest. Then her arm slid downwards from his chest to his stomach.

Cole sucked in a sharp intake of breath as his muscles danced under her fingers. Growling, he very gently took hold of her seeking hand, pulled it back to his chest and held it there.

It was a long time before he was able to breathe normally.

