

DAY TRIP
DESTINY

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This book is a work of fiction. Places, events, and situations in this book are purely fictional and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental

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Formatting and cover design by Debora Lewis
arenapublishing.com

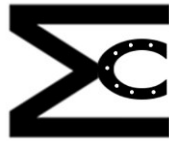
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ISBN-13: 978-1717467249
ISBN-10: 1717467245

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B. B. MONTGOMERY

Acknowledgments

As a creative writer, I strive to take fact into the wonderful world of fiction. This is my third book and each one has been based on some basic truth. I want to thank Jim Liggett for supplying me with the facts about the Walnut Grove Dam failure. His book, *Arizona's Worst Disaster – the Hassayampa Story 1886 – 2009*, was the inspiration behind this story. My sister Elaine has shown immense courage and strength over the last few years, which I hope has been successfully implanted into Jessica, the leading lady of this tale. Marcella deserves all the credit for the facts in the portrayal of my Native American tribe and any mistakes are purely my own. Thanks to Tenita, my hard-working editor, for keeping me in line. Last, and certainly not least, I want to thank the love of my life, Bob, for his encouragement and support.





Prologue

“Thank you for calling Jessie’s Jaunts. Where can we take you today?” Jessica Mayfield automatically answered the ring of her office phone with all the efficiency and warmth she had acquired over the last four years.

“How about drinks at Westgate?” A pleasant voice answered the question with laughter.

“Kari! How nice to hear from you. What are you up to?” Jessie smiled as she greeted her long-time friend.

“Jessie, I haven’t heard from you in a while. Really, let’s have a drink later. I have something I want to talk with you about.” Her friend prompted.

“If it’s another date with another strange man, I pass.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. None of those guys were strange!” Kari protested with an amused vigor.

“That, my friend, is a matter of opinion.” She quipped in return.

“And you’re an expert in strange men?” Kari teased her dearest friend.

“Not really, I’ve had one love in my life and he was definitely not strange.” She felt the pain of her loss still

after all these years. At least now, she could smile as she remembered Kyle with fondness. The loss was there, although time had helped eased the hurt.

“You were definitely the lucky one. Kyle was very special.” Kari reflected on her friend’s husband and the wonderful life the two had shared. She cleared her throat and continued, “I just want to see you and drag you away from all that hard work you do. Please, meet me for drinks at The Yard House. I have something to talk with you about, and before you decline, it’s business.” She knew that Jessie would be interested in something to do with her desert tour company. Since Kyle’s death over five years ago, all her friend did was pour herself into her job and Kari had pledged to help her move forward with her life.

“Are you sure? You’re just not trying to pull a fast one and have another man for me to meet?” Jessie teased.

“Positive! It’s a business proposition that will add to Jessie’s Jaunts repertoire. You said that you wanted to improve your list of trips and this is just what the doctor ordered.” Kari spoke with confidence.

“Fine. I’ll meet you at six at Westgate.” She agreed, but quickly added, “But if I see a strange man with you, I’m leaving!”

Later after locking the door to her office, Jessie climbed the steps to her upstairs apartment. It was so convenient having her business and home in the same location. She had purchased the older building in the very small town of Litchfield Park after Kyle had been killed in the war in the Middle East. It gave her a new purpose and slowly she had built a new life. A warm

feeling entered her heart as she entered her living room. The soothing tones comforted her and she wanted nothing better than to just slip into her comfortable clothes and curl up on the couch with a good book and a glass of wine.

Reluctantly, Jessie crossed to her bedroom and went to the closet. She stood there deciding what to wear for drinks with her best friend. She changed out of her slacks and blouse and grabbed her favorite pair of jeans. She topped them off with a bright red top and added a little blush to her cheeks. She stared at the woman facing her in the mirror. She had lost over fifty pounds when her husband died and had kept it off over the years. Except for her unruly, curly hair, Jessie was satisfied with her looks. She tried desperately to put some order to her short bob of curls, but eventually gave up. Other women would die to have those curls, but Jessie just cursed them. The dark brown tones in her hair accented her deeper chocolate eyes.

She pulled her truck into a parking space outside the Westgate Entertainment District. This huge complex housed the stadiums for the football and hockey teams of Arizona as well as a theatre, upscale stores for shopping, and several restaurants. She walked with a purpose to the restaurant in the middle of the corridor and found her friend waving to her from the door.

“Kari, it’s so good to see you! You look great.” Jessie followed her friend to their table. Kari’s blond straight hair and tall stature was in direct contrast to her own. It often drew attention to them when together but she ignored the looks from other patrons in the restaurant.

After ordering a glass of wine and some appetizers, they got down to conversation.

“I was really glad to see that you were alone.” Jessie teased her.

“After your warning, I wouldn’t have dared bring another man for you to meet.” She laughed back. “How’s business?”

“I’m busy enough. This is tourist season and they all want to go into the desert and see the sights. I’ve linked with the local hotels and they’re offering my desert tours to their guests.” She sighed. “I’ve added another two drivers and jeeps.”

“Then why the sigh?” Her friend was always very perceptive to Jessie’s moods.

“Well...,” She hesitated, before continuing with another sigh, “I’ve become a bit bored. I love doing what I do, but it seems that the desert doesn’t hold the same magic it used to for me. I know that sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all, Jess. You fight me, but what you need is a man.” She held up her hand before her friend could protest. “I mean it, you are wasting away.” She reached over and patted her on the shoulder. “Kyle wouldn’t want you to do this to yourself. What you two had was absolutely wonderful, but you have too much love inside of you to live the rest of your life as a nun.”

Jessie looked down at the small tattoo on the inside of her left wrist. ‘Forever Love’ were the words printed in a delicate script. She had the tattoo put on within the first year after Kyle was killed. It was a symbol of their undying love and she knew she would never feel

like that about another man. She ran her fingertip softly over the words.

“You said you had a suggestion for my business.” She adeptly tried to change the subject.

Kari smiled at the obvious new focus. “Okay, I’ll let it go for now, but we’re not done with this topic!” She reached into her oversized bag and pulled out a file folder. “Wait until you see this! You’re going to love my idea.”

Jessie took the file folder and opened to see what the contents revealed. One by one she lifted the articles and brochures and finally looked up at Kari with appreciation. “What is all of this?”

“Matt bought one of those metal detectors so he could find gold and get rich. As I followed him in his quest, I found myself researching all about gold located in our wonderful state.” She reached for the internet article on the Hassayampa River and a ghost town called Seymour.

“I didn’t realize you were still with Matt. This is one of the longest relationships you’ve ever had.” Jessie was curious.

“Don’t make a big deal out of it.” Kari quickly held up the article and started to share the information with Jessie. “This is where I started my research. Do you remember the Vulture Mine just outside of Wickenburg?” She waited for Jessie to agree. They had spent plenty of time going to the rodeos in the small town of Wickenburg just west of Phoenix.

“Sure, not too long ago I took a tour or two out to the mine, but they’ve recently started to actively mine for gold there again and so the tours are very limited

and I haven't been able to visit in about six months or so."

"Well, back about 1866, the town of Seymour was where they hauled the ore from the Vulture Mine to a stamp mill for processing."

"You mean they hauled the ore over ten miles by wagon? Why didn't they process the gold at the site?"

"They needed the water from the Hassayampa to run the stamp mill and Seymour was right by the river at that time."

"That seems so weird. In my entire life here in the valley, I don't remember that river ever running. It's a dry bed practically all year long." Jessie continued to review the various pieces of paper in the folder as they talked.

"Well, the best I can ascertain is that back in the day, the environment was very different in this desert valley of ours and that river actually ran. In fact..." She teased while taking a long sip of her wine.

"In fact, what? Don't keep me in suspense!"

"In fact, the second worst dam failure in the history of the United States happened in that very same river."

"No way!" Jessie exclaimed.

"Way! A rock dam was constructed on the Hassayampa up near Walnut Grove, closer to Prescott. In early 1890, there was an unusual amount of rain in the Bradshaw Mountains and as the dam wasn't constructed correctly, an eighty foot wall of water came crashing down and wiped out the little town of Seymour." She sat back and waited for this information to soak into her friend's mind.

“Kari, I’m so impressed. You have done a great job in researching all of this.”

“Oh, there’s more.” Kari baited her friend.

“You know what? I could use some more wine, but I don’t want to drink and drive. How about we go to my place and have some more snacks and wine while you entice me with the rest of the story?” She waited anxiously for Kari’s reply.

“Oh, you are on!” Kari stood up and signaled for the waiter. “Let’s go, girlfriend.”

They giggled all the way out of the restaurant and agreed to meet at Jessie’s place. A short time later, they both pulled up and parked in the front of Jessie’s building. She unlocked the front door and together they climbed the stairs to her apartment.

“Wow! This looks great! I haven’t seen it since you finished it.” Kari appreciated the soft tones and comfortable look to the living room.

“Have a seat and I’ll get us some wine and snacks.” Jessie went to the kitchen and quickly acquired their comfort food.

As she sat the glasses of wine and snacks down on the coffee table, she noticed that Kari was looking at the picture of her and Kyle still placed in a prominent position.

“You two look so happy. Do you think you’ll ever find anyone like that again?” Kari questioned softly.

“I don’t think that I’ll ever find someone as special as Kyle. But, I do think it’s time to make a few changes in my life and if those changes include looking for someone special, then I guess I’m about ready to

start.” Jessie sat down and took a big sip. “Tell me more about that flood and the little town of Seymour.”

“Well...” Kari took a drink before continuing. “In the town of Seymour, there was a general store and in that store was a safe containing \$5,000 worth of gold. That safe and the contents were swept away and according to all my research have never been found!” She sat back and gloated with this bombshell.

“Never been found? Do you realize how much that gold would be worth today?” Jessie’s mind was running rampant with thoughts of gold and mystery.

“The heck with the gold, all I want is the safe. Wouldn’t it be cool to have a safe from the 1890s?” Kari sampled a bite from the plate of cheese and crackers Jessie had prepared.

Jessie laughed out loud as she listened to her crazy friend. It had been quite a while since they had shared such a moment as this. “Hey, why don’t you stay the night? We can have more to drink and not have to worry about driving.”

“And we can talk about what we’d do with all that gold?” Kari laughed.

“Wait a minute. All you want is the safe, remember?” They laughed and Jessie felt herself enjoying her friend and their special relationship once again.

Suddenly a light bulb went off in her head. “That’s what you meant by adding to my business! I can take gold hunters out to the Hassayampa and entice them with tales of a lost safe full of gold!”

“You were always a quick one with the wit.” Kari teased her. “Don’t you agree it would add a new dimension to Jessie’s Jaunts?”

“Of course. I would want to get a more detailed map and check it out for myself first.” Her brain was churning away with plans and details.

“I’m one step ahead of you.” Kari reached into her bag once again and pulled out several maps. “I went to the map store and got these.” As she unfolded the first map, she explained, “This is the site where the Walnut Grove Dam was built. I understand it’s now on private land, so you’d have to gain permission to take tours there. This one shows the location of the town of Seymour, some twenty or thirty miles downstream from the dam.” Kari switched maps. She laid out both maps on the coffee table as Jessie cleared the surface of glasses and snacks.

“These are awesome!” She studied the two charts carefully and together they tried to figure out the best way to both the site where the dam had been built and the remains of the town of Seymour. “What does that article say about anything left of that town?” Jessie looked up and saw the gleam in her friend’s eyes.

“I got you hooked, huh? I knew you would love this.” She got up, kicked her shoes off and headed for Jessie’s bedroom. “Can I borrow a gown?”

“Of course, you know where they are. Help yourself. I’ll be in there after you to get my comfies on too.” She didn’t look up as she peered at the maps, making notes on a pad of paper she had grabbed from the drawer in the coffee table. She heard Kari laughing as she left the room.

It had been a long time since she felt this excited over a new adventure. Kyle and Jessie had planned this business together and upon his untimely death, she vowed to make a success of their dream. She worked long hard hours and in the beginning had put in lengthy, tiring days. Recently, she was able to hire two guides or as she called them, wranglers. This had eased the workload some, but also gave her a new problem to deal with – time on her hands.

Jessie sighed a bit and was looking over her notes when Kari came back into the room. “Hey, I just had another great idea. I finally have a few days off this next weekend. Why don’t we go up to a ranching buddy of mine in Wickenburg, borrow two horses and go out to check these sites? Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

As Kari plopped back down on the sofa, she huffed out her response. “I’d love to, but unfortunately, I have a wedding, a family reunion and a sixtieth birthday party to shoot. All those folks would be so disappointed if I wasn’t there to take their pictures.” She laced her response with sarcasm.

“You love it and you know it. You are the best photographer around and I understand.” She went back to making notes on her pad.

“You’re going anyway, aren’t you?” Kari knew her friend well. “I’d really like it much better if you didn’t go alone.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s been awhile since I was on horseback, but I think I can manage.”

“Why don’t you ask one of the cowboys from the ranch to join you?” Kari prompted.

“Still trying to be a matchmaker? No thanks, I’ll be fine. I’ll take my cell and call if I have any trouble. It’s supposed to be beautiful weather even for an early February day.” She found herself thrilled and looking forward to this adventure.

“I just wish you’d be more cautious. One never knows what danger lurks in the desert.” Kari spoke honestly and from the heart.

“Kari, you and I have been raised in this desert and we both know what dangers are out there. You also know that I’m not one to take chances. I can’t thank you enough for this new information and I’m so excited to go out there and check it out. I thank you so much, my friend.” Jessie looked at her girlfriend with grateful eyes.

With a sigh, Kari responded. “Just be careful and call me when you get home, okay?”

Saturday morning dawned with not a cloud in the sky. Jessie pulled her truck into the busy yard of her friend’s working ranch. She had called earlier and they readily agreed to loan her a horse for the day. She greeted David Connell, the owner of the Lazy Bar T ranch.

“David, how’s everything?” She shook his outstretched hand.

“Just fine and dandy, Miss Jessie. I haven’t seen you in a while.” David pushed his cowboy hat back on his nearly bald head and scratched at his forehead.

She grinned at the almost formal greeting. David was from another generation and she enjoyed his respectful tone. “It’s been awhile, David. I’ve been busy hauling all those tourists around in my jeeps. I haven’t

had any time to myself until today. I'm glad it's a nice day for a ride." She reached into her truck and hauled out a couple of bags. As she approached the horse tied to the hitching post, she reached up and patted the docile animal on the neck. "I'm glad you had Mr. Kelly available. I like him."

"He's steady and pretty reliable. I just want to make sure you're safe while you're out there. Is someone coming to go out with you?" He helped her load the items into the saddle bags already on the horse.

"No, I decided I wanted to have some time to myself." She didn't explain any further.

David adjusted his hat once again and cleared his throat. "What ya' looking for?" He posed his question carefully.

"Glad you asked. I'm going down to the Hassayampa river bed and looking for the ghost town of Seymour. Any ideas as to where I should look?" She had studied the maps in detail and knew exactly where she would start her journey, but also knew that the locals, such as David, would have valuable information about the layout of the land.

"There isn't much left, just a concrete slab. If you go down about a quarter of a mile, you should see it on the north side of the river bed. The stamp mill was located across the river but there isn't anything left over there."

"That's what I'd read. How far up the river was the Walnut Grove Dam?" She pressed for more information.

"What are you on to, Miss Jessie?" David stifled a grin as he probed for more information from her.

“I’ve gotten some facts from my friend and I think that it would be good for my business to include some treasure hunts.” She kept packing the items into the saddle bags as she spoke. She turned to him when he didn’t reply. “Do you think it’s silly?”

“Not at all. I never thought I would turn part of my ranch into a place for city dudes. Miss Jessie, anything that helps pay the bills is alright with me.” He watched as she mounted the gentle horse and adjusted her gear.

“I’ll be back before dark, David.”

“You be mighty careful out there. You got a cell phone on you? One of my hands saw a rattlesnake just the other day. It should be too early for them, but this warm weather has brought about some changes we aren’t ready for.”

“Yes, David. I’ll be very cautious and don’t worry.” She urged her ride forward toward the Hassayampa.

The sun was coming up strong and just a slight breeze blew through the mesquite trees lining the path to the river bottom. David’s ranch was just outside of Wickenburg and situated along the banks of the dry river bed. She got to the edge and stopped, reaching for the map showing the location of what was left of the town of Seymour. Turning her horse west, she entered the sandy, mostly dry river bed and was soon heading towards what she hoped would be a new destination for her clients.

“This is why I live in Arizona, Mr. Kelly.” She spoke in hushed tones to her horse. She stopped for a moment and reflected in the peace and serenity of the desert surrounding the Hassayampa. A few birds soared in the sky and she could hear the barking of

some distant neighborhood dogs, but for the most part, she was alone in this wilderness.

She urged her horse forward and slowly they made their way through the riverbed towards the concrete slab belonging to Seymour. In no time at all, she came upon that very destination. Her excitement grew as she realized that over one hundred plus years ago, this was a thriving community. All that was left was a simple cement-type block belonging to one of the buildings in that town.

Jessie climbed from the saddle and walked over with the reins in her hand. She tied Mr. Kelly to a small bush and walked onto history. Jessica closed her eyes and allowed herself a moment to soak in the vibes from this part of the past. Perhaps this belonged to the general store and somewhere on this slab of concrete had been that safe with the gold. A huge grin spread over her face as she opened her eyes and let loose her imagination.

Retrieving the map, she held it before her to absorb the lay of the land. As she looked back east she could see the red cliffs located on the map. The river took a noticeable bend to the north at that point. That would be an excellent place for a safe to get stuck and be buried in the sandy river bottom. She giggled as she thought of her friend and how she would love to find that safe and its contents.

Soon, she got back on her horse and started up the river bed. She didn't know if she could find any trace of it, but there had been a smaller dam approximately fifteen to twenty miles downstream from the Walnut Grove Dam. As soon as the huge wall of water hit it,

that smaller dam had given way. The town of Wickenburg had been deluged with a wave over forty feet tall, and had wiped out the town of Seymour just below. This was all too exciting and she found herself thrilled to find a new purpose to her life.

As she followed the river bed, the evidence of civilization became sparser and sparser. In no time at all, she could not see any more houses or buildings from the town of Wickenburg and the shrubs and trees grew larger and denser. She was heading into an unpopulated area of the river.

“Well, what’da you think, Mr. Kelly? Do you think we can find any evidence of that lower, smaller dam?” She urged the horse further up the Hassayampa. As she surveyed the landscape, Jessie thought she saw what could have been part of a structure a little higher up on the west bank of the river bed. She pressed her horse and together they climbed the rocky terrain up the bank.

“Easy now!” She coaxed Mr. Kelly as he stumbled a bit as rocks and gravel slid down the terrain. “Careful, we don’t want any accidents.” She pulled her cell phone from her pocket to check for service availability and sighed as she saw that she was still in a service area. There must be a tower in the area, she thought comfortably, but before she could put it back into her pocket, she heard a sound that made her pulse race. The distinct noise could only come from a rattlesnake as a warning. She pulled the horse to a sudden halt but not in time to stop the damage.

The horse bucked and caught Jessie off guard. As she found herself falling, she tried to keep hold of the

reigns, but felt them slip from her hands as the horse bolted. As she hit the ground, Jessie's thoughts were on the location of that snake and would she miss it or land right on it? Rolling down the bank, she found herself thinking she was safe when suddenly she felt a sharp pain on the right side of her head, then nothing as her world went black.



One

“Hey, buddy. Are you okay?” Jessie felt a strong hand carefully roll her over and she struggled to open her eyes but the pain in her head was far too great. Once again, she heard the deep voice of her rescuer. “Whoa! You’re a woman!” Caleb stilled his hands from touching her any further. He leapt into action as he heard the rattle from the nearby snake. Caleb drew his gun and adeptly shot the coiled predator. As soon as it was silenced, he returned his attention to the woman lying before him. She hadn’t stirred at the sound of his shot and he immediately realized she was in danger from her fall. Gently, he brushed her hair back from the obvious wound oozing blood from the side of her head as he tried to assess the damage. He grabbed a handkerchief from his back pocket and pressed it to the point of impact to try and stop the flow of blood. Working hard to be extremely careful, he tied the bandanna around her head to keep pressure on the bleeding cut.

She moaned and once again Jessie tried to bring herself back to reality. “Hey, take it easy. Lie still.” She heard his voice and found herself trusting his

ministrations. Her head ached horribly and she wanted to succumb to the dark world surrounding her.

She felt him pressing something to her head and tried once again to open her eyes. Slowly she was able to focus her gaze on the face of her savior. Finally she looked into eyes so blue they made the sky overhead seem pale in comparison. His cowboy hat was pushed back on his head and his dark brown, almost black hair was falling over his forehead. "Help me." She was barely able to whisper.

"Don't speak. Just lay still and let me stop this from bleeding." He kept the pressure on her head. "What's your name?" He spoke to her in a gentle soothing tone.

She attempted to open her eyes but failed and instead spoke her name with a rasp in her voice, "Jessie."

"Jessie, stay with me. It's going to rain and we need to get you to a safe, dry place." He stood up and looked at the now darkening sky. The tall, dark cowboy bent down once again by her side and implored her. "Jessie, I'm going to lift you. I don't think anything else is broken. Your head has a nasty bump on it, but I think I've stopped the bleeding for now." He hoped she could forgive him this little lie. He was worried but knew they needed to get out of the pending storm.

"Jessie, let me know if this hurts too much." He lifted her adeptly in his strong arms and when she didn't protest, walked swiftly to his waiting horse. As a man used to carrying heavy objects, he was able to carry this slip of a woman with no trouble. "I'm going to put you in the saddle. Try to hang on until I can get up behind you."

She stirred enough to realize that he needed her help. Jessie felt him raise her onto the waiting horse and with all the energy she could muster, grabbed hold of the saddle horn with all her might. He was quickly mounted behind her and she felt herself slump back into his strong embrace. He grabbed her tightly around the waist and urged his mount forward. He headed back in the direction he came as fast as he dared without shaking the injured woman in his arms. She had grown silent and he feared she wasn't going to make it to the wrangler's shack at the edge of the river.

As soon as the small rough building came into sight, he breathed a sigh of relief. The cowboys on the ranch used this little cabin for overnight stays when they were checking on the herd at the southern part of the ranch. It was rough and only one room, but it would give them the shelter they needed as the rain started pouring down on both of them. He tried to protect her from the cold rain as it pelted down upon them. He urged his horse faster and Jessica moaned with each jolt of the horse's gait, but didn't open her eyes.

"Jessie, we're almost there. Hold on a bit further." He spoke into her ear.

The wind had picked up, the sky was dark with clouds, and the cold biting rain sliced at them. He pulled his hat down over his head but kept his arm firmly around her waist. They were finally at the little structure and he halted his horse at the hitching post just outside the front.

"Jessie, we're here. I'm going to get down and I'll help you."

“Don’t let me go.” Was all she could plead before he dismounted.

“I won’t let you fall. I’ve got you.” He started down off his horse and pulled her into his arms as he reached the ground. He could see that the handkerchief was soaked with her blood and his concerns for her welfare grew with each minute.

He carried her into the cabin and quickly put her down on the only bed in the room. She groaned but didn’t stir as he tried to make her comfortable. Caleb went to the door and shut it. I’ll have to take care of my horse later, he thought as his concern was clearly for the woman in the bed. He strode across the room, lit the wood that had already been stacked in the fireplace and as soon as the flames started, he went back over to Jessica. He removed the handkerchief from her head. The blood had soaked through the thin material and he reached the only conclusion he felt he could.

Caleb rose slowly never taking his eyes off the frail woman lying on the small bed. He went over to the only shelf in the cabin and searched for the items he needed. He lit the lamp on the sole table and gathered the things he felt he needed to help Jessie. He walked across the small space and sat on the bed beside her.

“Jessie,” He spoke loudly to the semi-conscious woman. When she didn’t immediately respond, he shook her gently. “Jess, I need you to listen to me.” She opened her eyes slightly and tried to speak, but was unable.

“It’s okay. Just listen and squeeze my hand if you understand.” He hoped she understood what he was about to say and do. “Jess, I need to put a few stitches

in your head. The wound is still bleeding and I need to close it.”

After he felt the pressure on the hand that was gripping hers, he continued. “You need to take a drink of this. It will help dim the pain.” As she once again squeezed his hand, he lifted the bottle of whiskey to her lips. Once she tried to stop, but he encouraged her to take another big swig. “Jess, you need to take as much as you can.” Once he felt she had taken enough of the whiskey, he let her down gently. “Jess, you need to let me know if it hurts too much and I’ll stop long enough for you to get your breath. Okay?” When she didn’t immediately respond, he sighed and proceeded.

Carefully, he used the straight razor to shave away her hair from the spot of the injury. As soon as he was able to see the damage more clearly, he used the whiskey to sanitize the area. He could see her flinch a little and was encouraged that she was conscious enough to help him.

He grabbed the needle and the thread and took a deep breath before starting. “Jess, I’m ready, are you?” He took her hand and waited for her response. He was impressed with the strength and stamina of this small woman as he felt a renewed grip on his own hand.

Slowly and methodically, he inserted the needle and proceeded to make one stitch. She moaned and he stilled his hand long enough to see if she was ready to continue. Jessie opened her eyes and focused on his face and spoke softly, “Let’s get this over.” And she shut her eyes as though completely drained.

He didn’t waste any time and placed another two stitches on the wound in her head. She groaned but

other than that, didn't move a muscle. Caleb cut the remaining thread with his knife and dabbed the area once again with the hard liquor. He saw her respond slightly to the pain she must be feeling but other than that, she didn't open her eyes nor speak. He checked his handiwork once again and was relieved to see that the bleeding had stopped.

Caleb rose and pulled the heavy wool cover over her. He watched a moment as he saw her chest rising and falling with each breath she took. Confident that she was going to be alright, he stepped to the door and went outside. He braved the sleeting rain to take his horse to the small stable and proceeded to see to the care of his animal. The sky was darkening with the end of day and his stomach growled with hunger. She would be hungry too, he thought.

Caleb grabbed the game bag from his saddle and proceeded to clean the pheasant he had shot earlier. Upon completing this task, he strode quickly back into the small cabin. After checking on his patient, Caleb went over to the fireplace and stoked the dying embers. He placed another log on the fire and satisfied that it was hot enough, put the bird into the cast iron pot hanging on the hook, added some water and, placed it back over the now burning fire.

He went over to the bed and felt her forehead. No fever, he thought with gratitude. She would definitely be hungry when she finally gained consciousness. He picked up his tools and the bottle of whiskey. As an afterthought, he uncorked the fire liquid and downed a big shot. Here's to you, he looked down at the sleeping woman. Beautiful was the word in his mind and he

found himself longing to know more about her. She was dressed in men's clothing and her hair was a short, dark brown mop of sexy curls. He had never seen a woman quite like this before.

As he stared, she stirred and her left hand came up to her head. His gaze caught the tattoo on the inside of her arm. Slowly he reached for her wrist and stared at the words on her delicate skin. He had seen some tattoos on men and even some local Indians, but to see words emblazoned on a woman was something very new to him. He released her arm and pulled the cover back up over the sleeping woman.

This was not how his trip to the lower pasture was supposed to go, he thought grimly. He was just going to be gone a day or so to check on the herd and make sure the bunkhouse was stocked for the hands that would be occupying it during round up next month. He was grateful that he had brought all the supplies as he realized that he might be here for a few more days than he planned. He sat down at the rough table and adjusted the lamp so it burned brighter. His gaze turned to the small woman again. Who was she? Why was she out there alone? Was she running away from something or someone? Where was she from? It was obvious to him that she wasn't from this territory.

He suddenly realized that he was very tired from his long day but the only place to lay down his weary bones was on the very same bed occupied by his unexpected visitor. He looked her way just to make sure she was sleeping as well as could be under the circumstances. Caleb propped his boots up on the table and slumped down in the hard, wooden chair. He sat

his hat down on the tabletop and ran his hand through his disheveled hair.

Hours later, Jessie stirred and rolled over on her side. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light in the small room, she tried to take in her surroundings and assimilate where she was and how she got here. The smell of something wonderful cooking assailed her nostrils and she located the cast iron pot hanging over the small fire burning in the fireplace.

As she tried to raise herself up on the bed, a sharp pain stabbed her in the side of her head. She carefully raised her hand to gently feel the spot on her head that was the source of her anguish. It was too intensely painful to do anything more than a cursory pat. She struggled to remember the incident that caused the injury that someone had obviously tried to repair.

Upon those thoughts, her eyes landed on the man slumped down in the chair at the small table in the center of the room. He was snoring softly and she chuckled at the noise emanating from him. She had a sudden memory of intense blue eyes looking down at her as she lay on the ground after being tossed from her horse. The noise of the rain hitting the tin roof of the cabin aroused her curiosity even more. Slowly and very carefully, Jessie sat up and waited to see if her head was going to allow her to move without any dizzying affects.

Convinced that she was able to move without repercussions, Jessie finally stood up. Not wanting to disturb her host, she moved deliberately across the rough, wooden floor to the pot cooking over the fire. Seeing a cloth close by, she used it to raise the lid and

with a fork hanging from above the hearth, she poked at the meat boiling in the pot. Warm, wonderful scents assailed her nostrils and her stomach growled as she realized it had been a long time since she had last ate.

Thinking about time, Jessie reached in her pocket for her cell phone but suddenly remembered dropping it when her horse bucked. Darn, she thought. Now I can't know what time it is. She went to the only small window and looked out but there wasn't a thing she could see but rain and darkness. Maybe there's a clock, she thought and gingerly started a small journey to look at her refuge.

"You're up!" She heard his startled voice and immediately turned to face the man that saved her. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, I think." She replied with a certain amount of shyness. She raised her hand to the spot on her head. "Did you do this?"

"You needed some stitches." He stood up and came across the room to stand beside her. "Jess, I think you need to take it easy." At the use of her name, she looked up to meet those beautiful blue eyes of his. He put his hand under her elbow and helped her back to the bed. She sat back down on the small narrow bed and quietly spoke.

"I seem to be at a disadvantage, you know my name but I don't know yours." He still stood above her, but at her question, he sat down beside her on the edge of the bed.

"Caleb. My name is Caleb McCaslin." His voice was soothing and she found herself mesmerized by his nearness and his touch. He had reached up to check

his handiwork. "I'm sorry, but I had to cut away some of your hair."

"That's alright. As you've already seen, you can't mess up this mop." She laughed nervously. "Do you know what time it is?"

Caleb reached into his pocket and pulled out a watch. How quaint, she thought. Who carries a pocket watch anymore?

"Are you a doctor?" She questioned.

His deep laughter filled the room. "A doctor? I'm just a rancher. It's nearly six."

She laid back down in an effort to relieve some of the pain. "Where are we?" She needed more information. What kind of person puts stitches into another person's head if they weren't a medical professional?

"We are in the camping lodge in the southwest part of the Lazy MC ranch. I found you down by the river. You had hit your head on a rock."

"And the snake?" She shuddered as she remembered the reason for her mishap.

"I shot it."

"Did you find Mr. Kelly?"

"Who is Mr. Kelly?" He looked at her with curiosity in those blue eyes.

"My horse. I was bucked off when it scared my horse. Did you find him?"

"Sorry. I only found you and the snake."

She was in deep thought for a moment when he rose and went to the pot hanging over the fire. He took a few logs from the stack at the side of the fireplace

and stoked the burning embers before putting them on the fire.

“Are you hungry?” He didn’t turn when asking his question.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. What’s cooking?”

“Pheasant.”

“You’re a man of few words, aren’t you?” She teased the tall, silent man.

He didn’t respond but instead went to the cabinet over by the table. Once there he pulled several tin plates from a shelf and ambled back to the pot. “I’m sorry but we don’t have anything but this bird to eat. I hadn’t really planned to stay the night.”

“It smells great. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” She tried to sit up again but only made it to her elbows. “I don’t know if I can sit at the table.” She labored with her words.

“Don’t strain. I’ll bring it to you.” He filled a plate with their dinner and brought it to her.

“Thank you.” She struggled but eventually managed to sit up enough to eat the proffered meal. “Ummm, this is good. You’re a good cook, Caleb.”

“Eat up and then we need to get some sleep.”

“Sleep? Can’t you take me to town? I have friends that will be missing me.”

“We can probably get to town in the morning, if this rain stops.” He kept eating his food.

She looked around and then, stated the obvious. “There’s only one bed. And it’s a very small one.”

“I’m used to rougher conditions. I’ll just sleep on the floor. You can have the bed.” It seemed as if nothing was going to disturb this intriguing man.

“I dropped my phone when I got bucked off. Can I use yours?” She asked of the silent man.

He looked at her with curiosity. “I don’t have this phone thing that you speak of. We’ll go into town in the morning.” He spoke with finality and got up to put his plate on the table. He came over to take her empty plate and put it on the table, too. Maybe she hit her head harder than he had originally thought. It might be a good idea to keep her awake for a while just to make sure she was not suffering from further injury to her head, he mused to himself.

Something was definitely weird with all of this, she thought to herself. No electricity, cooking over the fire, no phone and a man that hunts his dinner. Maybe I’m with a hermit, a recluse from society, she pondered, or even worse a criminal on the run and hiding from the law. None of this information did anything to comfort Jessie, but she feigned a casualness she didn’t feel.

“I guess it can wait until we get to Wickenburg. I can contact my people from there.” She started to lie back on the bed when his next words interrupted her.

“We’ll go to Seymour in the morning.” He was pouring water into their plates and scrubbing the leftover debris from them.

“Seymour!” She exclaimed. “That’s a ghost town. There’s nothing there. How am I supposed to contact my friends from there?” She looked at him with shock showing on her face.

“Can you get up?” He ignored her outburst and completed his dish cleaning process.

She had already shot up at his declaration but it was not without quite a bit of pain. She stopped herself

before rising to cross the room and came to stand directly in front of the tall, dark man.

“I’m up. What now?”

“Let’s play some cards.” He reached to the shelf and grabbed a deck of cards and a box of wooden matches.

As he sat himself at the small table, she continued to stare at him. “Cards! What in the world would I want to play cards for? I want some answers, mister and I want them now!” She demanded as her thoughts swirled around in her head. Things were not right. Something was wrong with all of this.

“Jess, you’re obviously not doing too well. You’ve had a terrible shock to your head and we would be best to keep you awake for a while to make sure that nothing else is wrong.” He talked as though to a small child. Caleb continued shuffling the deck of cards and motioned for her to take the chair directly across from him. He waited patiently and smiled softly when she finally plopped down on the seat he had indicated.

The grin on his face did funny things to her system. She found herself very intrigued by this silent, smiling man. His eyes flashed that clear, sparkling blue they had when she first looked upon him. It was hard to continue with her anger when he seemed genuinely concerned with her welfare. He had, after all taken very good care of her to this point.

“Do you know how to play poker?” He divided the wooden matches between them and waited for her response.

“Of course, who doesn’t?” She retorted with her own grin.

“Not many women play cards let alone poker.” He stated matter-of-factly. This woman was so different than any he had ever met.

“Well, Mister, bring it on.” She reached for the deck and proceeded to deal out their cards. “Ante up, buddy. You’re about to lose that pile of matches you’ve got there!” She threw out her challenge.

They played for what seemed like hours, when Jessie leaned back in her chair and displayed a huge smile. “Well, cowboy, I think that about does it! I’ve just won all of your matches!” She laid down her winning cards in triumph.

“You do take your cards seriously, don’t you?” He conceded with his now very familiar grin. “How are you feeling?”

“Great!” She responded with fervor.

“I mean, how is your head feeling?” He rose and came around to check the stitches on the side of her head. His touch disturbed Jessie, but not due to pain. He was gentle in his exploration and she found herself holding her breath.

When he finished his examination, he tenderly patted her curls back in place. She reached her own hand up and felt for the spot his hand had just vacated. “How do you know how to do this?”

“When you’re out on the range, a man has to take care of many different things without any help. Let’s get you to bed. I think you’re going to be fine.” He took her hand and helped her to her feet. Slowly he led her over to the small bed and as she sat down, he patted the pillow.

“It’s not much, but it’ll have to do for tonight. You going to be okay?” He questioned.

“I think I’ll be more comfortable than you. I hate to put you out of your bed.”

“I’ll be right there in front of the fire.” He went across the room and reached for a bedroll. He spread his pad out on the floor and sat down to pull off his boots.

Jessie reached for her own boots and when she was trying to find a comfortable position, watched him reach for the lamp to blow it out. Soon the only light in the room was the soft glow from the fireplace. Just when she thought she wouldn’t be able to go to sleep, Jessie found her eyes getting harder and harder to keep open.

There was nothing but the crackling of the fire and the rain pelting the tin roof. Jessie wasn’t used to this complete silence but found she was relaxing with just Caleb for company. She listened to his breathing. It was even but not noisy.

“Caleb?” She spoke softly.

“Do you need something, Jess?” He responded equally quiet.

“I didn’t thank you for taking care of me today.” She was sincere in her appreciation of his thoughtfulness and assistance.

“Not necessary. Just doing my duty.” His voice was soothing.

“Just the same,” She continued with humility. “Thank you for taking care of me.” With that she rolled over and promptly fell asleep.

Caleb tried to sleep but the small woman lying in the bed just a few short feet away was on his mind. He didn't have any answers as to who she was or what she was doing out here in the wilderness on her own, but she had needed him and that was enough for now.



TWO

“Time to get up, Jess. We need to get to town so you can contact your family.” She felt Caleb’s gentle touch on her shoulder. Slowly she rolled over and met his gaze with a smile.

“Hi,” was her short greeting.

“Hi, yourself. How are you feeling this morning?” He continued to look into her beautiful face. Something about this woman pulled at him and he found himself tied to her needs.

“My head still hurts but my mind seems clearer with some sleep.” She rose up, straightened her clothes and proceeded to put on her boots. As she stood up, Caleb had to grab her to keep her from falling. “Whoa! I’m still a bit dizzy.”

“Take it easy.” His touch on her arm was firm as he helped Jessie to the table and a chair. “Sit for a bit. I’ll get you a cup of coffee.”

She took a private minute to stare at his backside. He was built so solid and his pants hugged his bottom and long legs. Caleb was definitely easy on her eyes. What is wrong with me? She thought with shock. I haven’t looked at a man like that since my husband.

She quickly averted her gaze when he turned back with a mug of coffee in his hands.

“Careful, it’s very hot.” Caleb warned her.

“Thank you.” She took a small sip of the hot brew.

“Are you hungry?” He questioned.

“Not yet. I don’t normally eat breakfast, so I’m fine until we get to town.” He was so attentive to her needs. It made her feel special.

“Great. When you’re ready, we’ll go.” He straightened the covers on her bed and she saw that he had restocked the fireplace and cleaned up the pot they had used to cook the pheasant. How did he accomplish all of this while she slept?

She took her time in getting to her feet. No sense in passing out at his feet, she thought. “I’m ready.”

As they walked out the door, he reached behind them and pulled it shut. She noticed he didn’t lock the door.

“Aren’t you going to lock it?” She couldn’t help but question.

“No need.” He helped her down the few steps to his horse tied at the hitching post. “Do you need some help getting up?”

“This is what we’re taking to town?” She looked around for the first time at their surroundings. The cabin was little more than a hut and the only other building was a small corral and stable area. She realized that he was truly a cowboy on the range, traveling as simple as possible.

As she approached the waiting mount, she asked, “What’s your horse’s name?” She reached up and stroked the tall beast.

She heard Caleb's laughter and turned to see the most mind stunning smile on his face. She found herself grinning back at the tall man.

"Jess, we don't name the horses on our ranch. They're working partners, that's all." He indicated that she should get on the horse. She struggled and soon felt his strong hands on her waist, lifting her up in the saddle. Before she could get settled, she realized he was mounting the horse behind her.

His closeness was a bit unnerving, but Jessie did her best to ignore that. "Ready?" His deep voice sounded in her ear and she could feel his breath at the side of her face. She could feel the gun he wore as it pressed into her thigh.

Unable to speak, she simply nodded and he nudged his horse forward. There was no conversation between them for what seemed forever, and then she heard him say, "If you were to name my horse, what would you call him?"

"Are you making fun of me?" She was on the defense. This nearness and the jostling of their bodies together was wearing on her nerves. How in the world was she going to make this trip to town?

"No, Jess. I'm just trying to get you to relax and enjoy our journey. We have several miles and it will take us a few hours to get to Seymour. We might as well get to know each other."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I just wish I had my own horse." She stopped speaking as she realized she was revealing more than she wanted to this tall, dark man.

"You're different than most women I know." He spoke seriously.

“In what way?”

“Most women I know aren’t as independent as you. Most women want and need a man to take care of them.” He shifted himself in the saddle as they traversed some rough terrain and it brought them closer together.

“I’ve been on my own for almost six years now.” She stated with certainty. “I guess I’m just used to taking care of myself.”

“What happened six years ago?” He continued probing.

“I lost my husband.” She responded with a simple fact.

“You were married?” He continued with his questions.

“Yes, I was married to Kyle.” It seemed she was reluctant to part with more than just the basic answers to his questions.

“Is he the reason for that marking on your wrist?” His curiosity about the tattoo was still piqued.

She moved her shirt back and stared at the words imprinted on the inside of her arm. “I loved him very much. I got this during the first year after he died. It seemed the right thing to do at the time.” She didn’t know how Caleb would respond to her confession.

“He must have been a very lucky man.” He adjusted his hat on his head. “Most men live their entire lives with never experiencing that kind of love from a beautiful woman.”

For several minutes there were no words between them. Soon however, she turned the tables on him. “Is there a Mrs. Caleb?”

He was silent and she thought that perhaps he wasn't going to give her an answer. The horse jostled on for another few yards, when he finally spoke. "I once had a wife."

Jessie spun around to see the look on his face and caught him with a wistful expression. She turned back to face away from him as he quietly explained. "I was only married for a few months. I had to go out and work the round up. It was just starting to turn cold and we needed to get the cattle down to the lower range." His voice grew rough as though with emotion.

"You don't have to finish telling me. It's really none of my business." She tried to ease his pain.

"It's been about the same length of time since you lost your man. I still feel guilty." He took a deep breath. "I met Emily when I went to school in Texas. She was from the East and visiting her aunt and when we met, I fell hard."

The sky was starting to cloud over and the wind was kicking up as they kept moving forward on their journey. She looked up at the darkening sky and wondered if the rain was going to begin again. Caleb continued his tale. "We married right away much to her aunt's dismay and I brought her here to Arizona and my family's ranch. She was delicate and from the city."

His voice told her so much more than his words. She was at a loss for words, but her heart heard his pain and she wanted to try and help. "What happened to Emily?"

"She was with child, about four months, when I had to go out with the wranglers and help move the herd

from the hills down to the southern range. I was gone about two weeks.”

With child? She thought of his strange words. What a romantic way to put it. She trembled thinking of the pain he must have gone through.

“Are you cold?” He was aware of her movement and immediately reacted, by pulling her closer into him and shielding her with his arms.

Wow! Her thoughts went wild. This feels so good. I must have hit my head a whole lot harder than I thought. What am I doing here?

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” She tried to shrug out of his embrace, but Caleb ignored her efforts.

“Emily wasn’t as independent as you, but she tried. I suggested that she go to the main ranch house when I had to go, but she wanted to show me that she could be a good ranch wife and stay at our place.” This was the most he had ever talked about a very painful part of his life. What was it about this strong, little woman that affected him so?

They rode on a little further when Caleb made a suggestion. “Feel like stopping a bit? I want to check your stitches and make sure that we’re not jostling them too much.”

“Sounds good.” She agreed more to put some distance between their bodies than anything else. Caleb dismounted first and reached to help her down to the ground. Once there, she quickly walked away and pretended to view their surroundings.

Caleb grabbed his canteen and a few strips of jerky. He offered the water to her and once she had her fill,

held out some of the dried beef. “We’ll eat once we get to town. But this might help keep the hunger away.”

“Thanks.” She turned away to stare out in the wilderness. Jessie felt him touch her head and started to turn back to face him.

“Hold still. I’m checking my handiwork.” He tenderly moved the dark, chocolate curls from the area. “Everything looks fine. How do you feel?”

“I think you missed your calling. You should have been a doctor.” She tried to tease him in an effort to lighten the situation. She hadn’t been alone with a man since Kyle and this man definitely stirred feelings she thought were long dead.

“I went to college to study veterinary techniques. My father thought it would be helpful on the ranch.”

“Really? Where did you go?” She was further intrigued by her rescuer.

“Texas.” Was his short reply.

“Where in Texas? In case you didn’t know, that’s a very large state.” She found a large boulder and sat down on it.

He joined her on an adjoining rock and chewed on the jerky before answering. “Texas Agricultural and Mechanical. It’s located in a little town called College Station.”

“I’m familiar with Texas A&M.” She took another drink of the canteen water.

He looked at her with a quizzical look on his handsome features. “Where are you from? It’s obvious you’re not from around here.”

She chuckled at his observation. “What makes you think I’m not from here?”

“Your manner of dress for one. I’m not used to seeing women in trousers. Are you a rancher?”

The air was thick with moisture from the recent rain and a few birds flew overhead in the darkening skies. The sensation of something being wrong washed over her again. Things were not normal with her encounter with this mystery man.

“I’m not a rancher and to answer your first question, I’m from Phoenix.” She watched his reaction.

“You’re a long way from home.” His look was one of serious thought.

“What happened to Emily?” She adeptly changed the subject and watched the look of pain cross his face.

“She was trying to gather some kindling and tripped and fell. She tried to get herself into the house, but she was found just outside the doorway.” His voice cracked.

“I’m so sorry. I know how hard it is to lose one you love.”

“My father buried her before I got back. I came home to find myself with no wife and no child.” He stood up and turned his face to the sky. “We need to go. It’s going to rain again and we still have a few more miles to go.” He offered his hand to help her stand.

She looked up into those blue eyes as she put her hand into his. They had a bond; a bond of loss and the everlasting pain from that loss. This was a special moment for both of them. He helped her up onto the horse and climbed in behind her just as the first few drops of rain started falling. It was a slow drizzle for now, but he urged his horse faster down the trail.

“Caleb?” She asked quietly.

“What, Jess?”

“Why do you feel so guilty? You couldn’t have known.”

“She was so delicate and had only lived the life of a girl from the city. She had no idea what living on a ranch was like. It’s hard out here. This land is harsh and unforgiving and she was like a fragile flower in a strange land.” She could feel him taking a deep breath before continuing. “I should have taken her to the main ranch house and not allowed her to press her own will. My job as a husband and a father was to protect her from harm.”

Jessie wrapped her hands around his holding the reins and gently squeezed them. “You’re a good man, Caleb, and I don’t have the words to change your mind or heart. I’m sure Emily wouldn’t want you to live the rest of your life with a huge load of guilt.”

With those words, Jessie felt her own heart release its own burden of pain. She was proud of Kyle’s service to his country and knew he wouldn’t have lived his life any other way. It was time to let him go and to start living again. She felt Caleb release her hand and wrap his arm tenderly around her waist. She snuggled back into him with a comfort and peace she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

They traveled the last few miles without words as the rain was starting to come down harder. He pulled his hat down over his head enough to cover both of them from the worst of the downpour. It was cold and wet, but at least the wind was blowing the rain away from them instead of into their faces. As they headed up a steep ridge, he finally spoke.

“Seymour is just over this ridge. We’ll be dry and safe in just a little bit.”

She was still convinced that he was wrong. She was just at the site of Seymour the day before and there was nothing there but a concrete slab. Perhaps she hadn’t been at the right spot, perhaps he wasn’t used to this part of the country. He did say the bunkhouse was on the southern-most part of their ranch. Maybe he hadn’t been there in a long time and didn’t know that Seymour no longer existed.

As they climbed the ridge and crested the hill, the wind shifted and suddenly the rain was blowing directly in their faces. Jessica turned her head into him to shield her face from the wintry cold water. She could feel their horse stumbling over the trail down the other side directly into town. The wind and the rain prevented her from opening her eyes even though she longed to see their destination for herself. She could only hope that the brim of his hat was protecting those wonderful blue eyes from the worst of the weather.

“Jess, I’m afraid we’re going to have to go to Lil’s. It’s the only place to get a hot bath and change out of these wet clothes.” He spoke to the top of her head as she simply shook her head in agreement. She was feeling chilled and knew the dangers of letting your body getting so wet in a cold rain such as this one. She wasn’t sure where Lil lived, but it must be a friend of Caleb.

She wanted to look and see this town he was taking them to, but found the rain too intense in her face. Keeping her eyes closed, Jessica snuggled into his chest until she felt their horse stop.

She opened her eyes just as Caleb dismounted. Her heart stopped and she struggled to breathe as she finally looked about. Caleb was tying their horse to a hitching post and as he came back to help her down, she practically leaped into his arms. He helped her to the wood walkway in front of the building.

“This can’t be! This is impossible!” And with those words, fell into a dead faint into Caleb’s quick hands.



Three

“Is she going to be alright?” Caleb’s anxious voice came from behind the woman helping Jessie.

“Caleb, she’ll be fine. Just leave me to it and I’ll get her in a hot bath. Hand me those smelling salts first.” She reached for the small vial as he handed it to her. “Now, go and get yourself out of those wet clothes. Benjamin has drawn you a bath in the other room.”

When he hesitated, she shooed him out. “Caleb McCaslin, I’ve never seen you so upset. She’ll be fine. Just trust me to take care of her.”

“Lil, you know I’d trust you with my life. She’s just different, you know.” He tried to grasp his own strong feelings for this delicate woman, but not willing to completely go there, turned and left Lil to handle the situation.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Lil uncorked the bottle of smelling salts and held them under the nose of the unconscious woman lying on the lounge chair. Jessie immediately gasped and tried to sit up.

“There, there. Be careful.”

Jessie opened her eyes completely and took in her surroundings starting with the rather large woman sitting on the edge of the bed. She coughed a bit, but

soon regained her composure. As her vision cleared, she stared at the woman with blond hair piled high on her head. The gown she was wearing was definitely of another era with its lace and beads. The neckline was low showing an ample amount of her breasts. She wore a lot of makeup and a necklace of diamonds draped around her neck along with dangling diamond earrings decorating her lobes.

“Who are you?” She was confused. “Where am I?” All of a sudden the impact of her surroundings hit her. “Oh, my God! What is happening to me?” She lay back down and started to cry.

“Sweetie, I’m Lil. Caleb brought you here because he knew you needed to get out of the rain, those wet clothes and get yourself warmed up before you catch your death of cold.” With that Lil got up and pulled a screen around the copper bath tub sitting in the middle of the room. Her long, taffeta dressing gown rustled as she moved about. The golden bangles on her arm jangled with a soft clanking noise.

“Jessie, you need to get out of those clothes and get in this hot tub. You hear me?” Lil came back over to the crying woman. “Jessie?”

“I don’t belong here. I don’t know how I got here.” It seemed that her world was crashing down around her as she slowly got up and started removing the saturated clothing she wore. Her body still sobbed with her confusion and tears. When she got her shirt unbuttoned, she suddenly realized that Lil was still in the room. Carefully she made her way behind the decorated screen and continued taking off her soaked garments.

“If you hand me your things, I’ll make sure they’re dried out for you.” Lil stood in the middle of the room and her husky voice startled Jessie.

“Thank you.” Jessie’s voice was meek. She put her things on the top of the screen and proceeded to climb into the hot tub. It felt so wonderful and soon she felt herself starting to warm up.

She watched as her clothing disappeared from the screen. “Lil, where’s Caleb?”

“Sweetie, he’s in the other room getting warm too. You both need a switching for getting yourselves so wet. I swear I don’t know what that man was thinking of, taking you out in this weather.” Lil held up the bra and panties that Jessie had put on the screen and shook her head in wonder. She had never seen such dainty women’s garments before.

“Are you going to be alright if I step out for a minute?” Lil asked of the soaking woman. “I’ll put a gown and robe over the screen for you to put on.”

“Sure.” With that the older woman left the room. Her voice betrayed her doubt, but Jessie needed a few minutes alone. How could this be? Jessie’s mind raced on with pictures of what she had just seen. The town of Seymour did exist, but in what era? How could I be here? What has happened to me? I can hardly believe my own eyes. She felt the water starting to cool and quickly got out of the tub. After drying herself, she slipped into the red, satin gown and robe.

Jessie headed over to the fireplace and put her hands out to continue the warming process. As she did, she searched the room for more evidence of what her head was already telling her. The room was

decorated in gaudy flocked wallpaper with candles lighting the area. The brocade drapes embellished with fringe covered the windows and she could hear the rain beating on the tin roof overhead. She also heard the tinkling of the keys on a piano and conversational noise from the room below.

“This is like a scene out of an old western movie.” She finally found her voice and stated what she was feeling. “Wait a minute! If this is Seymour, then the flood hasn’t happened yet!” Her thoughts were furiously churning about the events her friend Kari had talked about. It had been an unusual amount of rainfall that year, she thought as she once again became aware of the rain pelting away at the building

“I must be dreaming. This can’t be real.” She exclaimed nervously. “Yeah, that’s it. This is all a dream.” She moved from the fireplace as she felt the warmth seeping into her bones. Jessie wandered about the room, fingering objects and looking for evidence that she was just in a dream state.

She found a gilded mirror on the wall and looked at the reflection. She smiled at herself and thought of her situation. She reached up to fluff her hair and when she felt the stitches on the side of her head, she suddenly stopped. Oh my, she panicked. This is real. Those are real stitches and I am really back in time. Just then the door opened and Caleb stepped into the room. Her heart pounded as she realized that he might be a real cowboy from the old west. This is ridiculous! His hair was still wet from his bath and she found herself staring at him. He had taken the time to shave

his tanned face and he looked more handsome than before.

“How are you doing?” He spoke as he came over to stand in front of her. “Are you warm enough?” His blue eyes were curious and she found him looking at her attire. She was suddenly self-conscious about the intimate clothing covering her small frame.

“Caleb, where are we?” She needed more information.

“I told you I’d have to stop at Lil’s. It’s the only thing I could think of at the time to get us dry and warm.” He seemed a bit nervous.

“What is this place?” She pushed for more.

He was definitely embarrassed as he turned to stare into the fireplace. “This is Diamond Lil’s saloon.” He turned back to see her reaction. “I’m sorry, Jess. I know this isn’t a place for a lady such as you. But Lil is good people and she’ll take care of us.”

Oh my God, she thought. I’m really back in the old west. She swayed a bit and Caleb quickly moved to keep her from falling again. “I’m fine, I’m okay. I just need to sit down for a bit.” She allowed him to help her to the chair closest to the fire. I have to be strong, she thought. When my Kyle was in a foreign land he must have been as terrified as I feel, but he did his job. I must remain calm, she tried to quiet her nerves as she performed some deep breathing techniques.

He kneeled by her side and took her hand. “Jess, I’ve asked Doc to come over and look at your head. He’ll be able to tell if I did a good enough job stitching you up.” He stroked her skin on the back of her hand. It was doing strange things to her equilibrium.

“Thanks. It probably wouldn’t hurt to have a doctor look at me.”

“Well,” again his response seemed uncomfortable. “Seymour doesn’t have a real doctor.”

“What kind of a doctor is he?” She looked at Caleb anxiously.

“He’s the town’s dentist, sort of.”

“Sort of?” She demanded more of an explanation.

“He runs the barber shop and folks just started coming to him when they had problems with their teeth.” When he saw the look of shock on her face he continued, “I’d trust him. He’s very good at it.”

She smiled a weak smile. Could this scenario get any worse, she thought to herself. Caleb’s intentions were good and it seemed that this was the best help she was going to get under the circumstances. “Bring him in. It can’t hurt, can it?”

“Great!” He got up and went to the door. He beckoned a small, balding man into the room.

“Hello. Caleb tells me you might need my help.” The short stocky man put a worn leather bag on the floor by her chair.

“I’m Jessie.” She stuck her hand out to shake his. “And you are?”

“Most folks just call me Doc.” He took her hand in his and shook it eagerly. “May I look at the stitches?”

She turned her head so that he could get a good look at the handiwork that Caleb had performed. This is all surreal, she thought. I’m definitely losing my mind.

“Caleb, you did a good job. These stitches look just fine.” Doc moved his hand over them carefully. He

turned to open the bag by his side and removed a bottle of liquid.

“Miss Jessie, this is a mixture that the Hohokam Indians use. May I put some on the wound on your head? It’ll help promote healing.”

As she nodded her consent, he pulled a clean cloth from the same case and dabbed it with the potion from the small corked bottle. It felt cool and soothing on the sore spot on her head as he gently dabbed the area.

“I’d like you to take a small dose of this internally, too.” Doc continued his ministrations as he spoke. Caleb was standing close on her other side and she could feel his nervousness as she was being treated.

“You want me to drink some of that?” Jessie’s doubts reflected in her voice.

“It’ll be okay, Jess. Doc knows what he’s doing. The Hohokam tribe has been using these potions for a very long time.” Caleb tried to soothe her concerns. “Doc, tell her about the time you’ve spent with the tribal medicine man.”

“Okay. First, Caleb, take this and make this lady a hot cup of tea. Put in a generous amount of the serum for her.” He turned his attention to Jessie and while applying the compress on her head, he talked of his time spent with the local tribe learning their ways of dealing with medical emergencies by using natural plant remedies. He explained the process the Indians used to boil the leaves from the mesquite tree and make the serum. She felt calmed by his quiet demeanor and was becoming confident in his medical knowledge.

“There, that should do it.” Doc put the cloth down. “How is that feeling? Caleb did a great job of sewing you up. It should hardly leave any scar. How did this happen?”

“My horse was startled by a snake and he threw me. I must have rolled into a rock and passed out. Caleb came along just in time.” She recanted her tale.

Just then the man she was talking about came back into the room with a cup of tea. “Here, Jess. I brought the sugar just in case it needs sweetened.”

His thoughtfulness touched her heart. She smiled up at him and he responded with that “aw shucks ma’am” grin of his. Their private moment was interrupted by Lil coming back into the room.

“There you are!” Her voice was deep and raspy as she rustled across the room. “How’s our patient?” She spoke directly to Doc.

“Lil, you’re beautiful as ever.” Doc gave her a quick hug. “This little lady is going to be just fine. Caleb did a good job fixing her up.”

“He’s such a good boy.”

Caleb shuffled nervously around the room. “You two need to be quiet. I just did what anyone else would have done.” To Jessie, he added, “Do you feel like you can get dressed? The rain has stopped and we can get to the telegraph office to send your message to your family.”

The telegraph office? Just another point to confirm what she feared. I really am in the past. How did this happen? Then a thought suddenly occurred to her. What date is this? It obviously has to be before the flood. The town of Seymour was wiped out by the

ravaging waters. But when? I need to find out, she realized with an urgency pumping through her veins.

“I think she needs to rest awhile.” Lil responded to Caleb’s invitation. “She’s been through enough for now. The telegraph office will be open and if it isn’t, I’ll make ole Tom send her telegram before he gets his first drink of the day.” She laughed at her own joke.

I need to get some control back in my life, Jessie thought to herself. “Lil, if you have some dry clothes I can borrow, I’d like to see the town with Caleb.” She sat up straight on the chaise lounge.

“Are you sure, honey? I can find something for you to wear, that’s not a problem. I just want you to make sure you feel okay and don’t let this cowboy rush you.” She pointed her thumb in Caleb’s direction.

“Yes, I’m sure. I want to get up and get moving.” She looked to Caleb for support in her decision.

“Lil, find her something to wear. We’re going for a walk.” His voice brooked no arguments from anyone.

Lil gave him a look of exasperation but moved from the room. Doc started loading the things back into his worn bag. “Are you sure you want to get up?” He asked softly of Jessie.

“Thank you for all you’ve done, Doc. I need to get moving.” She assured the older man of her well-being.

“Okay, then,” Doc turned to Caleb, “Her welfare is in your hands, young man. Make sure she eats a good, healthy meal and don’t let her do too much.” He tried to sound stern. He left the room and soon it was just the two of them.

“Jess, are you sure that you’re okay?” Caleb came and sat down on the side of the lounge.

His nearness bothered her, but Jessie was determined not to let him know. "I'm fine. I just need people to stop fussing over me. I want to see this town of Seymour." She reached over and patted his arm tenderly.

Caleb placed his own roughened hand over hers. Their eyes met and he stared into her dark, brown eyes as if he could read her mind. It had been so long since someone had been there to show they cared. It felt so good to have his hand covering hers, but Jessie knew something that he could never know. She wasn't from this time; she wasn't supposed to be here. She didn't want to be the one to break his heart a second time.

As she started to speak, Lil came bustling back into the room carrying a few items of clothes. "I think you'll fit into these. Several of my girls gave me things for you to wear. Please try them on and take your pick. It'll do until you can get your own things back."

"Now you young man, get out of here and let the girl have some privacy." Lil shooed Caleb from the room. She turned to Jessie and spoke quietly.

"I know that these things aren't what you're used to wearing, but..." She seemed at a loss for words. "I've never seen clothing like yours. You must not be from around here. Are you from back East or something?"

How do I answer this? Jessie thought to herself. I can't tell anyone what I suspect. They'd all think I'm nuts! "No, I'm not from back East, but you're right, I'm not from here." She stood up and took the things from Lil's hands and moved around behind the screen.

“Do you work on a ranch? Most women I’ve ever seen wearing trousers work their own spreads.” Lil pressed for more information without shame.

“Thank you for loaning me these things.” Jessie hoped a change of subject would alleviate the need for answers. “I’ll go to the store and buy some more clothes and return these as soon as I can.”

“Don’t worry. The girls don’t need those things working here. I gave your clothes to Lee, the Chinaman for cleaning. As soon as he’s done, I’ll bring them to you.” She chuckled a raspy laugh. “I’ll be right back.” With that left the room.

Jessie stared at the items of clothing as she held each piece up. What in the world am I going to do? She looked at the camisole, the bloomers, the long skirt and the blouse. A far cry from my own jeans and lingerie, she mused.

“Well, I guess I need to try and blend in a bit.” and with that thought, started to put on the clothes. As she glanced at the reflection in the mirror, she laughed out loud. Staring back was an almost perfect picture of a typical woman from the old west. The only exception was her unruly, halo of curls. The silky bloomers actually felt sensual against her skin without the binding tightness her own intimates gave her. She swirled around and felt the skirt at her ankles. Thank goodness the skirt didn’t have a bustle, she giggled.

She was pulling her boots on when a soft knock at the door grabbed her attention. “Yes?”

His voice brought a smile to her face. “Jess, are you ready for a walk?”

She quickly jumped up and went to open the door. She grinned and found her heart racing. “Hi. I’m almost ready.” She turned to check her reflection in the mirror but when he didn’t respond, she looked back at Caleb. He was just standing in the doorway, staring at her.

“What?”

“You’re beautiful.” As soon as the comment left his mouth, Caleb seemed embarrassed at his honest reaction.

For what seemed much longer than just a few seconds, they stared at each other. What is happening, Jessie thought to herself. I’ve got to stop this.

“I’m ready whenever you are. Lead away.” She crossed the room and indicated the open door. “Come on, cowboy, I need to see this little town of Seymour.” She tried to make light of the situation and put some distance between them.

“Okay, but we’ll go down the back stairs. I don’t think you need to go through the saloon. The crowd is starting to grow and those cowboys can get rowdy, especially with a pretty lady like you.” Caleb put the shawl he was carrying over her shoulders and took her hand to lead her to a door at the end of the hallway. As soon as he opened the door, the sun streamed through and she held her hand up to shield her eyes. Even though the sun was bright, the air was still crisp from the rain and the late January weather.

“I guess the rain has stopped.” She felt the swish of her skirt and grabbed it to start the trek down the stairs lining the wall outside the building. He put his

hand on her back and guided her down the stairs and to the right.

The view in front of her was extremely hard to believe. She took in the bustle of a town awake and moving about as the people were taking care of business. Her boots rapped a staccato rhythm as they moved down the boardwalk. Caleb kept his hand at her back. She again felt the comfort in his gentle touch. This was a strange world and she needed his support to make her way through it.

“Let’s go over to Kate’s. We can get something to eat, if you like.” He looked to her for approval.

“That sounds great, Caleb.” She allowed him to lead her down the street to a small café style restaurant. He pushed the door open and waited for her to cross ahead of him. They were the only people in the little room but a small woman quickly came through the kitchen door to greet them.

“Caleb! How wonderful to see you again. And who’s this lovely lady? I’m Kate and this is my place.” She dusted off a table and motioned for them to sit.

“I’m Jessica.” Jessica smiled at the woman.

“I’ve got a great beef stew on. How’s that sound?”

Caleb looked to Jessie for her approval and as she smiled in agreement, he told the other woman, “Kate, that would be perfect. Please don’t go to any trouble.”

“Heavens, child. I have nothing but this to do. I’ll be right back.”

“Caleb, how many people live here in Seymour?” Jessie started pressing for more information about the town that shouldn’t be here.

“I’m not sure. What’s left of the people still live in tents down by the Hassayampa. They used to be workers over at the stamp mill across the river, but they shut it down when they ran a pipeline to the Vulture mine and started the stamp mill there. Most of the townspeople moved on that way.”

“My turn. What is your full name?” He asked curiously. “All I know is Jessie.”

“My name is Jessica Lynn Mayfield. I live just west of Phoenix.” She was reluctant to give too much away.

He must have sensed her need for privacy as he changed the subject. “Do you want to go to the telegraph office after we’ve eaten?”

“Ummm,” she paused for a minute to think about her response. It wasn’t in Jessie’s nature to outright lie, but this was a unique situation and she was convinced she had to tread lightly. “I would love to see more of Seymour, and then we can go to the telegraph office afterwards.” She hoped he would support her decision to delay errand.

“It’s a little cool out there today, especially after the rain. Are you sure you want to walk around town?” He showed concern for her health and welfare and this pleased Jessie. “I have this shawl to keep me warm. I’d really like to see all of Seymour. I understand they have a railroad station and a general store. I thought there was a hotel, too.” She tried to remember everything in the folder her friend Kari had given her. Oh my, was it just a few days ago? She caught herself thinking of the night Kari and she had shared drinks and talked about the new tour Jessie should add to her

business offerings. I wanted to add a new excursion but I never dreamed of living it!

“The hotel closed a few years ago and about all that’s left is Lil’s, the general store and the railroad station.” He projected his sadness at the thought of this town dying.

“What are you thinking of?” Caleb caught the faraway look in her eyes.

“Oh, not much really.” Unconsciously she reached up and ran her fingertips over the stitches in her head.

He noticed the movement immediately and rose to go by her side. “Is your head hurting? Is there something I can do?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m ready to go when you are.” She pushed back her empty bowl. The beef stew was everything their hostess had said and Jessie wanted to thank her for it.

“Caleb, I don’t have any money to pay for my meal. I’d like to thank Kate for this great dish.” She fiddled with her spoon.

He seemed surprised at her admission. “Jess, do you think I’d really allow a lady to pay for her own meal?” At that same moment, Kate came back into the dining room.

“How was your meal? Do you want some more?” She bustled about cleaning up their dishes and filling their water glasses.

“Kate, it was absolutely delicious, but I couldn’t eat another bite. Thank you so much.” Jessie complimented the older woman.

“What about you, Caleb? You usually need another bowl.” She teased him.

Caleb brushed a kiss on the other woman's cheek as he laid some coins on the table for their meal. "Thanks, Kate. We may be back later for one of your great steak dinners." He helped Jessie up and put his hand near the small of her back to guide her from the room.

The cool air hit them as they exited the small restaurant, but Jessie felt warmth from his nearness. They strolled on down the boardwalk until they came to the end. As they stopped, Caleb looked down at the muddy track and looked back at Jessie. "It's really muddy. Are you sure you want to continue?"

"A little mud never hurt anybody." She replied as she stepped down onto the mud-covered trail. "How far is it to the river? Can we go and see?" She was most anxious to see the Hassayampa flowing. In all her years in this desert location, she had rarely seen the river with water freely flowing inside its banks.

He just grinned. He'd never met a woman with so much gumption before. She was amazing. He quickly followed her and soon put his hand under her elbow to usher her onto the short path to the riverbank. Jessie looked up and gave him a smile that he was swiftly becoming attracted to and as she leaned closer to him, his heart beat faster.

"Caleb, can we visit the general store? I need to buy some more clothes." She stopped and wondered how to proceed.

"Sure." They had reached the end of the path and both stopped to look at the river in front of them.

"Wow!" She exclaimed. "I've never seen it like this!" She stared in amazement at the sight before her. The Hassayampa was flowing freely. It was probably as

wide as a football field and while it wasn't raging, it was definitely flowing faster than she had ever witnessed.

"The rain has been unusually heavy this winter. That water's needed by the miners and the farmers." Caleb didn't seem unduly alarmed about the flow of the river. "Are you ready to go to the telegraph office?"

"Ummm," She stalled. "Can we go to the general store first?" She hoped he'd agree.

"Sure, it's on the way." Caleb wheeled her around and that familiar hand found its' way on the small of her back. They walked across the mud and stepped once again onto the boardwalk. There were people in town and as they passed, greetings were exchanged.

"Do you know everyone in town?" She inquired.

Caleb seemed amused by her question. "I guess so. Our ranch ends just outside of Seymour and I spend quite a lot of time here." He tipped his hat in respect to an elderly woman and man as they passed. Their footsteps made short, clipped sounds on the wood walkway. Jessica was fascinated by the store fronts. Many were empty, some were boarded up, but others still showed signs of activity. She felt excitement at the thought of actually being present in an old western town. Like most people, she'd only seen this type of scenery in old movies.

They reached the general store and Caleb held the door open for her to enter. They were immediately greeted by the clerk behind the counter.

"Caleb, how nice to see you." The older man finished up with the woman in front of him before

coming over to shake hands with the tall cowboy. "And who's this lovely lady?"

"Hello, Jeb. This is Jessie Mayfield."

"Hello, Miss Jessie. What can I help you find?" Everyone seemed to take her at face value. She turned to look at the tall cowboy by her side. He must be someone important, she thought to herself.

"I need to get some new clothes." As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized that she had no money with which to buy new things. She turned to Caleb, her cheeks red with embarrassment.

"Jeb, just put her things on the Lazy MC account." He smiled at her with the grin reaching all the way up to his bright blue eyes. "I need some new shirts, myself. You know the kind I like."

"Yes, Caleb, I have those on the shelf over there." Jeb indicated the display of shirts. "I don't carry that many dresses, but I'm sure we can find something for you." He spoke directly to Jessie.

"Well, actually, Jeb, I'd like to have some more pants." She hesitated as she spoke.

"Pants!" Jeb seemed as startled as she thought he would be.

"Yes, please. I work and need them." She hoped he would buy her explanation.

Caleb spoke in her defense. "Jeb, this little lady works her own homestead. She really does need some trousers."

Jeb looked from Caleb to Jessie and then relinquished. "Okay, I have some trousers, but they're for men and I'm not sure we can fit you."

“Whatever you have will be fine.” She tried to comfort the merchant. “I’m sure we can find something that will work for me.”

For the next several minutes, they went about the store and gathered clothes that would fit. Caleb picked out two new shirts and Jessie soon had several pairs of trousers as well as a few new shirts. Unlike the stores of her day, there were no dressing rooms, so she only hoped that the sizes would fit properly. I don’t know how long I’ll be trapped in this era, she thought suddenly. What am I going to do?

As Caleb was signing for their purchases, Jessie continued to browse around the small mercantile. “Ready?” Caleb was by her side.

“Yes, I’m ready when you are.” She reached to help him with the parcels, but being the gentleman she already knew him to be, he declined her help.

As they stepped outside, she realized the sky was darkening once again. It was going to rain and they needed to hurry.

“Ready to go to the telegraph office?” He questioned.

Jessie stopped and turned to face him. How do I tell him it would do no good? How do I explain to this wonderful man that I don’t belong in his world? Her eyes started to tear and she found herself without the words to explain.

“Jessie?” He pressed her for an answer.

She found the tears starting to fall but still no words would form.

He looked at her with compassion in his eyes. He seemed to struggle with his words, but soon spoke. "There's no one to send a telegram to, is there?"

When she didn't answer, he asked again, "Jessie?"

She struggled with her emotions before uttering a small denial. "No, I have no one."



Four

Suddenly, she was enveloped by Caleb's strong arms. He was whispering small words of comfort and it felt so wonderful to be embraced by this handsome cowboy. "It's alright, Jess. You're with me now."

Between sobs, she gulped her words. "I don't know what to do. I don't know why this has happened." She held onto him and felt his strength pouring into her very being. Oh it would be so good to just let him take care of her; but it would be so wrong.

She leaned back and looked up into his eyes. "Caleb, there's things about me that you don't know."

He didn't speak, but for a few seconds just stared into her dark brown eyes; she knew it was going to happen, but was powerless to stop it. He leaned down and placed a small tentative kiss on her lips. It was just a soft press of their lips together, but it made her heart soar. It wouldn't hurt to have this one kiss, would it? She asked of herself. They heard a small sound and quickly pulled apart. It came from across the road as a man was loading a wagon with hard goods. They both seemed embarrassed about the public display of affection.

Jessie quickly turned to walk back to Lil's.

"Wait! Jess, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take liberties." Caleb was instantly by her side.

"Oh, Caleb, it's not that. I'm lost. I don't know where to go and what to do. I know you don't understand a bit of what I'm saying, but I just don't know what I'm going to do." She let the tears flow freely at this point.

He didn't speak but put his hand under her elbow and guided her back up the stairs to Lil's. As soon as they got into the room, he hugged her tightly to his firm body. "I've got to go and do some things, but I'll be back as soon as I can. You just sit here and I'll have Lil send up something to drink."

He left the room abruptly but shortly after Lil came in with a tray of drinks and glasses. "Sweetie, I'm not sure you imbibe, but Caleb said you needed a drink." Lil swished into the room with her satin dressing gown pooling around her on the floor. With a flourish, she sat at the small table and indicated that Jessie should join her.

"Are you a teetotaler?" She inquired with a small knowing grin.

"Right now, Lil, anything with alcohol in it will do." She plopped down in the chair to the other woman's right.

"I brought some fresh water, some hot tea, and wine. This," She held up the bottle with no label, "is special wine for only my favorite people." She laughed and that husky sound penetrated the room.

"Well, Lil, I'm special people and that wine will do just fine." Jessie held up the two glasses inviting the

other woman to pour. Lil didn't scrimp with the amount of liquid she put into their goblets.

Jessie lifted the wine to her nose and swirled the dark red wine so she could smell the bouquet. "Um, this smells delicious!"

"Wait until you taste it." Lil challenged her.

Jessie lifted the goblet to her lips and allowed a small amount to slip into her mouth. "This is fantastic! Where do you get this?" She was totally impressed with the quality of the dark, red wine.

"I order it from a little vineyard in California. They ship it to me on the stagecoach." She giggled like a school girl. "Isn't it heaven?"

"Oh, I definitely agree. This is great!" She took another sip. "The last time I had a glass of wine was with my very best friend, Kari. It seems like so long ago." Her voice was tinged with wistfulness.

Lil looked at her companion before she spoke. "Sounds like you're missing her."

"Yes, I miss her. But more importantly, I miss my life." She suddenly was aware that she had maybe given more away than she wanted.

"What are you running from, Jessie?" Lil probed.

Jessie's laughter was filled with sarcasm. "Lil, I'm not running from anything. I'm here by accident." She looked directly at the older woman. "I don't expect you to comprehend what I'm saying. Hell, I don't even understand what is going on, but believe me, I'm not running from anything."

"Here's to you finding out what you need to know." Lil poured some more wine into their glasses and raised hers in a toast to Jessie.

“I’ll drink to that.” Jessie savored the dark, burgundy drink and felt it going down smoothly in her throat. She felt herself relaxing and turned to Lil. “Here’s to you, Lil, a woman in her own right. Thank you for your help.”

“What happens now, Jessie? Where do you go from here?”

“I’m not sure. I told my friend just a few days ago that it’s time to make some changes in my life. I’m just not sure that this is what I had in mind.” Once again she realized the predicament she was in and it made her sad. Since losing her husband, she had prided herself in making her own way. She had set herself on a path and created her own destiny. For the first time in over six years, Jessica Mayfield didn’t know what she was going to do.

“Here’s to you, Jessie. I feel that you’re going to be alright, no matter what you do or where you go.”

They both sat there and drank another glass of wine. Jessie didn’t want to think about her future, but just then the door opened and Caleb walked through. His arms were full of parcels and he dumped them unceremoniously onto the floor.

“Lil! I told you to get her a drink, not alcohol!” He took in the scene in front of him.

Lil laughed loudly, her raspy voice filling the room. “Caleb McCaslin, I gave the lady a choice and you can see what she wanted.” She raised her glass to him in salute.

The women looked at each other and took in the perplexing look on his face and burst out laughing. Jessie took another sip of her wine and waited for him

to speak. Her eyes were sparkling with mischief. Neither woman moved and instead just sat there watching the wave of emotions cross over his handsome face.

“Wow! You two are something else!” He took his cowboy hat off and ran his hand through his unruly hair. He plopped his lanky frame down on the nearest chair. “Got any more of that?” He indicated the bottle of wine sitting closest to Lil.

“Of course, honey!” Lil got up and went to the door. As she opened the door, she hollered down the hallway to Benjamin to bring them another bottle of the special wine. She came back in and found another wine glass on the sideboard. In no time at all, Benjamin appeared with the bottle. As he handed it to Lil, Jessica noticed his gnarled hands, and stooped posture. The years showed in the lines on his weathered face. He displayed little emotion except when he looked at Lil. The care and affection he felt for the woman radiated from his worn features. He was so much smaller than her, but his obvious love made him seem like a man of stature. He touched Lil lightly on the arm and then left the room silently.

“He’s such a dear. I don’t think I could run this place without him.” Lil spoke fondly of her silent helper. She handed the freshly poured glass to Caleb and raised her own in salute. “Here’s to you, Caleb McCaslin. A great man, too!”

He grinned at the praise and drank heartily of his glass. He was enjoying this time with the two women.

“What are those?” Lil finally asked, indicating the packages he had dropped on the floor.

“Oh, those! I thought I’d take Jessie to the ranch. We’ll need those supplies for the trip.” He looked to Jessie for a reaction. She seemed surprised at his admission.

Lil noticed her reaction and admonished Caleb. “Look, cowboy, a lady needs to be asked, especially this lady.”

Looking properly chastised, Caleb turned to Jessie and turned on his best charm. “Miss Mayfield, would you like to come with me to the Lazy MC ranch? I think you’d really like to see it and meet my family.”

When she didn’t answer right away, he added, “It’ll take two days but I promise you we’ll stop at the Lower Dam for the night. We’ll be properly supervised.”

Jessie smiled at his proposal. I could get used to this type of chivalry, she thought to herself. She’d been on her own for what seemed an eternity and to have someone such as Caleb so concerned for her welfare and safety was refreshing.

“Does that smile mean you’ll come?” He spoke boldly, his spirit soared at the thought of spending more time alone with this wonderful, mysterious woman.

Lil watched the exchange between the two of them with amazement. She’d known the McCaslins for a long time and she’d seen Caleb grow into the fine, young man sitting here today. It tickled her to see him so smitten with Jessie. He’d been so heart broken when his young bride had died so suddenly.

“Yes, Caleb, I’d love to see your ranch.” She drained the last of her wine and lifted her empty glass. “Do we have time to drink some more wine?”

He rose quickly and grabbed the bottle, filling both glasses for the ladies. “Of course. We won’t leave until early morning. We’ll have to spend the night here.” He turned his smile to Lil. “That is, if you could put us up here tonight?”

“Oh, you rascal, you know I won’t refuse you!” Lil got up and headed toward the door. “I’ll go make arrangements for the night for you two.” Just before she disappeared from the room, she added, “In separate rooms, of course!”

Caleb refused to look directly at Jessie, his embarrassment distinctly showing on his face. Jessie’s heart was touched as she watched him quickly turn away from her to hide his awkwardness. She got up and slowly walked to his side.

“Caleb,” She quietly spoke his name and put her hand on his arm.

When he turned to face her, it seemed as if time suddenly stopped and the rest of the world didn’t exist. She looked up into his deep, blue eyes and realized as he removed his cowboy hat that he was going to kiss her again. She froze, unable to move. I want this. She was shocked with the depth of her need to feel his lips on hers and powerless to stop him from lowering his head.

He put the hand that held his hat behind her and pulled her closer, molding her body to his. With his free hand, he softly stroked his rough, calloused knuckles down the side of her face. Jessie could feel her pulse pounding in her veins and the heat emanating from their touching bodies was nearly suffocating. When she thought she couldn’t stand the

suspense any longer, he swiftly and powerfully pressed his lips to hers. It was a kiss meant to take her breath away and it didn't disappoint.

She could taste the wine on his lips and the scent she was coming to know as Caleb's rushed her being; with no thought as to the consequences, she wrapped her arms around him and relished in the intimate embrace and kiss. It had been so long. She heard a soft moan and recognized it came from her. She reached up and ran her hands through that dark midnight hair; it was as soft as she had imagined.

Through her foggy state, she realized the kiss was slowly coming to an end. She felt Caleb pull back and lifted her face up to him. "Jess," his voice was husky with emotion. "I shouldn't have done that, but I'm not sorry."

Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment as the truth of their actions dawned on her. "No, you shouldn't have." She pulled out of his arms and the world suddenly felt so cold.

"I'm going to go now. I'll be back and get you for dinner." He went to the door and placed his hat back on his head. "If you need anything, Lil will take care of it." Saying no more, he left the room.

With the impact of their kiss fresh on her lips and mind, Jessie sat back down. She raised her hand and gently ran it over her lips. After all the years, she was forgetting how her husband's kisses had felt. The effect of Caleb's lips touching hers had her pulse racing and a desire spreading throughout her body for more. Caleb was right, he shouldn't have done that. It could do more harm than good.

She was sitting there trying to figure out what she was going to do when she heard a small tapping on the hallway door. At the same time, Lil walked back into the room. “Everything alright? Where’s Caleb?” She bustled in the room, straightening the tray and wine glasses.

“He had to go somewhere. He’ll be back for dinner. Here let me help you.” She got up and picked up their empty bottles and started to help Lil.

“I’ve got that. You just rest. Remember, you’re still supposed to take it easy from your injury. In fact, why don’t I show you to your room and you can rest a bit.”

Jessie took a deep breath. “Maybe you’re right. I could use a little nap.” Lil kept looking at her and Jessie was sure she knew about their kiss. She couldn’t know, but it felt like Lil had a sixth sense about these things. They made their way down the dark hallway to a small room at the end.

Lil opened the door and beckoned Jessie to enter. “It’s not much, but I think it’ll be quiet for you in here. I used this room for storage but Benjamin got tired of toting things up and down the stairs. I had him turn it into this for guests on the stage when the hotel closed down. Now, it isn’t used that much.” The sadness about the demise of her town showed on her painted face.

“It’ll do just fine.” Jessie leaned over and placed a small kiss on the powdered cheek of the large woman. “Lil, I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality. You’ve been very kind.” She crossed the floor and sat on the single bed in the middle of the room.

“You get some rest. I’ll let you know when Caleb comes back and we’ll eat some dinner in my room.” She left, quietly shutting the door behind her.

Once alone, Jessie pulled off her boots and stretched out on the feather bed. As she stared at the ceiling, her thoughts were swirling around in her head. I would love to have a latte, she almost laughed aloud at that thought. She rolled over and stared at the wall. If only I could get on the computer, I could research my predicament and find out how to get myself back to my own time. But another thought entered her mind at the same time. If I left, I couldn’t see Caleb. She sighed heavily at that revelation. Before long, she had drifted off to sleep.

Caleb stood outside the closed door after leaving Jessie. His mind was in a jumble and his feelings were worse. He headed down the hallway but instead of going out the back door, he turned to go downstairs to the saloon. At the bar, he ordered a whiskey and downed it as Lil was coming down the stairs.

“That’s not what you need, cowboy.” She signaled for the barkeep to bring her a glass. “You’ve got it bad.” She downed her own shot of the dark brown liquid. “The question is,” she paused before continuing, “What’re you going to do about it?”

Caleb poured himself another drink from the bottle before turning to the woman next to him. “Lil, I don’t know. She’s a mystery, you know. There’s something about her that’s not quite right. But, there’s also something that intrigues me.”

They both stood there, each in their own deep thoughts. The music surrounded them from the player

piano in the corner. There were a few locals at the bar, and a poker game was quietly going on at a table in the corner. The sun was starting to set and showed through the dirty, dingy windows. When Seymour had been a thriving town, the saloon was a place to be proud of, a place that would have been clean and well kept. A cool breeze blew gently through the swinging doors and whipped around the room. At one time this was a bustling town and the saloon was always busy, but now the town and business were dying.

“There’s not a whole lot of us that are ‘right’. We all have our own secrets and burdens to bear.” Lil spoke profoundly. She took a slow sip of the next drink he had poured for them.

“It’s not so much secrets that I’m concerned about, it’s more about who she is.” Caleb struggled to put his thoughts into words. “I mean what was she doing out riding alone? I didn’t find her horse anywhere. She’s not from around here, but she seems familiar with the area.”

“She’s an independent woman, Caleb. She must own her own ranch or something like that. Maybe she was looking for some lost stock or something. Maybe her ranch is close by, nearer to Phoenix than here.” Lil seemed to be reaching for her own answers to the mystery. “I like her. I don’t care what she’s done or where she’s from. I think she needs someone like you.”

“I like her, too.” His words were simple.

“So, I ask again, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m taking her to the ranch. There she can relax and heal and maybe we can get to know each other.

What happens after that, well....” He shrugged his shoulders and downed his drink.

Lil patted his shoulder. “You’re a good man, Caleb. Any girl would be lucky to have you take care of her.”

“I didn’t do such a good job taking care of Emily.” His voice was gruff with emotion.

“Now, don’t go and hash over that again. There’s nothing you could have done for her. It wasn’t your fault and you know it.” Lil admonished him sternly.

“Just the same,” he spoke with determination, “I’ll not have another woman die on my watch.”

He turned from the bar and told Lil, “I’m going to go up and check on Jess. I’ll see you in a little while for supper.” As he strode away, Lil let out a sigh. “Oh, young love. What I wouldn’t give to feel it again.”



Five

“Jess, it’s time to get up.” She heard his voice through the fog in her mind. She struggled to reach consciousness. She felt his gentle touch on her arm.

“Jess, we have to get going. We have a long way to go today.” He pleaded quietly with her to wake up.

Memories of the night before tried to rush into her brain. Jessica wiped away the cobwebs of her deep sleep as she thought about a light knock at her door. Did he come into her room and sit on the side of her bed? As her mind cleared, she suddenly recollected his soft touch when Caleb tenderly brushed the hair back from her face. And then she definitely remembered his kiss on her forehead as she struggled in her sleep. Oh those lips! Oh those soft, sensual lips!

“Jess.” His voice was stronger this time.

“I’m awake.” She tried to open her eyes but failed. “Caleb, is it time for dinner?”

“I’m afraid you missed supper. You were sleeping so soundly, I couldn’t bring myself to wake you. I let you sleep.” His voice was tender and she felt herself caught in his thoughtfulness. “Breakfast is waiting in Lil’s

room. We need to get on the trail if we want to make it to the Lower Dam before nightfall.”

He waited patiently for her eyes to open and once they did, he smiled. “Ready?”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes. I need to wash my face.” She sat up and realized that someone had pulled a blanket over her. She still had her full clothing on and was relieved that nothing was revealed.

“I’ll let Lil know you’re on your way.” He left the room and gave her the privacy she needed.

Jessie quickly got up and went to the washstand where she found fresh water poured in the water and bowl. She reached for the cloth on the stand and dipped it into the cold, refreshing water. She was wiping the sleep from her eyes when a knock at the door interrupted her.

“Yes?” She inquired of the unknown interruption.

“Miss Jessie, I have some fresh clothes for you from Mr. Caleb.” She heard the male voice from the other side of the door.

“Come in.”

Benjamin stepped into her room carrying some packages. She recognized the parcels that Caleb had brought with him yesterday. “Mr. Caleb thought you would want to change into one of these outfits for your ride.” With that he put the packages on the bed and quickly exited the room.

She slowly went over to the chair where Benjamin had placed the brown paper parcels. As she undid the first one, she exclaimed with delight. Jessie lifted a dark, brown gaucho skirt up and held it to her waist. This would be perfect for the horse ride to the ranch,

she thought joyfully. The gauchos seemed custom made just for her. She quickly got out of the long skirt, pulled the culottes on and looked in the small dresser mirror. She strained to see all of her body but failed.

Anxious to thank Caleb for the perfect gift, she tucked in a new blouse, pulled her boots back on, and headed down the hallway to Lil's room. She knocked loudly and was immediately invited in by Lil herself.

"Well, don't you look pretty!" Lil complimented her on the outfit. "Did Caleb get those for you? They fit you perfectly. Go on and look in the mirror." Lil struggled to get her large body out of the chair and eventually came to stand beside Jessie as she stared at her image in the gilded full-length mirror.

For a few moments, neither woman said anything. Finally, Jessie leaned over and gave the other woman a hug. "Lil, I can't thank you enough for everything." Her voice cracked with emotion.

"Are you going to be alright? I mean, you and Caleb are going to be on the trail alone for several days. Did you send a wire to your people?" Lil was curious and not shy about asking questions.

The look on Jessie's face betrayed her. She couldn't share her secret but lying was not in her character. "Lil, I don't have anyone to contact. I just said that so Caleb didn't feel obligated to continue taking care of me."

"Honey, he is taking care of you because he has feelings for you. Look at the things he's done." Lil went and sat back down on the chaise lounge. "I think you have feelings for him too." She waited for a reaction from Jessie.

Jessie took her time in responding. How much can I say without giving my secret away? She walked away from Lil and sat down in the chair by the fireplace. “Lil, I haven’t been interested in a man since I lost my husband six years ago.” She hesitated to get her thoughts together before continuing. “Caleb is a very exciting man, but I don’t belong here and I don’t want to hurt him.” She looked directly at Lil. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. I don’t have anyone else here.”

“Then go to his ranch and enjoy what time you have with him. In fact, you’ll get there just in time for their famous Valentine’s Day celebration. Well, the men think it’s a roundup, but the women come and they have a dance and everything.” A look of joy crossed over Lil’s face. “They have the best celebration around. Everyone for miles is invited. Families come and camp out and enjoy the festivities. I would go, but I’m too old to travel that far anymore.”

Oh my God! It suddenly dawned on Jessie that the flood that would destroy this town and the people in it would hit in just over a week! She got up and rushed to Lil’s side. Crouching down, she pleaded with the other woman, “Lil, come with us! We can all travel together and then you can join in the fun, too!” How much can I tell her? If I interfere with the events yet to come, will I change the future? This is too much for me, she thought with anguish.

“Are you hurting? Should I get Doc?” Lil was concerned as she watched the agony on Jessie’s pretty face.

“No, no, I’m fine.” She stalled for time. Just then, Caleb knocked and came into the room. She stood up

and felt her heart beating hard in her chest. He was gorgeous. Can a man be gorgeous? Yes, she stared at him, this man is certainly gorgeous!

“Hello, ladies.” He went over to the sideboard and poured himself a drink of coffee. “What are you two up to?” He waltzed over and placed a peck on Lil’s cheek, but he stopped short of showing that same kind of affection for Jessie even though he wanted to touch her and kiss her. His eyes caressed her, his pulse pounded in his head; she was beautiful and he wanted her. He took in the fact that she had on the riding pants he had bought for her. The gauchos fit her perfectly and the blouse strained across her breasts. Their eyes were locked and neither seemed willing to break the spell.

“Doesn’t she look lovely?” Lil’s raspy voice broke through the electricity sparking between them.

“Caleb, I was just trying to talk Lil into coming with us.” Her voice came out rushed and forced. “She talked about the round up party and how wonderful it is at the ranch.” Jessica restrained the urge to take a step backwards out of his personal space.

Caleb grinned but allowed Jessie her emotional retreat. “Lil, you know you’re always welcome at the ranch. I can get a wagon and you can travel with us.” He crouched down and looked the older woman in the eyes. “You haven’t left this place in years. A trip might do you some good.”

Lil patted the side of his face. “You’re such a sweet boy. I would love to see the ranch again, but who’d run this place while I’m gone? I need to stay here.”

Jessie felt the panic of earlier returning full force. “Lil, I think you need to come with us. We’ll be back in

a few weeks. Benjamin can run things for you.” She tried her best to convince Lil to leave this doomed town without giving away her real motive. In a few days, the town of Seymour wouldn’t exist once a forty foot wall of water comes rushing down the Hassayampa. Her heart lurched with the horrible secret she was carrying. She looked at Caleb with pleading in her eyes.

He saw the look even though he didn’t fully understand what was behind it and made his own appeal with Lil. “You know how you love our spring gathering. Come with us!”

Lil managed to lift her hefty frame up and out of the lounge chair. “You two need to forget it! I’m not going anywhere. I love this town and it needs me. This town is where I’m going to be until I die!” She chuckled, “But, I’m not ready to go yet, so get yourselves ready for some breakfast.” With that she lumbered out of the room.

“Jess, what’s wrong? You look like you’re going to pass out.” He quickly stepped over to her side. He wrapped his muscular arms around her shaking frame and held her. “Hey, if you’re not okay, we can wait and get started on the trail tomorrow.” He stroked her back.

Jessie worked hard to gain some composure. What was she going to do? Gulping huge breaths of air, she felt some sort of calm coming over her body. She still had several days before disaster hit this area. She needed that time to consider her actions and what better place than the scene of the crime? She suddenly realized that by going with Caleb to the Lower Dam

and that area, maybe she could alert people of the possibility that a tragedy could be averted.

“I’m going to be fine, Caleb. I’m ready to get going.” She stepped out of his embrace. “Let’s get some breakfast.” She didn’t know what else to say.

About that time Lil came back into the room followed by Benjamin. He pushed a cart loaded with covered dishes. Lil knew how to live even in this dying town and it showed in the linen, china and silver that Benjamin was setting out on the small table in the room.

“Come on, you two. The least I can do is make sure you have a full stomach before you start out for the ranch.” She sat herself at the table and watched patiently as they came to join her.

“I hope you like biscuits and gravy, Jessie. There’s also sausage, bacon, and eggs.” She was filling her plate while talking. “If you want something else, I can have Benjamin get it for you.”

“Oh, my God, Lil, this is more than enough. I normally don’t even eat a meal in the morning.” Jessica helped herself to some of the wonderful fare on the table. She watched as Caleb piled his plate full. It tickled her to see that he wasn’t shy about getting his fill.

“I’ll make sure Benjamin packs a lunch for you. It’s a long way to the Lower Dam and I’m not even sure you’ll get a decent meal there. Caleb, is the only place for a meal still at the saloon?”

“Unfortunately, yes. They should have a tent for us, though.” He attacked his meal again.

“A tent?” Jessie stopped putting the fork in her mouth to respond to Caleb’s comment. “We’re staying in a tent?”

“Sure, I thought you’d know that.”

“Why on earth would I know that?”

“You’re from this area, right? I thought you would know that.”

“I’m from this area, but I’ve never been up the Hassayampa past Wickenburg. I’ve never been to the Lower Dam or the Walnut Grove Dam. This is all new to me.” She put her fork down and looked at him. Did he know? No, she thought furiously, he couldn’t possibly know her secret.

There was an uncomfortable silence around the table for a few long minutes. Lil finally cleared her throat and spoke, “Do you want more, Caleb?” She offered him the plate of meats.

“No, thanks, Lil. We need to get going.” He finished clearing his plate and stood up. “When you’re done, Jess, come on downstairs. I’ll be getting the horses ready.” He hustled from the room before anything further could be said.

Lil laughed out loud. “My, my. I’d love to be with you two on this trip!”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Jessie’s tone was one of slight annoyance.

Lil’s response was just more laughter. She struggled to get out of the lounge. “I’ll get Benjamin to help me make a basket of food for your trip. Now go on back to your room and get your things ready.” She paused at the door, “Oh, I have your other clothes from the laundry. I’ll bring them to you downstairs. Caleb will

be out front waiting.” She left the room in a rush of satin. Her dress was adorned with ruffles, lace, and fringe. Jessica couldn’t imagine being bound by so much fabric.

Jessie went to the small room at the end of the hall, quickly made her bed, and straightened the room. She grabbed all the parcels and with her arms loaded, maneuvered down the hallway to the door leading to the stairs out back. Watching her steps carefully she made her way down the wooden steps and found her way to the front of the saloon.

As she rounded the corner, she saw Caleb there with three horses. She recognized his mount and realized that one of the other horses was packed with supplies. He looked up and came over quickly to relieve her of the load she was carrying. He took the packages and started adding them to the rest of the stuff already loaded on the horse. Once he finished, he turned and took her by the elbow.

“Jess, this is your ride to the ranch.” She reached up and patted the horse on the forehead. “Her name is Ginger.” His eyes twinkled with delight.

“You named her?” She pushed him for more information. She knew he was teasing her. “For me?”

“Always for you, Jess. Ready to go?” He offered to help her mount her horse. She declined. As she got up on Ginger, she laughed out loud. This man made her laugh.

Just then, Lil came out of the front of the saloon. “Wait, Jessie, I have your clothes.” She rushed to the waiting horses and lifted a brown paper package to Jessie’s waiting hands.

“Thank you so much, Lil. I’ll miss you.” Jessie bent down and took the package and placed it in her saddlebag.

To Caleb, Lil gave the basket of food stuff. “This is so you don’t starve our girl over there.” Lil stepped back and tried to hold back the tears. “I’m going to miss you two. Come back soon. Go now before I get all teary eyed.”

Caleb blew a kiss to Lil and soon spurred the horses into action. Jessie’s horse followed suit and soon the three of them were heading down the main street of Seymour. The early rays of sunshine were just starting to rise in the sky and the whole day seemed to be ahead of them.

They rode side by side slowly enjoying the morning sun and the sounds of nature. He adjusted his cowboy hat down on his head to keep the glare of the day from his eyes. As he looked at Jessie, he noticed her squinting under the brightness of the day. He stopped and got off his horse.

“What’s wrong?” She was puzzled at his sudden stop.

He went to the pack horse and rummaged through the parcels before grabbing a cowboy hat and brought it to her. “Here, I got this for my cousin but you can use it until we get to the ranch.”

She was so taken aback at his thoughtfulness that for a moment she was speechless. She took the proffered black felt hat and placed it on her head. It took a second attempt before she could get her wild curls arranged under the hat and out of her eyes. “How’s that?” She wished for a brush and a comb, but

having none of her usual beauty treatments available, succumbed to using her hands to smooth the disarray surrounding her head.

He was transfixed by her beauty. This woman sat on a horse in the bright morning sun with a hat bought for a man and still managed to look stunning. His heart lurched in his chest. He was in trouble for falling for this woman in just a few short days.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "It's fine. At least you'll keep the sun from your eyes." He mounted his horse and once again they started their slow journey.

"Which way to the ranch?" She disrupted the quiet that had settled between them.

"We're going to follow the river up until the Lower Dam. Once we leave there, we may have to travel east away from the river. I hope you don't mind the ride, it can get pretty rough at times." He watched to see if she would protest.

"No, I think this is beautiful land. I've always loved Arizona and the desert." She looked around at the mesquite trees and the desert sage. At least the ground was wet from the recent storms and they didn't have to contend with dust on their trek.

"It's unusually warm today." Caleb's voice interrupted her thoughts. "The weather has been so strange lately. We go from tons of rain to heat in just days. I don't know what to make of it."

She mused over his comments. Jessie knew what was coming from this uncommon weather, but couldn't tell him. An errant thought suddenly entered her mind. One of her favorite television shows as a

child had been the science fiction series called Star Trek. The mission of the space travelers was to explore space and any new civilizations that they found, but the prime directive was one of non-interference. The captain of the space ship was under direct orders to not interfere with other civilizations and their progress for fear of altering the future. She suddenly felt a kinship with that fictional television show. If she tried to warn Caleb and the people she met, would she change the future? Would they believe her?

She looked at the man riding beside her. Her heart stirred at his quick smile causing her to grin back. “Thanks for the hat. I’m glad to have the shade.”

“It looks good on you. You should keep it.”

“What about your cousin? Won’t he mind?” They moved along at a steady pace. The river was running next to their path.

“Once he sees you in it, he’ll eagerly give it up.” The compliment made her blush.

“Tell me about your family. Do you have many cousins? Do they all live and work at the ranch?” She was most curious about this cowboy and his life.

“I’m the only child of my parents, but I have two uncles and their wives and their children that live on the ranch. I don’t lack for family. In fact, there are times I have to ride up into the hills to get some privacy.” He laughed as his memories flooded over him.

“Do they all live with you?” She was amazed at the size of his family. She had been an only child too and often found herself longing for the sibling rivalry that some of her friends shared.

“No, thank goodness. Mom and Dad and I live in the main house. Uncle Seth and his wife and three sons live about twenty miles away in their own house. Uncle Ben and his wife and two sons and two daughters live in the opposite direction but within site of the main house. The ranch is over 500,000 acres in the heart of the territory.” He chuckled at the look of complete surprise on her face. “As you can see there’s plenty of room for all of the families.”

“I thought you had your own place. You don’t live there?” Her horse bumped into his as they pushed up the trail.

He didn’t answer right away but adjusted himself in the saddle. “Are you ready for a short break? These horses could use a drink and I’m sure you could too.”

She didn’t think he was going to respond to her question. Maybe she was prying where she didn’t belong. She’d had a hard time returning to the home she and Kyle had shared once she heard of his death. Having sold the home just after a year, she bought the building in Litchfield where her apartment was located above her business. Jessie could understand his reluctance to go back to the home where he and Emily had lived.

She resisted his offer of help down from her horse and instead jumped down only to nearly collapse. Caleb quickly grabbed her to keep her from falling. “Whoa, it’s only been a few hours. Take it slow. We’ve got many more hours and miles to go before you can rest. Think you’re going to make it?”

His teasing was good natured and she responded in kind. “I can keep up with you all the way, cowboy!” She

dusted off her bottom and tried to walk with dignity as she headed to the river. She ignored his laughter as she stooped down and scooped a handful of the crisp, cool water. She raised it to her lips and tasted the fresh liquid. She grabbed another handful and removed her hat and splashed the back of her neck. It was refreshing and helped to cool her down from the warm noon sun.

“I couldn’t go back to the house once Emily was gone.” His voice startled her upright. He was near and his gaze was transfixed on the water flowing by. He seemed lost in his own pain and thoughts. She didn’t want to interrupt, full well knowing how easily a simple statement or action could trigger those old painful memories.

“It’s just sitting there empty. I’ll do something with it someday.” His words were insightful into his pain over the loss of his wife and unborn child.

“I wish it was warmer. I’d love to take a bath and this water seems so pure and fresh.” She changed the subject to allow him his privacy. His eyes reflected his thoughts as he turned to look at her. She immediately realized that he was thinking of her naked in the water. She turned and bent over to grab another handful of the cool, running water to stall the errant thoughts she was thinking.

“Jess,” his voice was raspy with emotion, but it seemed that he changed what he was going to say and instead, “Ready to go? We’re going to go past Wickenburg soon.” He turned and walked back to the horses. She followed and mounted her horse. She lovingly patted Ginger as she gently urged her forward.

There were no words between them as they followed the river slowly and deliberately. Their trip was exciting to Jessie. She'd taken lots of groups on this very same trip, but they usually trekked right in the middle of the dry Hassayampa riverbed. She'd never seen it flowing like it was just now. The only time this river had any water in it was just after the monsoons in late summer and then it was a short term situation. Maybe it was that, she mused, but more likely it was the company she was with on this particular trip. She stole a quick glance at her silent companion. He seemed troubled as a frown creased that handsome brow of his. She reflected on their journey and realized it was as difficult for him as it was for her. They were definitely attracted to each other, but where could it go from here?

“Jess,” His voice startled her out of her thoughts. “Look over there. That’s Wickenburg.” He pointed to the west of their location.

She was infinitely surprised as she took in the sight on the other side of the river bed. Modern day Wickenburg was a town of over 6,000 people. If she remembered the information Kari had given her, the whole territory of Arizona in 1890 had around 4,000 people total. The small town before her eyes couldn’t have had over 100 people. It was amazing.

“Wow, I expected something bigger.” She realized as she spoke the words that she would reveal more of her secret to him. “It’s been a while since I’ve been there.” She hoped her words would satisfy his curiosity.

Caleb turned and looked deep into her eyes. He suspected something, she was sure. Instead of probing, he spoke again as he turned back to their trail. "We'll stop just up the river and have a break for some food. We're a little over halfway to the Lower Dam site." He spurred his horse along and expected her to follow.

What I wouldn't give for my phone, she thought to herself. I could take pictures so if and when I get back to my world, I can prove what has happened to me. This is also wonderful information for my jeep tours. I can describe with authenticity the scene in front of me for my customers. Oh, who am I kidding? Who knows if I can get back? As she stared at Caleb's strong back in front of her, another thought occurred. Do I really want to go back and be alone?

The landscape was still pretty flat as they followed the curves and bends of the Hassayampa. The slow and steady pace of their horses and the breeze blowing in the wind were the only sounds for miles around. Such a peaceful life, she let her thoughts fill her brain again. It was a hard life, but one without the stress, hustle and bustle of her normal city life. I could get used to this, she mused, but another notion entered her muddled head. I may have to get used to this. How in the world can I possibly get back to my time?



Six

They had ridden for what seemed like hours when in the shade of a small group of Palo Verde trees, Caleb finally halted. “Let’s stop for some rest and food.” He got down and grabbed the basket containing the food Benjamin had prepared for them. He walked over to Jess and held out his hand for hers. She didn’t hesitate and quickly put her hand into his as they walked to a soft place under the tree.

He placed a small blanket under the shade of the crop of trees and encouraged her to sit. Caleb sat the basket of food down on the blanket and joined her. As they looked at the goodies Lil had packed, Jessie realized how hungry she had become.

“This all looks so good.” She grabbed a biscuit and loaded it with bacon. “Would you like one?”

“Yes, that looks good.” Caleb took the proffered treat from her hands. “Lil sure knows how to live, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, she does know good living.” Jessie agreed as she took her fill of the food. She didn’t realize that she had become so hungry, but had no trouble eating her fill.

The silence between them was very companionable and Jessie wished it could last forever. She knew that somehow she had to let Caleb in on her secret, but part of her wanted to wait for a little bit. She tried to lighten the mood in her heart. “So, cowboy, what do you do for fun?” She watched the mirth appear on his face as he responded. She scrunched up her face as she realized that her question sounded like the worst pick up line she’d heard.

“Let’s see. I fish when I can. I play cards with the cowhands on the occasional Saturday night and I go into town and listen to the music at Lil’s.” He winked at her. “What do you do for fun, little lady?”

She laughed at his teasing banter. “Well, I don’t have much time for fun, but when I do, I like to meet my friend Kari and have some serious girl talk. I love to cook but don’t do that often. If I cook, I eat and then I have to watch my weight for the next few weeks. I used to love dancing but since losing Kyle, I haven’t done that.” She said it without sadness. She was finally adjusting to that change in her life it seemed. Jessie looked at the tall man sitting next to her.

“Well, you’ll have plenty of dances at the Valentine’s Day shindig. There won’t be any lack of willing males around to ask you.” His face took on a more serious look. “I think I’ll have to watch out for those cowpokes.”

She laughed at his honesty. “I’m sure you won’t lack for the attention of the pretty ladies. You’ll have to promise to save a dance for me.”

He stood up and started cleaning up their meal. “You’ll love our party. Ma goes all out. She’s probably

wondering where I am so she can put me to work setting up everything.”

“Well, we’d better get going then. I wouldn’t want to be the reason for you to get out of work.” She got up and helped clear their picnic. As she walked back to the horses, she paused for a minute. “Caleb, you sure they won’t mind you bringing me to your home?”

He looked taken aback. “Why on earth would they mind? The biggest problem we’ll have is to keep them from playing matchmakers.” He turned his back to her and finished securing the basket of food.

As he started to mount his ride, he looked at her and smiled. “Ma’s going to love you. She doesn’t have much female company and I’m afraid you’ll have your ears talked off.”

This news pleased Jessie. She wasn’t used to the ways of the old west and to hear his reassurance of being welcomed helped ease her mind. When had her life become so complicated that she misunderstood kindness and friendliness?

They started once again along the river path and headed north. The sun was slowly setting in the west and she could feel the chill coming in the air. He turned to look at her before speaking. “Do you think you would be able to keep up if we step it up a bit? I want to get through Box Canyon before the sun sets completely. It flattens after that and we can slow it back down, then.”

“I’ll be fine.” She answered faintly. She didn’t want him to know that her bottom was already sore. “Lead on.” She spoke more loudly.

He took one long look as though he knew she was lying, but necessity required they move faster. He spurred his horse and the pack horse on and she did the same with Ginger. "Come on, girl, we've got to keep up. If you can do it, I can."

Their pace prevented any further conversation and soon she could see they were changing direction and were heading more eastward. The terrain was getting steeper and she felt the canyon walls narrowing. The river was flowing but not so badly that they couldn't keep to the trail such as it was. Jessie reflected on some of the excursions she had lead up this very same riverbed. To see it now was such a treat. The water was flowing freely, the landscape was unscathed and free of any signs of mankind. It felt almost spiritual to see the sun setting on the terrain and hear the gently flowing river.

She suddenly realized that Caleb had stopped as she almost ran her horse right into his. "Whoa! I thought we'd stop for a minute and let you stretch your legs."

She smiled with gratitude at his thoughtfulness. She put her leg over to slide down from her horse and if Caleb hadn't caught her, she would have fallen all the way to the ground. He put his hands firmly around her waist and helped her lower the rest of the way down. The moment his hands touched her, she felt an emotional charge surge throughout her being. She looked up into those wonderful eyes of his and saw that he was as affected as she was by their nearness.

"Jess?" Was all he asked.

She nodded her assent and he quickly lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. Her hat was knocked

off as they meshed their bodies together in a tight embrace. It didn't matter. All that she was aware of was the feel and taste of him. She hadn't realized until that instant that she'd been craving this since the start of their trip earlier that morning. She reached up and ran her fingers through that dark hair of his, pushing his hat off his head. She heard him moan and a small groan escaped her own throat as they deepened their kiss.

“Jess.” His voice was gruff with want.

Her body moved closer if that was even possible. In some far distant place in her mind, Jessie knew this shouldn't happen, but her hands and lips seemed to have a mind of their own. The absence of physical love was paramount in her life lately and she was determined to feel it again.

He traced small kisses down her neck and she felt his capable hands moving seductively down her back and cupping her backside. She strained to get closer to no avail. She felt him pull back just a bit and opened her eyes to see him. He was looking at her with deep, hazy eyes. “Jess, I know this isn't right, and if you just say the word, I'll stop.”

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She should refuse. They were from different worlds and she didn't know how it was all going to end. All she knew for this instant was that she had a need burning in her that had to be satisfied. She knew that Caleb was the only man that could put out the fire flaming in her being. “Don't.” was her soft reply.

He instantly released her, quickly went to his horse and grabbed a blanket from the pack animal. He

returned before she could change her mind. As he put the rough rug on the ground, helped her down. The sun was setting and a beautiful orange glow lit the sky as she looked up at the tall, gorgeous man standing above her. "Caleb," She encouraged him to join her on the cloth covering the dirt.

He didn't hesitate and sat down beside her. He leaned over and placed a tentative kiss on her swollen lips. She wouldn't allow him to back down now. Jessie wrapped her arms around him and increased the intensity of their caress. He didn't seem to need much encouragement as she found him struggling with the buttons on her blouse. Jessie leaned back giving him full access to her shirt. He seemed surprised as he pushed it back off her shoulders to find she was bare beneath. She wasn't a woman with big breasts but they were softly rounded and ready for his touch. His roughened hand felt good as he fondled her nipples.

"Oh, Caleb. Please." She moaned and fell back on the blanket.

He bent down and kissed her breasts with reverence. She arched her back to meet his touch. As she reached up and struggled with the buttons on his shirt, Caleb stopped only for a moment to remove the offending garment. They were soon skin to skin as he leaned on top of her to place frantic kisses on her face, lips, and breasts.

She didn't want him to stop and wanted so much more. "Caleb, please let me take my clothes off." She wasn't shy with him and that surprised her, but Jessie didn't take time to think about the consequences of their actions. He backed off and while she removed the

remains of her clothes, he took the opportunity to take off his own. In seconds, they were laying there face to face, in all their natural glory. She suffered a small tug of consciousness, but before she could act on it, she felt his wonderfully rough cowboy hands on her exposed skin.

“Jess, you’re so beautiful.” He kissed her until she thought she would pass out from ecstasy. As their spirits merged, she realized he was on top of her and she eagerly opened her legs to allow him total access. She heard the soft, ripple of the river and a lonely howl of a coyote in the distance as they soared above it all.

She found her breathing returning slowly to normal as they lay there side by side. Sweat was glistening on her brow and she simply stared at the sky, watching as the dark took over the golden hues. Jessica could see a few stars brave enough to start shining and smiled. It had been absolutely wonderful. This was the man she had been waiting for since Kyle’s death. This was the man she had been destined to meet.

“Jess, are you alright?” His voice seemed to reach her through a fog. She felt his roughened hand on her stomach as he turned to face her.

She smiled and rolled over to place a tender kiss on his lips. “I couldn’t be better, cowboy.” She assured him.

“You’re quite a woman, Jessica Mayfield.” It was the first time since they’d met that he used her full name. It just sealed the intense beauty of this moment.

“I hate to destroy our time, but we really need to get to the Lower Dam. It’s only about a mile away.” He reluctantly got up and started to put his clothes back

on. Caleb handed her things to her and turned away to give her privacy so she could get dressed. He shortly returned with his handkerchief wet from the river. She hadn't moved yet, just simply pulled the rest of the blanket over to cover herself from the cooling, evening air.

"I brought this." He handed the damp cloth to her. He turned away abruptly. "I'll see to the horses." She watched as he walked away.

"That's so thoughtful, Caleb. Thank you." She called after him, hoping to allay his apprehension. She felt wonderful but he was obviously feeling guilty or something.

Nothing was going to ruin this moment for her. She had felt something magical between them and she was sure that Caleb had sensed it too. It was that old west sense of morality that was getting in his way. She quickly cleaned up and put on her clothes. As she picked up the blanket, she heard Caleb walking up behind her.

Jessica felt his arms come around and hug her to him. He nuzzled her neck and she felt her pulse quicken. He didn't speak but instead put her hat back on her head. Jessie turned into him and hugged him tightly. Words escaped her. She wanted to comfort him and convince him that all was going to be fine, but her future in this world loomed ominously ahead of her. She couldn't speak lies.

"Ready?" He broke the silence.

She looked up at him and smiled her agreement. He took her hand in his large one and led her back to the waiting horses. The darkness was now overtaking the

environment and she felt herself getting anxious to get to the Lower Dam. As she broke free and headed to mount Ginger, she felt him tug at her arm. He didn't speak but gently pulled her to his own horse. Carefully and almost reverently, Caleb helped her up on his big steed. He quickly tied Ginger to the pack horse and was soon getting up behind her.

"Let's go, Jess." He whispered in her ear. She nodded and he spurred his horse into action. They made their way slowly up the bank with the other horses following meekly on the path. She snuggled back into his arms and they spent the next hour enjoying the intimate contact on his horse. She felt her desires growing with each jostle and wondered how she was going to keep her mind on the reality of her situation.

It wasn't long before she saw the lights of the small encampment located at the Lower Dam. She had thought Seymour was small, but this little touch of civilization was just a few tents and several small buildings. In the center of it all was the largest structure with the most noise and lights coming from it.

He stopped the horse just short of entering the town and helped her down. "You should get on Ginger. I wouldn't want people to think the wrong thing." His care and concern about her reputation touched the very heart of Jessie. She reached up and placed a kiss on his lips.

"If you keep that up, I'll not be responsible for my actions or your reputation." He gave her a second kiss and helped her up on her horse.

They finished the last few feet and stopped at the front of the saloon. “The Lower Dam Saloon.” Caleb confirmed their destination. “I’m sorry but this is the only place to get a hot meal and find us a room for the night.” He tied up the horses and then took Jessie by the elbow and led her up the wooden steps in through the swinging doors of the saloon. She marveled at the sight before her eyes.

There were at least a dozen men inside the noisy tavern. She observed several ladies in sparkling dresses entertaining their companions. An elderly man played the upright piano with vigor and behind the bar stood a big, burly man pouring alcohol into glasses. At her entrance into the busy room, all activity suddenly ceased. She felt Caleb’s firm hand in the middle of her back and was comforted by his support.

“Caleb!” The bartender hollered at them. “Come on in!”

As they crossed the wooden expanse of floor, Jessie felt all eyes on them. It was obvious that a woman such as herself wasn’t usually seen inside these premises. Funny, she thought to herself. In her time, any woman could enter any bar or restaurant she wanted. How times have changed and how grateful she was for that freedom.

“What’ll you have, Caleb?” The robust man behind the bar asked of her escort. As he pulled a bottle from underneath the bar and uncorked it, the music started and conversation returned to the room. “The usual?”

“Sure, Bob, I’d love a drink.”

“I’d like a drink, too.” Jessie spoke up and addressed the bartender. “Do you have a glass of wine?”

Once again, the conversation level was reduced to nothing but small whispers as everyone in the room waited for Bob’s response.

“Sure, little lady, I have a nice wine for you.” He reached behind the bar and pulled out a dusty bottle. He grabbed a cloth to remove some of the grime before he poured a generous helping of the red liquid into a glass. He put the glass in front of her and held out his hand, “I’m Bob, Bob Brow. This is my place.”

As she took the hand he offered, a touch of kismet coursed through her system. His name struck a chord in her memory. In the material Kari had given her, he was one of the survivors. In fact, she suddenly realized, he was the owner of the safe that had been swept away in the flood with over \$5,000 worth of gold in it. But, the article she read said his saloon was in the town of Seymour, not here in the Lower Dam encampment.

“I feel like I know you, Mr. Brow.” She spoke coyly. “I’m Jessica Mayfield.”

“And I’m sure I’d remember you, Miss Mayfield, but we’ve never met.” He looked at Caleb. “Where have you been keeping this little lady?”

Jessie saw the muscles twitching in Caleb’s jaw. She was sure he was not happy with the attention Bob Brow was giving her. She reached over and patted his hand. “Caleb is taking me to his ranch. We’ve been traveling all day.” She waited for Caleb to expand on the information. He seemed at a loss for words.

Bob looked back and forth at them and then grinned as he saw the look of jealousy cross Caleb's face. "Well, Caleb, heading to the ranch, huh?"

Caleb finally shook his head as though to clear his thoughts and responded. "Yes, we're going to the ranch for a while. Do you have a place for us to stay? We're also hungry. Can we get something to eat?" He downed his beer and waited for Bob to answer.

"I'm sure I could get you a tent." His teasing look indicated he was going to prod Caleb. "Are you wanting one tent or two?" He grinned mischievously.

Time stood still as Jessie waited for his response. She knew what Bob was doing and felt a little apprehension waiting for Caleb's answer. She didn't have to wait long as she watched Caleb lean close to the bartender.

He spoke in a low controlled tone so that only she and Bob could hear. "Miss Mayfield is a lady and I wouldn't want her treated any other way than that. We will have two tents." His tone brooked no room for argument or further teasing from the saloon owner.

Bob stood up and chuckled nervously. "Sure, Caleb. I didn't mean to suggest anything otherwise."

"Then I suggest you apologize to Miss Mayfield."

"Sure, Miss Mayfield, I'm sorry for any offense I may have caused. I'll get your tents ready." He motioned for a young Mexican youth cleaning the floor to come over. He spoke in Spanish and directed him to prepare two tents for his guests.

"Now, if you two will step over to the table in the corner, I'll get a meal prepared for you." He smiled and Jessie could tell the moment had passed.

She grinned back and with Caleb's hand firmly at her back, they stepped to the table at the back of the saloon, away from the crowd. A small, elderly woman came and wiped the table clean, adding silverware and some condiments. She didn't speak to them as she worked fast and efficiently to set the table for their meal.

They were soon left alone. "I'm sorry about Bob's behavior." Caleb apologized.

"That's not necessary. He was just teasing, I'm sure."

"I didn't like the way he was talking to you."

"Caleb, it's really okay. I'm sure he was just being mischievous. Let's not let it spoil our time here." She put her hand over his on the table and squeezed it lightly. "I'm starving, aren't you?" She tried to steer his thoughts away from Bob's behavior.

Just then the older woman came back with a plate for each of them. A freshly grilled steak and beans were on the tin plate. The aroma was wonderful and Jessie realized she was truly hungry. The woman didn't speak but placed a basket of freshly made biscuits on the table between them.

"Thank you," Jessie tried to show her gratitude. "Gracias." She tried again in Spanish. This brought a small smile from the careworn face of the woman. They both dug into the hearty fare placed in front of them. As soon as they finished, Bob came up and grinned.

"Looks like you were starving."

"It was wonderful, Bob. Thank you for taking care of us." Jessie smiled gratefully.

“Yeah, thanks.” Caleb’s gratitude was less enthusiastic.

“I’ve got two tents prepared for you. I’ll have Jose show you to them when you’re ready.”

Caleb looked to Jessie as she stifled a small yawn. “I think Jess is ready now. I’ll walk over with her and make sure everything is okay.” He rose and put his hat back on his head.

As Jessica got up, she felt his steady hand in the small of her back. Caleb gently pressed her into moving towards the door. Before exiting, she turned and spoke to Bob, “Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“Anytime, Miss Mayfield. You’re always welcome here.”

Jose led the way as Caleb and Jessie walked along the rough path behind the saloon. They came to a large canvas tent and he opened the flap to allow entry. With a quick bow and a grin, the young man took his leave. They stepped in and Caleb went over to the lantern glowing softly in the enclosed area.

“It’s not very fancy, but it’ll keep the weather out.”

“It’s fine. I’m tired enough to sleep on the hard ground.” She sat down on the small cot and started to remove her boots.

“I’ll leave you then.” Caleb started toward the entry.

“Caleb,” Her voice was hesitant but enough to stop him. “Are you alright?”

“Jess, I’m fine. Like you, I’m tired and we both need to get some sleep. We have the last leg to get to the ranch tomorrow.” He grinned to try and convince her with a look that all was well. “Sleep tight.” He went out

the flap in the tent and she immediately felt the void left by his lack of presence.

She looked around at the basic setting she was in and felt the tears welling up in her eyes. What is wrong with me? What did I expect? He's trying to protect my reputation. Damn this time period and its old fashioned views. She fell back on her cot and curled up with the blanket. In just a few moments, the tent flap moved and Caleb swiftly entered the space.

"Damn you and your beautiful eyes!" He strode over and as she rose to a sitting position, he grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. His lips met hers in an impatient embrace. The kiss deepened and she gave in to the intensity surrounding them.

He broke off the kiss but hugged her to his tall, muscular frame. "Jess, I want to stay, but I don't want anyone to think badly of you. Please try to understand."

She answered, her reply muffled into his chest. "I want you to stay, Caleb, but I understand your need to protect me. Thank you for that." She reached up and placed another searing kiss on his waiting lips.

"You're making it hard for me to leave, Jess." His voice was husky with wanting.

They eventually separated and she looked up into his wonderful, caring eyes. "You better go. If you don't, I might not care about what people think."

"I'll see you in the morning. I'll be close, so you'll be safe." He hesitated before adding, "Do you want me to leave a gun with you?"

This alarmed her immediately and she reacted with shocked concern. “Caleb, do you think I’m in danger here?”

He paused, “Jess, the only danger is the fact that you’re a beautiful woman in a place where women are scarce.” He held his ground even though his heart wanted to hold her tight. “I would never let anything happen to you. You have to believe that.”

She relented, “Caleb, I know you and I know you’d protect me.” She wanted to reassure him. “I’ll be fine. I don’t need a gun. Go and I’ll see you in the morning.” She went to his side and placed a small kiss on his cheek.

Reluctantly, Caleb finally left the tent. She secured the flap by tying the cords shut. Jessica chuckled as she thought of how little security those ties would offer should anyone really want to get in to her tent. His chivalry was admirable but misplaced, she contemplated. I can take care of myself she thought with more confidence than she really felt.

Soon Jessica was asleep totally unaware that Caleb was sleeping on the cold, hard ground just a few feet from the front of her tent.



Seven

A small clap of thunder woke the sleeping woman and she jumped up in a frenzy. She opened the flap of the tent and was disappointed to see the sky was dark with rumbling clouds. She looked around her surroundings and found a familiar figure walking towards her. Her heart beat deeply in her chest as she looked upon the handsome countenance of her escort. Caleb pulled his hat down on his head to keep it firmly where it belonged as the wind whipped round.

“I’m afraid we’re in for more bad weather.” He spoke as Jessie stepped aside to allow Caleb access to the tent. “Bundle up and put on your slicker. The rain isn’t far behind.”

She hurried to pull on her boots and reached for the pack to get her slicker and hat. “Can we wait it out?”

“I wish we could. We need to get to the ranch before they send out a search party for me. I’ve been gone a lot longer than originally planned.”

“Caleb,” she suddenly realized that her appearance in his life had delayed his own plans. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t stop to think. I’ve kept you long enough.”

“Jess, I stayed because I wanted to.” He came and pulled her into his arms. “I wouldn’t have missed this for anything. Now get ready and we’ll get on the trail.”

After his quick touch on her lips, she scurried about gathering up her things and soon she was leaving the tent all ready for a rough ride. Caleb was close by with the horses, waiting for her to appear. He smiled weakly but came forward with the reigns to Ginger in his hand. “Ready?”

Just at that moment, another thunderous sound cracked above their heads. She jumped and grabbed for him. “Oh, this is not going to be fun.” She turned and mounted her horse.

Caleb pulled himself astride his own horse and they were soon on their way. The wind was whipping around them but so far no rain had started. She was grateful for that, but shivered as the cold weather permeated her clothes. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a hot cup of coffee, she thought to herself as Caleb lead them out of the Lower Dam settlement. The distance between them coupled with the bad weather prevented any conversation, so Jessie entertained herself with words to her horse.

“Ginger, what am I going to do? I mean, I’m stuck in a century I don’t belong in and I’m very much attracted to a man I can’t have. It’s very cold and I wish I had one of my jeeps with a heater instead of you. Nothing personal you understand.” She patted her horse gently.

On one side of their trail the high cliffs rose far above her head, but on the other side the landscape was virtually flat with scrub trees and cactus. In

between the river flowed. Jessie caught herself wondering how deep the Hassayampa was at this point. It didn't appear all that dangerous but then she'd never seen this river running at all let alone on a regular basis.

They rode for several hours before Caleb halted and slid down from his horse. He tied his horse and the pack horse to a Palo Verde tree and came back to help Jessie down from Ginger.

"We need a break. I have some biscuits. It's not much, Jess, but it'll have to do for now." He waited for her reaction as she remained in the saddle of her horse.

She tried to smile but felt that her attempt wasn't successful. "Thanks, Caleb. I am ready to rest a bit." She dismounted slowly and stretched her tired aching muscles. The wind was getting stronger and she felt the dampness in the air as she strode over to the nearest available rock. Once there, she sat down and eagerly took the biscuit Caleb offered.

Caleb didn't sit but instead towered over her as he ate his dry fare. He stared at the darkening sky. "Jess, I have some more bad news. It's going to start raining soon and we need to keep going. Can you make it?" He waited for her answer.

"Caleb, you're so kind to worry. I'll try not to be a bother for you any more than I already have." She looked away. Jessie felt a strong urge to share her secret with him. He'd been so great, taking care of her since she got bucked off her horse.

“Caleb, I need to tell you something.” She was pensive. How do I start this conversation? How in the world do I tell him that I’m from the future?

He sat on the rock beside her and took her hand. Slowly he rolled her wrist over to look at the tattoo emblazoned on her delicate skin. “Jess, I know we shouldn’t have done what we did, but it can’t be undone.” He struggled with his words as he gently ran his thumb over the words on her wrist. “I’ll make it right. We’ll get married as soon as we get to the ranch. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He finally looked her in the eyes and saw the shock showing on her face.

“Married! Caleb, we can’t do that! I, I...” She fell silent.

“Of course we can. I know that we care for each other and I want to make an honorable woman out of you.” He was completely taken aback at her reaction. “I know I’ll never be your ‘forever love’ but Jess I’ll be a good husband and I’ll take good care of you.” His words and the hurt expression on his face showed how vulnerable he was at this moment. He’d never expected her to turn him down.

“Caleb, please let me explain. I’m not from here. You don’t know anything about me. There’s something very important I have to tell you.” She stood up and turned to face him. At that very moment, a large crack of thunder sounded overhead and she nearly jumped out of her skin. The sudden pouring of cold, sleeting rain made both of them scramble for the protection of a nearby tree.

“Jess, this will have to wait, we need to get going.”

“In this?” She exclaimed with surprise. “Caleb, we’ll be soaked.”

He went to the horses and grabbed their reins before they could bolt. “Jess, hurry!”

His tone brooked no time for argument and she scurried over to Ginger and mounted. Jessie urged her horse to keep up with Caleb’s larger animal. They weren’t at a full gallop but were definitely moving much faster than they had before. She noticed the landscape changing on the north side of the river. The cliffs were starting to form and soon they headed into a canyon- like countryside. There was still a distinct trail they were following but she could see the rain water starting to muddy up the path ahead of them.

Jessie kept her head down to keep the rain from hitting her directly in the face. The slicker was keeping the downpour from completely soaking her clothing but she could feel the dampness seeping into her blouse and gauchos. She had no idea how far they still had to go or if they were going all the way to the ranch. All she knew is that she would never again take for granted her car or modern transportation. Her bottom hurt, her shoulders ached and she was now soaked with a chill was settling into her bones.

The trail they followed led them higher and higher up the mountain side. Just when she thought she couldn’t go any further, the rain seemed to subside. She could see a clearing of blue sky in the far distance and Jessie felt a sense of hope coming over her. She looked at the tall man riding ahead and saw that he was slowing down.

He allowed her to catch up and when she got by his side, spoke, “Jess, you did great! I think the rain is stopping and maybe we can have a dryer trip to the ranch. Are you alright?”

Words escaped her as she stared at the sight before them. They had climbed the altitude and were on top of a plateau with a lake spreading on the landscape. Her amazement was beyond words. They rode a few yards further and were soon traveling parallel with the shoreline.

“Is this the lake?”

“Sure is,” was his ready reply. “That’s the Walnut Grove Dam and this is the lake behind it.”

“It really exists,” were her only words as she stared in wonder.

“Of course. They’ve worked really hard on creating this lake. It will support all the fields and mines down below by supplying all the water necessary for their operations.” He seemed proud of the accomplishment before their eyes.

“I’ve never seen this before.” She seemed at a loss for words as she stared at the full body of water before them. She shivered at the thought of that water barreling down the canyons below wiping out any civilization in its way. What am I going to do? I feel as if the entire weight of the world is on my shoulders.

“Jess, are you alright?”

“I’m not sure, Caleb.” She was at a loss for words.

He came close enough to touch her. His skills at containing his horse were pushed to the max as they stood side by side. “Jess, we’ll be there in just a few hours. A warm house, a nice hot bath and a

comfortable bed will make things seem better. Can you make it?"

She took a deep, cleansing breath and looked him straight in the eye. His hat covered the most of those beautiful eyes, but she could hear the sincerity and warmth in his promise. He was such an honorable man, such a caring man and she felt secure in his words.

She leaned over and placed a tender kiss on his waiting lips. Their kiss was warm in spite of their surroundings. Her feelings for this kind, strong man were growing with each interaction. For now, she wouldn't allow herself to think beyond today.

He grinned that contagious smile and spurred their horses to move forward. She felt an instant regret at the loss of his touch, but smiled as she knew they would soon be in the comfort of his family's ranch.



Eight

“Do you think you can make it?” He prodded her as he stopped once more. The sun was finally showing through the scattered clouds above them and the air was crisp and breezy.

“How much further, Caleb?”

“Just a few more miles, Jess. I promise you’ll get a hot bath, dry clothes and a warm stove to sit by.” He stared at the disheveled woman sitting astride her horse.

“Let’s get there, cowboy. I can’t wait for that hot bath you promised me.” She made a weak attempt to smile. He could see how tired she was as he spurred his horse into action. The scenery was changing slowly as they left the lake behind. The leaves from the cottonwood trees shimmered in the breeze as they headed along the plateau. She admired the mountains surrounding their path and was grateful that the rain had finally subsided. She tried to ignore the dampness of her clothes and the pain in her bottom as the horses seemed to speed up on their own.

“Look,” He pointed to a herd of cattle grazing on the tall grasses. “That’s the herd we’ll be moving down south in a few weeks. That’s why I was there preparing

the bunkhouse.” He waved to a cowhand on the other side of the herd. The cowboy raised his hat in response, but didn’t leave his post.

Suddenly in the distance, she could see the formation of several buildings. Her spirits rose as she could make out the huge frame of a barn, and just beyond that was a sprawling ranch house. There was more activity as they rode closer. She could see people working in the corrals. The ground was not dusty due to the recent rain and for this she was grateful. Her body ached to get down from her horse and she longed for a good, hot soaking in the bathtub.

They rode through an archway indicating they’d reached their destination. The Lazy Mc Ranch sign greeted them overhead. As they neared the larger barn, a voice pierced the silence.

“Caleb!” An older version of the man riding beside her stopped what he was doing and scaled the corral.

“Nephew, it’s so good to see you! We were beginning to think something happened to you!” As he turned his head to lock eyes with Jessie, his face took on a grin she’d seen on Caleb’s own face. “It appears something did happen to you!”

“Uncle Ben, this is Jessica Mayfield.” He made the introductions casually as he dismounted.

Ben came over the railing and went to greet Jessica. Caleb was just helping her down from her horse when she stumbled and nearly fell.

“Jess, are you okay?” Caleb’s arms were immediately around her as he helped her steady herself. These motions were not lost on the older

cowboy observing the intimate moves between the two.

Jessie was aware of the other man's observation and straightened to her full height. "I'm fine, Caleb. I'm just a little tired, that's all." She freed herself from his hold and put her hand out to Ben. "Great to meet you."

Ben took the hand she offered as he stared in her eyes. "It's good to meet you, Miss Mayfield. Welcome to the Lazy Mc Ranch."

"Uncle Ben, Jessie is staying for the round up party. Have the preparations been going alright? Has mother missed my help?" The last question had a mischievous tone to it.

"You know she can always find things for all of us to do. With your dad up on the north range, she's hard pressed for someone to do all the work. But to answer your question, nephew, she has definitely missed your help."

"Well, then, it's time to face the music." Caleb steered Jessie towards the main house. He waved his hand at his uncle.

"Caleb, is your mother going to be alright with me coming here?" Her nervousness was showing.

"Jess, she's going to love having another woman in the house." He kept gently pushing her towards the big house.

"Caleb, be serious. She knows nothing about me and wasn't expecting me to be with you. I'm not so sure this was a good idea."

He stopped before they reached the wrap-around porch and turned to face Jessica. “Jess, Ma is going to love you as I do.”

His words stopped her in her tracks. They hadn’t spoken any words of love to each other and she wasn’t sure she was prepared to return the favor. This all had to be one of the main differences between the sexes in their eras, she thought to herself. Casual sex, even though she hadn’t participated, in her time was not a common event in this cowboy’s world. The turbulence she was feeling must have shown on her face as Caleb pulled her to him in a huge hug.

“Jess, I know it’s sudden and this may not be the right time, but you need to know that I love you. I think I fell in love the minute I saw you in the dirt with that wound on your head.” He kissed her forehead and continued to hold her gently in his strong arms.

“Caleb, for now, let’s keep this to ourselves.” She felt him tense as her words tumbled out. “I am out of my element here. This is your world and I’m very confused.” She pulled back to look into those soulful eyes. “I care for you deeply, but for now, let’s not say anything to your family. Please?” Her voice cracked with emotion as she pleaded with him.

Had it really only been days since she’d come to this time and place? She reflected on the fact that she’d only been here for a short time, but she felt herself adjusting to the ways of living in the old west and that frightened her. What did she want? Did she want to get back to her time? Could she? She looked at the handsome man standing in front of her and her heart lurched. Could she really leave this gentle, loving man?

Did she want to go through the heartbreak of losing someone she loved? Jessica pushed those words of love aside as they frightened her to death.

His attempt at a smile pulled at her heart. “Come, let’s get you that hot bath I promised.” As soon as they stepped onto the wooden porch, she heard a woman’s voice call from within the house.

“Caleb Joseph McCaslin! Is that you?” A small woman rushed through the front door and grabbed him in an all-encompassing hug. “Where have you been? We were worried half to death!” It was at that moment, she realized that Jessica was standing meekly behind her son.

“Oh, I see the reason for your delay.” She pulled back from her son and with a smile that radiated all the way to her eyes, introduced herself. “Hello, I’m Mary McCaslin. Welcome to our home.”

Jessica felt the words stick in her throat. This was all too much and suddenly she felt herself spinning and the world going dark.

A short time later, she first heard a soft voice talking soothing words of comfort. She then felt a cool, damp cloth on her forehead and tried to open her eyes.

“There, there,” the voice repeated again. “You’ve had a bad time young lady. Just relax.”

As Jessica focused her eyes, she found herself looking into the same blue eyes as her son. Mary was sitting on the edge of the bed, wiping gently at her forehead.

“You’re just plain ole’ tired, young lady. Caleb told me all you two have gone through. Just rest and we’ll

get the tub full of hot water and let you get a good soaking.”

Tears welled up and Jessica turned her head away. “You must think I’m a mess. I’m so sorry I kept Caleb from getting home sooner.” She let the tears fall freely down her cheeks.

“Shush. My boy is just fine and I’m glad he was there to help you.” She kept up with the soothing cloth on Jessica’s forehead. “I’ve sent for the healer to come and check out that bump on your head. Maybe you need some attention.”

With that said, Jessica turned her head to look at Mary. “The healer?”

“Yes, we don’t have a doctor way out here but there’s a native woman that we all depend on. She’s a healer for her tribe and she often comes to help with situations like this.”

Through her tears and with broken words, Jessie spoke softly to the caring woman sitting beside the bed. “I’m not this.” She tried again, “I haven’t been a weepy woman since... well, in a long time.” She hesitated talking about her past life with Caleb’s mother.

Mary patted her hand and smiled. “Caleb has talked of your strength and I’m sure that it’s just the miles and your weakened state that has brought on your tears. Please just rest and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jessie was immediately tempted to beg her to stay, but Mary was out of the room before she could act on her impulse. She looked around at the room and saw the same tender touches of Caleb’s mother. The

chenille bedspread, the lace curtains and the pink color on the walls was so feminine and instantly comforting.

I feel as lost as when Kyle was taken from me. The tears flowed once again and Jessie felt powerless to stop them. He was the center of my life then and I don't know how I coped with his death. Now I'm in a place I don't belong and I'm falling in love with a man I can't have! What am I going to do? She pressed her face to the pillow and let her emotions flow.

"Jess," she heard Caleb's soft tone. The bed sank as he sat on the side and reached to cuddle her in his hold. "Please, don't cry. We're safe and sound. I have them heating bath water if you're up to it. It might make you feel better." His voice was soothing but it only added to her distress.

"Oh, Caleb, if only I could make you understand." Her voice broke as she tried to speak between sobs.

"Ma has sent word for the healer to come and help. She's a kind woman from the local tribe – Yavapai. You'll feel better after she visits." He placed a soothing kiss on her forehead.

Jessie looked up and faced him. "Caleb, I'm only bringing bad news to you and your family."

"Shush, I won't hear it. You are the best thing to happen to me in a very long time." His strong, worn hands cradled her face and she looked into those beautiful eyes as he lowered his head. Jessica didn't fight, she wanted his kiss too badly.

There was a knock on the door and Caleb released his hold on her and answered. "Come in." A weather worn woman stood in the doorway and spoke in broken English, "The bath is ready, señor."

“Do you feel up to it?”

She hesitated for a moment, sighed and agreed to the bath. It won't help, she thought to herself. Nothing can help. This whole thing is going to end badly. A horrible flood will wipe out their world and I can't change it. Overwhelming grief consumed her being. What am I to do?

“Come on, let's get you to your bath. You'll feel better when you're all clean and rested.” He encouraged her to get up and move.

“Okay,” she agreed meekly. She allowed Caleb to help her move across the room and down the hall to a smaller room. In the middle was a huge copper tub filled with steaming water. It did look enticing.

Maybe, she thought, with a bath and a nap, I can think of some way to help these people. The room was glowing from the oil lamps scattered about. The windows were covered with dark curtains to allow her complete privacy.

“This looks wonderful, Caleb. I think it'll help.” She turned to him. Their eyes met and she lost herself in their locked glance. He shut the door tight behind himself and came slowly across the room to stand before her.

“I'll go if you want.”

Her voice was lost. She wanted the comfort and closeness he offered. Jessica knew she should decline, but the trauma of her being here in this time, this place, didn't allow for any discussion.

Slowly and carefully, he helped her remove her clothes. She then did the same for him. As they stood there in their newborn glory, she waited for the spell to

break. But, instead, he leaned closer and lifted her in his strong arms. Gently he placed her in the huge tub. She felt the warmth of the water surround her body. Slowly he lowered his own body into the bathtub. He turned her around and put her back to his front. With deliberate motions, he used the cloth to slowly and gently bathe her in the warm water.

She felt the tension ease from her body. This was magnificent! She lowered her head and allowed him to drip the warm water down her neck onto her breasts. Never in all her days, had she experienced such a sensual moment. Wanting to give him the same pleasure, she turned and took the cloth from his hands.

Leisurely and with the same tender ministrations, she dipped the cloth into the warm water and ran it down his chest. She heard him gasp as her hand reached nearer to his manhood. It was a heady sensation to know that she had such power over him. But then, didn't he possess the same power?

"You're beautiful. I've never been so bewitched." His voice was ragged with desire.

"What about your mother? Won't she be shocked?"

"My mother is a wise woman. She could tell that I love you. She wouldn't question the ways of love."

He took the cloth and dipped it once again into the water and then allowed it to run over the top of her head. She gasped as the warmth flowed down her face. He reached for the bar of lye soap on the stand next to the tub. He slowly rubbed some into her hair. He dipped the cloth into the bucket beside the tub and

allowed the fresh water to rinse the soap from her head.

“That didn’t hurt your wound, did it?” He gently touched the place where he put in the stitches.

With everything else she had been experiencing, she had almost forgotten the bump to her head. Jessica shook her head to indicate that her injury was the last thing on her mind right now.

Jessie wanted to do the same for him. She treated Caleb to her tender caresses as she allowed the soap to drip down his smiling face.

Soon, the water was cooling and he spoke tenderly to his lady love. “Let’s get out and dry off. I had ma bring you a gown and robe to put on.”

His thoughtfulness was almost her undoing. “I don’t deserve such kindness, Caleb. You’ve taken such good care of me.” Her voice broke.

“Nonsense.” His words were simple, but she understood the message he was sending.

He reached for a towel and started to rub the moisture from her heated skin. His delicate tenderness allowed her to completely relax. She took the towel from him and treated him with the same kindness. She admired his lean, muscled frame as she wiped at his damp skin.

“You’re so beautiful.” Her voice was soft as she spoke.

His laughter was unexpected. She looked up into those wonderful, blue eyes. He bent his head and kissed her waiting lips tenderly. “Men aren’t supposed to be beautiful.”

“But you are!” She protested.

“Come on, let’s get you back to your room.” He bundled her into the gown and robe and wrapped himself in a big burly robe as well. They quietly walked back down the hallway to her room.

The sun was setting now and the lamps had been turned on giving a soft glow to the entire room. She went to the bed and sat down as she used the towel to rub the moisture from her locks. Her naturally curly hair would eventually do its own thing, but she felt nervous and needed something to do with her hands.

“Jess, I think you need to sleep. I won’t stay.” His voice was near but she hesitated looking at him.

“Look at me.”

She slowly raised her head to meet his gaze. “I’m confused, Caleb. I want you, but I think it wouldn’t be proper.”

“Jess, I don’t want to do anything to distress you. My family can see that I’m infatuated with you and they respect my feelings.” He pulled her up to him and hugged her tightly. “Just rest, I’ll be just down the hall, in case you need me.” He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “We can talk tomorrow when you’ve rested.”

“Wait, Caleb,” she reached for his arm. “It’s still early and I don’t want to be alone. Please stay for a bit.”

He turned and the look on his face told her that he wanted to stay. “Jess...”

The knock on the door interrupted anything he was going to say. Caleb stood up and took a few steps away from the bed before answering. “Come in.”

His mother shyly opened the door and stuck her head into the room. "Caleb, Pakri is here. Is Jessica up to seeing her?"

He looked to the woman now sitting up in bed. The expression on her face showed her feelings of embarrassment at being caught in their robes.

Caleb went to the door and stepped in the hallway. She could hear their muffled voices but couldn't make out the words. This was getting worse, not better, she thought.

Shortly, Caleb came back into the room. "I told ma to give you a few minutes and then she'll bring Pakri to see you. You can stay in your robe and gown if you want. I'll leave you to your privacy."

"Oh, what she must think of me." Jessica moaned.

"Listen, Jess, my ma is not that type of a person. She knows that I love you." He saw the look of surprise on her face. "I know you didn't want me to say anything, but I didn't have to. Jess, it's going to be alright."

He sat down once again on the side of the bed. "Jess?"

"Oh, Caleb, it's such a mess. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have come to your ranch." She leaned into him.

He put his arms around her shoulders and drew her closer. "Nothing is further from the truth. Jess, I am so glad that you're here. Everything is going to be fine."

"I don't see how."

"Are you ready to see Pakri? Maybe she'll help. She's a great healer and we've depended on her help many times before."

“I don’t think she’ll be able to help me. My problem is too deep.” Jessie shook her head.

“Come on, let’s get you in that chair. I’ll go and get dressed while you meet with her.” He left the room as soon as Jessica was sitting in the settee by the window.

Not so long after he went, there was a soft knock at the door and a small, slender woman walked in the room. Her skin was dark and weatherworn. The rawhide dress she wore was adorned with beads. Jessica found it difficult to judge her age as her face was lined with wrinkles. She felt a strange sensation invading her being as the woman moved soundlessly further into the room.

“Hello.” Jessica’s voice came out hesitantly. She looked into the eyes of Pakri as she came to stand in front of her.

“You are the marked one!” Her words were spoken with reverence. As she spoke the words, she lifted Jessica’s left wrist to reveal the tattoo. With slow, deliberate strokes, Pakri ran her hand over the words emblazoned on the delicate wrist.



Nine

Jessica stammered her response, “I’m not sure what you mean.” Pakri was still holding her wrist.

“The storyteller has spoken words of you.” Pakri reluctantly let go. She reached up and touched the wound on the back of her head. “Does it still hurt?”

Jessica shook her head slightly. “Caleb did a good job with the stitches.”

“He is with honor. He is a good man.” Pakri continued her examination of Jessica. “Was your journey difficult?”

For an instant, Jessica wasn’t sure which journey Pakri was talking about, but decided that she meant the trip from Seymour.

“The weather didn’t cooperate, but we finally made it.” She replied. Her words lacked the confidence she tried to portray.

Pakri rolled open the leather pack she was holding and laid some strange things out on the nightstand. She reached for a shiny stone and carefully placed it in Jessica’s hand. “Hold this.” Those were her simple words with no further explanation coming. Jessie took the smooth stone into her palm and wrapped her fingers around it.

Pakri then took a sage stick from her pouch and placed it in a large shell to light. Once lit, she blew out the flame and then began moving about the room, spreading the fragrance. She was softly chanting under her breath.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to clean the room.” Pakri continued around the small space, waving the sage. Her voice was soothing and Jessica found herself relaxing. She rested her head back onto the cushion from the lounge chair and watched silently as Pakri moved about the room.

Soon Pakri came to stand by the lounge, her soothing voice was helping Jessica to relax even more. A calming peace floated down from the soft words the native woman was chanting. The scent of the sage was also drifting around her and added to her serene moment. She felt Pakri move away and felt a small sense of panic, but the older woman was back before Jessica could react. She closed her eyes and allowed the feeling of peace to invade her being.

She felt Pakri’s hand reach to caress the now drying curls on her head. Her strong, worn hands reached to the wound on the back. “Are you in pain?” Her quiet words asked.

“Not really.” Jessica opened her eyes to look straight into the deep, brown eyes of the healer. “I have pain that isn’t caused by that bump on my head.”

“I know.”

“Can you help me?” She almost held her breath as she waited for Pakri to respond. When the older woman didn’t reply, Jessica pressed further. “Please tell me the tale of The Marked One.”

Pakri pulled a chair up to the side of lounge and reached to hold Jessica's hand in her two. She stroked over the tattoo emblazoned on Jessica's wrist before speaking. Finally her soft words came.

"Our people have used stories to tell of great events. These happenings are part of our past and part of our future. They help the Spiritual One guide us in making decisions that will benefit our people. They also help us do the thing that will save us from danger." She stopped talking and Jessica waited with great patience for Pakri to continue.

"The Marked One," she stared at the tattoo on Jessica's wrist as she went on. "The Marked One has been sent by the Spiritual One to prepare us for the flood."

With those words spoken aloud, Jessica gasped. "You know!"

Pakri finally looked up and gazed into the eyes of the startled woman. She shook her head in affirmation.

"What should I do?" Jessica's soft question floated between them.

"You have been chosen because you possess wisdom and when the time comes, you will know what you should do."

"That doesn't help!" There was anguish in her voice as she went on, "If I speak up, will that change the future? Will it save the people I have come to know or endanger them further?"

Before Pakri could respond, Jessica realized that they weren't alone. She looked up to see Caleb standing in the doorway. Immediately, the elderly woman got up and started gathering her things.

“Wait, Pakri, don’t go.” Jessica pleaded.

The medicine woman looked from her to Caleb and back again, shook her head and started to leave the room.

“Pakri, you don’t have to leave.” Caleb finally spoke.

“I must go.” She hesitated but instead of leaving the room immediately, came back to stand in front of Jessica. Pakri took Jessica’s hand in hers once again and looked directly into her eyes. “Hold onto this stone. It will soothe you. It will help you when you need to decide.” She indicated the smooth, round crystal that was still cradled in Jessica’s hand. With that said, Pakri bowed slightly to both Caleb and Jessica and silently left them.

There was a stunned quietness between them as Caleb slowly entered. He didn’t sit, but instead walked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. When he still didn’t say a word, Jessica finally spoke.

“Caleb,” She took a steadying breath before continuing. “Caleb, how much did you hear?”

With his back to her she could see the tension in his being. He seemed to be trying to come to grips with the information from Pakri before facing her. When he turned to finally look at her, Jessica could see the torment in his features. In slow, deliberate strides he came across the room to sit down and occupy the chair that Pakri had just vacated.

“I heard her call you the Marked One. I knew that something was very different about you when I found you that day. I have heard the legends from Pakri since I was a child.” He hesitated as though struggling with his thoughts before continuing. “I need time to adjust

to this. I care deeply for you, Jess. You know that I wouldn't hurt you. For now, let's just help Ma get ready for the neighbors and the party." He didn't touch her but she felt his misery just the same.

"Caleb, I tried to tell you. I tried to let you know that..."

He interrupted her abruptly and stood up. "Jess, please just get some rest. We'll talk more tomorrow." With a second thought to his actions, he bent down and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "Get some sleep, Jess. Please." He tried to soften his voice.

After he left, she got up and walked to the window. The sun had set and nightfall surrounded the ranch. She could hear a few sounds of the animals in their pens, but for the most part all was silent. She took a deep, steadying breath and let the lace curtain fall back in place.

One by one, she blew the oil lamps out until her bedroom was in complete darkness. She lowered herself onto the bed and sat on the side of the soft, fluffy mattress. As she removed her robe, Jessica allowed her thoughts to stray. She knew the news that Caleb overheard was overwhelming for him. She could relate to the shock he was feeling. Was it really only a few days since she herself had to process that information?

She lay back on the feather pillow and tried to relax. I need to keep my head straight, she thought. I need to help him get through this. When she thought she wouldn't fall asleep, she soon was in deep slumber.

Caleb stood behind her closed door. What had just happened? If Pakri hadn't been there, he would think

Jessica was losing her mind. I need to talk with Pakri, he thought suddenly. He hurried down to the kitchen where he knew Pakri would be having a quiet visit with his mother.

Upon coming into the kitchen, he saw Pakri and his mother enjoying a cup of coffee. They were talking like the two old friends that they were. As soon as his mother saw him, she spoke. "Son, come and join us."

Pakri smiled and took a sip of the hot brew in front of her. The atmosphere in the large room was one of warmth and friendliness. Caleb hesitated but joined the two ladies after his mother put a fresh cup of coffee on the table.

"How's Jessica?" His mother inquired.

"She's resting. She's been through a lot." He looked at Pakri for confirmation.

Pakri spoke quietly. "She is a strong woman."

His mother watched the exchange between her son and the tribal healer. She addressed her son, "Caleb, are things alright with Jessica?"

"Jess will be fine, ma. I think she just needs to rest in a comfortable bed." He shuffled in his chair, his discomfort showing in his inability to look his mother directly in the eyes.

"We will have our friends and neighbors arriving tomorrow for the festivities. Will you be able to help me?"

"Of course, ma. You know I am always willing and eager to help you." He mocked his enthusiasm.

Mary laughed and stood up. "I'm going to bed. Pakri, thank you for your help with Jessica. You will come tomorrow and stay for the party?"

“Yes, I would be honored.” Pakri stood up to leave.

Caleb watched his mother leave the room and turned to the older tribal woman. “Pakri, could I ask some questions?”

With a short nod of her head, Caleb continued. “Is Jessica okay?”

All he got was another nod of her head.

“Is she the Marked One?” His voice was a mere whisper.

Again, the tribal healer nodded her head in affirmation.

“Pakri, you’ve got to help me here. I have a lot of questions.” His voice was strained.

“Young Caleb, I can only tell you that you and she will decide what is best. I cannot help.” She rose and started to the door. “There is a reason for all of this and I do not have the answers. You will have to find them for yourself.” She opened the door and left, leaving a stunned Caleb standing in the middle of the kitchen.

With a huge sigh of exasperation, Caleb went through the door to the mud room and grabbed his hat. He slammed the door and stomped to the corral. As soon as he had saddled his horse, he shot off in the dark. The wind was whipping around and a light drizzle fell on his dark form, but Caleb had a worse storm brewing inside. He rode toward an unknown destination, but soon realized he was heading for his Uncle Ben’s place. As he got closer to his uncle’s spread, he could see somebody coming from the barn.

“Nephew! What’s wrong?” His uncle addressed the harried man. The older man rested his hands on the

corral fence and cocked his hat back on his head. He waited patiently for Caleb's response.

Caleb stayed on his mount and took his time to answer. "Uncle..." He stopped abruptly.

"Well, spit it out, nephew! It can't be all that bad."

Caleb took a deep, cleansing breath and dismounted. "Uncle, it's Jessica."

Before he could continue, his uncle interrupted with a gruff chuckle. "I could tell that one has you lassoed."

"It's not just that, she's..." He stopped his words and looked directly at the older man. What do I say? Would he believe what I'm already thinking? Would it affect Jessica if he shared her secret?

"Boy, you just gotta love 'em and let nature take its course." He patted the younger man on his back. "Come on in the house and we'll have some pie. I know Hannah's been baking all day for the round up and I'm sure she'll let us have a piece."

The two men ambled towards the ranch house. Once in the back door, they removed their hats and dusted off their boots. It was the same ritual each day as they headed into their homes. The smell of fresh baked pies greeted them as they went into the warm kitchen. Hannah and several ladies were there busily stirring pots on the stove.

Hannah immediately wiped her hands on her apron and came over to give Caleb a huge hug. "It's so good to see you! We were all starting to get worried."

His uncle went right to the table and sat down. "He brought a woman with him."

"Oh, that's why you were late." His aunt's eyes twinkled.

Uncle Ben spoke up. “Hannah, how about a piece of pie?”

“Of course,” She went right to the cooling pies and cut a huge slice for each of them. She brought coffee and pie and set it before the two men.

“Is she staying for the party?” She wanted to ask so much more but refrained.

“Yes, Aunt Hannah, she’s staying at the ranch. I found her injured near the old wrangler’s cabin. I had to put some stitches in her head.” Caleb shuffled nervously in his chair. “She doesn’t have anyone.”

“My, oh, my. What in the world was she doing out by herself?”

“She lost her husband years ago. I think she was trying to run their ranch by herself.” He hated not being truthful with his family, but suddenly felt a need to keep Jessica’s secret. “Her name is Jessica Mayfield; she’s from closer to Phoenix.”

“She must be a strong woman to be ranching all by herself.” Hannah rose to go and stir something on the stove.

Caleb ate his pie in silence, finished his coffee, and rose to leave. “I should get back to the ranch. If Dad doesn’t make it back in the morning, there’ll be tons of work for me.”

Uncle Ben and his wife exchanged knowing glances but did nothing to stop their nephew. He came and gave his aunt a kiss on the cheek and shook his uncle’s hand before leaving the warm, loving room.

Caleb rode his horse at a more leisurely pace as he headed back to the homestead. He looked at the now clear sky and listened to the silence of the range. Only

a few noises drifted on the still air and his trip was accomplished in a short time.

After hanging his hat in the mud room and removing his cowboy boots, Caleb made the silent trip up the back stairs. He stopped outside Jessica's room and stood there for just a few moments. His heart ached for her, his body yearned to lie against hers, but he hesitated. Finally, he opened the door to her room. It was in complete darkness and he slowly made his way to the side of her bed. He came to stand beside her bed and watched as she lay there.

"Caleb?" She sensed his presence. He started to turn and go, but the longing in her words stopped him in his tracks. "Caleb, please don't go."

"Jess, you need your sleep. We've got lots to do tomorrow to help Ma." He tried to be logical and not allow his emotions to rule his actions, but the yearning in her voice allowed his heart to overrule his mind. He sat down on the side of her bed. She reached for him and he turned to cuddle her in his arms.

"Caleb, are we going to be alright?" Her tiny voice pierced his heart.

"Jess, we are going to be fine." He hoped his small lie would appease her for the night. They both needed time to absorb all of what they both knew. He soon felt her falling back to sleep, but was reluctant to leave just yet.

She heard the rooster crowing and Jessica rolled over to be greeted by the morning sun streaming through her bedroom windows. As the sleep cleared from her head, she turned to see the indent left by Caleb on the side of her bed. She felt the covers to trace

his shape and felt sadness that he had left her sometime in the night. He was such an honorable man.

She got up from the bed and went to put on her clothes. She wanted to put on her jeans and a tee shirt, but felt that would be too out of place. Instead she reached for another pair of gauchos and a blouse. Caleb had said they were going to perform work to get ready for the party and she wanted to be dressed as properly as she could.

She smiled as she realized that she had gotten some much needed sleep. Things always looked brighter in the light of day after a well-rested night. Maybe, just maybe, things were going to be better today. With that thought in mind, Jessica went out in the hallway and downstairs, trying to find her way to the kitchen. The smells of breakfast guided her steps and she eagerly looked for the location of those scents. As she stepped into the warm, cozy room, she was greeted by Mary and several ladies.

“Good morning, Jessica. Did you sleep well?” Mary’s smile reached all the way up to her eyes. “Can I get you some breakfast? Everything is ready. I’ve been keeping it warm for you.”

“I can’t thank you enough.” Even though she didn’t really want a big meal, she sat down anyway.

“Oh, let me introduce you to our neighbors.” She proceeded to tell Jessica the names of the women helping in the kitchen. “We have so much to do. People should be arriving today.”

“What can I do to help?” Jessica immediately volunteered.

“Oh, you just eat and then we’ll figure out what you can do.” Mary kept bustling around the kitchen. She laughed with the other ladies and kept busy with the food preparations.

“Has Caleb already eaten?” Jessica finally asked.

“Heavens, yes. He was up with the sun and is helping ready the barn.”

“The barn?”

“Yes, with all this rain we’ve been having, we decided to put all the tables and have the dance in the smaller barn. It won’t take the men too long to clean it out.”

The mention of rain brought a furrow to Jessica’s brow. It reminded her of the tragedy yet to come.

“Now, don’t you worry yourself. We’ve done this in the barn before and it came out wonderful.” Mary patted Jessica on the shoulder. “That’s it! You can help decorate once the fellows have the barn cleaned. How’s that sound?”

“How many people are you expecting?”

“We have about 40 or so neighbors and friends that will come. Most will camp out for a few days. I’m surprised you’ve never attended one of our round-up gatherings.” She laughed and added, “Although the men think it’s just for working the round up.”

“I’ve not been to this area. I’m from west of Phoenix.” Jessica hoped that the subject would be dropped.

“I knew I’d never seen you around here.” One of the ladies remarked.

All this talk made Jessica nervous. “I think I’ll go and find Caleb. Can you point me in the right direction?” She asked of Mary.

“Sure, just head out the back door and directly down the path to the right. You can’t miss the barn.”

“Thank you for breakfast.” Jessica headed out the door and missed the knowing looks shared among the women.

As she headed down the path Mary indicated, a slight drizzle of rain hit her head. She looked to the heavens and frowned; there was just a week before disaster would hit this area. Shoving that thought into the back of her mind, she came up to a group of men in front of the smaller barn.

It wasn’t hard to find Caleb. Even among the brawny, hard-working cowboys, he stood tall. Her heart lurched as he looked her way and their eyes locked. It was impossible to read his expression as all the men turned to look at her.

“Hello.” She addressed the group of men but kept her eyes on Caleb.

“Good Morning, Jess.” Caleb responded. “This is Jessica Mayfield. She’s staying at the ranch.”

The men responded with greetings of welcome. All seemed a bit anxious, but showed interest in her presence.

“Why don’t you go and finish clearing out that equipment. I want to talk with Jessica a moment.” Caleb directed the crowd, who quickly disappeared into the barn.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I did better than I thought I would.” She felt the tension between them and wished it wasn’t there. “How did you do?”

“I slept fine, Jess.” He avoided looking directly at her.

“Caleb, I want to help with the preparations for the party. Your mother said I could help decorate the barn.” She tried to relax, but failed. “Please, let me help.”

He let out his breath, but agreed. “Come inside and see what you can do.”

They stepped into the barn, where men were busy cleaning and clearing the entire area. She could see them hesitate but at the stern look on Caleb’s face, they soon turned back to their tasks.

She could see they had most of the loft cleared and were working on the downstairs floor. It was a huge place and she found herself wondering how big the other barn was if this was the smaller barn. “What do you use this barn for?”

“Mostly excess equipment. Ma decided that with all the rain, we needed to have the main party inside here.” With those words, he turned to look at her. He suddenly ushered her outside and turned to head down another short path. Soon they were at a small gazebo and Caleb indicated she should sit down.

“Jess, I need to ask you something.”

She wanted to reassure him, to tell him that all would be well, but knew that she couldn’t. She dreaded his next words.

He didn’t sit, but turned his wide back to her, gathering his thoughts. The noise of the rain hitting

the tin roof was only sound between them. He finally turned and faced her.

“Jess, are you The Marked One?”



Ten

Words failed her at that moment. The roof of the gazebo kept the rain from falling on them, but the breeze was cool. She shivered partly from the rain and partly from the confused look on Caleb's face. Finally she found her voice.

"Caleb, I don't know. I just know that I'm where I don't belong." She stopped long enough to hold back tears. "I'm scared and don't know what to think or do."

He instantly pulled her into his arms. Caleb didn't speak but held her tight and stroked her back. This was almost her undoing. Such tenderness, she mused. She leaned back to look in his eyes.

"Caleb, I don't understand any of this. One minute I was riding my horse up the dry riverbed and the next thing I knew, I was waking up to see you. I tried to tell you, but I thought you would think that I was losing my mind. Maybe, I am." Her voice broke.

He sat down and encouraged her to sit beside him. "Jess, I know how difficult this has been for me to understand; but, I can only imagine what has been running through your head. What are we going to do now?"

They sat there for a few minutes. After her husband's death those many years ago, Jessica poured herself into building her company. Hard work was an escape from thinking about the void in her life. She finally spoke, "Caleb, we have a celebration to get ready for. Let's just work today and worry tomorrow." She stood up and waited for him.

"I have so many thoughts running through my head, but I guess you're right for now. Are you up to helping my family get ready? We have about 50 people starting to arrive."

She tried to smile, but fell short. "I'm ready if you are." Together they made their way back to the barn. She joined in with the cowhands, clearing and cleaning. Work was a great distraction. Her clothes were soon covered with dirt and grime but it didn't keep her from helping Caleb. She looked up to see him staring in her direction. He smiled and she found herself responding in kind.

Just then they all heard the sound of the supper bell clanging. It didn't take long for the men to scramble towards the house. Jessica kept sweeping the floor, her stomach was in knots and food was the last thing on her mind. All of a sudden, Caleb put his hands over hers to stop the broom.

"Jess, it's time to eat."

"I'm not hungry. Go. I'll just finish this corner." She avoided his gaze. She could feel his hesitation, but was relieved when he dropped his touch from hers. The next thing she heard was his footsteps on the hardwood floor as he left her alone.

Jessica finished sweeping the area she was in and then found the nearest hay bale to sit down on. She allowed her thoughts to ramble. Pakri said she was chosen because she had the wisdom to make the right decisions about the knowledge she possessed. She felt the burden of life on her shoulders. A new thought crowded its way into her mind. This must have been how her husband felt when he was fighting in foreign lands for people he had never known. He had the power of life and death in his hands, too, and he died fighting for what he believed in.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the men returning from their meal. She stood up and started clearing another part of the barn when they came through the door. Caleb was in the lead and carried a tin plate. He walked up to her and kindly offered the simple meal to Jessica.

“Here, I brought some of ma’s ham and beans. You need to eat.” He urged her to sit back down on the hay and eat her lunch.

The food did smell good and soon she was enjoying the hot plate. He left her to enjoy the meal and was directing the men on what to do next. As soon as she finished, Jessica joined him.

“It’s looking pretty good, don’t you think?” She asked.

“We need to set up tables and benches over there for the meals. This area needs to be clear for the dance and the band will set up over there.” Caleb pointed out the direction.

“Ma told me that the old decorations are up in the loft. I don’t know what shape they’re in, but I can help

you bring it all down.” He pointed the way to the ladder leading to the loft.

As she climbed, Caleb was right behind making sure she didn't fall. They got to the top and looked around. Suddenly, a slight sound and scurrying sent her into his arms.

He laughed and she found herself looking into his wonderful eyes. “It's just a mouse. Nothing to be afraid of, Jess.” He didn't give her time to move, but bent his head and placed a firm kiss on her lips. She responded in kind.

“Caleb, we need to get those decorations out.” She finally broke free and put some distance between them.

He went over to the boxes located on the far wall. She followed reluctantly, looking intently for any more movement. He motioned for her to help him move the boxes close to the ladder. Soon, they had at least six huge crates at the edge.

Caleb called down to one of the men below and soon the wooden crates were on the bottom floor. Caleb pried open the lid on the first crate and soon different banners, flags, hearts and decorations were strewn over the floor. As they looked over the huge display, Caleb and Jessica laughed.

“What in the world are we going to do with these?” Jessica held up several small tin buckets. At the same time, Caleb held up several bundles of lace curtains.

“Maybe there's something in the other crates we can use.” Jessica was hopeful. If only I could run down to the local craft store, she mused. How do I decorate

for a spring round up/Valentine's day party without the internet?

As they opened all of the crates and removed the objects an idea was forming in Jessica's head. "Caleb, when will the rest of your family arrive?"

"They should be here soon. My father and Uncle Seth should be bringing the herd in before long. They're a bit overdue. Why do you ask?"

"How many children will be here?"

He pushed his hat back on his head and looked at the woman standing there among the odd collection of adornments. "I guess around 10 or 12."

"What ages?" She kept organizing the piles of objects into a certain order.

"I'm guessing anywhere from six to fourteen or so."

"Boys or girls?"

"More girls than boys. Most of the boys will be helping with the cattle. What is it you're planning?"

She turned to him with a huge grin on her face. "I'm going to let the children help decorate for the party!"

Just that moment, a young girl ran into the barn. "Cousin Caleb!" She threw her arms around the tall cowboy.

Caleb hugged her to his large frame and swung the twelve year old around. "Helen, I swear you're getting more and more beautiful every day!"

She giggled with delight. "You're so funny!" She looked up into the eyes of her captor.

Caleb set her down on the floor and turned to Jessica. "Jess, this is the most wonderful young lady you will ever meet. My favorite cousin, Helen McCaslin."

Jessica quickly offered her hand for Helen to shake. The young girl was not shy at all and eagerly grabbed Jessica's hand in a warm and friendly grasp. "Nice to meet you, Miss Jessica. I heard momma and Aunt Mary talking about you."

Jessica looked to Caleb. She wasn't sure that this was a good thing.

"Is that right, little lady?" Caleb questioned Helen.

"Did I say something wrong?" She looked from Caleb to Jessica. "They were just talking about how special you are."

How could I be mad at her? Jessica smiled and grabbed the young lady for a big hug. "You are sweet!"

"I think you've found your first volunteer for decoration duty." Caleb said with satisfaction.

"Decorations?" Helen asked with curiosity. "I get to help you?"

"If you'd like to, Helen. I need to get this entire barn ready for the big dance tomorrow night." Jessica felt herself catching the young girl's enthusiasm.

"I'd love to help you. You know I get to come to the big dance this year. Momma says it's time."

"It's time?" Jessica questioned.

"Momma says I need to start thinking about..." She stopped suddenly. "Well, she said I need to grow up a little."

"Then let's get busy. We have a lot to do." Jessica urged. "Caleb, you and the guys need to get the tables and benches set up. I would like some bales of hay over there and the band can set up over there." She stopped suddenly. "Did that sound bossy?"

Helen laughed and Caleb scratched his head. “It sure did, but I get the message.” He turned to assist the guys with the tables and benches. Soon the entire barn was ready for decorating.

“What other help do you need?” He asked of Jessica. She and Helen were busy sorting the various decorations.

“We need you to hang these lace curtains at the entrance to the barn.” She held up the yards of lace for him to see.

“You want these hung by the barn door?” He seemed puzzled by her request.

“Of course, Cousin Caleb. Jessica knows what she wants and you just have to do it.” Helen grinned.

“Your momma is right. It’s time for you to grow up! You’re ready to find a husband!” He teased.

“A husband!” Jessica exclaimed. “She’s just a baby!”

Caleb’s hearty laughter was music to her ears. She turned to see his huge grin. She’d grown to love his wonderful sense of humor over these last few days.

“Helen, would you go and get your cousins to help us?” He prompted her.

“Yes!” She responded with delight.

As soon as she left the barn, Caleb reached for Jessica. He pulled her into his arms and placed a passionate kiss on her lips. “I’ve wanted to do this all day.” She responded in kind. He was becoming so important in her life.

“Want to sneak away?” He teased.

“I would love to, but didn’t you just invite the world to help us?” She was still in his arms.

He growled with frustration. "As soon as we are done here, we'll take a ride. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes." Her response was tender.

At that moment, Helen returned with several young girls. "Miss Jessica, I found us some help." Soon the barn was full of giggling young girls. They eyed Jessica with some curiosity but were polite and more reserved than Helen.

"Okay, what do you want us to do?" Helen asked.

"Take these small buckets and go out and find all the pine cones you can. Try to get the pretty ones." She handed each girl a bucket.

"What are you going to do with them?" The young girl asked.

"You'll see. Hurry, we have to get this done fast. The men are done setting everything up. I want to have this barn ready for the dance."

The girls scurried out the door with their buckets in hand. In the meantime, Jessica started looking for things she needed. One of the cowhands wandered in looking for Caleb.

"Miss Jessica, how are you doing?"

"I need some help, but it might take more than one of you. Could you get Caleb and some of the other men?" She smiled at the hand.

"Glad to." He tipped his hat.

As soon as the men came in, Jessica pointed to an old wooden wagon wheel leaning against the side of the barn. "I want that hung from that beam."

Caleb watched as the men looked from her to him and back again. He noticed they tried to hide their

grins as Caleb rubbed his hat back on his head. “Jess, why are we going to hang that wheel up there?”

“Because I want to create a chandelier by hanging these lanterns from it.” She held up one of the lights they found in the cases. “Won’t that be romantic for the dance?”

She turned to hear the men laughing as they watched Caleb’s reaction. She smiled at them. “You all agree, don’t you?”

“Yes ma’am. I’d like to court my girl under the romantic lights.” He encouraged her plan. The men were obviously having fun with the interaction between Caleb and Jessica. They watched to see who’s will would be done. It wasn’t long when they saw Caleb head toward the old wheel.

He looked back to the men. “Well?”

They were openly chuckling as they walked over to help him lift the big wagon wheel. They rolled it slowly over to the barn door and cleaned it off before moving it further into the room.

After much discussion, the wheel was hanging solidly from the beam. Caleb dragged a ladder over to reach the new chandelier. As Jessica handed him the lanterns, he connected each one securely from the wheel. Once it was done, all of them stood back to see the effect it gave to the barn.

“Once we light the lanterns, it’ll be beautiful!” She was extremely pleased.

Caleb grabbed her and danced across the floor. “You’re right. It’s romantic!”

The cowboys laughed and the young girls chose that moment to return to the barn with their pails full of

pine cones. They joined in the hilarity even though they weren't sure what they were laughing about.

Helen spoke first. "Cousin, you're so funny!"

"Sweet One, you don't even know what you're laughing about but I love you just the same." He smiled at his favorite cousin.

Jessica took the buckets and went to the nearest table. "Girls, bring your pine cones here."

Caleb and the men left the barn allowing the girls to work alone. Jessica went to the crates and grabbed several checkered tablecloths.

"Here, girls, put these on the tables. And when you're done, put your buckets on the middle. Then add two lanterns on either side. These will be our centerpieces."

The girls giggled as they complied with her plans. As soon as the tables were covered and the centerpieces were in place, they all stood there marveling at the sight of a mere barn turned into a beautiful place for a dance.

"Girls, you did a beautiful job. Thank you all." Jessica congratulated them.

The sun was going lower in the afternoon sky. "You all need to go on to the house and get cleaned up for dinner. The bell will be ringing soon." She shooed the girls out of the barn.

Jessica finished cleaning up a few messes and was about to go to the house for dinner when Caleb appeared. "Jess, you've done a great job! Ma will love this place."

"Ready for some dinner?"

“I guess. I’m not really very hungry thanks to that great lunch you brought me earlier.” She was a bit nervous. They still hadn’t discussed much of anything since he overheard Pakri.

“Let’s go.” He took hold of her arm and steered her through the door of the barn. She looked up to see two horses, all saddled and ready to go.

“Where are we going?”

“Ginger was lonely. She asked me to get you for a ride.”

She laughed. “You don’t honestly want me to believe that a staunch cowboy like you listens to horses?”

She eagerly climbed up on the waiting horse. “Where are we going?”

As he mounted his steed, he indicated a picnic basket tied to the side of his saddle. “We’re going to my favorite hiding place. Remember when I told you there are times I need to be by myself?”

She nodded and they took off. He led the way to the edge of the mountains and then up the barely noticeable trail. Soon they climbed higher and higher and when she thought they would reach the top, he turned sharply to the left. Her little horse Ginger followed steadily. Jessica patted her on the neck and murmured words of encouragement.

Shortly the forest opened and she stared in amazement at the rough, rocky outcrop. The pines framed the view and she quickly climbed from Ginger. The entire plateau was laid out at her feet as she carefully stepped upon the huge granite rocks. Caleb was right behind her with the basket and a blanket.

“Oh, Caleb,” She exclaimed, “I can see why you come here. This is beautiful beyond words.” She could see the ranch directly in front of them and to her right the sun was making its way to the horizon. She watched in wonder at the movement of people in the distance. There were several tents already erected and children running around.

“Ready for food?” He patted the spot next to him on the blanket. She scrambled from her outlook and sat on the place he had indicated. He handed her a tin plate and offered a basket of chicken.

“Mmm, smells great! Fried chicken is the one thing I’ve never mastered.” She was hungry now.

“I have some lemonade if you want. There’s also some fruit and ma’s biscuits. I didn’t think the pie would make the trip.”

They ate in silence and once they had their fill of the delicious fried chicken and fruit, Caleb cleaned up the remains.

She longed for her camera or at least her phone. This was a view that would be embedded in her memory forever.

She felt him come up behind her and her heart lurched. He gently pulled her back into his embrace. “Are you warm enough?” She couldn’t speak. She just nodded her head. His arms felt so strong and she longed for this moment to never end.

“Jess, do you know the whole story of The Marked One?”

She had dreaded his questions but knew that some answers were due. “Pakri didn’t go into a lot of detail.” She stalled.

“I’ve been raised on the legends of the local tribe. I believed those stories for the most part.” He hesitated. “After college, I realized that most of those traditional stories are based on some sort of fact even if they were embellished a bit over the years.” He turned her around to face him.

“Look at me, Jess. Look into my eyes and know this. I can feel you, I hear you breathing, and I can feel your heartbeat when I hold you close. I know you’re a real live woman in my arms.” His voice was gruff with wanting.

“Caleb, there are so many unanswered questions. I... I just don’t know what to do.”

“I believe that we all have a certain destiny. You have yours and I have mine. It’s all been designed by forces larger than us. Pakri’s tribe has told these legends forever and they govern their lives by them. Jess, the only thing we can do is enjoy each day and let tomorrow take care of itself.” He lowered his head to take her lips in a slow, seductive kiss.

She ended the kiss and took a deep breath. “Caleb, we should go.”

He put his hands on either side of her face. “Jess, I know you’re right, but I don’t want to share you with anyone. I want you all to myself for as long as we have.”

His words disturbed her, but this whole situation was so bizarre, she could only agree. They kissed once more and finally prepared for the ride back to the ranch.

As they were leaving the mountain pines, Caleb exclaimed. "There's my father." He pointed to a huge herd of cows in the distance.

She could see the small cloud of dust as the animals moved over the plateau. There were several cowboys maintaining control over the herd. They stopped to watch the site of the cows moving slowly across in front of them. The sun was almost gone now and the scene was magical.

Jessica found herself mesmerized by the fact that she was sitting here astride a horse watching a real, live scene from an old western movie. Anytime now she expected to see John Wayne gallop up to them.

"This is amazing!" She finally exclaimed.

"The herd looks good, healthy." Caleb commented.

"So what happens with them now?"

"We'll brand the new calves and put the herd out to graze for a couple of days. Then we'll move them to the south range after that. It's the cabin area where we first met." He turned to see if she remembered.

The look on her face was one of horror. Jessica knew that in just a few short days, that entire area would be flooded with a wave of water over 40 foot high!



Eleven

“Jess, what is it? What’s wrong?”

She didn’t get time to answer as just then an older version of Caleb galloped up to them.

“Son! Good to see you.” His father patted him on the back.

“Pa, you’re running a little late, aren’t you?” He smiled at the older man.

“Yep, the snow run-off made crossing the streams a tad difficult. But we’re here and ready for some good food and rest.” He then directed his glance at Jessica.

“Oh, Pa, let me introduce you to Jessica Mayfield.”

The older man tipped his hat and grinned. “Pleasure. Son, you want to help us?”

Caleb glanced at Jessica. She finally found her voice, “Go.”

As they rode off, she overheard Caleb’s dad tell him that he understood why he hadn’t been much help. She grinned in spite of the news she’d just heard. They can’t move that herd in a few days, she thought grimly. I have to keep them from doing that.

She spurred Ginger to move and fell in behind the slow moving herd. Thank goodness that it had rained recently as it kept the dust cloud to a minimum. She

headed to the barn and dismounted. Before she could remove the saddle, one of the cowboys came and did it for her. "Miss Jessica, I'll take care of this for you. You go on up to the house."

Jessica went in the back door of the kitchen. At the mud room, she took off her boots and tried to shake some of the dust from her clothes. She'd had a busy day and it showed.

As she entered the kitchen, warm wonderful smells drifted across to her. Mary was at the stove, stirring a huge kettle of something deliciously tantalizing. "Jessica, sit. I'll get you a dish of this beef stew. I'm sure that chicken wasn't enough."

Jessica did as she was told. Mary quickly put a steaming cup of coffee in front of her and soon had a big bowl of the stew.

"I saw the barn. You did a wonderful job! Who would have thought of putting lace curtains at the door?" Mary said as she continued bustling around the kitchen.

"Can I help you?" Jessica finished the savory soup. "I'm sure the men will be in shortly wanting their dinner." She stood and went to the stove.

"During round up we all eat in the barn. The other ladies have already set everything up. I just came for this stew."

"Are you anxious to see your husband?"

Mary giggled. "You'd think I was an innocent young maiden, wouldn't you? I miss him when he goes." Together they grabbed the kettle and carefully made their way out the back door. Mary set it on the porch while Jessica put on her boots.

The barn was a lit up with the lamps. As soon as she walked in, she looked up to see the lantern chandelier they had built. It was perfect!

Helen ran up and hugged Jessica. “Isn’t it beautiful? Didn’t we do a good job?”

Her enthusiasm was contagious and Jessica hugged her back. “Yes, you did great!”

“Miss Jessica, I’m so excited. I get to come to the dance for the first time! Momma says I have to go to bed early tonight but it’s alright!” She talked excitedly, not allowing for any conversational input. “Wait till you see my dress. It’s so pretty! I bet your dress is going to be beautiful. Wait till Cousin Caleb sees it.”

“I don’t have a special dress, Helen. I didn’t prepare for the dance.” Jessica tried to explain.

“I know that Caleb will love whatever you choose to wear. He’s smitten, you know. Momma says so.” Helen grinned up at her.

About that time, the man in question walked through the door of the barn. Their eyes locked and he grinned. He strode directly over to her and took her hand in his. He raised it to his lips and placed a kiss on the back.

“Did you miss me?” He teased.

She was immediately self-conscious as she felt the eyes of the people in the barn staring directly at them. “Caleb, stop it. People are staring.”

Helen laughed. “Miss Jessica, everyone knows he likes you.”

“Yes, Miss Jessica, everyone knows I like you.” He mimicked his cousin.

She quickly pulled her hand from his. "Stop it, you two." She tried to chastise them but fell short. "Oh, you are awful."

"Have you eaten yet?" Caleb asked of her.

"Yes, I had a some stew and then helped your mother bring over the kettle."

"Then let's go and help ourselves." He held her by the elbow and directed her over to the food table.

"If I keep eating this much, I'll weigh a ton!" She exclaimed to Caleb.

"You look great! I don't think you have to worry at all about how much you're eating." He whispered in her ear as he loaded her plate with the delicious smelling food.

"You, sir, are incorrigible!"

They found two seats at a table and he proceeded to clean up his plate. Jessica ate more than she originally thought she would but the food was so good it was hard to resist.

Soon, Helen came up to sit with them. "Cousin Caleb, did you help with the round up today?"

"I only got to help at the end. I was busy showing Jessica our favorite spot up on the mountain." He winked at his cousin.

"Oh, did you love it?" She turned to ask Jessica.

"Yes, Helen, it is a very special place. I am honored that Caleb decided to share it with me."

"We go up there each chance we get. It's so special." Helen looked wistful as she spoke. "I'm glad he took you there, Miss Jessica."

"Me, too. It was especially nice."

“Uh oh, I see momma looking for me. It must be time to go.” Helen stood up and greeted the older woman.

“Not yet,” The other woman smiled. “I’m Hannah. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jessica stood and put her hand out for the other woman to shake. There was a moment of stunned silence, but Hannah slowly put her hand in Jessica’s.

“How are you?” Hannah spoke with definite nervousness in her voice. “I hope you are enjoying your stay at the ranch.” She looked nervously from Jessica to Caleb.

Jessica then realized her mistake. Women of this era didn’t act so aggressively as to shake hands. Oh, so much to learn, she thought.

Caleb quickly diverted the situation with his quick comments. “Aunt Hannah, are you coming to the rodeo tomorrow? Are you going to watch me beat Uncle Ben at the bull riding?” He grinned from ear to ear.

“Nephew, you’re in for a whooping. You know your uncle is the best in the territory.” She laughed at his teasing. “Come now, Helen, we have to go and get to bed.”

The two left and Jessica turned to Caleb. “Are you really going to ride a bull tomorrow?”

“Of course. It’s the rodeo. That’s what they do at those events.” He chuckled.

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Haven’t you ever been to a rodeo?”

“Of course. I just never knew someone that actually rode one of those huge beasts.”

He hugged her to his firm body. "Are you worried?"

Jessica pushed him away and looked around the room. "People are looking."

He glanced around and when he saw no one even noticed, he laughed again. "You are scared! Jess, I'm going to be perfectly safe."

"I don't know how you can say that. You must be crazy to climb on one of those bulls. Why would you want to do that?" She was worried.

"Jess, I'll be fine. You'll be there and you can see for yourself."

She was suddenly sick to her stomach. "I think I need to go. I'm tired and should get some sleep." She rose to leave.

"I'll escort you." He took her by the elbow and they left the barn.

"It's not necessary. It's just up to the house. I know the way."

"Jess, it wouldn't be proper if I let you walk alone."

They walked the short path to the house. Once there, they took their boots off in the mud room. She turned to say goodnight but could see that he was going to go all the way to her room.

At her door as she put her hand on the knob, he stopped her. "Jess, you'll see tomorrow. It's just for fun. I'll have you there to show off for." He leaned in and placed a short kiss on her lips.

She wanted more, but knew that with all the people at the ranch, there wouldn't be any improprieties. As she opened the door and went to step in, he sighed.

"Jess, we'll have time alone after tomorrow. There'll be the rodeo, the dance and then people will leave to

go back to their homes.” His reluctance to let her go was showing.

“Go. I understand.” She kissed his cheek lightly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She went in after shutting the door and sat on the side of her bed. She took a deep, cleansing breath. I want him, she thought with total clarity. I shouldn’t, but I do. She could hear sounds of gaiety drifting in from the area of the barn. The men would probably stay up later than the women and she smiled at that thought. She could just imagine the bragging and teasing that was taking place.

Jessica got into her night gown and crawled between the sheets of her bed. She settled in and slowly drifted off to sleep, her mind still reeling from the growing feelings for a certain cowboy.

She felt the bed shift and rolled over to see Caleb sitting on the edge of her bed. She smiled. Somehow she knew he would come to her despite his better intentions.

He was still fully clothed but stretched his tall frame into the space beside her. “Come here, woman. I want to hold you for a while. I know I shouldn’t be here, but when it comes to you, I can’t help myself.”

She snuggled into his side and rested her head on his chest. He kissed the top of her head and they lay there just enjoying the warmth and touch of each other.

Sometime before dawn, he left. She woke to the sun streaming into her window and grinned at the imprint of his body next to hers. She quickly rose and went to get dressed. Oh, wouldn’t I love to put on my jeans and

tee shirt. But instead, she searched through the closet for some gauchos and a lacy blouse.

“I could get used to dressing like this.” She stated aloud and giggled. I might have to. That thought suddenly planted itself into her mind. She grabbed a red ribbon to tie around her head in an attempt to control the wild curls.

As soon as she was dressed, Jessica went downstairs to help Mary with any meal preparations, but to her surprise the kitchen was empty. There wasn’t even a cup of coffee to be had.

Realizing that breakfast was in the barn, Jessica hurried to put on her boots and head out the door.

The activity in the barn stopped as she entered the double doors. For an uncomfortable moment, all eyes seemed to be on her. Mary quickly came over and gave her a huge hug. People returned to their conversations and the minute passed.

“Hello, sleepy head. I’m so glad you’re relaxing and getting your health back.” She beamed a comforting motherly smile.

“I’m so sorry. I should’ve been here to help you.” Jessica apologized.

“Nonsense. You can help with dinner. We’ll have to set up after the rodeo and before the dance. It seems that all we do is eat at these roundups.” She laughed and ushered Jessica over to the table. “Now, help yourself to some breakfast.”

Jessica went for the coffee first and then decided on some bacon and fried potatoes. She looked for a place to sit when she saw Helen waving her over to join

them. She took a big breath and headed over to the table.

Hannah greeted her first. "Jessica, how nice you look this morning."

"Thank you, I'm not sure this is the right thing to wear for a rodeo."

"You're going to be the best dressed belle there. Cousin Caleb is going to have to concentrate on his riding with you looking so lovely." Helen added.

"That makes me nervous. I don't want him to get hurt."

Helen giggled but added in a more serious tone. "Miss Jessica, he's a very good rider. I don't think you have to worry about him getting hurt. He's always one of the top cowboys."

"When does this rodeo start?"

"We should be going over to the main corral soon." Hannah answered as she got up and started clearing the table. Jessica joined in on the efforts and soon all the women were putting the food on a small wagon. "We'll take this back to the main house before going over."

Shortly after securing the leftover food, the ladies all started the short trek to the main corral. As they neared, Jessica could see that in place of modern-day bleachers was a small hill. From their viewpoint, they could observe the entire day's activities. They placed blankets on the ground to sit upon and as they settled in, the cowboys started to gather in the enclosure. The mid-morning light showed on the corral and allowed an almost romantic ambience to the entire scene.

She spied Caleb almost immediately. He stood above the others or did it just seem that way to her? She was surprised to see so many people gathered about. There must be at least eighty including the women and children. There was a carnival like atmosphere to the whole scene. The young boys were gathered hanging on the corral and the women and girls were properly sitting in their spot on the small hill. The trees above offered some shade for them.

Their eyes connected over the short distance and she smiled at him. He interrupted the conversation with the other cowboys and started in her direction.

Helen laughed. "Here he comes, Miss Jessica. He's already seen how beautiful you look and cannot resist."

She watched as he strode over to them. She couldn't take her eyes off him. She felt her breathing increase as he closed the distance between them.

"Hello."

"Hi, yourself." She replied. She struggled to maintain her composure. He sat down beside them as he addressed his cousin and aunt. Helen continued with her amusement of the situation.

"Cousin, you are enamored of Miss Jessica."

Immediately his aunt chastised her daughter. "Helen, you shouldn't speak so boldly. Your cousin has every right to be mad at you."

Helen looked ashamed and addressed Caleb. "Cousin, I am so sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Helen, that's alright. You are entirely correct. I am enamored of Jessica." He looked directly at Jessica as he spoke. She couldn't turn away.

Hannah spoke softly, “Caleb, she should know better. Sometimes, she’s so outspoken. You shouldn’t encourage her.”

“Hannah, I’m alright with her behavior. Please don’t be too harsh on her.” He grinned that infamous look at his aunt.

“You, sir, are hopeless.” His aunt smiled and hugged her daughter.

“Helen, do you have a ribbon for me?” He smiled at his cousin.

“Of course, Cousin. Here is your lucky ribbon.” She held up a small blue hair decoration.

“Will you tie it on for me?” He held out his right arm.

Helen was gloriously pleased that her favorite cousin wanted her ribbon. She started to tie it on his bicep when she noticed Jessica intently watching the exchange between the two.

Helen leaned in and whispered into his ear. He grinned and looked to Jessica. He nodded his head in affirmation.

“Miss Jessica, would you like to give Caleb your hair band? It’s for luck during his rodeo ride.” Helen pleaded his case.

Jessica’s heart lurched at the sincerity in the young girl’s question. “Oh, are you sure he needs my ribbon too? I’m positive yours is the lucky one.”

With the complete innocence of a twelve year old, Helen instantly replied. “But, Miss Jessica, he needs both of them! We want him to win.”

“Helen, what about your father? Don’t you want him to win?” Her mother teased.

“Momma, you know father has your luck with him. He always does wonderful in the rodeo.” Helen looked apologetic.

“Silly girl, I’m just teasing you.” Her mother hugged her to her side. “Caleb needs your luck and I want him to have it.”

Caleb went over to Jessica and gently pulled the red ribbon from her hair. “Will you tie it on with Helen’s?” His nearness was powerful and she felt herself leaning into him.

“Of course, cowboy. I want you to have all the luck you can get.” She carefully tied it next to Helen’s and patted his arm when she finished.

“I also need a kiss, Miss Jessica.” His eyes twinkled. “It’s for luck, too.” He stated innocently.

They both turned toward the corral when they heard a man’s voice over a megaphone announcing the start of the festivities. Caleb turned back to Jessica and placed a quick kiss on her cheek. Before he got away, she grabbed him by the arm and reached up to place her lips on his cheek.

She heard Helen laugh and Hannah telling her to be quiet, but her heart and her eyes were only for the man striding toward the arena. Jessica had seen rodeos in the city but they were staged productions with lights, music and she didn’t know any of the cowboys personally. This was different, very different. There was a danger here and she wasn’t sure she could watch Caleb climb upon a ferocious bull.

“Miss Jessica, he’ll be fine. He’s very good at this.” Helen came to her side. They both looked towards the arena. People were pulling wagons and carriages close

to the railing for viewing the rodeo. Near the northern side of the corral, Jessica could see Pakri and several tribal members walking up to the hill where they were now seated. She smiled and waved. Pakri immediately acknowledged with a small flip of her own hand.

Caleb had asked her if Pakri had told her the entire legend about the Marked One. Perhaps now she could ask and find out all of the details. She excused herself to Hannah and Helen and made her way to where Pakri and her people had sat down.

As she approached, Pakri rose and greeted her. “Miss Jessica, are you feeling well?”

“I’m doing much better. Thank you.” She looked to the other members of the tribe. They seemed interested but were extremely polite. Pakri turned and spoke to them in their own language. Their looks changed from curiosity to reverence in an instant. Jessica self-consciously pulled the sleeve of her blouse down to cover her tattoo. This motion didn’t go unnoticed by Pakri.

“Pakri, can I speak to you?”

“Yes.” She moved away from the others so Jessica could speak privately.

“Caleb says there is more to the legend of the Marked One. Can you share that with me?” Jessica looked anxious. They had walked a few feet away from any of the others.

“You and Mister Caleb are, how can I say?” Pakri seemed to struggle with her words.

Jessica waited patiently for the older woman to gather her thoughts. She stared out at the arena watching the activities but not really paying attention.

“We are taught by the missionaries to speak your words. They teach us some Spanish. They teach our people not to use our own words.” Her face didn’t betray her feelings. It was upsetting to Pakri to be taught that her own language was not the proper way to speak.

She finally spoke again, “The word they use is ‘simpatico’. You and Mister Caleb are two that should be as one.”

“I... I don’t think I understand, Pakri. You speak very clearly, but I still can’t see why Caleb and I are simpatico.”

“We grow food for our people. We grow corn, squash, and beans. Each of them grow well alone. When we use three sisters way to make our crops they do much better. By planting them together, one offers the other seedling things that help them grow taller and bigger.” Pakri smiled up at Jessica.

“I think I understand. You’re saying that our paths, our destinies are to help each other.”

Pakri gently took her hand and slipped the sleeve of Jessica’s blouse up to expose the tattoo. “By coming together, you will reach love forever. Your paths will cross for all time.”

Jessica’s breath caught in her throat. She felt the warmth from the older woman’s hands on her skin. Tears formed in her eyes. Pakri smiled an encouraging smile. “Do not be afraid, Miss Jessica. Your love will grow even when you return. Your forever love will be with you always.”



Twelve

Before she could ask any further questions, the announcer started to speak. She turned to listen and heard Caleb's name called.

"You must watch him, Miss Jessica. All will be well." Pakri turned and went back to join her fellow tribal members.

Jessica walked slowly back to Hannah and Helen. She was too nervous to sit down.

"Miss Jessica, he'll be good. Just you watch!" Helen bragged about her favorite cousin.

"I don't think I can watch this." Jessica's breath came fast and shallow. "I've never seen anyone I care for get on a huge animal that's determined to buck him off. This is all insane!"

Hannah came to her side and pulled her into her embrace. "Jessica, he'll be fine. It's something he's done a hundred times. Come, sit down and let's watch." Hannah encouraged her to sit on the blanket.

The action in the arena started about the same time Jessica sat down between Hannah and Helen. She watched, holding her breath, as Caleb was bucked up and down. He was successful in staying on the ferocious animal for over the eight-second time limit.

The crowd of people cheered enthusiastically as he ejected safely from the beast. He came up grinning and waving his cowboy hat vigorously to the crowd surrounding the corral.

He caught Jessica's eye and sent a special message to her alone. She tried to grin, but felt the smile choking in her throat. This was a dangerous world, she thought. I don't know how much more I can take.

In just a few short minutes, Caleb was walking toward the small hill and the ladies. She watched the tall, smiling cowboy and her heart lurched. I do love this man, she thought with sudden clarity. I never thought I could love again, but this man has penetrated the deepest part of my heart.

As he neared, she stood and went to meet him. They embraced and Jessica felt his warmth and strength. He was solid. He was strong. He was everything she needed and wanted.

He kissed her cheek tenderly, but stopped short of the passion they were feeling. She looked back at Helen and Hannah. Jessica was aware that this behavior wasn't proper for a lady in this time and place, but the smiles on both their faces told her that judgment wasn't part of their nature.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Jessica asked of him.

"I'm fine, Jess. It was a great ride." He released his tight hold on her, but still kept her close to his side. He looked to his cousin, "Helen, how did I do?"

"Cousin, it was one of your best!" She beamed proudly as she responded. "I told you he was great!" She bragged to Jessica.

Caleb encouraged Jessica to sit back down on the blanket. “I have to go. There are more events for me. Uncle Ben and I compete in the team roping.” When he saw the look of concern on her face, he took her hand. “Jess, it’s not as dangerous as the bull riding. It’s fun. Try to relax and enjoy it.” He placed a kiss on the back of her hand.

As he walked away, she exclaimed, “Relax! How can he say that? How can men put themselves in harm’s way like this?” She turned to Hannah for some sort of comfort.

Hannah’s calm voice came and Jessica found herself relaxing a bit. “Miss Jessica, men have been doing this to themselves as long as God put them on this land. They yearn to prove themselves and as women, we just need to learn to live with it. They are experienced cowboys and we can be proud of their abilities.”

Jessica resigned herself to that fact and tried to enjoy the rest of the festivities. At the conclusion of the rodeo, the supper bell rang indicating for all to take an afternoon siesta and have some food. She joined the ladies in the set up and serving of the meal. There was lots of laughter and gaiety around the barn. She listened to the men, women, and children all enjoying themselves. It was an exciting moment for these ranching families and she soon joined in their happiness. This was a hard life and these joyful times were few and far between.

She saw Caleb’s mother coming towards her. “Jessica, thank you so much for your help. But, you need to go to the house and rest. Caleb wanted me to

make sure you didn't tire yourself out. You are still recovering from your accident."

"Nonsense," Jessica replied. "I should be here helping you ladies. I'm going to be just fine."

"Now, I have my orders, young lady. Caleb is concerned about your welfare and I intend to see that you rest. All of us will be taking a siesta before the dance tonight. Go." She smiled at Jessica.

As Jessica walked slowly away towards the house, she heard a horse just behind her.

"Hey, lady, want to get away?" Caleb grinned down at her from astride his beautiful animal.

"You bet!" She reached for his hand and he helped her onto his steed in front of him. In no time at all, they were galloping past the arena and up towards his favorite spot on the mountain. She snuggled into his arms and reveled in their closeness.

They soon disappeared into the trees and left the noises and people behind. The afternoon sun felt good as it filtered down through the leaves of the forest. She looked to the sky and realized it hadn't rained for a day or two. That might be a good thing, she thought hopefully.

They soon came to the granite rock and the clearing he had shown her the day before. As they got down from the horse, she saw him reach for a blanket. He placed the blanket on the ground and indicated for her to join him. "You looked like you needed some time alone."

"I am so grateful. I was so nervous watching you in the rodeo. You are very good, but it's a danger I am not used to." She sat next to him. He reached out and

pulled her in his arms. They kissed and she realized that she was waiting for that moment all day.

“Jess, I know we should get back to the ranch so you can rest.”

“Shhh.” She put her fingers to his lips. “I’m right where I want to be.” She pulled him with her down on the blanket and deepened the kiss. As they lay down, he took his hat off and stretched out beside her. “Jess, I can’t promise that nothing will happen.”

She reached up and pulled open the snaps on his cowboy shirt. As her hands smoothed down over his chest, she felt his muscles contract.

He returned the favor and opened the buttons on her blouse. He pushed it back off her shoulders and kissed down between her breasts. Jessica lifted up a bit and reached back to undo the clasp on her bra. Soon she was bare and felt his lips on her breasts.

“You’re so beautiful.” He murmured.

She ran her hands through his hair and struggled to get closer to him. “Caleb, I want you.”

He didn’t waste any time, he reached for his belt and they both hurried to get out of the rest of their clothes. As soon as they were bare, they reached for each other and embraced eagerly.

He tried to stop one more time. “Jessica, we shouldn’t be doing this...”

She silenced his protest with another deep, caring kiss. She heard him groan as they gave in to their passion. The wind was blowing softly through the pines that outlined their special place. It felt good to have the sun shining down on her naked body, but it felt so much better to have him caressing her bare skin.

She pushed him over and climbed on top of Caleb. He was taken by surprise at her boldness, but it didn't take long for him to react. He reached up and pulled her down on himself. As they reached their climax, she slumped down and snuggled into his arms. He rolled them over to face each other on their sides. He kissed her tenderly and put his hands on either side of her face.

“I love you, Jessica.”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “I love you too, Caleb.” She smiled. It felt good. It was the right thing to say. Pakri had said that their destinies were intertwined and she felt this to be the moment of truth.

He smiled and she could see that his heart was touched by her declaration. He hugged her once more before speaking.

“Jess, I think we should get back to the ranch. We need to get ready for the dance.” He helped her up and turned to gather their clothes.

As they dressed, he stopped to give her small kisses. She smiled at his tenderness. He helped her mount the horse and they started down the path to the ranch. He nuzzled her neck as they rode.

“Jessica, I want to announce our marriage at the dance.” He stated quietly, waiting for her reaction.

Her mind raced wildly. Was she here permanently? Was this the destiny Pakri spoke of? Would it cause any harm to agree? In just a few days, their entire world was going to change and not for the best. She heaved a big sigh and snuggled deeper in his arms.

“Caleb, can we tell just your parents for now? I would like them to share in our decision.” She hoped he’d agree.

“That’s a good idea. They’ve worried about me for so long. It’ll make them happy to know that I’ve found a wonderful woman to share my life with.” He kissed her neck again. “I agree.”

They rode to the ranch house and as they stepped into the kitchen, she saw his mother and father sitting at the kitchen table alone, their hands were clasped together. It was perfect timing.

“Ma, Pa.” Caleb greeted them. “We wanted to talk with you.” He took Jessica’s hand as they came to the table beside his folks.

Mary looked to her husband with a knowing glance. “What is it son?” His father asked, trying hard to keep the grin from his face.

“Jessica and I are going to be wed.” Caleb announced proudly. He hugged her to his side.

William and Mary immediately jumped up and hugged their son. Mary reached for Jessica and embraced her warmly. “Welcome to the family. I knew you were someone special!” She placed a motherly kiss on Jessica’s cheek. “When is the big day?”

Jessica looked to Caleb for the answer. He smiled down at her and replied, “As soon as I can get this lady to agree!”

A thought suddenly occurred to Jessica. She needed a diversion to keep them from moving the herd south below the dam.

“How about a week from tomorrow? She proposed shyly.

“That would be perfect.” Mary agreed. “The padre will be here and he can perform the rites.”

Caleb’s father had a small frown on his face. “Son, that’ll delay moving the herd. I hoped to have them down on the south pasture by then.”

Jessica held her breath. Would her ploy succeed? She needed to keep this family from moving down the river and this seemed the perfect way.

“William,” Mary patted his hand. “Things can wait until after they get married next Sunday.”

“You’re absolutely right. Our son’s happiness is more important.” He smiled warmly at his wife.

Caleb grabbed his parents in a giant hug. “I love you.” There were tears in their eyes as they shared a family embrace. Mary reached over and pulled Jessica into the circle. She found herself enveloped in their love.

They all turned as they heard the back door opening. Uncle Ben took in the scene before him. “Now what’s all this about?”

Caleb looked to Jessica for approval before speaking. She shook her head slightly in agreement.

“Uncle, you’re looking at a happy man. Jessica’s agreed to be my wife.” The older man smiled a huge grin. He heartily shook Caleb’s hand and patted William on the back. “Brother, looks like you’re going to have a new one in the family.”

He came to Jessica and repeated what she’d already heard from Mary. “I knew you were special. My nephew’s a lucky man.”

The celebration lasted a few more minutes with everyone talking at the same time. Jessica felt a bit

overwhelmed by all the activity. She'd been alone for so long that this big family was a bit hard to take. She took a few steps towards the hallway door when she felt a familiar hand on her back.

"Jess, are you alright?" Caleb's voice brought some calming tones to her being.

"I'm fine. It's just a bit much."

"They can be an enthusiastic bunch. I just want you to be happy."

"Oh, Caleb, I am. I am." She repeated herself.

Caleb addressed the group at the table. "I think we all need to get ready for the dance." He hoped to give Jessica the space she seemed to need.

As everyone started to leave, he added, "If you all would honor our request, we'd like to keep this news to just the family."

He turned and escorted Jessica upstairs to her room. Once in, he reached for her. She willingly went into his arms. "I love you, Jess." He stated quietly.

She snuggled deeper into his embrace. "Thank you, Caleb. I do want our wedding to be just the family. Is that okay?" She asked meekly.

"Anything, Jess, anything you want." He lifted her chin so he could place a deep, searing kiss on her lips. "I just want our happiness."

She instantly felt the sting of the knowledge she carried. They would never be wed. The flood would erase any chance they had for happiness and a life together.

She tried to relax, tried to reassure herself, but failed. "Caleb, I need to get ready for the dance."

He reluctantly let her go. "Jess, do you want a bath? I can have them ready the tub."

"No, I'll just wash here. You, my love, go and I'll see you at the barn."

He was hesitant, but Caleb finally kissed her goodbye and left the room. She immediately went to the window and looked out at their surroundings. It was so beautiful here. There hadn't been any rain, the sun was shining and the weather for this time of the year was warmer than usual. The fear she had tried to shove to the back of her mind came forward into her immediate thoughts. She had just a week before disaster hit this area. She had managed to delay them from moving the herd down below. What else could she do?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. She instinctively knew it wasn't Caleb. As she opened it, she saw Helen standing there. The young girl was grinning from ear to ear.

"Miss Jessica, I just found out about you and Cousin Caleb." She rushed into Jessica and wrapped her small arms around the surprised woman. "I'm so happy! You are wonderful and Caleb is a lucky man."

"Whoa, Helen!" Jessica found herself hugging this young lady back with the same enthusiasm.

"I know I shouldn't be here. They said you needed some time alone. You aren't used to a big family like us, but I couldn't wait."

"You are so sweet! I don't mind your interrupting me."

"My momma will be angry." Helen confessed.

“We’ll keep this our secret. Now, go and get ready for the dance. I’ll see you there.” Jessica ushered her out the door.

“Miss Jessica, I love you.” Were the young girl’s parting words.

“I love you, too.” Jessica quietly mouthed. Helen had already bounded down the hallway.

Jessica shut the door and proceeded to wash up and dress for the dance. She chose a simple, black skirt and a white lacy blouse, but added a beautiful rose colored shawl to the ensemble. She put on her boots and completed one last check in the full length mirror. She was actually getting used to seeing herself in this style of clothing.

As she went downstairs to the kitchen, Jessica noticed that a silence had settled on the household. Perhaps she was the last one to go to the barn for the dance. She took a moment and looked around the simple room. Here was the heart of the house, here was where the family met and interacted with each other almost daily. She sat down at the table and rubbed her hand across the wooden surface lovingly.

A sudden memory surfaced unsolicited. She and Kyle had often sat at their small table at the end of the day. They would quietly share events from their day. When he was shipped overseas for the war, she missed that closeness. She wiped at a small tear that had escaped. Jessica had fought hard for survival when she learned of her husband’s death. The small day to day tasks became almost unbearable. She stopped sitting at the kitchen table. But, she let a little smile crease her face.

“Now, I can enjoy the specialness of a table such as this.” She was hopeful for the first time in a long time. “I won’t let myself think of the future! I will enjoy today.” She vowed.

With a renewed sense of determination, Jessica rose and quickly went to the door. As she followed the path to the barn, she could hear the strains of music already coming from within.

As she got closer, she saw several cowboys hanging just outside the open doors. The conversation quickly ceased and the men each took their hats off to acknowledge her approach. She grinned coyly and continued into the barn.

It was beautiful. The decorating job had created a magical atmosphere with all the lanterns glowing brightly. The crowd of women and men were gathered at the various tables. She looked to the bandstand as she listened to the lively tune being played by several men. She found herself fascinated with the strains of the guitar, banjo, and the fiddle as they blended to make beautiful music. They were extremely entertaining without the modern-day electronics that she was used to hearing.

She saw Helen waving frantically from a nearby table. “Miss Jessica, come and sit with us!” She was immediately hushed by her mother.

“Helen, young ladies do not holler across the floor! If you’re going to participate in this dance, you’ll need to learn proper behavior!”

Jessica went and sat down with the ladies. “Helen, you look beautiful!” She watched the young girl blush at the compliment. Helen stood up and twirled herself

around showing off the special dress her mother had made.

“I love the way that makes you look more grown up. That little rose pattern is so delicate and feminine.” Jessica could see the pride Helen had in her new gown. As her words settled on the young lady, Helen straightened up to mimic a taller, more mature person.

“Miss Jessica, you’re the prettiest woman here. Oh, except for momma!” Helen added and smiled at her mother.

Hannah smiled back. To Jessica, she spoke. “You’ll have to forgive Helen. She’s done nothing but talk about this dance. It’s her first time and she’s rather excited.”

“I’m sure Helen will have a wonderful time.” She was about to ask about Caleb’s whereabouts when she sensed his presence. Slowly she turned to see him walking through the open doors. The sight of him took her breath away.

Caleb strode confidently into the room and moved straight to her side. Jessica rose to meet him. His white bib western shirt emphasized his tanned face. His hat covered up his dark unruly hair but she could see he had made an attempt to smooth it down as he removed it to greet her. His hair was still damp.

She ran her hands down the front of his shirt. She’d only seen this type of shirt in old John Wayne movies. He stilled her hands as he lowered his head to give her a sweet kiss on the cheek. She looked up into his blue, blue eyes and smiled.

“You are so handsome!” Her words had a definite effect on him and he softly spoke to Jessica.

“If you keep up your sweet talk, Jess, we’ll not stay for the dance.” He winked.

“Cousin Caleb, you are the finest looking man here.” Helen’s words were almost whispered.

He turned to give his favorite cousin a big grin. “Little Helen, you’re the prettiest girl too!”

“Are you ready to dance?” He spoke to his young cousin.

“Don’t you want to dance with Miss Jessica?” Helen was all a twitter.

“I’m sure she’ll allow you this dance.” He turned to Jessica for approval.

She shook her head in affirmation. She loved the interaction between Caleb and Helen.

Helen looked to her mother for approval. When she saw the slightest shake of her head, Helen moved to Caleb. “Cousin, I’ve never done this at a dance before.”

“Don’t worry, little one. I’ll help you.” He led her to the dance floor where several dancers were. “This is called the two-step. I know you practiced at home. Just follow my lead.” He winked at his cousin. The two started to dance across the wooden floor covered with dancers and sawdust. Helen couldn’t have smiled any bigger as Caleb moved them around. She stumbled a bit, but he quickly helped her recover.

The lively music came to a stop and the crowd applauded. The laughter and conversation added to the happiness in the room. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. As Caleb and Helen strolled over to where she was sitting, Jessica could see that the young girl was thrilled with the whole idea of being old enough to participate in the dance.

“Helen, you were wonderful!” Jessica congratulated her.

“Oh, Miss Jessica, it was grand. My cousin is the best! It’s your turn.” She turned to Caleb. “Show her how good you can dance.”

Jessica rose and moved into his open arms. In her time, she would have snuggled right up to him, but she knew it was proper to allow an arm’s length between their bodies. After their love making, this seemed silly. His knowing grin told her that his thoughts were identical to her own. As the gentlemen started their tune, Caleb guided her to the middle of the floor.

With her long skirt swishing about her ankles, Jessica moved in tune with him. It was magical and if not for the impending disaster looming in her mind, she could have danced with him endlessly.

She spent the rest of the evening in a dream-like state. Dancing and laughing with people she’d grown to love. It was fun to watch people of all ages out on the floor. But soon, as the crowd thinned, Jessica realized their night together was about to end.

The band finally signaled their last tune and those that were left, made their way to the floor. Jessica so wanted him to hold her tightly in his strong arms, but she settled for the proper closeness that was allowed for a lady of this time and day. When it was over, he bowed and took her by the elbow to lead her out the door.

“Jess, this was great! I wish it could last forever.”

She simply nodded her head. To speak would break the magic spell they were under. They walked the short distance to the house, but instead of coming in with

her, Caleb placed a tender kiss on her cheek. “I don’t trust myself to leave you alone tonight. I’m going to stay in the bunkhouse with the men.”

She understood completely. She placed her hands on his chest and smiled up at him. “Thank you, kind sir, for the best evening ever.”

“Jess, you are a vixen. I love you. I will see you in the morning.” He then placed a passionate kiss directly on her waiting lips. She felt the breath leave her body as they deepened their caress. Finally, he pulled back and tipped his hat at her as he backed away.

Jessica slowly found her way upstairs and as she removed her clothing, she found herself humming a tune from the dance. If only... she stopped her random thoughts. If only won’t happen, she sighed. With a heavy heart, she crawled between the sheets and finally fell into a deep sleep.



Thirteen

As Jessica slipped down the back stairs to the kitchen, she stopped when she heard male voices. It wasn't polite to listen, but something about the tone in their voices, tempted her to eavesdrop on the conversation between Caleb and his father.

"Son, I'm telling you something isn't right. The heat is melting the snow earlier than I've ever seen. That's what delayed us getting back with the herd. The streams are swollen and starting to exceed their banks."

Caleb didn't respond right away as his thoughts were on the words from Pakri. He knew that Jessica was a part of the strange happenings in their world. What would his father think if he tried to explain things?

"Pa, what do you think is happening?"

"I'm not sure, son. I only know that the local tribe is moving up into the mountains sooner than they normally do. I think maybe I'll have a talk with Pakri."

Their words stopped as Jessica finally stepped into the kitchen. She smiled meekly at the men and headed for the coffee on the stove. As she poured a cup, she turned and offered more to them. Both declined as

they stood, waiting for her to be seated at the kitchen table. She sat down and tried to smile, but failed.

“How are you today, Miss Jessica?” His father asked politely of her. “Did you have fun at the dance?”

“I’m fine and yes, I did enjoy the dance. How about you?”

“Well, you know us old folks left early. We can’t kick up our heels like we used to.” His voice was teasing.

“I’m not sure I’d call you old, Mr. McCaslin.” She answered, a smile finally coming upon her face.

“I think you’d better get used to calling me Pa. You’re going to be part of our family soon.” The older man reached over and patted her hand.

The deception sat heavy on her heart. I’ll never be part of this family, she thought sadly. It’s almost too much to bear. She looked to Caleb for support.

He stood, “Ready to go, Pa? Those cattle are waiting for us.” He bent down and placed a small kiss on Jessica’s cheek. “We’ll be working through the day. Will you be alright?”

She smiled weakly up at him. “I’m sure I can help your mother. I’ll be fine.” She urged him to go.

As soon as the two men left the kitchen, she got up, went to the window, and watched them go. Her spirit sank as she realized in just a few days, the dam would break and disaster would reign in the area.

“Oh, God, what to do?” She spoke aloud.

She jumped when she heard Mary’s answer. “We have a wedding to plan. That should keep us busy.”

Caleb’s mother obviously misunderstood her question. She smiled and responded with what she hoped was an appropriate answer. “Mary, we want a

small ceremony with just you and William. I don't think there's much to plan for, do you?"

"Nonsense, child, we need to get a dress ready and then we need to decide about your wedding cake. I'm sure the rest of the family will be here, too." Mary took her by the arm and steered Jessica into the parlor. "I took the liberty of gathering some of my fancier dresses. I think we can use the material and alter one of them into a beautiful gown."

"Mary, please you don't need to go to all that trouble. I have a dress that Caleb bought for me in Seymour and I haven't even worn it yet." She tried to dampen the older woman's enthusiasm, but failed as Mary took her by the arm and steered her towards the back stairs.

"Then, let's go to your room and see it."

The ladies spent the next hour looking at Jessica's dresses and apparel. They chatted about things that didn't really matter, but Jessica found herself drawing closer to Caleb's mother. They finally agreed on what Jessica would wear and Mary gathered all the clothing she would need.

"I'll get this put together right away so you can try it on. You're going to be lovely." Mary smiled grandly at her new daughter-in-law to be.

"I can't thank you enough, Mary. Is there something you want me to be doing? I find myself with time on my hands and I was never very good at that."

"No, dinner is already on the stove. Why don't you go for a ride. Caleb has told me how much you love to be out there on the land."

“Thank you, Mary. I think I will.” She followed her future mother-in-law down the stairs. As she started past Mary, the older woman reached out and put her hand on Jessica’s arm.

“Jessica, I’m so glad you and Caleb found each other. It seems you both needed to believe in love again.”

Her words hit far closer to home than the older woman would ever know. Jessica stopped her physical reaction to Mary’s words, but put a smile on her face instead. “I’m so glad that it was Caleb to find me, Mary. He is a great man and I’m very lucky.” She hoped her words would satisfy. “I’m going to go for a ride. I’ll be back in time to help with supper.”

She quickly left the kitchen and headed to the stables. As soon as she found her horse and lead Ginger out, a gnarly ranch hand welcomed her.

“Mornin’, Miss Jessica. Anythin’ I can do for you?” His crooked smile greeted her. She noticed the wrinkles in his worn face along with the smile lines around his eyes.

“No, I’m fine. I’m just going for a ride.” She reached for her saddle.

“Mr. Caleb told me to help you with anything you needed.” He took the saddle from her hands. “I don’t want the boss to be mad at me.” He chuckled like he just told a good joke.

She smiled at the older man. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

He tipped his beaten cowboy hat as he replied. “It’s Matthew, Miss, but folks just call me Smiley.”

“Well, Smiley. Glad to meet you.” She watched as he deftly saddled the patient horse. “Why do they call you that?”

“It seems that I can be friendly with anyone.”

“I can believe that. Thanks for your help.”

“Where might you be goin’?” He asked of her.

She looked a bit surprised at his question.

“Mr. Caleb will want me to know. He told me to look out for you while he’s busy with the herd.”

“I’m going to the hills over there, Smiley. If Caleb asks, tell him it’s our special place. He’ll know what I’m talking about.” She mounted Ginger and prodded her into action.

As she rode across the pasture and towards the mountains, Jessica reflected about the serenity and beauty of her surroundings. If only I could present this as one of my day trips, she thought. On one hand, it seemed like forever since she’d had a car, a cell phone, and all the modern conveniences of her life. On the other hand, she felt a peace and tranquility, in this world and time that she had never experienced in her own. The idea that this would appeal to others settled on her as she slowly made her way to the mountains.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn’t hear the rider coming up behind her until Helen called out to her. “Miss Jessica! Wait up!”

“Helen, how wonderful to see you.” She reined her horse and waited for the younger girl to catch up.

“Can I ride with you?” Helen asked shyly.

“Of course, I would love the company.” They turned their horses to ride side by side up the trail. “Helen, does your mother know where you are?” Her curiosity

was peaked when she noticed Helen looking back at the ranch.

“She said I could take a short ride.” Helen paused and then added, “I’m not sure what she considers a short ride.”

Jessica laughed out loud. “Young lady, you are a free spirit, aren’t you?”

“Momma says I’m a handful.” Her words were spoken with a certain amount of pride. “I want to know about everything and she says I make her tired with all my questions.”

“I can believe that, Helen. But I have to be honest, I find your directness very refreshing. Don’t ever change that.”

“Are we going to the bluff?” Helen noticed the direction they were heading.

“Yes, I find that it is a very good place to do some thinking and today I need to refresh my mind.” She pushed Ginger into a faster pace. Soon the two were laughing and giggling as they raced up the mountainside.

Once arriving at the bluff, Jessica noticed that the day was warmer than she could remember in any other February. She lifted her face to the sun and let the warm rays shine on her skin.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Helen was gazing down at the fields below them. “I love this place. I’m so glad Cousin Caleb showed this to me. Miss Jessica, what do you need to think about?”

Oh, the innocence of youth, Jessica thought as she looked to her companion. Not sure how to answer her, Jessica got down from her horse and walked to the

rock. Once seated, she took a deep breath. When Helen sat down beside her, Jessica turned her attention to her new young friend.

“Helen, I’m not sure how to answer you. I know you’re a very smart young lady but some things are not so easy to comprehend.”

“I know that you and my cousin care very deeply for each other. I can see it in the way you two look at one another. I know that you’ve just appeared in our lives and that is a little hard to understand. I know that Pakri has spoken some words of why you are here and that has some people... some people a little concerned.” She suddenly looked to Jessica, afraid that she had spoken out of turn.

“Helen, it’s okay. When you’re friends, you can speak honestly and frankly.” She patted the hand of her young friend.

“Momma doesn’t gossip. Please understand that.”

“I do. Go on.” Jessica encouraged her.

“I’ve heard my father and momma talking late at night when they think I’m asleep. The weather is not as it should be, the Indians are moving up above the dam, and you appeared in our lives. It seems to be one of the legends that we’ve heard about is coming true. Does that make any sense?” Helen seemed relieved to be able to talk about it with her.

“Helen you are so much wiser than your young years.” Jessica sighed. “I don’t fully understand all the events that have lead up to me being here, but I want you to know that your cousin has helped me with my life. Until I met him, I had forgotten what it was like to

love and be loved.” She smiled with the warmth that information made her feel.

Helen sighed. “That makes me feel so much better. I love my cousin and I wouldn’t want to see him hurt again. When he lost his wife, it was so hard for him.”

“I can assure you, Helen, that I would never deliberately hurt Caleb. Just like you, I don’t understand all that is happening. I’ve talked with Pakri, too, and it just confused me even more.” Jessica realized that she couldn’t tell this wonderful youth much more. Once again, fate had dealt her an unfair hand.

Just then they both heard the hoof beats of an approaching rider. Helen was the first to recognize their visitor.

“Cousin!” She jumped up to greet Caleb.

“I knew I’d find you here.” He jumped from his horse just in time to greet her, the surprise showing on his handsome features.

Jessica rose from her seat and found it hard to keep the huge smile from spreading across her face.

He held Helen’s hand and crossed the small few feet to come up to Jessica and greet her. He cocked his hat back on his head and bent down to place a small, discreet kiss on her cheek.

She wanted so much more.

“Caleb.” Her voice was little more than a whisper. “What are you doing here?” She tried to bring reason and reality back to their situation.

“I took a break. I told Pa that I needed to check on my bride-to-be and he agreed. I think he thinks I’ve

lost my sanity.” He kept her close by wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

Helen giggled. “Cousin, you are crazy!” The three of them joined in for a good laugh.

“I know you two would like to stay here, but I think that we should go. It’s almost supper time and I’m sure your mother needs your help.” He spoke specifically to Helen.

Instantly Helen showed remorse. “I shouldn’t have been gone so long! Ma depends on me.” She hurried over to her horse and mounted. “Come on, you two. I’m in enough trouble!”

As they rode down the mountain, side by side, Helen chatted away. She didn’t reveal any of the serious conversation the two ladies had on the mountain, but instead related anecdotes about her siblings. Once down on the plain, she turned to the couple.

“I have to go. Thank you so much, Jessica. I enjoyed our time together.” She waved and spurred her horse into action, galloping off towards the ranch.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Caleb turned to Jessica. “I thought I’d find you alone. I wanted some time with you.”

She laughed at his admission. “She just showed up. I can’t seem to refuse her.”

“Well, it’s probably for the best.” He admitted. They continued their short ride to the ranch. As they dismounted, Smiley came to get their horses.

“Thanks, Smiley. I found her.” Caleb handed the reins to the older cowboy.

He helped Jessica down and together they walked toward the back of the house. Before they got too close, he stopped Jessica and gave her a proper kiss. She reveled in his touch. She had been waiting for this.

“I should get back and finish helping Pa. Are you going to be alright?” His reluctance to leave her was evident.

She put her hands on his chest and felt his heart beating hard. “Caleb, let’s just enjoy these moments, even if they’re short and not very private. I understand.”

“Damn! I just want to hold you and love you, Jess.”

“Go, Cowboy! A man’s work needs to be done.” She gently pushed him away. She went into the kitchen and started helping Mary with supper preparations. It was just shortly after dark when the two men stomped their way into the room. Supper was an informal meal at the small table and conversation was mostly about catching up on the day’s events. Jessica thoroughly enjoyed the banter between Mary and William. It gave her a warm feeling deep in her heart to be a part of such a loving family.

She felt Caleb’s stare before she turned to lock eyes with her handsome cowboy. “What?” She questioned him.

“Just looking at you, Jess.” Her hair was in its usual curly disarray and she went to run her hand to try and smooth it into some order.

“Don’t.” His voice was soft. “I like it like that.”

“You two need to go into the parlor. Your father and I will clean up the kitchen.” Mary shooed them out of the room.

Caleb led the way and when they got into the privacy of the small room, he turned to take her into his arms. Their kiss was long and he savored her soft lips. “Ma knows I need some time with you. She’s so wise.”

They sat on the small settee and cuddled up together. Words weren’t needed as they shared a private moment. She valued this side of their new relationship. He was a man of few words, but she felt she knew what he was thinking and feeling by his calm, gentle demeanor.

“Caleb, do you have to work tomorrow with your father?”

“I do, Jess. I wish I had some time for us, but life on the ranch is always busy. After Pa takes the herd south, we can have some time for us.” He spoke with hope.

The heavy truth was there once again between them. They couldn’t have time. Their time together was growing short. “Caleb, it’s probably best that we can’t be together.” She smiled a knowing grin. “I would want to do unspeakable things with you and we both know that it wouldn’t be proper.”

“Oh, you are so unlike any woman I’ve ever known. I love that you say what’s on your mind.” He kissed her once again, but released her as he heard footsteps in the hall.

Mary peeked her head around the doorway. “Son, we’re going to bed. We’ll see you two in the morning.” His mother smiled warmly.

“I think that’s her hint. I need to get some rest and so should you.” He rose and helped her to her feet.

Caleb walked her to the stairs.

“You’re not coming up?” Jessica asked bravely.

“Oh, sweet lady, you don’t know how badly I would love to do just that.” He cupped her face and lowered his head for a final sweet kiss. “I will see you in the morning.”

Once again, Jessica spent a restless night. It had cooled down with darkness falling, but she could still feel the tension in her body. In the middle of the night, she got up and sat at the window seat, staring out at the ranch below. The sky was full of stars. The night was dark even though there were few clouds and the sounds of the ranch life were drifting through to her. She could hear the snicker of horses in the corral and the screech of a night owl as it searched for food.

Jessica was unsure of the next noise to reach her ears. She waited again and then she realized it was a soft knock at her door. Without a doubt, she knew it was Caleb. She crossed the room quickly and pulled it open. He stood there with a sheepish grin on his face. Just as fast, she ushered him into her room.

“Do you think I’m weak?” He asked with embarrassment.

“Never! I think you’re a man in love.” She pulled him to her and shut the door at the same time. “I couldn’t sleep,” She stated the obvious.

“Can I stay?”

“Of course!” She went to her bed and patted the space beside her. As he sat down, she lifted her gown above her head and suddenly she heard his groan.

“God, I love you!” He quickly stripped off his clothes and soon they were snuggled closely in the same feather bed. Their naked bodies were hungry for

each other and after satisfying their needs, they lay there just enjoying the moment.

“Please stay.” She asked. “Just for a little while.”

“I will. Jessica, in just a few days we’ll wed. I can’t wait to take you to our home.” He stopped as he felt her withdrawal.

“Caleb, you know as I do, that we’ll have to deal with that all in good time.”

“I know, my love, I know.”

They fell asleep together but when morning dawned, Jessica found herself alone. She rubbed her hand over the indentation his body had left on the mattress. He’s a good man, she thought proudly to herself.

The next day went very much the same as the previous. She helped Mary in the kitchen until mid-afternoon. Smiley greeted her at the barn and saddled her horse. Helen found her riding up to the mountain bluff where they spent much of the afternoon. They headed down the hill at dusk just in time to help with the supper preparations. Caleb and his father came in for their evening meal and after that the young couple sat in the parlor.

When they parted company at the bottom of the stairs, Jessica knew she would see him later. Her knowing grin gave him reason to hesitate, but after a short struggle with his conscience, he found himself making the trip up the back steps to her room.

She greeted him at her door. “Love, I’m glad you came.”



Fourteen

The crash of thunder caused her to sit straight up in bed. She turned to see that Caleb had already left her side. Her pulse pounded so hard that she could feel her heart beating in her head. It's started, she thought miserably. It rained for three days prior to the failure of the dam according to the information her friend had given her before her mysterious trip to this era. God, it seemed like an eternity and yet it was only a few weeks ago.

She quickly dressed and hurried downstairs. It was barely daylight, but the coffee had been made. As she poured herself a cup of the hot brew, Mary came into the room.

"Did it wake you, too?" She hustled about the room, straightening things.

"Oh, yes. I was sound asleep. Where's the men?"

"They'll be making sure the herd is under control. They can't do anymore branding, but there's plenty for them to take care of. You might as well try to go back to sleep. They'll be here for lunch perhaps."

"Mary, I don't think I can sleep. Isn't there some way I could help?" She couldn't sit, but instead paced about the room. As the two women were talking,

Jessica was aware of the rain pounding down on the tin roof of the house. She looked out the kitchen window only to see the dark, ominous clouds pouring water over their world. "I'm not used to sitting still. I run my own business and am constantly going. What can I do?"

Mary thought for a minute. "One of the things that never gets done on a ranch is the repairs to equipment. How are you as handling the needs of the tack room?"

"The tack room?" Jessica was intrigued.

"Yes, on rainy days, Caleb spends time in the tack room repairing bridles, saddles, and such. There are always things that need stitched up. You may find him there." She watched the glee cross Jessica's fine features.

"That I can do! Where is the tack room?" She jumped up and went to the mud room. She reached for her coat.

"Here!" Mary handed her a rain slicker and older, well-worn boots. "No sense in getting your fancy boots all dirty. You can wear my old work boots. Do you have a hat?"

"I don't normally wear one. You can't really hurt these curls." She laughed.

"You'll need to keep the rain from soaking down your back. Put this on to get to the tack room." Mary handed her what looked like an old gardening hat with a wide brim.

Jessica gladly put the straw hat on her head, anything to get out and do something constructive. Mary gave her the instructions on which path to take

to find the tack room and within minutes was on her way in the pouring rain to find her goal.

It wasn't hard to find the right building. The door was already open and when she stepped inside she found a room full of saddles, bridles, and other leather objects. She could see Caleb sitting at a bench, working diligently on the stirrups of a saddle. He held what looked like a huge needle and was methodically pulling a long leather strand through each hole on the equipment.

She stood there just marveling at his skill. She'd seen this man ride a huge ferocious animal, cook a pot of stew, sew her own injury and now he was using those wonderful hands to fix much needed ranch gear.

He must have sensed her presence, because he raised his head to glance her way. "Jessica! What a pleasant surprise. What are you doing here?"

"I have a huge problem just sitting around. With this weather I found myself going crazy. Your wonderful mother pointed me in this direction. Can I help?" She came closer to the stool he was perched on and ran her hand through his disheveled hair. His hat was hanging on a peg just behind the door.

"If you do that, lady, I don't think we'll get much work done." His voice was heavy with desire.

She stilled her hand and stepped just inches away. "You're right. I came to work, not play." She teased.

His laughter was rich, but he accepted her answer. "Have you done much sewing?"

"I can't say that I have, but I'm up for my first lesson. Can you show me what to do?"

Caleb grabbed what looked like a leather pouch. “Let’s start with something simple. This is used to hold small tools, but years of use have allowed some holes to develop. I need for you to just sew up these holes.” He poked his finger through the corner of the bag to demonstrate what he meant.

They worked together for hours, stitching and talking and laughing side by side. She picked up the work like she’d been born to it. It was fun and she loved the companionship between the two of them.

“Do you feel like tackling something harder?” He stood up and waited patiently for her to answer.

“Sure! What do you have in mind?” She appreciated his vote of confidence in her newfound abilities.

He went to the far wall and grabbed a saddle. It was heavy but he handled it with the ease of a man used to such tasks. He brought the saddle to a wooden stand near their bench. He pulled it over to fit between them. “This was supposed to be a gift for Helen. I just never got time to finish it. She always borrows one of the stable saddles, but I thought she would appreciate having her own.”

“Did you make this?” She marveled as she ran her hand over the soft, tooled leather. “It’s beautiful! You are the most talented man I know.”

Her compliment embarrassed him as a red flush crept up his handsome face. He stood and reached for a bag of leather tools on the top shelf of the bench. “Would you like to try?”

They were in the middle of Caleb showing her how to create special markings in the leather when Mary

showed at the door. “Are you two ready for some lunch? Jessica didn’t even take time for breakfast.”

“Ma, please come in out of that rain.” Caleb rose and took the picnic basket out of her hand. “Wow, what’d you put in here? It smells delicious.”

“It’s just my fried chicken. Don’t make a fuss.” Mary looked at the project the two had been working on. “Is that Helen’s saddle? Are you finally going to finish that for her?”

“Ma, I thought it would be a good project for Jessica and I to do together.” He put his arm around Jessica.

His mother smiled deeply. “I can remember many a rainy day when your Pa and I worked side by side. It was some of the best times of my life.” She spoke fondly.

“Mary, that smells wonderful and I am suddenly very hungry.” Jessica hesitated breaking the warm feeling in the room.

“Oh, my, here you two find a clean place and enjoy.” Mary started to leave.

“Mary, we want you to join us.” She turned to Caleb. “Mister, find your mother some place to sit.” He laughed at her order.

They spent the next little bit, eating and talking. Mary related several stories about Caleb when he was a lot younger and soon the three of them were laughing together. Presently Mary stood up and started cleaning up the remnants of their impromptu picnic. “I’ve got to get back and get supper started. William went to help his brother take care of some sick calves. He’ll be well fed over there, but he always seems to have a great appetite when he gets home.”

Jessica marveled at the way this wonderful woman was so dedicated to the care of her man. She remembered her own mother and father and their caring loving relationship. It seemed like Kyle and she never had the time for that sort of attention. His military life was always in the forefront. They spent a lot of their time together saying goodbye and hello with little else in between.

“Ma, thank you so much for thinking of us. You know I always love your fried chicken.” Caleb walked her to the door.

The rain was still coming down in buckets. Jessica looked forlornly to the darkened skies. Her heart was as heavy as the rain in the atmosphere. She knew without a doubt that history was accurate and the dam would break as reported in the papers in 1890.

“Jess?” She heard the confusion in Caleb’s voice. She shook herself out of the stupor she was in and turned to face him. “Jess, Ma is leaving.”

“I’m sorry. Mary, thank you for thinking of us. I was famished and your chicken was absolutely delicious.” She leaned over and put a small peck on the older woman’s cheek.

“You’re so sweet. I couldn’t possibly let you starve. If it was up to this one, you’d never get a break.” She joked about her son’s hard working tendencies. “I’ll see you two later. I’ll leave supper on the stove in case you get distracted and he doesn’t let you have another break.” She laughed at her own joke and headed out into the downpour.

As soon as Mary disappeared down the pathway to the main house, Caleb turned and took Jessica in his

arms. "I've wanted to do that since you showed up this morning." She returned his fervor with an equal amount of energy.

They soon pulled apart reluctantly. "Caleb, if you do that again, we won't get more work done on this gift for Helen. I'm enjoying this, aren't you?" Jessica looked up at him and saw the look of love on his face.

"I'm enjoying this more." He stated and tried to pull her back into his arms. She dodged him and went around to her side of the saddle. She giggled at his look of defeat.

"Okay, I can see you are a task master. I bow to your demands for more work!" Just then the crack of thunder sounded overhead. It was so loud, that the building seemed to shake with fear.

"Caleb!" Her voice was filled with terror. He came around and took her in his strong arms. "Jess, it's okay. It can't hurt us."

"I know it can't but all this rain is going to be disastrous." She sat on the high stool beside the bench. With tears streaming down her face, Jessica looked up to the cowboy standing there in front of her. "Caleb, you know the legend. You know where this is leading." She could see by the look on his face that he had no words of comfort to give her.

Caleb turned his back and faced the open door with the rain streaming steadily down from the heavens. "Jess, we are destined to go through this together. There's nothing we can do. The story is as old as time itself." He sighed and slowly faced the woman he loved. "I wish with all my heart that I could change

this. I wish that I could save those that are going to be affected, but, Jess, you know that it's impossible."

"Is it? Is it really impossible?" She was heart sick knowing that people she had just met would be in harm's way.

He didn't answer but instead picked up his leather working tool and started patiently on the saddle. She knew that it was not something she could take care of today. She knew that she would continue to fret and worry, but for now, she needed to keep busy. Jessica picked up her awl and began work on her side of the saddle.

"Shouldn't both sides of this saddle match?" She suddenly realized.

"Think of Helen." Caleb stated laughingly. "She is so unique. I think this saddle should reflect that wonderful personality of hers, don't you?"

She suddenly laughed and the dark cloud hanging over her temporarily lifted. "You're right! It would be so like Helen to be different. I love that idea."

The rain continued and with a sudden realization, Jessica shivered. It was definitely getting cooler and her jacket was no longer keeping her warm. Caleb noticed the movements and stopped his work. He went to the pot belly stove in the middle of the room and stoked the dying embers. He added some wood and quickly the fire was blazing.

"That'll warm you."

"You're so thoughtful. Thank you." She smiled at him.

They worked well past dark. Both of them seemed determined to keep their depressed thoughts at bay.

The saddle was coming along and Caleb was confident that Helen would finally get her gift.

As Jessica stretched her aching back and finally stood up, Caleb was joining her. "It's time, pretty lady. We can call it a night and go get some supper."

She got up and put her hat on. Caleb grabbed his from the peg and together they dashed out into the still pouring rain. It was now forming puddles all over the path to the house. They tried to miss the water, but failed and by the time they reached the mud room, both were soaked.

Laughing and dripping, they removed their boots and coats before entering the warm kitchen. Caleb went over to the hot stove and stood next to it to warm his hands. "Ma left us some stew. I'm starving. Are you?"

"Yes. That sounds good." Jessica grabbed the bowls from the sideboard and together they filled them. Caleb took some biscuits from the basket and they sat at the table.

"Mmmm, this is delicious. I hate to tell you but I'm not as good a cook as your mother." She teased.

"I'm sure you're a fine cook." He looked at her.

They ate their meal and then as Jessica yawned, Caleb announced it was time for bed. She went to the back steps and turned to see if he was following.

"I want to, Jess. I'm not sure it's a good idea." He stood in the middle of the kitchen.

"Caleb, I think we need to savor the time we have, don't you?"

He didn't answer but instead came across the room and with his hand on her back, together they climbed

up the steps. Once in her room, Caleb shut the door quietly and stood just inside. The fireplace had been lit and the room was bathed in a warm glow. Time seemed to stand still as they stood face to face looking at each other.

Jessica moved first. By the firelight, Jessica slowly removed her damp clothes. He watched with a tempered desire, not missing the passion lighting her eyes. She was soon standing there bare for him to see. He took a deep, steadying breath before moving closer to her.

She waited until he was close and then reached up to stroke his face. His eyes lit up at her touch. He was hesitant to move and found he didn't need to when she started to undo the snaps on his shirt. It wasn't a hurried motion, rather a slow, sensuous one-at-a-time movement. Unwilling to break the spell, Caleb savored her being in control of the moment. Not long after his shirt was gone and when she started on the pants, he helped.

Soon they were both ready for a faster pace. They found themselves in the bed and in a hurry unleashed their hunger. She was a woman that actively participated in their love making. He found himself totally mesmerized with her.

As they lay there in the aftermath, Jessica cuddled into the crook of his arm. She couldn't tell if it was her heart beating so hard or his, but didn't even care. Caleb had opened her heart and for that she was grateful.

He moved a bit and she started. "Please stay."

“Jess, I wasn’t going anywhere. I was just going to put more logs on the fire before we fall asleep.” He kissed the top of her head.

She stared without shame as he walked across the floor and stoked the fire. His body was muscular and she enjoyed the view as he put another log on to burn. He turned to come back to the bed, and noticed her look.

“You are an incredible woman, Jessica Mayfield.” The bed shifted as he added his weight to the mattress. He leaned over and gave her a lingering kiss. They soon settled down for the night to the sound of the drumming rain.

When she awoke, she found the same empty spot on his side of the bed. She grinned with the knowledge that they had shared a wonderful night together. Not one to waste time, Jessica rose and dressed warmly for another day in the tack room. She hoped that the rain had ceased in the night, but she quickly realized that her wish would go unfulfilled.

Hurrying down the back steps, Jessica found Mary in the kitchen as usual. “There you are, young lady. Here’s the coffee.” Mary handed her a steaming cup. “Are you ready for another day of saddle making?”

“You bet! I really enjoyed learning how to work with leather. I’m sure I am not as good as Caleb, but creating a beautiful gift for Helen is very rewarding.” She sipped on the hot liquid.

“I know my son is enjoying the time with you. Helen will love the effort and the gift. Jessica, just value the time you two have together. I always try to make the best of my time with my William.” Her words

were meant to comfort, but Jessica was a bit suspicious that Mary knew more than she was letting on about events yet to come.

“Mary, I want to thank you for welcoming me into your home. I know this whole situation must be very strange for you.”

“Life is unpredictable, Jessica. I only know that we need to enjoy one day at a time.” Mary patted her on the back.

“Thank you, I intend to do just that.” Jessica started to bundle up for her short journey to the tack room. As she stepped out into the drizzling rain, Jessica looked skyward. The shower was still coming down but it had slowed for the moment. She covered the soaked ground to the tack room and burst through the open door.

“There you are, sleepy head. I hoped you slept well.” He grinned wickedly.

She went over to him and kissed him deeply on the lips. He hugged her tightly. When they finally parted, they were both breathing hard. “You are a magnificent man, Mister.” She could hardly speak the words for the passion flowing through her veins.

His words came out short. “I think we need to get busy on this saddle, lady.”

She laughed at his diversion. “Okay, I get the hint.” She took off her overcoat and sat at her stool. Once she got the tools necessary, Jessica started on her side of the saddle. They worked for several hours before taking a break. Finally he stood up and stretched his aching muscles. He walked over to the pot belly stove and reached for the pot of coffee.

“Are you ready for a break?” He lifted the pot, waiting for her to acknowledge his offer.

“Yes, I am sore from sitting here so long. It’s too bad we can’t take a ride.” She walked to the open door and stared out at the falling rain.

“Who says we can’t?” Caleb came up behind her and pulled her to him. “How brave are you?”

She grinned at him. “I’m game. Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s go see my home. I haven’t been there in a very long time and I’d like for you to see it.”

“Are you sure? Do you really want me to see where you lived with Emily?” She was unsure how she felt about this development but was willing to go.

“Yes, let’s go.” His answer was stated matter-of-factly, leaving her guessing what his true feelings were.

She grabbed her overcoat and her hat. Caleb handed her the rain slicker before putting on his own. They trudged over to the stables and Smiley helped them saddle their horses.

“Are you two sure about going into the rain?” He finally questioned them.

She looked to Caleb for the answer. “Smiley, we’ll be back later. Thanks.” He offered no more explanation.

The rain continued at a slow, steady pace as they rode off into the fields. She followed his lead and kept her head down to keep the moisture from soaking down her back. It was exhilarating to be out in the wild. She felt that Caleb was as excited as she was to be enjoying the outdoors as he soon spurred his horse into a gallop. She responded in kind and soon they headed closer to the mountains.

He turned along the edge of the hills and followed it along for quite some time. She turned to see the main house and outbuildings disappear. She had no idea how far they would go, but was just relishing the ride. It wasn't long before he made a turn up into the edge of the trees. She strained to see where they were headed, but the thickness of the forest made that impossible.

The rain was somewhat blocked by the canopy of the pines and for that she was grateful. The damp, musty smell of the trees, the lack of sounds from the birds, and the only sound of their horses footfalls alerted her senses. She took a deep, cleansing breath and found herself relaxing for the first time in several days.

Before she knew it, they entered a small clearing. In the center of the space was a single level, small ranch style house. She marveled at the simple beauty of the structure. She saw Caleb slow his horse down and he waited for her to come by his side.

"It's been a long time." Was all he said.

She felt there was a lot of emotion in that statement. He rode to the hitching post located just at the front door. As he dismounted, she hesitated. "Are you sure we should do this?"

"Jess, I want you to see my home." He helped her dismount and together they walked up the few steps onto the front porch. He turned to point out some of the features of the homestead.

"That is obviously the barn. That smaller building is the tack room. I stopped developing my place after Emily died. I did all my work at the main ranch, so it

only made sense to live there.” His words sounded sad but she could tell he had accepted the circumstances of his life. It was pretty much the same with her life after losing her husband. It took a long time to move on but once she’d adjusted, she founded her day trip business and worked on making her apartment a home.

“Why don’t you go inside. I want to make sure everything is all right in the barn.” He walked to the front door and pushed it open.

“It’s not locked?” She was surprised.

He looked at her with amusement showing in his eyes. “Why are earth would I lock my door?”

It was just another reminder of the differences in their worlds. She would never think of leaving her front door open and unlocked. “Never mind, Cowboy!”

She stepped through the open door while he headed back down the stairs and went over to the barn. The room was rather dark so she left the front door open. It was a great room with the kitchen area on one side and the living room on the other. The room was clean but showed signs of neglect, like no one had been in there for a very long time.

She walked to the small kitchen table and ran her hand over the layer of dust that had settled there. She saw that everything was in order but sadness was prevalent in the huge room. She turned to see the stairs on the far end leading to a loft area. That must have been their bedroom.

I feel like an intruder, she thought sadly. This was where he lived with his wife, where they cooked, and shared the events of their short life together. The shelves above the small wood burning stove held

dishes, pots and pans, and other kitchen utensils. It was modest, but functional. She could see Caleb and herself living in this simple home. They would sit in front of the fire after a hard day's work mulling over life's moments.

She crossed the room to come in front of the fireplace. The space was huge with a metal arm holding a cast iron cooker. Some of the cooking would be done here, she thought. I don't consider myself much of a cook, but I guess I'd learn. There didn't seem to be many personal items around the room. In her own apartment there were plenty of pictures of her and Kyle. She caught herself wondering when photography was available to the average person. It obviously wasn't part of the lives of these people in this area.

Suddenly Jessica shivered and realized that during their ride, she had gotten a bit wet. She bent down and found a match and proceeded to light the logs waiting on the grate. It took several attempts, but soon the fire started and she grinned at her accomplishment.

She sat down on the settee placed in front of the burning fire. As she settled back into the couch, she heard Caleb stomping his boots on the front porch. She waited for him to enter, anxious for his presence in this room.

"Jess, are you okay?" His voice was tentative.

"Come, sit here and get warm." She patted the space next to her. He came slowly and sat down beside her.

"Are you okay?" He repeated.

“I feel sad. I know this house and these rooms were very special to you and Emily. I almost feel like an intruder.” She leaned over to cuddle into him.

“It took a long time for me to return here, but when I finally did, I felt those very same feelings.” He paused. “Jess, I wanted to share this with you. I know that Emily would approve. She wouldn’t want this place sitting here unused and rotting away.”

Jessica sighed. “I think you might be right. Caleb, it’s a lovely home and you can be proud of it.”

They sat there for a while when Jessica realized that the rain outside was starting to come down harder. “Caleb, I think we need to start back. We’re going to be soaked.”

He placed a tender kiss on her head. “Let’s go.”

They mounted their horses and in a downpour, headed back to the main ranch house. There was no time for talking, just riding hard and fast.



Fifteen

As the morning dawned, Jessica lay in bed thinking over the previous day's events. They had gotten back to the house in time to have supper with his mother and father. The conversation circled around the rain and the lack of work on the ranch. His father was more than upset and all of them spent the entire meal trying to calm him down. William even referred to the lake filling and expressed concerns about the dam's stability. For reasons she couldn't explain, Jessica felt guilty about the trouble falling on the McCaslin homestead. She knew it wasn't logical, but emotions seldom are.

When it came time for bed, Caleb made excuses that he was needed elsewhere and she spent her first night alone since arriving at the ranch. Jessica resigned herself to the fact that it was probably for the best. She needed the time to gather her thoughts.

As the day dawned, she noted the rain was still coming down. She rolled over in bed and looked at the window. The sun was trying to come from behind the clouds, but it was a weak attempt at best. Begrudgingly, she finally rolled out of bed and got dressed. As she arrived in the kitchen, Jessica realized

she was alone. Mary was not in her usual place in the house.

The coffee tasted good as she looked out the window at the lack of activity on the ranch. In just one more day, the dam would collapse and havoc would reign in this region. It wouldn't affect those above the dam so much, as it would totally destroy the landscape below for miles and miles. She was deep in reverie and didn't notice Mary coming into the room.

"There you are." She greeted Jessica. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did fine." She smiled at the warmth displayed by the older woman.

"Well, I have a surprise for you. Do you feel up to trying on your wedding dress?"

Jessica was taken aback. She had almost forgotten that Mary thought a wedding was still going to happen. She knew that Mary had worked hard on the gown and she didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm. "Sure! I can't believe you're finished."

"Come, Jessica, I don't want to take a chance that Caleb could see it before the wedding." She encouraged her to follow her up the stairs to the master bedroom. "I put it in here. I know that my son won't come in here uninvited." She giggled like a young girl.

Once in the bedroom, Mary shut the door and went to the wardrobe and pulled out the beautiful dress. Jessica's mouth dropped open and she was at a lack for words.

"Do you like it?" Mary held it up for Jessica to see. What had started out as a plain, pale pink cotton dress was now a very beautiful but unpretentious wedding

gown. Mary had added a lace ruffle around the bottom of the swaying skirt. The same lace was now delicately gracing the sleeves of the bodice.

Jessica went over and ran her hand over the dress. Tears welled up in her eyes as she turned to give Mary a big hug.

“Do you like it?” Mary repeated her question.

“It’s the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen.” Jessica spoke softly.

“Put it on! We need to make sure that the ruffle isn’t too long. I wouldn’t want you to trip down the aisle!” She chuckled at her own joke.

To appease the wonderful woman standing in front of her, Jessica went behind the dressing screen and removed her own clothing. Mary handed her the gown. “Let me know when I can help you do up the buttons.”

Jessica stepped out and allowed her future mother-in-law access to fasten the back of the dress. Once done, Mary encouraged her to look at the gown in the cheval full-length mirror. She adjusted it so Jessica could see herself.

“This mirror was part of my dowry. My father bought it for me when I was betrothed to William. It will be something I’ll pass to my son and the woman he loves. Dear, I’m so glad that you are here and that my son loves you.” She took a lace handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped at the tears forming in her eyes.

As Jessica stared in disbelief at the beauty of her dress, Mary went to the wardrobe. She pulled out a delicate veil and brought it to her. “I used the rest of the lace to make this for your head covering. It may

help keep those wild curls of yours in order.” Jessica was pleasantly surprised at Mary’s teasing.

As they fastened the veil in place and Jessica turned to stare at her reflection, words escaped her. Too many emotions and confusions were churning about in her head. They both stood there for a few minutes, each caught in their own thoughts.

“Mary, you’ve done a fantastic job of sewing this for me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Just seeing you happy is enough.” Mary smiled. “Now let’s get you out of it before we get caught.” They hurried and soon the dress was safely tucked away. Once done with that, the two ladies went downstairs to the kitchen.

“You haven’t eaten. Let me make some breakfast.” Mary bustled around the room, gathering pans and ingredients.

“Mary, that’s not necessary. I want to get to the tack room. Caleb and I are almost finished with Helen’s saddle.” She walked to the mudroom and started putting on her rain gear. Before leaving though, she came back and gave Mary another big hug. “Thank you so much for all the love and care you put into my dress.”

“Jessica, I wish I could do more.” The older woman offered.

“I wish you could too.” Suddenly she felt they were talking about so much more than a dress. She turned and left before she revealed anything else. As Jessica hurried down the path to the tack room, she looked again to the darkened skies. Never in her life could she remember so much rain. The annual rainfall for the

Phoenix area was only around eight to nine inches. She couldn't be sure, but the amount of water coming down had to equal or exceed that. She shivered as she recalled the disaster that much precipitation was going to cause in just a little over 24 hours.

As she finally reached the tack room, she quietly entered to see Caleb sitting beside the saddle. He wasn't working, just sitting there in silent reverie. As he heard her footsteps on the wooden floor, he turned to greet her.

"Jess," He rose and came to hold her tightly in his arms.

She returned the embrace.

"I missed you last night." She whispered to him.

"I wanted to stay, but..." His voice was equally low and she felt him give her a light kiss on the head.

"I know. It was probably the best decision." She sighed and tried to hold the tears at bay, but a single drop slid down her cheek. He lifted her head up so he could see into her eyes.

"Jess, we can't change this, we can't change the path we're on."

"You know that it isn't going to end well, Caleb. You know the legend and you know that I am a part of that."

"Jessica, believe in our love. Don't ever forget that we will be together." He placed a tender kiss on her lips.

"I do believe, but... but Caleb I feel that I need to do something. I can't let a horrible thing happen to Diamond Lil, or the storekeeper, or Bob Brow or anyone I've met."

“Jessica, you can’t change the future, you can’t change what’s about to happen. You can’t fight destiny. Promise me that you won’t try anything.”

She took a deep breath but avoided looking directly at him.

“Jess, promise!” He pushed for her commitment.

“Okay, okay.” She acquiesced reluctantly. She wiped the tears off her face and tried to put a smile on before looking at him. She reached up and gave him a kiss.

They finally parted and turned back to their project.

“Are we ready to finish this?”

“It should only take a few more hours. We should be done today.” He ran his roughened hand over the smooth, tooled leather. His fingers traced several of the patterns cut into the rawhide. “Helen is absolutely going to love this. I can’t wait for her to see it. She’ll be so impressed that you helped.”

They worked for most of the day side by side. Jessica’s stomach finally growled loud enough to alert Caleb’s attention.

“I’m sorry, Jess. You’re probably hungry. Let’s go to the kitchen and get something to eat.” He took the tool from her hand and urged her to get up from her stool.

As they made their way through the mud and puddles, Jess reflected on their progress. “We’re almost done, aren’t we?”

“Yes, just a few last details and Helen will have the most beautiful saddle in the land. We can finish it in the morning.” They made it to the house and quickly took their coats and muddy boots off before entering the warm, cozy room. Caleb headed over to the stove and found a stew simmering on the burner.

“Ma always has something warm.” He grabbed one of the tin plates and dished out some of the warm soup for Jessica. She took the offered plate and sat down at the table. He soon joined her and they ate without speaking. She was hungry but her mind wouldn’t shut down and she found herself pushing the bowl back half eaten.

“Aren’t you hungry?” He asked.

“Caleb...” She started again. “Caleb, do you really understand what’s going to happen? Tomorrow night a disaster too huge to imagine is going to hit this area. People are going to lose their lives, their homes, everything!”

“Jessica, I’m a simple man, living in a simple place and time. I’ve heard the stories since I was young and I honestly don’t know what to think. I just can’t imagine what you’re talking about.” He looked at her directly and spoke very seriously. “Jess, you can’t change what’s going to happen. We can’t control the weather and nature.”

“Do you really believe that? Do you think that we should just sit here and do nothing?” Her voice was strained heavy with despair.

He put his hand over hers. The air was heavy with emotion. He shook his head. “I don’t know what to say.”

It’s too much to ask of him, she thought sadly. He doesn’t truly understand that the dam failure will change this area and their lives forever. “Caleb, it’ll be fine. I think I’m ready for bed. I know it’s early, but I’m tired.”

He rose and escorted her to the back stairs. “I think it’s best if I go and check the stock.” He gave her a small peck on the cheek. She looked into his eyes for a moment and tried to smile. “Jess, it’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

She slowly took the steps to her room. She shut the door and went to light the lamp on the dresser by the window. As Jessica looked out, she tried to see Caleb walking in the rain towards the barn. The sky was dark but she could just barely make out his silhouette in the distance. His shoulders were slumped against the shower and the cold wind. Her heart was heavy with the burden she was carrying and it appeared that he was just as upset about their situation.

Jessica undressed and crawled into bed. The sheets were cold as she snuggled down into the feather mattress. Her mind wouldn’t shut down. The only sound was the rain hitting the tin roof of the house. At home, she always had the sounds of the cars and the city to go to sleep with, but she suddenly realized that she was getting used to the wonderful silence of this rural setting.

Despite her troubles, she fell asleep almost right away. Her dreams were not pleasant and she soon found herself waking suddenly. Jessica got up and went to the small desk in the corner. She lit the single candle before finding paper and a fountain pen. The ink well was right in front of her and Jessica dipped the pen into the dark liquid. It took a few attempts but she finally got the hang of it and started penning her thoughts.

As she folded the paper in half and placed it on the desk, Jessica felt a calm settle down upon her being. With a lighter heart, she snuggled back in the bed and settled into a peaceful slumber.

The morning dawned and as Jessica rose, she went to the basin and washed the sleep from her face. She dressed and found her way down to the kitchen. Mary greeted her with a cup of coffee and a smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, yes, I did.”

Mary turned to stare out the window. “All this rain can’t be good. William is more worried than I’ve ever seen him.”

At a loss for words, Jessica just reached over and hugged the woman beside her. “Mary, we’ll be alright.”

“I know, dear, I just can’t help but worry about him.”

Jessica sighed, put down her coffee cup and went to the mudroom to dress for outside. She took one final glance into the kitchen and smiled weakly at Mary still standing at the window.

As Jessica stepped out into the dark, stormy day, she looked to the sky and was not surprised to see the sun trying to peek out between the clouds. She hurried to the tack room and went to Caleb for a hug. “Hey, cowboy, how are you doing?”

“I’m much better now that you’re here.” He returned her hug with fervor. “We should be done this morning. Look at the finishing touches I gave her saddle.” He proudly showed his handiwork to Jessica.

“Caleb, it’s absolutely beautiful!” She rubbed her hand over the supple leather. “What’s left for me to do?”

He handed her a small punch tool. “It’s tradition that the creator signs their work. Put your initials or a symbol on the saddle.”

She chuckled. “Caleb, you’re the one that made this gorgeous saddle. I only helped a little.”

“Jessica, that’s not true. Without your talent, I would’ve never finished it. Look, there’s my mark.” He pointed to some initials carved on the side of the saddle horn. She marveled at the letters ‘CMc’ etched into the leather. She ran her fingertip lovingly over the familiar initials.

“Can I put my mark here next to yours?” She asked shyly. “I don’t want to take away from yours.”

He came to stand beside her. “Jess, it’s only fitting that you make your mark next to mine. We’re going to be together forever.”

She looked up into his trusting, blue eyes. He saw her hesitation. “Jessica, you have to believe. No matter what happens, we will be together. Look into my eyes and believe what I say. It’s in the legend. We are part of history and our destinies are entwined. Now put your mark next to mine.”

She turned and used the tool to make a small heart right next to his initials. It fit. He marveled at the skill she showed handling the leather tool. He reached for the tin of oil sitting on the shelf and rubbed it into the newly carved symbols.

“What is that?” She asked of him.

“It’s oil pressed in California from olive trees. It’s necessary to keep the leather supple and this oil seems to work best in our climate.” She watched in fascination as he gently rubbed the oil into the freshly cut leather.

As he worked diligently with the final touches, Jessica moved about the room. She started straightening the shelves and moving things in a more orderly fashion. It was dusty, dirty work but she felt a sense of accomplishment when Caleb came to stand beside her and comment. “Wow! This place certainly looks much better. I think I can actually find a bridle when I need it. You’re wonderful, Jess.”

“It’s getting late and I think I need to go and see if your mother needs my help.” She avoided looking at him as she spoke.

“Sure, go. My Ma will love any help you can give her. I’ll finish up here and come to the house for supper.” He kissed her and sent her on her way. Jessica took one long look before heading out the door into the cold, damp weather. She gave a huge sigh and slowly headed up to the house.

As she stepped into the mudroom, she peeked around the door to see if Mary was in the kitchen. Jessica let out a sigh of relief when she realized the room was empty. Hurrying up the back stairs, she made her way to her bedroom. Moving just as quickly, she found her old jeans and shirt and put them on. She grabbed the cowboy hat that Caleb had given her and placed it on her unruly curls. Before, leaving the room, Jessica took the letter she had written and placed it directly on the bed. She grabbed the rain slicker before

heading back down the steps. Once again she moved silently so as to not disturb anyone in the house.

Once outside, Jessica practically ran to the barn. She had hoped to get her horse without anyone seeing her, but Smiley was in the barn.

“Miss Jessica, can I help you?” He stopped his task and approached.

“Smiley, could you help me saddle Ginger?”

“Where in the world could you be going in weather as bad as this?” He didn’t see his query as intrusive or none of his business. If he was confused by her appearance, he kept his opinions to his self.

“I’d appreciate your help, Smiley.” She avoided answering his question.

“Sure thing, Missy.” He didn’t question her further.

Without delay Jessica was mounted and headed out of the barn. She encouraged her horse down the lane from the main house. There was little activity due to the deluge but what few men were out, didn’t pay her any attention. Her heart was beating hard in her chest and she knew she had to get out of sight before Caleb was aware that she was gone.

She spurred her horse into a gallop and was heading to the south along the path they first came to when they arrived at the homestead all those days ago. Jessica hoped she could find her way in this strange time and land. With her day trip business, she was used to having GPS and familiar landmarks to guide her customers to their destination. Without that technology, she prayed her own skills wouldn’t fail her now.

There was still plenty of daytime left for her to at least reach the lower dam site and hopefully Seymour before disaster would hit those areas. She knew she would have to push her horse and herself to the limit, but she was determined to save lives if she could. The rain eased a bit and she silently thanked the heavens.

When she came to a swollen stream, Jessica had the sudden realization that the entire area would be soaked. What had been a small trickling brook was now a danger to anyone attempting to cross. She paused in her trek, looking up and down the swiftly flowing water to see if there was a safer, narrower way to traverse the obstacle in her path. Taking a deep breath, she pulled her hat lower on her head and urged Ginger into the stream. Her horse didn't want to cooperate but as Jessica pressed her on, Ginger moved forward into the angry, rolling waters.

The wind started to pick up and she pulled her slicker tighter around her to protect herself from the stinging rain. Ginger stumbled and Jessica's heart pounded hard in her chest. She was more than halfway across and knew she was now committed to making it to the other side.

Caleb was still in the tack room when Smiley came in to deliver more gear that needed repair. "Thanks, Smiley, I was running out of things to do." He laughed sarcastically.

"I bet Miss Jessica will help you when she gets back from her ride." He put the halters in a pile on a bench and started to leave when Caleb stopped him.

"What do you mean?" He questioned the older man; all of his senses were on alert.

“She took her horse and rode out.” He didn’t seem to realize that this was not the news Caleb wanted to hear.

“Damn!” Caleb didn’t explain but hurried up to the main house. He went straight to Jessica’s room and when he pushed open the door, his eyes fell right on the letter in the middle of her bed. His heart sank and for a moment he was frozen in place. Slowly he reached for the yellowed paper lying on the bed. He hesitated before opening the sheets to read.

‘Dearest Caleb, I have never broken a promise and it pains me deeply to do so now. If we’re going to have any kind of a decent life together, I have to do what my heart and conscience guide me to do. That dam is going to fail and all the wonderful folks I have met below that structure will be impacted. Some will die, others will be seriously hurt and all will lose their very way of life. I will be back as soon as I get the message out to the people down below. Forgive me. Love, Jessica.’

His heart sank and he cursed aloud. Jumping into action, Caleb flew from her room, down the stairs and only hesitated a moment to grab his rain gear before heading to the stables. He quickly saddled his stallion and leaped into action. He spurred his spirited horse down the lane and prayed he would be in time to stop her. She didn’t have much of a head start thanks to Smiley.

Jessica breathed a sigh of relief when she finally reached the other side of the swollen stream. Once again the dreaded rain had started to come down even harder as she tried to find a tall, cottonwood tree to get

under for a moment. “Sorry, Ginger, I know this isn’t fun.” She patted her horse. She stayed under the tree for a few minutes to gather her wits and her courage. This was going to be a lot more difficult than she had planned on and for a moment, she regretted her impulse to take this trip downstream. She had lost valuable time going so slowly across the water and now needed to speed it up in order to get to those below in time.

She had just turned her horse and was starting down the trail when she thought she heard her name. Startled, she spun around to see Caleb charging at her on the other side of the raging waters. The look on his face was not one of pleasure at seeing her, but one of determination. She knew she was caught.

She started to move on, but when he fired his pistol in the air, she drew to a sharp halt. She realized that he was not a man to be challenged at this moment. She pulled Ginger to a quick stop and turned to watch him charge into the swollen river. She held her breath as the sturdy animal didn’t hesitate to brave the swift current.

His horse was bigger and stronger than hers and had no trouble making a dash through those troubled waters. She held her breath at the magnificent picture he made before her eyes. His eyes were blazing blue and his wild hair was flowing from under his hat as he spurred his stallion faster. For a fleeting second she was afraid of the power of this man in this time and place.

He rode up to her side and dismounted. He didn’t hesitate and grabbed her out of her saddle. As he drug

her to the ground and to his side, she knew he was a man possessed. “Damn you, woman! What do you think you’re doing?”

He didn’t give her time to answer but instead lowered his head and gave her a hard kiss on her lips. “Jessica, I love you and I don’t want to lose you. I couldn’t take losing the woman I love again.”

The wind had started to blow and the rain was pelting them both as they stood facing each other. The skies had darkened considerably. The tension was not only in the weather surrounding them, but in their very bodies as they stood. They were two adversaries facing each other.

“What were you thinking?” He asked of her.

“Caleb,” her voice was pleading. “If you knew ahead of time that your first wife was going to die, wouldn’t you have done everything in your power to come back and prevent it?” When he didn’t answer right away, she prodded. “Caleb, I am not from your world. You and I both know that the dam is going to fail and people are going to die! I cannot allow that to happen.”

He removed his hat and ran his hand to push his soaked hair back on his forehead. As he put it back on, he replied. “Jess, I will go down stream. You won’t know the way and you’ll never make it on your own.”

The noise from the weather surrounded them and added to the pressure of their situation. “Let me go with you. I can help.” She begged him.

“No.” His one word answer stopped her in her tracks.

“Caleb!” She tried again. “I need to be with you in this.” She grabbed at his jacket and tried to reason with this mountain of a man.

He turned and faced her, his blue eyes blazing with determination and authority. “Jessica, believe me in this. We will be together. You need to go back to the ranch and I’ll return when I’m done.”

“Caleb, what if... what if you don’t come back?” She finally spoke her fears aloud.

“Then, look into these eyes and know that I love you and we will be together. It’s our destiny. No matter what, Jess, you will find your forever love!” Before he mounted his horse, Caleb turned her wrist over and gently ran his hand over the words emblazoned on her wrist.

“Now, go! I won’t take any more of your independence, Jessica Mayfield. Go to the ranch and wait for me.”

She got up on Ginger and scooted closer to him. They met and shared a searing last kiss before each going in their opposite directions.

As she started back across the stream, she turned to see him watching her progress. Her heart was throbbing in her chest, for a quick second she thought about turning around and following him, but stopped. As soon as she safely reached the other side, she watched to see him charging through the woods. His words echoed in her head. “No matter what, Jess, you will find your forever love!”

Just then a loud crack of thunder exploded in her ears. It sounded like all hell breaking loose right above her head. She tried to comfort her horse but failed as

Ginger bolted suddenly. Her last thoughts were of trying to keep in the saddle, but she failed. Jessica felt herself losing her grip not only on the horse but on her consciousness.



Sixteen

“Hey!” Jessica heard the male voice through the fog in her mind, but couldn’t quite focus on it.

“Hey, are you alright?” She heard it again and felt strong hands on her shoulders, shaking her gently. She tried to open her eyes and managed a quick look.

“Caleb,” She whispered his name. “I’m sorry. The thunder... I fell.”

She once again felt his warm hands on her body. He was running those hands down her arms, her legs and eventually on her waistline. “Are you hurt anywhere?” She heard him ask.

“Caleb, you came back for me.” She responded and finally looked into the blue eyes of the man kneeled above her.

“The name’s Mick.” His simple answer shocked her.

Jessica reached for a strength she didn’t know she possessed and finally sat in an upright position. She took a long look at her rescuer. His eyes were the same intense blue and his hat was pushed back on his dark, curly hair. He was the spitting image of Caleb.

“Where am I? Who are you?” She stammered and then fell back again. “Oh, my God, this can’t be happening! I can’t believe it!”

“Whoa, whoa. Take it easy.” He quickly went to his vehicle and grabbed a canteen. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, wet it with the cool water, and lightly wiped it on her face. “Can you take a drink?”

She barely shook her head as he lifted the canteen to her lips. The water was indeed cool and refreshing and she felt life slowly returning to her damaged body. “Thanks.” She tried to make sense of her circumstances.

Suddenly, Jessica became intensely aware of her surroundings. The sun was shining, the ground was not soaked and she looked around to see the riverbed was as dry as she had always remembered. What in the world was going on? She rubbed at her head. How could this be occurring?

“I’m Jessica.” She finally stated, looking once again into the azure eyes of the man kneeling before her. Tears started to flow down her face and she fell back, resting her head on the dry, hard ground.

“Stay still. I’ll get my Jeep.”

She didn’t move. Her head was aching intensely and she tried to still the thoughts swirling about her mind. How can this be? What about Caleb? The tears were flowing freely when she heard his vehicle. Mick came over and knelt back down beside her.

“Do you think you can get up? I called Doc and he’ll meet us at my place.” He waited for an answer from the sobbing woman. “I know we shouldn’t move you,

but I don't think anything is broken and you obviously need medical attention. Getting you to the ranch is our best option."

When she didn't answer, he tried again. "Jessica, I'm going to pick you up. Let me know if it hurts too much." He easily picked up the distraught woman and gently placed her in the front seat, buckling her in carefully. Jessica kept her eyes shut as though to block out her thoughts.

He ignited the engine and as carefully as he could, started the short trek to the ranch. Soon they were pulling onto a shaded lane off the dirt road. She didn't react as he came around and lifted her into his strong arms to carry her into the main house. As he placed her onto the sofa, Jessica finally responded.

"I'm so sorry." She couldn't say anything more as the tears wouldn't subside.

"Shhh. It'll be alright. Doc has to come all the way from Wickenburg, so I just want to make you as comfortable as I can until he gets here." Mick went to the kitchen and wet a cloth to put on her forehead.

She tried to thank him, but words failed her. This can't be happening, she thought once again. How can I cope with this?

She moaned and his ministrations stopped.

"Jessica, what can I do? Where are you hurting?" His voice showed care and concern.

"I'm aching all over. My head is killing me. I have a thousand questions and I have no clue where I am." She retorted all the while with her eyes closed.

"We'll have time for questions later. You need to try and relax." When he saw her start to protest, he

continued. "Jessica, I know it's not as easily done as said. You've obviously had a terrible blow to your head and body. Let's just get you comfortable and in just a little bit, Doc will be here and then we'll get to your questions. Okay?" He was sitting near to her on the coffee table and continued placing the cool, wet cloth on her head and face.

Not content to wait very long, Jessica asked him, "Did you find my horse?"

His motions stopped. "I didn't see a horse. Is that how you got here?"

Her impatience was exerting itself. "Of course, I was on horseback! How else would I get here?"

She heard him sigh but he spoke no words. He was obviously a very patient man and she felt a bit guilty at her rather bad-mannered behavior.

"Caleb... I mean Mick, I have no idea where I am nor how I got here and I don't mean to be rude to you. Thank you for finding me." She finally opened her eyes and looked once again at her rescuer. "Who is this Doc? Doctors don't make house calls."

"Do you want something to drink?" He stood up, neglecting to respond to her question and waited for her to answer.

"Just some water would be great."

He left her and she heard him in the kitchen. Shortly, Mick returned with a glass of cold water. He handed it to Jessica and she took a few long sips.

When she was done, she tried once again to gain answers. "Where are we?"

"You are at my bed and breakfast ranch in Walnut Grove."

The shocked look on her face had him immediately worried. “Jessica, are you going to be alright? Is there someone you should call?”

She didn’t answer but just shook her head. She let the tears flow down her face. She was actually in Walnut Grove, the sight of the dam failure!

Just then there was a knock at the door and someone walked in without waiting for Mick to answer. “Mick, are you here?” A male voice sounded in the front hallway.

“In here, Doc.” He stood and moved over to greet the man.

“What do we have here?”

She heard them talking but just laid there with her eyes shut. This was too much. How can any of this be happening?

“I found her down by the riverbed. She was unconscious but there was no blood and once I checked, no broken bones. She says she was on horseback, but I didn’t find any horse.”

The doctor then came over and sat on the coffee table beside her. “Jessica, I’m Erik. Can you open your eyes?”

His voice was one of patience and calmness. He waited for her to comply. Slowly, she opened her eyes and took in the man sitting next to her. He wasn’t wearing a suit like she expected. She thought maybe he would have scrubs on, but he was in jeans and a tee shirt.

“You don’t look like a doctor.” She finally quipped.

“Well, I am. Can I examine you?” His voice was soothing.

“Why not?” She stuck out her arm. He took her wrist and looked at his watch to take her pulse. He reached up and ran his hands gently on her head, feeling around to the back.

“I feel a good knot back there. Did you get that when you fell off your horse?”

She looked beyond him to Mick before answering. “I probably did, even though a certain person doesn’t believe me.” Her answer was aimed directly at her host.

Erik laughed but continued his exploration of her head and body. “Where do you hurt most?”

“I’m not sure. My head hurts something terrible, but my back and neck are not in great shape either.” She winced when Erik put his hands on the back of her neck.

“Jessica, I am pretty sure you have a concussion. I want you to take it easy for a few days. I’m going to get you some pills to help ease the headache.”

“What do you mean ‘take it easy’?” She asked pensively.

“I mean you shouldn’t be moved. I think you need to stay here at the ranch for a while.” He stood and looked at Mick.

Mick was just watching this exchange but with the doctor’s words, came forward. “Jessica, you can stay in one of the cabins. We aren’t booked at this time of the year.”

“I can’t stay here. I have to get back to my life. I have a business to run. I’ve been gone a long time.” She stopped in her tracks. “What day is this?”

The look exchanged between the two men wasn't wasted on her. She waited for an answer.

"Jessica, its Saturday."

"What date is it?"

"It's February 8th." The doctor answered.

"That can't be!" She stammered. "I've been gone for almost three weeks! The dam is going to break tonight!" She ranted and started to get up from the couch. "Caleb went down river! He went in my place to save people! Oh my God, what am I going to do?"

Mick went over to her and took her in his arms. "Jessica, calm down." Over her head, he looked to Erik. They passed a knowing glance.

"I can't. Don't you understand? Don't you see?" She was beyond hysterics and tried to get out of his grasp. "Mick, I have to save Caleb. I have to go downstream!"

"Erik, can't you do something? Can't you help her?"

The doctor went to his bag and reached for some pills. He hesitated but soon returned to her side. "Jessica, let me give you something to calm you down. It'll help you."

"Will it give me some answers? I've been gone for three weeks and yet you tell me it's the same day I left Wickenburg. How can that be?" She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"Jessica, let Erik help you for now. We'll make some calls to your family and then we'll get you some rest. Please, Jessica, just let us take care of you for tonight. We'll talk more tomorrow and maybe we can answer your questions."

She sat back down but both men could see she was still highly agitated. Erik tried to console her. "It's not

uncommon for people with a concussion to have loss of memory, confusion and emotional outbursts. The best thing right now is to get you comfortable and try to relax, even get some sleep.”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid this is all very traumatic to me and I haven’t been a gracious visitor. Mick, I’m not usually this obnoxious.” She attempted to make amends with the tall, handsome man standing nearby listening to their conversation.

“It’s okay. I’m just glad that I found you. Do you want to use my phone to call someone? Is there someone that’s going to be worried about you?” He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

“I should call David and tell him about losing his horse.” She reached for the phone but when she went to call him, she hesitated. “I don’t seem to remember the number.”

“Jessica, that’s part of the concussion symptoms. Let’s get you into your cabin and we’ll make the call a little later. Okay?” Mick waited for her reaction to his suggestion.

She tried to keep the tears from starting to fall again, but a few slid down her cheek. “I’m so embarrassed. I’m not usually a weak, crying woman.” She remembered saying those same exact words to Caleb’s mother. A shiver slowly floated down her trembling body.

“I’m sure you’re not, Jessica. Do you think you could walk a few steps?” Mick came to her side.

She stood up slowly, trying to get her bearings. “I think I do need to rest. I have a lot of thinking to do.” She took a wobbly step but Mick reached for her.

“Let me help.” His words were simple.

She didn’t fight him, but reached for his arm. “I’d like that.” Together they walked to the door. The first cabin was just a few steps down the path and with Erik following close behind, they made it. The sun was starting to fade just beyond the horizon, sending golden rays across the sky.

Mick opened the door and helped Jessica inside. It was wonderfully cozy. She looked about the small room. It had a kitchenette by the north side and a bed on the other. They were two leather chairs next to the fireplace and a wooden door led to the bathroom. All was decorated in old western style items giving it a rustic look.

Mick helped her into one of the chairs and went to light the fireplace. She turned to Erik. “Are you really a doctor?”

“Yes, as I told you before, I am a real doctor. In fact, I should fill out an official examination form on you. Do you feel up to a few questions?” He sat in the identical chair next to hers and took a few papers out of his briefcase.

“What do you need to know?” She leaned her head back into the soft, comfy chair.

Erik pulled his pen from his pocket and started writing on the first paper. “What is your full name?”

“Jessica Mayfield.” She didn’t seem to have trouble with remembering that.

“Where do you live?”

She thought for only a few seconds before giving him her address in Litchfield Park. “You didn’t answer my question. What kind of doctor are you?”

“I’m just a general practitioner. I only work in town at the clinic on Saturdays. My real love is here in Walnut Grove. I’m Mick’s cousin and our ranch borders his.”

“You said you run a business earlier. What kind of work do you do?” His questions seemed innocent enough and she felt inclined to answer.

“I have a day trip business. I take tourists out in the desert to discover the beauty of our Arizona wilderness. I was exploring this area as a possible new itinerary. I learned of the failure of the Walnut Grove Dam back in 1890 and wanted to see if my customers would be interested in some local history.”

Erik kept writing down notes on the pages and she looked to see Mick listening intently. His deep blue eyes were sparkling with interest in her answers.

“How about your medical history? Do you have any issues I should know about?” Erik turned his questions to a more medical viewpoint.

“No, no I’m fine. I haven’t even seen a doctor in a while.” She tried to be complete with her information. “I’m healthy as a horse – whatever that means.”

“Hmmm...” Erik responded.

“What does that mean? Do all you doctors learn that in med school?”

She heard Mick’s deep laughter and felt herself responding in a way she didn’t expect. Her cheeks were a bit flushed with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to insult.” She apologized to Erik.

“Oh, don’t mind him. My cousin has always tried to keep me humble.”

Erik stood up and put the papers in his briefcase. “I think that’s all I need for now. Jessica, I can leave some pills for the pain. I’m just a few miles away and Mick knows how to get hold of me. I think a few days rest might be the best thing for you for now. You will find things are not so easy to remember, but with time all should return to normal. Just try to take it easy for a day or two, okay?”

While she felt she should be anxious to get home, Jessica felt at ease here in this homey, little cabin and was for now content to stay put. “Doc, thanks. I’ll see what I can do to take it easy.”

Mick stood and walked Erik to the door. The two men exchanged a few words and after a brief handshake, Erik left the small cabin. Mick turned back and went over to stoke the fire before claiming the chair next to Jessica.

“How are you feeling? Can I get you something, anything?”

“Can you just talk to me for a bit? I feel those pills are working their magic and I feel I’m a bit calmer.” She turned to her host. It was amazing how much he resembled Caleb.

“What do you want to talk about?” His voice was deep and soothing.

“What is your last name?”

“Tarver. This used to be a working ranch but with the hard economic times lately, I turned it into a bed and breakfast. We cater to hunters, outdoor adventurers, and tourists looking for that unique western escape.”

“Is that working for you?” She seemed interested.

“It pays the bills and keeps the ranch in the family name. This ranch has been here for over 150 years.” His pride of ownership was evident.

“How about you?” He returned the favor. “How did you happen to become the owner of a desert tour company?”

She answered without hesitation. “My husband Kyle was killed in the war in the middle east over five years ago. It was our dream and I just needed to move forward to keep from going crazy over losing him.” She was amazed that she could say that now without sadness entering her soul. It seemed that her contact with Caleb had helped heal her heart and body.

“That’s the research you were conducting in this region. You wanted to know more about the Walnut Grove dam failure.” Mick stated the facts.

“Yes, my friend Kari had told me about it and I wanted to see the area for myself. I get a lot of people wanting to search for gold and the newspaper articles talked about the safe full of gold that has never been found.” She laughed quietly.

After seeing her yawn, Mick got up, ready to go. “You should get some rest. Doc said that it would be good for you.”

For a slight moment, she panicked. “What do I do if I need you?”

“Jessica, just pick up the phone by your bed and dial ‘O’. It will connect you to me. I’m just a few feet away.” He reached to help her out of the chair. His touch seemed so familiar, but yet it couldn’t be, could it? “Are you alright with everything?”

“Not really, I’m not sure I want to be alone.” She looked around and saw the little kitchen table. “Can you stay for a little bit?”

Mick didn’t answer but instead went to the buffet next to the small table and opened a drawer. “Do you play cards?” He held up a deck of playing cards. “Do you know how to play poker?”

An overwhelming sense of déjà vu cascaded over her. Caleb had asked her the same thing just a few weeks ago. She tried to hide her feelings, but if Mick saw anything, he didn’t say a word. He sat down at the small table and encouraged her to do the same.

After shuffling the cards, he pushed them over for her to cut. As if in slow motion, Jessica reached out and took a small stack of cards off the top. “What are we going to bet with?” Her voice was weak and she was anxious for his answer.

Mick got up and reached for the matches at the fireplace. “How about these?” He sat them down on the table between them.

“You better watch out, I play a mean game of poker. I may just win all your matches before the night is out.” His grin spread up to his sparkling blue eyes.

She didn’t answer but gathered up the cards he had just dealt. Her movements were mechanical as she tried to get a hold of the situation. What was going on here? Had she imagined the entire thing? Was it the concussion that had caused her to believe she was really back in 1890?

They played for an hour or two and when he finally gained all of her matches, Mick declared he was hungry. “Jessica, I’m going to go next door and make

myself a sandwich. Can I bring you something?" He stood and waited for her answer.

"Maybe half a sandwich. Could I borrow your phone? I think I remember David's number." She stayed seated and held her hand out for his cell phone.

As Mick handed it to her, he asked, "Who is David?" His question was casual enough, but Jessica felt he wanted to know more.

"David is a friend with a ranch in Wickenburg. I often use his horses for my customers when they want to ride. I feel bad that I've lost his horse." She sighed.

"I'll be right back. Feel free to call anyone you need to. I wouldn't want anyone to be worried about you." He quickly left her alone.

She tried and after a few attempts remembered the right number. David answered and after she explained her situation, he told her not to worry. He'd send some of his hands out to look for her horse. She was just finishing up her conversation when Mick came back in with a tray of food.

"I hope you're hungry. I can never make just a little food." He chuckled and continued, "I guess that I get that from Ma. She always fixes too much for our guests. I brought some of the soup she left on the stove." He sat the tray down on the table and proceeded to lay out the meal.

"That soup does smell delicious. Does your mother live here on the ranch?" She reached for the utensils and waited for Mick to reply.

"You don't have to be nervous, Jessica. Ma lives in Congress, just up the highway. I am safe to be around." He laughed.

She smiled at him. “I know. David says the Tarvers are good people. He said I was in good hands. He is David Connell of the Lazy Bar T ranch in Wickenburg. He says you two know each other.”

“Of course, I know David quite well. He’s part of the reason I turned my ranch into this bed and breakfast.”

He sat down and started eating his sandwich. They ate companionably for a while.

“I guess I was hungrier than I thought.” She finally sat back in her chair. “Thanks so much, Mick.” It reminded her of the first meal she had shared with Caleb. Or did she?

“Why the frown?” Mick noticed her change of expression.

“If I tell you, you’ll think I’ve lost my mind.” She stopped for a moment. “Maybe I have.”



Seventeen

“I think that’s enough for one day. Jessica, I’m just next door. Use that phone,” Mick pointed to the desk set next to the bed, “if you need me. I’m not a heavy sleeper and I’ll come right away.” He rose and headed toward the door of the cabin.

She got up slowly and followed him. “Thanks, Mick. Thank you for finding me and thank you for taking care of me.” She put a weak smile on her face. “I think a good night’s sleep is just what the doctor ordered.”

“Sure you’ll be okay?” He started to reach out and touch her but stopped. Jessica nodded her head and reluctantly Mick left as she slowly closed the door.

Jessica went to the fireplace and put another small log on the smoldering fire before cautiously finding her way to the bed. After pulling the covers back, she removed her clothes and slid into the cool, crisp sheets. Trying hard to put all thoughts out of her mind, Jessica felt herself drifting off to sleep. And sleep she did.

The morning sun was shining through the window and Jessica found herself stretching as she woke. She was just sitting up when she heard a knock at her door.

Quickly, she snuggled back down in the covers and answered.

“Yes?” Her voice was unsure.

“Jessica, it’s me. I’ve brought you breakfast.” Mick’s voice was hardy and strong through the door.

Her state of undress was a source of embarrassment but she pulled the sheets up to her neck and invited him in. Mick opened the door slowly and stuck his head through. “You, okay?”

“Sure, I’m not out of bed yet, but will be shortly.” She hoped he would leave the tray and exit the room so she could dress.

Mick grinned knowingly. “I hope you like omelets. I make a mean one.” He turned his back to her while sitting the tray down on the table. “Ready?”

She saw him glance at her clothes lying in a pile at the foot of the bed. She was caught! “Ok, Mister, go out and wait until I get dressed. Then and only then can you come back in!”

She ordered him.

Jessica dressed quickly as soon as Mick shut the door behind himself. She was at the table before calling out to him. “Mick, you can come in now!”

He entered and noticed she was already eating. “Good, I see you have an appetite. Doc said to watch for that.”

He sat down and they both ate in silence. She was just scooping up the last remnants of her meal, when he finally broke the silence. “Jessica, do you need to use my phone again? I know this is Sunday, but is there someone else that might need to hear from you?”

She was impressed with his consideration. After spending the last three weeks without technology, she was not really eager to return to being electronically linked. “I should call my friend Kari. She’s the one that gave me the information on the dam failure and she wanted to hear from me once I made my trip upstream.” For some unknown reason, Jessica was reluctant to reconnect with her own reality. She had enjoyed being with Caleb and his family. She had been alone for so long and being part of a family had felt good.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. If you feel up to it, I thought we might take a short ride back to the spot where I found you and see if we can find your cell phone or maybe even your horse.” He offered his help along with his phone.

“I think that would be great. Just give me a few minutes.” She stood slowly as her head was still not without pain. Her movements didn’t go unnoticed by Mick.

“Are you okay?” He stopped at the door.

“I’m fine. I still have a headache. I’m moving about a bit better, but this head is still pounding.”

“Doc said he would come by later.” He explained.

“I’m so grateful to both of you. I’m sure I’ll feel better in a few days.” She smiled.

“I’ll be back shortly. Go ahead and make your call.” He shut the front door behind himself.

Jessica dialed her best friend’s number and waited for her to answer.

“Hey, Kari, it’s Jessica.”

“Hey, how’d the trip up the Hassayampa go?” Her friend was oblivious to the trauma Jessica had just gone through.

“Kari, I need to talk with you. I’ve been through the most amazing adventure! You’ll never guess what’s happened to me!”

After Jessica told her tale, Kari was dumbfounded. “Are you trying to tell me that you think you’ve been back in 1890! Jessica, that’s absurd!”

“I don’t know, Kari, I just don’t know. Now I’m here and Mick is the spitting image of Caleb. He’s a rancher and we’re near the site of the dam! This is all unreal!”

“But, Jessica, how in the world could you have gone back in time? That’s something that couldn’t happen, could it?” Her friend prompted.

“I know, I know. It all seems like something out of *The Twilight Zone*! I feel like I was really there. I felt his kisses, his touch and, Kari, I made love with that man!”

After her friend’s giggles faded, Kari asked, “You said this doctor has diagnosed you with a concussion, right? Can’t that cause something like you’re describing? Time travel is only in the movies!”

Tears started to form and her breath shook as Jessica explained to her friend. “I’m telling you I woke up in 1890 and he was towering over me. He had the most gorgeous blue eyes and he took care of me. He stitched my head when I fell! Oh, my God, Kari, I just don’t know what to believe! I opened my heart to that man! And now, with Mick, he’s got the same eyes and he’s the one taking care of me. I feel... I feel so connected with Mick. It’s like I already know him.”

Her friend hesitated, but continued. “Jessica, you know I’m your best friend. You and I have always been totally honest with each other. I’m not going to fail you now.”

“Kari, you’re the only one since Kyle that I can depend on. Please help me.” Jessica pleaded.

“I think you were in need of a shock! You know as well as I that Kyle wouldn’t have wanted you to waste away. He would have wanted love for you, Jessica! He would have wanted you to be happy.”

There was only silence on the end of the line.

“Jessica?”

“I’m here. I know you’re probably right. It was wonderful with Caleb. He showed me love and I felt free to love him back. Maybe that’s the message from all of this. I just don’t know.” As soon as she finished speaking, there was a knock at the door. She knew it had to be Mick. “Kari, do me a favor. Call Megan at the office on Monday and let her know I’ll be gone for a few days. I need some time to figure this out!”

Kari agreed and they both hung up.

“Come on in, Mick.” Jessica stood up and went to door to greet her reluctant host.

“Do you feel up to a drive? I promise we’ll only be a little bit.” He held his cowboy hat in his hands, twisting it nervously.

“I think I can do that. Maybe we can find my cell phone.” She handed him his own. “Thanks for letting me use yours.”

“I told Doc that we’d be back by noon.” He put his hand on her back as they went out the door to his Jeep.

His hand felt familiar, but that couldn't be, she thought to herself. Once safely buckled in his four-wheel drive vehicle, Jessica finally looked at her surroundings. The day was sunny with just a little breeze blowing through the cottonwood trees lining the lane. She saw the beautiful larger main house next to her cabin. She turned in her seat to check out the huge barn and corrals on either side. Jessica could see several small cabins like the one she had been in closer to the barn. There were horses grazing in the pasture, with several ranch hands working nearby.

"Mick, this is beautiful. It seems so peaceful here."

"It is now, but once tourist season starts, we'll have our hands full. Ma comes and stays to be the chief cook and my sisters come to clean the cabins. I bring on more hands to help with the horseback rides." He spoke proudly. "We've been doing this for almost ten years now."

"It seems you're very organized. I love the way my cabin is decorated. I'll bet the tourists like it too." She winced as they jostled over the rough dirt road.

"I'm sorry, but I can't avoid all the holes or rocks."

"I'll be fine. It can't be helped." She agreed.

They drove just a few miles and Mick turned toward the riverbed. She didn't recognize any of the area but then she knew she had been under trauma when she was last here. He stopped and shut off the engine. He came around and offered her help out. Jessica looked to him and smiled. "Thanks."

He started looking around the area. She joined him and found herself hoping they could find her phone, her horse, anything to help solve this mystery. They

moved in silence, each kicking at bushes, rocks, or anything in their way.

“Does anything look familiar? I found you over there.” He pointed to a rough patch just under a huge tree.

“No, sorry. I can’t say I remember much of this area.”

She wanted to share her story with him, but felt he would think her mentally unstable. Her best friend couldn’t believe it. Why would he?

“You said you traveled all the way from Wickenburg? That’s a long way from here.”

“I honestly didn’t think I was this far up the river.” She stood up and looked around. “Mick, I’m not sure how I got all the way up here.”

“Did you have anything else with you? I mean, like your purse?”

“No, I left that in my car back at David’s. The only thing I had on me was my cell phone. I wanted it in case I had an accident.” She laughed without humor. “A lot of good that did, huh?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Jessica. A blow to the head like the one you suffered can cause enough trauma. No sense in beating yourself up.” He tried consoling her.

Suddenly she exclaimed, “Look! My phone!” She bent down and picked it up. It was in a protective case and as she opened it, was relieved to see it wasn’t damaged. In fact, it still had a little battery life left. She saw that she had missed several calls.

“Maybe we can find Mr. Kelly.” She said as she looked around.

“Mr. Kelly?” Mick questioned.

“The horse I was riding from David’s stables.”

“Mr. Kelly!” This time Mick said it with a grin.

“Yes, I named him.” Jessica was defensive but with laughter lighting her eyes.

“You are special, Jessica. The only horses we name on the ranch are the ones that can’t be broken. They get names like Tornado, Killer, or Death Watch!” He was definitely teasing her just like Caleb did. Oh, my, the similarities to these situations were uncanny.

“Mick, I have some questions.” She was determined to get answers.

“Let’s go back to the ranch. Erik will be meeting us there. It might be best if he was present.”

“Do you think I’ll need a doctor to have my questions answered?” She was on the alert.

“Jessica, I’m not qualified as a medical professional and under these circumstances, I don’t want to take any chances with your well-being.” He offered her his hand as they walked back to the vehicle.

She looked in his eyes and put her hand in his. His hand was rough much like Caleb’s had been. She supposed it was the life of a rancher. It felt right.

The trip back to the ranch was made in no time at all. They were just getting up to the porch of her cabin when Erik pulled up. He grabbed a bag and followed them into the small room.

“Hey, guys! How’s it going? Jessica, it’s good to see you up and about.” He put the bag on the table. “How are you feeling?”

“Is that a professional question?” She smiled at his friendliness.

“Yes and no. Why don’t you have a seat and let me get your blood pressure.” He was taking some medical equipment out of the very used medical bag.

She complied with his request as she noticed Mick was heading out the door. “I’m going to get some drinks. Erik, do you want anything?”

After they each gave Mick their orders, the two of them were alone. “I think he wanted to give us some privacy.” Erik commended his cousin.

“He’s a really nice guy.” Jessica agreed. She put out her arm as Erik took her blood pressure. She willingly opened her mouth to accept the thermometer. Erik talked about the beautiful weather.

Once he had made his cursory inspection, she finally asked, “Doc, am I going to live?” Before Erik could answer, Mick returned with drinks and snacks.

They all sat at the table before the doctor could answer her question. It was a very companionable time, Jessica felt at home.

“I have a few questions that I think either one of you could answer.” Jessica finally spoke what was on her mind.

“Fire away!” Mick answered.

“Where was the Walnut Grove dam from here? Is the site close? Can I go there?” She questioned.

“The dam site is on private land. We can ask the owner for permission to visit the site and it’s not far from here. I’m not sure you’re up to it right now, though.” Erik offered the answer.

“Okay.” Jessica seemed to accept his explanation for now. “Have either of you heard of the McCaslins? They had a huge ranch in this area years ago.”

The look between the two men wasn't wasted on her. She saw the knowing glance pass from one man to the other. "What's going on?" She rubbed at her head.

"Is your head hurting?" Mick asked.

"Yes, but don't try to change the subject. What about the McCaslin ranch? I think you're trying to hide something from me." She challenged them.

"You'd better tell her, Mick." Erik encouraged him.

With a great sigh, Mick finally answered. "My name is Caleb McCaslin Tarver." He spoke quietly watching her reaction intently.

"I knew it! You look exactly like him!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Jessica knew she had so much more to explain. Both men were shocked.

"Jess, I think you have more of a head problem that we first realized!" Mick was the one to speak first.

"See! That's what he called me!" She jumped up now much too excited to sit still. "I know you're going to think me crazy, but I swear to you that I was there. I knew him and his family and I was here before the Walnut Grove Dam failed." She was pacing the small room.

She stopped as she realized the men were speechless. "Please, don't think this is just a concussion talking. I know you two don't know me but I have been a responsible, self-sufficient woman most of my adult life. I'm telling you that I have spent the last three weeks in 1890!"

"Jessica, won't you please sit down?" Erik asked her. His calm voice prompted her to comply.

"There has to be some way I can prove all of this." She looked from man to man, suddenly realizing that

no one in their right mind would believe her. “Talk to me, Mick.”

“I don’t know what to say. This is quite a tale.” He took off his hat and scratched at his head. “We are both descendants from the McCaslin family. I was named after my great grandmother’s favorite cousin.”

Before he could say anything more, Jessica stated her name. “Helen. Your great grandmother was named Helen.”

Erik finally stood. “Jessica, let me make some phone calls and do a little more research on this situation. I want you to try and stay calm until I can come up with more information for us.” He looked to Mick and they exchanged knowing glances.

“My best friend in life didn’t believe me either.” Jessica’s voice was not as confident as before. She had tears in her eyes. “Can this really be just a result of a concussion?”

Mick went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Jessica, let’s not make any conclusions until Erik can do more research.”

She turned into him and he wrapped his arms around her. She was crying now and both men felt powerless to help. Erik went out the door, leaving them in their embrace. Mick’s touch was so familiar, so much like Caleb’s. He even pressed a tender kiss on her forehead. Her thoughts strayed to the last time she saw Caleb. He told her that no matter what she would find her forever love.

She raised her head to look into his eyes. The moment was there between them and Mick lowered his head to place a soft kiss on her lips. She returned

his kiss and for a few fleeting seconds, felt the wonderful sensation of being with someone she knew.

Suddenly, Mick pulled back. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm so sorry, Jess. I would never take advantage of you in your condition." He stepped away leaving her longing for his warmth.

"Why don't you rest a bit? I need to go and tend to the stock. I'll be back later." He grabbed a piece of letterhead from the nightstand and wrote a number down. "Call me on my cell if you need me."

With that he went out the door and left Jessica with her mixed up thoughts. This has been the most confusing time of her life. Even learning of Kyle's death all those years ago, she didn't feel as chaotic as she did now. She crawled upon the bed and pulled a soft, comfortable blanket throw up over her. In spite of her turmoil, Jessica found herself drifting off to sleep.

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but as soon as she woke up, Jessica was ready to find Mick. We need to talk about whatever is happening between us, she thought. The sun was still in the sky but was definitely going west. She went to the bathroom and tried to straighten her tumbling curls, but gave up and decided it was as good as she could do. The weather was a bit cool and a little breeze had stirred up. She lifted her face to the sky and marveled at how clear and beautiful it was out here in the wilderness.

She headed out to the barn as she figured he still might be there. Her feelings were in turmoil and she supposed his were too. Perhaps if we talk, she thought, we might be able to get a grasp on this situation. She poked her head through the opened doors and called

out for him. When she didn't get an immediate response, she stepped in and looked around the dusty interior. There were the usual items that someone might see in a barn, stacks of hay, bags of feed, some implements, but what drew her eye was the area in back. The tack area was neatly arranged with halters, saddles, and other leather items. She wandered close remembering her time with Caleb as they worked to create a beautiful saddle for Helen.

She sighed and then another thought entered her mind. How could I create such definite memories without them being real? Is it possible that it was all in my head when I was unconscious? She moved closer to the area when she spied an item up on a wooden rack covered carefully with an old tarp. She got close enough to reach out and lift the corner of the old, dusty cloth. Her breath caught in her throat as she recognized the saddle. It was the one! She threw back the covering and stood back to take in the scene of this magnificent saddle.

"Jessica?" She heard Mick call her as he entered the dimly lit barn. "Are you in here?" He saw her over in the corner by the tack and moved closer.

She ran her hands over the saddle lovingly. She didn't react to his voice or his nearness as salty tears started to fall. Slowly as though in a trance, she looked to the saddle horn fearing what she knew she would find. She found the initials 'CMc' and next to it was her heart!

"Jess?" Mick's voice was right next to her.

Slowly she turned to face him. "You're the one!" She barely whispered.

He took her into his arms and kissed her boldly. She returned his passion with her own. She had knocked his hat off when she reached for him. She now ran her hands through that wonderful dark hair. "You're the one he promised would be there!" She repeated.

"Yes, lady, I've been waiting for you. I'm your forever love!" With that he lifted her wrist and placed a kiss on her tattoo.



Epilogue

One Year Later, February 22

“Oh, Jessica, you look absolutely beautiful.” Kari spoke to her friend as together they looked in the full length mirror.

“What made you choose this dress?” Jessica smoothed her hand down the simple, cotton dress. It was pale pink with a full skirt and a lace ruffle around the bottom.

“I just thought it should be something simple.” She turned around to see the back. “My life here with Mick is wonderful, uncomplicated and well, simple. Here, help me with my veil.” She held out a lace veil that matched the ruffle at the bottom of her dress. Kari pinned it into place.

She hugged her friend tightly. “I’m so thrilled! It’s wonderful to see you so happy.”

Just then a light knock sounded on the door. “Jessica, it’s me.” Mick’s mother spoke.

“Please come in. I’m almost ready.”

“I didn’t want to intrude, but Mick wanted me to give you something.” His mother smiled.

“You’re not intruding at all, Lisa.” Jessica came to her and gave her a big hug. “I’m so glad you’re here. You’ve met my friend Kari?”

“Of course. It’s so nice to have you here. You know you’re welcome any time.” Mick’s mother held out a small box to Jessica as she spoke. “This was his great-grandmother’s and he wanted you to wear it today. He said you’d understand.”

Tears filled Jessica’s eyes as she took the box. When she opened it, she saw a silver cuff bracelet. “This was Helen’s?”

Mick’s mother nodded. “Yes, it’s been handed down a few generations and he said you would appreciate it. Do you remember the saying that a bride should wear something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue? This bracelet is all except the new.”

Jessica took the smooth silver cuff out of the velvet box and looked at it with love. It was handcrafted made of silver and adorned with delicate turquoise stones. As she looked at the handiwork, she listened to her new mother-in-law to be.

“It was made by local Native Americans way back in the day.”

Jessica rubbed her hand over the front of the bracelet and then she turned it over and looked at the smooth silver back. Her eyes immediately focused on the name etched in the silver – Pakri! She smiled as she knew this was confirmation of the step she was about to make.

“Lisa, would you put it on me?” Jessica asked his mother to do the honors.

“Only if you promise to call me Ma. I’ve enjoyed you being a part of our family this last year and now it’s going to be permanent. I can’t tell you how wonderful it’s been having you here.” The older woman leaned in and gave Jessica a soft kiss on her cheek.

“Ma, I’ve had the most perfect time. I’ve always wanted a big family and now I have one!” She hugged her tightly.

Kari watched this tender exchange with tears threatening to fall. “You two are going to make me cry! We’d better get out there or your groom is going to think you changed your mind!”

“No way! I’ve waited a whole year to make that man mine.” Jessica smiled with love shining from her delicate features.

Lisa kissed her tenderly on the cheek and left the room. Her best friend turned to give Jessica one last look. “Jessica, are you sure this is what you want? Do you really know that Mick is the one?”

“Kari, there’s no doubt in my mind. He grew up here and he’s heard the legends. That’s how he knew he was the one I’d been promised.” She smiled tenderly as she remembered getting to know him and sharing all sorts of stories over the last months together.

“What about Diamond Lil and Bob Brow and the others? What happened to them?” Kari’s curiosity was still peaked.

“All of the articles I researched state that Bob Brow survived and went on to become part owner of The Palace Saloon in Prescott.” Her voice softened, “As for Diamond Lil, they say a woman was found clinging to a

tree down by Seymour. I can only assume that it was her. She did make it, though. The other crazy thing about all of this is that the 1890's census was destroyed in a warehouse fire in Phoenix, so the records of names, births, and deaths are a little sketchy. All of the McCaslins were fine as they were above the dam when it burst. I won't let myself think anything but good thoughts about them today."

There was a knock at the door. Mick's sister stuck her head in, "Ready, lady? There's an impatient man standing in the front room, waiting for you." She teased.

Kari and Jessica stood and hugged one last time. "I know it's a bit unconventional, but thanks, Kari, for walking me down the aisle. They headed to the hallway and just as Jessica turned to see her handsome cowboy waiting, Kari turned to her with one last question. "I just have to ask. What about Caleb? Jess, what happened to him?"

With a twinkle in her eye, Jessica smiled and answered the question with one of her own, "Do you believe in destiny?"

About the Author

A professor on the path to her Master's degree posed this question – “If you were arrested today for something you are passionate about, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” B. B. Montgomery's passion for writing spans back to her childhood. As a human resources trainer for over 25 years as well as an instructor at the local community college, she has written numerous facilitator's guides, participant guides, and collateral pertinent to the subject being taught in her classes. She finally found the time to pursue her passion, dust the manuscripts sitting on her bookshelves, and finish what she started years ago. Yes, there is enough evidence! She lives in Surprise, AZ with the love of her life!

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