

MILLS & BOON®

Jeb Hunter's Bride

Ana Seymour



Historical

Ana Seymour
Jeb Hunter's Bride

«HarperCollins»

Seymour A.

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A WOMAN ALONE, yet determined to fulfill her dying father's golden dream, Kerry Gullivan heeded the siren call of pioneering and set out on "the sea of grass." But how was she to know that while she sailed her prairie schooner, Jeb Hunter would become captain of her fate? A MAN APART Wagon master for a Conestoga caravan west, Jeb Hunter held the lives of his people in his hands... and a guilty secret in his soul. Haunted by the past, he had no future - until Kerry Gullivan schemed her way onto his train, and into his heart!

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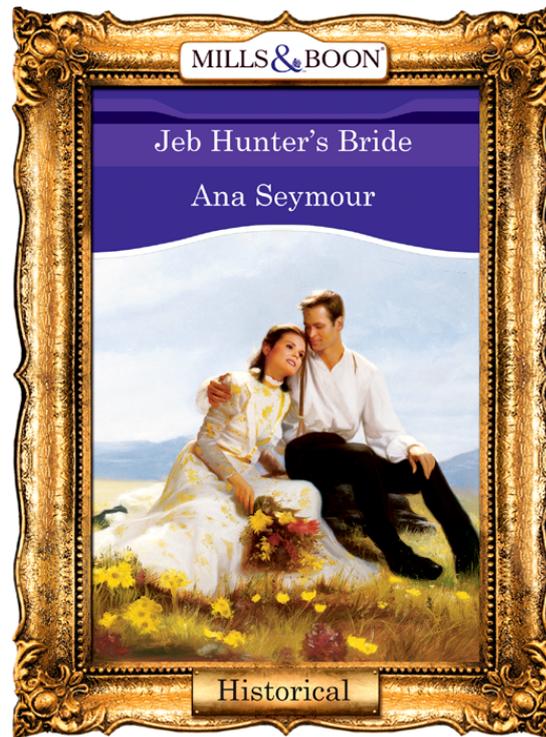


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Praise for Ana Seymour's previous books

Outlaw Wife

"...a fine romance..."

—*Romantic Times*

"...a satisfying tale..."

—*Calico Trails*

Lucky Bride

"...a lucky find..."

—*Affaire de Coeur*

"A Western winner!"

—*Rendezvous*

"...superb, enchanting..."

—*Under the Covers*

Gabriel's Lady

"Ms. Seymour is rising to the top of the historical romance mountain at an incredible pace.

4¹/₂ ★ s."

—*Affaire de Coeur*

"...a romantic treasure."

—*Rendezvous*

Frontier Bride

"...a wonderful romance, filled with Western adventure..."

—*Affaire de Coeur*

"...a story that is not to be missed."

—*Rendezvous*

“The train doesn’t take lone women,” Kerry said

She’d anticipated a showdown with their wagon leader if her disguise was ever discovered. Well, the time had arrived. And she wasn’t going to let him intimidate her into backing down.

“You’re darn right it doesn’t,” Jeb said. “And for many good reasons.”

Kerry looked Jeb Hunter squarely in the eye. “I’d be interested in hearing those reasons, Captain. But right now I’m more concerned with getting some dry clothes and trying to figure out how we’re going to get my wagon out of the middle of the river!”

She turned her back on him and marched up the bank. Jeb Hunter felt his gut twist. A woman. Damnation, what a development. A lone woman on his train. And not just any woman—one who wouldn’t listen to orders and who had a stubborn streak as wide as Kansas...!

Dear Reader,

If your mother didn’t tell *you* about Harlequin Historical, this Mother’s Day might be a good time to let *her* in on the secret The gift of romance can enhance anyone’s life, and our May books promise to be a spectacular introduction. Critics have described Ana Seymour’s romances as “spirited,” “heartwarming” and “impossible to put down.” This author is sure to please with her latest title, *Jeb Hunter’s Bride*, the story of a feisty adventuress whose journey west heals the haunted soul of a handsome wagon train leader.

And don’t miss *The Wilder Wedding*, by up-and-coming author Lyn Stone, the story of a sensible heiress who believes she is dying and, determined to live for the moment, proposes to a dashing and dangerous private investigator Rae Muir returns with *Twice a Bride*, the second book of her captivating WEDDING TRAIL series. In this authentic Western, a trail scout’s daughter marries a rugged hunter to fulfill her father’s dying wish—only her father doesn’t die...

Rounding out the month is *Lion’s Lady* by award-winning author Suzanne Barclay. In this latest title featuring the stormy Sutherland clan, Lion Sutherland must choose between his duty to his clan and his undying passion for the woman he betrayed.

Whatever your tastes in reading, you’ll be sure to find a romantic journey back to the past between the covers of a Harlequin Historical. Happy Mother’s Day!

Sincerely,

Tracy Farrell

Senior Editor

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Jeb Hunter's Bride

Ana Seymour



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ANA SEYMOUR

has been a Western fan since her childhood—the days of shoot-'em-up movie matinees and television programs. She has followed the course of the Western myth in books and films ever since, and says she was delighted when cowboys started going off into the sunset with their ladies rather than their horses. Ms. Seymour lives with her two daughters near one of Minnesota's ten thousand lakes.

For my aunt and uncle,

Betsy and Richard McCosh, in celebration of the
50th anniversary of their very own Western romance.

Prologue

Independence, Missouri

April 1857

Kerry closed her eyes as the scissors sliced through her long black hair. “Do it quick, Paddy, before I change my mind.”

“I wish you *would* change your mind,” her brother grumbled. “And stop calling me Paddy.” The shears clicked ruthlessly as shimmery cascades of hair fell to the ground around them.

“It’s the name our father called you. Out of respect for his memory, if nothing more, you should use it.”

Patrick Gullivan sighed. “Kerry, you were twelve when we came here—you remember the Old Country almost as well as Papa did. But I was only six. I’m American—I don’t want an Irish name.”

“You’re Irish, too.” Kerry’s eyes were still shut. “Is it too horrible to look at?”

Patrick stepped back and reviewed his handiwork. “Well, you don’t look like a man, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t know how you expect to fool anyone.”

Kerry opened her eyes and slowly bent over the silver filigree mirror that had been her mother’s back in Duncannon. “Oh dear” was all she could say.

Patrick put down the scissors with a snort of disgust. “I knew you’d be sorry, Kerry. What a dumb idea.”

Kerry glared at her thirteen-year-old brother. “I suppose you’d rather go back to New York and stack boxes of fish for the rest of your life.”

Patrick shuddered. “I never even want to *see* another fish.”

“Then you’d better help me with this. Because otherwise there’s no way the association will let us stay with the wagon train. Single females are not allowed.”

Patrick’s face softened. “You’re not a single female, Kerry. You have a male protector—me.”

Kerry swallowed the lump that had lodged in her throat the minute she had seen her shorn head, and reached for her brother’s hand. “You *are* my protector, Pad...Patrick, but I don’t think the association leaders will see it that way.”

“The lawyer in St. Louis said that the contract Papa signed was”—he stopped and screwed up his mouth as he tried to remember the legal terms—“transferable in perpetuity to his heirs.”

“Yes, but he also said the members can vote to remove *any* wagon considered undesirable for the welfare of the group.”

For a moment neither said anything. They’d had enough of feeling undesirable since leaving Ireland. Instead of the golden land of promise they’d expected, New York City had proved remarkably hostile toward the small band of immigrants who had arrived in the fall of 1853 with little money and fewer prospects. It was no wonder that in the squalor of the overcrowded immigrant neighborhood Sean Gullivan had been immediately homesick for the green hills of his homeland. No wonder that he’d dreamed of reaching California, where a man could still live and support his family from the fruits of the land.

Finally Patrick grinned. “Well, if they do have the right to kick us off the wagon train, I guess we’ll just have to be sure they don’t want to. We’ll have to show them what a fine couple of lads we are.” His voice held the same brave determination that had helped Kerry keep going over the past horrible month. Her little brother was growing up, she’d thought more than once as they dealt together with her father’s sudden death. He was growing up just in time to face a world that sometimes seemed too harsh for even the strongest spirit.

Kerry smiled back at him. “So...do I look like a *fine* lad?” she asked with an exaggerated brogue that made the word sound like “foine.” Standing up from the table in the tiny boardinghouse room they’d shared since arriving in Independence two days ago, she put her hands on her hips and stalked

across the room with giant steps. She was wearing a pair of Patrick's trousers, which came well above her ankles, and a jacket of her father's that hung on her narrow shoulders like a potato sack.

Her brother watched her thoughtfully. "You don't have to walk like a rooster. Just move normally...only don't, you know, sway your hips."

Kerry's eyes widened. "I never sway my hips."

"Yes, you do." He grinned mischievously. "When the Flanagan brothers used to come around, you would sway them even more."

Kerry tugged at the hem of her father's coat to cover more of the tight pants. "That shows how much you know, little brother. I *hated* the Flanagan brothers."

"Not Mickey..." Patrick teased in a singsong tone.

Kerry gave a huff. "I don't have time to listen to your nonsense. Tomorrow we face the head of the association, and if we can't convince him that we're capable of driving a rig to California, we're in big trouble. So, truly now, how do I look?"

"You'll have to wear boots to cover those bare ankles."

"I'm going to wear yours. You can almost fit into Papa's by now, the way your feet are growing."

"Mine are too big for you," he protested.

"I'll make do."

Patrick shook his head, still studying her. "I don't know, sis. We'll have to hope that this Captain Hunter is half-blind."

"I don't think we want our trail guide to be half-blind," Kerry observed dryly, flopping down on the narrow cot that was the room's only bed. Their funds were growing distressingly low, so they had taken the poorest room they could find, and Patrick had slept on the floor for the past two nights. Today they would hire a temporary wagon to take them, along with their father's tools, which they had brought from New York, to Westport Landing. There they would join the encampment gathering along the banks of the Missouri River. The fully outfitted Conestoga their father had arranged through painstaking correspondence over the past few months should be waiting there for them.

Patrick laughed. "Well, not blind, maybe, just a little near-sighted. And you'll have to try to keep out of his way as much as possible."

Impatiently she tore off the oversize coat, revealing curves that would instantly give the lie to her deception. She threw the coat on the bed, then ran her hands through her newly shorn hair. "All I want is to get to California." With a last look in the mirror, she sighed. "I plan to stay out of everyone's way—especially Captain Hunter's. I hope the man never even knows I'm alive."

Chapter One

Westport Landing, Kansas
April 1857

Jeb Hunter rode along the double row of wagons, nodding an occasional greeting to his newest band of pilgrims. The wagons always looked so fresh and pretty at this stage—their hickory-stretched covers flapping proudly in the gentle Kansas breeze. It was the largest group he had taken yet. From a trickle of daring pioneers a decade ago, the western flow had grown to a mighty river, so that by now at midseason the trail outposts—Fort Kearney, Fort Laramie and the like—were bustling cities with thousands of wagons passing through. But the numbers hadn't lessened the danger, nor lowered the toll. Each time Jeb went across, the crosses marking trail deaths had multiplied like seeds scattered in the wind.

"Afternoon, Mr. Todd, Miz Todd," Jeb called, flicking his finger against the brim of his leather hat. The Todds were exactly the kind of people he liked to have in his party. Frank Todd was coolheaded, strong and a good shot. And he only had a wife to watch out for—no children, no mother or sister-in-law to lessen the odds. One man protecting one woman, the way things were meant to be. Every time Jeb took on a big family with helpless females and children he felt the familiar knot in his stomach. It wasn't as bad as it used to be. There had been times after he'd lost Melanie that the knot had gotten so big and tough, it would actually make him sick. He'd have to stop along the trail and puke out whatever had gone into his stomach over the past few hours. But nowadays he could usually swallow down the knot and get his mind back to other matters.

Frank Todd hollered back to him. "Will we be ready to roll on schedule tomorrow, Captain?"

Jeb nodded and reined his horse to pull closer to the Todds' wagon. "We're waiting on two more outfits, and they're both due in this afternoon."

"One will be those Irish boys, isn't that right?" Eulalie Todd asked. At Jeb's nod she continued, "Those poor boys with their father dropping dead so sudden like. It's a wonder they still want to make the trip."

Jeb frowned. "Their father already had his equipment all purchased. He did a good job of it, too. It's a fine wagon. But I'm not too comfortable myself with the thought of the two of them tackling it alone. If we could talk them out of it, I'd be a mite relieved."

"Don't we want all the wagons we can get?" Frank asked.

"Not necessarily. We already have nearly fifty, and anything more than that can get difficult to manage."

"Do you want me to talk to the boys when they get here?" Frank had been elected representative for the paying members of the association, which meant that Jeb could use him as an arbiter if there was a disagreement among the settlers. They also were carrying Jeb's personal supplies and food. Once they started rolling, he would camp with them each night and share their cookfire.

"No, I'll handle it. Legally, they're signed on, and their wagon's already been delivered here from Boone's place. So if they're up to it, I guess we'll take them."

Frank nodded his approval. "You tell them to call on Eulalie and me if they need some extra help."

Jeb smiled. "The papers say Gallivan's children are thirteen and nineteen years old. Thirteen's barely out of knee britches, but I'm hoping that the nineteen-year-old will turn out to be a burly fellow who can pull his own weight."

"Well now, I'd say nineteen's a fine age to be starting a new life out West," Eulalie Todd offered. "Most lads are in their prime by then. But they'll be grieving still. You tell them to come on over and see Eulalie if they get to feeling poorly. I'll feed them a nice hot bowl of turnip soup." Her voice became wistful. "Back home we'd have the house full up of neighbor children every time I made my

turnip soup.” She looked over her shoulder as if she might see all the way across the prairie to the neat brick house she had left behind in St Louis.

“I’ll do that, ma’am.” Jeb turned to her with the deep smile that lit his face only seldom these days. “And I’ll plan on polishing off a bowl or two of that soup myself.” He winked at her, then tipped his hat once again and rode away.

Patrick eyed their new wagon with a look of dismay. “How are we supposed to fit everything in there, sis? Papa’s tools alone will take up half the space.”

Kerry was thinking the same thing. She had that sick feeling in her stomach that had become so familiar since the day three weeks ago when she and Patrick had returned to their hotel room back in St. Louis to find their father slumped over the edge of his bed, still and cold. She took a deep breath. “We’ll take out all these supplies and put the toolboxes in first, then pile things on top of them. It’ll be tight, but I think we can do it.”

“And where do we sleep? On top of the roof?” Patrick’s voice gave signs of beginning its descent into manhood, but at the moment it was shrill, sarcastic and annoying.

“We’ll sleep on the roof if we have to in order to get all this to California. If Papa could bring these things all the way from Ireland, I can sure as shooting get them to California.”

Her brother leaped nimbly into the back of the wagon. “We could just take the metal pieces and leave some of the wooden things behind. I can make new ones myself when we get to California.”

This last was said with a deliberately casual air that told Kerry her brother knew perfectly well that his woodworking was not even close to the master craftsman level that had been passed along in the Gallivan family for generations. Patrick was good with his hands, but he had not had time to develop his father’s skill. But Kerry would never be the one to tell him this. “It was Papa’s dream to start a new life in California, Patrick. To start over on rich, new land and with the things he brought from home. Now that he’s gone, we’re going to do it for him. We’ll find the room.” Kerry bit down hard on her lip. This was not the time to give way to grief, or to discouragement “Maybe we don’t need all these supplies the Boone store sent. There are only two of us to feed now instead of three.”

“That’s right. Papa certainly won’t be eating anything this trip.” Patrick’s face brightened. “Maybe we could sell some of this food back to Boone’s and it would give us a little cash.”

Kerry tamped down her annoyance at her brother’s light tone. She knew that Patrick missed their father every bit as much as she did, but his youthful high spirits gave him the edge on dealing with his death. With each passing day, it seemed to be easier and easier for her brother to talk about him, to consign him to a place in the heart and mind reserved only for memories. Kerry had not reached that point. She still felt as if any minute she would turn the corner and see his dear, weathered face. When the realization hit that this would never happen again, she’d feel as if a hand was clutching at her throat, threatening to squeeze away her breath. Sean Gallivan was dead. After all his dreams, all his planning, all his saving, he would never see his dream fulfilled in the promised land of California. But she would.

“We’ll ask Captain Hunter when he shows up. In the meantime, let’s start moving some of these barrels out so we can get organized.”

“I thought the captain was supposed to be here to welcome us.”

Kerry pulled herself up beside her brother. There was scarcely room for the two of them inside the narrow bed of the wagon, which was already crammed full with the supplies her father had ordered. Patrick was right. There was no room left for the beloved woodworking tools that had been made by their great-grandfather—two heavy boxes of them that had already journeyed across an ocean and a third of a continent.

“Captain Hunter has many duties. I’m sure he’ll be along directly.”

Kerry was in no hurry for the meeting with the wagon train captain, knowing that the encounter would be the first true test of her disguise. This morning when they’d left Independence, Patrick had settled the roominghouse bill himself and the man at the livery stable had hardly given her a glance.

And she was becoming more comfortable in her brother's trousers. But she couldn't hope to escape scrutiny forever.

She worried about her face. Before packing her mirror, she had taken a long look at herself. The short hair didn't change the fact that her face was distinctly feminine—the lips full and red, the bright blue eyes heavily lashed. Her face was bronzed by the sun, not lily-white like that of the true ladies she had seen parading up and down Park Avenue back in New York. But her cheeks were smooth as polished marble. No one who came close would believe that they belonged to a man. Once they'd left the city this morning she'd rubbed dirt all over her face, much to her brother's amusement.

"Hallo there!" A voice reached them from the front of the wagon.

Patrick jumped down and leaned around the edge. "We're back here."

From the dark shelter of the wagon, Kerry peered out at the man who was pulling up his horse next to her brother. Her first impression was that he was big. Even mounted in his saddle, she could tell that he was much taller than the immigrant lads she had spent time with back in New York. Fully half a foot taller than Mickey Flanagan, she'd wager.

"Mr. Gallivan?" the man asked, bending to look inside the wagon.

Kerry's stomach tightened. "My father's dead," she said gruffly, remembering at the last minute to keep her voice low.

The man looked disconcerted. He rubbed a hand along a whiskery chin. "Ah...I know that. I'm sorry. We've been in touch with your lawyer, of course. But I was addressing you, sir. I'd be happy to call you by your first name, if you prefer, but I don't know what it is. I'm Jeb Hunter," he added.

Kerry sat back on her haunches and willed herself to stay calm. Of course, *she* was Mr. Gallivan now. And she'd have to do a better job of keeping her wits about her if she wanted her ruse to succeed.

Her brother calmly reached a hand toward the newcomer. "Pleased to meet you, Captain. I'm Patrick, and that's Kerry. Skipping the 'mister' part would be fine with my...ah...brother."

"Kerry?" the captain asked, still trying to see into the dim interior.

"Ah...Ker...ah...Kiernan." Patrick corrected firmly.

Captain Hunter cocked his head. "Irish name, right? Well, are you two gentlemen finding everything to be satisfactory?"

Patrick looked at his sister to reply.

Kerry took a deep breath and spoke carefully in the deep voice she'd been practicing. "We seem to have a few more supplies than we can fit, Captain Hunter."

Jeb grinned. "Old Albert Boone knows how to pack them in, that's for sure. But I think you'll find that they've given you just enough to cover your needs. The wagon may look crowded now, but you'll get used to it."

Kerry risked leaning a little into the sunlight. In spite of her resolution to stay away from Captain Hunter, he would have to see her face sometime, and it might as well be now. "The problem, Captain, is that we've brought a few items along with us from New York that have to go in our wagon."

She noticed that he started a little when he saw her, and she quickly pointed behind him, hoping to distract his attention. Jeb gave her one more hard glance, then turned back toward the rented wagon. With a low whistle he swung a long leg over his horse and jumped to the ground. "What in the name of Jupiter is all that?"

He didn't sound pleased. Kerry swallowed. "There's some farm equipment, and the two boxes are my father's tools." The defensive tone made her voice creep higher.

Jeb stalked over to the freight wagon and looked at the jumbled contents with disbelief.

Once again Patrick took charge. "My brother and I are going to start our own ranch in California. My father brought those things with him when he came from Ireland."

Jeb turned around and looked from Patrick back over to Kerry, who had once again retreated into the shadows. He shook his head. "There's no way you'll be able to take all this with you. Your father should have understood that it would be impossible. I'm sorry, lads." He lowered his head and

once again tried to peer inside the dark recesses of the wagon. "Listen, I know your father's death must have been a terrible shock to you two. If you want to head on back to New York, I'll be sure you get your money back from the association and from Boone's, too."

Kerry's cheeks flushed hot. She had been told one time too often over the past few days that she ought to consider giving up. Vaulting over the lip of the wagon she landed hard on the ground and turned to face Jeb Hunter with her hands on her hips. "Captain Hunter, my brother and I are going to California, and we have a contract that says you have to take us."

He took a couple steps toward her. His eyes were an odd hazel color, the corners crinkled from years of riding outdoors in the prairie sun. He had a strong face that matched the raw strength of his tall body. Her anger died as swiftly as it had arisen. "We won't give you any trouble," she added softly. "I promise."

Jeb looked at her curiously, then over at Patrick, and back once again to the loaded freight wagon. "That stuff came all the way from Ireland?" Jeb snatched his hat off and ran a hand back through his unruly, light brown hair.

"All the way from Ireland," Kerry said firmly. "And now it's going all the way to California."

Jeb looked uncertain. The expression didn't sit naturally on his face. He stretched his neck to look around toward the front of the wagon where the team of four oxen grazed placidly. "The more weight your oxen pull, the more water they'll need." Jeb put on his hat and pushed it to the back of his head. "Water can get mighty precious along the trail."

Kerry had begun to relax. Though he had given her some strange glances, it appeared Captain Hunter was not going to question her identity as the *son* of Sean Gallivan. "I've noticed that many of the families are bringing along a milk cow. Will their cows need water, Captain?"

He gave a reluctant smile. "I reckon they will."

Kerry nodded. "Then you can just consider the extra equipment to be our milk cow."

Jeb pulled himself back on his horse in an easy, natural motion that did something queer to Kerry's insides. "I'll make a bargain with you. Cut this stuff in half." He gestured to the freight wagon. "Leave the plow, one of those toolboxes, whatever else you can. There'll be a representative from Boone's out later on this afternoon to take back any leftover supplies. He'll probably give you some money for whatever you have to leave behind."

"Captain Hunter, my brother and I have already had to leave the body of our father behind in St Louis. I intend to take whatever else I can of him to California." Kerry realized that her voice had trembled slightly. Furiously she bit painfully into her lower lip. But her emotion had apparently not affected Jeb Hunter.

"I'm sorry. At least half that pile stays here...or you and your entire wagon stay. Take your choice. We leave at dawn, boys. I'll leave you alone to make your decision."

When Kerry made no reply, Patrick said, "Thank you, Captain. We'll be ready to go at dawn."

Jeb took a last look over at the freight wagon. "Just remember we've got two sets of mountains to cross before you get to the California. My best advice to you is to travel as light as possible."

Then he wheeled his horse and rode off, sending up a cloud of dust that stung Kerry's eyes.

"Maybe he's right, Kerry," Patrick said after a moment. "We don't really need all those things. I can get new tools when we get out there, and then I'll make whatever else we need."

Kerry had a sudden vision of her brother as a small boy sitting at their father's side, earnestly copying each move of Sean Gallivan's sure, swift hands. She blinked hard and let the tears well up to wash away the dust. "We're going to build Papa's ranch in California, Patrick. It's going to be every bit as rich and beautiful as he dreamed. And," she added fiercely, "we're going to do it with his grandfather's tools."

They had worked through the night. The settlers' representative, Frank Todd, had ridden up at dusk to invite them to a campfire and farewell party, but they had politely declined and continued shifting and shoving and unloading and reloading until the inside of their wagon was more intricately

arranged than a Chinese puzzle. It had been almost dawn before Kerry had been satisfied that everything was packed. The two big toolboxes were covered with supplies, impossible to see from any angle. Everything was on board except for a box from the Boone store labeled Meat Cakes.

"I think I'd have trouble getting one of these things down anyway," she'd told her brother.

"They're not so bad," he'd replied, munching on one. "At least they're not fish."

When their father had become fanatical about his plans for the journey to California, they'd saved money by eating the broken and sometimes half-spoiled pieces of fish Patrick had been able to bring home each day from the docks. Now just a fishy odor was enough to make them both queasy.

The man from Boone's outfitters had come and gone the previous evening, so the box of meat cakes sat in the grass alongside the wagon. "We have an hour or so until dawn," Kerry said finally. "We could probably sleep."

"I'm too wide-awake," Patrick replied, sitting down beside her at the little campfire they'd kept burning through the night. "It's hard to believe that we're finally on our way. So much has happened..."

His voice trailed off. "It's not fair, is it?" Kerry mused. "He should be here."

Patrick nodded as they both stared at the glowing embers. After several minutes he said, "You go ahead and sleep if you want, sis. We have a long day ahead."

"No. This is restful right here. A few moments of peace before everyone else is awake. Maybe we'll be able to sleep along the way."

Patrick grinned. "Show me a square foot of space inside the wagon where I can curl up and then I'll think about napping."

Kerry sighed. "There'll be more space as we use up the supplies along the way."

"You boys must be eager to get started." Jeb Hunter's voice came out of the darkness behind them. "You're the first ones up."

"We haven't been..." Patrick began, then stopped as Kerry elbowed his side. "Ah... we're ready and waiting."

"I hope you got enough rest. The first couple of days are usually grueling." Jeb glanced over at their wagon. "I see you got your wagon loaded. Did you sell the rest of your stuff back to Boone's?"

"Yup. No problem," Kerry replied quickly without so much as a stammer. What was one more lie among the many she would be forced to tell to maintain her masquerade?

Captain Hunter was studying them keenly in the firelight. Kerry didn't like the speculative look in his eyes when he glanced her way. She bent over to put a log on the fire, hiding her face. "Like my brother said, we're ready to go."

Jeb sauntered casually over and peeked in the back of the wagon. "It looks pretty full up in there."

Kerry gave a noncommittal murmur in reply.

He walked back over to the fire and stood towering over them. "Just so you understand. Sometimes the trail gets too tough—we have to lighten the load, leave things behind. You'll find the way littered with family heirlooms, tools, furniture, all kinds of 'essentials' that somehow just don't seem that essential anymore a thousand miles out from Westport Landing."

Kerry wanted to look him directly in the face, but she had to remember that her disguise was more important at this point than her pride. She kept her eyes lowered. "I understand what you're saying, Captain. I can assure you that my brother and I will do whatever it takes to reach California."

"Well, I admire your attitude, Kiernan. That's the kind of spirit we need along the trail." Jeb lapsed into silence as he once again studied the two Irish boys. He'd been disappointed when he first saw the elder Gallivan brother. The lad was slight, almost sickly thin, and looked not much older than his little brother. But the young Irishman had stood up to Jeb well enough—both brothers had, for that matter. Perhaps they would also stand up to the rigors of the trail. "How well can you boys shoot?" he asked them.

Patrick and Kerry looked at each other. “We’re willing to learn,” Patrick said finally. “There’s a fine new rifle with the supplies Papa bought.”

“You’ve never been hunting, never shot a gun?” Jeb asked, incredulous.

“There are very few buffalo wandering around the streets of Manhattan, Captain,” Kerry retorted, watching him from under her thick eyelashes.

Jeb chuckled, but shifted uneasily. He could swear that the boy raised his hackles in a way that he’d only experienced with women. It was an odd sensation. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the lad was so femininely slender. And then there was that face, so perfect it looked as if it had been chiseled directly off one of the marble statues he’d seen once in a book.

“Well, you’ll have to learn to shoot out here—both of you. Maybe one of the other men will give you some lessons. Have you met your neighbors yet?” When both boys shook their heads he continued. “Up in front of you will be Scott Haskell. He’s an argonaut and is traveling alone.”

“An argonaut?” Patrick asked.

“A prospector. That’s what they’re calling them—after Jason and the Argonauts. You know—the never-ending search for the Golden Fleece.” There was a disdainful note to his voice.

“I thought the Gold Rush was pretty much over,” Kerry said.

“There’ll always be a gold rush somewhere as long as men think that money is the secret to a happy life.” Jeb had learned otherwise a long time ago, but it wasn’t a lesson he shared easily. “Anyway, the outfit behind you belongs to the Burnetts—a young couple from Virginia and their two young’uns. Nice folks.”

Patrick jumped up from his place by the fire, looking as if he was ready to start this instant. “Do we stay in the same order for the whole trip?” he asked their guide.

“We keep the same order usually, unless there’s a reason to switch. But each day the lead wagon goes to the rear.”

“How come?”

Jeb smiled. “It’s so that every outfit gets a chance at one blessed, dust-free day.” When Patrick looked confused, he added, “You’ll understand what I mean after an hour or two on the trail.”

He wished them luck on their first day, then left to begin a last-minute check on the other wagons.

By the time the first licks of dawn began appearing across the prairie, most of the camp was awake, bustling with energy and the same kind of suppressed excitement that Kerry could see in her brother’s face. She herself was wishing she could find a place to get away from everything and sleep for about a week. The long night of loading had taken a toll, as had the past few weeks of grief, strain and worry. Promising herself a good night’s sleep once they were out on the trail, she dabbed some water on her tired eyes, then rubbed more dirt across her cheeks.

Actually, she told herself, she should be feeling great. She’d successfully accomplished what she’d promised to herself as she’d stood watching her father’s body being lowered into the ground in a cheap pine box. This morning they started west. The wagon train captain had accepted them. Once they left Westport, there was no turning back. Even if her disguise was discovered, they’d have to let her continue on with them. The most difficult obstacle had been met and conquered. She should be feeling on top of the world, but as visions of her father’s twinkling blue eyes covered the blur in her own, she couldn’t seem to feel anything but tired.

“Wagons, ho!” She turned around at the sound of a childish shout, then blinked to try to clear her vision. She must be more tired than she realized, because she was suddenly seeing double.

“Forward, ho!” shouted vision number two. Kerry gave a small laugh at her own confusion. The pair were twins, of course.

“Good morning,” she said as the two identically clad youngsters ran up to her, stopping abruptly a safe five feet away. “Who are you two ladies?”

The little girls giggled and the one on the right said, “I’m Polly, she’s Molly.”

Kerry masked a wince at the thought of a mother who would name her daughters like two rhyming parrots. “Pleased to meet you. I’m...Kerr...Kiernan. Kiernan Gallivan.” She’d entirely forgotten to lower her voice, but the girls didn’t appear to question her masculinity.

“We’re Burnetts,” Polly added. “We’re gonna be your neighbors, Ma says, and we have to be nice to you, ‘cause you and your brother lost your pa.”

After too much false sympathy from strangers, Kerry found the girl’s directness disarming. Once again the unshed tears stung her throat. “Yes, we did,” she said softly. “How old are you two?”

“I’m older.” Polly continued to be the spokesperson for the duo. “Five minutes. But we’re both ten.”

Kerry turned her eyes to Molly, whose smile was just a little more tentative than her sister’s. “Well now, ten’s a wonderful age, isn’t it, just starting to be grown-up.”

Molly looked down at her scuffed shoes. “Pa says we get to drive the wagon,” she contributed in a voice Kerry could hardly hear.

“That sounds about right. My brother’s thirteen and he’s been driving for at least three years.” “But he’s a boy,” Polly pointed out. “That’s different.”

“Not always. It doesn’t have to be different.”

“You talk kind of funny.”

Kerry didn’t know if the girl was referring to her high pitch or her slight accent, but decided to stay with the safer topic. “That’s because I grew up in another country. Have you ever heard of Ireland?”

Both girls nodded and Polly said, “In school. On the train we won’t have any school and maybe not for a long time, but my Ma will teach us.”

“That’s good, Polly. Learning’s important.”

“That’s what Ma says.”

“It sounds as if your mother’s a smart lady,” Kerry replied with a smile.

“I told you girls not to bother the neighbors till we all get started.” A pretty blonde who didn’t look old enough to be anyone’s mother was walking toward them from the next wagon. The smile on her face diluted the reproachful tone of her words.

“She talked to us first, Ma.”

“They’re not a bother, ma’am.” Now Kerry made an effort to keep her voice low.

The woman came up behind her daughters and draped an arm lightly around each. “I’m Dorothy Burnett. And you must be one of the Gallivan boys.”

“I’m Kiernan, ma’am. Pleased to meet you.” Kerry took a step back toward her own wagon, hoping the woman would not offer a hand to shake. Her slender hands were the one part of her that was impossible to disguise.

“And I see you’ve already met Polly and Molly.” With a little laugh and the air of someone who’d made the explanation many times in the past, she continued, “Their real names are Priscilla Jo and Margaret Mary, but their father put the nicknames on when they were just babes and somehow they’ve stuck.”

Kerry grinned. “Polly and Molly it is, then. You girls will have to help me out on which is which for a while.”

“They’ve been known to trick people in the past,” Dorothy said, laughing, “so be careful.”

Kerry was drawn to the woman’s warmth. It was nice to have another young woman along as a companion, and for a moment she felt a pang knowing that, thanks to her masquerade, she and Dorothy would not be able to become confidantes. It would be comforting to confide her secret to someone. “That’s all right, girls,” she said a touch wistfully, smiling down at the twins. “I’ve been known to trick people myself on occasion.”

Chapter Two

Jeb Hunter had been right about the dust. It didn't take even the hour or two he had predicted for Kerry and Patrick to realize that moving along in the middle of a train of nearly fifty wagons was a grimy business. The first part of the trail out from Westport was level, easy going—the “sea of grass” her father had told them about during those long evenings of planning back in New York. But the endless procession of wagons had worn the actual trail down to bare ground, and each wagon churned up its own little dirt cyclone as they rolled along. Following the example of some of the more experienced travelers, Kerry and Patrick tied bandannas over their faces to keep out the worst of it.

“I guess I won't have to rub dirt on my cheeks any more,” Kerry joked to her brother as they sat side by side on the wagon seat. “There's enough natural accumulation of the stuff to disguise the President of the United States.”

“I wish papa had bought us horses instead of these stupid beasts,” her brother grumbled. “Then I could ride out into the fresh air like Captain Hunter.”

All morning they'd watched their wagon master riding from one wagon to the next, checking equipment, giving advice and generally elevating spirits as his flock took their scary first step beyond civilization.

“Horses don't stand up well enough pulling a heavy load. Papa said it had to be mules or oxen, and oxen were cheaper.”

“If he'd bought mules, I could at least have ridden some of the time.”

Jeb Hunter was riding toward them. “I'll not have you criticize Papa's decisions, Patrick,” Kerry said absently, her eyes on their guide. It was his extraordinary, almost golden eyes that drew her frequent glances, she'd decided, but she had to admit that the face that went along with the eyes was ruggedly handsome. He had creases along each cheek that made his expression look severe except when he smiled. He didn't seem to be a man who smiled often.

“Are you listening to me, sis?” her brother asked.

“What?”

“I asked if you thought we might switch the oxen for mules when we reach the changing station.”

Jeb pulled up to them, and at the very last minute Kerry remembered to tug down the brim of her big felt hat. “How are you boys getting along?” he called.

“Fine,” Kerry mumbled. What was wrong with her? She must be even more tired than she thought. Captain Hunter had asked them a simple question, and she'd felt it inside her like a jolt. He was a fine figure of a man, that was for sure, but she had no business getting jittery around him like a maid at her first dance.

“I wish my papa had bought mules,” Patrick complained, drawing the captain's eyes away from her. Kerry let out a long breath.

“You've got good animals there, Patrick. You might be thankful to have oxen when your arms start aching from those reins. They're much easier to handle.”

“My arms don't ache, and I'd give anything to be able to ride out like you do.”

Jeb smiled. “One of these days after everyone's settled you can ride the rounds with me on the back of my horse. Or, even better, you can ride Storm by yourself for a spell and I'll climb on up there with your brother.”

Patrick darted a glance at his sister, whose eyes had widened in dismay. “Ah...that's all right,” he answered. “I don't mind it so very much.”

Jeb seemed a little puzzled at the boy's quick refusal. “Well, the offer's open. And, of course, you can always get out and walk along out in the grass. You and your brother can take turns driving and walking to get a little time out of the dust.”

Kerry found her eyes wandering to the way Captain Hunter's strong thighs gripped the side of his horse. With a puff of irritation, she forced her thoughts back to the trip. "Do you really think the oxen are a better choice, Captain Hunter?" She was hoping that the captain's opinion would validate her father's careful preparations.

"There're folk who take both sides," Jeb answered, "but I might go for the oxen for just one reason."

"What's that?" Patrick asked.

Jeb hesitated a moment, then said. "It's a long way to California, and things don't always go as we plan. If we find ourselves up against it, an ox makes a sight tastier meal than a mule."

Patrick and Kerry looked down in dismay at the four black hulks that plodded along in front of them. As Captain Hunter tipped his hat and started back to the Burnetts' wagon, Patrick turned to his sister and said with a weak grin, "At least it's not fish."

They stopped for nooning early in deference to the first-time nerves and muscle aches of the new pioneers. Kerry was relieved to climb down from the wagon and stretch her back. She felt as if she had spent the morning inside a butter churn. Patrick so far seemed unaffected by the jolting. He'd been up and down from the wagon a dozen times already, sometimes walking alongside, sometimes running out into the long grass to get a look at the line of wagons stretching out as far as the eye could see.

As Kerry took out two apples and some jerky for their lunch, her brother came walking sedately back to the wagon with a visitor. Kerry recognized the man as their neighbor to the front—the argonaut, Captain Hunter had called him. She tugged on her hat and tensed her shoulders. She'd be glad when she'd met everyone on the train and had been generally accepted as a male.

In spite of her nervousness, the introductions went smoothly once again. Kerry let out a breath of relief and allowed herself to study Scott Haskell from underneath her hat. He was not as handsome as their trail guide, but his face was pleasant, instantly likable.

"I wanted to come back and meet you boys last night," he was saying, "but I didn't get in until late."

"It wouldn't have mattered how late you came," Patrick replied cheerfully. "We were up all night trying to get the wagon packed up."

Haskell's bushy blond eyebrows shot up. "All night! You boys must be even more tired than I am after working all day yesterday at Iron Joe's."

"Iron Joe's?" Patrick asked.

"The blacksmith, lad. I was a blacksmith up in Pittsburgh, and I earned my team of mules by shoeing just about every other blamed mule on this train."

"Are you going to be a blacksmith in California, Mr. Haskell?"

"Call me Scott, lad. And you too, Kiernan." He gave Kerry what started out to be a quick glance, then seemed to catch himself and let his eyes rest on her face.

"So *are* you?" Patrick persisted.

"What was that, boy?"

"Are you going to be a blacksmith out West?"

Finally he shifted his gaze back to Patrick. "No, sirree. No more smoky bellows for me. No more iron filings itching my hide like a swarm of marsh flies. I'm planning to be rich, Patrick, my lad. The only kind of metal I'm going to be dealing with anymore is gold—pure, yellow gold."

"Golly." Patrick was looking up at Scott Haskell as if he had just crossed the Missouri River on his bare feet.

Kerry felt a twinge of impatience. All she needed was for Patrick to get fancy ideas about gold prospecting instead of working with her to set up the ranch. Once they reached California she would need her brother's help more than ever. "We wish you luck, Mr. Haskell, I'm sure," she said briskly.

“But first of all we have to get there. And we should probably be tending to our lunch before Captain Hunter calls for us to get moving again.”

He turned that disconcerting gaze on her once more, and this time a secret little smile played around his lips. “You’re absolutely right, young man. I’m going to head back to my wagon this minute. But I’ll be looking forward to getting to know you *boys* better at the meeting tonight.”

Kerry remembered that Captain Hunter had told them that there would be a formal meeting that evening to discuss any problems that might have arisen during their first day. “We’ll be there,” she said wearily. And after the meeting, she would finally get some sleep.

This was the sixth spring that Jeb had set out with a new band of travelers. Every year there were two or three outfits that headed back by the time they reached Fort Kearney. He usually could predict which ones they would be after the first day on the trail.

This trip it would definitely be the Wagners. The man’s wife had not stopped complaining the entire day. And perhaps the Pendletons. They had come all the way from England, but both looked as if the journey was beginning to be too much for them. He wasn’t sure about the Irish boys. They certainly had the spirit for it, but it was a tough thing to leave behind a father barely cold in his grave and head out across a continent. He’d found himself thinking about them frequently during this first long day.

He had to spread his attention around—there were always adjustments to be made at the beginning and these people had paid equally for his help. But he’d swung back to the Gallivan wagon as often as he could. Young Patrick was refreshingly enthusiastic and observant. He’d even exclaimed over the different clouds of dust tossed up by the mule teams versus the oxen. The older boy had less to say, but there was a determined expression on his handsome face that intrigued Jeb. When he’d tried to engage the young Irishman in conversation, the lad’s answers had been curt and uncommunicative. But somehow Jeb sensed a great vitality behind those vivid blue eyes.

He watched the two brothers as they made their way to the edge of the circle of settlers who had gathered by the big fire Jeb had built a short ways out in the prairie. He had not circled the wagons this first day. That could wait until they were into Indian country.

In the early-spring twilight he could see the faces of his charges. Good folk, generally—steady and determined. He scanned the crowd, but his eyes kept turning back to the striking faces of the two Irish lads.

“Patrick, Kiernan! Come on up front,” he called to them finally. “We never got a chance to introduce you to everyone.”

Patrick looked at his sister, then gave her elbow a comforting squeeze. Kerry closed her eyes briefly. She was exhausted. But she had wanted to get through with introductions. It might as well be now. With her hat tugged down and concentrating on not swaying her hips, she stalked around the circle to the front. “These are the Gallivan brothers,” Jeb was saying, “and I hope all you folks will do your best to make them feel welcome.”

Jeb didn’t dwell on the presentation. There were a lot of issues to cover, and everyone was tired, so he nodded to Kerry and Patrick to take a seat and started in on the meeting.

Kerry sank heavily to the ground. The few minutes of standing in front of the crowd had used up the last bit of strength she had. She had fully expected that any minute someone—a sharp-eyed child, probably—would point to her and cry out, “Why, that’s a girl.” But no one had raised a voice. She was now officially Kiernan, one of the “Gallivan brothers.” And she could sleep a little easier tonight.

After the meeting, Scott Haskell stepped into place beside her as she made her way back up the line to their wagon. Patrick, not yet out of energy, had run ahead of her. The sky had darkened and was slowly becoming spangled with stars. Her father had said that they would have spectacular nights out on the prairie, but the real thing was far beyond his descriptions.

“It looks like our good weather is going to hold,” Haskell observed, matching his pace to hers.

Kerry's face was hidden by the darkness, so she relaxed as she answered sleepily, "The sky's unbelievable. I never knew stars could be so bright."

"We're lucky. Some trains start out in spring rains that don't stop for days. They end up eating mud the rest of the trip."

"My brother and I are prepared to eat anything we have to as long as we get to California."

Haskell chuckled. "You are two mighty determined lads. How old are you, anyway, Kiernan?"

"Nineteen."

Haskell nodded. "You're not too big a fellow, are you?" he asked casually.

"Ah...no. Folks aren't so tall where I come from."

"Patrick looks as if he'll be a strapping gent someday. He's already almost as tall as you are." Haskell's blond hair glinted in the starlight, and he had that same secret smile on his face that had made Kerry uneasy when they'd met earlier in the day.

"I guess he'll be bigger than I. Our father was a tall man." She was finding the conversation a little odd. Scott Haskell had barely met them. What did he care about her brother's height—or hers?

He looked at her steadily in the darkness for a long moment. Then he gave a little nod and switched subjects. "I understand you're headed for the Sonoma valley."

Kerry shrugged her shoulders to ease out the tension. "Yes. Where are you headed, Mr. Haskell?"

"Scott, please," he said with a smile.

"Scott."

"I reckon I'll look around a bit—see where the veins are running richest. Probably south of San Francisco somewheres."

Kerry started to reply when suddenly her foot, clumsy in Patrick's oversize boot, hit a large rock that had been camouflaged by the darkness. She fell off balance directly toward her companion. Scott turned quickly and caught her with strong, sure hands at each shoulder. "I'm sorry," Kerry faltered, embarrassed. She righted herself, grimacing as her ankle gave a nasty twinge.

"Are you all right?" Scott asked.

"Yes, just...I'm sorry." She took a step away from his grasp, giving a little gasp as her foot hit the ground. The twinge was turning into a definite throb. "I seem to have twisted an ankle."

Scott reached out and took her slender hands. He pulled them toward him and turned them over slowly studying them in the starlight. Then he looked into her eyes. "Perhaps those heavy boots are too much for what must be delicate little feet...*Miss Gallivan*."

Under the smears of dirt on her face, Kerry blanched. "I...what do you mean?"

Scott smiled. "Don't worry, lass. Your secret is safe with me, though I can't imagine how anyone on this train can actually believe that you're a male."

Kerry pulled her hands away from him. "When did you know?" she asked dully.

"The minute I saw those beautiful blue eyes," Scott answered cheerfully. "I couldn't believe that God would be so cruel as to waste them on a man." As her features became more dejected he added gently, "Your face is well disguised by the dirt and floppy hat, lass, but I saw your hands. Those slender wrists couldn't belong to a man."

Kerry moved another step backward, only to be reminded once again of the pain in her leg. "The lawyer in St. Louis told us that they wouldn't take a lone woman," she explained, a little breathless with nerves at her sudden discovery and the pain.

"And you wanted to come anyway."

"Yes. My brother and I have to get to California."

Scott nodded, suddenly serious. "You're a brave lass, Kiernan. Is it Kiernan?"

"Kerry."

"Ah. That's better. You're a brave lass, Kerry, and, as I said, I won't be turning you in. In fact, I hope you'll consider me a friend."

His eyes were kind and his hand gentle as he gave her shoulder a little squeeze. “If you will keep my secret, Mr. Haskell, I will definitely consider you a friend.”

“Good.” He cocked his head. “But you’ll have to learn to call me Scott.”

She smiled, then sighed. “I guess I’d better, Scott, because I’m already going to take advantage of your friendship.”

“Just ask.”

Giving her foot a rueful glance, she told him, “I’m afraid I’m going to need some assistance getting back to my wagon.”

Scott frowned. “You *are* really hurt, then. Damnation, what luck. I wonder if anyone in the group is trained in medicine?”

Kerry put both her hands up in protest. “No, please. I’ll be fine. If you’ll just help me to my wagon, I’m sure by tomorrow this’ll be back to normal.”

Scott hesitated. “You don’t want anyone looking at you too closely. Is that it?”

Kerry tightened her jaw against the pain that was beginning to radiate in rings up her leg. Scott grasped her elbows as she swayed. Her hands clutched at his forearms. “Will you help me? Please?” It was not a plea that came easy to her, but at the moment the pain was overriding her usual sense of independence.

Scott bent his head to see her eyes in the starlight, then without a word scooped her up in his brawny arms.

“You don’t have to carry me,” she protested.

Scott shook his head. “You weigh no more than a feather, lass. I could carry you from here to California without breaking a sweat.”

The ache pulsating upward from her foot obliterated all sense of embarrassment she might have felt at this unexpected intimacy with a man she had barely met. “Thank you,” she murmured. Then added in a tired voice, “Tomorrow I’ll be back on my feet.”

But the next day there was no way Kerry would be able to walk and take a turn away from the dust. Her foot had swollen so that even Patrick’s large boot would not fit over it. Patrick had bound it in rags over which Kerry had painfully pulled on a large wool sock.

Scott appeared at breakfast to ask about her injury. He offered to make a bed for her in the back of his much roomier wagon, but she refused, accepting only his offer of help in climbing up onto her wagon seat.

Kerry told no one else of her mishap, but there seemed to be some mysterious network of communication among the wagons, and before they were a half hour out on the trail, Jeb Hunter rode back to them, his forehead creased with worry.

Without preliminaries he said, “I understand you hurt your leg last night, Kiernan.”

She nodded, keeping her face down under the big hat. After her discovery by Haskell, her confidence in her disguise had disappeared. “Just an ankle twist—nothing serious,” she mumbled.

Jeb shook his head. An injury already—the very first day out. He hoped it wasn’t an omen. “Are you sure it’s not broken? We won’t exactly be running into any doctors between here and Fort Kearney. I guess I’d better have a look at it.”

Kerry tensed, and Patrick, riding alongside her in the box, gave her a reassuring pat on the knee. “My brother will be fine,” he said. “Honestly. You don’t have to worry about it”

Jeb hesitated. The boys’ independence was admirable, but the health of his band was his responsibility. He’d seen broken legs fester and turn rotten. “I’ll just check it over to be sure,” he said in a tone that left no room for argument. “I’ll come around when we stop for the nooning. In the meantime, Patrick, why don’t you take over the reins and let Kiernan climb in the back to lie down—get that leg propped up.”

“There’s no room back there to lie—” Patrick began, then stopped as he saw the slight shake of his sister’s head. “All right, Captain. We’ll do just as you say.”

“Good lad.” Hunter wheeled his horse and headed back along the train.

“Now what?” Patrick asked after a moment.

Kerry had turned her head and was watching the guide’s retreating form with an indignant expression. She was starting to get a little tired of Captain Hunter’s high-handed ways. Her father had paid good money to hire his services, as had the other people on the train, yet he acted as if he were the one who had the final say in everything.

“I’m not sure I like that man. He thinks he’s the boss.”

“Well, he is the boss in a way,” Patrick said reasonably. “Everyone on the train has to do what he says.”

Kerry turned around on the seat to face her brother. “We’re paying *him*, remember?”

“But he’s responsible for all of us.”

“Well, he’s not responsible for…” She sputtered a moment, letting her temper build. “For my feet!” she concluded, looking down at her bandaged leg.

Patrick shook his head. “I think he’s going to want to look at your ankle—one way or another.”

Kerry thought for a minute. “As soon as we stop for lunch, I want you to run up and fetch Mr. Haskell—Scott Tell him I need to take him up on his offer.”

Patrick frowned. “What offer?”

“Of help. If my foot’s already been looked at by an expert, Captain Hunter can’t insist on treating it.”

“Mr. Haskell’s an expert?”

Kerry’s chin lifted and her smile held a touch of defiance. “He shoes horses, doesn’t he?”

Scott had agreed to help deflect the attention of the wagon train captain from Kerry’s obviously feminine legs, but only with the condition that she let him really check on the state of her ankle.

“I’m telling you, it’s nothing,” she said, her dirtsmearred face growing red. She’d been without a mother since she was a child and had grown up in a household with two males. She wasn’t used to *anyone* seeing a portion of her body that should in all decency be covered up.

“Sorry, lass,” Scott answered with a charming grin as he climbed up on the side rail to lift her down from the wagon seat. “If I’m to help out with this little deception of yours, I’ve got to do it with a clean conscience. What if your ankle’s actually broken?”

“It can’t be broken,” Kerry answered firmly. “I can’t afford for it to be.”

Scott chuckled and bobbled her a bit in his arms as he awkwardly stepped backward down to the ground. “It wouldn’t dare,” he clarified.

“That’s right.”

His chuckle turned into a laugh. Against the hard surface of his chest, Kerry felt warm and comforted—the way she felt when she used to crawl up into her father’s broad lap as a child. She put the thought out of her head. She hadn’t needed the comfort of her father’s lap for some years now, and she certainly didn’t need the warmth of a man’s arms. She was just feeling a little weak because of her injury and because the throbbing had kept her awake for yet another sleepless night.

“Well, we’ll just take a quick look, lass. On a strictly professional basis, I assure you.” Now his blue eyes smiled at her. “In my capacity as your…ah…*veterinarian*.”

Patrick had finished watering the oxen and came up behind them. “Is my brother going to be all right?”

“How about you lift down one of those boxes for your *sister* to sit on, lad,” Scott answered.

Patrick’s eyes widened and he turned to Kerry. “He knows?”

Kerry nodded. “It seems that my disguise was not convincing to Mr. Haskell. But he has promised to keep our secret.”

“Criminy, Kerry. I told you this wasn’t going to work. It’s not going to work, is it, Mr. Haskell?” Patrick kicked the wagon wheel with his boot.

“It’s Scott,” he said, still holding Kerry lightly in his arms, then added gently, “the box, lad.” Patrick pulled a packing crate from the back of the wagon and positioned it where Scott could easily set Kerry. After she was situated, Scott stepped back and continued, “I can’t answer you for certain, Patrick, but no one else has questioned your sister’s identity. She’s a smart lass. She may be able to pull it off.”

“As long as Jeb Hunter doesn’t insist on seeing my ankle,” Kerry added grimly, stretching her leg out in front of her. Her foot, bandaged with strips of cloth she had torn from a petticoat last night, stuck awkwardly out the end of her too short, borrowed trousers.

“Maybe he won’t even come around,” Patrick suggested hopefully, but before he had even finished the words, all three lifted their heads at the sound of a horse riding toward them. The wagon master was approaching their wagon, his eyes on Kerry.

Scott pushed back the brim of his hat, then stood awaiting Jeb Hunter’s arrival with crossed arms. “Afternoon, Captain,” he said in a loud voice, drawing the trail guide’s gaze.

Kerry twirled around on the box so that her bad leg was partially out of view.

“Afternoon,” Jeb answered gruffly, pulling his horse to a stop a few feet away. “I came to see the lad’s bad ankle.”

He dismounted and walked toward them, but Scott took a step closer, cutting off his approach. “He says it’s fine.”

Kerry watched as the two men came to a stop opposite each other. Something in their demeanor made their positions look more like a confrontation than a conversation.

“I know,” Hunter said, with just a brush of irritation in his voice. “But I’m going to check it out just to be sure.”

He started to take a step around Scott, who reached out and put a hand on his arm. “I’ve looked at it myself,” he said. “There’s no need for you to bother.”

“Scott’s an expert,” Patrick chimed in.

Jeb Hunter looked down at Scott’s restraining hand. “An expert?”

Scott removed his hand and spoke in conciliatory tones. “I’ve worked with this kind of injury before,” Scott said. “Ankle sprains and the like. I think Kiernan’s going to be just fine if he keeps off it for three or four days.”

For the first time since her injury, Kerry was oblivious to the pain as she watched the exchange between the two men. They were not destined to be friends, that was clear. And it looked as if it would take little to set off a spark of animosity between them. “I wish everyone would stop talking about me and my blasted foot,” she said, making her voice as forceful as she could in its low range. “Mr. Haskell says it’s fine, and it’s practically stopped hurting. So I’d like to just forget the whole incident.”

Jeb Hunter looked over at her and frowned. “Did you get it properly bandaged?”

“Yes. As we said, Mr. Haskell is something of an expert.”

He took a step backward and turned his glance back to Scott. “The lad seems to take your word for it, Haskell, and it was nice of you to help out. But in the future I’d appreciate it if you remembered that I’m the one responsible for the health of the people on this train.”

Scott gave a bland smile. “Sure, Captain. We all know that you’re the boss man.”

Hunter seemed to hesitate for a moment, trying to decide if Scott’s comment had carried hidden sarcasm, but he evidently decided not to press the issue. “Fine. We’ll be getting started again here in about twenty minutes.” He nodded to Patrick, then turned with a last caution to Kerry. “Stay off that foot, then, Kiernan.”

When he mounted up and rode away Kerry discovered that she’d been holding in a deep breath. She let it out slowly. “Well, that’s one crisis past.”

Scott dropped to one knee beside her. “But I’m still going to look at your foot, lass.”

She winced in pain and embarrassment as he deftly pushed the trousers up her slender leg and began to unwind the cloth strips. Her ankle was puffy and grayish blue. Scott gave a low whistle, then looked up at her with a wink. “Now I’ve heard of a nicely turned ankle before…”

Kerry laughed and found herself relaxing in spite of herself under the influence of Scott Haskell’s charm. By the time he had gingerly felt along each side of her ankle, declared that there appeared to be no broken bones and rebandaged it, she had lost all her self-consciousness and was enjoying his banter. Though his detection of her secret had undermined her confidence in her disguise, it felt good to know that she had at least one ally on the train besides Patrick. She was determined to get to California on her own and wasn’t looking for help from any quarter. But it didn’t hurt to know that once in a while she could let down her guard and be assured of a friendly face.

Chapter Three

By four days later she'd begun looking forward to Scott Haskell's friendly face. The morning after he had first bandaged her ankle, he had shown up just after dawn with a load of firewood, his own coffeepot already full of water and a can of coffee. Kerry had awakened from another restless night to decide that it wasn't worth the effort to prepare anything warm to combat the chill of the spring morning. But she was happy to sit peacefully, leaning against the back of the wagon wheel, while Scott bustled around their small camp and prepared a nice breakfast of fried bacon and strong coffee.

The noon stop had been brief, and the travelers had eaten a cold lunch, but that night, Scott had appeared once again to work with Patrick on fixing supper.

By the next day, Kerry could hobble around on her own, but Scott had adamantly refused to let her move, taking over the cooking chores, directing Patrick with good-natured teasing, as naturally as if he had been an older brother. But his occasional unguarded glances at Kerry were not always brotherly, much to her amazement. She recognized the male admiration in his gaze, and found it incredible that he could find anything attractive in her, dressed as she was in her odd male attire and already grimy from the trail.

Everyone else on the train seemed to take her male status for granted. The well-meaning neighbors who had stopped by after hearing about her injury treated her with that breezy indifference often extended to an inconsequential young man who had yet to make his mark in life. There was no deference, nor anything in their manner to suggest the stilted courtesy prescribed by society for a single young woman. She found it liberating.

It was only with Scott that she felt back in her feminine role. He was looking at her that way now from the other side of the campfire. The two were alone. Patrick had joined some of the other youngsters at another wagon. "I've appreciated your help these past few days, Scott," Kerry said finally, when the silence had stretched out long enough to be awkward.

Scott grinned. "I'm a born romantic, Kerry. Always ready to help a damsel in distress."

Kerry chuckled and held out her arms to flop the sleeves of her father's jacket. "Damsel is a bit too elegant to describe me, I'm afraid."

Scott's face grew serious. "I'd have trouble finding the right words to describe you, Kerry. I look at your beautiful face and into those big blue eyes and it makes my heart stop cold."

Kerry flushed and leaned back a little, moving her face out of the circle of firelight. "I thought only Irishmen knew how to talk blarney."

Scott stayed serious another moment, then smiled. "I'm sorry. It must sound like that. I've spoken too soon. Forgive me, lass."

Kerry shook her head in confusion. "No, I didn't mean... There's nothing to forgive. You're... you've been so nice to us."

Scott waggled his eyebrows mockingly. "And as with all beautiful females, you're wondering if my motives are pure."

Kerry giggled. She'd never met a man who could put her so at ease. She had a feeling that Scott's easy charm would be appealing under any circumstances. It was in marked contrast to the taciturn manner of the wagon master, who had been by to ask about her foot several times, but had never stayed more than the time it took to get an answer on the subject. While she was relieved that he didn't again ask to look at the injury and that she would not have to undergo a close scrutiny that might risk revealing her secret, she found herself a little annoyed by Jeb Hunter's brusque manner.

"I'm not too concerned about your motives, Scott," she answered her new friend. "Patrick and I are both grateful to have you around."

"He's a fine boy. You can be proud of him."

“I am. We’ll make a good team in California.”

“That’s a tall order, Kerry—starting up a ranch with just the two of you.”

Kerry’s chin came up. “Not too tall, though. We’ll make it work. I can do anything a man can do.” She gave a rueful glance down at her foot. “When I have two good legs, that is.”

Scott narrowed his eyes to see her face in the dim light. “Perhaps you won’t be alone by then. I’ve heard that young women don’t stay unmarried for long in the West.”

Kerry grinned. “But I’m not a young woman, remember? And I’m not interested in having a man in my life telling me what to do.”

Scott barked out a laugh. “I guess that states it plain enough.”

A shower of sparks rose from the fire as a log broke in two and slid off the top of the pile toward Kerry. Scott was on his feet in an instant, moving to her side and shoving the log back with his boot. Kerry had started to push herself backward, but he reached down and stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to move, lass. I’ll just rebuild this.”

He knelt beside her, his leg touching hers, and, using a smaller, unlit log, maneuvered the burning ones into a more stable pyramid. “That ought to do it,” he said, pushing himself backward to sit beside her. Their legs still touched, and neither one pulled away.

Kerry drew in a deep breath of warm air that smelled of dry meadow and smoke. “It’s a perfect night,” she said dreamily, looking up at the black velvet sky.

Scott leaned back on his hands and looked upward, then turned his head to study her. “Yes, it is,” he answered finally. “When I set out on this journey, I had no idea just how perfect it was going to turn out to be.”

His voice had grown unmistakably husky, and Kerry turned toward him in surprise. Their gaze held for a long minute, then Scott reached out a hand and gently pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead.

His fingers were rough on her smooth skin, but she didn’t mind. They moved a little into her hair, a gentle caress. “I like your hair short,” Scott murmured. For once she was not wearing her big felt hat. She made no effort to resist his touch. The warm contact blended with the peacefulness of the night to make her relaxed and happy. He leaned closer until she could see the stubble of his whiskers. Perhaps he was going to kiss her, she thought in a kind of haze. Darkness had closed around them like a protective cloak. She wouldn’t mind if he did, she decided sleepily, and her eyes drifted closed.

“Good evening!” came a deep voice from just beyond the light of the fire.

Kerry and Scott pulled apart abruptly. Scott scowled into the darkness. “Hunter,” he acknowledged in an uncharacteristically gruff tone.

Kerry’s cheeks were burning, though she didn’t know exactly why. She and Scott had not been doing anything wrong, but she felt like a child caught stealing cookies.

Jeb Hunter moved to the other side of the fire and crouched down. “How’s the foot today, Kiernan?” he asked. There was an edge to his voice.

Kerry straightened up farther and slid her leg away from contact with Scott’s. “It’s fine,” she said with a dry mouth. Her voice came out much too high. Forcing it to a lower register, she repeated, “The ankle’s nearly healed, I think.”

The captain nodded, then looked from her to Scott and back again. He seemed at a loss as to what to say. After a moment the silence became awkward, and Kerry said, “Would you like a cup of coffee, Captain?”

Scott made a slight grimace of annoyance at her invitation, but he recovered quickly. “Your duties must be about done for the day, Hunter.”

Jeb gave a faint smile. “My duties won’t be done until I get you and everyone else on this train to California, Haskell.”

“Done enough for a cup of coffee, at least.” Scott got to his feet and went to fetch a tin mug from the canvas sack that held the Gallivans’ dishes.

Scott Haskell acted as if the wagon belonged to him rather than the two Irish lads, Jeb noticed, and tried to decide why the thought irritated him. He knew that part of the reason was simply that the affable young Haskell had declared his intentions of becoming a prospector. Jeb had left California and taken up his job as trail guide partly because he never again wanted to have anything to do with the gold rush fever. Whenever prospectors joined up with one of his wagon trains, he found himself wanting to shake them until that eager, hopeful look disappeared from their eyes.

Scott returned to the fire, poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Jeb, who was still crouching at the other side of the fire. "Have a seat, Hunter," Scott urged, now evidently resigned to the wagon master's interruption of his private moment with Kerry.

Jeb hesitated, then sat back on the ground and reached for the cup. "Much obliged," he said tersely.

"Are we keeping on schedule, Captain?" Kerry asked, this time remembering to keep her voice low.

Jeb nodded. "We've been lucky so far—no rain. The wagons have made good time over this nice dry trail."

"It's not too dry, is it? We'll have plenty of water along the way for the animals?" Scott asked.

Jeb shrugged. "No way to tell. It could be a problem. We usually hit spring rains at this point, but they can turn a nice trail into a muddy nightmare. And an easy river into a raging flood."

Kerry shivered a little in spite of the warmth of the evening. "Will we be crossing a river soon?" she asked.

Jeb shook his head. "Not for a few days anyway. We'll keep this side of the Kansas for a ways. We don't usually cross it this soon."

"We do cross it, then?"

"Yes, we have to, before we reach the Blue. But if things stay this dry, it'll be no problem to ford. Still, it's a good-sized river—that's one of the reasons I made sure everyone's load was light enough before we left."

He watched as the Irish lad cast a guilty look back at his wagon. Jeb suspected that the two Gallivans had not completely followed his orders about how much load they could carry. Well, time would tell. They wouldn't be the first outfit to have to abandon precious possessions along the way. He wished, though, that they had listened to him. He had an odd, protective feeling about the two newly orphaned lads. He'd like to get closer to them, but so far they had not seemed to welcome his presence or seek his advice. Now it appeared that they had found a different protector in Scott Haskell. "You'll be in front of the line tomorrow, Haskell," he told the prospector. "Then the next day you'll move to the rear."

Scott had resumed his seat next to Kerry, though not quite as close as before. He cocked his head and looked over at her. "You know what, Hunter?" he said. "I'm going to move my wagon behind the Gallivans'. They can have my day at the front and their own, too. Then in two days we'll both move to the rear."

Jeb stopped the coffee cup halfway to his mouth. "Now why would you do that, Haskell?" he asked, the irrational irritation surging once again.

Scott turned back to Jeb. "I don't want to split off from the...ah...boys." At Jeb's surprised expression, he added, "Kiernan still might need my help with that bad foot."

"I thought you said the foot was better." Jeb's gaze went to Kerry.

"I...it is," she stammered. She, too, was surprised that Scott would give up a blessed, dust-free day just so that their wagons wouldn't be separated.

"Well, it doesn't matter. We're not switching the order of the wagons," Jeb said firmly.

Scott sat up straighter and said calmly, "The move won't concern any wagons except the Gallivans' and mine. I don't see why it should be a problem."

“It’s not your job to see the problems, Haskell. It’s mine. And I’m telling you we don’t switch the order.”

There was a moment of silence as Scott and Jeb glared at one another across the fire. Once again Kerry had the impression of two rival bulls facing off for leadership of the herd. It made her distinctly uncomfortable. “That’s okay, Scott,” she said quickly. “You should take your day in front like everyone else.”

Scott shook his head. “It’s my wagon. I guess I can put it where I want.”

Jeb set his cup down next to the fire and got to his feet. This time his voice was soft, deceptively silky. “It’s your wagon, Haskell. But it’s my train. And you’ll put your wagon where I tell you to put it or I’ll be asking you to leave.”

Kerry could almost feel Scott bristling at her side. She reached out and put a hand on his arm. “Honestly, Scott,” she said in a low voice. “I’ll be fine.”

Jeb’s eyes followed the movement. There seemed to be some kind of unspoken communication between the prospector and the younger man that Jeb found unsettling. He couldn’t put his finger on the reason. His gaze drifted to Kiernan Gallivan. In the dancing firelight, the lad’s features looked almost pretty. He was a bit too delicate for the rigors of the West—that must be why Jeb felt such a need to protect them. Hell, he should be happy that the boys had Haskell to help them out. Jeb had enough to think about along the trail. He considered changing his mind about the order of the wagons, but decided against it. He’d learned from experience that making people understand that his orders were the law could mean the difference between life and death. “So we’re all agreed then?” he asked after a moment.

Scott looked down at Kerry’s hand and seemed to be considering his reply. Finally he said. “All right. We’ll keep the wagons in order.”

Jeb nodded. “Good.” He waited for further comment, but when both Scott and Kerry were silent, he said in a stilted voice, “Thanks for the coffee, then.” And without making a sound he disappeared into the darkness.

“He doesn’t like me,” Scott observed.

“Why do you say that?” Kerry asked. Her hand was still on his arm.

“I don’t know. A man can just tell when another man would rather take a swing at him than shake hands.”

“What possible reason could he have for not liking you?”

Scott shrugged. “Maybe he doesn’t like gold prospectors,” he said lightly.

“Well, now, that’s a silly notion,” Kerry said with a little laugh.

She started to move her hand away from his arm but he reached down and captured it with his own. “Maybe so, but he doesn’t like me.”

Kerry wrinkled her nose. “Well, I’m not so sure I like him very much.”

Scott laughed. “He’s not the friendliest fellow, is he?”

“No. And he’s...high-handed.”

He released her hand, holding his own up in a gesture of surrender. “I’ll take note. You don’t like forceful men.”

He said it in a teasing tone, but Kerry did not return his smile. “I don’t know,” she said slowly, considering his words. “I’m not sure I like men much at all. Or rather, I like them okay but I’d just as soon not have to have anything to do with them. Except for Patrick, of course. I plan to do fine on my own.”

Scott looked at her oddly. “If you ask me, that’s one prediction that’s not likely to come true.” Then before she could start to bristle, he added, “Not that you wouldn’t do fine on your own, lass. It’s just that I don’t think the men you encounter will want to let you.”

“Why not?”

Scott let out a puff of exasperation. “Lord, Kerry. You may try to cover up in men’s togs and throw dirt on your face, but any male under the age of ninety who sees the real you is going to be attracted.”

It was the blarney again. But somehow Scott Haskell sounded more sincere than the boys back in New York City. Perhaps there was some truth to it after all, she thought with amazement. Growing up without a mother, she’d never had anyone to talk with about the effect a woman can have on a man. And her father had certainly never mentioned that she was pretty or that she might have an allure that could attract masculine attention. She wasn’t at all sure that she liked the idea.

“Well, at least I won’t have to worry about that this trip. No one even knows that I’m a girl.”

“Except me.”

The fire was beginning to die, and Kerry had trouble seeing Scott’s face in the dim light, but his voice held a resonance that was as palpable as his earlier caress on her hair. “Yes, of course. Except you.” She cleared her throat and rubbed her arms briskly. “It’s starting to get chilly out, don’t you think?”

Scott’s smile was understanding. “I’m anything but chilly, lass, but it *is* getting late. Do you want me to help you with anything more tonight?”

Kerry pushed herself to her feet without putting weight on her bad ankle. “No, I’m just going to curl up and go to sleep.” She pointed over at the wagon where Patrick had earlier thrown their bedrolls.

“I’d feel better if you and your brother slept inside the wagon.”

“There’s no room.”

“One of these nights it’s going to rain, and then you’ll have to find the room somehow.”

Kerry sighed. “Well, it’s not going to rain tonight.” She swept an arm up at the cloudless sky. “So I guess we’ll just cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Scott hesitated, then said. “There’s plenty of space in my wagon, lass.” When her finely arched eyebrows lifted in surprise, he added with a grin, “I just mean...if it should start to rain and you need to take shelter fast.”

Kerry smiled in return. “Thank you for the offer, Scott, but Patrick and I will work out something.

You’ve already gone to too much trouble for us. For me.”

Scott’s voice grew soft again. “Heck, Kerry. That’s what neighbors are for.” He laid his palm against her cheek for an instant in a gesture that was anything but neighborly, then nodded and turned to walk to his own wagon.

“Captain Hunter?”

Jeb whirled around, startled by the voice. His years on the trail had sharpened his senses and usually made him alert to everything going on around him, but he hadn’t heard the boy approach. “Oh hello, Patrick. How’s your brother’s foot getting along?”

He expected he’d get the same story he’d been told by Kiernan himself last night at the Gallivan campfire, but it seemed the natural question to ask.

“He’s getting around all right now. In fact, my...brother said I could come ride with you for part of the way today if the offer’s still open.”

Jeb felt a spurt of pleasure. Patrick was an earnest young lad, a little too serious for his age. He’d worked hard along the trail without a single complaint. Jeb wondered fleetingly if he and Melanie would have had such a son. The twist in his insides was so familiar by now that it passed almost without notice. Almost.

“I’d be happy to have you ride with me, Patrick. You’ll have to sit at the back of my saddle, you know.”

“I know.”

The boy's black hair and blue eyes were nearly identical to his brother's, but whereas on Kiernan they looked almost pretty, Patrick showed the promise of turning into a handsome, virile young man. The contrast between the two brothers was marked.

"If you want I can ride with your brother for a while and you can sit on my horse by yourself. We'd keep it alongside your wagon," he added, to reassure the boy that he wouldn't be completely on his own.

Patrick eyed the gray roan stallion with longing, but he said, "No, I'd rather sit behind you."

Jeb shrugged. "All right. It's probably better. That way I can keep track of things up and down the train. You're sure your brother won't need any help?"

"I'm sure. Anyway, the Burnett twins are going to ride with her today."

Jeb frowned in confusion. "Ride with who?"

Patrick's face paled. "Ride with *him*, I mean. With my brother."

"Oh." Jeb nodded. "Well, good. If he needs anything, they can fetch Mrs. Burnett."

"Yup," Patrick said, his skin returning to its normal color.

There was something a little odd about the Gallivan brothers, Jeb decided, as he mounted his horse, then reached down a long arm to pull Patrick up behind him. And yet he was drawn to them nevertheless. Perhaps it was because he identified with their recent bereavement. It was still so soon after their father's death. They needed time to recover. It was the natural way with grief. With most grief.

He felt the boy's arms clasp around his waist and put his big hand over Patrick's smaller one for a moment of reassurance. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." The childish, eager voice made Jeb smile in spite of his dark thoughts as he signalled his horse to move. Patrick was young. It wouldn't take long for time to work its healing power on the boy's grief. Unlike Jeb's own. He had refused to let his loss grow any less vivid with the passing years. He didn't intend to ever allow time to numb the wound. He didn't deserve to heal.

Kerry was thoroughly enjoying herself for the first time in what seemed like weeks. Once Polly and Molly had become completely comfortable in her company, their conversation had become delightfully unreserved. It appeared that the shyer twin, Molly, had developed a crush on Patrick, and her irrepressible older sister had already learned to use the fact as a weapon.

"Molly has a boyfriend," she told Kerry, her little mouth making a round expression of excitement.

"I don't either," Molly argued with a scowl.

"Do, too."

"Do not!"

"Do, too!"

Kerry sat up on the high wagon seat with a sister on each side. She laid the reins in her lap for a minute and put her arms around each. "Here, now. Let's not have a fight. It's not polite to tease about boys, Polly," she chided gently.

Polly was undaunted. "It's your brother," she told Kerry in dramatic tones, sending a glance of defiance at her sister, who gave a wail.

Kerry hid a smile. "That's all right, Molly. There's nothing wrong with feeling a fondness for a boy. Most girls do at some point or another."

Molly looked up into Kerry's face, blinking hard. "You won't tell him?" she asked in a painful whisper.

Kerry shook her head. "Not a word. I promise. And don't you go telling either, Polly," she cautioned. The wagon lurched over a rut in the trail and she picked up the reins again. "Now, were you girls going to teach me that ballad your mother was singing at the campfire last night?"

All at once the quarrel and Patrick were forgotten as the girls vied to teach their new friend a favorite family song. Kerry leaned against the backboard of the seat and enjoyed their antics, trying

to remember when she herself had been ten. Had she ever been as carefree as the Burnett twins? Her mother had died giving birth to Patrick when Kerry was six. It had broken Sean Gullivan's heart, and most of Kerry's memories concerned her attempts to try to make up to him for his loss. It seemed that no matter how hard she tried, it had never been enough. She could never make up for her mother's absence.

The sisters had lapsed into an argument again about the order of the verses, but there was less vehemence than when the dispute had involved a matter of the heart. "How would it be if we sang it once each way? That way I'll be sure to learn the whole thing." Kerry's suggestion was all it took to settle the matter. The two little girls squabbled, as was natural for two siblings so close in age, but they were good-natured children, and Kerry found it relaxing to be with them. She had not given a thought to her disguise all morning.

But her relaxed state came to an abrupt end as she saw Jeb Hunter riding toward them with Patrick bouncing along behind. At her side, she could feel Molly straighten up on the seat, and Kerry found herself doing the same. She pulled reflexively on the brim of her hat.

"You have helpers along today, Kiernan, I see," Jeb called out to her. His voice was much lighter than it had been around the campfire last night. The tone made him sound younger. His face looked younger, too, as he gave her one of his rare smiles. Kerry caught her breath at the difference in his expression.

"I certainly do," she answered carefully, keeping her voice extra low. She hoped Polly and Molly wouldn't pay attention to her sudden change in register. "And you have a helper of your own."

Jeb turned around in the saddle to give Patrick a fond look. "He'd make a good guide himself one of these days."

Kerry's smile dropped as she said quickly, "Not likely. We're going to be ranchers, remember? And Patrick's going to do carpentry like our father."

Jeb didn't appear to notice the vehemence of her remark. "He's got sharp eyes. He's been pointing out things along the trail that I missed myself."

Patrick was beaming at the praise. "It's been great, Ker...Kiernan," he exclaimed. "I wish I could ride every day."

"You don't want to be a bother to Captain Hunter, Patrick," Kerry said softly.

"He's no bother. I've enjoyed the company." Jeb pulled his horse around and matched its stride to the slow plodding of the oxen. "I just brought him back because we're stopping for lunch and I thought you might need his help. In fact, I thought I'd join you for the meal myself."

Kerry's gaze went to the wagon in front of them. She knew that the minute the wagons rolled to a halt, Scott would be back to get the noon meal for her as he had since her accident. But she couldn't very well turn down the captain's request for an invitation.

"Certainly, Captain Hunter," she said trying to mask her misgivings. "You're welcome to stay."

Chapter Four

They rode along for another few minutes before the wagons in front started drawing to a halt one by one. “The head wagon must have reached Silver Creek,” Jeb explained. “I told them we’d stop there.”

Almost instantly the twins’ mother appeared to collect her girls. Kerry noticed that the polite smile Captain Hunter turned on Dorothy Burnett was not any different than the one he used with Frank Todd or the motherly Eulalie Todd or anyone else on the train. Scott, on the other hand, who joined them immediately, as Kerry had predicted, flashed the pretty blonde a charming grin and cocked his head in a greeting that showed appreciation of her as a young, attractive woman. Jeb Hunter didn’t seem to like women all that much, Kerry decided. Or perhaps he saw himself in such a lofty position on the train that he felt above flirting with a pretty girl. Of course, either way, it was a matter of indifference to her.

“I’ve brought lunch,” Scott said, hoisting a heavy iron kettle. “Boone’s finest molasses baked beans. A whole tin of them,” he added, looking from Kerry up on the wagon seat down to Dorothy and Jeb and Patrick, who had dismounted from Jeb’s horse. “Plenty to go around.”

His tone held no indication that he was annoyed by Jeb’s presence, but Kerry already knew him well enough to sense a certain tenseness in him that was not natural to the easygoing Scott. She didn’t analyze why she felt it was her job to be sure that he and Jeb Hunter would not antagonize each other. She had been responsible for taking care of the males in her own family for so many years, it just seemed to come as second nature. “Captain Hunter is going to stay for lunch,” she said, sending Scott a bright smile and silent thank-you for his forbearance. Her gesture was rewarded by an immediate warming of Scott’s expression.

Jeb watched the interplay between Kiernan and the affable prospector with renewed confusion. There was definitely a communication between the two young men that went a step beyond neighborly. If he hadn’t seen the unmistakable look in Scott’s eyes when he’d been greeting Dorothy Burnett, he’d be almost worried that Haskell had unnatural designs on the young Irishman. A silly notion, he decided. After all, he’d felt some kind of pull himself toward both boys—a protective, paternal instinct.

Nevertheless, he felt a bit awkward and out of place as the prospector assumed control of things as if he were part of the family. “Will you and the girls eat with us, Mrs. Burnett?” Scott asked Dorothy with another charming smile.

“Can we, Mama?” Polly asked as she scrambled down from the wagon.

“I suspect your papa will want us to eat back with him, honey. He missed not having his kittens with him this morning.”

The girls were obviously disappointed at the refusal, but neither one pouted or asked again to have their way. With good-natured smiles they waved goodbye to Kerry and followed their mother back to their own wagon.

Scott had set the kettle on the ground and was building a small fire to heat the beans. “You can light it now, Patrick,” he said, straightening up and brushing off his hands. Then he turned to the wagon where Kerry was still perched up on the seat. He put his foot up on the sideboard. “Let me help you down,” he said to her.

Kerry looked over at Jeb. “I can manage myself, now, Scott.”

Ignoring her protest, he hoisted himself toward her and lifted her off the seat. In a minute they were on the ground, but not before Scott had said in a low voice in her ear, “But I *like* helping you, sweetheart.”

No one else could possibly have heard him, but Kerry’s face flamed. It was the first time he had used such an endearment, and it occurred to her that he’d decided to use it to somehow stake a

claim on her right in Jeb Hunter's presence. The thought irritated her. She pushed away from him the minute he set her on the ground and limped over to the fire. "I'll do that," she snapped at Patrick, taking the box of matches from him and crouching down by the fire.

Her brother looked at her in surprise. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, concentrating on lighting the curling edges of the branches Scott had placed under the logs for tinder. She kept her head down, still feeling the heat in her cheeks. "You go fetch some water," she told Patrick. "It'll be time to move before we know it and we'll still be sitting here hungry."

With another doubtful look at his sister, Patrick grabbed the bucket that hung from one side of the wagon and headed toward the river. Jeb stood watching the exchange. "There's no hurry," he said. "The animals need a good long rest on a day this hot. We'll start up again later this afternoon when it begins to cool down a bit"

His voice had taken on a comforting tone, almost like an adult dealing with a cranky child, and Kerry realized that she was sounding churlish. She was at a loss to know what had set her off so. Scott had had no business calling her sweetheart, but it wasn't a capital offense. And the captain had done nothing to deserve her ill humor. She raised her head and smiled at him. "It was kind of you to take Patrick today. Quite a treat. He always wanted to ride in New York City, but of course there was very little opportunity."

"A city's not the best place for a boy to grow up," Jeb answered, returning her smile. "He'll like the West. And I enjoyed having him with me. He can ride with me anytime."

Kerry chuckled. "You'd better not say that or you'll never be rid of him, Captain. He's none too happy sitting up on the wagon with me."

"I mean it. Storm's a big animal—it's no problem to have Patrick along. You're welcome to give it a try, too, when your ankle's better."

Kerry found herself drawn to Jeb Hunter's rare smile. It transformed his face from the authoritative wagon train captain to a man who would take the time to give pleasure to a young boy. The fire caught and blazed with a sudden flare of heat. She backed away, noticing out of the corner of her eye that Scott was watching her exchange with the captain with a slight scowl.

With a sigh, she reached to set the pot of beans on the fire. She felt a little like the jugglers she used to see sometimes on the streets of New York—trying to keep two quite different men happy. And she didn't think it would get any better as they continued across the country. As much as she had hoped to make this trip without notice from anyone, the discovery of her secret, coupled with her accident, had provided her with a protector in Scott Haskell. And as much as she wanted to keep out of the way of their captain, she was already realizing that the long days on the trail became a little more interesting every time Jeb Hunter rode up to their wagon.

It had become the custom for Jeb and Patrick to ride together at least part of every day. The sight of the brawny wagon captain with the Irish lad bouncing along behind him on the big roan stallion had become a common sight up and down the train. And each day, Jeb found himself spending a little more time at the Gullivan wagon, staying for one more cup of coffee, listening to one more of Kiernan's amusing tales of the scrappy life he and his brother had led back in New York City.

There was a special warmth between the two brothers that drew in their visitors, rather than excluding. Scott Haskell evidently noticed it, too. The aspiring gold hunter was often present at the Gullivan wagon when Jeb showed up there, and he never seemed overly happy at the wagon captain's arrival, though Jeb wasn't sure why. It should do no harm to have two men concerned with the boys' welfare. Yet sometimes Jeb felt almost as if he and Haskell were rival suitors vying for the hand of a pretty girl.

Jeb became more fond of Patrick each day and more fascinated with the older boy. Kiernan's ankle was almost healed by now, and he was again able to move around to the neighboring wagons at the camp each night. The young man always seemed to have an encouraging word for everyone. He'd sat for hours one night listening to Eulalie Todd's reminiscences about St. Louis. And he regularly took

the twins off for a walk or some other adventure to give Dorothy and John Burnett a few moments' respite from their offspring's constant activity. Jeb, himself, looked forward to his conversations with the young Irishman, whose questions about the trail and about what they could expect in California were intelligent and animated.

As he felt himself drawn to the Gullivan wagon for the fifth evening in a row, Jeb decided that the attraction must be that Kiernan Gullivan's interest was flattering. He'd lived alone for so many years that he'd forgotten what it could be like to sit with someone and talk over his day.

As usual, Scott was also present at the Gullivan campfire when Jeb arrived, and all four Burnetts had joined them for some trail songs that were being enthusiastically led by Polly and Molly. Molly had gotten over her shyness with Patrick and now unabashedly made her fondness for the boy obvious to the entire group, always choosing the seat next to him and sitting as close as she dared. Even her sister's occasional taunts on the subject had not dimmed her youthful infatuation.

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