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Kathryn Albright

The Angel and the Outlaw

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He wants her as his bride, but the law wants him! No one asks the dark, brooding stranger about his past. People gossip, but daren't question. He and his young daughter live alone—and that's the way Stuart Taylor wants...needs it to stay. When the spirited new schoolteacher, Rachel Houston, is touched by Stuart's shy little girl, who's never uttered a word, everything starts to change. Stuart's surly manner doesn't worry Rachel—she can see the vulnerability hidden in the depths of his blue eyes. She's convinced there's more to the rugged, handsome stranger's story. But when the truth comes out, has Rachel the courage to stand by her man?

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The Angel and the Outlaw

Kathryn Albright



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To my mother and father, who taught me
to go after my dreams.

Thank you for your love, support and encouragement.

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Prologue

San Francisco, California, 1870

At the sound of someone running up his ship's gangplank, Matthew Taylor looked up from the scatter of charts on his desk.

"Matthew! Let me in! I must speak with you."

He strode to the door and stopped short at the sight before him. "Linnea!"

The light from the cabin's oil lamp exposed harsh bruises against the pale skin on her face. Blood dripped from a cracked lip. Under the dark hooded cloak, her blond hair, usually swept up in the latest fashion, hung unkempt to her shoulders.

"My God! What happened?"

"I...I killed John!" she gasped. "He was going after Hannah."

Suddenly he realized the bundle she held was her daughter. "Let me take her." He pulled the cover away, breathing a sigh of relief that Hannah was free of any sign of battering. She was shaking, just as her mother was. He laid her on his bunk and turned back to Linnea. "Tell me what happened," he said, the rage in his voice barely subdued.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I... Might I use your handkerchief?"

He handed one to her. God, he couldn't stand the tears. "Don't cry, Linnea. You know I'll help."

"Yes," she said softly. "I know."

With his fingers under her chin, he lifted her face to the light. "How long has this been going on?"

She turned away from him. "Awhile."

He poured a brace of whiskey into his mug and handed it to her. "It's all I have."

"Taylor!" John Newcomb bellowed from outside.

Linnea's eyes widened. "I thought he was dead!"

"Taylor!" John was closer now. "You holing up with my wife? You send her on out here. We've got unfinished business."

Linnea started to rise.

"No," Matthew said, and motioned for her to stay put.

She grasped his arm. "Matthew. Be careful. He's changed since you last saw him."

He stared at her, taking in the changes the past few years had wrought on her. A hundred things went through his head in that moment, none of which he could say to her as a married woman. Why did you marry this animal? Why didn't you wait for me? He sighed. At the least, he could protect her.

He squeezed her hand. "I'll just talk to him. I don't want a fight, but I won't run from one, either." He reached into a desk drawer and drew out his Colt .44.

On the wharf, John Newcomb leaned heavily against the railing, his tie askew against his linen shirt. "Send my wife out, Taylor. She don't belong with you."

"You're drunk, Mr. Newcomb. Go home and sleep it off."

"I'm not leaving without my girls. Linnea! We need to talk. I...at least give me a chance to apologize."

Matthew heard the door creak behind him.

"Go away," Linnea said softly, her body half-hidden behind the door post. "We'll talk later."

"We'll talk now," John growled, and started up the gangplank, clutching his chest. "Then I'll have words with Taylor, here." Suddenly he stopped and leaned awkwardly on the ship's railing. As he straightened, he pulled a gun from his belt and aimed past Matthew.

A shot rang out.

"Mama!" Hannah screamed.

Matthew watched in horror as Linnea crumpled to her knees, a look of stunned surprise on her face.

John stormed up the gangplank, aiming his gun for a second shot at her. “I’ll teach you to at shoot me.”

“No!” Matthew roared. He whipped up his Colt and squeezed the trigger.

In the loud report of the gun, John Newcomb staggered, but then regained his footing. He swung his gun toward Matthew. “You can’t have her, Taylor. I’ll kill you both before I let that happen.”

Matthew steadied his gun, aimed at Newcomb’s chest and fired.

Newcomb fell forward hard, landing with a heavy thud. The wharf’s gas lamp cast a yellow light over the blood saturating his shirt and dripping onto the wooden planks beneath him.

Matthew threw down his gun and hurried to Linnea. Blood trickled across her forehead. She was so still, so pale. Crouching, he gathered her in his arms, unable to breathe, afraid she was hurt or—worse—dead.

Her large gray eyes fluttered open. “I’m all right.”

His heart pounded in his chest.

She raised her hand to his cheek, the worry in her eyes for him now. “Matthew, I’m all right.”

He let out a long, shuddering breath. “I thought...”

“Yes. I know.”

He hugged her to him, burying his face in her neck until his heartbeat slowed to normal. He couldn’t bear to lose her.

After a moment she struggled up on her elbows. “Is he dead?”

Matthew followed her gaze. He walked over to the still form. Not breathing. He rolled Newcomb over to his back and felt for a pulse at his throat.

Nothing.

“What happens now?” Linnea asked, her voice shaking. “Should we contact the authorities?”

Chapter One

Southern California, 1873

Stuart Taylor crouched on a flat boulder and pulled his trap up from the harbor floor. A small brown lobster slid to the corner of the crate. He grabbed it, turning it over to make sure of its size, and then tossed it back into the water. “Come back when you’ve grown,” he murmured. Then, placing new bait in the trap, he stood and swung the trap out as far as possible, releasing the hemp rope at the last second. The crate splashed into the brine and sank quickly beyond sight.

He looked for his other lobster trap, but it was gone—rope and all. Someone was still stealing from him. He’d warned off two boys a few days ago with a bullet into their boat. Their sudden departure had convinced him they wouldn’t try again. Maybe he’d been wrong.

Great. Guess he and Hannah would be eating beans tonight. Not the best way to celebrate a birthday. He grabbed the bucket at his feet and made his way up the narrow dirt path.

Hannah stood at the stone doorstep, anxiety filling her heart-shaped face until she caught sight of him. She wore her one good dress, the dark-chocolate-brown one he’d laid out last night. A white pinafore covered it, wrinkled in one spot now where her hands had twisted and worried the fabric. Uncanny how that trait of her mother’s manifested itself in Hannah, though she’d only been three when Linnea died.

“Did you eat?”

She nodded, and with the bob of her head, he spied her tangled mass of blond hair. “Forgot something, birthday girl,” he said gruffly, turning her toward the kitchen. “You can’t go into town looking like something washed in by the waves.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and stood stiffly while he brushed her hair then tied it in a ponytail with an old blue ribbon. The face that stared back at him grew more like her mother’s every day. The dove-gray eyes shone with anticipation for the promised trip. She was lonely here. So lonely the thought of a trip into town had her flushed with excitement and up before dawn. He felt it, too—the isolation, the quiet. But it was safe.

He followed Hannah outside and boosted her onto his horse, Blanco. She fidgeted, patting the dusty animal on its withers. He grabbed the lead rope. “See that you don’t wiggle right off your perch.”

They took the trail that led from the tip of the windy peninsula, four hundred feet above sea level, to the small town on the water’s edge. He didn’t get into town much, only when supplies ran low, but today was August 10, Hannah’s birthday, and he wanted to make it special for her.

He drew closer to La Playa and his anxiety increased in measure. Surely the risk of discovery had diminished now. It had been more than three years since the accident. Hannah didn’t even look the same. She had stretched up into a thin wisp of a girl who seldom stood still. Her naturally pale skin had taken on a golden glow over the long summer days.

He rubbed his smooth chin, remembering the dark beard and mustache that once covered his face. He didn’t look the same either. Still, doubts niggled at his mind. Dorian wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t a quitter. San Francisco might be five hundred miles away but sooner or later Dorian would find him—and if Dorian found him, so would the law. Perhaps he should think about moving on.

Halfway to town, the trail sloped steeply through a brush-studded canyon. Two small lizards scurried from under the horse’s shadow and dashed into the nearby chaparral as he led Blanco around one last sandstone curve. The harbor opened up before them, deep blue and sparkling in the sunlight. Barely visible through the scruffy bushes to the south lay the whaling port. He raised his face to the wind and sniffed. “Smell that, Hannah? Just salt and sage. No whale butchered today.”

Turning toward La Playa, he led Blanco past a steamer moored at the new wharf before heading up San Antonio Street and past the Mexican Government Custom House. A few odd-shaped

buildings, some built of wood and some of adobe, hugged each side of the square like ticks on the ears of a short-haired dog.

Stuart stopped at the community well and filled his canteens, all the while taking in the surrounding sounds the way a deaf man would who for one day is able to hear. Loud clanging rang out from the livery's half-opened doorway as the blacksmith forged a new tool or horseshoe. A thin, aproned woman swept the front boardwalk of the town's only mercantile.

Hannah tugged on his shirt.

"All right, all right. I'm going."

Looping the two canteens over the saddle horn, he walked back to Morley's Mercantile. Two young women stood at the opened doorway of the store, giggling and whispering behind gloved hands. He glanced up while tying the reins on the hitching rail. Both attractive, especially the blonde. He turned back to help Hannah.

"There on his forehead. Do you see it?"

He slowed in the act of setting Hannah on the ground. So he was to supply their gossip for today. He clenched his hands. He'd hate to disappoint them. Straightening, he leveled his gaze at the two.

The blonde quieted. She must be the banker's wife—or daughter. Her dress was quality through and through, right down to her matching green parasol. He hadn't seen anything so fancy since he'd left San Francisco. Her eyes judged him coolly before she whirled about with a toss of her head and entered the store.

Anger surged through him. Already he could feel people staring at him through the streaked windowpanes. He couldn't care less that they talked about him. But Hannah—Hannah, he worried about. She might not talk anymore, but she could hear just fine. He'd rather take her anywhere than into the store right now.

But it was her birthday. And he'd promised this trip for weeks.

He grasped her hand and helped her jump onto the boardwalk before stepping up himself.

The other woman, the one who'd gotten an earful, remained standing in the doorway, curiosity etched in her strong face. He wouldn't call her pretty—yet the sum of her features pulled together in a pleasant way. She wore a plain yellow dress, simple and sturdy, and a straw hat that covered thick auburn hair.

He stepped close—closer than was conventional—and dragged off his seaman's cap, giving her a good view of his scar. He met her unflinching gaze full-on—challenging her to speak. She was older than he'd first thought. Fine lines splayed from the corners of her eyes and her nose was sunburned and peeling. He let his gaze wander the length of her until he arrived again at her face, and found himself slightly irritated for enjoying the trip. "By all means, believe everything you hear."

Her cheeks flamed scarlet. With an almost imperceptible nod of her head—or was it actually a raising of her chin?—she stepped aside for him to enter the building.

The scent of cloves and cinnamon intermingled with the barrel of pears in the doorway. He breathed deeply and tried to shake off the discontent he felt. This was Hannah's birthday trip, and by God he'd make it special.

The blonde stood at the counter speaking with the lanky owner of the mercantile and glancing over her shoulder at Stuart every few seconds. Terrance Morley drummed his fingers on the countertop. "Mornin', Taylor. Things quiet up your way?"

Stuart hesitated a fraction of a second and then nodded. Things were always quiet at the lighthouse. He handed Morley the list of needed supplies.

Suddenly, Hannah let go of his hand and dashed across the room. Stuart followed slowly, a sinking sensation in his stomach. He hated to put a damper on her fascination with the trinkets and products, but whatever the item might be, likely they couldn't afford it. He'd planned only to buy her six sarsaparilla candy sticks, one for each of her six years, and a new hair ribbon.

She spun around holding a new doll with shiny waves of painted black hair and red lips. She fingered the doll's pretty green dress and ruffled underthings. He knew what would come next and steeled himself against the disappointment that would transform her face. Before the accident he wouldn't have thought twice about the cost of the doll. Although not rich, he had been comfortable, and the future held such promise. But now, on a light keeper's salary, the toy cost more than he could afford.

The woman in yellow entered the store, the sun casting her shadow across the hardwood floor. Morley glanced up, started to greet her and spied Hannah holding the doll.

"Put that down!" he shouted.

Startled, Hannah jumped. The doll crashed to the floor, its china head shattering at her feet. She stared in frozen shock at the pieces.

"Now look what you've done!" Morley yelled and pointed a bony finger at the mess. He charged around the end of the counter and jabbed Hannah's shoulder. "Children have no business being in here without proper supervision. You'll pay for that, missy."

Stuart leveled his gaze. "That's enough, Morley."

Tears brimmed in Hannah's eyes. She was scared—and sorry—even though the words wouldn't come. Stuart put his hand on her shoulder. "It was an accident, Hannah."

Next to him, the blonde turned on Hannah. "You must apologize to Mr. Morley this instant, child."

"I said that's enough," Stuart said, making sure there was no mistaking the warning in his voice. "And I'll thank you to keep to your own business, ma'am."

She glared at him, obviously perceiving the double meaning of his words, then stuck her nose higher in the air and walked from the store.

Slowly Hannah stooped and picked up the fragments of china.

I should scold her, Stuart told himself, but Mr. Morley had done a strong job of that. "Hannah," he said, sharper than he intended.

She stopped her gathering and glanced up, the tears spilling onto her cheeks in earnest now. Tightness wrapped around his chest and squeezed at the sight of her misery. Linnea would have handled this differently. He gentled his tone. "Put those on the counter and wait outside."

When she had done as he asked, he stepped up to the counter. He would settle the cost of the toy, but he'd have to omit an item or two from his list. How could he salvage her birthday after this?

The woman in yellow stooped to pick up one last fragment of china and the body of the doll. She placed them next to his parcels.

"Miss Houston, you don't need to clean up," the clerk said. "You'll cut yourself."

"You frightened the girl."

Her reproachful voice held a hint of soft Midwestern twang.

"She should sweep the entire floor for her punishment," Morley said.

Stuart pressed his lips together, checking his urge to hit the man. "I'll take care of my girl. You just mind your store." He looked over his stack of supplies and removed the canned beef and fresh bread. He could hunt rabbits and quail as usual. And there was always fish. They'd make do with the tin of crackers. It would last longer than the bread, anyway. Stubbornly, he kept the six candy sticks. "Now what is my total with the doll?"

While Morley tallied the order, Stuart found himself watching the woman, surprised she had spoken in Hannah's defense—and a little suspicious, too. She strolled to the yard goods, smoothing her hand across one piece of fabric and then another.

She must have felt him staring. After a glance in his direction she looked away, but her cheeks flushed pink. She selected two bundles of yarn and set them on the far end of the counter. The scent of honeysuckle wafted over him, feminine, inviting. How long had it been since he smelled anything other than the brine of the ocean?

“You aren’t charging full price for the doll, are you Terrance?” she asked.

Mr. Morley stopped his tallying and frowned over his glasses at her.

“Part of the fault lies with you,” she continued.

“That doesn’t excuse the cost.”

“But you startled the girl. If you’d asked her to put the doll down rather than speaking so sharply, she wouldn’t have dropped it.”

Morley caught Stuart’s gaze. “Three dollars, Taylor.”

The clerk’s attitude disgusted him. The sooner Stuart got out of here, the better. He counted out the money and dropped it on the counter then picked up the box of supplies. The doll he left behind purposely. To have what was left of it would only distress Hannah.

He packed his saddlebags, and then helped Hannah onto Blanco. Despair knifed through him at the silent shaking of her shoulders. She had dressed so carefully this morning, had been so excited about this trip into town, and it had ended in a nightmare. Stuart’s stomach knotted. He couldn’t do anything about other people. They were cruel. Hell, life was cruel, but somehow he’d make it up to her.

A flash of yellow in the doorway caught his eye. He glanced up to see the woman watching him. He didn’t quite know what to make of her. In the end she’d been kind, and so he tipped his cap to her.

She acknowledged him with a nod, her gaze steady.

Anxious to put the town and its people behind him, he led Blanco home. The bustling sounds of the harbor grated on his ears. The silence that shrouded them daily at the lighthouse would be safe—safe for him and safe for Hannah. No one and nothing would bother them...nothing but the never-ending quiet.

“Your yarn, Miss Houston.” Terrance Morley leaned on the wooden counter and smiled—a smile Rachel could easily mistake for a leer if she gave room to the thought.

“Thank you, Mr. Morley.”

“It was Terrance a moment ago.”

“Yes, well. It was a bit presumptuous of me.”

“But you’ve been coming in here for over two months now. I’d like you to use my given name.”

“Oh,” she said, not particularly thrilled with what others might read into the familiarity. “I’m a little uncomfortable with that.” Her position as the new schoolteacher in this small town hinged on the degree of respectability she could maintain. At her interview with the school board she had downplayed the last few years she’d spent at the mining camp where coarseness and crudeness frequently overpowered a gentler nature. Instead, she had reframed the questions to answer them from her earlier life when she’d helped at the one-room schoolhouse in Wisconsin.

She picked up the yarn and turned to go, but stopped when she saw the broken doll. The head was shattered. No amount of gluing could repair it. Fingering the mint-green satin dress and miniature crinoline, she thought of the girl’s sad face. The wrinkled, too-small dress, the small hole in one stocking below the knee, all spoke of a girl with no mother to do for her. Rachel knew what it was like to live without a mother. At least she’d been lucky to have known hers for the first fourteen years of her life. How lonely the girl must be on the peninsula with no one but her father.

Since she’d moved to town two months ago, she’d heard stories of him. How he kept to himself and was unfriendly toward the townspeople. She didn’t know what to believe and most likely shouldn’t listen to half of it.

Still, she’d expected someone much older to be the town’s enigma—someone grizzled, with bushy brows and an irascible nature. At most, Taylor must be all of thirty years—or perhaps thirty-five—for he had the solid, filled-out look of a man. His clothes were simple, serviceable—a faded blue chambray shirt, slightly snug across the stretch of his shoulders, tucked into canvas pants, and scruffy boots that passed for comfortable on his feet. A thick wisp of dark-brown hair fell across his temple and had obscured his scar until he purposely exposed it for her.

It was a hideous scar—puckered and red. She wondered how he'd really gotten it. Amanda said he'd been struck with a red-hot fire poker when he escaped from prison. That was ridiculous, of course. The lighthouse board would never have hired a convict. Since coming to town two months ago, Rachel had heard other stories about him as well, enough to know that no one knew anything definite about him at all.

Besides, it wasn't the scar that drew her, but the intensity of his blue gaze. When he'd stopped no more than a foot from her in the doorway she'd scarcely been able to breathe.

No, he wasn't her idea of a light keeper at all.

Chapter Two

Rachel jerked open the oven door and pulled out the roast.

Finished. Except for the gravy. Lamb wasn't her favorite dish, but she couldn't very well serve rabbit or fish tonight—not with company coming.

Reverend and Emma Crouse rented two rooms to Rachel and her brother, Caleb, on the condition that they would help with odd jobs around the place. That usually meant cooking for Rachel, and tending the horse and small carriage house for Caleb. Of course, four dollars a month from Rachel's teaching salary also helped cover their rent. Reverend and Emma Crouse were in their late sixties and ready to slow down a little. Staying with such an upstanding couple had helped with her acceptance into the community. One couldn't be too careful that way, especially after the years she'd lived in the mining camp. The roughness of the camp had rubbed off on her and try as she might to put it all behind her, unfortunate things would spring out of her mouth—or show up in her actions.

She pushed a strand of damp hair from her forehead, then leaned across the small table to open the window. A cool evening breeze swirled in heavy with the scent of brine from the ocean. Looking out into the early evening, she wondered what the light keeper and his daughter would be eating tonight. The two had been in her thoughts throughout the day, popping in unexpectedly.

She hadn't liked Amanda's attitude or Terrance Morley's for that matter. Maybe what they said about the light keeper was true. Perhaps he was a criminal. But even so, the girl—Hannah, he'd called her—should not be condemned along with the father. The man obviously cared for his daughter or he wouldn't have protected her from Terrance's tirade. There must be something good in him.

The kitchen door opened and Reverend Crouse entered. It seemed the room warmed as much from the heat that emanated from him as it did from the stove. "Supper ready?"

"Nearly." Then, knowing his next question, she answered, "Mrs. Crouse is in the parlor with the guests."

"Ah. Then I'd best get out there and greet them, too. Are you doing all right in here without Emma's help?" She nearly smiled at the relief on his face at her quick nod. Then he headed to the front of the parsonage.

Suddenly the back door crashed open and her brother barreled into the kitchen along with his dog. At fifteen, Caleb was neither a boy any longer, nor yet a man. Clumsy was what he was. He was growing so fast—already four inches taller than she. He reached for a dinner roll, and she caught the bony knob of his wrist just in time.

"Not before supper. Now take Settie right back outside."

He ignored her. "She's getting close, don't you think?"

Rachel studied the large black animal. The dog's bulging abdomen swayed as she walked around the small kitchen sniffing the different aromas. "Any day now, I suspect. She is so big I don't know how she manages to move."

"Enrique said he'll take a male. He thinks it might make a good hunter."

She frowned. Caleb could use a good friend, but someone other than Enrique. Together, the two of them got into too much mischief. She turned back to her preparations. "Well, for now Settie goes outside. Wash up. The food is ready."

Behind her, she heard Caleb maneuver the dog out the back door. When he didn't come right back in, she glanced through the window. He stood in the yard talking with Enrique and another boy. The way they leaned toward each other, whispering, unsettled her. She watched a moment longer and then tried to shake off her misgivings. Time to get supper on.

She carried a platter with the roast lamb surrounded by new potatoes to the dining table. When they were all seated, Rachel sat down across from Terrance Morley and his sister, Elizabeth. The

bouquet of roses he'd brought graced the center of the table, their delicate fragrance completely overwhelmed by the odor of mutton.

"Where's Caleb?" Emma Crouse asked.

"He's just outside with a friend. He'll be in shortly," Rachel said. "Perhaps we should go ahead before the food cools."

The reverend frowned, but bowed his head to say the blessing. Then the dishes were passed around and the talk turned to local business and how New San Diego was quickly becoming a ghost town. Rachel tried, but she just couldn't follow the conversation.

"If you'll excuse me a moment," She said, standing. "I'll just see what is keeping Caleb." Rachel walked into the kitchen and peered out the window into the empty yard. A feeling of foreboding enveloped her. She'd have to have a talk with her brother about manners—a good hard talk the moment he came back. But oh, how she dreaded it. Lately her talks had met with considerable deafness on his part—or anger.

She sat back down with the others. Elizabeth leaned toward her. "How is the teaching going?"

"Well, I think. The most difficult part is getting some of the local children to show up regularly. Last Tuesday I caught several boys heading toward Old Town to watch the horse races."

"Perhaps you won't have long to worry about such things," said Emma. "You will settle down with some lucky man and start your own family. Except, of course, that would mean the town would need to hire another teacher." She laughed softly.

Rachel tensed at her words. Although none of these folks knew much about her past, she'd already spent most of her life taking care of her father and Caleb, following the whim of a man caught up in gold fever. She forced a smile and tried to keep her voice light. "Oh, I don't know. I rather like making my own way at the moment."

Terrance raised his brows. "I should think marriage, taking care of one man and raising his children would be enough to satisfy a woman."

A slow burn started inside her. "I like teaching. And I'm good at it. Don't I have a responsibility to use this gift?"

"Yes," Terrance said, frowning slightly. "Of course, for your own children."

"Ah-hem." Reverend Crouse placed his napkin carefully by his plate, signaling that supper—and this conversation—was over. She bit back her retort. "Rachel, if you're still set on riding out to the lighthouse, we'll go first thing in the morning."

Terrance paused in taking his last bite of strawberry dessert, looking from the reverend to Rachel. "Uh...if you don't mind my asking, what business do you have at the lighthouse?"

"I want to invite Mr. Taylor and his daughter to attend services," the reverend answered.

Terrance quickly covered his mouth with his napkin, subduing a snort. "Good luck, then. He's been living out there for nearly a year and this week was only the third time I've ever seen him in the store. He's a lost cause—his daughter, too. You shouldn't waste your time on those two."

"Lost causes are the Lord's specialty," the reverend said, rising to his feet. "And I'm beginning to believe Rachel's too."

The others followed suit. Amid compliments to Rachel and Emma for the fine dinner, they gravitated toward the parlor to play games.

Terrance stayed behind as Rachel began to clear the table. "Excellent meal, Rachel."

"Thank you." It had better be edible; she had been cooking since she was fourteen. "Oh, you don't need to help—"

A loud knocking on the front door interrupted her.

"Rachel?" Reverend Crouse called. "You'd best come here."

She put down the dirty plates and walked into the parlor. Sheriff Thorne stood in the entryway holding firm to Caleb.

“Miss,” he acknowledged her and then the small group, sweeping his battered hat off belatedly. “Perhaps we’d better take this out on the porch so your guests can carry on.”

She nodded and followed him outside, feeling Terrance’s presence behind her. Thorne was the town’s part-time sheriff, splitting his time between La Playa and Old Town San Diego. She didn’t know him well, but he drew a lot of respect from the people here. “What is going on?”

“I caught your brother with his friends, startin’ a fire down by the old hide houses. A fire this time of year could destroy the whole town.”

Her brother hung his head and didn’t look at her.

“This is one more mishap in a line of minor scrapes, miss. You’re his guardian. I’d suggest you keep a closer eye on him.”

She nodded, acknowledging the responsibility. She couldn’t believe Caleb would try something so foolish on his own. It had to be the coercion of the other two boys. “Have you got anything to say?” she asked her brother.

His jaw set, he glared at her from under his red brows and shook his head.

“Then go to your room. We’ll talk about this later.” He shuffled past her and inside the house.

She turned back to the sheriff. “Thank you. I’ll watch him more closely.” She didn’t know how she could, but she’d try. Every day Caleb pulled further and further away from her. She was losing him. Her one bit of family left.

Sheriff Thorne touched his hat. “Sorry to intrude upon your day.”

She watched him stride down the steps and back toward the Custom House that held the small, makeshift jail.

Terrance stepped onto the porch from the doorway. “I’ll help the best I can, Rachel. Boys can be tough.”

A heavy sigh escaped. “He won’t listen to me anymore. Not like when he was younger.”

“His father should be the one looking out for him,” Terrance said. “Not you.”

Rachel pressed her lips together. Her father hadn’t taken much of an interest in either of them since her mother passed away. He’d just been interested in finding gold. If only Caleb had someone who could help him through this rocky stage. She certainly wasn’t much help. The tighter she held on, the harder he pulled away. Plus she worried about how Caleb’s actions would affect her standing in the community. The selfish thought nudged her and she felt small for thinking it. But she still worried. Teaching was her livelihood—and Caleb’s too, for the time being.

Terrance cleared his throat. “About tomorrow. I...wish you would reconsider about going out to the lighthouse. It will be a long ride, and Taylor won’t take you up on your offer.”

“I don’t shirk a challenge, Mr. Morley. The girl needs to be in school and I’m going to convince him of it.”

By the look on his face, it wasn’t the answer he’d wanted. “Nothing I say will dissuade you?”

“My mind is made up.” She didn’t add that the more students she had in school, the better job security for her, although the thought had crossed her mind a time or two since seeing the girl.

“It seems like everyone dislikes him. Are they true—the things I’ve heard?” But even she could hear the beginning of doubt in her voice.

“Rumors have some truth to them in most cases. Otherwise how would they start?”

She shook off the misgivings. “I’m sure I’ll be safe enough with Reverend Crouse.”

“Yes...well,” he said, his gaze hardening slightly, “you know how I feel about you going out there. It’s a fool’s errand.”

He waited. Probably still hoping she’d change her mind. When she didn’t say more he continued. “Thank you for supper. Until Sunday services then.”

She nodded and watched him walk down the porch steps to the street. Sunday was the furthest thing from her mind.

Chapter Three

Reverend Crouse yanked sharply on Jericho's reins to avoid a large dried rut in the dirt road, yet their carriage still bumped through the edge, jostling Rachel to one side. She grabbed her seat and smiled gamely. "I hope after all this, we find them at home."

"I don't know where else they would be. Light keepers as a rule must not leave their lamps unattended."

"Well, that gives us a place to start, then," she said, thinking of her brother and how easily he slipped out of sight whenever he wanted to. "Trying to tie Caleb down and keep track of him is not easy."

Reverend Crouse chuckled. "It may seem that way now, but you're doing the right thing. Caleb will be the better for it in the long run. He's not a bad boy, he just needs direction."

"I suppose." Rachel sighed, thinking her brother more and more showed signs of being like his father. "I'm glad you had chores for him to do today."

"Terrance Morley stopped by earlier. He has things Caleb can help with at the mercantile."

She shook her head. "Caleb needs something physical. He's never been one for being cooped up inside. Often he talks about joining up with the whalers. And I'm afraid he might. That would suit him."

The reverend skirted another deep rut where rainwater had gouged out the quickest path to the sea several hundred feet below. To Rachel's left glistened the deep-blue waters of the harbor, and to her right the ocean stretched out unbroken to the horizon. Stunted light-green sagebrush and chaparral lined both sides of the road, struggling to keep a foothold in the dry ground. No homesteads broke the monotony of the single dirt road they traveled, a road that striped the ridge of the peninsula like the line down a lizard's back.

Jericho pulled the carriage up one last rise and the lighthouse came into view. The sandstone house and tower stood sharply defined against the brilliant blue of the Pacific sky. Two short chimneys straddled the peak at each end of the two-story roof, the far one emitting small burps of black smoke. The light tower rose straight up through the center of the roof's peak. She searched the black iron catwalk that circled the lamp for any sign of the inhabitants.

The reverend stopped Jericho at the picket fence that surrounded the lighthouse and enclosed a small, barren yard and the shriveled remains of a garden. "He's home, all right," he murmured, his eyes focused on the opening door.

Mr. Taylor stepped outside, his shoulders dwarfing the size of the doorway, his mouth set in a tight scowl as he slipped his shoulder suspenders into place. He wore a cream-colored muslin shirt, open at the collar on this warm and windy day, and dark brown pants that, as his clothes yesterday, appeared serviceable.

A small thrill went through her. What was it about this man that his very presence commanded attention? Would he lump her with all the other people from town? Most likely. She sat straighter in her seat, the urge to prove him wrong infusing her with courage. She wasn't here for him, but she did need his support regarding his daughter.

"Hello. Mr. Taylor, is it?" Reverend Crouse climbed from the carriage. "I'm Reverend Crouse and this is Rachel Houston, the schoolteacher in town. We've come to invite you and your child to Sunday services."

If it were possible, the light keeper's scowl deepened further. His gaze flicked to Rachel, still seated in the carriage, and then settled back on the reverend. "Then you've wasted your trip, Pastor. I'm not on speaking terms with God."

The blunt reply surprised Rachel, but the reverend seemed unruffled. "If not for yourself," the reverend continued, "surely you want your daughter growing in the faith."

Sarcasm twisted Mr. Taylor's mouth. "I'm certain the good people of La Playa want nothing to do with her or me. You must have heard about what happened at the mercantile." This time his stormy gaze settled on Rachel.

She swallowed hard, unable to look away, and felt her heartbeat quicken.

"An unfortunate incident, to be sure," said the reverend as he swept off his black-brimmed hat. "You'll find Hannah is treated better in church."

Taylor turned back to Reverend Crouse, and Rachel took the moment to descend from the carriage and approach the two men. "That has not been my past experience."

Reverend Crouse's silver brows knitted together. "We are not a group of perfect people. Everyone is welcome in God's house."

Mr. Taylor didn't answer, but his eyes hardened to blue slate. He folded his arms across his chest. "Look, Pastor, I mean no offense, but it's best if you just leave. It's too bad you had to ride all the way out here just to hear me say no, but no it is."

The reverend shrugged his shoulders and gave a brief smile. "There is always that chance in my line of work. However, my job is to sow the seeds. Only God can make them grow."

He seemed on the verge of continuing in the same vein, but then pulled back. "Very well. I won't press you further. Remember, though, the invitation stands in the event you change your mind."

"Good day, Pastor."

"One more thing," the reverend continued, smoothly filling in the awkward quiet. "We are planning to hold the annual community picnic here in a few weeks. You weren't here last year, so I wanted to forewarn you."

Taylor pressed his lips together. "Thanks for the warning."

Concern softened Reverend Crouse's eyes. "You're welcome to attend, of course."

Mr. Taylor nodded his acknowledgment.

"Come, Rachel." The reverend started back to the carriage along the hard dirt path.

When she didn't move, Mr. Taylor's steely gaze fastened on her. She swallowed hard. He made it difficult to breathe, let alone speak. It seemed he really hated their intrusion into his life. "I...I brought something for Hannah."

Conscious of being watched, she walked to the carriage boot, and withdrew her present. She'd wrapped it in a large scrap of brown cloth to protect it from the dust on the trip. Perhaps Mr. Taylor would be angry about the gift. Perhaps it would remind him about the incident in the mercantile and he'd refuse it. She hadn't thought of that when wrapping it, and now that made her nervous. But when she turned back to him, she caught a glimpse of his daughter peeking around the door frame. Curiosity and shyness warred on the young girl's face, and Rachel's confidence grew. This wasn't about Mr. Taylor. It was about the girl.

Returning to stand in front of him, she unwrapped the cloth to reveal a papier-mâché doll. Pupilless glass eyes stared up at the light keeper from under painted brown hair. The doll was not new—spidery, hairline cracks ran along the chest and shoulders—but Rachel hoped Mr. Taylor would let Hannah have it. She drew back the cloth further to reveal the green satin gown that had dressed the doll at the mercantile. "The dress fit perfectly. I thought Hannah might give my doll a good home."

Mr. Taylor's brows drew together. "We don't want your charity."

"That's good, because I'm the least charitable person I know," she said, her anger surfacing. "You've already paid for the dress. Sarah sits in a box under my bed day in and day out. She needs a little girl to play with again."

"I'm sure there are plenty of girls at your school. What about them?"

Frustration knotted within her. "I want Hannah to have Sarah."

He continued to watch her silently.

She was not going to back down!

"Do you bribe all children this way?"

He would think such a thing! She struggled to keep her voice low so that Hannah would not hear her anger. “You, sir, are being ridiculously suspicious of a simple kindness. This is not a bribe. And I do not appreciate your rudeness over a simple gift!”

“Perhaps I’ve had a little experience with Greeks bearing gifts,” he said. But he turned to stare at his daughter in the open doorway. Hannah’s heart-shaped face was filled with anxious hope. Tangles of blond hair fell over her thin shoulders and onto the same brown dress she’d worn at the mercantile. Timidly, Hannah inched down the stone walk to stand behind her father.

Rachel glanced up at Mr. Taylor but his closed expression told her nothing. A shiver stole through her as she watched him. He was a formidable man, standing a full head taller than her, and she was not a small woman. Yet, he hadn’t actually refused the gift. She squatted to the child’s level and then held out the doll. “This is Sarah. She was my doll when I was little. I brought her for you.”

Hannah glanced up at her father and then slowly reached for the doll, her eyes filled with wonder. She pressed Sarah against her in a hug.

Rachel smiled and let out the breath she’d been holding.

She rose and met his gaze, determined to ignore his surliness. “I know you said church is out of the question. Would you consider school? Hannah is old enough to be in the first or second grade by now.”

His look of incredulity gave her his answer even before he spoke. “Absolutely not.”

“Mr. Taylor, you can’t keep her isolated out here. She’ll never learn that there are decent people in this world. She’ll always expect the worst.”

Anger flashed in his eyes. “Hannah. Go back inside.” He held up a hand, forbidding Rachel to speak again until Hannah had done as she was told. When his daughter was at a distance that she could not hear him, he turned to Rachel. “You were there. You saw how they treated her! They talked as though she couldn’t hear.”

Rachel remembered all too well the lack of empathy in the mercantile. She was still upset at her friend, Amanda. “It bothered me, too,” she admitted. “They just need to get to know her. If you were to bring her to school, I would take extra care with her. You must know that this constant isolation is not good for her.”

Her words hung suspended in the air between them.

His eyes narrowed, but he seemed to consider her suggestion for the space of an instant. “Prove it. You tutor her.”

Startled, she met his gaze. “Tutor her? But that’s not what I meant!”

He waited, watching her closely.

The thought took hold. Could she do it? She had so little teaching experience, and Hannah was not an ordinary student. Did she have what it would take to help her? She swallowed hard, intrigued with the idea.

She met his gaze. Was that hope in his eyes beneath the hardness? Perhaps he was reaching out. In his own way, he was asking for help and she suspected he was a man who seldom asked for anything. He confused her—and he fascinated her.

But how could she agree to his offer? If the school board got wind of any arrangement, she’d lose her job for sure. They wouldn’t see it as her teaching Hannah. They’d see it as an unmarried woman visiting an unmarried man—without an escort. It could jeopardize her employment at the school.

“I..I’m sorry, but I haven’t the time,” she said, her excuse sounding weak, even to her ears. “As I said, bring her to school. I’ll see she’s looked after and not hurt by the others.”

He shook his head. “Why should I trust you any more than the others?”

“I guess you have no reason to. It’s just tha—”

“Just forget I asked. I’ll teach Hannah what she needs to know.”

“You must understand, Mr. Taylor—”

He shut her out. “The reverend is waiting. You better leave now.”

She felt her chance slipping away. “Mr. Taylor. I really do want what’s best for Hannah.”

“You’ve made your point, Miss Houston. Apparently, we’re at a standoff. I won’t change my mind.” He walked past her and then headed to the carriage where Reverend Crouse waited.

Well that didn’t go as planned, she thought. Disheartened, she followed him and let him help her up onto the burgundy-cushioned seat. Her fingers tingled where he steadied her with his callused hand. Unsettled, she busied herself adjusting her skirt about her knees even as she felt him continuing to study her. Then her curiosity got the better of her. “The other day at the mercantile...”

He nodded curtly, listening though she sensed he was impatient for her to leave.

“What did you mean when you said I should believe everything I hear?”

“Why don’t you ask that friend of yours? She seemed to know it all.”

“I prefer to know the truth.”

He just stared at her.

She refused to be baited—handsome or not—and plunged on. “Amanda said you killed your wife.”

Beside her, Reverend Crouse inhaled sharply and grabbed the reins. “Rachel! That’s quite enough. I believe we have just overstayed our welcome.”

Stubbornly she notched up her chin. “If one can call this a welcome at all.” She wasn’t about to back down. Mr. Taylor had dared her. “She said you escaped from prison.”

The light keeper leveled his gaze at her and she felt a twinge of remorse.

“Isn’t there something in the Bible about gossip, Reverend?” he asked. Suddenly, with the flat of his hand, he struck Jericho’s rump. The horse bolted.

“Oh!” Rachel grabbed her hat with one hand and the edge of her seat with the other, holding on tight as the carriage careened away from the yard.

Reverend Crouse struggled with the reins for control and finally maneuvered Jericho into a jerky canter down the dirt road. They neared the rise and Rachel glanced back, fervently hoping Mr. Taylor’s palm stung like the bite of a ruler against bare skin. To her keen disappointment, he snapped an obviously fine-feeling hand to his brow in a mocking salute.

Chapter Four

Stuart descended the circular stairway after checking the lamp. It should be good until dawn when he would extinguish it. He sat at the parlor table. Through the window in front of him, he could see the beam from the light above sweep across the peninsula and then out across the moon-dappled water. The strong smell of ocean and sage permeated the room. Opening his logbook, he wrote:

September 16, 1873

11:45 p.m. Mild wind from the northwest. Clear night.

Visitors—Reverend Crouse. Rachel Houston.

He straightened in his chair, stretching his back as he considered how much he should write about the visit. Invitation to church? No. It was no one's business but his own. And the less he mentioned about Hannah, the better.

He swiped his hand across his face. Lord, he was tired. Hannah had been moody and difficult about everything until Miss Houston had come and given her that doll. Then she had disappeared into her room to play.

Miss Houston. Now there was an interesting woman. Outspoken to be sure, but then, words meant only so much. Actions told a lot more about the character of a person—man or woman. And she had character to spare. She sure didn't back down. First, at the mercantile when she stood up to Terrance and then today, when he was her problem.

His head started to nod and he jerked. What the heck were people saying about him in town? He wanted to keep a quiet existence here, not have people talking about him. He'd had little experience with such things before moving here, finding it easier to hide out in more populated areas. He was getting a fast introduction to small-town nosiness.

His head nodded. The pen fell from his hand. He lowered his head to the desk and closed his eyes. Just for a minute....

Stuart pushed open the heavy oak door to the captain's cabin. A soft light from the whale-oil lantern illuminated the nooks and crannies of the small room, spilling a rich golden hue on the wooden beams overhead. Linnea sat at the end of his bunk and leaned over a makeshift bed, singing in a low chant to her daughter.

"Linnea?" he whispered.

She placed her finger against her lips. "Hush. She's nearly asleep." She smiled at him briefly, then continued her song. The dark bruising along her chin had healed to a yellow color but the shadows beneath her eyes confirmed his worry that this voyage had not healed her spirit. She wasn't sleeping. But she hadn't complained. She never complained anymore.

A thrill rippled through him at the scene in the small cabin. Three-year-old Hannah lay curled on her side, a white cotton nightgown covering her chubby limbs and a matching sleeping bonnet taming her fine blond wisps of hair. Wet spiked lashes quieted against pale cheeks. So there had been another battle of wills about bedtime. He smiled to himself.

Assured that all was well, he returned to the deck. The last pink rays of sunlight sparkled across the water as he barked out orders to adjust the sails and take full account of the northern winds. On the ship's port side the purple outline of California's southern coast rose above the sea, the hazy mountains familiar sentinels on his journey to San Pedro.

Linnea came to his side, pulling her shawl tighter around her for warmth. The breeze whipped golden tendrils of her hair across her neck and cheeks.

"She's asleep now."

He nodded his acknowledgment.

"Do you think John's family will come after us?"

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“My father, too?”

“Especially your father. We left a mess in San Francisco. They will want to set it right.”

“By condemning you.”

He kept silent a moment, looking at but not seeing the water. “I killed him. John’s family will want revenge, or payment in some way. So will the law.”

“Oh, Matthew. I’m sorry to have dragged you into this. I just didn’t know where to turn.”

Stuart pulled her close, his arm around her shoulder. “You did the right thing. Never doubt that.” He felt the rise and fall of her shoulders as she took a deep breath.

“Yet there is one more favor I must ask of you.”

He waited.

“Promise me you’ll take care of Hannah if anything happens to me.”

“Lin—”

“No. I mean it. I’ve thought about this a lot. We don’t know what will happen. John’s family and my father have the law on their side. They have all the resources. Our running away looks like we planned John’s death. They’ll think we are lovers. John accused me of that so many times—I think to rationalize his own lack of fidelity.”

“He didn’t deserve you.”

Her chin trembled. “I should have waited for you, Matthew. I was weak and lonely at that school. I ruined everything.”

He squeezed her arm. “We’re together now. And don’t worry about Hannah. I’ll stand by both of you.” He looked over the water, subconsciously noting the increase in whitecaps while he tried to figure out what they should do after delivering the cargo to San Pedro. The voyage had given him time, but a reckoning was swiftly catching up.

First Shipmate Saunders approached with a worried look on his face. “Captain, I don’t like the looks o’ that horizon.” He raised his thick wiry brows toward the stern of the vessel indicating billowing clouds in the distance. A line of dark gray in their belly foretold of the rain within.

“I see it,” Stuart said grimly. “If it heads this way we won’t be able to use the stars tonight to guide us. We may have a swift race to port. Make sure the crew is prepared.”

“Aye, sir.” Saunders hesitated.

“What is it?”

“Touhy stands watch tonight.”

Stuart considered the level of experience of the younger man. “Have him wake me if the wind changes course.”

“Aye, sir. Can’t help thinkin’ one of Mr. Lansing’s steamers would have been a better choice for this trip.”

“Only our ten-year friendship makes it possible for you to say that, Saunders,” Stuart said with a sternness he knew his first shipmate would see right through. “The Maiden is old, but fit. Rather like you,” he teased lightly. “And she’s mine, not Dorian’s. That makes all the difference on this particular voyage.”

With a salute—and a wink—Saunders left.

That night Stuart awoke from his makeshift pallet on the floor. He sensed a change, a creaking of the ship as though forced on a new course. In the bed, Linnea slept fitfully, her soft breath puffing against the sheets. He rose and dressed quickly.

Above deck the light breeze of the evening before had transformed into a bitter gale. Stuart searched the black skies for any sign of lightness, anything to mark his bearings. The darkness was so thick he could only guess at the horizon, where sky dissolved into ocean without a trace. It would be time for the third watch—Touhy should be in charge. Why hadn’t the man woken him?

He grabbed the rail to steady himself and walked aft. When he neared the binnacle that housed the compass, a flash of lightning illuminated the sky. In that instant he recognized the familiar peaks of Santa Catalina Island rising not five hundred yards off the port bow. In the few moments the wind had grabbed control of their ship it had blown them far south of their plotted course.

“Bear away before the wind!” he shouted above the gale. Shipmen raced to obey his commands. “One thirty-five on a broad reach! Touhy! Get Saunders! Then take position in the stern!”

The Frisco Maiden surged ahead, her bow lifting high in the inky water, running on the forefront of the storm. Suddenly, sheets of rain plastered his shirt to his skin, chilling him to the bone. The storm had overtaken them. He glanced astern and his heart turned to ice at the sight of the monstrous waves forming. The vessel began to pitch and yaw, a toothpick in the violent, churning waters. Mast and foremast alike, weighed down with wet sails, creaked and groaned, protesting the strain as though alive.

No storm that Stuart had ever seen possessed such fury. Linnea! Hannah! He had to make them safe. Should the ship not clear the island—He refused to think of what might happen. He clung to the thick wooden railing along the gangway and made his way toward his cabin. Sailors ran before him, jumping to the bark of his commands.

Another bright, jagged flash of lightning coursed through the rain. The craggy islands stood behind them now. A wave crashed over the stern adding to the deck’s slickness as though layering it with whale oil. At the boom he joined his men pulling on the rigging to lower the foresail. If only he could get a few sails down before the next gigantic wave overtook them.

A deafening crack pounded his ears.

He looked up and found the main topmast hanging at right angle to the lower main mast. The eerie blue-white glow of Saint Elmo’s fire raced the length of the yardarms and danced along the top of the two standing masts. The light wavered and then disappeared against the backdrop of black.

Suddenly a swell, which had to have measured as large as the island itself, lifted the Frisco Maiden high into the air, high enough that Stuart could see the end of the storm front approaching from the north. For one brief, suspended moment he thought he saw a beacon of light shining from the mainland. It had to be his imagination. No lighthouse beam was that powerful. Then the swell curled over, crashing in upon itself and swallowed the ship.

Stuart clung to the railing with all his might. Frigid seawater swirled over him, alternately pushing and then pulling him. The salt stung his eyes, blinding him.

When he could drag a deep breath of air into his lungs, he straightened and took note of his surroundings as best he could in the dark. The ship listed to its side and he knew without being told that she was taking on water. How could he order his men into the small lifeboats in such a wild sea? But if they remained on the schooner, there would be no hope for them at all.

“Lower the lifeboats!”

The words rasped out of his throat, raw from the constant abuse of the storm and brine. Single-minded now, he made his way grasping at rigging and railing until he entered his cabin.

“Linnea!”

A mewling sound came from the bunk. He groped his way there, touching upon Linnea’s ankle. She sat huddled on the far side of the bed.

“Are you all right? Is Hannah?”

“She’s here, Stuart. I have her.” Seawater soaked the bed and the two shivered in their wet nightgowns.

“The Maiden’s taking on water,” he said, hugging them to him. “I must get you to the lifeboat.”

Lightning flashed outside, illuminating a small portion of the cabin through its only porthole. He could see the terror in both their eyes, see the white-knuckled death grip with which Linnea held to her bedpost anchor.

There was no time to waste. Stuart peeled her hand loose and immediately she grasped his arm, surprising him with her strength. He snatched Hannah to him and together they made their way above deck.

One boat full of crewmen already tested the turbulent ocean. Panic mixed with relief marked the faces of the fourteen men. They veered away from the Frisco Maiden, rowing with a vengeance to get clear of the larger ship. Waves washed over them, tangling kelp and sea grass around their bodies, fashioning them into grotesque monsters rising from the deep.

The ocean churned and heaved, playing with the Frisco Maiden and mocking her tenacious grasp on life. Stuart helped the remaining crewmen and Saunders make ready the second lifeboat. When they had all settled into the boat along with Linnea and Hannah, he hesitated.

“Come on, Cap’n!” Saunders yelled. “She’ll go under any minute. Save yourself. No need for heroics!”

“Are all the men accounted for?”

“Yes, sir.”

Stuart glanced about the deck one last time, then climbed over the railing and down the rope ladder to the lifeboat. Sheet lightning flared in the sky, this time farther to the south.

“We’re caught up!” Saunders yelled from the bow.

Stuart looked down into Linnea’s frightened eyes.

“I cannot do this by meself!” Saunders’s gravelly voice competed with the crashing of waves. “Give a hand!”

Stuart squeezed Linnea’s hand. “Hold tight to the side. I must help Saunders or we’ll be dragged under with the ship.”

His words seemed to penetrate her fear, for he felt a loosening of her grip. Quickly he moved her hand to the side of the lifeboat. He looked briefly at Hannah, and then crawled toward Saunders in the bow.

Kelp, seaweed and a plank of wood had tangled about the Maiden’s ladder. There was no hope in untangling the floating mass. He would have to cut them loose.

“Hold my legs!” he shouted at Saunders and grabbed the large knife he carried in his belt. He inched forward until more than half his body hung over the bow and then sawed at the thick hemp rope. In short time the rope gave way and they were free. Winded, he inched back into the boat and sprawled on the seat to catch his breath.

A swell rose fifteen feet above the lifeboat like a vengeful Poseidon rising from the deep. Stuart watched in horror as the swell broke at its apex and crashed down on them. The turbulence battered him, pushing saltwater into his eyes and filling his mouth. He gripped anything he could hold on to, climbing over his crew, trying to reach Linnea. When the water calmed enough to see again, surprisingly the boat still floated right side up.

But Linnea and Hannah were gone.

“Cap’n, don’t do it!”

He heard Saunders yell, felt hands reach for him, but there was no time to wait.

He dived in.

Groping frantically through the water, he searched for Linnea and Hannah. The waves shoved him about like a plaything. Kelp tangled around his legs, pulling at him, binding him.

Something drifted across his face—seaweed? More kelp? He struggled closer. In vain he tried to see through the murky waters. Then something bumped against him. He reached—and his hands closed on cloth. Hannah! He pulled her close, and suddenly Linnea was there, too, grasping his forearm with both hands.

Renewed strength flowed through him. He kicked hard for the surface, struggling with the weight of the two. His lungs burned with the need for air.

Lightning flashed above him. The surface was so close, so close. His legs muscles tightened into knots. He forced himself to keep kicking, straining. He had to breathe, had to reach the surface. Then Linnea's hold loosened and he felt her hands slide down his arm. He tried to grasp her, but her fingers slipped through his. He reached again—and his hand closed on nothing but water.

Stuart woke with a start, disoriented, his body coated in sweat. He stared at the logbook on the desk, seeing it without knowing where he was, what it meant. He struggled to get his bearings. His heart pounded, yet quiet surrounded him. Through the window flashed a beam from the lamp, the circular pattern somehow familiar and settling. He buried his face in his hands.

The dream had come again.

He drew in a deep breath to steady his heartbeat, then closed the logbook and rose from his seat. It had been months since he'd dreamed of it—almost a year. He longed for the night it would leave him for good, and yet he feared it, too. The dream was his punishment for not protecting the woman he loved. Yet, in the dream he could still feel her touch and hear her voice.

He climbed the stairs to Hannah's room and leaned against the door frame, studying her. At least he'd never forget Linnea's face. Hannah was her mirror image. She slept on, her new doll crushed beside her.

That doll.

The events of yesterday rushed back into his thoughts. He'd been rude to Reverend Crouse and Miss Houston. But he wouldn't apologize for his blunt words nor would he place his trust in a God who allowed an innocent woman like Linnea to drown. Still, he did feel a twinge of remorse. Hannah surely liked that doll.

Back in his bedroom he poured cool water into his bowl, then splashed it on his face. His hand strayed to the raised quarter-inch-wide slash that started just over his right brow and extended into his hairline. The angry red mark never let him forget it was his fault Linnea had died...his fault Hannah no longer talked or laughed.

Odd, when he thought over the previous day, how the vision of Miss Houston formed in his mind sharper than that of Linnea. She was nothing like Linnea, who had been soft and biddable. Miss Houston seemed all strong angles and had a decidedly sharper tongue. She certainly hadn't been cowed by him—not with that parting question about prison time. Still, her urging to start Hannah in school nagged at him. Linnea would have insisted on private tutors long before now.

He'd said he could teach Hannah himself, but he wasn't sure he could. He knew all about shipping, about commanding a schooner or steamer and bartering the best price for goods. That wouldn't do Hannah any good. Was he selfish in wanting her to stay here with him? She needed to learn of life beyond the peninsula—but at what cost? All he wanted to do was protect her. His gut twisted. He'd done a damn poor job of that so far.

He could throttle Miss Houston for stirring up the ashes, for bringing back the nightmare. And that doll! He knew better than to accept it. Why had he? Now his conscience would prick him every time Hannah played with it—and he would think of her.

Chapter Five

San Francisco

Dorian Lansing hurriedly mounted the steps of his mansion on Nob Hill, his walking cane tapping a rapid-fire cadence across the smooth-tiled entrance.

“Rose! Rose! Confound it, Whitlow, take these.” He shoved his cloak and top hat at the butler. “Where is that woman!”

“In the dayroom, sir... Dr. Garrett is with her.”

Dorian dropped his cane in the wrought-iron rack by the door and headed down the hall. His wife lounged with her feet on the couch, still dressed in her pearl-colored morning robe. At least she’d allowed Mattie to draw her hair back with a pink ribbon today in deference to the doctor’s visit.

Dr. Garrett stood as Dorian entered the room. The heavy drapes remained closed against the light of day. No air stirred.

“You’re home early, dear,” Rose said in her birdlike voice. He detected a slight trembling of her hands.

“May I have a word with you, Mr. Lansing?” Dr. Garrett subtly nodded his head toward the hall.

“Certainly. I’ll be right back, Rose.” He followed the doctor to the hallway.

“How is she today, Doctor?”

“Thinner, paler.”

He’d thought so, too, but to hear his fears out loud made them so much more real. “What else can we do? We’ve tried everything.”

“This is not so much an illness of the body as it is an illness of the spirit. You must find something that captures her interest. She needs a reason to continue living.”

Dorian thanked the man and dismissed him. A reason for living! Of all the nerve. Apparently taking care of her husband and household wasn’t enough of a reason! Disgruntled, he strode into the dayroom, crossed the parquet floor to a southern window and drew back the heavy burgundy drapes.

“Please...leave that closed.” Rose struggled to sit taller. “What did the doctor say?”

He left the drapes as they were and began plumping the pillows at her back, avoiding her gaze. “Nothing new. You’re doing just fine.”

She caught his hand and motioned for him to sit. She didn’t ask why he was early today. He knew better than to hope for a show of interest from her. It had been years since he’d seen any spark in her eyes. He dragged a straight-back chair near and sat. This was his last hope.

“I have information regarding Linnea.”

The muscles in her neck worked convulsively as she swallowed. After Rose’s panic attack a year ago, the doctor had said not to bring up the accident or the past, but to wait for her to mention it first. So far, she never had.

By God, he’d had enough. Enough! He was not the type to sit around and take this situation a moment longer. He was through with waiting. “I heard from Miss Forester’s School for Young Ladies. The headmistress there confirmed my suspicions. She knew John Newcomb well.”

“That means...”

The plaintive plea in her voice knifed through him, and he turned from her, unable to bear seeing her hurt more. “Yes. John married our daughter to get his hands on her inheritance. He used her just as we suspected.” Dorian kept quiet about the mistress. Such information was not for a genteel lady’s ears.

“Oh, Dory.”

The reproachful tone set him off. “She should have known better!” His voice quaked with anger. “How could she have been so gullible as to let a man like that into her life? She was a Lansing, for God’s sake. Why didn’t she listen to me?”

Rose dropped her gaze and turned from him.

“I know what you’re going to say, Rose. But I was angry. And frustrated.”

“And you turned her away when she finally did come to us for help,” she said dully.

“She had to learn to live with her choices. Make the best of it.” He took his wife’s frail hand. “Well, no matter now. She is gone and we cannot change the past. But for certain, the child, our granddaughter, belongs with us.”

“Matthew is still involved, isn’t he? That’s why he hasn’t come back.”

Dorian stiffened at hearing that name and chose to ignore her question. He’d kept the part about the murder from his wife. She’d suffered enough. But he knew Matthew was involved, whether the rumors of adultery were true or not, it was his gun found on the docks. He’d probably pulled the trigger. “I’ve decided to hire another detective. Randolph has given me a name.”

A flash of fear crossed Rose’s face.

“I know we had little luck with the first one. I’m willing to try again. More important, are you?”

Her shaking grew worse, but when she looked up at him, her gaze was resolute. “Yes. Do try. It’s time we were a family again.” She drew a breath and added, “Even...even Matthew.”

Dorian felt a sickening lurch in his gut and hardened his heart at her words. “I don’t want to hear that man’s name spoken in this house or have you forgotten that?”

Rose visibly shrank in front of him. “No. I’ve not forgotten. But Linnea ran to Matthew. And he took her in. He loved her—as a brother would and...and possibly more.”

“Confound it!” He beat his fist on the arm of the couch. “The girl belongs with us. He isn’t her father.” The hate boiled up inside, choking him.

“But the things you said—”

“He as good as killed Linnea. Matthew murdered our daughter.”

Rose shrank away from him and lay back against her cushions. “Oh, Dory. Do what you must. I want nothing more than to find Hannah. She belongs here. This is her birthright. Bring her home any way you can.”

Dorian took her hands in his. “If there is a way on earth to find her, I will. And when I do, Matthew will have no choice but to hand her over to me.” The vengeance in his voice surprised even him. Slowly he loosened his grip. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Chapter Six

The strong September sun had finally burned away the fog that hovered each morning over the peninsula. Rachel lifted her face to its warmth for a moment and then glanced behind her. Two wagons and five carriages loaded with churchgoers and food snaked their way to the point like an army of determined ants.

She sat in the bed of the wagon, one arm resting on a picnic hamper, the other holding tight to the wooden side. She had spent all of yesterday baking. Her mouth watered at the thought of the pies nestled between the slow-baked beans and cold chicken.

“So, how much longer do I have to put up with this prison sentence?” Caleb asked from his sprawled position beside her. “Haven’t I been okay for the past couple weeks?”

“The sheriff said at least two months,” Rachel answered. “You’re lucky he didn’t put you in jail for starting that fire.”

Caleb scowled. “No one cares about those hide houses anyway. One less wouldn’t hurt anything.”

“But they aren’t your property!” she said, exasperated with his attitude. “Besides, you could have torched the entire town. It was irresponsible.”

He clamped his hands over his ears to shut out her voice and glared at her. After a few minutes he looked up at Reverend Crouse. “Is the light keeper coming to our picnic, Reverend?”

Rachel tensed. It had been three weeks since her visit with Mr. Taylor and three weeks spent pondering the man. Impulsively, she’d even ordered a book on sign language from back east, just in case it could help the young girl.

“He’s welcome, as is anyone,” Reverend Crouse answered her brother. “After all, this is a community picnic.”

“It’s not a good idea,” Caleb said.

Reverend Crouse glanced over his shoulder. “Why do you say that?”

“Cause he shot at those fisherman a while back. He’s not right in the head. Living out here has made him crazy. Enrique said—” Caleb stopped at the amused look in Reverend Crouse’s eyes.

“Don’t believe everything you hear. Rumors have a way of growing and changing over time.”

“I still say you shoulda had the picnic somewhere else.”

They crested the last brush-covered rise and saw the lighthouse. When they neared, Mr. Taylor stepped through the open front door, his jaw set tight. Resentment radiated from him, thick and strong.

“Look at him.” Heaviness lodged in the pit of Rachel’s stomach. “He doesn’t want us here.”

“Whether he does or not is of no concern. This is government property. The town has had a picnic here for the past seven years.” He stopped Jericho at the gate. “In any case, I’ll ask if he and his daughter would like to join us.”

Rachel couldn’t hear what was said between Reverend Crouse and Mr. Taylor but watched while Hannah inched up to her father and tucked her hand in his. She looked once in Rachel’s direction. A moment later she slipped back into the darkness of the house. Mr. Taylor soon followed his daughter and firmly shut the door.

The reverend climbed back into the wagon. “We’re welcome to enjoy the view but he prefers not to join us.” He clucked at Jericho, urging the horse on, and then waved at the others to follow.

“What of Hannah? She might like the games later,” Rachel asked.

“He’ll keep the girl with him.”

Rachel didn’t understand the ambivalence she felt. She’d worn her favorite navy-blue skirt and white blouse, trying to appear tailored like the perfect teacher in order to impress them. And she’d

packed enough food in the hope that Hannah and even Mr. Taylor would join them. But now, learning they wouldn't, a wave of relief washed over her. Perhaps she could relax now and simply enjoy the day.

A hundred feet farther, Reverend Crouse pulled the wagon to a stop on a stretch of level ground. Rachel spread out their large quilt with the faded star design between two small sagebrushes. The wind swirled and caught the edges of the makeshift tablecloth whipping it about. "Caleb! Help me, please!"

Amanda Furst caught a corner as Caleb caught the other.

"Didn't want you sailing off," Amanda said.

Rachel glanced up from anchoring her corner with a rock. Amanda, as always, looked prim and proper in her brown satin dress. "Why, thank you."

Amanda nodded toward the lighthouse. "He won't join us?"

"Mr. Taylor was invited, along with his daughter," Rachel answered. "He said no."

"Well, at least he has some common sense." Amanda stood and twirled her parasol over one shoulder. "He would make us all uncomfortable. He treated me abominably in the mercantile."

"He was just looking out for his daughter. And we were gossiping."

Amanda raised her chin. "I don't gossip. I was telling the truth."

Why Rachel should feel the least bit protective of Mr. Taylor, she couldn't fathom, but she thought a change in topic was warranted to keep the peace. "I see your brother is here," she said, nodding toward where a few men were setting up tables.

Amanda wrinkled her nose. "Trying to get on Mother's good side. He's up to something."

"I hope he stays clear of my brother." Sam was well-known as the town terror. A few years older than Caleb, he had harassed her brother more than once when she and Caleb had first arrived at La Playa.

Amanda nodded. "Me, too. I suppose Mr. Morley will be sitting with you?"

Rachel stopped pulling things from the basket and looked up. "I'm not sure. He has relatives visiting from San Diego. I imagine they're talking business."

"Oh." Amanda blushed. "Well...that's nice. I, ah, better get back to help Mother." She spun around and returned to where her family was setting out food.

Rachel sat back on her heels. Amanda was interested in Terrance! Before the thought registered any further, a flash of white from the lighthouse drew her eye.

Hannah stood on the catwalk, her chin on the railing, watching the people below. Rachel started to wave a greeting, but then lowered her hand when Mr. Taylor appeared behind the girl and placed his hands on her shoulders. Without turning, Hannah reached up and grasped one of his hands. Such a small gesture, full of trust and innocence. And with it Rachel's heart softened considerably toward the light keeper.

As if he felt her watching, Mr. Taylor's gaze caught hers...and held. Something tenuous reached out to her. Almost without realizing it, she rose to her feet, her gaze still locked on his. The wind picked up the ribbons on her bonnet and tickled her cheek, but she barely noticed. His eyes held hers as though he tried to read her thoughts, see into her soul. Before she could muddle through the strange sensation, he pulled Hannah back from the walkway and disappeared from sight.

Rachel let out the breath she had been holding and turned back to setting out the tin plates and napkins. Her cheeks flamed with heat as she tried to concentrate on the dishes, but could only see his face before her. Even her breasts tingled with awareness of him.

Caleb lugged over another basket and dumped it awkwardly in the middle of the quilt.

"My pies!" She reached out and righted the hamper, glad to have a diversion from her thoughts of the light keeper. She held up a squashed cherry pie in her hand. "To think it made the trip all the way here, and then to end up as flat as a sand dollar."

"Where's the problem, Rach? I'll eat it, anyway."

She lowered the pie, placing a cloth napkin beneath to protect the faded quilt. "No matter, I guess," she said grudgingly. "It will still taste the same. Besides, we have the apple pie, and there will

be ice cream later. Just try to be more careful.” Caleb was getting clumsier every week. Lately he reminded her more of a disjointed rag doll, all elbows and knees, than a flesh-and-blood boy.

Across the quilt from her, Reverend Crouse rose awkwardly, pressing on his knee with one hand. Skirts and coats rustled as those assembled stood for the blessing. Once he was finished, everyone gathered around the tables piled with food to fill their plates.

At Rachel’s makeshift table, the chicken pieces disappeared quickly. Rolls with butter and then molasses cookies followed. Caleb sectioned off a large piece of mashed cherry pie and ate it with boyish gusto. Rachel had just put her tin plate back in the basket when Terrance strolled up.

“Hello, Rachel.”

He towered over her, pulling on one end of his drooping mustache. He nodded to the reverend, Emma and Caleb in turn, and then his gaze locked on her to the exclusion of the others. What was it that Amanda found appealing about him?

“Ready for that walk?”

She glanced over at the other picnickers. They were finishing their meals. “What about starting the children’s games?”

With a wave of her hand, Emma Crouse intervened. “Oh, go on now, you two. I still remember a game or two. And Caleb can help me.”

Terrance pulled Rachel to her feet. “It’s settled, then.” He offered his arm.

He led her along the perimeter of the peninsula. From this high position, she could see a steamer leaving the harbor. Two ships headed toward San Diego, their white sails taut against the wind as they navigated the deepest part of the channel.

A burst of laughter and giggles came from behind her. Rachel looked back toward the picnickers. Emma and Elizabeth organized the boys and girls for the three-legged races, handing out long strips of cloth to bind legs together.

“I should get back and help,” Rachel said, starting to release Terrance’s arm. She glanced again at the children and Elizabeth. Where was Caleb?

Terrance patted her hand back into place. “Those children get you all week. They can do without you for a few more minutes.”

Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be led toward the ocean side of the point. Here the ground dropped steeply down hundreds of feet. Sagebrush and scruffy vegetation covered the higher ground, but in two areas, the wind had bitten into the high land, carving naked sandstone cliffs. Far below, the waves beat against their base. “Is that a beach down there?”

“A small one. You can’t see much from here.”

She searched for something to say. “How are your cousins from San Diego enjoying their stay?” she asked.

“They’re hoping to see a whale or two while here. So far there haven’t been any.”

“I’m not sure it’s the season for them,” she said, trying to remember what a Portuguese whaler had recently told her in town.

Terrance stopped walking and faced her. “Rachel, ah, I don’t quite know how to say this.”

She glanced up at him. “Just say what’s on your mind. I don’t bite.”

He offered a weak smile. “You know that I sit on the school board.”

“Yes.”

“Well, the others have asked me to inquire into your qualifications.”

Suddenly concerned, she met his gaze. “But they’ve already done that—when they interviewed me. They don’t think I’m doing a good job?”

“No, it’s not that.”

He ran a hand through his straight hair, and she noticed a pink tinge to his usually pale face.

“Will you be taking the teacher examination this year?”

“I plan to—after studying more. Probably in early spring.”

“Oh...well, then. That should appease them,” he said, but he wasn’t looking her in the eye.

She tried to remain calm, but her insides were in turmoil. She needed this work. “Would they hire someone else? Someone with a certificate in place of me?”

He hesitated in answering at first. “I’ll be honest.”

“I would prefer it,” she said, her alarm growing.

“A few of the board are talking about it.”

“Terrance, they hired me knowing I didn’t have that piece of paper. And I promised to work toward it. Surely they can give me a little more time. At my interview they said they understood my experience in Wisconsin was as valuable as that certificate.”

He stepped close, and this time he did meet her eyes. “I’ll talk to them. I, for one, want to keep you happy. If that means teaching for a year or two, so be it.”

“Thank you.” Her smile trembled a little. “You know my schooling has been haphazard. There are gaps in it because my father moved us around so much. But I’ll study and be ready for the test in the spring. You can count on me.”

“I know. And I’m sorry to worry you.”

“I need this job, Terrance. Caleb and I—we both do.”

He nodded his acknowledgment just as a chorus of lively shouts rose behind them. “Maybe we should join in the games now.”

She smiled slightly. After all, this was a picnic and she intended to have a good time. “Let’s join in the race. I promise I won’t trip you.”

He raised a brow. “Think we’ll make a good team?”

“Of course,” she said quickly, then realized as he continued to watch her that he wasn’t talking about the race at all. She swallowed hard. Did her job depend on her relationship with Terrance?

They neared the lighthouse, and she glanced once more at the empty catwalk. She had to talk with Mr. Taylor before she left today. Just once more—to encourage him to send Hannah to school. It was best for the girl, and it wouldn’t hurt her own job security to have another steady student.

Suddenly a series of loud pops exploded through the air. Someone cried out, and people began running to the cliff’s edge. A woman screamed.

Rachel scanned the cluster of people for Caleb. She found him crouched at the edge beside Sam Furst. Her heart pounded in her chest as she picked up her skirt and raced toward them. What had happened?

Murmurs rose from the group. “It’s little Benjamin! Somebody get a rope.”

Several men rushed past her, heading for their wagons.

The crowd moved back to allow Reverend Crouse in. Rachel peered over the edge, and then covered her mouth to stifle her cry.

Thirty feet below, seven-year-old Benjamin Alter clung to a small outcropping of sandstone and brush, his stomach flush against the side of the cliff. Blood trickled from a large scrape across his forehead. Hundreds of feet below him, the ground fell away to the foaming ocean and jagged rocks. The boy looked up at them with terrified eyes.

“Hang on, now,” Reverend Crouse said. “We’re getting a rope.”

Rachel’s heart pounded in her chest. Ben could lose his grip on the ledge at any minute. She met the reverend’s worried gaze. “Surely Mr. Taylor has rope.”

Before the words were out of her mouth, the light keeper appeared at her side, a thick coil of rope slung over his shoulder, his manner so commanding that everyone backed away to give him room.

“Help! I can’t hold on!” Benjamin yelled.

Caleb grabbed the rope from Mr. Taylor’s hands and began tying it around his waist.

Rachel gasped. “Caleb! No!”

“It’s my fault he fell,” her brother mumbled. “It’s my place to get him.”

Stuart watched as the boy fumbled with the thick rope at his waist. It was a poor attempt at a knot and one he knew from experience would prove unsafe. Stuart could handle the rope and the climb. He'd climbed among the rigging of schooners being tossed and pitched about by the sea for years. He snapped the rope from the boy's hand. "Step back."

Tying an efficient knot at his own waist, he looked directly at Miss Houston. "Keep Hannah from the edge."

At her wide-eyed nod, he handed the other end of the rope to Terrance Morley, wondering for a moment if he could trust him. But then another man, and then another gripped the rope, their faces set with determination.

Stuart lay down on his abdomen and lowered himself over the cliff's edge. His last look at the handful of onlookers centered on one person—Rachel. Her eyes had clouded with worry. Likely for the boy; surely not for him.

"Don't look up," he yelled down to the boy below. "The loose sand will get into your eyes. And don't move. Let me take hold of you."

Pebbles and loose dirt shot out from beneath his boots as he scrambled down the steep wall of sandstone. All at once his feet met air rather than the cliff and he swung around, smashing his shoulder against the gritty wall. Finally he slid even with the boy.

"Just a minute more and I'll have you. Don't let go yet."

The boy gasped as he struggled to hold on while Stuart wrapped the extra length of rope tightly around the boy's waist and tied a lighterman's hitch. To his credit, the boy remained still as instructed rather than panicking and grabbing hold of Stuart too soon.

"What's your name?" Stuart asked gently.

"B-Benjamin."

The boy couldn't be much older than Hannah.

"Onto my shoulders now," Stuart commanded. "Slide over to my back."

"I can't."

His plaintive voice tugged at Stuart's heart. "Sure you can."

"I'm scared."

"The rope will hold you."

"My hands—they're s-stuck."

Stuart glanced at Benjamin's white-knuckled grip on the ledge and a small tuft of weeds. How had the boy managed to hang on this long?

"Okay. Just do the best you can. I won't let you fall."

Benjamin's eyes filled with unshed tears. Stuart could almost see the boy's mind working, trying to bolster his courage.

"I'll count to three and you grab my neck."

A small nod.

"One...two...three!"

Stuart leaned toward the boy, snaking his arm around Benjamin's waist and hauling him close. He struggled to keep his grip on the rope while the boy locked his legs around Stuart's hips. Frantically, Benjamin grabbed Stuart's shirt then scrambled up and wrapped his arms around Stuart's neck. He could feel the thudding of the boy's heart against his back.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Good job. You ready now?" He felt Benjamin's nod rub against his back. Looking up, he yelled, "Haul us up!"

The men pulled on the rope, a rhythm building as they heaved against the weight. Stuart braced his feet against the cliff to steady the swinging. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Above, Stuart could see the first man's arm muscles bulging with the effort to draw him up.

Finally he and the boy came flush with the ground at the top of the cliff. Strong hands reached out to grip Benjamin and pull him from Stuart's neck. More men reached down to help Stuart over the edge. He crawled a few feet then sprawled onto his back and gasped for air.

People crowded around congratulating the men who'd held the rope. A few nodded to him by way of thanks, but most seemed a little unsure what to make of him. He rose slowly to his feet.

An elderly couple stopped before him. The old woman dabbed tears from her eyes while she thanked him profusely for saving her grandson.

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