HISTORICAL
KATHRYN ALBRIGHT
THE GUNSLINGER AND THE HEIRESS

Kathryn Albright

# The Gunslinger and the Heiress

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FROM TWO DIFFERENT WORLDSYears ago heiress Hannah Lansing was forced to give up the man she loved. Now, to save the family business, her grandfather demands she marry someone she feels nothing for. Torn between duty and desire, Hannah can turn to only one man…Gunslinger Caleb Houston is shocked when Hannah arrives in San Diego – he never expected to see her again!In the eyes of society they're worlds apart, but can Caleb finally convince Hannah to put her own happiness first and trust in the power of the love they share?

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# Содержание

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***His kiss deepened—demanded more —and suddenly she was nervous.***

"Caleb … stop, please."

He squeezed his eyes shut and then, breathing hard, pulled back. "You do realize this changes things?"

At her silence, he looked up from his task.

"It can't change, Caleb. I can't—"

Thunderclouds gathered on his brow. "I must be the biggest fool west of the continental divide. Even now you are thinking of going through with marrying Rowlings?"

"Don't you understand? I can't think about just me!"

He stood and buckled on his gun belt, shoving his gun into its holster. "Don't explain it. I don't want to hear it again. Look. I don't fault you for being loyal to your family, but you need to figure out if that is more important than being loyal to yourself."

An obstetrics nurse, sonographer and medical writer, **KATHRYN ALBRIGHT** was delighted to add 'published novelist' to her bio when her first completed manuscript made the finals in the Romance Writers of America Golden Heart Contest and was picked up by Harlequin® Mills & Boon. She writes Americanset historical romance, and her award-winning books are inspired by the real people and events of the past. She lives in the Midwest and loves to hear from her readers at www.kathrynalbright.com

# AUTHOR NOTE

I've had several readers write and ask what happened to Hannah, the little girl from my first book THE ANGEL AND THE OUTLAW. She's all grown up now, and it is a pleasure to bring you her story here.

I enjoy the colourful history of my hometown, San Diego. Many of the unique facts I learn show up in my stories. 1888, the setting for THE GUNSLINGER AND THE HEIRESS, was a time when Wyatt Earp owned three businesses in town, when the famous Hotel Del Coronado had its grand opening, and when a young boy stumbled into town saying he had been living with pirates off the coast. No one believed him until he produced a few items from the stolen pirate booty.

I love to hear from my readers. You can find me online at www.kathrynalbright.com, on Facebook, and at Goodreads. Stop by and say hi.

The Gunslinger
and the Heiress
Kathryn Albright

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my sons—Beau, Zachary and Cole.
You are my inspiration for every hero …

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Prologue

San Francisco Bay, 1883

"Look lively, Scrapper. We be dockin' soon. Need you on deck."

Caleb opened his eyes, letting in a sliver of light.

In response, Squid squared a hard boot to his side, rocking the rope hammock in a violent arc.

"Back off!" Awake now, Caleb stretched his back against the stiffness that had taken over his body, and then swung his feet to the plank flooring. He rubbed the remaining sleep from his face, wincing when he discovered his bruised and cut bottom lip.

"Gor. Look at you."

"Trask and Corcoran deserved everything they got," he muttered. He'd only protected what was his.

"Good thing you're getting off. Corcoran is fair anxious to have you gone."

"That makes two of us. I didn't sign on to dance with him." All he'd been lookin' for when he'd boarded the clipper in Windham Bay was to work his way south. It had been the captain who had offered a bonus if he'd stay on. The permanent crew, namely Trask and Corcoran, had taken offense. Last night their petty jealousy had turned on a new tack, bypassed annoying and headed straight to ugly when they'd learned he'd had some luck in the gold fields. It wasn't information he bandied about, so how they'd come across it was a mystery. Whatever the case, they'd come out of the scuffle in worse shape than he had. Gingerly, he touched his lip again. Scabbed over. He'd heal. He always did.

Squid gave him the once-over, apparently decided he was up and moving and left.

Caleb walked to the porthole and surveyed the shoreline. The ship maneuvered through the deepest channel of the harbor toward the docks. Shipyards and warehouses lined the waterfront in a familiar pattern like every other port he'd ever entered. But this was San Francisco, which made all the difference. It wasn't home. Not once in his twenty-four years did he remember having a true home, even though his sister, Rachel, had tried her best. He let out a long breath. No, Frisco wasn't home, but when her letter had finally tracked him down, he'd known he had to come back. He'd read it in the spaces between her words. With her first baby on the way, she was scared—scared things might be the same for her as it had been for their mother the night he was born. Heck, he was worried, too. Rachel had always been there for him. It was time he returned the favor.

* * *

A thick border of red and blue flowers bobbed in the summer breeze, issuing a light scent along the stone path to the front door. Rachel would know their name. She'd planted them on his last visit, talking on and on about how they'd look when he came back in a year.

That had been four years ago.

And that was why he stood before the cottage on Sand Pebble Road with his canvas duffel bag slung over his shoulder, bracing himself for the meeting ahead. A tongue-lashing was to be expected—and not the enjoyable kind with a willing woman. The scolding wouldn't change a thing, but it would make Rachel feel better, make her feel as if she had done her duty as his stand-in mother.

Either way, a place like this—a place he could hang his hat—just hadn't been in the cards for him. *Too much gunpowder inside,* one black-eyed Sitka woman had said. That had been true once, but now...now he might try staying put—for a while or possibly longer. Rachel would be plumb tickled at that prospect.

He pounded on the door, stepped back and listened for sounds from inside. Silence.

Briefly, he considered heading back to the bar he'd passed on the waterfront. He could come back later—when Rachel or Stuart was home. Trouble was, Trask and Corcoran were probably there by now. Better to sit that one out. He tried the door latch, sure it'd be locked tight, only to feel it give under his hand.

Striding inside, he dropped his duffel on the parlor floor. Sunlight through the window turned the sitting room and entryway into a yellow and rust-red kaleidoscope of color, but the house was eerily quiet. He'd expected Rachel to be home. After all, it was near time for the baby to come. Wasn't she supposed to be sitting in a rocking chair knitting socks or blankets or something? Course, he hadn't sent word ahead that he was coming. There hadn't been time.

A scrap of paper, blown from the tea table by the breeze he'd created on entering, floated down to the dark plank flooring. He crouched and picked up the note, his gaze falling on a familiar name. He rose to his feet, smoothing out the crease as he read. Hannah's birthday. He'd missed the date by a few days, but apparently a party was happening even as he stood waitin' for company. No doubt he'd find Rachel there.

Hannah. If Rachel had had to take over being his mother, it was Hannah he thought of as his kid sister. She'd been a skinny mite the last time he'd seen her. Rachel had mentioned Hannah didn't come by anymore, didn't have much to do with Stuart either, no matter that the man had been a stand-in father and raised her those years at the lighthouse. When her grandfather finally found them, he'd insisted she live in the mansion as her birthright.

Guess he might as well head there and see what she looked like after all these years. It was as good a time as any to give her that trinket he'd been carrying around. Taking a small leather pouch from his duffel bag, he stuffed it into his vest pocket and set off for the Lansing estate.

* * *

The property encompassed the entire crown of a prominent hill. He stopped before entering the wrought iron gate and checked the view of the harbor below. A long, low whistle escaped. Several sailing vessels with their tall masts lined the wharves beside smaller fishing boats. Beyond them, a swath of deep blue water glistened under the setting sun. Hannah must have felt like a queen to see this every day.

He turned and strode up the long cobbled drive. Around a tree-lined bend, the mansion emerged—elegant white stucco surrounded by an expanse of green grass. The place hadn't changed much since the last time he'd seen it. Five black carriages were parked in front of the estate, and more conveyances had pulled off under the trees. Gas lanterns spilled light along each side of the marble staircase leading to the front entrance. At the base of the stairs, a large fountain sprayed sparkling water into a shallow pool.

He swallowed, feeling wholly out of his element. At the door, the butler pursed his lips, but reluctantly allowed him in. He stood in the entryway under thick cherrywood beams that crisscrossed the white domed ceiling. Down the wide hallway came the sound of deep voices interspersed with high twittering and the smell of something sweet baking—cookies or maybe a cake. The flash of a dinner jacket at a doorway had him looking down at his leather coat and canvas pants. Guess he was a bit underdressed for the occasion. He wore his Stetson—the only new thing he owned.

When someone finally emerged to meet him, it wasn't Hannah or even Rachel. It was Dorian Lansing. Leaning slightly on the cane that had always been a statement of his power, he strode down the hall decked out in a stiff new suit. The ruffles at his collar seemed out of place on such a man. His appraisal was quick, but Caleb felt as if he'd been turned inside out and inspected thoroughly for bugs.

Dorian nodded briefly. "Mr. Houston. It's been a while."

"I've just arrived in town. Thought I'd let my sister know I was here and say hello to Hannah. Don't mean to interrupt anything."

Dorian peered at him with those piercing blue eyes. The years might have watered them down some but hadn't blunted their sharpness. "You'll understand if I don't invite you in. This is an exclusive gathering. I will inform my granddaughter you stopped by." Without waiting for a response, he turned back toward the party.

Caleb hadn't expected to be treated like royalty, but then he also hadn't expected to be treated like dirt. He took two steps following Dorian. The butler blocked him from going farther, so he called over the man's shoulder, "I'll see Rachel. Just to let her know I've arrived safely."

Dorian paused halfway down the hall. He didn't look back. "Very well. I'll send Mrs. Taylor out."

Caleb tried to corral his retaliatory thoughts. He'd better not be waiting until Christmas.

Sudden movement from a nearby doorway caught his eye. A young woman stood there, frozen like a deer in the woods before it breaks and runs. Recognition hit him like the wallop of finding gold at the bottom of the Indian River. Hannah. Last time he'd seen her, she'd been in braids and wore a pinafore to her shins. Now her fancy white dress hugged curves of a waist he'd never seen before—and her shoulders were bare. Bare! Where had he been while all this came about? She wasn't quite a woman yet—but she was close, mighty close.

He tipped the brim of his hat and then signed her name. *Hannah?*

A smile transformed her face, dimples forming on both cheeks. She ran toward him, her arms stretching wide to hug him the way she always had.

"Miss Lansing," the butler said, and coughed discreetly.

Immediately Hannah slowed, and the smile disappeared into tightly pressed lips as she lowered her arms. The transformation cautioned him. Guess she was a young lady more than a girl now.

She stopped a full three feet from him. *Hello, Caleb,* she signed. *How lovely to see you.* She was suddenly so stiff and formal that he half expected her to curtsy. Before he could answer, she wrinkled her small nose. *You smell like fish.*

He raised a brow. So the imp was still inside her. Reading her sign language came back to him naturally, as if he'd never had a four-year hiatus—a surprise after all he'd lived through in the north country. He looked closer at her, noting the changes. Still the same heart-shaped face, the same big gray eyes, but the young waif was turning into a butterfly. She carried herself as if she was royalty coming to call. A comb sparkled in the upsweep of her pale blond hair. Diamonds? Most likely...

"Miss," the butler cleared his throat again.

Her hands flew in beautiful rhythmic patterns. *I'm fine, Edward. Really. You may go.*

Caleb hadn't expected the way she spoke with her hands to be so elegant, so...so graceful. It was like a dance—mesmerizing.

Edward frowned but did as he was instructed and disappeared into a side room.

"Well, aren't you all grown up, *Miss* Hannah?" Caleb emphasized the *miss* to tease her. He'd never called her anything but Hannah or peanut. She might not be able to speak, but her hearing was just fine. "And looking mighty pretty for your birthday celebration."

Her cheeks colored. That was new. She'd never blushed before when he teased, and he always teased her. Mostly she'd tease right back or stomp off in a huff.

Laughter filtered in from down the hall, drawing her attention. She turned back to him. *Won't you come join us?*

He'd rather drink a gallon of seawater. "I don't fancy meetin' a bunch of strangers just now. I'm fresh off the boat and could use a shave and a haircut." He ran his palm over the four days' growth of bristles on his face in emphasis. "Just let Rachel know I'll be at the house."

*But you just got here! I want to hear all about what you've been doing.*

The warmth of her greeting relieved him. He hadn't known how she would be—growing up in this huge mansion and after all these years. He'd halfway wondered if she'd forget about him.

She glanced down the hall, pressed her finger to her lips and then grabbed his hand and pulled him the other way—outside. She led him down the front steps and onto a path through a flowering trellis that led to a large rose garden. Their floral scent filled the warm evening air along with something he hadn't smelled in years—night-blooming jasmine. In the center of the garden, a bronze sundial stood next to a wrought iron swing. She sat down, a conspiratorial smile on her face, and patted the bench seat beside her.

He took care not to crush her fancy party dress as he joined her. "Just what are you up to, Hannah-girl?"

Her eyes shone, drinking him in and making him feel all of ten feet tall. *You were gone a very long time. Where have you been?*

"Alaska mostly."

Her eyes widened into saucers. *Looking for gold? Did you find any?*

He chuckled, enjoying her exuberance. He gave a push with his feet to set the swing in gentle motion. "Some. Bears, too. Big black ones."

*You are lucky to have so many adventures—see so many new places.*

"You're pretty lucky yourself." He tilted his chin toward the mansion behind her. "This looks like a big adventure in its own way."

Instead of agreeing, like he thought she would, her shoulders sank, the movement nearly imperceptible.

He hadn't intended to put a damper on the day. After all, it was her birthday party. "So how have you been, Miss Hannah?"

She blinked and seemed to shake off the mood. *Next week I'm going to see a man about my voice.*

Apprehension tasted sour in his stomach. "Thought you'd been down that road before."

She frowned. *I thought, of all people, you'd understand best.*

Great. He hadn't been here five minutes and they were arguing. "Understand what? Understand how many times you've had your hopes trampled? This isn't some endurance contest, Hannah. You were all broke up the last time when it didn't work like you hoped."

*But this is different.*

"How so?"

*It's called hypnosis.*

Coldness spread through his gut. "Like at a carnival? Some mind reader playing tricks with your brain?"

*It won't be like that. He'd be doing it to help me, not to make fun.*

"Sounds crazy to me. Crazy and dangerous."

She wilted at his words. Must have thought he'd be as enthusiastic as she was. He felt bad—selfish even—for throwin' cold water on her hope. "I'm sorry I can't be more excited for you. I just don't want to see you hurt again. To my way of thinkin' you're fine just the way you are."

*That's because you can read my hands. Not everyone can and...* Her hands dropped to her lap.

"And what?" he prodded, knowing his voice was harsh and not caring. The gal would keep at this like a dog worrying a sore paw.

*I...I...* She squeezed shut her eyes. *Never mind. I'm sorry I spoke of it.*

Now he really felt like an ass. He just didn't want to see her hurt. "Go on. I won't laugh or give you any more grief."

She took a deep breath. *I want to sing.*

It was a dream any young girl might have—rich or poor. Taken by surprise, he grinned. "Guess I'd like to hear that myself."

*You're just scared I'll talk too much once I learn how.*

He smirked. That sounded more like the Hannah he knew—a bit on the sassy side. "Could be. But whatever happens—whether this hypnosis thing works or not—you're still Hannah to me.

Nothing can change that." He said the words to convince himself. She *was* changing—right before his eyes, she was growing up.

A coyote howled in the distance, and the sound pulled him from his thoughts. The stars were popping out, too. Guess he best say what he'd come to say so she could get back to her party. He fished in his pocket and pulled out the leather pouch. "I...ah...have a little something for you—for luck."

Her eyes took on a sparkle. *A birthday present?*

"Call it that if you want. Been carryin' it for a while. It's not much." He handed her the pouch.

She loosened the drawstring cord and upended the bag. The necklace he'd had made slid into her waiting palm—a swirl of silver and abalone in the warm twilight. He watched for her reaction.

Her eyes opened wide in recognition.

She remembered. Unaccountably pleased, he said, "I've had that piece of shell with me ever since we found it on the beach. Been my good-luck piece. Figured it was your turn to have it."

*It...it is lovely. Will you put it on me?*

She handed him the necklace and flounced around on the swing, turning her back to him. The movement wafted her flowery perfume up to fill his nose. His gaze slid down the gentle slope of her neck and farther to her shoulders. He'd never seen so much soft, creamy skin. Queer sensations pooled in his stomach as he circled the silver chain around her head. A tendril of hair danced in the breeze where he needed to lock the clasp. He leaned close and blew it out of the way.

She inhaled sharply.

He smiled at her reaction and then leaned in to tease her. "Goose bumps?"

She didn't indicate she'd heard. In fact, she was mighty quiet. And goose bumps *had* formed on her upper arms. His fingers stilled in their task. He'd only meant to move the hair out of the way. After all, this was Hannah. He hadn't given any thought to his actions being more than that. Suddenly they were. Suddenly they seemed...intimate.

He finished locking the silver clasp and pulled back. "Done."

Hannah fingered the pendant as she turned to him. The gleaming shell rested just above the rose-colored satin neckline of her dress. He liked the way it sat there all shimmery on her smooth skin. "It's not emeralds...or pearls...."

*I have those things. It...* She stilled her hands and then started over. *This is special. It means a lot to me.*

She leaned up and kissed him softly on the cheek.

Drawing back, she stopped close enough for her breath to tickle his skin. Gray eyes, large and luminous, blinked up at him. Her nearness set his entire body to thrummin'—not exactly the reaction he'd expected.

"You're sure sayin' a lot for someone who can't talk," he mumbled, unable to look away. They were friends—practically brother and sister. And she was way too young to be lookin' at him like that. To give in to the urge forming—the urge to kiss her properly—would change things between them forever. He should get up and walk away right now, put some distance between them before he did something stupid.

Trouble was, his head told him one thing and his heart said another. And the second was drowning out the first. So he sat there like a dang fool, caught betwixt and between. Those pretty gray eyes of hers grew bigger, and she tilted her face up. His heart lurched to a new rhythm in his chest. Apparently the little lady was wantin' the same thing. A fool he might be, but he didn't need to be asked twice.

He slid his hat from his head, barely conscious of the motion. Then, leaning forward, he tested the waters—a quick brush of his lips to hers. When she didn't pull back, he took her by the shoulders and bent down to her mouth—careful to keep the kiss light. A birthday kiss. A sweet-sixteen birthday kiss. Gentle. Chaste. Her lashes swept down, and likewise he let himself enjoy the moment. She had the softest lips he'd ever felt, the smoothest skin he'd ever touched.

And she was an innocent. She trembled under his mouth, stiff and a bit awkward in a way only first kisses can be. That she'd chosen to share her first kiss with him humbled him. It was a gift—the gift of herself.

He broke contact and then brushed her forehead with a parting kiss, murmuring against her skin, "Happy birthday, Hannah."

When he pulled back, heightened color stained her cheeks, and her gaze was slightly out of focus.

Well, he was right there with her—in as much shock as she. Imagine that.

The tap of metal clicked on the flagstone path. "Hannah!" Dorian's harsh voice boomed through the garden.

Reluctantly, Caleb released her and stood to face her grandfather.

Dorian made his way toward them until he stopped three feet before them. Quietly, Hannah stood. Dorian took in the pendant she wore, took in her flushed face and cut a barbed look to Caleb before addressing his granddaughter. "You are ignoring your guests. Please, return to the house immediately."

Caleb glanced toward the front door. The partiers had wandered onto the open marble landing at the top of the steps and stared out over the railing, curiosity splashed across their faces. On the path behind Dorian, Rachel, large and awkward with child, hurried forward, followed by her husband, Stuart.

Rachel rushed up and hugged him fiercely. "You're here! When did you arrive? Did you stop at the house?"

He squeezed her tentatively, in awe of her changed form. "Hi, sis. Yes, I left my things there."

"Oh, it's been too long this time." She sniffled, and he saw the start of tears forming in her eyes.

Uncomfortable with the display of emotion, he turned to his brother-in-law, reading the dark bent of his expression. *Tread carefully,* it said. Rachel didn't need any worries, and an argument between him and Dorian wouldn't do her any good.

"Don't mind me. Really," Rachel said, blinking away her tears. "It's just something to do with being in a family way. I seem to cry at the drop of a hat."

He grinned at that. Seemed women could always muster up a good cry—sometimes in honest feeling and sometimes only to manipulate. He'd experienced both. "Guess I interrupted quite a party. I'll head to the house and you come on back when you're good and ready." Turning to Hannah, he resettled his hat on his head and tugged the brim down. "Your grandfather is right. Your guests are waiting."

Hannah pouted but moved her hands gracefully in answer. *Thank you for the gift. You'll come by tomorrow?*

Caleb caught the smoldering anger in Dorian's eye. "Sure. Tomorrow evening."

She smiled, reassured, and turned down the stone path to the house.

The moment she was out of earshot, Dorian faced him squarely. "Please don't make contact with Hannah again."

"I'd say that's up to Hannah, Mr. Lansing."

Rachel's face blanched.

"You *will* honor my wishes with my granddaughter." Dorian didn't raise his voice, but Caleb heard—no, he *felt*—the underlying steel. This was a man who got his way. "Hannah is young and impressionable, and she has been brought up to a finer style than one to which you are accustomed. I believe you would agree with me when I say that she deserves better."

Caleb nearly choked. The man was anything but tactful. "Our friendship goes back way before Hannah came here to live with you. Money doesn't figure into it."

Dorian raised his brows. "You'll find, Mr. Houston, that money has everything to do with her life now, the merchant business and her future."

Rachel gasped—a strangled, half-swallowed sound—and the corners of her mouth tightened, pale and drawn. Her hand clutched her bulging abdomen. “I...I believe I really must start home.”

The way she said it, more than the words she used, had Caleb moving toward her to catch her by the arm. Stuart did the same, clutching her opposite arm in support. “Rach?”

Her attempt at a reassuring smile faltered. “We should be going.”

“The midwife?” Stuart asked, looking at Caleb over her bowed head.

She shook her head. “It will pass. I need to lie down for a bit. Just overdid things today. That’s all.”

Stuart quirked his head. The look was subtle, but Caleb understood. He was to take Rachel home. Stuart would go for the midwife. It didn’t matter that Rachel thought it unnecessary.

“Thank you for having us, Dorian,” Rachel said. “Give Hannah our love.”

Dorian stood aside to let them pass. Caleb could almost hear the thoughts swirling as the man assessed him one last time. “Mr. Houston. You’d be smart to remember what I said.”

The challenge rang in the damp evening air. Caleb ignored it, but as he stepped away, flanking Rachel’s side, he felt the man’s gaze sear his shoulders. Dorian Lansing was not someone to turn his back on. He’d best remember that.

* * *

The guests were gone, the servants abed, the house quiet. Yet in one room, Hannah’s sitting room, the gas lamp burned steadily. Hannah sat at her writing desk watching Grandfather stride the length of the apartment, his bow tie hanging loose at his collar and his face tight with controlled anger.

“I cannot believe that you left your guests, friends who had traveled considerable distances, to consort with that ne’er-do-well. Have you no pride in yourself? No sense of decency?”

*Caleb is a good friend, too—* Grandfather turned away before she could finish signing. She dropped her hands into her lap. She wasn’t surprised. He had little patience for the way she communicated. Since the day she’d arrived ten years ago, unable to speak, she had been a disappointment. Each doctor she had seen, each professional opinion, each unsuccessful visit had frustrated him further. Yet she had no control over this wretched solitude. If only she could be the same as everyone else, if only she could force the words out, then everything would be righted. Grandfather would have to listen.

He stopped pacing. “Tonight’s inappropriate behavior must be addressed. In view of what has occurred, I feel I must contain you to your room for the time being.”

But she was supposed to see Caleb! Thoughts of his kiss came back full force. What a flood of sensations had come over her with that kiss. Was that what it was supposed to be like? One thing was certain. She wanted to talk to him about it. And she wanted another one.

But of that, Grandfather would not approve. She did, however, need to keep her appointment with the hypnotist. Opening her secretary, she withdrew a sheet of paper and dashed off the words *Appointment. Hypnotist. Ten o’clock.*

Grandfather frowned. “I haven’t forgotten, but I regret now giving you leave to go. That man is not a physician. I find it distasteful to visit his establishment, to be seen in his part of town.”

No! Grandfather mustn’t change his mind! She had to see the hypnotist! Quickly she wrote Edward’s name.

“It’s not a matter of who will accompany you. This person is no more than a carnival charlatan—a waste of time. With further consideration, I cannot allow you to keep your appointment.”

The thought flitted through her mind that he sounded much like Caleb had in his assessment of the hypnotist—a similarity she refused to dwell on at the moment. She had to go, had to try, no matter how slight the chance it would work.

“We’ll talk more tomorrow, after you have time to consider your actions and how they’ve disgraced the family.”

Grandfather was nearly to the door. She tugged at his arm.

He looked down at her, his mouth a firm line of disapproval. She'd seen that expression a number of times over the years since coming to live with him and Grandmother Rose. Nothing she did would change his mind.

Then, as she watched, the resolve on his face shifted.

She stepped back, unsure what this might mean.

"Your mother was the same, you know," he said. "Impulsive. Headstrong. I had hoped you would not take after her in that regard."

Her mother? He never spoke of her. That he said anything emphasized how upset she'd made him. She'd been three years old when Mother drowned—and she had stopped speaking. At least that was what Stuart had told her when she was old enough to understand. As much as she would have liked to remember her mother, she couldn't. Her memories started at the lighthouse with Stuart taking care of her.

Grandfather sighed and patted her arm. "I don't wish to do this, you know—punish you like a young schoolgirl. Not at your age." He moved back to the window seat and sat, hands on his knees, and stared at the floor—a sign he was deep in thought.

The quiet between them filled with impending heaviness. Her breathing grew shallow, until the air in her lungs ceased entering or leaving. She dared not move. This was too important. Everything seemed to hang in the balance of what he would say next.

Finally, he looked up and narrowed his gaze on her. "Therefore, I have a proposition."

* * *

Three days later, Caleb knocked on the door of the estate and asked for Hannah.

"Wait here," the butler instructed. He didn't bother inviting Caleb inside but shut the door in his face.

Caleb blew out a long breath. Guess he'd worn out his welcome in one fell swoop. Could be that the whales would start their trip south before he'd see Hannah now.

He paced along the top of the marble steps. Twice, he thought about leaving, despite the fact he'd thought of little else but Hannah for the past three days. It was that kiss. Whether he liked it or not, kissin' her had changed things between them. He felt—different now. A surprise, considering he'd known her all his life. Concerning, too. And he didn't want to think any further along those lines until he spoke with her.

He viewed the rose garden and lawn twenty feet below the low ornamental railing and resigned himself to waiting as long as it would take. He'd meant to come by sooner—two days ago to be exact—but it couldn't be helped. Babies come on their own timetable without any consideration for the knots they might tangle in everyone else's schedules. His nephew, Lawrence, had squalled his way out and demanded every minute of his time while Stuart and the midwife tended Rachel. She'd had a rough go of it. Even now, thinking on it made his stomach clench.

The door hinge creaked and immediately he turned. "Hannah—" She wasn't alone. Her grandfather stood beside her, creating a chill in the air just by his presence. "Mr. Lansing."

Dorian didn't bother to acknowledge him.

"I couldn't come sooner. Rachel had a boy. She's fine—they're both fine." He stopped talking. Hannah looked as if she might be ill—or exhausted. There was a bruised, fragile look to her eyes, and she had trouble meeting his gaze. His breath left him in a whoosh of disappointment. She wasn't speaking. *That* was what the problem was. She'd had her hopes up so high. Too high.

He started toward her—not quite sure what to do, what to say. He wasn't exactly the "cry on my shoulder" type, but he had to do *something*.

She stiffened, clearly erecting an invisible barrier between them.

He stopped, curling his hands into fists at his sides to keep from reaching for her, whether to hug her or shake her, he wasn't sure. Hadn't he told her it was a long shot? Hadn't he warned her not to get her hopes up? "It didn't work," he said flatly.

She looked down to the slab of white marble at her feet.

He'd bet two shiploads of gold that she'd done this because of Dorian. The man steadfastly refused to learn the sign language. Over and over, Hannah put herself through agony because she wanted to communicate with him, and all the while Dorian didn't even try to understand.

A body couldn't keep warding off disappointment time after time without growing bitter.

Finally, she met his gaze. *I can't see you anymore, Caleb.*

That wasn't what he expected. "What's going on?"

She shook her head, a pained expression on her face.

Suddenly worried, he stepped toward her. "Did something happen at the hypnotist? Did he hurt you?"

She moved away until her back flattened against the great oak door. *No. I'm fine.*

Well, that was a lie. He waited for her to go on.

*Things have changed since I saw you last.*

It had to be that kiss. He darted a look at Dorian, a few feet away. It wasn't hard to figure that the ocean would turn red before that man would give them a sliver of privacy.

She twisted a handkerchief in her hand.

"I'll come back in a few days—when you are feeling better."

*No. Don't come. I can't see you anymore, Caleb. Not ever.*

He tightened his jaw. "You're not makin' sense. If it's the kiss that's botherin' you..."

*You shouldn't have done that.*

A slow burn started in his gut. "As I recall, you were the one doing most of the asking."

*No. I'm sure you are wrong.*

So that was how things stood. She couldn't own up to her actions. She was embarrassed about being forward, and instead of admitting it or dealing with it, she was trying to put the blame firmly in his lap.

He glanced at Dorian, wishing the man would disappear so he could talk easier with Hannah. Now, that *was* a fantasy. He swallowed. "This is how you want it?"

She nodded, not quite meeting his gaze.

He took one last considering look. They both knew she was twisting the facts, but she'd made her choice. He should have been ready for it. People he cared about had been leavin' him his entire life—first his mother, then his father, and then Rachel. This was just one more time.

"Have it your way, then." Slow and deliberate, he turned and strode down the front steps. Behind him, he heard the door quietly click shut.

## Chapter One

Five years later

"I'm sorry, miss. I'll need payment up front for that."

Hannah stared at the thin, pimply-faced boy behind the counter for a full ten seconds. He shifted from one foot to the other, looking at any corner of the Cigar Emporium rather than back at her. He was new and hopelessly awkward in his new position. "You must be mistaken," she said, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

"No mistake. I'll lose my job if I extend more credit."

She stiffened, at the same time glancing over her shoulder to make sure no customers had heard. Across the room two men stood before a display of chewing tobacco and debated the merits of the three different brands. They appeared unaware of her situation, and she'd like to keep it that way. Only moments before she'd been thinking how she enjoyed the fragrance of the cherrywood tobacco that permeated the small shop as a respite from the brine-laden air outside. Now she could barely think through her embarrassment.

Forcing a calm demeanor, she asked, "Is this a new policy? If so, I'm sure it doesn't pertain to my family." She pushed the hand-carved ivory pipe across the counter. "Please. I'd like it wrapped."

Still the boy hesitated, wiping his hands on his white apron.

"You *do* know who I am?"

He gulped audibly and fidgeted with the corners of the massive account book in front of him. "Yes, Miss Lansing. Your family has done business here for years."

"And half of the items in this shop arrived here by way of my grandfather's ships." She softened her voice. "This pipe is for his birthday. You wouldn't deny him his present, would you?"

"I...I... Your total has reached the limit."

"My grandfather pays the bill monthly. There must be a mistake." The ledger would prove her point. She reached for it to see for herself when a beefy hand splayed over the page, blocking her view.

"I'll take it from here, Toby. Go see to the other customers." The shop's owner, Mr. O'Connell, a heavyset Irish man with a handlebar mustache, turned the book back toward himself as the new clerk scurried away with a look of relief on his young face. "Can't have my other customers' tabs becoming general knowledge, now, can I? I'm sure, given your family's business, you understand, Miss Lansing."

What he implied stung. She wasn't one to manipulate such knowledge to her own advantage, though she knew those who would. She was only interested in the accounting of the Lansing total.

The two customers had stopped their discussion and listened intently now. Good gracious, but this was getting uncomfortable! Her cheeks heated. She never carried much money on her. According to Grandfather, it was unladylike. There had never been any problems in the past with putting items on a tab. Her gloved hands shook slightly as she loosened the blue ribbon cinching her purse and counted out enough money to cover a deposit on the pipe. "In the first place, I hadn't planned to have my grandfather pay for his own present, but it quite takes me by surprise that you won't extend credit to me. I shall return tomorrow with the rest. Good day, Mr. O'Connell." She made a stiff-backed, dignified exit—a Lansing exit. Grandfather would be proud—she hoped.

Once outside she stopped and took a deep breath, allowing a moment for her cheeks to cool and to put up her umbrella against the light rain. Down the wet street, her carriage waited. She had planned to stop at the milliners to check the designs for a new spring bonnet, but now she was uncertain. Would she run into the same predicament there as she had at the tobacco shop? Perhaps it would be best to first speak with Grandfather.

"Please, take me home," she instructed her driver when she arrived at the carriage. He jumped down from his seat and assisted her inside the conveyance. Only then, obscured by the dark velvet curtains from the curious stares of the few people who had ventured out in this weather, did she sink back into the plush cushions and consider what had just occurred.

It had to be a mistake. Grandfather was always punctual in paying his bills to the point of being regimental. For as long as she could remember, there had been plenty of funds from the shipping enterprise to cover incidentals whenever she'd wanted anything. Perhaps, with Stuart away, Grandfather needed a hand with the business. It couldn't be easy keeping track of everything with all that he had to do.

The carriage jolted into motion, but she paid no attention to the tree-lined city parading by. Absently she tugged on the pendant at her breast. Ever since Grandmother Rose had passed on, Grandfather had been happy to have her run the household. Although she was now proficient at throwing dinner parties and carrying on the conversation with business associates, Grandfather had maintained that the shipping business was a man's task. In the past five years he'd expanded it—adding two more ships. Had it become too much for him to oversee without an assistant?

The trip from the shopping district to the Lansing estate on Nob Hill took a matter of minutes. Once there, she hurried up the wide marble stairs and through the massive front door. The faint scent of lemon polish reached her as she deposited her cloak and umbrella into Edward's waiting arms. "Grandfather?"

"In his study, miss."

She headed down the hallway, untying her bonnet as she walked. The sound of her footsteps on the tiles echoed off the high ceiling and walls.

"Grandfather? We need to talk—"

His room was empty.

She sighed in frustration, spun around to search farther down the hall and then stopped herself. Something wasn't right. She turned back to the study. Papers and notes were scattered askew over Grandfather's massive desk. Totally unlike him. Neatness and order ruled Dorian Lansing and everything around him. He controlled his estate in the same manner he had once, as a young man of twenty-two, controlled his first ship—or so she'd been informed.

She hesitated in the doorway. Slowly, eerily, a moan issued, the sound coming from behind the dark Victorian desk. Her breath hitched in her chest. She ran to the far side of the furniture and found him lying prostrate on the parquet floor, his face pasty white.

"Grandfather!" she cried out, kneeling beside him. In the next breath she screamed, "Edward! Come, quick!"

* * *

A significant stroke, the doctor said. Upon hearing it, Hannah's heart plummeted to the pit of her stomach. Grandfather would need constant care and rest if he was to recover. After seeing the family's personal physician out, Hannah called the house staff together in the kitchen.

"Where is Tan Ling?" she asked. "She should hear this, too."

"Mr. Lansing discharged her last week, miss," Edward explained.

"Oh," she said, confused. Grandfather had neglected to tell her. Then she grew irritated. She should have been informed. After all, *she* was in charge of the household staff. It was her job to do the hiring and discharging. Tan Ling had been with the Lansings for the past three years. What of the letters of recommendation the young woman would need to find new employment? Had Grandfather considered them? Besides, more than any paperwork, she would have liked to have said goodbye.

She looked over the expectant loyal faces of those before her. "Mr. Lansing has taken ill and will require special care. A nurse will be attending him over the next few weeks while he recovers." *If he recovers,* she thought to herself, and then quickly pushed the traitorous idea from her mind. He had to get well. He just had to. "Please make her welcome when she arrives."

A burning sensation threatened behind her eyes. "This illness will be especially hard on Grandfather. He's...he's weak on his right side and unable to get out of bed. I'm sure you know how independent he has been."

Looks passed between the staff.

Hannah understood their trepidation. Dorian wasn't known for his patience or temperate disposition when he was in good health. What would the household be like now?

"That is all. Except, Edward? A word, please."

Hannah waited for the others to take their leave, and then turned to the butler. He had been a sailor on one of Grandfather's ships before coming to work at the estate. He'd been with Grandfather the longest and was a man she knew would answer honestly.

"What happened with Tan Ling? Was there an infraction of the rules?"

"No, miss."

"What, then?"

He paused, a discomfited look passing over his usually austere face.

"I have known you many years, Edward. Please, speak freely. I know you are cognizant of a great many things within the household and keep them to yourself."

"Very well, then." His brow furrowed as he chose his words. "I believe Mr. Lansing was concerned with conserving costs. The loss of his ships—"

Ships lost? She schooled her face to remain impassive. "Obviously it is worse than he confided to me."

Edward exhaled, believing her ruse that she was in her grandfather's confidence. "I believe so."

* * *

For the next three days, Hannah studied the Lansing Enterprises ledgers until numbers and cargo listings were leaking from her ears. Foul weather had claimed two of their largest cargos, not to mention the two ships, sinking both to the bottom of the sea. They had but one ship left—an older one that was in dry dock for repairs.

No matter how hard she stared at the figures, she couldn't come up with additional income. The majority of the balances had a minus before them. She longed to discuss it with Grandfather, but the doctor had said that any added stress might cause him to suffer a relapse. He was to be kept as calm as possible. She mustn't burden him with business.

Shuffling through the layers of letters and bills, she categorized them from most pressing to least—the most being a legal document from San Diego regarding the shipment of furniture and supplies to the Hotel Del Coronado, an establishment that was to rival the Palace in San Francisco. Apparently upon hearing of the downed ships, the owners had sent an immediate claim demanding compensation. She frowned. How considerate of them when Grandfather's health hung in the balance. Some things were more important than their gold-rimmed tea sets. She dropped the offending papers on the desk and then checked the time on the cabinet clock. Nearly noon. Perhaps his tray was ready. She rose to her feet and found Nina in the kitchen assembling Grandfather's lunch. "I'll take it to him," she said, picking up the tray laden with warm, mashed apples and cinnamon, a thin slice of cheese and clam chowder soup. "I'd welcome a respite."

"You'll be sick yourself if you don't rest a bit, Miss Lansing. You must take care. You can't solve everything in a day as much as you try."

"Thank you, Nina." She scooted out of the room. Nina would talk forever if given the chance. Her conversation was at times comforting, but right now Hannah needed solutions, not chatter.

She climbed the stairs and entered Grandfather's room. Upon seeing him sitting up in bed, surrounded by plumped pillows, she stopped short, nearly dropping the tray. "You're sitting up!"

A gruff "Harrumph" punctuated the expectant pause following her words. He had no patience for people who stated the obvious. Quickly she handed the tray off to the nurse and hurried to his bedside.

"Are you well enough to do this?" she asked, worried that the strain might be more than he could handle.

He held his left hand out to her, and she moved to take it, letting him draw her to his side. She sat on the edge of the mattress and expelled a shaky breath. "You...you are stronger today?"

At his nod, she motioned to the nurse, who rose and stepped from the room. Hannah had made it a point to help Grandfather daily with his meals. So far, she'd managed to keep from pouring out her worries, but today would be doubly hard. The company lawyer had dropped by with a large packet, and the post had just arrived full of overdue bills.

She spread the linen napkin over his chest and scooped up a spoonful of soup. When she raised it to his lips, his gaze met hers.

"Whas wong?" he said, his words slurred.

Her smile was forced. "Hungry myself, that's all." She scooped up another spoonful, but he clamped his mouth shut.

"Whas wong?" he repeated and pointed to the lap of her skirt where she'd worried the fabric into a wrinkled mess.

She sighed. She'd never been able to get away with anything with him. He could read people—her especially. The talent had made him a keen businessman—that and his innate stubbornness. People didn't call him Old Ironhead for no reason. He nearly always got his way. Perhaps it would be smarter to let him help her. Frustration at being kept in the dark would surely be worse than concocting a plan of action.

"I'll tell you if you promise to eat."

In answer, he opened his mouth, ready for another spoonful.

While he ate, she told him how she'd discovered the bills piling up. "Why didn't you tell me about the ships? Perhaps I could have helped."

Grandfather shook his head.

"But it affects me. It affects you and this entire household. You need to trust me with this."

Rather than acknowledge her, he indicated he was ready for another spoonful of soup.

Pressing her lips together, she held back the retort that threatened and brought the soup to his mouth. "It appears Thomas's company reimbursed for the first ship and cargo, but I couldn't find any insurance paperwork on the second ship. Does he have that at his office?"

Grandfather shook his head slightly and glanced out the window. Ignoring her? Or considering what to answer? She wasn't sure.

"Should I send a telegram to Stuart?"

It seemed the obvious solution to her. Stuart managed his own shipping business now, but having trained under Dorian, he still partnered with him on an occasional run. Grandfather furrowed his brows.

"What, then?"

He grabbed the paper and pen from his bedside table. Moving them to his lap, he proceeded to write, left-handed and awkward.

"See? You should have learned to sign. It would help now," she said, teasing lightly while he scribbled. He grunted, apparently not flattered by her suggestion.

"Here. Let me take a look." She picked up the note and deciphered his squiggly handwriting. "Accept Thomas's offer?" Her gaze flew to his. "Marriage? You think the answer is for me to marry?"

He frowned at her with only half of his face, took the paper and wrote again. *He'll take care of you.*

She couldn't believe what he was suggesting. For years he'd said Lansing Enterprises was her legacy, and now he was asking her to turn her back on it? She rose to her feet and paced in the small confines of the room. "But...what about the business? Families we employ depend upon Lansing Enterprises for their livelihood. What about them? I cannot consider only myself."

With the pen, he carved the words in the paper, tearing it in the process. *You need a secure future.*

"But I thought... I believed..." She searched for the right words. He'd led her to believe she would inherit the company. "This is just a temporary setback. We'll build the business back up. We'll press on. That's what you always say."

He pressed his lips together on the one side of his mouth, and wrote, "Thomas knows what to do."

That was not how she'd envisioned her life. She'd thought she would assume control of the company. She'd made plans.... "Grandfather," she began, sinking back onto the bed. She closed her eyes, took a big breath and then opened them again. "This illness has scared you. You're acting like...like you won't get better. But you will. Look how much improved you are today compared to yesterday." The alternative, she could not bring herself to contemplate. He'd always been there for her, even when they disagreed. She couldn't lose him.

His glare only reinforced her words. A week ago he'd encouraged her to consider Thomas Rowlings's proposal. Grandfather's business associate was a pleasant sort and rather dashing for a man twenty years her senior. His insurance company was prosperous. She'd want for nothing.

It *was* a viable solution. She didn't expect—didn't *want*—a marriage based on love. That emotion led only to disappointment and heartbreak. Yet why did she suddenly feel as though she couldn't breathe? "I know you are thinking only of my good..."

Grandfather's gaze never wavered from her face.

She had to get away, had to take time to consider things. She rubbed her forehead. “You truly believe this is the best course?”

He nodded once, slow and firm.

She dragged in a shaky breath. “I see. Thomas is due back from Sacramento in one week. I’ll...I’ll give him an answer then.”

* * *

In the study, Hannah sat numbly at the large desk, staring at the piles of papers without really seeing them. Marriage... It seemed so final...like an iron door closing. And although she respected Thomas, he hadn’t shown any interest when she’d mentioned her desire to start a school for children who couldn’t speak. He’d simply smiled, rather patronizingly she thought, and changed the subject.

She gathered the stack of ledgers and deposited them in the third drawer. As she started to lock the desk, she noticed a packet from the lawyer and the pile of bills still sitting out. Although she trusted Edward, it wouldn’t do to have the other servants learning the extent of their circumstances and gossiping to others in town. She stuffed the papers into the drawer, yet one envelope refused to fit tidily in. She pulled it out and then recognized Stuart’s careful penmanship.

He’d taken his ship south several weeks ago and should be returning any day now. He seldom made long trips anymore, always anxious to return to Rachel and his children. Years ago he’d had a falling-out with Grandfather. Other than an occasional business dealing, they no longer communicated. So this wouldn’t be a personal letter. As acting owner, she had the right to read it. She drew the silver letter opener across the seal.

Dorian,

I trust this letter finds you and Hannah well.

While finishing business here in Los Angeles, I’ve discovered information that may prove useful to you.

Wares from your last shipment have appeared on the open market here—without evidence of ill use by the sea. My records show that the *Margarita* stopped in San Diego and disappeared shortly thereafter. I shall see if I can learn anything more before starting home.

Stuart

She stared in shock at the note. This changed things. If the merchandise was turning up in Los Angeles—and in salable condition—that meant the ship hadn’t gone down due to rough seas. It meant something entirely different altogether. Could it be the ship was somewhere else—possibly across the border in Mexican waters?

Visions of the lighthouse where she had once lived filled her mind. Even now she could hear the cry of the gulls as they glided effortlessly on the updraft created by the sandstone cliffs.

Shaking off the memories, she read the letter again. Nervous energy built inside, a fine tension that ricocheted through her. If she could find out what had truly happened, perhaps it would be possible to fix things enough to save the business. That would solve everything! She wouldn’t have to marry Thomas—at least not on his terms.

This was not something she could hand off to someone else. She needed to keep control. Only then would Grandfather believe she could assume leadership of the business. She must prove herself. She shoved the letter into the drawer and locked the desk.

It was simple. She must go to San Diego. There would be some maneuvering involved—particularly regarding Grandfather. He couldn’t know until she was safely away. She’d have to leave a note for him. The staff—Nina—could give it to him after she was well on her way. Time enough later to explain things.

She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear and realized her hand was trembling. Excitement coursed through her even as she tried to tamp it down. This was impulsive and perhaps

a bit foolhardy, but if she considered every angle and prepared for difficulties, then surely she would get her answers. To sit and wait for Stuart to return or Grandfather to get well wouldn't accomplish anything!

She'd need an escort. Edward could accompany her. *Oh, think again, Hannah! Edward will go straight to Grandfather.* The butler's loyalty was commendable, but in this situation could only hinder her.

*What about Caleb...?*

The thought stopped her midflight, and she plopped back onto the chair.

Her gaze darted to the drawer that held the small address book. No. She couldn't. She'd given Grandfather her word.

Besides, with Caleb's penchant for adventure he could easily be in Timbuktu by now. Yet the thought refused to leave her. Caleb knew about the currents and tides—things she didn't. After all this time, would he still be in San Diego? And more than that—would he even see her after the way she'd treated him?

She looked back at the desk drawer. At one time, back when they'd been friends, she'd written his name in that book. She fisted her hand. She shouldn't. She really shouldn't. She'd been so good. Tried so hard to please Grandfather. He would never approve of this.

Caleb even knew the shipping lanes and the crosscurrents.

Barely breathing, she reached out and pulled on the drawer. She withdrew the book...flipped through the pages.

*Harrison...Heinrich...Houston...*

Exhaling, she stared at her own childish penciled handwriting. Grandfather hadn't updated the entry. In fact, he'd crossed out the name with bold slashes of indigo ink, nearly obliterating its existence. The action spoke of suppressed anger...possibly fear, but he had nothing to worry about. A promise was a promise—and for a Lansing, it held even more weight.

And because of it, Caleb was no longer a part of her life. She wasn't proud of herself for what she'd done that day; in fact for many years she'd done her best to put it from her mind. It hurt to remember. But she'd kept her promise to Grandfather. That was the important thing. Her friendship with Caleb had been the price. Caleb would never forgive her, which was as it should be. She didn't expect his forgiveness—didn't deserve his forgiveness.

Her throat constricted. She couldn't have it all. A choice had to be made and she'd made it. Selfish? Yes. Purely and wholly selfish—wanting to speak, wanting Grandfather's approval, wanting...Caleb. She smoothed her fingers over her lips. To this day she remembered how his kiss had felt, how it had made her feel.

Suddenly angry with herself for dredging up a past she'd knowingly formed, a past that couldn't be changed, she slammed shut the drawer. It had been a crush. Puppy love, perhaps. And it had died years ago.

She would still keep her promise to Grandfather. If Caleb was in San Diego, she'd hire him for his expertise—and that alone. She wasn't going there to see him. That part of her life was over. What mattered was the business. Only the business.

## Chapter Two

Southern California, 1888

Keeping a steady hand on the reins, Caleb maneuvered his gelding past a sprawling pear cactus and then up the muddy slope from the river delta. With every step forward, the gelding slid halfway back through the soft muck. For the past three days, rain had drenched the earth, swelling the creeks and splattering the brown landscape with patches of green. The sparse vegetation needed it—for that matter, the people needed it to survive through the dry months.

He hiked the burlap sack higher on his saddle, tying it securely to the horn. Thoughts of the three coastal quail he'd shot made his mouth water. Bit by bit, with each mile that passed, the peaceful

feeling he'd absorbed while hunting disappeared. Hardly came as a surprise. Solitude fit him. Always had.

He glanced at the horizon. The sun hovered just above the ocean. Wyatt would be looking for him. Putting the mudflats to his back and leaning forward in his saddle, he urged his mount into a rocking gait toward town.

When he entered the saloon on Fourth Street, his boss looked up from analyzing the ledger in front of him. His gaze landed on the heavy burlap sack in Caleb's hand and a slow smile grew beneath his dark handlebar mustache.

Caleb tossed the bag to Yin Singh, Wyatt's personal cook. "There's three. I'll take the biggest." The cook grinned and bowed, and then disappeared under the stairs and into the kitchen.

A cursory survey of the room found two customers at the bar and another three at the gaming tables. The evening was just getting started, and so far things were quiet. It wasn't until later that the whiskey and tanglefoot loosed inhibitions and tongues—not to mention fists. Jim Avery, the barkeep, stood behind the counter, and with his meaty hand methodically polished the waxed countertop with a cloth, making it glow a deep honey color while he watched the goings-on. Jim nodded, acknowledging Caleb's entrance.

"Stop by your land?" Wyatt asked from his seat at the faro table.

"I'm still ponderin' about buyin' that particular stretch."

"I'm surprised someone hasn't beat you to it with the length of time it's taking you to decide."

Caleb shrugged. The stretch of river valley was choice grazing land—hunting, too. He had the money—had saved it up over the past five years, but each time he headed for the land office, something made him stop. He wasn't the "settling" type. And owning land sounded more like an anchor than an investment.

"Ya sliced it, mister!"

A young man—boy more likely, judging by his spare frame—hollered at two men playing billiards. When they ignored him, he bellied up at the end of the bar, tried to hook his boot heel on the rung of his stool and missed. Another attempt and he sat square, grabbed his Stetson off his head and slammed it on the counter. His unruly red hair, matted with sweat and grime from the confining band of his hat, sprang up in shock at the sudden freedom. He beat his fist on the bar, motioning to Jim for a beer.

"Haven't seen him here before," Caleb mentioned to Wyatt. The kid couldn't be a day older than seventeen.

"First time would be my guess. I believe that young man is on his way to a whale of a headache come morning."

"One's all it takes with someone his size," Caleb said, pushing away from the bar and sauntering toward their object of discussion. The boy stopped guzzling and faced him with the reckless bravado and glassy gaze liquor could bestow.

"Had enough?" Caleb said.

"None of your business how much I drink. My money's as good as the next man's." The boy took a defiant swig of beer and turned back to the bar.

"I can see that. Hard earned, too, I'll bet." The kid was nothing but stringy, corded muscle held together with sweat. "Which ranch you ride for?"

He didn't answer. Probably didn't even hear Caleb, the way he was caught up in his attitude—nursing some wrong with a heavy dose of anger. Suddenly he blurted, "Took six months! Six months of slavin' for her daddy only to find out she planned to go back East to finishing school and catch herself a dandy."

Acid roiled in Caleb's gut. He wasn't going down this trail. "What's your name?"

"What's it to you?" A belch rumbled out, and with it some of the boy's bravado evaporated. "I might as well be a flea on a rock. Why'd she even treat me nice in the first place? Got me thinkin' 'bout her all the time, thinkin' about us. It was all a lie. Big sinkhole of a lie."

"Best chalk it up to a lesson learned the hard way."

"Sure bet! I'll be a whole lot smarter from now on. Won't no pretty skirt fool me again. I'll take me another beer, barkeep!"

Jim's gaze slid to Caleb. "Older and wiser," Caleb murmured with a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. "Startin' now.

"'Fraid you've had enough to drink, Rusty. Time to head home while you can still sit your horse."

"You can't tell me what to do."

Caleb wasn't fooled by the belligerent tone. The kid was heartsick and slidin' toward misery. Caleb preferred anger. "Matter of fact, I can."

"Just try it, mu—ister."

On the last word, Caleb grabbed the boy's upper arm so tight he figured he'd kill off some fingers—whose he wasn't sure—but he wasn't going to let the boy stay and drink himself to the floor. Better for him to throw a punch or two and get some of his feelin's out.

Rusty flung a weak hook with his free arm. His fist stopped just short of Caleb's jaw, caught in another firm grip. "Leave it!" Caleb ordered, and twisted the boy's arms behind him while at the same time forcing him toward the door.

They stepped outside, and Caleb could have sent him sprawling into the street easily enough. Would have without a second thought if the boy had been a man—a man should know better—but the kid had had enough damage to his dignity in one day.

"Go home. Count yourself lucky you found out early on she was a gold digger." He let go of the boy's arm.

"But she weren't. It was her daddy."

"One and the same."

Rusty met Caleb's gaze. The young whelp still wanted to challenge him! Unbelievable. And stupid. Caleb raised one brow. When the boy swung, Caleb blocked with his forearm and jabbed his other fist into the kid's gut, striking quick, like a snake. The blow knocked the boy down two steps, where he lost his balance and sprawled face-first in the dirt.

Caleb followed and stood over him. When he didn't try to stand, Caleb reached down and yanked him to his feet. "I'm doing you a favor, kid. Take it. Make a move other than heading out of town and you'll be sorry." He picked up the boy's hat, slapped it against his thigh once to knock off the dust and handed it over.

The boy curled the brim before stuffing it on his head and meeting Caleb's gaze. "Name's Josh. Not Rusty."

It took a slice of humble pie for a boy this age to admit defeat...and a scrap of respect for authority. Caleb took the offered olive branch. "Caleb Houston. See you around, Josh."

The boy nodded, found the reins to his horse and climbed on. Caleb figured he'd get about halfway to his ranch before spewing out the liquor that sloshed around in his belly.

"Well," Wyatt said, standing up when Caleb reentered the saloon. "You handled that with more perception than usual."

Caleb ignored him.

Wyatt slipped on his wool coat and bowler hat. Didn't look much like the lawman who had cleaned out Tombstone, but anyone who crossed him knew those looks were deceiving. "Keep things quiet tonight. I need to check on my other properties."

Caleb raised his chin in acknowledgment. Earp ran into more trouble at his other gambling halls. Caleb should know—he'd worked at both, the worst on the edge of the Stingaree district. A

rougher brand of men with fewer rules and even less restraint frequented that establishment. After surviving a year, Wyatt had offered him the job here. Caleb looked over the waxed and polished wood of the bar and tables. Here in the center of the business district the glassware was finer, the clientele classier and even the brawls more refined—if that was possible. Oh, they happened—the arguments, the fights—but they started out subtle, creeping up on a body with only a look or a word before suddenly turning deadly.

Once Wyatt left, Caleb slid onto the closest bar stool. “Make it black, strong and hot,” he called loud enough for Yin Singh to hear in the kitchen. Lowering his voice, he turned to Jim. “Newspaper come yet?”

Jim reached under the counter, pulled out the most recent weekly and dropped it beside the steaming mug of coffee Yin delivered.

Caleb grunted his thanks and started to skim the front page.

“I signed for this, too. Hope it ain’t bad news.” Jim slipped a telegram on the bar.

Caleb stared at the paper. The only person who’d send him a telegram was his sister. His gut took a dive. He grabbed up the official-looking transcript. If anything had happened...

*Hannah arriving in two days. Please look out for her—for me—for Stuart. Love, Rachel.*

Hannah? His thoughts raced back to the last time he’d seen her—a time he’d buried deep and refused to think about.

“You look like you got the wind knocked out of your sails,” Jim said. “Someone die?”

“More like resurrected,” Caleb mumbled. It had been years since he’d seen Hannah Lansing. Five years and five hundred miles. He’d figured San Francisco was far enough away that he’d never again see her in this lifetime. That had been his plan. What was she doing coming here?

“Ghost from the past?” Jim eyed the telegram with growing interest.

Caleb crushed the paper in his fist, left his coffee untouched and slid off the stool. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t aim to find out.”

## Chapter Three

Hannah stood just inside the lobby of the Horton Grand Hotel and breathed a sigh of relief. Her heartbeat slowed to a steadier rhythm as she noted the large display of flowers on the central table. The Horton Grand Hotel appeared to be the essence of respectability—an oasis in a town of gambling halls and smaller businesses. The walk from the train station had caused her no small amount of anxiety. She wasn’t used to being so totally on her own, especially in a strange town. Halfway here, she’d seen three men on horseback racing through the main street of town, whooping and yelling and kicking up a minor dust storm. She’d known when starting her journey that this was no San Francisco, but it was a wilder town than she’d expected.

Not for the first time did she consider that her flight here may have been a bit impetuous. She hadn’t thought the trip completely through, and now those things she’d taken for granted in San Francisco—things like getting from Nob Hill to the docks, a trip usually made in a carriage with a servant accompanying her—seemed difficult and worry laden.

She had picked the Horton specifically for its location. The Florentine would have been a safer choice for a single woman, but Rachel had said Caleb worked at the saloon across the street. That would make him more accessible should she need him. She strode through the lobby past a middle-aged couple sitting in overstuffed leather chairs and placed her reticule on the ornate oak-and-brass front desk.

A short, round, gray-haired man looked up from studying the ledger. “May I help you?”

“I’d like a room.”

He surveyed the lobby behind her. “You’re alone? I’m afraid the Horton does not—”

“I’m Miss Hannah Lansing,” she said quickly before he could deny her accommodation. “And here on official business for my company.”

The clerk straightened, a small Napoleon at attention. “Of Lansing Enterprises?”

She nodded. “I’ll be attending the grand opening of the Hotel Del Coronado.”

He looked confused. “But you are staying here? Rather than there?”

It did sound suspicious. Those who’d helped finance the hotel had seaside rooms for the celebration. Grandfather hadn’t wanted to invest. It wasn’t any of this clerk’s business, but she felt she had to give him a plausible explanation. “I will be meeting with a few friends and business associates while here. It seemed simpler to stay in town rather than out on the peninsula.”

“Then, on behalf of the Horton, I am delighted you chose our hotel for your respite.” His hand hovered over the ledger before printing her name.

She relaxed somewhat. The first hurdle was behind her. She’d made it safely this far.

He swiveled the ledger so that she could sign her name, and then snapped his fingers. A tall, thin man appeared from the back room. “Jackson can show you to your room.”

“Thank you. My trunk is at the train station.”

“We’ll see to it, miss.”

She followed the porter up the staircase. On the second floor, Jackson opened the first door in the hallway. A bouquet of flowers adorned the table in the center of the room, filling the space with the scent of orchids. Along the wall, an oak buffet table held matching brass candlesticks on a delicate lace table runner. Walking to the adjoining room, she found a four-poster bed and canopy. An ornate, full-size pedestal mirror occupied one corner near the foot of the bed, and a stand with a gold-rimmed china bowl and pitcher stood in the opposite corner.

Jackson lit the gas wall sconces in both rooms before closing the drapes at the two tall windows. “I’ll be about retrieving your trunk now. Dinner is at six.”

She *was* hungry, but she was tired, and the thought of eating by herself in the dining room with others speculating about her aloneness was more than she wanted to endure tonight. “Thank you, but might I have my meal brought up?”

Jackson nodded and turned toward the hallway. She closed the door behind him, released a pent-up breath, whipped off her hat and tossed it onto the settee, saying a prayer of thanks that she’d not been denied a room. That would have been a setback she hadn’t considered. Thank goodness the Lansing name was known here.

She pushed a loose strand of hair back into place, securing it under her twisted bun, and then walked to the window and peeked through the drapes to look out over the town. With the descending twilight, colors were fading to shades of gray. Three tall brick buildings towered over the others—their signs indicating a bank, Marsten’s store and a gambling hall. The first two appeared closed for the day, but directly across from her hotel room, the saloon was lit up like a sparkler on the Fourth of July. Golden light and occasional raucous laughter spilled out on the boardwalk along with a light tune someone played on a piano.

Grasping the pendant of silver and abalone at her neck, Hannah searched through the fancy etched windows of the saloon. Somewhere inside Caleb went about his duties. Rachel had been curious as to why she was asking after him, and Hannah had made up a story about mailing the necklace back to him. Apparently Rachel had believed her ruse for she hadn’t alerted Grandfather, and no one had tried to stop her departure.

Would Caleb even want to see her after all this time? She swallowed hard. Most likely he wouldn’t. It didn’t matter. It couldn’t. She’d made a promise to Grandfather. Although she might be skirting it a bit in contacting Caleb, she had to have an escort, and once she learned more of what had happened to the ships, Grandfather would understand—and hopefully forgive her. After all, he’d always put the business first in his life. Surely if she did the same, he could only be proud. She intended to keep her promise—a Lansing *always* kept a promise.

The memory of Grandmother Rose’s thin, reedy voice trilling in her ear came to her. *It is paramount that in all things your conduct be above reproach. You are a Lansing. Your reputation must be above speculation or gossip of any kind. Believe me, any correction or chastisement that I give will*

*be minimal compared to what society will bestow.* At the time, Hannah had chafed against the rules of etiquette. They'd felt like a binding, an iron corset. But now, hearing the raucous music from across the street, they felt safe and secure—something that framed her existence.

She dropped the drapes into place and turned toward the small writing desk against the wall. First thing to do would be to send a missive to the port authority agent requesting an audience as soon as possible. Then a second note to the manager of the Hotel Del Coronado informing him she'd be present at the grand opening and would like a word with him. When Jackson brought her supper, she would give them to him for delivery by courier in the morning.

After eating a succulent supper of lamb, she sat down again at the secretary. It was time she wrote a short letter to Grandfather. If she posted it tomorrow, it would take a week to arrive at the house in San Francisco. By that time, perhaps she would be heading home. He'd be angry when he learned of her quest—angry when he found out she'd left San Francisco—but if the end result were the answers concerning the ships' disappearances...

Putting the finished note aside, she stared at the new blank page in front of her. Time for one more note—and the most difficult. She swallowed hard and then picked up the fountain pen once more.

Mr. Houston. I'm in town for a short visit. Please feel free to call this afternoon. Horton Hotel.
Hannah Lansing

Caleb fingered the impression in the wax seal—a curled, elaborate HKL. Leave it to a Lansing to use fancy paper. He read the note again. The Horton. Not the best, most expensive place in town but pretty near to it. And way too close for comfort. He glanced through the open doors of the saloon and across the wide, dusty street to the Horton's entrance. Acid churned in his gut. Miss High and Mighty. What was she up to? They weren't exactly on speaking terms any longer.

"You say this arrived at noon?"

"Seems I mentioned that." Jim narrowed his gaze at Caleb's tone. "It ain't my job to come lookin' for you. You're good at makin' yourself scarce. One minute you're hunting quail up to Tecolote Canyon and the next thing I know you're hauling in a string of fish."

Caleb ignored him. Right now, fishing off the point sounded like a fine place to be until Miss Lansing left town. Maybe he'd camp there.

"Ain't you goin' to go see her?"

In answer, Caleb walked around the counter and deliberately poured himself a shot of whiskey.

"You're not foolin' me."

Caleb scowled. "Leave it, Jim. It'll take a lot more than her crooking her finger for me to drop everything and look her up."

Jim shook his head as if Caleb were dense. "I'll say it plain, then. You're not one to drink this time of day, and suddenly a note from this woman has got you doing it."

Caleb looked at the amber liquid, swirled it around in the glass before shoving it toward Jim. "Save it, then." Whatever Hannah wanted—if anything—she would have to ask a whole lot nicer for him to mosey over to her hotel. Pushing thoughts of her from his mind, he walked over to the Bradison brothers' weekly poker game.

## Chapter Four

Caleb stared at the fancy stationery as if it was a stray cat with a piece of dynamite strapped to its back. The envelope, all gussied up with a black satin ribbon, had arrived from the Horton just after supper. He'd been eyeing it for the better part of two hours. He should set fire to the thing, but another part of him wanted to march across the street and tear up the note in front of Her Highness, dropping the pieces at her royal feet. It wouldn't appease what happened between them, or Dorian's slight of Rachel and Stuart, but it would sure make him feel a sight better.

Instead of taking either trail, he slid his pocketknife along the paper, breaking the ties, and opened the envelope.

Mr. Caleb Houston,

I find I am in need of your assistance. Please meet me at the Horton Hotel at your earliest convenience. The sooner the better.

Your friend,

Hannah Lansing

Well. That was a sight more cordial than the previous note. So she needed his help—not that he planned to give it.

His sister's request nagged him. He didn't want to "look out for Hannah." He didn't want to get that close. It would muddy things, and right now he was doing just fine with the line he'd drawn between them. But Rachel asked so little of him now that he was grown.

Maybe a quick check wouldn't hurt—just to appease his conscience. He'd only make sure she was safe and sound, send the information to Rachel and then go about his business.

He had to admit, he was kind of curious as to what Hannah looked like now. How had the years changed her since she was sixteen? She'd been pretty back then—just starting to fill out. He couldn't imagine her any more so. Too bad her beauty was only skin deep.

He slipped off the bar stool.

"Where you agoin'?" Jim asked, straightening.

"Got a score to settle, and for the first time I'm holdin' a full house." He stuffed his arms into his leather jacket and straightened his collar. "Won't take long. I'll be back for some of Yin's stew before Clyde plays another round on the piano."

He strode to the road, his gaze locked on the front door of the Horton. Two doors down a dog snarled from the shadows and then barked incessantly at a passing rider. Caleb shut out the sound, intent on getting his first look at the woman who had been the hull stuck between his molars for the past five years.

He entered the hotel, absently noting the rich interior, and then without a pause in his steps, zeroed in on the front desk.

The man behind the counter took one look at Caleb as he approached and raised his nose in the air—an interesting position since the clerk was the shorter of the two.

"I'm lookin' for Han—Miss Hannah Lansing," Caleb said. Guess they weren't on a first-name basis anymore. Not after the way things had set between them. The clerk muttered something about waiting while he notified her.

Caleb sauntered over to the fireplace. A woman like her would take her time coming to see him, no matter that the meeting had been at her request. She'd make some kind of a grand entrance.

The heat from the cracklin' logs took the chill from the damp night air. He rubbed his hands together, blew on them a time or two and then turned around to give the same consideration to his backside. A flash of light glanced off his eye—light reflected off a woman's dangling gold earrings.

She spoke with the desk clerk. There hadn't been enough time to fetch Hannah, so it couldn't be her. This woman wore a quality deep red traveling suit that hugged her waist. A fancy matching hat, swathed with black netting and three large black feathers, hid her features, although anyone with eyes could tell she'd be a looker just by the confident way she held herself. She tapped the toe of her polished boot, obviously not pleased with what she was hearing. Rich people always thought the world spun around them.

She turned from the counter, twisting her handkerchief in front of her waist. He stopped short in the middle of blowing on his cold hands. Memories flooded him of a little girl crying over her puppy, practically strangling her pinafore. It couldn't be...

The woman looked straight into his eyes. Beneath the black netting, her dove-gray eyes widened against pale, creamy skin. Her jaw slowly opened before she seemed to remember herself and closed her mouth. She tucked a wayward strand of blond hair over her ear and then checked the fancy twist at her neck, a move that unconsciously showed off her figure in that formfitting jacket and full skirt.

Caleb might as well have been sucker punched, the way his gut twisted into a knot. It wasn't enough that she was rich and confident—she also had the looks to match. Like fine wine in elegant crystal, she outsparkled the chandelier. His mouth went dry. He counted it significant that he remembered to remove his hat.

It didn't change one thing, though. He still planned to speak his piece.

And in that moment her face became a mask of perfect, controlled alabaster. Slowly, she walked across the room and stopped before him. "Mr. Houston. How good of you to come. I...I feared you might not have received my message."

He froze—and couldn't draw another breath. Hannah Lansing...speaking?

He'd never believed it was possible after so many years of silence. And yet here he was, hearing her voice with his own ears! The rich, cultured cadence held him mesmerized. He'd never given it much thought—her speaking like everyone else. Didn't actually believe it would ever happen. She'd been young and not much more than a baby when she'd lost the ability to speak. How had she gotten it back? And when?

It took him a moment to come back to his senses and realize that although her words were polite enough, her tone was formal—distancing—like being doused with a bucketful of cold water. He sobered instantly. She might be talking, but she hadn't thought enough of him to inform him. That only pounded the nail of truth deeper about their lack of any real friendship.

Now, what had she said? Something about her note?

"It came," he said. "They both did. Just took a while to decide if I'd answer."

That seemed to shake her up. She looked down, away from his face, and swallowed hard. "I see. Then, I thank you for deciding to come."

"Didn't figure we had much to say to each other after so long."

She blinked. "I suppose I deserve that. *Touché,* Mr. Houston."

He was baiting her, punishing her for the way she'd left things between them. He'd thought he was over it, that he'd buried the bitterness a long time ago, but seeing her now—well, guess it wasn't buried deep enough after all.

She looked him over, starting at his boots. He could sense her cataloging everything as her gaze touched on him. Boots—leather, dusty. Denim jeans—worn, serviceable. His hat in his hands—a tan, weather-beaten Stetson. Cotton shirt. Leather vest. Neckerchief tucked at his collar. She stopped when she reached his face. He didn't look his best, but he wasn't plannin' on changing up just because she'd ridden into town.

"Your sister will be gratified to know you are looking well."

"I get by all right."

She twisted the handkerchief again, obviously uncomfortable with the awkward gaps in their conversation. Guess his attitude didn't exactly inspire small talk. He had one foot trampling on everything she was sayin' and one foot already headin' for the door. It wasn't like him to be so cantankerous, but she just seemed to bring out the worst in him.

"So you've taken your grandfather's name," he said, trying halfheartedly to remedy his mood. "Where is Dorian?"

"He didn't accompany me."

That brought him up short. "You're traveling alone?"

"Of course not. My valet and maid have accompanied me. However, there have been some complications. It has put my business here behind schedule."

So he hadn't been a thought in her head until she'd run into trouble with her *schedule.* Guess that told him where he stood. He chewed on that notion and grew angrier with the chewing.

"Believe me," she continued, "this is as uncomfortable for me as it is for you."

"Somehow I doubt that."

Her mouth pressed together in a perfect seam.

"I take it you are representing Lansing Enterprises now. Congratulations. Although I gotta admit I'm surprised Dorian eased up on the reins enough to give you a position."

"Yes...well...he did."

He had to know but hated to ask the question, hated to let her know that he'd wondered about her at all. "So when did you get your voice back?"

"It's been a while."

"When?"

"Four years ago."

So—she'd had plenty of time to send him a letter and hadn't. Well, what did he expect? She'd made it clear enough they weren't friends any longer.

"I'd like you here tomorrow at nine to accompany me."

He raised his brows. He didn't care to be ordered about. "Now, hold on, Hannah—Miss Lansing." The formal name didn't roll off his tongue any easier this time, but he'd remember to use it if it killed him. No way would he forget the way she'd treated him. Calling her by her proper name would just cement the fact. "I haven't said I'd do anything."

"But you're here. I thought that meant..."

"Go on. Spit it out. What's this all about?"

The desk man approached. "Is everything all right, miss?"

She nodded. "I'm fine, Mr. Bennett." She waited for the man to leave and then pressed her hand against her temple. On closer examination, purple smudges tinted the skin beneath her eyes. He hadn't noticed those right off.

"Can you stay for supper?" Her eyes—surrounded with those long lashes—looked up at him all expectant and hopeful. Five years ago that look had gotten him into hot water and changed the course of his life. He didn't relish a repeat performance.

"Caleb?" she asked again.

"I've got a job to get back to. I've been gone too long as it is."

"I hoped at the least we could have a cup of tea. And...and talk."

"Tea? That's what this is about?"

"No. Of course not."

She said it too quickly, worryin' that handkerchief again. At this point, he was surprised it hadn't been torn to shreds. "I'm not believing any of this. One minute you say you didn't plan to see me at all, and then the next you want to have tea. You're not making any sense. Level with me, woman. What exactly is going on?"

Her eyes widened at his sharp tone, and her chin raised a notch. "All right, then. I'll be blunt, as that is what you prefer. The Hotel Del Coronado opening ceremony is tomorrow. I am in need of an escort."

She had to have a fever. "Me? If you remember at all, I'm not much for crowds. It sounds like a pretty fancy shindig for the likes of me. Shouldn't you be attending with the mayor or one of his lackeys? Someone closer to..."

Her brow furrowed delicately. "To what, Mr. Houston?"

"Look—" He turned to block their conversation further from the interested desk man. "Pardon me for being confused, but the last time I saw you, you and Dorian made things very clear. I don't owe you a thing."

Frustration flashed through her eyes. “You are not being fair. I had no—” She took a deep breath. “You don’t understand anything.”

“Then, explain it to me.”

The way her brow wrinkled up, she looked as if she was in pain. It surprised him. Lansings were tough as old cowhide, in his estimation. But then, she could be quite the actress. He had believed what he’d felt in that kiss so many years ago. He wasn’t plannin’ on playing the fool a second time.

“I’ll pay.”

“Now, that sounds like something your grandfather would do. Why me? Why don’t you save some money and have your valet go with you? He’s already in your service.” He shoved on his Stetson. He’d heard enough. Too bad the only remembrance he’d have of her voice was this conversation. It left the taste of sour pickle juice in his mouth.

“Double.”

He paused.

“I’ll pay you double what you make at the saloon.”

A hint of desperation had crept into her voice. The money would come in handy, but it was something else that tugged at him, a feeling that there was more going on that she wasn’t saying.

“Mr. Houston...I really want you to be the one escorting me.”

Maybe he could make himself stand being near her in short doses—for the money—and because it would salve his conscience concerning his sister. “How long?”

“Two days. All I need is two days of your time.”

His gut told him to stampede for the door. He should listen to it.

“Please? I really need your help.”

There it was—she’d finally come around to asking him. Now was his chance to squash her the way she’d squashed him. So why wasn’t he throwing it back at her like he’d planned? “What time did you say this ribbon-cutting happens?”

Something glimmered, lighting her eyes. Hope? “The ceremony starts at eleven.”

“Guess I could see my way to doing it for the money. Long as we are clear on that.” At least that was what he was telling himself. “I’ll be by at ten.”

“That will make us late.”

“Half past nine, then.”

She stretched out her hand. “Agreed.”

He hesitated. It was how business deals were made, although usually it was man-to-man. Touching her seemed a might more personal than he wanted at the moment. He kept his hand stuffed in his pocket. “Agreed. Two days.”

Slowly she pulled her hand back. “Yes. Thank you, Mr. Houston.” She turned toward the stairs.

He could handle this. Two days would pass quick enough. Long as he kept the upper hand, it would be easy money. He could tell her off later. Feelin’ a bit ornery, he decided to let her know who was in charge. “Miss Lansing?” Her proper name rolled off his tongue easy enough.

She stopped. “Yes?”

“I’m not much for waiting.”

A slight hesitation was the only indication he’d unnerved her before she replied, “Neither am I, Mr. Houston. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She spun her trim backside on him and walked to the stairs. He watched the swaying movement of her burgundy skirt as she mounted each stair until she stepped out of sight on the landing. A queer feeling rolled in his gut that had nothing to do with the absence of food there.

Turning toward the door, his gaze collided with the desk man’s. The man watched until Caleb stepped through the ornate entryway to the street and let out a long—*long*—breath.

Heaven help him. Hannah was all grown up.

Chapter Five

Hannah woke early the next day, her thoughts on last evening's encounter. Dressed and ready, she waited at the sitting room window, watching for Caleb to emerge from the saloon.

He hated her. She felt it to her bones. What she'd done years ago had ruined any hope of friendship between them.

She raised her chin. It didn't matter. This wasn't a social visit. Paying him would keep things businesslike and proper between them. He was the right man for the job. Although it hurt deep inside that he wouldn't do it out of the goodness of his heart. He would have—*before.* But obviously, things had changed. *He* had changed.

She thought back to the first look she'd had of him in the lobby. He was as tall as a ship's mast, and, though lean, he looked solid, as though nothing could move him from the path he set. The day's growth of whiskers and the simple clothes he wore had only enhanced his ruggedness. And the gun belt—low on his hips... He carried a gun now. Years ago he'd only carried a knife.

How much more had he changed on the inside? Was it a fantasy of her own mind that she even knew him at all?

If only things were different. If only she hadn't been forced to make a choice. The ache in her breast deepened, and she tugged on the pendant. But no. She hadn't really been forced. She'd done what she had to do. The stark reality was that, at sixteen, she'd wanted to speak more than she'd wanted anything else, even Caleb's friendship, and so she'd made that vow to Grandfather—a vow that existed to this day.

Absently she twirled the long gold fringe on the heavy draperies. Caleb had been lanky then. That wasn't the case any longer. Last night she'd noticed his stance that guarded their privacy. How his wide shoulders had easily blocked out the curious stares of Mr. Bennett and Jackson. He'd fairly cocooned her in a corner of the lobby. The thick red hair of his childhood had darkened to the color of a rich brown cherrywood color, and his face—always a bit angular—was now square-jawed and firm. A man's face. She swallowed. The boy she'd caught sand crabs with on the beach was gone, and in his place stood a compelling stranger. A compelling—*brooding*—stranger.

A polite knock sounded on her door. She opened it to Jackson.

"Mr. Houston is in the lobby."

Hannah nodded her acknowledgment and shut the door. She walked to the bedroom and stood before the full-length mirror to smooth her skirt. For the third time that morning, she puffed the sleeves on her blouse and repositioned her blue velvet hat just above her chignon. "What Mr. Houston thinks is not my concern," she told her image. "It's the manager at the Hotel Del that I need to impress." She took a deep breath, grabbed her parasol and started for the door.

In the lobby, the sight of Caleb waiting for her, holding what looked to be a new black Stetson, had her gripping the handle of her parasol a bit more tightly than necessary. He'd been busy. He'd shaved, which brought the strong line of his jaw into view. His hair hung wet and slightly wavy where it brushed his white shirt collar. Instead of the bandanna he'd had on yesterday, a dark gray bow tie circled his neck. He wore a dark gray vest and black pants. And his boots... He'd polished them recently—this morning? Caught off guard by the sudden butterflies inside, she pressed her hand snug against her tummy.

He walked to the base of the stairs, looking her over in much the same way she'd just appraised him. "Mornin'." He took her cloak from her arms and draped it over her shoulders.

Edward had done the same for her numerous times over the years. So why did Caleb's closeness and his clean, soapy scent stir those butterflies in her stomach into a frenzy? He picked up a black wool coat lying on the wing-back chair and, with a crooked finger, slung it over his shoulder as he escorted her through the lobby and out the door.

"You're mighty quiet," he said once outside.

"I...I expected the same person I met last evening. You...you clean up well."

He huffed. "I'll change if that's what you want. You *are* paying me to accommodate you."

"No. Of course not. I'm...more than pleased." She opened her parasol and propped it on her shoulder. For all his surliness, he sure watched her closely.

"Don't see those much around these parts."

"I burn easily." And she needed something to keep her hands busy. With so many years of signing her thoughts, her hands retained the connection of the words and motions—a weakness should she suddenly forget herself and start signing in the midst of her confrontation with Mr. Barstow today.

"Hmm. Well. Let's get a move on."

He accepted her answer easily enough. She had the urge to explain further, but already he'd started down the boardwalk. She picked up her pace to catch up to him.

"We'll walk to the docks," he said. "It's not too far. Word is there are carriages arranged on the other side to take us from the ferry to the hotel."

She stopped suddenly. "We aren't taking the Coronado line?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"They're still laying track. Won't be done for another two months or so." When she didn't move, he arched one dark brow. "Something wrong with the ferry?"

She swallowed. "I...I just thought... The hotel is on a peninsula, isn't it? I thought we would take the train or...perhaps a buggy?"

"We'd never make it in time for the ceremony."

"Still—there must be another route...a shortcut perhaps?"

He smirked. "Other than a hot air balloon ride over the harbor, this is your only option."

His sarcasm irked her. "You needn't be condescending. I'm well aware the sea breeze would send a balloon toward the foothills—not toward the peninsula."

"I'm not tryin' to be—" He stopped talking. The puzzlement on his face dissolved into speculation. "Wait a minute. Are you saying you're afraid of the water? Miss Lansing, heir to one of the largest shipping enterprises on the West Coast—is afraid to get on a boat?"

Her cheeks warmed. "Of course not. That would be silly."

"Then, what is the problem?"

"I just prefer land travel to water. Always have."

His expression sobered. "It's a short ride on the ferry. You can see the other landing from here. No waves, no swells. I'm not taking a buggy twenty miles out of my way just so you can keep your boots dry. We either take the ferry or we don't go."

Hannah rubbed her forehead. This was unexpected. She had to talk to the two owners of the Hotel Del Coronado, or at least the manager. They'd all be at the ceremony today. "There must be another solution," she said, although her voice carried none of its previous strength. "I...I really must attend."

His green eyes hardened. "It's the ferry or nothing."

She gazed longingly at a carriage passing by. It had been years since she'd last boarded a boat. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad now. Perhaps, if she forced herself, she could overcome her discomfort. "Very well. It seems I have no choice. The boat it is."

They turned the corner and passed a grocery with boards on the windows and then, farther down the street, a sad-looking milliner's storefront with nothing but empty hat stands in the windows.

Her steps slowed. "I was informed business was doing well here."

He glanced sideways at her. "A month or so ago land prices started coming down. Your stake in the Hotel Del might not have been timed the best. People 'round here are selling out and leaving."

She nearly told him the truth then—that there was no money invested, although it had been her wish to advance a small sum. Grandfather had refused. In the end, she held to her own counsel and let Caleb assume what he would. Better too little information than too much.

They walked a while before he spoke again. “So are you going to tell me anytime soon how you got your voice back?”

It was inevitable he’d ask. She had prepared an answer—enough to satisfy his curiosity and no more. It was the “more” she wanted to avoid.

“You said it had been a while,” he prompted.

“Nearly four years ago.” She could see him calculating back. “It was the hypnotist. I saw him for over a year, going back weekly. Grandfather was not happy about that—he thought him a charlatan at first. But the man, Mr. Donniger, was adamant that it would take more than just a few visits, that each session built on the last. And something... I guess a small change, a small insight each time, made me keep going back. Six months into the therapy, I uttered my first word.”

Caleb blew out a low whistle. “So it worked after all. I was of the same mind as Dorian about the hypnotist.”

“I remember.”

They stepped around the corner of a brick warehouse and the sea air swirled around her skirt. Quickly she clutched her bonnet, tying the ribbons more securely beneath her chin. The strong odor of fish filled her nose. They were close to the wharf. Another block and the sparkling harbor water greeted them, along with one tall sailing ship and a steamer vying for a place at the long dock. Halfway down, passengers crossed over a slanted gangplank to board a ferry. Along with the people, several buggies were lined up to make the trip.

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