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Christy Award-Winning Author

CATHERINE PALMER

THE OUTLAW'S BRIDE

He saved her life—
by marrying her!

Catherine Palmer
The Outlaw's Bride

Аннотация

Isobel Matas's hope of marriage to her betrothed depends on recovering her dowry from the outlaws who killed her father and stole her inheritance. But, while traveling in New Mexico territory, she witnesses a murder that changes everything.Suddenly, her own life is threatened–until she's rescued by fast-talking cowboy Noah Buchanan. Isobel's only chance for survival is to marry the rugged trail boss–who needs her to fulfill his own destiny. As the mismatched newlyweds unite against Lincoln County's tumultuous violence, Noah's deep faith challenges Isobel's quest for vengeance. And will lead them on a journey neither ever imagined.

Содержание

“You’re the man who married me, Noah Buchanan, and I command you to treat me with respect!” 5
CATHERINE PALMER 6
The Outlaw’s Bride 7
Contents 8
Chapter One 10
Chapter Two 28
Chapter Three 41
Chapter Four 55
Chapter Five 71
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 76

“You’re the man who married me, Noah Buchanan, and I command you to treat me with respect!”

“If I’m the man you married, Isobel, then you’d better do as I say. That means no taking matters into your own hands and getting somebody killed. If I’m your husband, I’m the boss. You hear?”

Simmering, Isobel stared at the towering cowboy who presumed to rule over her by his bartered title of “husband.” His blue eyes fairly crackled as he met her gaze.

“You know nothing,” she managed.

“I know that right now you’re starting to look like a blushing bride.”

“Oh, yes, my strong, brave husband,” she responded, bat ting her eyes for effect. “I will stitch and bake—and weep for joy when I hear your footsteps on the porch.”

“You do that, sweetheart.” Chuckling, Noah tucked Isobel close and strolled with her toward the adobe home.

At the warmth of his arm around her shoulders and the graze of his unshaved jaw against her cheek, it occurred to Isobel that perhaps she wouldn’t mind being a wife who would sew and bake and wait for her husband to come home at night. What a curious thought.

CATHERINE PALMER

The author of more than fifty novels with more than two million copies sold, Catherine Palmer is a Christy Award-winner for outstanding Christian romance fiction. Catherine's numerous awards include Best Historical Romance, Best Contemporary Romance, Best of Romance from Southwest Writers Workshop, and Most Exotic Historical Romance Novel from RT Book Reviews. She is also an RT Book Reviews Career Achievement Award winner.

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The Outlaw's Bride
Catherine Palmer

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Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

—Romans 12:19

To Sharon Buchanan-McClure who introduced me to the real Belle Buchanan

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Epilogue

Acknowledgments
Letter to Reader
Questions for Discussion

Chapter One

February 18, 1878

Lincoln County, New Mexico Territory

Isobel stood, her crimson boots side by side like drops of bright blood on the snow. She stared at her feet for a moment, thinking how far they had come from the sprawling pasturelands of her beloved Spanish Catalonia to this slushy trail in the New World. Weeks aboard a wave-tossed ship, days across the Texas prairie to Fort Belknap, miles along the Goodnight-Loving cattle trail toward Santa Fe…and for what?

Sighing, she pulled her lace mantilla closer around her face, lifted her chin and walked on through the scrubby, wind-whipped trees. Her emerald hem swept across fallen, brown pine needles, the ruffle on her skirt rippling along behind.

It had happened here, she thought, near this very place. A shiver of apprehension coursed through her as she looked in the twilight at the secluded forest. Five years earlier, her father—the powerful Don Alberto Matas—had been jerked from his buckboard wagon and shot.

Isobel tightened her knotted fingers inside her muff and squeezed her eyes shut against the sting of tears. As a child, she had believed her father invincible.

Forcing away the fear that haunted her—transforming it to the more comfortable heat of anger—she gritted her teeth. Why

had the lawless Americans done nothing to find her father's murderer? Not only a murderer but a thief. The killer had stolen the packet of land-grant titles and jewels that had been her inheritance—the dowry to secure her marriage to Don Guillermo Pascal of Santa Fe.

She inhaled a deep breath of crisp, pine-scented air. Five years had passed, yet the anger and betrayal still burned brightly in her heart. Despite the pain, the five years spent managing her father's vast estates in Spain had been good ones. She had overseen lands, governed workers and carved a faith that could not be shaken. And then she had traveled to America.

Though at twenty-three she knew her hopes of marriage might appear dim, she still was betrothed to Don Guillermo. She would see to it that he married her. She would recover her stolen inheritance as well. Isobel Matas was not one to cower when faced with a challenge. Glancing behind, she scanned the scrub oak and twisted-pine woods. The small party of travelers who had accompanied her from Texas to New Mexico—an itinerant preacher, a missionary doctor and his family, a schoolteacher—rested from the journey. Their horses grazed, tethered a safe distance from the trail.

The delay would put them in Lincoln Town after dark, too late for her to speak to the sheriff. She chose not to tarry and drink coffee. Instead she walked alone through the forest and thought about her father. If he hadn't come to the New Mexico Territory, he would still be alive, his golden hair shining in the sunlight, his

deep laughter echoing over the rolling hills of Catalonia.

Hoofbeats thudded across the damp snow. Her eyes darted toward the trail. Highwaymen? Banditos, like the men who had murdered her father?

Alarm froze her breath. Her traveling companions were too far away to be of help, and she had left her pistol in her saddlebag. Clutching her mantilla at her throat, she melted into the shadows of a large juniper. Leaning against the rough trunk, she peered through the lace in the direction of the sound.

"Things are unhappy indeed in Lincoln Town, Noah." A young voice. English—not American.

"We're glad you're back from the trail. Mr. Chisum is wise to let you run his cattle. South Spring River Ranch profits under your management."

Isobel counted three riders, one dapper in a brown tweed coat, the others roughly dressed, their faces obscured by hats and heavy beards. Livestock behind. More men at the rear.

The man called Noah rode tall on his black horse. He wore a long coat of black leather and was massively built, with broad shoulders and lean, hardened legs. With skin the color of sunbaked adobe, his face was grim beneath the wide brim of his black felt hat. His blue eyes flashed back and forth… alert, missing nothing. This man—and not the dandy—knew a dangerous life.

"Do you suppose Mr. Chisum would take my side against Dolan?" The young Englishman's voice held a note of hope. He

could not be more than thirty years old.

Noah shrugged. “Chisum stays out of a fight until it reaches his own back door.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Tunstall,” the third rider put in. “He’ll come out of that jail fightin’ mad against Dolan.”

“I expect so—” the Englishman began. A raucous squawk shattered the stillness in the canyon. Isobel stiffened.

“Turkeys.” Noah Buchanan rose in his stirrups and searched the gathering dusk. “How about it, boys? Let’s bag one.”

“Sure!” The slender man slid his rifle from his saddle scabbard. “Coming, Mr. Tunstall?”

“No, thank you.” The Englishman beckoned the three riders behind the packhorses. “But go on—all of you. Perhaps Mrs. McSween will cook it for us when we get to Lincoln.”

The men set off toward the nearby ridge. Noah glanced to one side, and his eyes fell on Isobel. He frowned. Reining his horse, he let his companions ride on.

“What have you there, Buchanan?” the Englishman cried out.

The American looked at Isobel an instant longer, as if to confirm the strange apparition in the woods. “Some kind of bird,” he called back.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Bird? She knew the man might do anything. Yet there was something gentle in his manner. Perhaps it was the way he held the reins…as if he were an artista. She had seen the hands of a poet and she felt sure this man’s hands, though large and strong, held no malice.

Glancing at her one more time, his eyes flashed with—what was it—warning? Then he flicked the reins and his horse vanished into the woods.

Isobel licked her wind-parched lips. Looking up, she saw suddenly what the others had not. Forty or fifty armed horsemen guided their mounts down onto the trail from the ridge.

"Tunstall!" A shout rang out from halfway up the slope. "That you, Tunstall?"

The Englishman reined his horse. "Who's there?"

"Jesse Evans. I'm with Rattlesnake Jim Jackson and a posse Jimmie Dolan sent to round you up. He made us deputies." The riders advanced to within twenty yards of Tunstall, and Isobel calculated they would meet directly in front of the juniper tree.

"Come ahead, Tunstall," a second man commanded. The blue light of the setting sun coated his heavy jaw and wide nose. "We ain't gonna hurt you."

"What is it you want, Jackson?" Tunstall kept riding as the men facing him lifted their rifles so the stocks rested on their knees. Isobel tensed, willing the Englishman to draw his own weapon. Could he not see these men meant to harm him?

Jackson urged his horse forward.

"Not yet," he muttered to Evans. "Wait till he gets nearer."

Isobel's mantilla buffeted her face, and she struggled to push it aside. She must warn the Englishman. But at that moment, his companions burst through the trees onto the trail.

"Take cover, Tunstall!" Buchanan shouted. "Head for the

woods!" "Now!" Jackson raised his rifle and fired. Tunstall jerked backward and dropped from his horse to the frozen ground.

Evans dismounted and ran to where Tunstall lay face down. He pulled Tunstall's revolver from its holster and shot the fallen man in the back of the head. Then he turned the gun on the horse and pulled the trigger.

Isobel swallowed in revulsion. She realized that Tunstall's friends had been too late to help him. They dispersed into the woods as the posse crowded forward, a mixture of triumph and horror written on their faces.

"With two empty chambers in Tunstall's gun," Evans crowed, "the judge'll think he fired first. Let's round up the rest of his men and give 'em the same medicine!"

Trembling, Isobel watched Evans remount and ride away. Jackson and three others remained. They stretched out the Englishman's body and wrapped it in blankets. Chuckling, Jackson pillowed Tunstall's head on a folded overcoat. Then he laid the horse's head on the Englishman's hat.

"This is abominable," Isobel muttered, icy fear melting before crackling rage. And suddenly she saw her father—lying just as Tunstall now lay—murdered, with no one to defend him.

As she stepped from behind the juniper, the wind caught her lace mantilla, tugged it from its comb and whipped it across the trail like a dancing butterfly. She caught her breath. Jackson glanced up and snatched it midair. Frowning, he spat, and

stepped over Tunstall's body. "Don't move, señorita." His voice dripped with contempt. "Hey, fellers. Looks like we got us a Mexican."

Isobel swallowed the last of her fear and remembered the raw wound of her father's death. A familiar anger flowed. If she must die, she would die bravely. Lifting her chin, she stepped onto the trail.

"You…" She stopped before the men. Forcing herself to think in English, she spoke. "I have seen your murder. I curse you—asesinos—assassins!"

"You ain't seen nothing yet, honey." Jackson whisked his rifle to his shoulder. But before he could fire, a horse thundered across the trail. Its rider leaned down and swept Isobel from the path of a bullet.

"You're dead, you little Mexican!" Jackson's voice rang out behind her. "I swear I'll kill you!"

"Keep your head down, lady." Noah rode through the trees, one arm around the woman's waist, the other controlling his horse. "They got Tunstall, didn't they?"

"The man called Rattlesnake killed him," she cried. "Give me your rifle and horse. I shall make them pay."

"Whoa, now." Noah reined his horse to a halt beneath an overhanging sandstone ledge. As he lowered his bandanna, he looked the woman up and down. Emerald gown, red ruffles, crimson boots. "Give you what?" he asked.

"Your horse. Your rifle. For revenge."

Around them, all had calmed—the wind, the horse, the trees, Noah's pounding heart. He studied her eyes, her nose, the high curve of her Spanish cheekbones and her lips.

"My father," she choked out. "My father was…" Covering her face with her hands, she folded inward. Her shoulders convulsed as a sob welled from her throat.

Noah set a gentle hand on her back. "Now then, little lady, don't you know revenge never did a lick of good? The Good Lord's in charge of that. One way or another, He'll see that those men pay. You put everything you saw right out of your head, hear?"

She nodded, dabbing her eyes. "They even killed his horse."

Noah shook his head, then spoke. "The woods are clear. The posse's gone to Lincoln to tell Dolan they've done his dirty work. I'll take you back to your people. I passed them on the trail. They'll keep you safe."

He turned his horse, and the rhythmic gait eased the tension in his shoulders. Darkness like velvet silk enfolded them. Noah knew he must weigh the implications of Tunstall's murder. But for now, he drank in the stillness, the quiet.

The woman had draped against him, her cheek resting on his chest. He recognized this was an improper, even dangerous, situation for a man in his position—single, bound to a mission and lonely. He had rescued her, and now, by all that was moral, he should move his arm from around her.

But she had closed her eyes. Her breath stirred the hair in his

beard. Her hand…each individual finger…warmed the skin on his arm.

The horse picked its way up a hill. Noah watched the moon rise above the pines on a ridge, his heart heavy. John Tunstall had been a good man. And young, maybe in his early twenties. Now a powder keg had been lit. Though Alexander McSween was a citified lawyer, he would go after Tunstall's killers.

Noah shifted in the saddle, and his thoughts swung away, too. The woman intrigued him. Her accent was Spanish, and she looked the part of a rich Mexican doña—green dress ruffled with red lace, red boots, jeweled comb. All this, yet her hair gleamed golden in the moonlight.

He gazed at the silken ringlet that curled down her back. If he took out her comb, the whole mass of hair would come tumbling down. Its mysterious, spicy scent would waft out into the air and —

"There is my party, vaquero," she said suddenly. "And your amigos, too. You see the fire?"

Caught by surprise, Noah shook off his wayward thoughts. He had been on the trail with Chisum's cattle many months. What else could be expected of a man who found his arms wrapped around a fine-smelling lady? He sent up a quick prayer to help him stay on task.

Tunstall's men were standing with the other travelers around the fire. There was Dick Brewer—Noah's closest friend and Tunstall's foreman—along with Billy Bonney and several others.

“Miss Matas!” A young, spectacled gentleman hurried forward as Noah guided his horse into the clearing. “We’ve been worried. Thank you, sir. I’m sure Miss Matas’s family will reward you for saving her.”

“Not necessary,” Noah said. “Glad to help.”

“Oh, Isobel, are you all right?” A pale woman rushed to her side. “When we heard the shots, I was terrified for you!”

Isobel’s expression softened. “I’m all right, Susan. I was walking in the forest.”

“Did you see what happened, ma’am?” Dick asked her. “A man was shot and killed.”

Noah dismounted and lifted his hands. Isobel slipped into his arms, but when her feet touched the ground, he set her aside. He had been distracted by the woman long enough.

As Tunstall’s men gathered around, she lifted her chin. “The one called Rattlesnake shot first. Then Evans. The killers must be brought to justice.”

“Yep, and you belong with your friends,” Noah spoke up. “Leave justice to these fellows.”

“But, Noah,” Dick argued, “she’s a witness. She could help us. She could testify.”

“Dolan’s men saw her,” Noah told them. “Snake swore he’d kill her. She needs to get out of the territory fast. Where are you headed, ma’am?”

“To Lincoln Town,” she replied. “To speak with the sheriff.”

“Someone murdered Isobel’s father here five years ago,”

the pale woman, Susan, explained in a soft voice. “Isobel is determined to find out who did it.”

Noah shook his head. “Bad idea. If you’re going to Lincoln, señorita, you can bet Snake will find you.”

“If one of us could protect her,” Dick said, “we could use her testimony.”

“How about you?” Noah suggested. “Your place isn’t far. She could lie low there until the trouble blows over.”

Dick looked away, his gray eyes troubled. “Noah, they killed John. It’s not that I wouldn’t protect a woman, you know that. But I was Tunstall’s foreman and his friend. I’m going after them.”

“We’re all going after them!” Billy Bonney stepped up. “C’mon, Buchanan, you can’t expect one of us to babysit the señorita. You’re not a Tunstall man, and Chisum’s in jail. Why don’t you take the job?”

Noah held up a hand. “Not me, kid. I’ve got papers to deliver to Chisum and my own business to see to.”

“But you told us John Chisum ain’t gonna sell you no land unless you can prove you’re willing to settle down and knock off that reputation you carry around. Now, say you come along with this pretty señorita—hey, what say you marry her? Chisum would sell you the land quick if you did that. You know how sentimental he is about families.”

“Marry her?” Noah felt the blood siphon from his face. “Billy Bonney, you’re a fool. There’s no way—”

“Can you be serious?” Isobel interrupted. “Never would

I marry this…this dusty vaquero! I am betrothed to Don Guillermo Pascal of Santa Fe. Nor do I need a protector. I am a better marksman than most of the men in Catalonia and I ride like the wind. I shall go with you on this journey of revenge."

"You can't come with us," Billy exclaimed, eyeing Isobel as if she were possessed. "The men who killed our boss have the law on their side. And the law in Lincoln County is as crooked as this trail. You'd best get on up to Santa Fe and marry your rich muchacho."

"Not until I find my father's murderer."

"Isobel," Susan broke in, "please consider what these men are saying. The murderers have threatened to kill you, and you have no protectors. Why not take on Mr.—"

"Buchanan," Billy put in. "His name is Noah Buchanan."

Lest the conversation erupt into a shouting match, Isobel had agreed to walk a short distance from the men to discuss the situation with Susan.

"Isobel," her friend said softly. "Can you trust me?"

Nodding, Isobel acknowledged the truth. Though she had not planned to get close to the others on the journey, they had won her friendship after all.

"This is a lawless land," Susan said. "If you insist on finding your father's killer and getting your inheritance back, you must have protection. I know you ride and shoot well, but you'll never survive against fifty armed men. If you won't go to Santa Fe and get married like you should, let Mr. Buchanan watch over you."

Isobel glanced at the huddled group of men. Billy Bonney and Dick Brewer clearly were exhorting Noah to action. “Don Guillermo may not accept me now, anyway,” she murmured, finally admitting aloud her fear. “Without my dowry, I cannot push for marriage. By law he should marry me, but his family is powerful.”

“Then you must get your rightful land. And to do that, you must let Mr. Buchanan look after you.”

Isobel knew it was the right decision—the only possible conclusion. She gave her friend a quick hug and hurried across the slushy snow to the men.

“Very well, Señor Buchanan,” she informed him. “If you agree to protect me, I shall bear witness to the authorities about the murder.”

“Sure, I’ll take you on,” Noah said. “If you’ll marry me.”

She gasped. “Marry you? Borrachón! What have you been drinking?”

“Not a thing.” He studied her for a moment, then gave a nod. “We’ll get the preacher over there to hitch us up. I’ll tell folks you’re the wife I brought in from the trail. That’s true enough.”

She stared at the blue-eyed man. “But I am already engaged.”

“And the last thing I want is to get married.” He glanced at Dr. Ealy, a missionary who was standing quietly in the background. “We’ll get it annulled later. Extreme circumstances…marriage without parents’ consent…lack of consummation…we’ll think of something. Once I convince Chisum to sell me the land I’ve been

after and you settle your business in Lincoln, you can go to Santa Fe and marry your don. Meantime, I won't lay a hand on you."

"Whoa, Buchanan!" Billy laughed. "Don't get carried away."

"Naw, kid. It'll all be on the up-and-up."

Again Isobel assessed the bearded, brawny trail boss. Did she really need his protection? Probably. Her father had been murdered despite his armed guard.

Could she delay marrying Don Guillermo? Certainly. Her fiancé had never even responded to her letter of intent to journey to America.

Retrieving the stolen land-grant titles was her primary goal. More than anything, she ached to possess those rich pastures on which to graze cattle of her own.

"Very well, Mr. Buchanan," she declared. "If you will protect me while I search for my father's killer and recover my family's stolen land, I shall marry you and prove to Mr. Chisum that you are very settled. And I shall be your witness in the law courts."

"Then I reckon we've got a deal."

Dick Brewer spoke up. "Stay at my place tonight, Noah, and head for Chisum's ranch in the morning. We've got to get Tunstall's body to Lincoln, and we can see the others safely into town."

The two conferred a moment before Dr. Ealy cleared his throat. Accustomed to unexpected weddings, funerals and the like, he had agreed to perform the ceremony and wanted to get on with it.

Isobel barely heard his words. Instead she stared down at the pointed toes of her red boots. What had she done? Minutes ago she had been planning to marry Don Guillermo of Santa Fe. Now this leather-clad cowboy who owned nothing but his horse and gun would be her husband.

The ceremony ended, and Susan presented her friend with a bundle of folded garments. “Not much of a wedding gift, Isobel. But wear them, please. Those killers will recognize you right away if you stay as you are.”

As the shaken group set off down the moonlit trail in one party, Noah explained to Isobel the situation in Lincoln Town.

Jimmie Dolan had profited from his store and vast acreage by keeping the small landowners financially strapped, until the young Englishman John Tunstall had moved to the area. On the advice of his business partner, Alexander McSween, Tunstall had started his own store and ranch.

Dr. Ealy added that he, along with his wife, two young daughters and Susan Gates, had been summoned to Lincoln by McSween. “It looks as if we’re already in McSween’s war,” he observed, “and we haven’t even arrived in Lincoln.”

“Just keep quiet about tonight’s business,” Noah instructed the group. “We’ll do the same.”

As Isobel watched her companions head north in the darkness, she and Noah turned their horses east. Less than an hour later, they arrived at an old cabin with a sagging front porch. With some trepidation, she followed this man who was no more than

a stranger up the steps.

Without speaking, he lit two oil lamps and began to build a fire. She watched him work, appraising biceps that bunched as he placed logs on crackling kindling, brown fingers that set an iron pot he had filled with water on a hook above the blaze. Broad back. Shaggy brown hair and beard. Muddy boots. Leather chaps. Such a common man, this Noah Buchanan.

"Like to wash up?" He asked the question so abruptly that she took a step backward.

He dusted his hands on his thighs before pushing open a door and carrying her bag into a small bedroom. She followed, surveying with some dismay the narrow iron bed, the washstand with its chipped white crockery, the window fitted with paper. Noah filled a cracked bowl with heated water, then shut the door behind him.

Isobel walked to the door and listened to him whistling in the other room. Dare she trust the man? She slid her revolver from her bag and set it on a table near the tub. With another glance at the door, she changed into a nightgown. Then she removed her comb, dipped her hands into the water and finally began to relax.

Curling onto the narrow bed, she sighed deeply. But as sleep crept over her, a movement rippled behind her eyelids. Horses cantering up a trail. Men shouting. Gunshots.

Noah sat on a three-legged stool before the fire and warmed his hands. A second pot of water had begun to steam. The woman in the next room would be asleep by now. No matter how

hotheaded, she must be exhausted.

He smiled and shook his head as he filled a large basin with hot water and set to shaving his whiskers off with Dick Brewer's straight razor.

Good old Dick. As Tunstall's foreman, he was bound to get into the thick of the trouble. Noah peered into a mirror hung by the iron cookstove. If Dick got hurt, he couldn't stand by, no matter what he'd promised the señorita.

Of course, the way she'd acted today, he'd probably have trouble keeping her out of it.

He dipped his head into a second bowl of fresh water and scrubbed his scalp. She was crazy to come after her father's killer all by herself. Of course he was just as loco to have married her. John Chisum would take some fancy convincing to swallow that one.

Trail dust was getting a little old. Noah looked forward to settling down and fixing up his own cabin. Then he could really begin to make his dreams come true.

He stared for a long time at the flames, thinking of the small packet he had brought in his saddlebag from Arizona, filled with pens and ink bottles. Soon he would start to put down the thoughts he had been having for years. Stories about trail rides, roundups, cowboys. Images and memories he didn't want to forget.

The thought of writing sent him searching Dick's cabin for paper. Maybe he would start right now—the tale of the señorita

and the Dolan gang. He wished he had a blank notebook with him, but they were back at his cabin.

Dick never kept paper. He searched the first room and hesitated at the bedroom door, then knocked. When he got no answer, he wondered if the woman had left. He leaned closer, peered into the room, caught his breath.

She lay curled on the bed, asleep. A fan of dark lashes rested on each pale cheek. Her chin was tucked against her arm. Long, golden hair draped around her shoulders and down her side.

Noah took a hesitant step toward the bed. She wore a silky white gown but her feet were bare. He was staring at her slender ankles when she turned. A soft moan escaped her lips as she lifted her head.

Rising up on one elbow, she whispered, "¿Mamá? ¿Dónde está?"

She lifted her hand to her eyes.

"Who…who are you?" Her voice was husky in the night air.

"I'm Noah Buchanan," he answered. "I'm your husband."

Chapter Two

"Noah Buchanan?" With a gasp, Isobel scrambled out of bed. What on earth was the vaquero doing in her room?

"That blanket," she ordered, pointing. "Now!"

As he fetched a faded homespun coverlet from a nearby chair, she sorted through images of this so-called protector. Shaggy black beard, dusty denims, travel-worn leather.

Outlined in lamplight, his strong, clean jaw was squared with tension. His hair shone a damp blue-black.

"You look different, señor," she said, glancing at her pistol on the table.

"I shaved." His blue eyes sparkled as they flicked down to her ankles.

Before he could speak again, she snatched the gun and leveled it at his heart. "Take your hungry eyes away from me!" she commanded, cocking the gun for emphasis. "Stand back, Buchanan."

"Whoa, now." He held up his hands. "I didn't mean any harm. I was looking for paper."

"Paper? Why paper?"

He didn't answer. "Why paper?" Her fingers tensed on the pistol handle.

"I wanted to write." Swifter than the strike of a rattlesnake, his hand shot out and knocked the pistol from her grip. A blast

of flame and smoke erupted from the barrel. The hanging glass lamp shattered. The gun clattered across the wooden floor. As the light died, he grabbed her shoulder and stared hard into her eyes.

"Don't ever pull a gun on me again, woman," he growled. "You hear?"

"Let me go!" she cried out, the nearness of the man plunging fear like a knife into her heart.

Relaxing his shoulders, he stepped back. "I won't hurt you, Isobel. I made a vow."

She swallowed in confusion at the change in him. "I must trust you to take me to Lincoln Town. Yet I know nothing about you."

"You know me real well. John Chisum says if you want to know a man, find out what makes him mad. If you draw a gun on me again, you can say adios to the best shot west of the Pecos."

"The best shot west of the Pecos?" She laughed. "I will have to see that to believe it, señor."

The moon kindled a silver flame in his eyes as he spoke. "Stick around Lincoln County and you'll see it. I can outdraw any man in the territory. But that's not what I aim to do with myself from here on."

She lifted the blanket to her chin. "And what is your aim?"

"The minute John Chisum gets out of jail, I'll introduce you as Isobel…no, Belle. Belle Buchanan, a slip of a lady I met and married on the trail."

"My name is Isobel Matas."

“You’d better be Belle Buchanan if you don’t want Snake Jackson after your hide. And Belle is just the shiest, quietest little thing Lincoln Town has ever seen.”

“If I’m to be Belle Buchanan, quiet and shy for your John Chisum, you had better be the fastest gun west of the Pecos—or your little wife will change swiftly into Isobel Matas, the fastest gun in Catalonia.”

Noah chuckled. “I’ve tangled with a few women in my time, but never one as sure talking, high strung and mule stubborn as you.”

“Nor as pretty,” she added.

“Ornery is more like it,” he said with a grin. “You put on a shy smile, and I’ll keep my trigger finger ready. We’ll settle the matter of my land first. Then we’ll check into this question of your father.”

“My father first. Then your land.”

“The trouble over Tunstall’s death needs to die down before we start poking around in Lincoln. We’ll go see Chisum first.”

“I have waited five years,” she told him. “I have traveled many miles. I will wait no longer. Now, leave me to sleep, Buchanan. I must speak to the sheriff tomorrow.”

“Sheriff Brady deputized that posse you saw today. He gave Snake Jackson a lawman’s badge. Brady’s a Dolan man. You ride into Lincoln tomorrow and you’ll be eating hot lead for supper.”

He headed for the open door, but he paused with his hand on the latch. “And it’s Noah…Noah to you…not Buchanan. Don’t

forget I'm your husband."

As he shut the door behind him, Isobel sagged against the bed frame. How could she forget? The man would be with her every moment, ordering her around, insisting on his own way. He was a bull. Rough and unrefined. Headstrong and stubborn. So powerful he frightened her.

Sinking onto the lumpy mattress, she closed her eyes. But instantly she saw him. Noah Buchanan. She felt the grip of his hand on her shoulder. He was a brute—nothing like Don Guillermo Pascal of Santa Fe.

At that thought, she left the bed again and searched through her saddlebag until her fingers closed on an oval locket. Holding the pendant up to catch the moonlight, she studied the tiny painting of her intended. His jutting chin, firm mouth, deep-set brooding eyes and shock of black hair made her proud. Here was the splendid Spaniard who could outwit the roughshod cowboy. This was the torero who could defeat the bull.

For ten years Isobel had known that Guillermo Pascal would become her husband. He owned a sprawling hacienda, a fine stable, countless cattle, land that stretched many miles across the New Mexico Territory. He was wealthy, noble, Spanish. And he was hers.

She snapped the locket clasp and slipped the golden chain back into her bag. As she crossed to the bed, she noticed the shards of glass from the shattered lamp. She ought to sweep them up.

But Isobel Matas had never touched a broom in her life. She was to be served—not to be a servant. Someone else would have to sweep the glass, someone meant for menial tasks. Shrugging, she found the fallen pistol, pushed it beneath her pillow and climbed back into bed.

The first rays of sunlight were slipping over the pine trees when Isobel waded from the shallows of slumber. She fought to catch the remnants of her dream—of that magnificent man who strode through the purple-ribboned depths, his chest broad, his shoulders strong, his eyes so blue. Blue?

Isobel frowned. Guillermo Pascal's eyes were not blue.

At a tinkling sound in the room, she eased onto one elbow. In the gray light she made out a tall figure. Noah Buchanan.

His black hat tilted toward the back of his head. His shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows. He wore a leather belt with a silver buckle. In his hand he held a stick. A rifle?

No…a broom.

Humming, he swept the broken glass. Unaware of her watchful eye, he raked it into a tin dustpan and stepped out of the room. She shook her head. This vaquero who could knock a loaded gun from her hand, who could guide his horse through darkness, who had walked through her dreams all night…this cattleman of the plains was sweeping!

As she rose from the bed, she caught the smell of frying bacon. He sweeps, he cooks, what else? Mystified, she peered around the door frame.

His worn brown boots thudding on the floor, the bull stalked across the room. His shoulder grazed a hanging pot, one knee knocked a rickety chair aside. But as he leaned over the fire, Noah Buchanan might have been a cocinero in a nobleman's kitchen. As he broke six eggs into sizzling grease in a frying pan, he hummed.

Bemused, Isobel eased the bedroom door shut and propped a chair beneath the handle. She wanted no intrusions this time. As she took a petticoat and faded skirt from the bundle Susan Gates had given her, she smiled. Noah Buchanan was rugged and earthy, but he was gentle and unpretentious, too. Perhaps they would do well together for the few days of their marriage.

A wash of guilt crept over Isobel as she slipped on Susan's petticoat. She had married Noah Buchanan under God's eyes. For as long as she could remember, she had faithfully attended church and said her prayers. She knew this marriage was a sin worthy of the harshest punishment.

As she fastened the row of buttons lining the bodice of the blue gown, she wondered what she would suffer. Would she lose her chance to wed Guillermo Pascal? Would she never learn the truth behind her father's death? Or something worse?

"Dear God," she whispered in prayer. "Forgive me, please." She knew God was harsh, vengeful, given to anger. His sacraments were not to be treated lightly. Yet she had done just that.

Struggling with the shadow such thoughts cast across the

morning's bright sunlight, she slipped on a pair of boots and laced them. She would make the best of the situation, she decided. She would see to it that the contrived marriage lasted no longer than necessary. Noah Buchanan would remain the stranger he had been from the beginning. For a few days Isobel would become Belle Buchanan—a soft-spoken, common woman, like Susan Gates, the schoolteacher.

Setting her shoulders, Isobel wound her hair into a tight chignon and buried her tortoiseshell comb deep in the saddlebag. Facing the world without her mantilla was uncomfortable. To be bareheaded in public was a disgrace.

Sighing, she thought of the trunks making their way by mule train to Lincoln Town for transfer to Santa Fe. Gowns of silk, ivory linen, satin and taffeta. Lace mantillas, velvet jackets, cloaks, stockings of every hue. She had packed ebony combs, gold pendants, pearl earrings.

But an uneven hem, sagging petticoats and a limp cotton dress were the lot of Belle Buchanan. Drawing a shawl around her shoulders, she recalled the hours she and her mother had spent choosing the perfect gowns for a dance or a visit with friends.

What would Noah think of her transformation? Cautious, she opened the bedroom door. He stood beside a rough-hewn pine table, setting out chipped white plates and spoons. Her heart softening to this strangely gentle man, she stepped out.

At a sound from the door, Noah glanced up, straightened, and let his gaze trail down the slender figure approaching. Like some

Madonna of the prairie, the woman wore a gown of soft blue with a white cotton shawl around her shoulders. Sunlight from the front window framed her, backlighting her golden hair.

"Well, I'll be." He shook his head to clear the surprise and let out a low chuckle. "You sure have changed. You look regular now."

The light in her eyes dimmed as she glanced at the fire. "Susan Gates gave me the dress."

"It looks fine." He wanted to rectify his careless comment, but the words came hard. "You look pretty, ma'am. Like you belong here."

"But I do not belong here." She crossed the room and seated herself. "I belong at the Hacienda Pascal in Santa Fe. I have been trained as a marquesa—to oversee many servants, host officials of the government, plan fiestas and bear sons and daughters for my husband in accordance with our Spanish tradition."

"Sounds like a real humdinger of a life." He sat down opposite her. "Care for some scrambled eggs, marquesa?"

She bristled until he held the frying pan under her nose. "Sí. I suppose I should eat."

Noah set a spoonful of fluffy yellow eggs on her plate and a slab of crisp bacon beside them. He reached into an iron kettle, pulled out two steaming biscuits and tossed them onto her plate.

Bowing his head, he spoke in a low voice. "God, thanks for this new day and Dick Brewer's grub. Amen. Whew! Good thing Dick had his chickens penned up. Otherwise, we'd have been

scrounging for breakfast."

At her silence, he glanced up to find her staring at him. "Was that a prayer?"

"Sure. Talking to God like always." He spread butter on a biscuit. "Tunstall did right making Dick foreman. He's got education. He can read and keep record books."

"And you? Have you an education, Buchanan?"

"Name's Noah." He took a sip of coffee. "I can read and write. Mrs. Allison taught me."

"Who is Mrs. Allison?"

"Richard and Jane Allison. He owns land around Fort Worth. English folks." He smiled, remembering. "Mrs. Allison took a liking to me. She didn't have children of her own, see. She used to invite me into the library—books from floor to ceiling. She read me all kinds of stories, mostly from the Bible. Taught me to read, too. I reckon I read nearly every book in that library."

"But where were your mother and aunties to care for you? Why did you live with Señora Allison?

"I didn't live in the big house. Mr. Allison put me in with the other hired hands when I was six or seven. I worked in the stables. What about you? Are you educated?"

"Of course," Isobel replied. "I had a tutor. Later, my father sent me to a finishing school in France. I speak six languages, and I am accomplished in painting and embroidery. Arranging homes is my pleasure."

"Arranging homes?" Noah looked up from his plate and

glanced around the cabin with its tin utensils, rickety furnishings and worn rag rug. “What’s to arrange?”

“Chairs, tables, pictures. My fine furniture will arrive with my trunks. You would never understand such things, Buchanan. Yet we are alike in some ways.”

“How’s that?”

“Books. Horses.” She sat back in the chair and studied the fire. “I was away at school when news came of my father’s murder. I wanted to go to America immediately and avenge his death. But my mother was devastated, and she knew nothing of my father’s businesses. So I stayed with her, preparing the books, paying debts, managing the hacienda. Five years passed, and I learned that my greatest love was the land. The cattle. The horses.”

“Then you’re a vaquero yourself.”

“Oh, no!” She laughed. “I am a lady.”

“And the land in Spain? Will you go back one day?”

Her smile faded. “My mother has remarried, and my brother is grown. Now he and my stepfather fight. In Catalonia, we follow the tradition of the hereu-pubilla. Only a firstborn son can inherit. My brother is the hereu, the heir. He will win the legal battle against my mother’s new husband.”

“And what about you, Isobel? What about all that work you did while your little brother was growing up? You ought to get something out of it.”

One eyebrow lifted. “I’m not considered worthy to own land. Nothing is left for me in Spain. I cannot marry there, because

my father betrothed me to Don Guillermo of Santa Fe. I'm old now, a soltera, a spinster. So I came here to avenge my father's death and find the man who stole my land titles."

"It's the land, then." Noah poured himself another mug of coffee. "You want your land a lot more than you want to marry that don in Santa Fe."

"I do wish to marry Guillermo Pascal, of course. But by law the land is mine. I intend to have it."

"You won't have it long if you marry him. The Pascal family is ruthless. They'll take your property and set you to planning fiestas."

"That is not how it will be!" She pushed back from the table and stood up. "I shall manage my own land. Those grants have belonged to the familia Matas from the earliest days of Spanish exploration. Don't presume to predict my future, Buchanan. You are a vaquero. You know nothing. Now, saddle my horse while I prepare for the journey to Lincoln Town."

"Hold on a minute there." Noah got to his feet and caught her arm. "A cowboy is as worthy of respect as any land-grubbing don. And I didn't take an oath to be a servant to the grand marquesa. I'll see to your horse while you wash dishes, but we're not going to Lincoln today. We're headed for Chisum's South Spring River Ranch until the trouble dies down."

Nostrils flared, she peeled his hand from her arm. "You may go to the Chisum ranch, Buchanan, but today I speak to Sheriff Brady." Starting for the bedroom door, she paused and looked

back. “And Isobel Matas does not wash dishes.”

Biting back a retort he would regret, Noah banked the fire and set off for the barn. He tried to pray his way through the silence as he saddled his horse, and he had just about calmed down when he heard the woman step outside.

“You finished with those dishes?” he called.

She lifted her chin. “I am not a servant, señor.”

He was silent a moment, his jaw rigid. Then he left the horse and strode to the porch. “Listen, señorita. We have a rule out here in the West. It’s called, ‘I cook, you clean.’ Dick let us use his cabin, and we’ll leave it the way we found it. Got that?”

Her pretty lips tightened. “And in Spain we have a rule also. ‘A woman of property does not wash dishes.’”

“But you don’t have any property, remember? So you’d better __”

Noah stopped speaking when the haughtiness suddenly drained from her face. Her brow furrowed as she focused on the distant ridge, and her lips trembled.

At that moment he saw her as she saw herself: fallen from social class, power, wealth. Linked with a mule-headed cowboy who sassed her and ordered her around. Threatened by a cold-blooded killer. Unsure of her future, maybe even afraid.

“I…I don’t know how to wash dishes.” Her voice was low, soft. “It was never taught to me.”

At her confession, he took off his hat and tossed it onto a stool. “Come on, Isobel. I’m an old hand at this. I’ll teach you how to

wash dishes.”

Chapter Three

The sun painted the New Mexico sky a brilliant orange as Noah Buchanan and his bride, Belle, rode into Lincoln.

She had not expected this victory.

While up to her elbows in soapy water, Isobel had told Noah about the letter informing her family that someone in Santa Fe had begun proceedings of land transfer. Unable to learn the name of the man who possessed the Spanish land-grant titles—no doubt the same man who had killed her father and stolen them—Isobel had departed for America.

As she dried dishes at Noah's side, he suddenly relented. They would go to Lincoln instead of Chisum's ranch. But the town would be up in arms over Tunstall's murder, he warned. Rattlesnake Jackson, Jesse Evans and the rest of the posse would be there, along with Alexander McSween and Tunstall's men. It would be a powder keg waiting for a match.

"You'd better get to know New Mexico if you want to run cattle here." Noah spoke in a low voice as they entered the town. "That plant with the spiky leaves is a yucca. The cactus over there is a prickly pear."

Riding a horse borrowed from Dick Brewer, she pointed to a twisted vine. "That's a sandía, a watermelon."

Noah shook his head. "We call it a mala mujer."

"A bad woman?"

“Looks like a watermelon vine. Promises a man relief from his hard life on the trail. But the mala mujer grows only cockleburs.”

“And so it’s a bad woman—promising much but delivering only pain?”

“Yep.” He straightened in the saddle. “There’s Sheriff Brady’s place. His neighbor is my friend Juan Patrón. We’ll stay with him.”

A lump formed in Isobel’s throat. She was here at last, in the town of her father’s burial. And no doubt a place well known to his killer. A dozen flat-roofed adobe houses lined the road. Where it curved, she saw a few finer homes and a couple of stores.

“Listen, Isobel.” Noah slowed his horse. “I brought you to Lincoln, but while we’re here, you’ll do as I say. Got that?”

“Sí. But if we disagree, you may go your way. Isobel Matas makes her own decisions.”

“You’re not Isobel Matas anymore, sweetheart. You’re Belle Buchanan—and you’d best not forget it.”

He reined in outside a small house with two front doors. “Patrón’s store. He used to be a schoolteacher and a court clerk. When his father was killed in seventy-three, he took on the family business.”

“Seventy-three?” She slid from her horse into Noah’s arms. “My father was killed in seventy-three.”

For an instant she was drawn into a dark cocoon that smelled of worn leather and dust. Resting her cheek against Noah’s

flannel shirt, she relaxed in its warmth. But at the sound of his throbbing heartbeat, she caught her breath and stepped away.

"Seventy-three," she mumbled. "My father—"

"Old Patrón was murdered by a gang," Noah cut in. "The Horrell Gang went on a rampage, killing Mexicans."

"But my father was from Spain."

"Wouldn't matter. If you speak Spanish around here, you're a Mexican." He absently brushed a strand of loose hair from her cheek. "And remember, you're an American. You don't understand a word the Patróns are saying. Your name is Belle Buchanan. You're my wife."

She nodded, aware of his fingertips resting lightly on her shoulder. His face had grown gentle again, with that soft blue glow in his eyes, that subtle curve to his mouth. He was too close, his great shoulders a fortress against trouble, his warm hand moving down her arm.

Her eyes flicked to his. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could form words, he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. Gentle, tender, his mouth moved over the moist curves as if searching, seeking something long buried.

She softened. This male kiss, the first of her life, held a delight she had never imagined from the perfunctory pecks of mother and aunts. But it was over as quickly as it had begun. Noah lifted his head and focused somewhere behind her. "Buenas noches, Juan," he said. "Put down your six-shooter. It's me."

"Noah?" The stout young man started across the darkened

porch, walking with a limp. He was sturdy yet trim in a tailored Prince Albert coat. "¡Bienvenidos! You've been away too long. Come in, come in!"

"Juan, I want you to meet someone." Noah set his hand behind Isobel's waist. "My wife, Belle Buchanan."

"Your wife?" The snapping black eyes widened. "So pleased to meet you, Señora Buchanan."

"And I you," Isobel said softly.

"Noah, you are the last man on earth I would guess to take a wife. But come inside! You must meet my family."

As they started up the steps, Isobel caught Noah's hand and raised on tiptoe to his ear. "The murder! You must ask him about the murder."

He nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. She struggled to dismiss his easy intimacy. The man at her side was only pretending, after all. The kiss had been nothing more than a signal of the role each must play as man and wife.

She brushed at her dusty skirts and tucked the strand of hair into her chignon. But the burning on her lips remained as she watched Noah's shoulders disappear through a door leading from the porch.

"Please meet my wife, Beatriz!" Juan held the door for Isobel. "She is of the family Labadie, from Spain. But they have lived in New Mexico many generations. Beatriz, can you believe Noah has brought a bride?"

"Señora Buchanan, welcome." Beatriz, surrounded by

children of various sizes, curtsied in greeting.

At the sight of the woman's lace mantilla and comb, it was all Isobel could do to keep from hugging her. She managed a whispered, "Thank you."

"Sit—Noah, señora." Juan gestured toward the fire. "How long will you stay with us? A week or more?"

Noah chuckled as he settled on a bench. Playing the dutiful wife, Isobel took her place at his side. He stretched an arm along the bench back. "We're just passing through, Juan. I need to settle up with Chisum and then—"

"But do you not know?" Juan sat forward on the edge of his chair. "Chisum is in jail! Lincoln is in a terrible state. I believe it will soon be war."

Noah's arm moved to Isobel's shoulders. "What's going on, Juan?"

"It is difficult to speak of." He lowered his voice. "John Tunstall was ambushed and killed yesterday. Shot twice. Most believe it was Jimmie Dolan's posse."

"Dolan. No surprise there."

"Tunstall's men brought his body here. The judge took affidavits from Dick Brewer and Billy Bonney and issued arrest warrants for the men in the posse. A coroner's jury is taking testimony even now."

"Who's named in the warrants?"

"Jim Jackson, the one they call Rattlesnake. Jesse Evans. Others. Maybe up to forty men."

“How’s McSween taking it?”

Juan shook his head. “You know Alexander McSween. A lawyer—so mild, always thinking of law and justice. I saw the shock on his face when they told him about Tunstall. But he is busy. His house is full of guests. A doctor and his wife, their children, a schoolteacher.”

Isobel bit her lip to keep from asking about Susan. Noah inquired about his boss as Beatriz set a bowl of steaming posole on a nearby table.

“Chisum won’t get involved,” Juan predicted, watching his wife ladle out the spicy pork and hominy stew. “But come. I shall tell of Chisum’s predicament at dinner.”

Isobel followed Noah and hoped she was creating the right impression. But she might as well have been invisible for all the attention paid her.

“McSween told me the story of Chisum’s jailing,” Juan said after he had asked a blessing on the meal. “Just after Christmas, John Chisum, together with Alexander and Sue McSween, left for St. Louis. McSween was to settle some legal problems for a client. Chisum wanted to see a doctor. He has poor health, no?”

Noah nodded. “Off and on.”

“When they reached Las Vegas, the sheriff and a gang of ruffians assaulted them. They knocked Chisum to the ground, and left Mrs. McSween crying in the buggy. She was taken to a hotel, but the men were thrown in jail.”

“On what charges?” Noah demanded.

“McSween was accused of trying to steal money from his own clients. Chisum was charged with debt, if you can imagine that. The sheriff wanted him to reveal all his properties, you see, as debtors must.”

“Dolan’s behind this.”

“It is bigger than Dolan, my friend. Never forget the ring in Santa Fe.”

“What ring in Santa Fe?” Isobel could no longer hold her tongue at this mention of her future home.

Juan leaned across the table. “Men in high places have united in a ring of corruption, señora. They take bribes, arrest innocent men, steal land titles.”

“Who’s in the group, Juan?” Noah caught Isobel’s hand and pressed it to silence her. “Do you have names?”

“Governor Axtell, of course. But even more dangerous is the United States district attorney. Thomas Catron is a friend to Jimmie Dolan. The two are working together to take the whole territory. Your boss will be lucky ever to get out of jail.”

“But McSween’s here in Lincoln,” Noah said. “How did he get out of jail?”

“McSween was set free to settle his business. But Chisum refused to reveal his properties.”

“So he’s still in jail.” Noah looked at Isobel. “We may want to have you go on up to Santa Fe.”

“Santa Fe?” Juan frowned. “But why?”

“Belle has relatives up there.” Noah glanced at Isobel. “Juan,

would you send her people a telegram? I may need to send her up there right away if things get worse."

"Of course." Juan stood. "I was planning to pay McSween a visit anyway. We'll rouse Mr. Paxton to open the telegraph office. Will you come?"

"Glad to." Noah rose and patted Isobel's shoulder. "You stay and visit with Señora Patrón, honey. I'll be right back."

"I'll go with you, honey," Isobel sputtered as she leapt to her feet and nearly upset her chair. Hot anger radiated from the place where Noah had patted her as if she were no more than a dog. "If you send a telegram on my behalf, I must know what it says."

Juan chuckled. "Your new wife has a strong will. You must mend your stubborn ways, Noah—or break her spirit as you break the wild horses."

Noah was silent a moment before speaking again. "Stay here, Belle. I'll take care of this."

Isobel clenched her jaw as the two men walked to the door. The señora and her children eyed their guest as she stepped to an open window.

"You did the right thing, Buchanan." Juan Patrón's words carried across the night. "A woman should stay at home. If your new wife isn't happy with that now, she will be soon. You'll see."

Battling fury at Noah, Isobel shifted her attention to the bustling Patrón family. The table was spotless now, its rough pine top scrubbed clean and its mismatched chairs pushed beneath. A clamor of giggles and pleas arose from the kitchen, where

Beatriz, surrounded by reaching arms and grasping hands, was doling out portions of yellow custard.

"Flan?" she asked Isobel, holding out the dish.

Isobel shook her head. "Where is Alexander McSween's house?"

"¡No, señora—por favor!" The woman's eyes were wide with pleading. "You must stay here! There is much trouble in Lincoln. ¡Violencia!"

As the children swarmed their mother again, Isobel turned away. A cramped home, rough-hewn furniture, hungry children, corn to grind, clothes to mend. This was the life of a woman in Lincoln.

Thanking God that she would be leaving Noah Buchanan soon, Isobel sank into a chair. Even now he was sending a telegram to Guillermo Pascal, alerting her betrothed in case she needed a quick escape from Lincoln.

But if Guillermo came here, he would take Noah's place as her protector, as the one to help solve her father's murder. Noah would be free of her. And she of him.

Isobel closed her eyes, imagining the life she had always dreamed of having. A vast hacienda. Countless cattle. A home filled with beautiful furniture. Gracious parties attended by dignitaries.

Her eyes snapped open. There would be no visits by members of the Santa Fe Ring if she had any say. And she would have no hacienda to manage if Guillermo had his say. Noah had been

right on that account. The Pascal family would swallow up her land. She would be mistress of a prison more than a house. There would be small mouths to feed, meals to plan, stitching to fill her days. How different would that life be from the difficult lot of Señora Patrón?

A gentle tugging at her skirt caught Isobel's attention. A bright-eyed little girl with shiny black braids smiled up at her. "La casa McSween is very close. It is just past Tunstall's store."

Isobel shook the girl's hand. "Gracias, mi hijita."

The child scampered away to join her brother in a chasing game. Their mother leaned against the kitchen door, watching her children. As her son ran by, she swept him into her arms and kissed him.

Amid the laughter and fun, Isobel took her pistol from her saddlebag, drew her shawl around her shoulders and slipped outside. But a glance back at the flat-roofed house revealed a subtle transformation in what she had termed a prison. In the window, mother and child made a picture of happiness. The whitewashed adobe walls glowed almost translucent in the moonlight. The home was swept and scrubbed, the children well fed and cheerful, the mother content.

Turning away, Isobel wondered if she would find such peace with Guillermo Pascal. Passing a saloon, she saw several men leaning against a crude wooden bar and lifting mugs of beer. They were the likely compadres of a man like Noah Buchanan —common, obstinate, inconsiderate.

So why did her lips still burn from his kiss? Why did her breath catch in her throat at the memory of his hands around her waist? Worse, far worse, was the persistent image of his gentle smile. She could see that smile even as she hurried down the road, her leather boots stumbling over frozen wagon ruts. There it was as he poured steaming water into her basin, as he offered her a spoonful of scrambled eggs, when he plunged his arms into the dishwater to teach his new wife the mysteries of housekeeping.

Men were not supposed to be gentle. They were matadors, toreros—vanquishing life as if it were a bull that might rip open their hearts. Brave, strong, intelligent, bold. Fighting the sense that Noah Buchanan might be all these things as well, she hurried past the courthouse, a corral, a small shop.

As she pulled the shawl over her head, she heard the thunder of hoofbeats on the road. There! A band of men—five or six—riding at a gallop toward her. Clutching the pistol, she crossed the road toward a tumble of stones that had been cemented with mud to form a knobby tower. She crouched down into spiky, frozen grass and watched the riders approach. As they neared the tower, their leader reined his horse.

"You see that, Evans?" His breath formed a cloud of white vapor.

"See what?" Another rider edged forward. "We got an ambush?"

The first man was silent for a moment, listening. Isobel studied the low-slung jaw, the wide, flat nose, the narrow eyes

searching the darkness. “I seen something run across the road just as we rounded the curve. It was her.”

“Confound it, Snake, if you don’t stop seein’ that Mexican gal in every crick and holler, one of us is gonna have to give you what fer.”

“I ain’t seein’ things this time, Evans.” Snake drew his gun and leveled it at the tower. “She’s over near the torreón. She had somethin’ white on her head, just like that Mexican that seen us level Tunstall.”

“So what if she’s here? Who’d believe a no-account Mexican over us? We’re deputies of the law, remember?”

Snake reached into his saddlebag and jerked out a handful of delicate fabric. Isobel caught her breath. Her mantilla! He draped it over the barrel of his gun and waved it in the air. “Listen up, señorita,” he called. “I got your veil—and I’m gonna get you.”

“Aw, come on, Snake.” Evans spat onto the road. “What is it with you and Mexicans? They ain’t worth half the heed you pay ’em.”

Snake flipped the mantilla into his open hand and shoved it into his bag. “Let’s go, boys. Dolan’s waitin’.”

But when the other men spurred their horses down the road, Snake circled around and approached the tower. Isobel shrank into the shadow, her hand trembling as she gripped her gun.

“I know you’re there, chiquita,” he growled. “One of these days I’ll make you wish you had never laid eyes on Jim Jackson.”

His horse whinnied as he dug in his spurs. Hooves clattered

across the frozen track. With difficulty, Isobel got to her feet.

"Just try to kill me, asesino!" she ground out as she shook her gun at the retreating form. "Murderer!"

Her blood pulsing in her temples, she lifted her skirts and began to run, her heels pounding out her anger. The shawl slipped to her elbows, catching the frigid wind like a sail. She passed an empty lot and then came to a low-slung building. Its painted sign creaked as it swung in the crisp air.

"Tunstall Mercantile," she read aloud. "Dry goods. Bank."

Tunstall. Isobel saw again his young face, blue eyes wide with an innocence rarely found in men. The hat, the tweed coat, the brown kidskin gloves. So young, so naive. With a shiver, she set off again, knowing she must find Noah and tell him that Snake Jackson was back in town.

Grabbing up her skirts, she made for a large adobe house a few yards beyond the Tunstall store. She knocked on McSween's door. When no one answered, she turned the handle and stepped inside.

All talking at once, a crowd of men sat around a table. Isobel picked out Dick Brewer, Tunstall's foreman and Noah's friend, bent over a sheaf of papers on the table. Billy Bonney had pointed his gun to the ceiling and looked as if he might fire it at any moment. Juan Patrón was shouting at Dr. Ealy, who was arguing back.

But where was Noah? She scanned the room again until her focus came to a window. On its deep sill Noah sat watching her,

his blue eyes soft.

Isobel approached, her shawl sliding unnoticed to the floor. Her heart thundered as she came to a halt before him. Fingering a loose button at her throat, she shrugged. “I came.”

He nodded. “I was waiting for you.”

Chapter Four

Hand over her mouth, Isobel sagged against the wall. The men around the table turned to look, then resumed arguing. Noah took in the woman's damp hem, muddy boots, fallen shawl. Her hair had scattered across her shoulders, a golden cape.

"If you knew I would come," she murmured, "why did you tell me to stay at Patrón's house?"

"I'm supposed to protect you, remember?" he said. Though color was slowly returning to her face, she was breathing as if she had seen a ghost. Noah battled the urge to take her in his arms. "Did Snake Jackson and his boys see you?"

"Only Snake. Do the others know they're in town?"

"Not yet." He jutted his chin at the boisterous group. "They're squabbling over how to counter Dolan's latest move. Sheriff Brady appointed Dr. Appel from Fort Stanton to perform a postmortem on Tunstall's body. Appel's a Dolan man. He'll support the posse's claim that Tunstall fired first."

She frowned. "Then I must give my testimony now."

"No." He caught her hand, drawing her closer. "Don't say anything, Isobel. Stay out of it."

"Did you send a telegram to Santa Fe?"

"Yes."

"You know I won't go until I find my father's killer."

"If things blow here, you'll need a place to run. Tunstall's men

are bent on revenge. Dolan's gang will do anything for him."

Noah made a place for her on the sill. He couldn't tell if the woman was terrified or exhilarated by her second brush with danger. Her hazel eyes had gone green in the firelit room. Strands of hair brushed the arch of her brows. That button she was fooling with had dropped off, and he could see the creamy curve of her throat.

Looking away quickly, he ran his thumb and forefinger around the brim of his hat. Isobel could get herself shot by Snake Jackson. The man had a reputation for killing—he and Billy the Kid over there.

Isobel was staring at her knotted fingers, and he remembered how they had felt sliding tentatively up his back when he was kissing her. That kiss was a big mistake.

Noah shut his eyes, recalling the transformation of Isobel's face from anger to hesitation to pleasure as she had rolled up her sleeves and dipped her arms into warm, soapy water. She had chattered the whole time—something about a horse she'd owned back in Spain. She'd talked on and on, unaware of the tingle that shot up his arm every time she handed him a dish and her wet fingers touched his.

The kiss had come from that, from the way she had gotten inside his mind. And now here she was beside him, her lips still beckoning. Even worse, he was beginning to care what happened to the señorita.

"Salir de Málaga para entrar en Malagón," she said with a

sudden smile. “It’s like when you say, ‘Out of the frying pan and into the fire.’ My father used to shake his finger and call me la alborotadora, the troublemaker, of my family.”

“Now you tell me.” Noah shook his head. “Well, Miss Troublemaker, Snake Jackson’s in town, which means the constable hasn’t been able to serve the warrant. He’ll be at Jimmie Dolan’s house cooking up a plan. If we’re smart, we’ll lie low the next few days and then head for Chisum’s place.”

“Will you ask Señor Patrón about his father’s murder?”

Noah stood and took her arm. “Let’s head back to the house. Patrón will go with us. I’ll ask him then.”

They started across the room, and Noah lifted her shawl from the floor where she had dropped it. As he drew it over her shoulders, she leaned against him. It was all he could do to keep from catching her up in his arms right then and there. A kiss… just one more…and surely his craving would be satisfied.

As they passed the throng of arguing men, he realized Patrón had gotten into the thick of the debate, his face red above his collar and his shouts adding to the chaos in the room. Noah was about to suggest they talk to him later when Isobel slipped away from him and pushed through the crowd.

At the appearance of a woman in their midst, the men around the table fell silent.

“Excuse me,” she began. “My husband and I wish to return to the home of our host. Mr. Patrón?”

“Señora Buchanan,” Patrón spoke up, “forgive my rudeness.

Mr. McSween has been kind enough to let us gather in his home to discuss the situation."

Noah studied Alexander McSween. No older than thirty-five, the lawyer wore a drooping mustache that hung even with his chin. His tailored suit, polished boots and pocket watch set him apart from his colleagues. Noah had little doubt he was unarmed.

"A doctor has been bribed to perform the postmortem," Patrón continued. "We must find a way to avert this injustice. Dick Brewer and Billy Bonney do not agree. Dr. Ealy and I—"

"Dr. Ealy?" Isobel lifted her eyebrows as if she had never seen the man who had ridden across half the New Mexico Territory with her. "Are you a medical doctor, sir?"

Dr. Ealy gave an uncomfortable cough. "I am."

"Then two doctors must perform the postmortem," she declared. "Or Dr. Ealy might help with the embalming. It cannot be difficult to record the truth."

The men gawked in silence until Dick Brewer finally spoke up. "She's right, fellers. Doc Ealy, we'll make sure you help with the postmortem—if you don't mind. Thank you, Mrs. Buchanan."

Isobel tilted her head. "You may call me Belle."

As the sea of men parted to let Isobel through, Billy Bonney called to Noah. "Hey, Buchanan, you bringin' your pretty wife to McSween's fandango Saturday night?"

Noah's blue eyes flicked toward Isobel. "We'll see. I want to get on over to Chisum's place."

"Come on, Buchanan! I deserve at least one dance with the

lovely lady. You may be faster on the draw than me, but I guarantee I'm the best dancer in town."

"You've got the biggest mouth in Lincoln County, that's for sure." Noah shifted his attention as Juan and Isobel joined him. "Hey, Dick. Come here a minute."

The young foreman detached himself from the group. As he neared, Susan Gates emerged from the shadows of a back room. Clutching her skirts in her hands, she rushed toward Isobel.

"Susan!" Isobel caught her friend. "Susan, what's wrong?"

"You know this woman?" Patrón asked, his brow drawn into a furrow.

"I'll explain later," Noah said. "Miss Gates, meet Juan Patrón. Looks like you already know Dick."

Susan gave Juan a polite nod, but when she looked into Dick Brewer's eyes, a pink flush spread across her cheeks. Noah's friend and the schoolteacher had met only the day before, Isobel realized, but there was an obvious attraction between them.

She wondered if anyone saw such a spark between Noah and herself. Surely not. After all, Noah was just her protector. He cared nothing for her. And she had no more feeling for him than she might for a loyal stable-hand at her family's hacienda.

While he informed the men that Snake Jackson and the posse were in town, Isobel and her friend stepped aside.

"You've lost a button," Susan said. "My dress doesn't fit you well. Why don't we buy some fabric at Tunstall's store? I'll sew a new dress for you. Isobel?"

“That cowboy is looking at you, Susan.” She maneuvered her friend away from Dick Brewer’s line of focus. “Stay away from him. He is in the midst of the trouble.”

Susan glanced over her shoulder. “Don’t you think he’s terribly handsome?”

Isobel shrugged. She preferred a man with a stronger frame, with broad shoulders and hands that could bring down a steer. She preferred a man whose face bore the weathering of life, who had seen good and evil—and who knew to choose the good. She preferred—

“Noah!” she gasped as he caught her around the waist.

“Let’s get out of here,” he growled against her ear. “This place is a powder keg.”

As he led them away, Isobel turned and caught her friend’s hands. “Don’t let any man capture your heart, Susan,” she said softly. “Never let anyone take away your dreams.”

“Oh, Isobel, I…”

“I’ll come tomorrow. We’ll go to the shops.”

Susan waved as Isobel, Noah and Patrón stepped outside. As the three started down the moonlit road, Noah spoke. “I see Dick’s taken a fancy to your friend.”

“Susan’s red hair charms everyone,” Isobel replied. “She is lovely.”

“She’s skinny,” Noah pronounced.

“Dick was never a man to take after women,” Patrón added. “Is that not so, Noah?”

“Yeah, he’s like me. Prefers the company of a few good cowboys around a campfire to the meaningless chatter of women.”

Isobel bristled. “What do you know about women, anyway?”

“Not enough,” Patrón interjected. “I am surprised my friend chose a wife. The rumor in Lincoln says these men—Noah, Dick, Chisum and more—were all wounded by love.”

Noah grunted. “Chisum told me he proposed marriage years ago. The gal wanted to carry on being the belle of the ball a bit longer. Chisum got impatient. Told her it was now or never. She chose never.”

“And he’s been a bachelor ever since,” Patrón concluded. “Too bad for him. But what about you, Noah? You always had a reputation as a man to leave alone. Women have given their hearts to you, but you never kept them long.”

“Settling down with a wife is the farthest thing from my thoughts,” Noah said. “God didn’t make me the marrying kind.”

“But now you’re married!” Patrón exclaimed. “And you found a beautiful wife. She’s smart, too. Smart enough to capture you.”

Isobel held her breath in anticipation of Noah’s reply, but he changed the topic. “How’s your leg these days, Juan? Looks like you’re walking pretty good.”

Patrón patted his leg. “It is not the leg, my friend. It is my back.”

“Did the Horrell Gang peg you the night they killed your father?”

“No, no. My father died in seventy-three. John Riley shot me two years later—but for the same reason. Hatred of Mexicans. Riley accused several Mexicans of stealing, and shot them dead. I demanded an investigation. When we went to arrest Riley, he shot me in the back.”

“In the back?” Isobel stopped on the frozen road. “Did he face trial?”

Patrón shook his head. “Riley is allied with Jimmie Dolan. He was never even arrested.”

Isobel was beginning to piece together a picture of Jimmie Dolan. The man held great power and he used it for evil.

“Did Dolan have anything to do with your father’s murder?” Noah asked Juan.

“No, the Horrell Gang was just a group of worthless men.” Patrón’s voice held a note of bitterness. “Outlaws, renegades. In early December, the gang rode into Lincoln, shot up the town and got into a tangle with the Mexican constable. Several men were killed on both sides. A couple of weeks later, the Horrells returned for revancha—revenge. The Mexican community was having a Christmas dance at Squire Wilson’s hall. The Horrells stormed into the room and began shooting. That night, my father was shot and killed.”

Isobel walked in silence, imagining the horror of a celebration transformed into a bloodbath.

“Did you go after the Horrells?” she asked.

“Killing and more killing?” Patrón shook his head. “That is

futile, señora. My father was dead. Another man's death could never bring him back. You understand?"

She nodded, but she didn't truly understand. Where was the venganza—a man's proud avenging of his father's spilled blood? By all that was right, Patrón should have gone after the killers.

"The Horrells made a pact to kill every Mexican in Lincoln County," he was saying. "For a month, they rode through the countryside slaughtering Mexicans. Finally they went to Texas, stealing mules and horses, murdering both Mexicans and gringos along the way. Eventually, the Seven Rivers Gang ambushed and killed some of them, but the rest made it safely to Texas. They were indicted, of course, but none was ever taken into custody."

He paused. "I've heard that some of the gang—not the Horrell brothers, but others who rode with them—returned to Lincoln. But we don't talk of this. It's better left alone."

Isobel studied the tower of stones as they passed it in the moonlight. If the Horrell Gang had ridden through the countryside in 1873 killing every Mexican in sight, might they have murdered her father? His golden hair would have distinguished him from the Mexicans of the territory, but his native tongue was Spanish. Perhaps he had encountered the Horrell Gang on their journey to Texas. Perhaps they had heard him speak and gunned him down.

"These men," she said softly. "Which of them returned to Lincoln? What are their names?"

Before he could answer, Noah spoke up. "Juan, I need to tell

you that my wife's father was killed near Lincoln about the same time your father was shot down. We're looking for his murderer."

"I guessed there was more to this marriage than met the eye. So you wonder if the Horrells may be involved? What else? This woman knows more than she says."

"I witnessed Tunstall's murder," Isobel admitted. "Snake Jackson has vowed to kill me."

"Noah, you must take your wife to Santa Fe," Patrón said. "To her relatives. In Lincoln County, no one is far from violence. Look at Billy Bonney. John Tunstall gave him a clean slate, taught him to read, paid him well. Now I fear the boy's past will catch up with his present."

"Billy's always hot for blood," Noah said. "The kid would rather pull the trigger than talk things over."

Patrón gave a wry chuckle. "How many men is Billy claiming to have killed now? Seventeen? Or is it twenty-one? Señora Buchanan, the men of the West will tell you many things. Do not believe one tenth of what they say, and you will have no trouble here."

Glancing at Noah, Isobel lifted her damp skirts and stepped into the warm Patrón house. If Juan was right, she should not trust her own protector. Nor could she be sure that the Tunstall-McSween faction was nobler than the Dolan gang. After all, Jimmie Dolan had the law on his side, and he was allied with the powers in Santa Fe.

Doubt slinking through her stomach, she drew her shawl

tightly over her shoulders as Juan placated his agitated wife in Spanish. Isobel understood every word, of course, and had to work at maintaining a look of innocence. Once Juan had assured Beatriz she was not to blame for Isobel's disappearance, she led them down the hall to a bedroom. After unlocking the door with one of the keys at her waist, she lit a pair of candles on an ornate bureau.

Awash in a yellow glow, the guest room held a bed, a washstand, a chair. A small crucifix hung over the bed, and a cross of woven palm leaves topped the washstand. Beatriz pointed out logs and kindling, then nodded, smiled and left.

Noah knelt and began building a fire. "What was Juan telling Beatriz?"

"He said I followed you because I'm so devoted to you. And that you're in love with me."

Noah's hand halted. He glanced across at Isobel. She was looking out the window. "Juan is going to talk to you tomorrow," she continued. "To tell you the correct way to treat your wife."

Striking a match, Noah held it to the tinder. Was Juan really fooled about the marriage? Did he see something that neither he nor Isobel could admit? Sitting back on his heels, Noah spread his hands over the crackling flames. He didn't trust himself with the woman. Maybe she didn't feel anything, but he sure did.

"My parents had two bedrooms at our hacienda in Catalonia," Isobel said as she joined him by the fire. "With a door to connect them. Where will you sleep?"

Noah looked up, read the trepidation in her eyes and stood. “I said I wouldn’t touch you.”

“And Juan told me not to trust any man in the West.”

“Do you have a choice?” At her nervous expression, he pulled a chair to the fire. “Relax, Isobel. Sit here. I want to talk about your father.”

She perched on the edge of the chair. “What about him?”

Noah pushed a log with the poker, and a spray of sparks shot into the air. “Do you know which day your father was killed?”

“No. Only that it was late December. He had spent Christmas with my uncle at Fort Belknap, then he followed the Goodnight Trail north.”

“Is your father buried here? In Lincoln?”

“At the cemetery. I promised my mother I would go there.” Her lips trembled, and she stopped speaking.

Noah knelt again, reached out and covered her hand with his. “I’ll go with you.”

Isobel was cold, shivering. She clutched the ragged shawl close around her in one white-knuckled fist. How vulnerable she was, Noah realized. She was scared, too, though she would never admit it. Without her land titles, Isobel had nothing. She insisted she could shoot well enough to protect herself, but a cold-blooded murderer had threatened to gun her down.

“We’ll visit the courthouse tomorrow,” he told her. “They’ll have the record of your father’s burial. We can check the date and look for someone who remembers where the Horrell Gang

was that day. But, Isobel, you'll never be able to track down the killer. You should go to Santa Fe and try to stop the transfer of the titles."

"You're asking me to forget my father's murder? Do you really think I can stop a land transfer without any documents or proof?" She shook her head. "Impossible without the titles. And without the land, I cannot marry Don Guillermo."

At the mention of her intended husband, Noah stood and slapped the wood dust from his thighs. "Who cares about ol' Don when you've got me? I mean, what more could a lady want?" He couldn't hold back a grin as her eyes went wide. "Why, there's a gal right here in Lincoln who'd be mad as a peeled rattler if she knew about this arrangement."

"What arrangement?" Isobel stood. "Your woman has no cause to feel jealous. We have a contrato, a contract."

Edging past Noah, she walked to the washstand, drew her shawl from her shoulders and draped it on the bed. After pouring water into the bowl, she splashed her face and rinsed her hands. Dabbing an embroidered linen towel on her cheek, she turned back toward Noah.

"For that matter," she said softly, "there are many men who would gladly trade places with you, vaquero."

Noah took a step toward her. "I don't doubt that. For a woman who's fretting over land titles and a Spanish dandy, you have a lot more assets than you know."

"What do I have? My father left me nothing but empty land

in a bloodthirsty country where no man can be trusted. And Don Guillermo—"

"Don Guillermo doesn't know what he's missing." He caught her hand and pulled her close. "You've got everything you'll ever need right now. You're smart, Isobel. Gritty, too."

"Gritty? What is that?"

"Brave. You'd take on Snake Jackson and the whole Dolan gang if you had to. You know how to ride and shoot. And you're pretty. Real pretty."

She removed her hand from his and turned her shoulder. "I have gowns and jewels, but here I dress as a peasant."

"You don't need fancy gowns to be beautiful, Isobel." He lifted a hand and brushed a lock of hair from her shoulder. "You've got those eyes—green, brown, gray—what color are they?"

"My brother used to say they matched the mud in a pig's pond."

"What do brothers know?" He placed one finger under her chin and tilted her face toward the candlelight. "There's a wild cat that hangs around Chisum's bunkhouse. We call her La Diabla, and she's a devil, all right. Always in trouble, always getting into things she shouldn't. If you can catch her long enough to get a good look, you'll see the fire in her eyes—a green fire that makes them glow like emeralds. Your eyes are like that, Isobel."

For a moment she didn't speak, and Noah stood trans-fixed by the scent of her hair and skin. He could almost feel the velvet touch of her cheek against his fingertips. Trying to breathe, he

knew if one of them didn't talk soon, he would lose himself.

"You should write a book, Buchanan," Isobel suggested, her voice husky. "Any man who sees emeralds in my mud-pond eyes has lost his senses."

"I will write a book," he told her. "And my senses never let me down."

Noah's finger now traced the line of her jaw. He knew she was unaware of how her full, damp lips entranced him. His throat tightened, and his breath went ragged with just one stroke of her skin. She was soft, silky, dangerous. Like the barnyard cat, she was elusive. He knew he shouldn't try to catch her. One look in those eyes, and all of his careful plans could go up in smoke.

"I trust my senses, also," she was saying. "And I sense you are not keeping our contract."

"I'll keep the contract, Isobel. I'm a man of my word. But your lips are telling me one thing, while your eyes are telling me something else."

"No. You're wrong."

She tried to step aside, but he caught her shoulders and drew her close. His hands slipped up and cupped her head. His fingers weaving through her silky hair, he pressed his lips against hers.

Her breath was sweet, fragrant, coming in shallow gasps as she stood rigid in his arms. Puzzled, he studied her face. Surely this gun-toting, haughty, gutsy woman had been kissed many a time. But she trembled against him, her eyes deepening to pools as she gazed into his.

“Isobel,” he whispered, uncertain what to do next.

“Kiss me one more time,” she murmured, her eyelids drifting shut. “Just once, and never again.”

Chapter Five

Moonlight wafted through the iron fretwork on the window to drape a lacy shadow over the room. Unaware, she drifted toward him as his lips brushed hers. She slid her arms around his chest. Reveling in the rich scent of leather and soft flannel, in the rough graze of his chin against her skin, she ran her fingers down his back, which was solid, as hard as steel.

The sense that he was someone she must keep at a distance evaporated in yet another crush of heated lips.

"Isobel," Noah murmured. His blue eyes had gone inky in the flicker of the candles. "I promised not to touch you. I made a vow."

Even as he spoke, she read his plea to be released from that oath. How should she respond to the unbearable tumult he had provoked inside her? She must think of who he was—a mere acquaintance, an American, a common cattleman.

But why did his words sound like poetry in her ears and his kisses feel like music? Perhaps it was the moonlight or the crackling fire. Maybe it was the turmoil that spun through her heart. Or simply the magic of a man's touch.

"I don't know what you've done to me," she whispered.

"The same thing you've done to me. But it's not right. For either of us."

She wanted to argue, but the words didn't come. For endless

minutes, they gazed at each other. Then with a deep sigh, Noah shook his head, grabbed his saddlebag and bedroll and left the room.

"Isobel." A cool hand rested on her arm. "Isobel, wake up. The morning is half gone!"

Her eyes flicked open. But instead of the man with blue eyes who had walked through her dreams, she looked into the face of her sweet friend. "Susan? Where is…what time is it?"

"After eight. Noah sent me to look in on you."

Isobel struggled to one elbow. "Where is he?"

"At Alexander McSween's house. He and Dick have been talking since dawn."

"About what?"

"I don't know. I was in the kitchen helping Mrs. McSween. Here's your breakfast." Susan set a basket of warm tortillas on a small table and glanced to the end of the bed. "Isobel, what happened last night? You look…rumpled."

Isobel touched her tender lips, remembering. "I'm all right, Susan."

"Did you and Noah…? Did he try to…?"

"No, it's nothing." She waved a hand in dismissal. "He wants me to go to Santa Fe. To Don Guillermo. Noah is…a problem. A problem for me. I'm sorry I agreed to the arrangement."

She tried to make the words ring true, but they sounded hollow and empty.

"Isobel," Susan spoke up, "if that cowboy is bothering you,

we'll find a way to get you to Santa Fe. I know your don will protect you."

She herself knew nothing of the sort, Isobel admitted as she rolled a tortilla and took a bite. The more she thought about the man who had never written to her, never even sent a token of commitment to her mother, the less she trusted Guillermo Pascal.

And Noah Buchanan wanted neither a wife nor children to clutter his life. Besides, the vaquero was too common. Any connection between them was impossible.

Isobel forced a laugh as she stepped to the washstand. "Noah thinks he's a king," she told Susan. "He makes me wash dishes. He sends telegrams without my permission. He gives orders left and right."

Susan giggled. "He gives you orders?"

"Noah fancies himself my equal. But he has nothing."

"Nothing except a good job and a quick draw. Out West that can make a man a king. Look at Dick Brewer. He works for the Tunstall operation, but he bought land and a house, and he manages his own cattle."

"You were interested in Dick Brewer last night."

Susan's pale cheeks flushed. "I went outside for fresh air, and Dick came out, too. We talked."

"Talked?"

"Oh, Isobel, he's wonderful!" Susan hugged herself. "He's handsome and kind and strong. I've never met anyone so perfect.

I love him, Isobel."

"Love, Susan? So soon? In Spain we say, Lo que el agua trae, el agua lleva. It means what comes easily can also go easily. Your parents should secure a well-to-do husband—one who can give you a fine home. I stayed in Dick Brewer's cabin. It's too small for a family. His land is nothing but rocks. Keep your thoughts from love and you'll be happier."

Susan shrugged. "My Mexican friends in Texas used to say, Más vale atole con risas que chocolate con lagrimas."

"Better to have gruel with laughter than chocolate with tears," Isobel translated the familiar adage. Susan was teasing her now, and she didn't like it. It was bad enough that she'd hardly had any sleep, and that all night her mind had been possessed with thoughts of Noah Buchanan, but now she could hardly focus on her plans.

"I'd rather marry a cowboy like Dick Brewer," Susan said as she helped her friend dress. "I'd rather live in Dick's old cabin and bear him seven little roly-poly Brewers than go up to Santa Fe and marry someone like your rich Don Guillermo. You don't even know him. He would protect you as his wife, but he might not care a fig about you. He can give you a big house and jewels, but can he give you his heart?"

"What do you know about a good marriage, Susan?" Isobel challenged her. "The great families of Spain have made such unions for centuries. No one sits about moaning for love. We marry well because it is our tradition. I am obligated to marry

Don Guillermo."

Susan embraced her friend. "Don't be angry, Isobel. We come from different worlds. To me, Dick Brewer seems like he stepped out of a dream."

"Dreams vanish, pffft!" Isobel clicked her fingers. "Like that!"

Susan walked to the window. "I always wanted to fall in love. I know it happened fast, but I do love Dick."

Fumbling with the unruly buttons of her wrinkled bodice, Isobel realized Susan looked different today. Filled with uneasiness at her memories of Noah's kisses, she hoped she didn't appear smitten, too.

"Let's go down to the mercantile," Susan chirped. "We need to sew you a gown that fits. You want to look pretty for Noah Buchanan, don't you?"

"Such nonsense you speak!" Isobel chided her friend.

Aware she was blushing, she snatched her white cotton shawl and wrapped it tightly around her shoulders as she and Susan set off. The day was sunny, and the frozen road had begun to thaw. Scraggly dogs and snuffling pigs wandered through the mud. Wisps of piñon smoke floated from beehive ovens beside the adobe houses that lined the road. The smell of baking bread hung in the morning air, mingling with the scent of bacon and strong coffee.

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