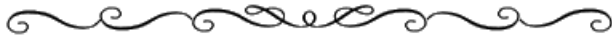


The Price of Eden
by
Bren Yarbrough Bruhn



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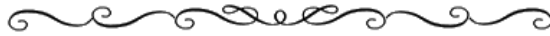
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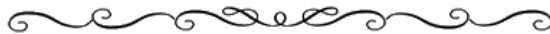
In the United States of America



"I was once a boy, then I saw the white man afar off. I hunted in the woods, first with a bow and arrow, then with a rifle. I saw the white man, and was told he was my enemy. I could not shoot him as I would a wolf or a bear; yet like these he came upon me; horses, cattle, and fields, he took from me. He said he was my friend; he abused our women and children, and told us to go from the land. Still he gave me his hand in friendship; we took it; whilst taking it, he had a snake in the other, his tongue was forked; he lied, and stung us."

Wildcat, Seminole leader

July 4, 1841



This book is dedicated to everyone who believed in me and encouraged me.

My deepest gratitude goes to my dear husband, Gary. Not only did he support me in this effort, but provides enough romance in our marriage to keep me believing in it.

And to my sweet mother, Betty, who never gave up on me, and always told me I was destined for great things. I sincerely hope she's right.

And last but not least, to all my dear friends and the clients of Lovely Painted Ladies. Thank you for buying my dolls and reading their stories. Your support has meant more than you will ever know. May God bless you all as he has blessed me with the gift of your friendship.

Special thanks to Terry G. Hawkins, who has always been my number one fan. I'm eternally in your debt, dear friend.

Chapter One

New Orleans, Louisiana 1855



"You stay right here Cait, understand?" Daniel warned sternly as he looked down the street. "I'm gonna make sure the horses are taken care of and I won't be long. Just don't go anywhere!"

Cait stood in the shadows in front of a popular river-front inn as her younger brother walked away, leading his big bay and the spirited black filly she had ridden into town. She hated to leave her horse behind, but she couldn't possibly take it with her.

She glanced back at the inn. Though it was still not one of the best in the city, Daniel thought it would be relatively safe for an overnight stay. It was close to the docks, but far enough away from the rougher parts of the city, and the livery stable was just around the corner.

Cait watched her brother disappear from view. He walked with an air of confidence, his compact, but brawny build making him appear older than his fifteen years. She had been angry with him when he insisted on coming with her, but she had to admit she felt safer with him by her side. She had never had the courage to venture into this part of the city before and though she found it terribly exciting, she couldn't help but feel slightly ill at ease, since she was completely out of her element.

She had been born and raised in New Orleans on her father's plantation on the Mississippi. She had lived a life of wealth and privilege and grown accustomed to the finer things in life. She had worn tailor-made clothes, been educated by a proper English governess, and had attended balls and parties in the homes of the cream of New Orleans Society. She had also been pursued by the sons of many well-to-do planters and politicians prior to her marriage five months ago.

But Cait had only recently discovered that her father was prepared to go to any lengths to insure that she never stayed married to Ian. It was that revelation that had prompted her decision to leave when the first opportunity had arisen.

Ian had returned to Florida less than a month after their wedding. Since then, she had awaited anxiously for an invitation to join him. She had received two letters from him in that time, the first promising that he would send for her in a matter of weeks. His last letter had been gossipy and informative, filled with news of progress in his work with the Indians and the restoration of Eden.

Though they were things she had heard before, he described in great detail the beauty and wonder of the tropical paradise that was to be her new home. He wrote in glowing terms of their closest neighbors, the Prophitt family, and how kind they had been to him, but failed to mention when he might send for her. It was a source of great concern for Cait, since it was crucial to their plan that she joined him as soon as possible. She couldn't imagine why Ian had delayed this long.

Hearing a string of swear words so colorful they could make even her father blush, she turned her attention to the predominantly male passer-bys. Burly stevedores and sailors with their unmistakable swagger, strode purposefully down the narrow cobblestone street, their conversations loud and crude. Men dressed in elegant attire paraded in and out of the various establishments from which raucous laughter, gay music, and an occasional angry shout could be heard. Dressed in tattered clothing, other men stood on street corners or just outside the doors of taverns, begging the departing patrons for spare change when they weren't sipping whiskey from small brown bottles tucked in their boots. Painted ladies in revealing, brightly colored dresses sashayed up and down the sidewalks, each step a seductive invitation as they cast bold glances at potential customers.

A woman with her cheeks so highly rouged they almost matched the red silk dress she wore paused to stand beside Cait. Pale and shaped like loaves of bread, her breasts were almost completely exposed by the deeply curved neckline of her dress.

"Nice dress," the woman commented. "But you won't make much money wearing clothes like that, honey. The men who come here expect somethin' different than what they can get at home."

Cait stared at her a moment, confused, then blushed from head to toe as she came to understand what the woman was implying. "But I'm not—"

The woman smiled, revealing a gaping hole where a front tooth had been. "It's okay, sweetie," said with a wave of dismissal. "There's no shame in it. We all have to make a livin' somehow."

A nattily attired little man with a balding pate and jowls as thick and heavy

as a bulldog's stepped up beside the woman, whispering something in her ear. With a throaty laugh, she took his arm and began walking down the sidewalk. "Good luck!" she tossed back over her shoulder.

Cait watched the pair as they slipped in the door of a brightly lit building further down the street. Suddenly self-conscious, she glanced down at the white voile day dress she was wearing. Perfectly respectable, with long, puffy sleeves, it fastened up the front with tiny pearl buttons that extended from the waistline to the demurely cut neckline. She hadn't worn it in years, as was evidenced by its tight fit. She had allowed Ian to take most of her good clothes with him when he left, leaving her with very little except the clothes her father had lavished on her recently. They were just another of his bribery tactics to get her to agree to a divorce. Though beautiful and stylish, she had refused take them.

She raised her gaze to the street, noticing for the first time the way men were staring at her, appalled that they would think she was standing here for the same purpose as the woman in the red dress. Pulling the hood up over her hair, she adjusted her long black cloak to cover her body, clutching it tightly in front of her.

Hearing a commotion, she stepped away from the wall as her attention was drawn to a saloon further down the street. A barrel-chested barkeep unceremoniously tossed two men through the swinging doors, uttering an oath and wiping his hands on his apron as he returned to the laughter and gaiety inside.

"Papa would just die if he knew I was here!" she said breathlessly. He had forbidden her to come anywhere near the docks, saying it wasn't a proper place for ladies. She was quickly learning why, finding that it was one of the few things about which he had been right.

She resumed her position, taking a deep breath to calm her shaky nerves. The smell of the river was stronger here, its odor dank and musty. She wrinkled her nose in distaste, noting the underlying smell of the wharf rats that populated the warehouses and abandoned buildings.

She heard the deep rumble of thunder and looked up at the sky. For days now a storm front had lingered over the city, producing sudden cloudbursts often accompanied by high winds and lightning. Heavy clouds blocked the stars and moon overhead, promising more rain, the cobblestone streets in front of her still drying from an earlier shower. The wind blew from the east, carrying with it a light mist that tore at the folds of her cloak.

She tapped her foot impatiently, wondering what was taking her brother so

long. Though accustomed to the summer storms, she didn't relish the thought of being caught out in one, but she had sworn she wouldn't step foot in any of the places that lined the docks unless Daniel accompanied her.

Her gaze wandered to the corner as an irritated frown creased her brow. "Where is he?" she muttered under her breath.

Seeing no sign of her brother, she stepped away from the wall, pausing in the light of a street lamp. Completely unaware that she was watched, she absently shifted the two items she held within the folds of her cloak. Beneath one arm was a small valise, hastily packed with a couple of extra dresses, hair ribbons and pins, and a pair of slippers. On the other was a little drawstring reticule, which she pulled closer to her body. It contained first class tickets on the *Blue Dolphin*, which was sailing for Tampa in the morning, and five hundred dollars, all the money she and Daniel had combined.

Barely aware that she was doing so, she casually strolled down the sidewalk. Before she realized it, she was standing near the bat wing doors of one of the saloons. She told herself she would be perfectly fine, even though Daniel had warned her to stay where she was. She was becoming increasingly anxious the longer he made her wait, making it impossible for her to stand still any longer. And besides, she thought obstinately, I'm a grown woman, and he has no business bossing me around.

Her gaze was drawn to a nearby tavern, the light, laughter and noise from the open door spilling out onto the sidewalk. Unable to resist the opportunity to view a world so far removed from her own, she stepped closer, her eyes growing wide in wonder.

Amid the dim light cast by lanterns on the walls, women wearing clothes that were little more than undergarments laughed and flirted with the men playing cards. An old black man with a deeply lined face and white hair played a lively tune on a spinet in the back of the room, though no one appeared to notice.

A scantily clad girl stepped up to the table closest to the door, a tray filled with glasses of whiskey balanced on one hand. As she placed a glass in front of him, one of the men swatted the girl's backside. The girl tossed him a saucy smile over her shoulder, apparently pleased by what Cait would have considered an insult.

More than slightly shocked and totally engrossed in her voyeurism, Cait didn't notice she was no longer alone. She felt a tug on her arm. Thinking it was Daniel, she turned around, fully prepared to scold him for taking so

long. She was alarmed to see that it wasn't her brother at all, but a complete stranger.

The man before her was a horrid creature, his lips stretched in a wide grin, with few teeth, rheumy eyes, and a bulbous nose. His clothes were filthy and torn, and he reeked of whiskey and sweat. Icy fingers of fear gripped her as he drew closer.

"Let go of me, you beast!" she shouted. Her demand only provoked a gust of whiskey-laden laughter from the man.

She tried to step around him, but he blocked her passage, reaching out for the reticule. The drawstring dug painfully into her flesh as he tried to wrench it from the crook of her arm. She struggled against him, pulling her elbow snugly against her ribs as he grabbed her in one beefy arm.

Cait knew he only wanted the money and most likely would leave her alone if she gave it to him, but she couldn't possibly let him take her ticket. It was the only way she was assured of getting to Ian, and all that stood between her and a lifetime of misery if she didn't.

She dropped the valise and shoved at him, frantically trying to pull away. She uttered a strangled cry of frustration, catching the eye of a man passing by. "Please help me!" she croaked, fighting hysteria.

The man merely shrugged and continued on his way.

Stunned to silence by the man's indifference, Cait was caught unaware as the thief suddenly shoved her backward. She threw out her arms, fighting to keep her balance as she felt her knees buckle. With graceful ease, the thief reached out and slipped the purse from her arm.

Her face frozen in surprise, Cait tumbled to the wooden sidewalk, landing so hard on her backside that her hair came loose from the pins that held it, falling in wild disarray about her shoulders. She remained seated, watching in astonishment as the thief disappeared down an alley.

Her stomach tightened into a miserable knot as she wondered what she would do now. Her ticket was gone, and all the money, too! How could she have let such a thing happen?

Even the weather seemed to be indifferent to her plight as the sky burst open above her in a sudden torrential downpour. Thunder shook the very earth as she rose to her feet. Lightning raced across the sky, the heavens glowing with the brightness of daylight. Stinging raindrops mingled with her tears, blurring her vision.

Pausing only to reach down and snatch up her bag, she ran after the

thief, her sodden clothes clinging to her ankles and hampering her movement.

She dashed under the canvas awning of the inn, running headlong into the imposing figure of a well-dressed man who stepped into her path.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" he asked as one large hand closed around her upper arm.

She mumbled an apology and tried to twist from his grip. "Let me go!" she shouted, her faced mottled with rage.

"Late for an appointment?" he asked, arching a brow.

"No!" she said swatting ineffectually at his restraining hand. She glanced up again and caught sight of the thief, who had ducked under an awning further down the street.

"That man! He stole my money!" she shouted. She pointed to the spot where she had seen him, but he was no longer there.

Hunter looked in the direction she pointed, but could see nothing more than people rushing for cover from the sudden torrential downpour. "Which man?" he asked.

"Never mind," she muttered miserably. "Now if you'll kindly take your hand off me," she demanded, her temper flaring. "You've already caused me to lose every dime I had and I don't need any more bruises."

Hunter released her arm, a wicked smile curving his lips as his gaze swept her from head to toe. He had to admit she was a tasty little morsel, and more to his liking than the city's usual fare. It was a shame he didn't have time to sample her wares, he thought regretfully.

"I thought you dockside whores protected your investments much better than that," he replied lazily, his grin widening.

Raising her gaze, she glared at him through her wet hair, her emerald eyes alight with fire. He was a big bulk of a man, much bigger than the one who had robbed her, towering at least two feet over her diminutive form. He looked as though he might be close to seven feet tall. He was dressed in a brown broadcloth frock coat, a gold brocade waistcoat underneath. His tight black breeches barely concealed hard muscled thighs. His stark white ruffled shirt was open at the throat, in vivid contrast to the bronze skin and tangle of dark hair on his chest.

His features were angular and chiseled, his raven hair parted in the center of his wide forehead and pulled back in a tightly woven braid that hung past

his shoulder blades. Above the high cheekbones were the pitch black eyes of the Devil himself, shining with merry light. They held hers in a strange grip, a sudden weakness overcoming her. Mesmerized by their onyx depth and intensity, she stared into them, unable to bring herself to move for a moment. Then his wide mouth stretched in a smug grin that made her want to slap it from his face. With little thought for the consequences of her action, that's just what she did.