

CHAPTER ONE

Jake Harwood eased his large buckskin over the last ridge before the wide expanse of the New Mexico backcountry began. He had been on the trail out of Santa Fe for five weeks and was dusty and tired. The Rio Grande, with its cool and soothing water, was some distance behind and Sam, his horse, needed water. He started downhill as the sky turned copper, but reined to a quick halt. A cloud of dust, vanishing in the southwest, caught his eye. Reaching into his left saddlebag, he pulled out a small field glass and peered through the lens. A band of Apache braves raced their ponies into the afternoon sun. Jake scanned the area next to the trail that parted the plains. An overturned stagecoach lay half-buried in the sand.

Urging his horse forward past clumps of brush and cactus, Jake drew his gun and cautiously trotted toward the stage. The bright sun and a slight breeze brushed his face. He adjusted his hat. Nothing moved as he drew closer. The coach was tipped on its side and the driver lay slumped over a wheel. A dead guard lay face up in front of the stage with an arrow protruding from his chest. All six horses had been cut loose. Three passengers, with arrows in their backs, lay spread-eagled, face down, in the soft sand next to the coach's door. Their bloody scalps attracted hungry ants. Trunks and baggage, busted open, lay scattered around and the strong box was smashed and empty.

Jake shifted his blue eyes from the bodies and dismounted from his horse. He flinched when he heard a scraping sound.

"Here . . . Help! Please . . . Help!" A choked cry belched from underneath the dug-in coach.

"Hold on." Jake ran to the other side of the stage.

The sand shifted by the half-buried door. He dug with his large hands. The back of a woman's head popped up first, then her hands and arms fought for freedom. She winced, shook her long, brown hair, and gasped for breath.

"Thank heaven!" She spit out sand and dirt clogged in her throat.

"You all right?" Jake stared at the encased young woman.

"I—I think so . . . ooowww!" She tried to wiggle out of her tomb, but the sharp pain in her left shoulder kept her captive.

"Let me help you. Just sit still a minute." Jake bent down, scooped out more sand from around her lower body. "There—that should do it, but don't move yet." He wrapped his arms under her breasts and slowly tugged her out of the hole.

"Who—who are you?" She rested against his chest.

"Jake—Jake Harwood."

"My arm hurts." She tried to move it.

"Take it easy." He released her. "I'll get water."

She sagged against the stagecoach. After a few swallows of water, the dazed woman looked over the carnage. "Horrible! Are they all dead?" She gingerly brushed dirt and sand off her dress with her good hand.

"Yeah, they're dead." Jake poured a little water from his canteen onto his weathered bandanna and handed it to her.

She squeezed the cloth, wiped it across her forehead, around her eyes, and down her cheeks. After patting her lips and neck with the scarf, she bent her head and shook the

grit from her hair. Wincing, she grabbed her shoulder. "I must have bruised this more than I thought."

"Might be broken. Let me see." Jake gently felt her shoulder, then folded his bandanna into a sling and fitted her arm into it.

The woman stood slowly. "That feels better." They faced each other for a moment without speaking.

He saw her beauty through all the dirt and anguish, but just stood and stared.

She gazed at his handsome ruggedness. "I guess I should introduce myself, and thank you properly. I'm Jessica. Jessica Raymond."

"Glad to meet you, ma'am."

"It's Miss . . ."

"What are you doing in Indian Territory?"

"I'm from New Orleans. I was on my way to California when . . ." She snapped back to what had just happened. Moving away from Jake, she surveyed the bodies strewn about the stagecoach. "I didn't realize Indians were this brutal." She covered her eyes.

"Apaches are raiders." Jake checked the victims again. "You are fortunate. They usually scalp and dismember the bodies." He scanned the scene. "Nothing we can do for these poor souls."

Jessica shuddered, put a hand to her mouth. "Shouldn't we bury them?"

"Got to tell the sheriff first."

"Why did they attack us?" She looked away from the bloody site.

"Probably for the horses . . . and gold. The cash box was empty."

"How would they know there was gold?" She still cringed at what had happened.

Jake looked closely at her. "I don't know, but we'd better get into town. Adobe Crossing isn't far."

"What about my things?" Jessica turned now, scanned the scattered luggage. Her fashionable trunk was still intact. "There." She pointed.

"Your trunk will have to wait. It'll be dark soon." He helped her up on his horse.

The afternoon sun lowered on the horizon and the desert's eerie shadows danced around them. The buckskin handled his double load easily over the grooved, worn trail toward the small town. Neither person spoke much, but Jake's curiosity peaked about the pretty lady from New Orleans pressing against him in the saddle.