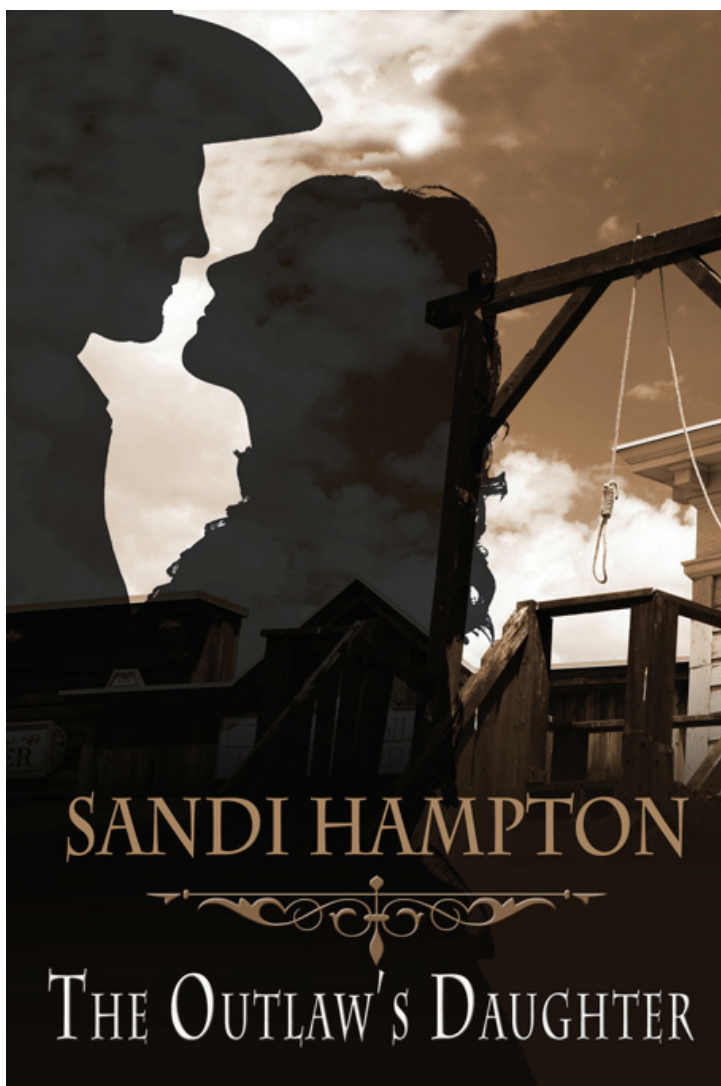




The Outlaw's Daughter

by

Sandi Hampton

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The Outlaw's Daughter

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Dedication

Thanks to my family and friends
for their continued support of my writing endeavors,
and a special thanks to my daughter Shelley
and my critique partner Jamie
for all the hours spent on "what ifs?"
And finally, thanks to my readers.
I hope you enjoy reading my characters' stories
as much as I enjoy writing them.

Praise for Sandi Hampton

SAMANTHA'S SACRIFICE

"I sat down to read this story when I woke up this morning and didn't stop until I finished. Yes, folks. It's that good."

~*Long and Short Romance Reviews*

"The plot was well developed, the sensuality was dynamic, and the emotional baggage each [character] carried around made this a great book. I could not put the book down. I look forward to reading more from this author. I wholeheartedly recommend this book."

~*The Romance Studio*

LAST CHANCE FOR LOVE

"An endearing story worth reading more than once. It is well-plotted and written in interesting language. I loved that it is listed as a sweet romance, yet there is enough sexual tension to keep you turning the pages to see how these two get together in the end. I applaud Ms. Hampton and look forward to reading more from her in the future."

~*WRDF Review*

"Beautifully written with a strong plot and all the makings of a great book. I was completely captivated."

~*Coffee Time Romance*

WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

"This wonderful tale left me with a smile on my face and a good feeling in my heart."

~*Seriously Reviewed*

Chapter 1

Charlotte Daughtery clawed at the rope around her neck and squeezed her eyes shut. As the noose tightened, she gasped for air. Lack of oxygen sent stars floating before her eyes. Sweat poured off her forehead, dripping down her cheeks like tears. The savage cries, filled with bloodlust, voiced their hatred for anything and anyone Daughtery.

“Get it over with. Hang her!”

“She’s a Daughtery. She don’t deserve no better.”

She could hardly blame these people. The Daughtery gang had terrorized Texas for as long as she could remember. But she’d never been a part of the gang—didn’t these people realize that? She hated what her family did—and who they were. Shame tinged her cheeks like a branding iron.

She’d done nothing wrong—yet she was going to hang because of who she was.

Two men grabbed her hands, twisted them behind her and bound them. The rawhide cut into her wrists, ripping and tearing her skin. Time stood still as she waited for someone to slap her horse’s flanks and snap her neck like a twig. She stiffened in the saddle.

With a prayer on her lips, Charlie stared at the faces in the crowd. No one there would raise a hand to help her. No one! Well, she wouldn’t beg for her life or ask forgiveness. She’d never killed or robbed anyone. Oh, she’d shot a few buzzards who were trying to hurt her. Wasn’t she entitled to defend herself?

It's not fair, she cried silently. I'm only nineteen and there's so much I wanted to do, so many dreams I wanted to follow, so much love to give someone.

At that moment, a shot rang out, echoing around the hanging tree in the hot Texas sun. The gunshot scared her horse, and it skittered beneath her. With every move the horse made, the rope tightened around her neck. She hugged her knees around the horse's belly and turned in her toes, trying to stay in the saddle.

Silence settled over the crowd as all eyes turned to find the shooter. The sun's glare blinded Charlie. All she could see was the tall shadow of a man on horseback, a smoking gun in his hand.

"That's enough," the stranger yelled. The deep voice was rough and forceful. "Now back off. There ain't gonna be no neck-tie party today."

"But she's a Daughtery," a man called out, "and we're gonna hang her. You can't stop us."

"She deserves to die," yelled another. "Stay out of this, Marshal."

Marshal? A strangled gasp escaped her lips. Her gaze fell to the man's chest where the faint outline of a star gleamed. A faint ray of hope dared to dawn in her breast. But could one man hold back this mob of hate-filled people?

"Get her down."

"But you can't—"

"Yes, I can. The name's Trey Thornton. I'm a U.S. Marshal, and this badge says I can." He dismounted and walked toward the man. "You want to argue the point?"

The crowd of angry people parted. The man's courage deserted him, and he shook his head. "Ain't no Daughtery worth getting killed over."

"Glad to hear you think that way." The lawman glared at everyone else, person by person. "Anybody else got anything to say?" When no one spoke, he

continued. "That's what I thought. Mighty brave men hanging a mere slip of a girl." The marshal spat on the ground in front of them, then turned to her. "You all right, miss?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words would come. She nodded. He pulled a knife from a sheath at his waist, stepped behind her and cut the ropes around her wrists. Despite her resolve, a whimper escaped her lips. She pulled the noose from around her neck and slid from the horse's back. Her legs buckled under her, and she slumped toward the ground.

Strong hands caught her. The marshal held her to his chest with seeming ease. Two men surged forward out of the crowd, but a well-placed bullet shot at their feet sent them stumbling backward.

"Stay back unless you want to eat some lead." He leveled an angry stare at the mob. "Where's the sheriff?"

No one answered until a boy stepped forward. "He went fishing, Marshal. He said he didn't want no part of this so he left town."

A sneer curled the marshal's lips. "I'll remember that. What's his name?"

"Hoyt. Red Hoyt."

"Well, I think you good, up-standing citizens will soon be losing a sheriff. I'll make sure of that."

Charlie glanced up and locked gazes with the lawman. His hard green eyes told her nothing. Was he really risking his life to save her? No one had ever done that before.

"Can you walk?" His voice was as hard as the glint in his eyes.

"Yeah."

"Is that your horse?"

She nodded.

"Grab the reins and follow me."

Charlie scooped up her mount's reins and

followed closely behind the lawman. Only the gun in his hand kept the still-angry mob from attacking her. When they reached his horse, he motioned to her. "Mount up."

She grabbed the pommel horn, summoned the last of her strength and pulled herself into the saddle. With trembling hands, she smoothed her tattered skirt around her legs. The marshal backed up to his mount. With his revolver still trained on the men, he climbed into his saddle. "I'm warning you men—don't follow us or I'll toss you in jail and throw away the key."

Charlie turned her horse and headed down the main street of Concho Springs. She'd always considered Concho Springs to be home, but now she hoped she'd never set foot here ever again. At first, the townspeople had been friendly, but then they'd found out she was a Daughtery.

And things had changed.

The shack she'd lived in had been just that, a shack to keep the weather out. No one had even come to visit. Only drunken cowboys had searched her out, but she'd always run them off—until today. And today, they'd used their fists on her. She must look a fright. Her right eye was swollen almost shut, and she could taste her own blood on her lips. Her jaw felt like it was broken. As she rode, leaving Concho Springs in the dust, a weight lifted from her shoulders.

Hoof beats sounded behind her, and soon the lawman drew even with her. She braved a glance in his direction. He rode tall in the saddle, sitting the big gelding as if he were part of it. His hat was pulled low over his forehead, and she couldn't see his eyes, but she knew they were green, a dark green like the forest. Longish brown hair curled over his shirt collar. His nose was straight, while a mustache covered his upper lip. Even though he was lean and

rangy, Charlie sensed great strength. He reminded her of a mountain lion ready to pounce. A shudder raced down her spine.

I'd like to have a man like that—Whoa! What am I thinking? That's asking for trouble, and I've got all the trouble I can handle. I'm a Daughtery—I'd best not forget it.

His big gelding quickly outpaced her mare. They rode steadily for over an hour. The hot Texas sun stole what little strength she had left while the lawman seemed unaffected. Several times he pulled up and scanned the way they'd come. But no plumes of dust rose in the distance, no shadows shifted where they shouldn't. She sighed in relief. Evidently the townspeople had believed the marshal would make good on his threat to lock them up and throw away the key.

They rode until the sun dipped below the horizon, leaving golden clouds floating in a blue and lavender sky. The distant mountains looked close, but distances out here were deceiving. A lone eagle soared overhead, riding the wind currents with ease. The only other creatures she'd seen were a few white-tailed deer and rabbits.

At dusk, he reined in his horse. "Looks like no one is following us. It'll be dark soon. Let's find a place to make camp."

She pulled up beside him. "What are you going to do with me?" Her voice was raspy, and she had to clear her throat several times. She reached up and touched the rope burns around her neck.

"We can discuss that later." He shifted his weight in the saddle and notched up the brim of his hat with his thumb.

"No. Let's discuss it now. Am I your prisoner? I haven't done anything wrong so you gotta let me go."

He raised an eyebrow. "No, I don't have to let you go. Like I told them back there in Concho

Springs, this badge," he touched the tin star on his chest, "gives me the authority to—"

"To what?" Her voice rose. "Hold me against my will when I've done nothing wrong? I'm not wanted anywhere, am I?"

He locked gazes with her. "Not that I know of. So if I did release you, where would you go? Back to the good people in Concho Springs?"

"That's none of your business," she protested. "So if I'm not under arrest, I guess I'll be going on my way."

He grabbed the reins from her. "You're not under arrest. Let's just say you're in my...protective custody."

"What does that mean?"

He spurred his horse forward and pulled her behind him.

"Stop," she screamed. "Let me go."

"You're going with me. There's a good place to camp up ahead. It's got good water and some shade trees. We'll spend the night there."

Charlie cursed him under her breath. She had no one to turn to and nowhere to go. She hated him for reminding her of that. But what did he want with her? Then it hit her. How could she have been so stupid? He'd rescued her because he thought she knew the whereabouts of her pa and brothers and that she'd lead him to them. Well, he could wait until hell froze over. She wasn't a traitor to her own kinfolk. Even though she hated what they were, they were still her family.

He halted the horses in the shade of several live oak trees and dismounted, then walked back to her and held out his arms. She glared at him and ignored his outstretched arms. She lifted her leg over the saddle horn and slid off the horse.

But her skirt caught on the pommel, and she plunged toward the ground.

Trey Thornton dove toward the falling woman, but he was too late. She slammed into the ground with a loud, bone-jarring thud. The breath left her body in a single swoosh. Her head hit a rock, knocking her unconscious. He scrambled toward her and knelt by her side, then leaned over to check her breathing. Her chest rose slightly, then fell. Thank God, she was alive. She'd been through hell today.

He lifted her easily. She weighed nothing in his arms. With great care, he made his way to the pool and gently laid her down in the soft grass. He untied his bandana and dipped it in the cool water, then hurried back to her. As he gazed down at her, he cursed. The bruises around her eyes had darkened, and the cut on her lip was crusted with dried blood. Her shirt had been ripped from her shoulders. He pushed the remnants of fabric aside and stared at the rope burn around her neck. His hands curled into fists. He'd like ten minutes alone—without his badge—with the bastards who'd done that to her. He'd beat them within an inch of their lives.

As he washed her face, she grimaced and groaned softly. He brushed the black hair back from her face. Even with the bruises, she was beautiful. Her heart-shaped face, turned up nose and wide, sensual lips set his heart to pounding, something he hadn't expected. When her eyelids fluttered open, blue eyes stared back at him.

"What happened?" She rubbed the back of her head. "Ouch!"

"You took a nasty fall."

She quirked an eyebrow at him and wrinkled her forehead.

He grinned. "Contrary to what you're thinking, ma'am, that's the truth. The hem of your skirt caught on the saddle horn."

She tried to sit up but fell back.

“Why don’t you just lay there and rest while I fix us some grub?”

“Guess I got no choice.”

Trey ignored the challenge in her voice. Despite her weakened state, she had grit. He shoved himself to his feet and glanced around the area. “There’s plenty of firewood. I’ll make a fire.”

After gathering several dried branches, he made a fire, then ringed it with rocks. With no rain to speak of, any spark could send a wildfire racing across the prairie. He walked over to the grub bag and pulled out a coffee pot and some coffee. As he made his way to the small pool and filled the coffee pot with water, he whistled to himself. He returned to the campfire. Soon, the smell of coffee perking filled the air.

He glanced over his shoulder at her and found her watching him. “You hungry?”

“Yeah.” She stared at him for several long moments. “Why did you risk your life to rescue me?”

He shrugged. “I’m a lawman. It’s my job to stop lynchings.”

“But how’d you know about the lynching?” She rolled on her side to face him.

The gentle swell of her hip caught his eye, and he licked his lips. An unexpected and unwanted flash of desire sparked, but he brushed it aside. She was the means to an end. Nothing more, and he’d best not forget it. “Heard tell there was a Charlie Daughtery in Concho Springs. Figured it to be another one of Bill Daughtery’s sons I didn’t know about. Kind of surprised me to find out you were...female.”

“Well, just so you know up front, I don’t know where my pa and my brothers are. They never let me know where they are. Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.” She flicked several strands of ebony hair away from her face.

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"I don't remember." She averted her gaze and stared out across the prairie.

"You're lying. You do know your pa and your brothers are robbers, and killers, don't you?" His mouth tightened into a thin line. "The scum of the earth."

"They haven't done most of the things they're accused of." She squeezed her eyes shut. "You know how rumors fly."

He considered her words. Did she really believe that? "You trying to convince me? Or yourself?"

"Well, my pa told me they hadn't done all...that, and I believe him." She pushed out her bottom lip and bit down on it.

Memories, bad memories, floated through Trey's mind. He forced them to a corner of his mind, angry that he'd let an old wound bleed. The Daughters had robbed a bank in Bitter Creek and killed the sheriff there, his best friend John Spencer. "I've seen firsthand some of their work—and it ain't pretty."

At his words, her face closed down. She shoved herself to her feet and walked away.

"Where do you think you're going?" He jumped to his feet.

She didn't turn around. "Don't worry. I'm not trying to escape. I've got to...you know..."

When he realized what she meant, he relaxed and hunkered down beside the fire. The horses were tethered nearby, so she couldn't escape. He poured himself a cup of coffee and pondered on what to do next. He had a hunch she knew more about her family's whereabouts than she was telling, but could he convince her to help him find them. The banker at Concho Springs had told him she regularly received money and that he'd deposited it into an account for her, and it now contained over a thousand dollars.

Blood money. He had to find a way to reach her and make her understand that she had to help him bring them to justice.

In a few moments, he heard footsteps. He glanced up and saw her make her way to the pool. She walked slowly, as if in pain. Again, anger surfaced at the treatment she'd suffered in Concho Springs. Even though she was a Daughtery, she didn't deserve that. As he watched, she knelt, reached out and scooped up a handful of water and splashed it on her face. A grimace pulled down the corners of her mouth. She massaged her jaw, then looked at him. "I'd like to bathe."

"That makes two of us. I've got a week's worth of trail dust on me needs washing off. But let's eat first and then I'll take a walk and you can have some privacy. We've got bacon and beans, and that's about it. We'll have to pick up more supplies later."

She stood and faced him. "*You* can pick up supplies, Marshal, because I won't be here."

"We'll see, Miss Daughtery, we'll see."

Chapter 2

Charlie eased her bruised and battered body into the cool water. Every bone in her body ached. She splashed water onto her face and gently rinsed the dried blood from the corner of her mouth. The swelling around her eye had lessened, but the rope burn around her neck continued to burn and sting, and it was hard to swallow.

She ducked under the surface and wet her hair. When she surfaced, she grabbed the sliver of soap the marshal had dug out of his saddle bag for her. She lathered the soap into her long tresses, then rinsed it. She stretched her legs out and leaned back against the bank. A long sigh escaped her lips. To be clean again was a heavenly feeling.

The moon broke through the dark clouds, washing the land in a golden, peaceful glow. The dark shape of an owl floated in the dark sky. It landed in the trees and hooted softly. The scent of sagebrush filled her nostrils while a night breeze chased away the heat of the day and cooled her fevered skin. If circumstances were only different, she could appreciate the beautiful Texas night. Instead, loneliness rolled in with the night wind. As if in response, a coyote howled a mournful lament.

For a moment, she allowed herself to wallow in self pity. But only for a moment. No one was going to help her but herself, and she'd best get used to the idea.

A movement on the small rise to her right caught her attention. The dark figure of a man stood silhouetted against the gray-blue sky. Marshal

Thornton blew a puff of smoke from a cigar, then stretched his arms over his head. He looked to be as exhausted as she was. She looked from him to the horses, judging the distance. Could she get to her horse, saddle it and escape before the lawman caught her? At that moment, he turned and stared down at the camp. Had he somehow sensed her thoughts? Escape would have to wait for another day. In her weakened condition, she wouldn't stand a chance.

Besides, if she ever did escape, where would she go? Other than her pa and brothers, she had no other family or friends. Her pa's drinking and robbing and killing had made sure of that. It'd sent her mother to an early grave. She hated her father for what he was—so why couldn't she give him up?

After soaking another fifteen minutes, Charlie climbed from the pool. Since she had no towel, she walked in the moonlight until she was dry, then walked over to where a blue chambray shirt hung from a low limb. Because her blouse had been torn to pieces by the angry mob, the Marshal had loaned her one of his shirts. 'Just til we get to a store,' he'd said. While she didn't want charity, it was either wear his shirt or her ragged chemise. She picked it from the tree and shrugged into it.

It smelled of tobacco, leather and horses—a very masculine scent. It wrapped around her like a noose, and she inhaled deeply. The tips of her breasts pearly into taut buds, straining against the rough fabric. What the heck was wrong with her? One sniff of his shirt had her acting like a mare in heat. She buttoned the shirt and rolled up the sleeves. The shirt fell past her knees. She fetched her skirt, or what was left of it, and stepped into it, then laughed. She looked a fright.

She glanced up at the ridge. He was gone.

As she ambled toward the campfire, he appeared

out of the darkness, without a sound. She'd not even heard him coming. When he saw her, he smiled.

She curtsied, then paraded around the fire. "And, kind sir, do you approve of my frock? I ordered it all the way from Paris."

"It's most becoming, *mademoiselle*." He hunkered down on the log beside the fire and picked up the coffee pot. "Would *mademoiselle* care for a glass of wine?"

"*Oui*." She flounced over to the fire and sat by him. He poured coffee into a cup and held it out to her. She smiled at him. "*Merci*."

"Where did you learn French?"

"From my momma. She was a stickler for learning. She used to send away for books until pa..." Her voice cracked. "Until she passed away." She emptied the cup onto the ground and then threw the cup as far as she could.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to stir up...old sorrows." He pulled his revolver from his holster.

Charlie's mouth gaped open. She jumped to her feet and stumbled backward. "What are you going to do?"

"Just going to load my gun. You don't have to worry." He chambered several rounds of ammunition, then rose and walked to his horse and pulled his rifle from the scabbard. After checking the rifle, he returned to the fire, picked up his cup and tossed the rest of his coffee onto the glowing embers. "Guess we'd better turn in. We've got a long ride tomorrow."

She jumped to her feet. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

He turned to face her. "Oh, yes, you are."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Nope."

"Then you can't make me go with you. In fact, I'm leaving right now." She darted toward her horse.

He caught her and whirled her to him. She fell against his chest.

"Sorry, Miss Daughtery, but you're staying with me. While you're not under arrest, you're a material witness and you're in my custody."

The light, teasing voice of earlier was now replaced with a voice as cold as a nor'easter. She fought against him, clawing at his face. Her nails raked his cheek, and his skin tore. He grabbed her hands and held them against his chest. She kicked him in the shin. He cursed but didn't release his iron-tight grip.

"Let me go. This is kidnapping, and I will press charges against you, Trey Thornton. I swear it." She gritted her teeth, trying to stop the threat of tears. But she failed, and wet tears trailed down her face.

"Look, I'm sorry," his voice softened, "but I'm just doing my job. And sometimes I hate my job, but I swore an oath." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

All fight washed out of her, and she slumped against him. He scooped her up and laid her on his bedroll. She turned away from him and cried until there were no tears left. After drying her eyes, she faced him. His long, lean frame stretched out, he leaned against his saddle, staring up at the star-lit sky. She studied his profile. He had a high forehead, a straight nose, a jaw that looked as hard as granite, a sensual mouth covered by a thick mustache and dark eyebrows and lashes. A very pleasing picture.

As if he sensed her staring at him, he shoved himself up on his elbows and locked gazes with her. Unbidden thoughts crowded into her mind. What would it be like to have someone like Trey Thornton, a strong, decent man, love you? To have a family? Bear his children?

But her pa and brothers had ruined all that for her.

"I need your word, Miss Daughtery, that you won't try to escape. If not, I'll have no choice but to tie you up. So what will it be? Do you give me your word?"

"I'm a Daughtery. Would you take my word?"

"Yeah."

She pulled the blanket up to her chin. Physically exhausted and emotionally drained, Charlie nodded. "I couldn't run if I wanted to. I'm too tired. You've got my word."

When Trey awoke, the dark shadows of night had faded, replaced by dappled sunlight shining through the trees. The strand of oaks kept the heat at bay.

Light snores told him Charlie Daughtery had honored her word. Probably the first Daughtery to do so in a very long time. She lay sleeping by the fire, the blanket wrapped around her slim body. The bruises around her eyes had faded to a pale yellow. She looked so fragile, yet she'd survived a beating and a lynch mob. Despite his hatred of anyone Daughtery, his estimation of her continued to climb.

And she'd survived being a Daughtery for another day.

For a brief moment, he wondered why she hadn't changed her name or moved away—to a place where no one knew her. But that wasn't his business. His business was to find the Daughterys and bring them to justice. And no matter what happened, she'd probably get hurt. And what was he going to do with her? If she refused to cooperate with him, he didn't know how long he could hold her.

He pushed his blanket aside and shoved himself to his feet. He headed off down a small, rocky ravine to take care of his personal needs. He'd let her sleep as long as possible. She'd need all the rest she could get because he was going to push hard today.

When he returned, she was still asleep. He gathered dried branches and stoked the fire, then set water to boiling and added the coffee. As it perked, he cooked the last of the bacon. They'd need supplies soon. It was beef jerky from here on.

As the bacon sizzled in the pan, Trey planned his course of action. The Daughterys were reported to be up around the Brazos. So he'd head north and stop at Stumpy's Trading Post. There, he could get food and some clothes for the girl. *Why do I keep thinking of her as a girl? She's clearly a woman.* For a few short seconds, he allowed himself to imagine how she'd look all dressed up in silk and satin, pearls around her neck, ribbons in her hair. What if she'd been given a chance in life? He'd wager a year's salary she'd outshine everyone.

Reluctantly, he walked over and woke her. "Get up, Charlie. Breakfast is ready. We're burning daylight."

She moaned and opened her eyes. Blue eyes misty with sleep stared up at him as she smothered a yawn. "It's not morning yet, is it?"

"Afraid so."

She stretched, her breasts pushed upward, straining against his shirt. Trey averted his gaze. This woman had quickly aroused his interest—and his body. In fact, his dreams last night had been full of her. Dreams that a man shouldn't have about a woman unless he was married to her.

She sat up and massaged the back of her neck. "That ground sure is hard."

"That it is." He returned to the campfire and hunkered down beside it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her rise and stumble off, hunched over and walking like an old woman, into the trees.

When she returned, she sat on the log beside him. He poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. "This should wake you up. It's strong enough to grow

hair on your chest.”

“I can’t think of anything I need more than hair on my chest.” She took a hesitant sip then made a face. “Are you sure that’s *coffee*?”

He laughed. “No guarantees.” He leaned over and softly touched her face. “The bruises are about gone. You look a hundred times better.”

She touched her face, then her neck. “And this one?”

He shook his head. “Nope.” He ladled beans and bacon onto a plate and handed it to her.

Her hand trembled as she took the plate. “When my pa hears about this...” her voice trailed off, then got stronger, “they’ll pay for this.”

Every nerve in his body tingled. “Revenge sometimes get in the way of straight thinking.” And that applied to him too. He had to keep his personal feelings separate and do his job. “Besides, how’s your pa gonna hear about it? You gonna tell him? Is he in the area?”

“Don’t be trying to trick me, Marshal. I told you I don’t know where they are.” She gulped down the rest of her coffee. “Are you going to let me go?”

“Nope. Today we head north to the Brazos. It’s a long, hard ride.”

“How far?”

“Couple of days ride.”

She regarded him steadily. “That promise I made you last night about not trying to escape, it don’t hold from now on.”

“Fair warning, but if you do try to escape and I catch you,” he wagged his finger at her, “you’ll ride handcuffed the rest of the way. Understand?”

“Fair warning,” she mimicked.

He was tempted to smile but kept his expression as serious as he could. He grabbed the coffee pot and doused the fire. He stood and kicked dirt over the hot coals. “You pack up while I saddle the horses.”

"Why should I pack up camp? I'm your prisoner—shouldn't you tend to that?"

He locked gazes with her. "It'll be a lot easier trip if you cooperate with me."

"I wouldn't count on it."

As Charlie broke camp, she watched Thornton saddle the horses. The muscles in his arms and back bulged as he picked up a heavy saddle and tossed it over the horse's back. When he finished, he took off his hat and wiped perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

She clenched her fist, ignoring the urge to get closer to him. Goose pimples slid down her arms. She hated her attraction to him, fearing it would weaken her resolve. She wasn't used to kindness, and while he wouldn't let her go, he'd not been unkind to her.

He led the horses over to her, grabbed the canteens and threw them at her. Without a word, she marched over to the pool and filled them. When she returned, he was already mounted astride his gelding. She handed one canteen to him, then hung the other on her saddle horn. With one hand, she held up the edge of her skirt. With the other, she grabbed the saddle horn and pulled herself into the saddle. He nudged his horse out of the clearing and then into a gallop.

Her mare pranced around the clearing, ready to take off after the gelding. Charlie tightened her hands on the reins. Was he testing her? Wondering if she'd try to escape? More likely, he thought she'd tail after him because she had nowhere else to go. And, dammit, he was right.

A kick of her heels sent her horse flying after him. When she neared him, she slowed. She wasn't particularly in a talking mood this morning. She needed to make plans. She did have one aunt, her

pa's sister, who'd moved back east and changed her name. Most likely though, she wouldn't want a Daughtery showing up on her doorstep. Maybe she should go back to Concho Springs and get her money out of the bank.

But that was blood money—she didn't want any part of it.

So what was she to do? Maybe head up into the mountains, maybe Colorado or Montana, build a cabin and stay away from civilization? Even then, she had no money for supplies and not even a gun to hunt game.

Her shoulders slumped. There was no answer to her dilemma.

"You're mighty quiet this morning? What's on your mind?"

So engrossed in her thoughts was she that his words startled her, and she glanced up. Thornton rode about five foot ahead of her. One hand held the pommel while the other rested on the back of his saddle as he twisted in the saddle to look at her. Absentmindedly, she admired his lithe frame. He took off his hat and wiped his brow. His light brown hair caught the morning sunshine. Her fingers suddenly itched to run themselves through his thick mane of hair. She rubbed her hands on her skirt.

"Not talking today?"

His voice held a challenge, but she ignored it. He was baiting her, and she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of getting all riled up. She smiled sweetly at him. "Why, I'm planning my escape. What else?"

He laughed, showing even white teeth in his tanned face and sending her pulse racing. "What else indeed?" As he put his hat on, he pointed at her nose. "Your nose is starting to burn. You need a hat."

"Well, I didn't exactly have time to pack before I left Concho Springs."

His expression darkened into a scowl. "No, you didn't, but at least you left there alive. It didn't look too good there for a while."

"Yeah," she mumbled to herself, "at least I'm alive."

He shook his head like he didn't understand her. But he said nothing, merely turned his horse and headed across the prairie, going north. She followed. The hills rose to the north, shimmering in the heat with shades of brown and gold. Even though she'd been this way before, she didn't remember it as being quite so stark and wild, yet so beautiful.

After a couple of hours, he reined in and pointed west. "Looks like a storm is rolling in. We need to find shelter—and soon."

Charlie glanced in the direction he pointed. Dark clouds scudded low across the ground. The wind whipped up, sending dirt into her face and bringing stinging tears to her eyes. She held up her hand to protect her face. Beneath her, her mare snorted and skittered, and she tightened her grip on the reins.

Trey pulled his kerchief from around his neck and handed it to her. "Cover your face with this."

"But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me." He grabbed his hat to keep it from flying away. "I know a small cave where we can take shelter. Follow me."

As the big gelding dashed away, the dark clouds released their burden. Cold, stinging raindrops beat down on her. With a muttered curse, she followed the lawman. Hopefully, shelter wasn't far.

Chapter 3

It wasn't really a cave, Charlie decided. Just a deep recess cut into the rocky hillside under an overhanging rock. It looked to be about a hundred foot wide and maybe fifty foot deep.

But it was dry.

She lifted her leg over the saddle horn and slid to the ground, her wet skirt a cold, sodden mass around her ankles. A shudder racked her body. The driving rain had chilled her to the bone. She couldn't remember ever being more cold and miserable than she was right now.

"You'd best get out of those wet clothes," Trey said as he dismounted beside her, "or you'll catch your death of cold, and God knows I don't need a sick woman on my hands."

"I wouldn't be on your hands...as you put it, if you would've released me and let me go on my way, so don't go complaining about me," she shot back at him. "And I'll get out of these wet clothes just as soon as I take care of my horse." Her teeth chattered so badly she could hardly speak.

He grabbed the reins from her. "I'll take care of the horses. You see if you can get a fire started. I'll find the matches for you." He dug in his saddle bag, pulled a box from its depths and tossed it to her. He pointed to the deepest part of the cavern. "Looks like the previous visitors had a fire there."

She nodded. "I'll try, but I'm not much good at fire-making." As she made her way to the back of the cave, she briskly massaged her arms in an effort to warm up. Someone had left a plentiful supply of dry

twigs and branches, and she muttered a prayer of thanks. She scooped up an armful, knelt down and spread them over the cold ashes. She opened the box of matches and pulled one out. She flicked it against the hard stone, and it sparked to life. She cupped her hands around the flame and held it to the dried twigs, then blew gently on it. In a few moments, the fire sputtered to life. With a sigh of relief, she held out her hands to the beckoning warmth.

Boots dark with moisture appeared at her side. "Charlie, I told you to get out of those wet clothes."

"No! Are you crazy? I'm not going to take my clothes off in front of you."

Strong hands pulled her to her feet. "Oh, yes, you are." He whirled her around to face him and reached for the top button of her shirt.

She grabbed his hands. "How dare you!"

"Listen, Miss Daughtery, I'm not going to harm you. I don't make it a habit of going around hurting women or violating them. So if that's what you think, you're wrong. Now do as I say."

She shrugged free of him and turned her back. She didn't think that at all. In fact, she'd never felt more safe than in Trey's presence, protective custody, she reminded herself. But she wouldn't let him know it. "I'll do it. Just...go...over there somewhere and turn around."

He muttered something about stubborn women under his breath, and she stifled a laugh. "Good. I'll grab a blanket, and you can wrap it around you while your clothes dry."

Footsteps moved away from her, and she unbuttoned her shirt. She shrugged out of it but kept it clutched to her chest. Water dripped from her hair, sending cold droplets running down her shoulders. Goosebumps pimply her skin in the damp air, and she shivered anew. Suddenly a blanket was draped over her shoulders, and she

pulled it close around her, gripping it tightly at her breasts. With her free hand, she pushed the shirt aside.

"Give it to me," Trey ordered, "and I'll hang it by the fire. Now the skirt."

She unfastened the waistband, stepped out of it and handed it to him. She now stood naked, only a thin blanket shielding her nude form. She glanced over her shoulder. The marshal stood by the campfire, her wet garments in his hand, as if trying to decide where to place them. Finally, he spread them out on a large flat rock.

Then he took off his shirt.

Charlie couldn't tear her gaze away. His muscled torso gleamed bronze in the glow of the campfire. His shoulders were broad, and brown hair glistened like down on his chest and trailed down his hard body to disappear beneath his pants. She'd seen shirtless men before—so why did he excite her so? The tips of her breasts pearled, but she told herself it was because of the cold. For a moment, she allowed herself to wonder what he'd look like—totally naked. Her thoughts shocked her.

He must have sensed her looking at him because he turned and stared at her. Even though he made no move, she felt him reach out to her. She licked her suddenly dry lips. What would it feel like to kiss such a man? To know his touch? She'd never really had a boyfriend. They'd either been too scared of her pa, or once they learned her identity, had figured they could do anything they wanted, but she'd set them straight right off.

A bolt of lightning sent spidery fingers of light across the gray sky and eerie shadows dancing through the cavern. A sharp crack of thunder followed on its heels and echoed off the walls. With a screech, Charlie darted for cover and hid behind the rock where the clothes dried.

The marshal's chuckle slid over the rock, and she peered around the boulder. He stood, hands on hips, at the cavern's mouth, his tall frame silhouetted against the gray driving rain. He stared out at the storm's fury as if relishing it, challenging it. A strong man, yet one so sure of his manhood that he could be gentle.

"Looks like the rain has set in for the night," he said without looking at her. "I guess we'll camp here and head out in the morning."

Charlie climbed to her feet and joined him at the entrance. A light spray of water bathed her face.

"I like the rain," she said. "It renews the earth, like a rebirth of new life. I guess that sounds kind of silly."

"Not at all. I feel the same way."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She swayed toward him. She stared into his eyes, the intensity in his gaze mesmerizing her. He cupped her chin and kissed her. A kiss that curled her toes and ignited a fire deep inside her. She'd never been kissed like that before, and it rocked her to her very core.

Trey broke the kiss, then pushed her aside. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

He swiped his hand across his mouth—as if he'd tasted something bad. *He regrets kissing me. I'm a Daughtery, and he despises me. He wants me as a man wants a woman, and he hates himself for it.* He'd given her a glimpse of ecstasy—and then snatched it away. He'd left her wanting something she could never have.

"Trey, look at me." When he turned to her, his eyes were shielded, and she couldn't read his thoughts. She laid her hand over her heart. "I'm sorry you find kissing me so unpleasant."

"Charlie, that's not true."

"Yes, it is, and I swear to you I don't know where my pa and brothers are, so you can let me go. I know you don't believe me, but it's the truth."

"Charlie, I'd like to believe you, but I...just can't. I think you're protecting them. They were last seen up near the Brazos. They robbed a bank, killed a couple of people and got away with about \$15,000. \$15,000 that some hard-working farmers and ranchers worked all their lives for."

She worried a hangnail, nipping at it with her teeth. "I'm real sorry about that. Really I am, but I had nothing to do with it. It's clear that you don't like me, so why am I here?"

He hesitated before he spoke. "It's not that I don't like you, Charlie. We're on different sides of the fence, that's all."

"Not really, but that doesn't answer my question. Tell me the truth."

"All right. The truth is I'm hoping that they'll find out you're with me and they'll come after you."

A cold hand seized her heart and squeezed it, cutting off her breath. "So you're using me as bait, is that it?"

A nod was his answer.

She choked back tears. "You don't know my pa. He won't come for me. He never wanted a daughter. His sons were more important to him. After my mother died, he left me all alone. I didn't mean anything to him." She drew a long, shaky breath, wondering why she was spilling her guts to a stranger. She'd never opened up like this to anyone. "That's when he sort of turned...bad. He went crazy I guess. So you're wasting your time with me."

"He'll come." He walked back to the campfire.

She followed him. "You sound mighty sure of yourself. How do you know?"

"I've known a lot of men like William Daughtery. No matter what he feels about you, you

belong to him, and he won't stand for someone taking something from him, even if he doesn't want it. His pride or ego or whatever it is won't let him walk away."

"You spoke earlier about revenge getting in the way of straight thinking. Sounds to me like you're dead set on revenge, and you're using that badge as an excuse to murder my kinfolk." *Watch it, Charlie. Don't push him too far.*

A faint tic of the muscle in his jaw was the only sign her words angered him. "It's my job to catch them. I intend to bring him in alive if at all possible."

"There's three of them, and only one of you. How do you plan to do that?"

"You're gonna help me."

She shook her head.

"I can put you in jail for obstructing justice. You want to go to prison?"

If he thought he could scare her, it didn't work. She shrugged. "I've been in a prison for most of my life. A prison with no walls, but a prison just the same." But the thought did frighten her, and she changed the subject. "How long you been a lawman?"

He poured water from his canteen into the coffee pot and sat it on the hot coals. "About five years."

"What made you decide to be a lawman?" She sat opposite him and leaned toward the warmth. Her shivers subsided.

He was silent for several long moments as if trying to decide to answer her question. "A long time ago, I was a wild kid headed down the wrong path on the wrong side of the law. My parents were gone, killed by renegade Indians, so I had no family to set me straight. Then I met John Spencer. He took me in, sent me to school and treated me decent, made a man out of me. And thank God he did, otherwise I'd probably be like your pa and your brothers—a

wanted man with a price on my head.”

She frowned. “So this John Spencer, is he a lawman too?”

“Yeah. He was the sheriff at Bitter Creek. When the Daughtery gang robbed the bank there, they killed him.” His voice was hard, devoid of any emotion, but she could sense his friend’s death had devastated him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Truly I am.” She rose and walked back to the cave opening. The gray clouds and sheets of rain added to her sorrow, weighing around her neck like a millstone. “Do you hate me, Trey?”

When he didn’t answer, she glanced over her shoulder at him. The rigid set of his shoulders and the grim line of his mouth said he did. So why had he kissed her? He’d seemed as surprised as she’d been that it happened. Was he trying to seduce her in an effort to gain her help in capturing her family? For the first time in her life, she considered doing just that. Her family had hurt or destroyed so many lives. How long could she continue to live with that?

“Of course I don’t hate you, Charlie. You didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“I know but they are my kin. What about you, Trey? Are you married?”

“Nope.”

“Girl friend?”

“Nope. I was engaged to this woman about a year ago. She didn’t like me being a lawman. She was always afraid I’d get shot or ride out of town and not come back. So she insisted I quit, and I wouldn’t so she left me.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie whispered. That woman was a fool. If Trey Thornton was her man, she’d never let him go.

“All right. Enough of this chatter.” He pulled a bag from his saddle bag. “Let’s eat. We’ve got plenty

of jerky.”

“I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“You’ve got to eat.”

With a nod, she walked over and perched on the flat rock and took the offering. She plopped it in her mouth and chewed the stringy meat. Her shoulders slumped. The kiss had changed nothing in her life. Thornton despised her. He’d kissed her as a man kissed a woman, wanting with his body, but not with his heart.

Trey swore softly. The hurt had started. He’d known she would suffer, but he hadn’t known it would be so soon. Maybe he’d thought he wouldn’t care. He flicked his tongue across his lips. Her kiss had touched him more than he knew possible, more than he had expected. It had hinted of deep passion and sweet innocence. He reminded himself of who she was—William Daughtery’s daughter. He’d wanted to hate her, but from the moment he’d seen her with the lynch rope around her neck and terror on her face, he’d not been able to do it.

He glanced at her, taking in her sad eyes, turned-down mouth and drooping shoulders. As John would have said, the starch had washed right out of her. He yearned to reach out and comfort her, but knew it would be the wrong thing to do. He couldn’t hold out false hope. He should never have kissed her, but he’d been unable to resist that sweet mouth and the soft curves of her body. From now on, he’d keep his body, and his heart, locked up tight.

With a whimper like that of a wounded animal, she rose and walked over to the blanket he’d placed for her by the fire. She sank to her knees then lay on the rough fabric facing away from him. The firelight played on her bare shoulders and down the slim curve of her hip. Her black hair seemed to absorb the glow of the flames.

After a quick smoke, he climbed into his bedroll. But sleep eluded him. Thoughts of Charlie Daughtery refused to leave him alone. And her questions had awakened some hurtful memories. He'd thought he'd have missed Sarah more, so why thoughts of her now? He tried to frame a picture of her in his mind, but the only face he could see was that of Charlie. Damn!

It was the loneliest night of his life.

The next morning Trey awoke to clear, blue skies. The rain had gone, soaked into the parched ground as if it'd never been there. He stretched and sat up, then sucked in a deep breath.

Charlie's bedroll was empty.

He bolted to his feet, her name on his lips, but before he could call out, he saw her. Seated on a boulder by the entrance, she stared out at the rocky hillside. Her hair had dried in a tangled mass. Soft ebony tendrils curled around her face. Her mouth was parted, her pink lips rosy in the morning light. The slender slope of her shoulder looked like satin. The blanket had fallen to her waist revealing full, rounded breasts, their peaks coral-tipped and taut. She looked like a pagan goddess overseeing her realm.

Trey fisted his hands, hands that itched to hold and caress those soft mounds. His body reacted, soaring to life, his manhood straining against his pants. His heart hammered in his chest. He knew he should avert his gaze, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the sweet temptress. At that moment, she turned and looked at him. A soft gasp escaped her lips, and she tugged the blanket up to cover herself.

Trey shifted uneasily, fighting to ignore his body's reaction. She'd seen his condition and had lowered her gaze. Without speaking, he marched past her and around the corner of the cave. Several long moments passed as he struggled to get his

errant body under control. Memories of the kiss they'd shared last night sure didn't help solve his problem.

When at last his body had returned to normal, he returned. Charlie had already dressed in his shirt and her tattered skirt. She didn't look up when he entered. "I made coffee," she said in a low, but steady voice.

"Thanks." He sat by the fire and poured himself a cup, then sipped the hot liquid. "Sure tastes better than mine. Sorry I don't have any fixings for breakfast."

She ran her hand through her hair like a comb. With ease of practice, she brushed her hair back and then plaited it in a single braid. "It's not the first time I went without breakfast, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

She said it so matter-of-factly that Trey glanced at her, wondering how much she'd had to endure. A surge of protectiveness hit him like a gunshot. He wanted to make sure she was never hurt again. He must be out of his mind—she was a Daughtery—she was the enemy. He gulped down the lump that rose in his throat. How could one with such a sweet smile be his enemy?

"I'll saddle the horses," he said and shoved himself to his feet. "There's a trading post not far from here. We should make it by dusk. We can get supplies there and stay there for the night if you want, maybe sleep in a real bed. How does that sound to you?"

A smile lit her face. "Like a dream come true."

Despite his resolve to stay aloof, her sweet smile summoned his smile in return. "Good." He saddled the horses and led them outside. He took one of the canteens and poured the water into his hat for the horses. He and Charlie could share the water in the second canteen. When he returned to the cave, he

saw Charlie had broke camp. The fire had been covered with dirt and the blankets had been rolled. He took them from her and left the cave. As he tied the bedrolls to the saddle, he looked at her. "Ready to ride?"

She nodded and climbed into the saddle. He followed suit and led the way north.

As the sun climbed directly overhead in the cloudless blue sky, Trey searched for some shade to rest for a while. The horses needed a break, and Charlie's nose had burned a bright red like a flag. His brow furrowed as he tried to recall the last time he'd come this way. He'd found a small stream shaded by several willow trees. Now all he had to do was find it again. He drew rein and studied the area.

"What's the matter? Why are we stopping?" Charlie pulled up beside him.

"Just trying to get my bearings," he explained.

"Are we lost?"

"Nope. I was through here a while back and found a creek. I was trying to remember where it was." He pointed at her nose. "You need to get in the shade. First thing I'm gonna buy you is a hat."

She didn't seem impressed by the offer.

He caught sight of a familiar landmark—a clump of twisted cactus, and steered his mount in that direction. About twenty minutes later, he glimpsed the ravine that dropped low into the earth. The river lay at the foot of the ravine, partially hidden by thick clumps of brush and heavy boulders. Wildflowers of gold and blue waved in the breeze.

He dismounted and motioned for Charlie to do the same. "We'll walk down. It's pretty steep. Don't want the horses to fall or step in a hole." As he led the way down, the hair on the back of his neck rose. His sixth sense had kicked in. Someone was down there. Friend or foe?

As they approached the bottom, several jays

rose, their raucous cries filling the air. If whoever waited below didn't know of their presence, they did now. He held his hand up. "I'd best go down alone. You stay here until I come for you."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"Maybe nothing." He drew his revolver. Beside him, Charlie let out a strangled gasp. "Just being cautious. Going to check it out and see if anyone is there." He handed the reins to her. "Keep the horses quiet."

"Did you see something?"

"Nope."

"Then how do you know?"

"It's just a gut feeling I have." He pointed a finger at her. "Don't get any bright ideas about taking off."

She flicked her hair out of her face. "I could take off with both horses and your rifle. You couldn't catch me."

"Oh, I'd catch you." He narrowed his eyes. "It might take me a while, but I'd find you. So I guess I need your word."

"No." She stuck out her bottom lip.

"You want me to tie you up?"

An angry glare was her response.

"I need to hear you say it."

"All right, all right. I'm not going anywhere."

He sent her a bright smile. "I'll be right back." He headed down the rocky incline, trying not to dislodge any rocks. If indeed someone was down there, he wanted to see them first.

Chapter 4

Charlie glanced nervously around her. The heat beat down on her like a hammer on an anvil. The headache which had been hiding behind her temples burst forth into full bloom. She stepped in the skimpy shade of a gnarled oak and watched Trey's retreating figure. She worried her bottom lip and considered doing just what she'd threatened to do—escape. She sighed heavily. She'd given her word, and even though she was a Daughtery, her word was good—and he knew it.

He'd sensed danger, a gut feeling he'd said. A feeling of dread washed over her. The air seemed charged, like before a storm. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Were her instincts also telling her that danger lurked nearby?

About fifteen minutes later, she heard him call for her to come down. She grabbed the horses' reins and led the animals down the slope. As she neared the bottom, she heard the bubbling of water. She rounded a huge boulder and saw clear water dripping down from the rocks into a pool of blue. She licked her parched lips.

Since the horses had cooled down, she led them to the water. They drank greedily, and once they'd consumed their fill, she hobbled them in the shade in a small patch of green grass. She returned to quench her thirst. A long aaaahhhh escaped her lips. She leaned forward and washed her face.

"Glad to see you made the right decision." Trey knelt beside her and filled the canteens.

"You know I keep my word."

“Yep. You want me to make some coffee?”

“Yeah. It’s hot, but it’ll fill that empty hole in my belly.”

“Okay.” He rose to his feet, gathered firewood and made a fire beneath the rocks. Soon the sound of coffee perking filled the hot air. “You want some jerky?”

She shook her head.

“Me neither. When we get to the trading post, I’m going to have a five pound steak, at least three potatoes and some biscuits doused in butter.” He rubbed his stomach and grinned. “And maybe a piece of pie.”

“Oh, don’t do that! I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” She glanced at their mounts, and he laughed. He grabbed the coffee pot and poured her a cup. She sipped it, the steaming liquid sending rivulets of sweat running down her forehead. After she finished, she sat the cup down, then glanced at the inviting pool. She sat on the soft sand and pulled her boots off, then scooted forward and stuck her feet into the cold water.

Trey scrambled over to a large rock and leaned against it, stretching his long legs out in front of him. He pulled his hat over his eyes. Even though he appeared to doze off, Charlie knew he was watching her. Ripples of awareness washed over her. Why couldn’t he be old and pock-marked?

The heat soon sent Charlie scurrying for the shade. The soft drip of the water as it fell from the rocks lulled her into a light sleep, and she curled up in the soft grass. Within minutes, a dream invaded her sleep. A confusing dream, one filled with gun fighting—and death. The figures were lost in shadows, and she couldn’t see their faces. The dream hurt, cutting her like glass. She fought the dream, trying to escape its clutches.

From that realm between sleep and

wakefulness, she heard a horse's whinny from above. Instantly, she woke and sat up. Trey rose to his feet and motioned for her to hide in the trees. She darted out of sight, grabbing her boots as she ran.

Once hidden, she peeped around the bole of a large cottonwood and watched Trey start up the ravine. But before he got fifty feet, two armed men surrounded him. Charlie gasped, then clasped her hand over her mouth.

One man was as big as a grizzly with a heavy black beard, while the second was tall and skinny and much younger than the first. They circled Trey like vultures.

"Well, well, look what we got here. We got us a United States Marshal," the young one drawled. "Throw down your gun, lawman."

Trey tossed his gun to the ground, then held up his hands. "Howdy, boys," he drawled. "I don't want any trouble with you two."

"We ain't gonna give you no trouble." The younger man spat at Trey's feet. "What are you doing out here, lawman? Tracking some poor soul like a hound dog chases a fox?"

"Just minding my own business. I'm headed north, up to the Brazos." He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. He looked nonchalant, but she knew he could pounce at any moment.

A lump appeared in her throat, and she fought it back down. She had to remain calm. She'd seen men like this before, men who killed for fun, men who had no conscience, and men who hated lawmen. A hysterical woman could get Trey, and herself, killed.

"I'm Marshal Trey Thornton. You two got names?"

"I'm Tom Langford, Marshal, and this here is my brother Rufus. You ever heard of the Langford gang?"

"Can't say as I have. I've got coffee made," Trey

said and pointed at the small fire behind them. "You're welcome to have some."

"Why, that's mighty kind of you." Tom kicked Trey's gun into the brush. "I think I will have some. What about you, Rufus?"

"I want whiskey. You got any liquor?" Rufus asked.

"Nope."

Tom motioned for Trey to return to the fire. When he did so, Rufus shoved him in the back with his gun. Trey stumbled and almost lost his footing. "Don't get no ideas, lawman."

For a moment, Charlie considered escape, but only for a moment. She was safer with Trey Thornton than these jackals.

The gun! Trey's gun! She had to get to it. That was their only hope. A slight opening led around the rocks behind the waterfall. She just might be able to squeeze through it. She quickly put on her boots, scrambled to her knees and crept through the small tunnel, the top of the rocks scraping her back. As she left the tunnel, she stopped and listened for any movement. When she heard nothing, she climbed up the rocky hillside until she was above the spot where Trey's gun lay hidden in the brush. As she started down the slope, her foot slipped. A jumble of rocks slid down the hill, sounding like an earthquake had shaken the ground.

"What the hell was that?" Rufus yelled.

"I don't know, but get the hell up there and find out," Tom ordered, "and you, lawman, don't make a move, or I'll blow a hole in you. I thought you were alone."

"I am. That's probably some critter."

With a muttered curse, Charlie hurried up the slope. She could hear the big grizzly of a man chasing her. What the hell did she do now? If she could only find a place to hide...but then what? She

didn't know where she was, didn't know where to go to find help, didn't have a weapon.

The noise grew louder as Rufus closed in on her. She hid behind two trees. At her feet she saw a huge flat rock. She picked it up and climbed up on a larger rock, then waited. In a few moments, the big man came into view, a gun in his hand. As he passed her, she crashed the rock down onto the man's skull. He slumped to his knees.

Charlie darted around him, but he caught her foot. She fell to the ground, screaming and kicking, but he didn't release his grip. Instead, he laughed. A chill snaked down her spine. Her fate might be worse with these two than facing the lynch mob back in Concho Springs. After all, the lynch mob had only wanted her dead.

The man rose and pulled her to his chest, keeping an arm as big as an oak limb around her. She cried out, her cry lost in the dirty hand that covered her mouth. The stench of unwashed flesh gagged her, almost making her sick.

"I'm gonna take my hand away, but you'd best be still, little girl, or I'll cut your throat." A knife appeared in his hand.

She ceased struggling, her efforts useless against his great strength. He ran his hand over her breast, then rubbed his crotch and made suggestive movements. "I'd like to take you right now, been without a woman for a long time, but Tom, he always likes to be first." He jerked a thumb toward the camp. "Get going."

Her insides grew cold, and body jerked. Her knees threatened to buckle under her, yet somehow she managed to get to the camp.

"Look what I found, Tom." Rufus shoved her forward, and she fell at Tom's feet.

Trey lunged toward her. "Get your filthy hands off her."

As fast as lightning, Tom drew his gun and fired at Trey. The bullet hit the ground in front of him, spitting up dirt and rock. "Don't do it, lawman."

Trey stopped in his tracks and backed up. "Leave the girl alone."

Tom laughed, a laugh that sent spasms of terror coursing through her body. He knelt beside her and touched her breast, then pushed her skirt up and ran his hand down her thigh. "I got an itch what needs to be scratched. She your woman, lawman?"

Trey hesitated, and Charlie could see him trying to figure out which story would be better. "Nope. She's in my protective custody, and you'd best leave her alone if you know what's good for you."

"How come?"

"She's Bill Daughtery's daughter. If you harm a hair on her head, I wouldn't give you a snowball's chance in hell that you'd live much longer." Trey rubbed his hands on his thighs.

"Daughtery's daughter?" Tom grabbed her shirt and jerked her up to face him. "That true, girl?"

She nodded.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I can prove it."

"Do it."

"Okay, my pa's name is William Jensen Daughtery. He's forty-two years old, has a scar that cuts through his right eyebrow. Walks with a slight limp. Rides with my two brothers, Wade and Rowdy. Wade is twenty-four, tall and rangy with black hair, blue eyes, a younger version of my pa. Rowdy is twenty-one, he's also got black hair but his eyes are dark. He's a mite heavier than Wade. My pa carries two pearl-handed revolvers, and there's a name on his gunbelt—Jessie—my ma's name."

"Aw, dammit, Tom," Rufus said. "She's telling the truth. Bill Daughtery will skin us alive if we as much as touch that girl. Let's get outta here."

"What you doing with the lawman, girl? Never knew a Daughtery who was fond of the law. You want to come with us? We'll take you to your pa." Tom held out his hand.

Charlie ignored it and scrambled away from him. She darted over to stand behind Trey. "I'll just bet you'd take me to him. I trust you about as much as I trust a rattler."

"You'll tell your pa we didn't hurt you none, won't you, girl?" Rufus whined.

"If we kill'em both, stupid, they can't tell nobody nothing," Tom said as he sneered at his brother.

"No siree, Tom. I seen Bill Daughtery kill a feller once, and it weren't pretty. Took the man three days to die. I ain't taking no chances. I'm riding out of here now." He disappeared up the slope into the bushes. Tom stood there, then evidently agreed with his brother for he too turned and climbed up the ravine.

"Even them fellers are scared of my pa," Charlie mused, tears misting in her eyes. "I guess that tells me something I've been trying to avoid."

Trey turned and caught her just before she slumped to the ground. He picked her up and carried her to the shady glade where she'd fallen asleep. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Oh, Trey, I was so afraid."

"I know, honey, but you're all right now. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"Kiss me, Trey. Please." She entwined her fingers in his hair and drew his face down to hers. "I need you to kiss me right now."

He couldn't have resisted had the Daughtery gang rode up right then and there.

He pressed his lips to hers, and she opened her mouth to him allowing him access to the sweet recesses. She met his questing tongue with reckless

abandon, and he yielded to the passion sparking between them, knowing it could consume him, yet powerless to stop. His need for her was too great.

"Trey, make love to me now."

Her words hit him like cold water. He drew back. "Charlie, I can't. It wouldn't be right."

"Why not? It feels right, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm a lawman, and you're in my custody."

"You're also a man, Trey Thornton, and I need you." She strained against his manhood. "I know you want me, and I need you. I must be as wanton as they believed me to be back in Concho Springs because I want you, I want you to touch me, all over, and make love to me." She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her breast.

Desire so intense it frightened him assailed him. He'd never before felt such need to be with someone, to join as one. What was happening to him? Was he falling in love with the outlaw's daughter? He pushed her shirt aside and took the pearly tip of her breast in his mouth. As he laved the sensitive bud, Charlie moaned and called his name, heightening his need. His hands cupped her derriere, and he pulled her to him.

He eased her back on the soft grass and tugged her shirt off, then shrugged out of his. Her fingers teased the hair on his chest, and she took his male nipple in her mouth. He sucked in a deep breath. No one had ever done that to him before, and his need spiraled. Hurriedly, he tugged her skirt off and feasted his eyes on her beauty. With the heel of his hand, he massaged the mound covering her woman's place.

"Trey, now. Take me now."

"In a moment, sweet temptress." He stood and removed his trousers, then lay back beside her. With his knee, he nudged her legs apart and thrust deep

within her. At the same time he covered her mouth with his and absorbed her cry of pain as the thin membrane stretched and tore. He'd been right—she was virginal. The knowledge intensified his guilt, yet filled him with incredible delight that he'd been the first.

She met his thrusts with an equal hunger, writhing beneath him, riding with him to ecstasy. When he thought he could wait no longer, she arched against him and cried out his name. He found his release and spilled his seed inside her. For the first time in his life, he felt complete.

But guilt gnawed at him. He'd taken advantage of her emotional state—and taken her virginity to boot. Could he ever forgive himself? He rolled over and grabbed his clothing. "Get up, Charlie. Let's get out of here before the Langfords change their mind and come back."

She frowned at him, as hurt contorted her beautiful face into a mask of pain. "Just like that? Get up, Charlie?" Tears ran down her cheeks, and she grabbed her shirt and swiped at them. "That didn't mean anything to you, did it? Just a roll in the hay with the outlaw's daughter? She doesn't deserve more than that." She scrambled to her feet. "I hate you, Trey Thornton. I hate you." She scooped up her clothing and disappeared into the trees.

Her words cut to the quick. At that moment, he hated himself.

When she returned, her eyes were dry. Her expression was hard, lifeless. She'd been through so much in her young life, and now he'd hurt her more. With a muttered curse, he kicked dirt onto the hot coals. "Let's get out of here."

"Aren't you going after them?"

"Nope." He walked over to the clump of bushes where his gun lay half buried in the sand. He picked it up and wiped it off, then walked back over to her.

"Why not? You're a lawman, aren't you?" Then realization hit her square in the chest. "You want them to get away, don't you? You want them to go to my pa and tell them that I'm with you. Don't you? Dammit, admit it." She fisted her hands and hit him.

He caught her hands and held them fast. "All right, all right. Yes, I want them to run to your pa and tell him that you're with me and where we are. Are you happy now? I've admitted it. I may not like what I'm doing, but I have to do it. Now saddle up. I'd like to make the trading post by sundown."

As the sun set in glorious hues of red and gold, Trey drew rein on a small rise and stared down at Stumpy's Trading Post. It wasn't much of a store, just a jumble of three sod buildings and a corral, but it was the only place to get supplies in this desolate area. He was sure looking forward to a bath and a steak, and it didn't matter in which order they came.

He twisted in the saddle and studied Charlie. She'd been close-mouthed since they'd made love back at the water hole. Even now, she wouldn't meet his gaze. He deserved her loathing. He didn't want to love a woman again—and be left alone again. It hurt too much. He'd been alone most of his life. He and Charlie were alike in that respect. Even though she had a family, she'd grown up alone. Besides, after he put her pa and brothers to the gallows, she'd hate him even more.

Her voice broke the stillness of the hot afternoon. "You know these people?"

He nodded. "Yep. Nice folks. I met Stumpy through John Spencer. He lost a leg during the war, thus the name. He was a Johnny Reb, met and married a Yankee woman, and the war started all over again. They've been having their skirmishes ever since."

"Why did they move way out here?"

Trey shrugged. "Never asked them, but you'll like them."

"But will they like me? Will they like having a Daughtery in their house?"

Her sad blue eyes cut a little deeper into his heart. "They're like most people out here—they make their own decisions about people and don't make judgments. At least that's what I've found to be the case." He kicked his heels against his horse's flanks and led the way down to the trading post.

As they approached the main building, an old man with a gray beard and a wooden leg limped out onto the porch. A scrawny dog followed on his heels. "Well, I'll be hornswoggled if it ain't Trey Thornton. Come on in."

"Thanks, Stumpy." Trey dismounted and looped his reins around the hitching post. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Charlie slip from the saddle and tie her horse beside his. He noted she stayed in the background. He climbed the steps and shook the outstretched hand. "Good to see you."

The old man pumped his hand up and down like he was trying to draw water. "It's bin a while, Marshal." He hollered over his shoulder. "Martha, we got company."

In a few minutes, a heavy-set woman appeared on the porch. Her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun made her look stern and unapproachable, but Trey knew different. Martha had a fountain of kindness in her heart. She wrapped Trey in a bear hug. "Trey Thornton, you look like you need a good meal."

"I do, Martha. Hope you've got some apple pie."

"I do, I do. Fresh baked." She glanced past him. "Who's your friend?"

Trey motioned Charlie onto the porch. "This is Charlotte." He didn't give a last name, knowing neither Stumpy nor Martha would ask.

"Hello," Charlie muttered in a low voice.

"My goodness, child, you look like—" She stopped and looked at Trey. "What have you done to this girl? Why, her face is bruised, her clothes are torn, and there's a bruise around her neck." Her face scrunched up into a frown. "Is she under arrest?"

"No."

"But he won't let me go," Charlie protested.

"Why not?" Martha glared at Trey, and he shuffled his feet.

"She's in my protective custody."

"Humph!"

"I'm fine, ma'am. Really I am," Charlie said as she smiled weakly. "In fact, Trey, I mean Marshal Thornton saved my life." She touched her neck. "He saved me from a lynching. You see, my name is Daughtery—Charlotte Daughtery."

Chapter 5

After she revealed her name, Charlie fully expected to be thrown off the place, but she was wrong. She saw nothing but kindness in Martha's eyes.

"Well, no matter what the name, young lady, you look exhausted. I think a good soaking in a tub of hot water is just what the doctor ordered, and then a good meal. Whadda ya say?"

Charlie huffed out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding until that moment. Finally, someone who hadn't judged her on her name alone. "That sounds divine."

Martha grabbed her hand and pulled her inside. As she walked into the dark interior of the trading post, she saw two boys of about ten lurking in the shadows. She waved at them, and they dashed behind the counter.

"Matthew, Mark, you two get a fire going and heat some water for this lady to take a bath."

"Yes, ma," they cried in unison and dashed out the back door.

Lady? Charlie couldn't remember ever being called a lady, but she sure liked the sound of it. "Do you have other children?"

"No. I wanted four or five. The Good Lord blessed me with twins, then didn't see fit to give me any more. Maybe He thought those two was all I could handle. He might have been right." Martha walked over to a counter filled with various items of clothing and rifled through them. She pulled out a blue dress and then glanced at Charlie. "This will

match your beautiful blue eyes, and I think it'll fit you."

"Thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I can't take it. I can't pay you" Charlie blinked back tears. "I don't have any money."

"Honey, I ain't worried about that." Martha winked conspiratorially. "Maybe I'll put it on Trey's bill since you're in his protective custody and he's the one who's dragged you across half of Texas. The State of Texas can afford it. Nevertheless, you need a dress, and you're going to have one. And some underthings. From the looks of your sun-burned nose, you also need a hat."

"I don't know what to say. I'll repay you as soon as I can." Charlie swiped at her eyes with her sleeve.

"Pshaw! Don't you worry none about that. With all these pig-headed men around, we women have to stick together, and I don't know about you, but a new dress always makes me feel better all around."

Charlie couldn't suppress the giggle that bubbled up in her throat. Clearly, Martha spoke her mind.

The older woman picked up something white and lacy and waved it like a flag. Charlie laughed, and Martha joined in. "Good. I'm glad to see a smile on your face, young lady. Now, let's go see if those two hellions of mine have got some water heated up for your bath."

As the two women made their way to the bath house, Martha put her arm around Charlie's shoulder. A warm feeling enveloped Charlie. She'd felt an almost instant bond with the older woman, and for the first time in a very long time, she felt like she had a friend.

The bath house was more of a shed really for she could see through the slatted walls and gaps in the roof let in the sunshine. But the tub was inviting, and Charlie eased her bruised and battered body

into the hot water. With long hours of riding under her belt, some of the soreness in her muscles had gradually disappeared. But she needed this bath more for her state of mind rather than the state of her physical well being.

Her gaze rested on the blue dress. Pristine white lace edged the neckline. Matching lace peeked out from under the long sleeves. A full skirt sported a ruffle. She reached out and stroked the soft fabric. A smile touched her lips. She hadn't had a new dress for several years. And now, a new dress and a new friend. She hummed to herself as the trail dirt and her worries washed off her. If only Trey...cared...just a little bit....

Even when the water grew cold, she was reluctant to leave the tub. *You're being selfish*, she told herself. *Martha is in the kitchen cooking for six people, and here you are dawdling in the tub.* She stood, and water dripped off her like rain.

A voice sounded close to the shed, and Charlie gazed in that direction. Through the slats, she saw Trey leading their horses to the corral. He must have sensed her gaze for he stopped and stared. She made no move to cover herself, instead she notched her chin up, hoping her small symbol of defiance would tell him she didn't care.

After a long moment, he moved on, disappearing from her sight, but she'd felt the heat of his gaze across the few feet that separated them. Her body tingled in its most private place. Oh, how she wanted him. Her body yearned to be one with him again. She wanted his love, his touch, his kiss. But he didn't return her feelings. He desired her, but he couldn't—wouldn't—love a Daughtery.

She grabbed a towel and dried quickly. Trey's appearance had detracted from the pleasure of her bath and new clothes. She slipped into her new bloomers, then donned the dress. To her amazement,

it fit perfectly, as if it had been made for her. The blue of the dress made her eyes appear even bluer. She grabbed the hairbrush Martha had given her and studied her reflection in the small mirror which hung on one wall. The bruises around her eyes had almost disappeared. Her cut lip had healed. She touched the faint outline of the bruise left by the lynching rope. It too was almost gone, but the memory would never disappear. As she combed her tangled tresses, she thought about what would happen in the next couple of days.

And how she'd react.

Another day's ride would take them to the Brazos. Another day closer to a show-down between Trey and her kinfolk. What if they killed him? Or if he killed them?

Either way—she lost.

A chill raced down her spine, and she trembled. She'd always felt alone, and now even more so. Her bottom lip quivered, and she bit down hard on it, then tasted blood. Well, she was on her own, and she'd best get used to it.

She gathered up her belongings and returned to the main house. As she entered the kitchen, Martha turned from the stove and smiled at her. "Wow! You clean up real nice. You look pretty as a picture."

Charlie returned the smile. "Thanks to you. I can't tell you how long it's been since I had a pretty frock like this."

"You're welcome. You can put your things in the hallway there for now."

"Okay." After she bundled her belongings in the towel, she placed them on the floor, then returned to the kitchen. She nodded at the stove. "What can I do to help?"

"You can set the table. The dishes are in that sideboard. Everything else is done, except the pie, and it'll be ready in about five more minutes. Trey

said he wanted a steak and potatoes, so that's what we're having."

"How long have you known Trey?"

"I'd guess about three years now." Martha peeked into the oven, then glanced at Charlie. "How about you?"

Charlie touched the bruise at her throat. "Three days, but it seems like a lot longer."

"Them people really tried to lynch you? A woman?"

"Oh, yeah, and they would have if Trey hadn't shown up when he did." She pushed damp tendrils of hair behind her ear. "But he only saved me so he could use me as bait to catch my pa and my brothers. He doesn't care anything about me."

"Judging by the way he looks at you, that ain't exactly true." Martha pulled the pie from the oven, and the delicious aroma of baked apples and cinnamon filled the air.

Charlie's face flushed, a tell-tale warmth sliding up her neck and across her face. She had a feeling Martha knew exactly what had happened between her and Trey. "Well, he is a...man...but that don't mean he cares."

"Trey Thornton is a fine man, Charlie, and he's a good lawman." She paused and faced Charlie. "I might as well tell you straight up, because I'm sure Stumpy has told Trey, your kinfolk was through here a few days back."

A cold hand gripped Charlie's heart and squeezed it. "Did they...did they...?"

Martha shook her head. "Didn't hurt nothing, but rode off without paying for supplies."

"Oh, Martha, I'm so sorry."

"Don't fret over it. Weren't your fault."

"I'll pay you for what they took as soon as I can. It may be a while though."

"It's not your debt, and I didn't tell you that for

that reason. Just wanted you to know they were in the area. Don't like no surprises. Now grab those dishes and let's eat."

Charlie cursed her family under her breath. She walked over to the sideboard and pulled out the dishes. Martha pointed to the silverware, and she scooped it up, then followed the older woman into the dining room. A huge wood-planked table sat in the middle of the room flanked by two benches. A soft white damask table cloth covered the rough hewn wood. She sat the plates down, then placed the utensils beside them.

Stumpy walked into the room, the twins right on his heels, and a clean-shaven Trey following the boys. He'd evidently bathed too for his brown hair was slicked back. A clean blue shirt covered his broad shoulders. When he caught a glimpse of her, he stopped in his tracks. "Wow! I hardly recognized you, Charlie. You look...beautiful."

She ignored his comment, and a heavy silence hung over the room.

"And, Martha, that food looks delicious," Trey continued, "I haven't seen anything that has looked that good in a long time."

Martha cleared her throat, a smug smile on her face. "Well, young man, there's plenty more, so dig in."

Across the table, the twins stared at her. With their red hair and freckles, they looked nothing like Stumpy or Martha. Matthew, or Mark, she wasn't sure, stared solemnly at her. "You really that outlaw Bill Daughtery's daughter?"

Stumpy leaned over and thumped the boy's ears.

"Ouch! What did you do that for, Pa?"

"You mind your manners, boy."

"It's okay, Stumpy," Charlie said. "He's just curious. I don't mind." She turned back to the boy. "Yes, I am."

"Are you askeered of him?"

Taken aback, Charlie hesitated. "You know I'm not really sure. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"How come?"

"He's on the run."

The boy turned to Trey. "You gonna catch him?"

Charlie glanced at Trey and saw his hesitation. But before he could answer, Martha interceded. "That's enough questions, young man. Eat your dinner."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned at Charlie. "When I grow up, I'm gonna be a lawman, just like Trey."

"That's great," Charlie answered. "I'm sure you'll be a good one."

After everyone had eaten, Trey and Stumpy headed for the front porch for a smoke and the boys to bed. Charlie retired to the kitchen to help Martha. As she washed the dishes, Martha dried them and put them away. Afterwards, Martha poured two cups of coffee, and the two women sat at the kitchen table.

"So what happens now?" Martha asked.

Charlie shrugged. "Trey said tomorrow we'd be at the Brazos. Then I guess there'll be some killing—Trey or my pa and brothers." She clenched her hands into fists. "I don't see no way around it. Trey's not going to back down, and I know my pa and brothers won't turn tail and run."

Martha grabbed Charlie's hands and gently unclenched them, then patted them softly. Her work-chafed hands comforted Charlie. "I'll say a prayer tonight that somehow, some way, things will work out and nobody gets killed."

"Thank you, Martha. Would you mind if I went to bed now? It's been a long day."

"Of course not, honey. I know I'm sticking my nose in where it don't belong, but can I give you some advice?" At Charlie's nod, she continued, "If

you've got feelings for Trey—"

"I do, but he doesn't have any for me."

"I'm not so sure," Martha said.

"I am." Charlie notched her chin up. "After all, I'm a Daughtery, and he's vowed to kill my pa and my brothers. There's no turning back now."

"Well, don't let other people interfere with your chance for happiness. If I'd listened to other folk telling me not to marry that old Johnny Reb in there, I'd have missed out on a lifetime of happiness."

Charlie rose, walked around the table and kissed Martha on the cheek. "I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or how I'll feel about it, but I'll take heed of your words."

"Good. Now go to bed. You're in the back bedroom, down the hall to the left."

Trey perched on the railing and stared off at the distant hills, now turning red and gold as the sun painted them in all its glory.

Stumpy sat opposite him and rolled a cigarette. "I think you need some backup when you face the Daughterys, Trey. They're a mean bunch."

"I wired Sheriff Quinn Brady over at Dry Gulch, and he and his deputy are supposed to meet me at the Brazos crossing." He took the cigarette Stumpy offered and inhaled slowly.

"How's the girl gonna take it?"

Trey exhaled, blowing the smoke into a circle. "Not good, I'm afraid, not good at all. I've considered letting her go, and going after the Daughterys on my own. But if Bill Daughtery knows I've got his daughter, maybe I can catch him sooner, maybe save some lives to boot. It's my sworn duty to bring them to justice, whether I like it or not. She may never forgive me for it."

"I've got a feeling," Stumpy said, "that means a

lot to you."

Trey nodded. "I didn't want to even like her, much less have feelings for her, but it just happened, and it happened quick, without me even knowing it. She worked her way under my skin like a burr works its way under a saddle."

"Hah! Like we have any control over it. Who'd think I'd ever marry a Yankee woman and stay married to her for fifteen years? Not me!" He stomped his wooden leg on the porch. "Especially not after those Yankees took my leg."

Trey stifled a laugh. "Well, I'd say you got a great woman in exchange for your leg."

"Yep, you're right about that, but don't tell her I said so."

"My lips are sealed." Trey stood and paced the porch.

"What's eating at you, boy?"

"I've been thinking this over for a while. When this is over, and if I make it out alive," Trey said as he tossed his cigarette aside, "I'm going to resign as U.S. Marshal."

"What? For God's sake, why? You're a good lawman. We need more men like you."

Trey rubbed his jaw. "Because I took advantage of Charlotte Daughtery. She was in my protective custody, and I took advantage of her, and that wasn't right."

"What do you mean? I think I know you well enough to know you didn't force her to do anything she didn't want to do."

Trey smiled his thanks. "No, I didn't force her, but she was all upset, probably not in her right mind at the time. I should've had more restraint."

"Well, I hope you'll reconsider. Like I said, you're a good lawman."

"I've made up my mind. Well, goodnight, Stumpy."

Chapter 6

Sleep eluded Charlie. Her frazzled nerves wouldn't let her rest. Thoughts of Trey's rejection and what might happen tomorrow wandered through her mind, making slumber impossible. She rose, walked over to the window and threw up the sash. The night breeze wafted in, cooling her sweaty brow. The dark mountains rose in the distance, mirroring her mood. Solemn, sober, somber.

She needed a miracle, yet she wasn't sure she believed in miracles, nor even sure that they even existed. She'd never experienced one, that much was certain. Dare she hope for one now? Yes—it was all she had.

The darkness beckoned to her, and she grabbed a wrap to cover the nightgown Martha had loaned her. She draped it around her shoulders and knotted it. She opened the door and scanned the hallway. Empty. She made her way to the kitchen, then out the back door. An owl flitted silently across the night sky, its wings outstretched, a dark shape against a gray sky. As she approached the corral, the horses nickered in welcome, probably hoping for a treat. Absentmindedly, she rubbed their velvet noses, her mind still focused on the morrow.

The crunch of boots in sand jerked her back to the moment. Afraid that the Langfords may have followed her and Trey, she whirled. A dark shadow loomed in front of her. A scream rose in her throat and threatened to spill out. She stumbled backward. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Charlie. Don't be afraid." Trey stepped

closer, his handsome face in shadow. His familiar scent circled her.

"What are you doing out here? Did you follow me? Afraid I'd run off?" She tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice but failed.

"No. I heard the horses and thought I'd check it out. I couldn't sleep anyway." He ran his fingers through his tousled hair.

"Me neither." Charlie pulled her wrapper tighter around her shoulders. "I'm...afraid, Trey. I'm afraid of what's going to happen tomorrow."

He pulled her into his embrace. "I'm sorry, Charlie. I don't know what else to say."

"Does it have to be you?"

"Yeah."

She leaned into him, drawing on his strength. What was wrong with her? She was in love, yes, love, with the man who was going to kill her pa and brothers, and the man who regretted making love to her. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks. "I guess there's nothing else to say."

"Charlie, all I can promise you is that I'll bring them in alive—if I can." His voice blew the tendrils of hair around her face. With a gentle hand, he pushed it back behind her ear, then wiped her tears. "Charlie, I'm so sorry about—"

She pressed her fingers to his lips. "Don't say anything. Let it be. Me and you, well, we're not meant to be together."

"I got scared."

"You? Scared of what?"

"Loving you."

Her mouth gaped open. Her heart thumped so hard she thought it would burst from her chest. "Love me? You love me?"

"I think so. I've tried not to, but I just can't help it." He ran his fingertips over her lips. His sweet caress awakened her body, branding her with his

touch. No matter what happened on the morrow, or what had happened in the past, she knew she'd always love Trey Thornton. "Trey, before...before...please love me. Hold me close."

"Charlie, are you sure?"

"It's the only thing I'm sure of. Trey, please... We might both be dead tomorrow—or wish we were. Let's share our last chance for happiness." She reached up and stroked the hard line of his jaw.

"Your touch sends reason out the door, sweet temptress. I can't think straight whenever I'm near you." He ran his hand over her breast.

Charlie's knees threatened to buckle under her. "Trey, don't think of tomorrow and what you have to do—don't think of your job. Think only of me—this one last time." She placed her hand over his.

He scooped her up in his arms, carried her into the barn and laid her down on a pile of fresh-smelling hay. He stretched out beside her and drew her close. "You feel so good in my arms, Charlie, so perfect. I love the soft satin of your skin. I've waited for this moment my whole life."

"When I was younger, I used to dream about a knight on a white horse who would ride into Concho Springs and rescue me. You didn't have a white horse, but you did rescue me."

He kissed her, then trailed kisses down the slim column of her neck. She strained against him, loving his body, so different than hers. Tremors coursed through her body, and she moaned in delight. Only Trey's touch could ignite the fires of passion deep inside her that had been waiting for so long to erupt.

He shed his pants and drew her on top of him. Instinctively, she knew what he wanted. She tugged her nightgown up and took him inside her. New and exquisite sensations washed over her. As she moved on him, he gripped her hips and levered himself up to take the throbbing bud of her breast into his

mouth. Ecstasy filled her—as he filled her—branding her forever as his.

She rose over him, lowered herself to him, took him in, arched back, and took him deeper. Her head fell back, her body going arrow-taut. Her muscles clamped down hard around him as she rode with him on passion's wings.

Sated, she moved to lay beside him and rested her head on his chest. She could hear the furious pounding of his heart, and hers beat in rhythm.

"I'd best get you back to the house," he said softly. "Stumpy and Martha will think you've been kidnapped."

She huffed out a breath. "I have a feeling those two know exactly what we've been up to."

He laughed and tugged a few sprigs of hay from her hair. "I think you're right." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. After she straightened her clothing, she studied Trey's face. She wanted to remember him like this—forever.

The next morning, Charlie folded her beautiful blue dress and stowed it in her saddle bag. She dressed in a split riding skirt, a white shirt with ruffles down the front, new boots and a new hat—all courtesy of Martha. "You can't ride in that dress," Martha had said.

With tears in her eyes, Charlie made her way to the front porch where Stumpy and Martha waited. She embraced the older woman. "Thank you for everything, Martha."

"It was my pleasure, child, and Charlie—"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You've always got a home here with us."

The floodgate of tears opened, and it was several moments before Charlie could compose herself. No one had ever been so kind to her before. Not trusting her voice, she nodded, then walked down the steps to

where Trey waited with her horse.

As the sky changed from soft hues of blue to a golden sky, she followed Trey north—to the Brazos—and to her destiny.

Trey reined in his mount and pointed at the meandering river. "That's it. The Brazos crossing." He glanced at Charlie beside him and pointed east. "Dry Gulch is not far from here, about 15 miles."

"Are we going there?"

"Yeah."

"Why? Are my pa and my brothers there?"

He shook his head. "Nope. At least I haven't heard that they were. I'm going to meet up with my old friend, Sheriff Quinn Brady."

"And is he going to help you kill my family?"

Trey sighed. "Charlie, I swore an oath, and this is something I have to do. And yes, Quinn's going to help me capture three criminals." He stressed the word criminal.

Charlie turned and stared the other way. Trey knew she was crying, but he had no words of comfort. "Let's go."

As they rode into Dry Gulch, Trey glimpsed the sheriff's office and steered the horses in that direction. He dismounted and motioned for Charlie to do the same. He led the way up the steps and into the office where his old friend sat behind a desk. Two men sat at a table across the room drinking coffee. A smile flashed across Quinn's face, and he jumped to his feet and held out his hand. "Trey Thornton. We been waiting on you."

Trey shook the outstretched hand. "Quinn. Good to see you. How's Marissa?"

"She's fine. Due any day now."

"Congratulations." He turned to Charlie. "Quinn and his wife Marissa are expecting their first child," he grinned at Quinn, "any day now."

"Congratulations, Sheriff Brady."

"Thanks. Well, Trey, your quarry is in the area. They've been seen down at the Crossing. The Langfords have been hanging around town. Sure wanted to run them out, but we didn't, just kept an eye on them."

Trey shook his head and motioned at Charlie. "This is Charlene Daughtery."

"Oh, Miss Daughtery, er, I'm sorry, I didn't know...."

"I know you all are after my kinfolk, Sheriff Brady."

"Well, I'm sure you're tired after your ride. Let me get one of my deputies to take you to my house and you can stay with Marissa while we..." His voice trailed off, and he looked embarrassed.

She finished the sentence for him. "While you make plans to capture my pa and brothers."

Quinn glanced at Trey who merely nodded his head. "Yes, Charlie, while we make our plans." He hated that look on her face.

"Very well."

"This is Bob Drake, Miss Daughtery, and he'll take you to my house."

"Thank you." She left without a backward glance.

"Bob, take their horses too and put them in my barn."

"Sure will, sheriff." He left and closed the door behind him.

Quinn turned to Trey. "Well, old boy, how was my acting? Do you think she bought it?"

"Yeah, and I think she'll try to warn them." He rubbed his jaw. "I don't know what I'd do if I was in that spot. Is you deputy going to hang around and keep an eye on her?"

"Yeah. He's going to watch from the roof of the livery. And I know you didn't want me to say

anything to Marissa but I had to let her in on it. If she sees Miss Daughtery trying to escape, she's not to try to stop her, just let us know as soon as possible." Quinn picked up the coffee pot. "Have I got it right?"

"You've got it."

"Good. You want some coffee?"

"I'd really like something stronger. This is sticking in my craw. I don't like tricking Charlie like that."

"I know you don't, but the sooner we capture the Daughterys," Quinn punched Trey in the arm, "the better things will be. We might even have saved a life or two."

"You're right. Come on, I'll buy you a beer, or something stronger."

As Charlie followed the deputy, she studied the town. Did they plan to lure her family into Dry Gulch? And if so, how? Her pa and brothers weren't fools—they'd never ride into such an obvious trap. She worried her bottom lip. Somehow, she had to try to warn them, then maybe they'd leave this part of the country.

The Crossings. Sheriff Brady had said they'd been seen there. And she knew where that was. Trey had shown her when they'd headed for Dry Gulch. But she'd have access to her horse—that is, if the deputy didn't stay around.

The deputy stopped in front of a white frame house with a picket fence with beautiful red roses spilling over it. Charlie studied it wistfully. What she'd give for a home like this. This Marissa was one lucky lady. And a baby to boot. But it was something she could never have. Warning her pa and brothers would ensure that Trey Thornton never looked at her again. She pressed the heel of her hand to her heart. But if she didn't at least try to warn them, she

could never forgive herself.

She climbed the steps behind the deputy, then waited as he knocked on the door. The door opened and a pretty young woman with auburn hair smiled at her. She was definitely in the latter stages of her pregnancy.

"Hi, Quinn said I might have company this afternoon. I'm Marissa."

"Thanks. I'm Charlotte."

Marissa glanced at the deputy. "You coming in, Bob?"

Charlie waited for his answer. Her plans depended on what Bob planned to do.

"Nope. Quinn just said see her over here, then get back to the office." With a smile, he turned and tromped down the stairs, then down the street.

"Come on in, Charlotte. It'll be nice to have some female company for a change." She led the way into the living room. "Have a seat and I'll get us a cup of tea."

"Thanks, but I'll be glad to get it. You look—" Charlie's face warmed, and she glanced down at the floor. "You look a mite tired."

"You mean fat and ready to drop this babe at any time." She laughed. "And you're right." She eased her heavy body into a nearby chair. "The tea is on the stove, and the cups are in the sideboard. Sugar is on the table. I'd be obliged."

Charlie smiled. She liked Marissa Brady instantly. "Which way?"

Marissa pointed to the door. "That way."

"You like sugar in yours?"

"Yep. One spoonful."

Charlie headed in the direction and found the kitchen easily. The tea was made, and she poured two cups, put a teaspoon of sugar in both and returned to the parlor. As she handed the cup to Marissa, she smiled her thanks. "Seems like I'm so

tired any more, I don't even want to get out of bed in the morning."

"The baby's taking all your energy. You want a boy or a girl?"

Marissa sipped her tea. "It doesn't really matter to me as long as it's a healthy babe. Of course, Quinn wants a boy."

"Don't all men? I know my pa favored my brothers over me." Charlie sat opposite Marissa and sat her cup down.

"Quinn told me why you're here, and I'm sorry."

"I thank you for that."

"He didn't want me to know because he thinks I'm too 'delicate' to handle it. What men don't realize is that we women are stronger than we look. We have to be. Look at you, and what you've survived. You're a strong woman."

"I don't know about that. I don't have any choice but to keep...going." Charlie pushed her hair out of her face.

"And that's what I call brave."

"Thanks, Marissa."

"You're welcome, and now if you don't mind, I'm going to go lie down and take a nap. My ankles are so swollen I feel like I'm walking on nails." She eased herself to her feet.

"Of course I don't mind. Can I do anything for you?"

"Just pray this baby comes soon." She motioned for Charlie to follow her. "I'll show you your bedroom. If you want to lie down..."

I'll try, but I don't know if I can sleep. I'm too anxious, not knowing what's going to happen and all. My nerves are stretched tighter than a bowstring."

"I'm sorry, but even if you can't sleep, maybe you can rest a little."

"I'll try." Charlie followed the sheriff's wife down

the hall. Once there, she went into the bedroom. It was a small bedroom but neat and clean with a frilly bedspread and matching frilly curtains. A wash basin and a ewer of water beckoned to her, and she bathed her face.

Afterward, she walked over to the window and scanned the area outside. There was an alley behind the house, and it was empty.

Charlie threw up the sash and leaned out to see where the barn was located and if she could get to it without being seen. A row of bushes led the way to the barn. She should be able to get to her horse without alerting anyone. She hated doing this to Marissa, but she had to try and warn her pa and brothers.

She decided to wait fifteen minutes or so to give her hostess time to go to sleep. She forced herself to lie on the bed and wait. She closed her eyes and massaged her forehead. Her eyelids grew heavy.

The sound of a dog barking jerked her awake. A glance at the clock told her she'd slept an hour. With a low curse, she rose and dashed to the window. To her amazement, the alley was still empty.

But what about Trey and Marshal Brady? Where were they?

And why wasn't someone watching the house to make sure she didn't escape? Maybe they thought the Daughterys would ride into town and try to rescue her.

But that didn't make sense.

Maybe they thought she was too cowardly to try to make a break for it. She crawled out the window and jumped to the ground, then darted behind the shrubs. She stopped and again surveyed the area. Still, no one in sight.

With careful steps, she made her way to the barn. To her surprise, the horses were still saddled. The deputy had merely put them in the stalls.

It was way too easy.

But now that she'd put her plan in motion, there was no going back. She led her horse down the alley and followed a line of trees toward the Crossings.

Chapter 7

Trey drummed his fingertips on Quinn's desk. "What's taking so damned long? This waiting is killing me."

"Maybe she's not going to try anything," Quinn answered. "Maybe you figured her wrong."

"I don't think so. I know she's torn between family loyalty and doing the right thing." He banged his fist on the desk. "Hell, I don't know what to think anymore."

Suddenly, the door opened, and Bob Drake ran into the office. Trey jumped to his feet. "What happened? Where is she?"

"I thought she wasn't going to try to leave but after about an hour she climbed out the bedroom window, got her horse and followed that line of willows along the creek that runs east of town. I saw Murphy pick up the trail, so I hightailed it back here."

Trey grabbed his hat and put it on. "Okay. Let's ride. Did she head for the Crossings?"

"I think so," Drake answered. "It looked like she was circling to the west."

Quinn unlocked the gun rack and handed each of the six men a rifle. "Trey, you think we got enough men?"

"I think so. If you count the four men stationed out near the Crossings, there's ten of us, plus we've got the element of surprise." Trey grinned at his friend. "At least I hope so."

The men left the office and mounted their horses. Trey led the way eastward. His heavy heart

rode with him. This would definitely be the final break in his and Charlie's...relationship, such that it was. He forced those thoughts to a corner of his heart. He'd take them out and examine them later when he could think straight. Right now, he had to concentrate on his mission—if he wanted to stay alive.

When the Crossings came into view, Trey held up his hand and stopped the posse. Quinn reined in beside him. "Murphy should be waiting for us." He pointed to a small figure riding toward them. "There. That's him."

The deputy rode up and reined in his mount. A frown creased his lips. "Dammit, Trey, Quinn. I lost her trail."

"What?" Quinn yelled. "How in the hell could you do that?"

"I just assumed she was headed for the Crossings, so I cut around to get in front of her. But then when she didn't show, I backtracked and lost her trail. She's covered her tracks pretty darn well. I never dreamed she'd be able to do that."

"Me either." Trey took his hat off and slapped it against his thighs. "She must have smelled the trap, or saw our dust and figured it out."

"She must have learned a few things from her pa," Quinn said with a grin, "like how to elude a posse. The Daughterys are masters at disappearing. That's why they're still on the loose."

"Looks that way. I keep underestimating her."

"What do we do now?" Murphy asked.

"We find her," Trey answered. "I'm not sure we can smoke her kinfolk out without her. She's got to be around here somewhere. Spread out and find her. We'll plan to meet back here in an hour."

As the men went in different directions, Trey tried to figure out where Charlie might have gone. Was there some way she could have gotten word to

her family to meet her? Were they even now riding away and laughing at the law? He thought back over the last two days. She'd had no contact with anyone except Stumpy, Martha and Marissa, and there was no way any of them would betray him.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. Where would she be? He'd have bet six months pay that she'd have made a beeline to the Crossings, yet she hadn't. Why?

There could only be one answer. She'd gotten lost. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that was the answer. A horrible thought struck him right between the eyes. Maybe she was hurt. That made more sense than her getting lost. Even now, she might be hurt, bleeding or even dying. His heart contracted in his chest. If anything happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

Enough was enough. Once he found her, he'd take her back to Quinn's house. He'd just have to catch the Daughterys on his own. He couldn't endanger her any further.

As the shadows lengthened across the prairie, Charlie limped into the shade of several huge boulders. She didn't think her ankle was broken, only sprained, but she couldn't put much weight on it. If she took off her boot, she'd never get it on again. When her horse had reared at a rattlesnake, she'd been thrown. The fall had sent her tumbling over rough ground, tearing her skirt and leaving several gashes in her leg.

And now she was afoot.

It'd be dark in a couple of hours. She'd seen the posse following her and had hid until they were out of sight. She'd been a sucker—they'd set a trap for her pa and her brothers and she'd fell for it. Now she knew why no one had been watching Marissa's

house and why she was able to get away so easily.

For a few moments, she considered seeking out the posse, but they'd use her to bait their trap. If she stayed out here overnight, that'd give her family, if indeed they'd taken the bait, a chance to leave the area. Her course of action decided, she cleaned her leg as good as she could with her kerchief, then leaned against the rough stone and closed her eyes. A violent headache pounded right behind her eyes.

The howling of wolves, or maybe it was coyotes, jerked her upright. The noise sounded very close, and she shivered. She had no weapon to protect herself. She hobbled to her feet and scanned the area but could see no critters. She eased herself back to the ground and looked around her. The only thing close was a large stick. She grabbed it and placed it beside her. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was all she had.

As darkness fell, the animals grew braver. Their howling increased, and she fancied she heard them breathing just beyond the boulders. She remembered her pa telling her once that wild animals could smell fear on a human. If that was the case, they'd know she was terrified. She clutched the stick and leveraged herself up on her knees. At least they could only come at her from one direction. The cold stone at her back protected her.

Snarling sounded a few feet away, and then a wolf appeared, its fangs bared. She sucked in a deep breath, then swung her stick at the fearsome creature. It hit the wolf in the face, and the animal retreated a few feet. Another one appeared behind it, and she screamed. Then they both attacked.

Suddenly, a shot rang out, and the larger wolf fell to the ground. A second shot followed, and the second wolf yelped, then collapsed on the ground.

"Charlie, are you in there? Are you all right?"

Trey!

"Trey, oh thank God, you're here." She shoved herself to her feet and stepped over the dead animals—and into his arms.

He kissed her everywhere, on the forehead, on the nose, on the cheek, her lips. "Charlie, I was so afraid for you. Thank God, I got here in time." He grabbed her shoulders and looked her over from head to toe. "Are you hurt? Did they get to you?"

"I'm all right, but in a few more minutes..." She didn't finish the sentence. Trey knew what she meant. "How did you find me?"

"When you didn't show up at the Crossings—"

"You wanted me to get away from the sheriff's house, didn't you?"

He nodded. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry about everything. I never should have used you to try to capture your pa and brothers. I let my emotions control my good sense. When you didn't show up, I started to backtrack. I found where the horse threw you, and then I heard the wolves. I don't know what they're doing in this area. I thought they were higher up in the mountains. I was so worried I wouldn't find you in time."

"When my horse threw me, I hurt my ankle," she explained. "I think it's sprained."

"When daylight comes, I'm taking you back to town. This is over—for you."

"But—"

"No buts. You're going back to town."

She cupped his face in his hands. "Oh, Trey, why couldn't we have met under different circumstances? Normal circumstances?"

He grinned. "Maybe we wouldn't have liked each other then." He pulled her close and stroked her hair. "When I thought you might be hurt..."

She heard the tremor in his voice. Dare she hope that they could be together...after this?

"Let's find a better place to make camp," he said

and scooped her up in his arms. In a few minutes he deposited her on a bed of grass beneath a gnarled pine. After retrieving his horse, he gathered wood and made a fire. "This should keep any more varmints away." He sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. "Now try to get some rest."

To her surprise, Charlie's eyelids grew heavy, and sleep enveloped her. With Trey around, she felt safe...and happy.

The next morning, Charlie limped off into the bushes to take care of her personal needs. Her foot still ached, and it took all her effort to walk on it. When she returned, Trey lifted her into the saddle behind him. She wrapped her arms around his midsection. When he headed east toward the Crossings and not back to town, she questioned him. "Why are we going to the Crossings? I thought you were going to take me back to town."

"I have to let Quinn know I've found you and what I'm doing. He can gather up the men and follow us back." Trey angled in the saddle and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

"Does that mean you've given up on trying to find my pa and brothers?" She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

"For now." He jabbed his heels into the horse's flanks, and the animal galloped off.

When they arrived at the Brazos, Charlie saw Quinn and his men camped under a strand of trees. As they rode up, Quinn jumped to his feet. "Thank God, you found her. When you didn't come back last night, we got scared something had happened to her."

"*Her* can speak for herself. My horse got spooked by a rattler and reared and bucked me off. I sprained my ankle. That's all." She grabbed Trey's arm and slid her leg over the horse's rump and down his hindquarters to the ground. "I need a cup of coffee."

With a defiant look, she limped over to the camp fire. One of the men stood, doffed his hat and poured her a cup of coffee. "Thank you."

From behind her, Quinn laughed aloud. "Well, I can see she's fine. So, Trey, what's the plan?"

"The plan is I take her back to your house. I need to get that boot off her foot and tend to her ankle. As far as the Daughterys are concerned, it's up to you if you want to go on. I'm calling it a day."

"Well, since we ain't seen hide nor hair of them, I guess I'll round up the other fellows and we'll head back to town too." He turned to his men. "Saddle up."

As the sheriff and his men rode off, Charlie gulped down the rest of her coffee and walked back over to stand beside Trey who still sat his horse. "I'm ready."

"You sure? We can wait a few minutes if you'd like."

She smiled up at him. "I'm all right." She took his outstretched hand and pulled herself up behind him. A groan escaped her lips as she put her weight on her sprained ankle.

"I'm going down to the river and water the horse before we head back." He steered the animal down toward the stream.

In about ten minutes, he reined in the horse and relaxed the reins so the horse could drink. From around the river bank, a horse's whinny broke the morning stillness. Trey's horse lifted his head and sniffed the wind. Trey dismounted, then helped her down. He drew his gun.

"No. Trey, let's go. Let it be." Her heart rose in her throat. The hair on the back of her neck rose, and she knew danger was close.

"Shhh," he whispered. "Get down and stay here. I'm going to check that out." He handed the reins to her. "Take the horse up the bank and stay out of

sight." When she hesitated, he said, "Promise me."

As she stared into his green eyes, she saw only care and concern for her safety. "I promise. Trey, be careful."

"I will." He checked his revolver for ammunition and then on silent feet made his way down the river bank and disappeared around the bend.

Charlie led the horse into the trees, all the while praying for Trey's safety. If indeed her pa and brothers were hidden around the bend, they would probably shoot to kill anyone, especially a lawman. She had to stop them. She tied the reins to a tree limb, then with her heart in turmoil, she followed Trey's path.

Chapter 8

Trey zigzagged from tree to tree until he had a clear view of the bend of the river. When he saw no one, he crept forward, keeping low to the ground. And then he saw the horse. Standing at the river's edge, a man knelt at the animal's side inspecting its back foot. One man, not three. Was it one of the Daughterys? And if so, where were the other two?

He had to get closer. He'd seen wanted posters of the Daughterys, he should be able to tell if the man was one of them. He dropped down to all fours and slowly edged his way down toward the river bank. When he got closer, he could make out the man's features. Tall with coal black hair. All the Daughterys had black hair, including Charlie, but so did a lot of other people. Just because he had black hair didn't mean he was a Daughtery.

He sprawled on his belly and crawled closer. He heard a noise behind him, but before he could turn, a gun appeared at his ear.

"Figured you'd try something like this," a deep voice said. "Get to your feet."

A low curse escaped Trey's lips. There was no doubt in his mind he'd found the Daughterys. Or, at least, they'd found him. His life probably wasn't worth a plugged nickel right now. He could only pray that Quinn and his men would find him before... No, he wouldn't think about that.

The man laughed. "We been watching you fellows for days now." He thumbed the hammer back. "Where's my daughter?"

"Who are you? What are you talking about?"

"Name's Daughtery, and I'm looking for my daughter."

"Don't know anything about your daughter. I was watering my horse, and I heard a whinny from around the bend. I was just checking it out."

"Liar. The Langfords said you had her. Now head down that way to where my son is, and don't try nothing."

With the gun in the small of his back, Trey climbed down the bank. As he approached the man by the horse, he could see his resemblance to Charlie. Two people leading four horses emerged from the brushes. He recognized the Langfords immediately.

"Where's Charlotte?" the younger man said. "You better not have hurt her. If you have—" He let the threat hang in the still, hot air.

Trey gave up the pretense. "I haven't hurt her. I took her back to town. She's staying with the sheriff's wife."

"According to Tom here," the elder Daughtery pointed at Langford, "he heard talk in town about how the law was setting a trap for us and using Charlotte as bait."

Trey nodded. "I'll admit that was my plan, but I figured it was too dangerous for her."

Bill stepped in front of Trey and thumped him on the chest. "Then I guess you'll just have to take us to her."

"And then what? Are you going to take her with you and probably get her killed?"

"I'll let her decide that."

"She doesn't want to go with you. The good people of Concho Springs have already tried to lynch her just because her name is Daughtery. Is that what you want for her?"

"Let's get out of here, Bill," Tom Langford said. "That other posse might be back by here at any time."

I don't fancy spending time in jail."

"We ain't going nowhere without my daughter. We'll snatch her, then head for Mexico."

"Mexico is a long way from here," Tom whined.

"Shut up, Tom," the young man said. "If you're yellow, you and Rufus can ride out now."

"I ain't yellin', Wade, and you know it."

"Me neither," Rufus added.

"Besides, we've got to wait for Rowdy. He's making sure the others don't ride up on us."

As Charlie followed Trey's trail down the creek bed, the hackles rose on the back of her neck. Last time that had happened the Langfords had appeared. She took a deep breath and kept going. Oh God, she prayed, please let Trey be all right.

Suddenly, a hand covered her mouth, and she gasped for air.

"Be still, Charlotte. It's me, Rowdy." He moved his hand.

She whirled and faced her brother. "Oh, Rowdy, it's been so long since I've seen you. Where is Pa? Wade?"

"Down by the river. We've done caught us a U.S. Marshal. How'd you get free of him?"

"Oh, Rowdy," she grabbed his arm. "Pa hasn't hurt him, has he?"

"No, not yet anyway. Why?"

Her face flamed. "Because...because I don't want him hurt. He hasn't touched me, and he's treated me decent."

"Let's go talk to pa."

"Look, Rowdy, you all have got to get out of here. There's a posse..."

"We know, been watching them."

In a few minutes, they stepped out onto the river bank.

"Hey, Pa," Rowdy yelled. "I found her."

Her father headed for her, and she ran to him. Despite all his sins, he was her pa and she loved him. He hugged her tightly, then turned to the others. "Now we can go."

"But I can't go with you. I don't want to be on the run, always looking over my shoulder."

"Then let's leave her, Bill," Tom yelled. He pulled his gun and pointed it at Trey. "And I'll take care of this lawman."

"No," she yelled, then darted over to Trey and stood in front of him. "No, you can't shoot him."

"Move out of the way, gurl," Langford yelled.

"Pa, please don't let him hurt Trey," she pleaded.

He eyed her with a look that said he couldn't believe his ears. "You siding with a lawman against your own kin?"

"I ain't siding with no one. You know if you kill a federal marshal, there'll just be more to replace him, and you'll be in even bigger trouble."

"You in love with this man, Charlotte?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, Pa."

"Well, I'll be damned." Bill turned to his sons. "A Daughtery in love with a lawman. If that don't beat all."

"Just ride out, Pa, before the others come back. Please." She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

"All right. If that's the way you want it. We're headed for Mexico. You won't be seeing us for a while." He took the reins of his horse from Langford and vaulted into the saddle. "Let's ride."

"No," Langford yelled. "I'm killing me a lawman."

He aimed his gun at Trey but Bill turned and knocked the rifle from the man's hands. He placed his hand on his revolver. "You'll do as I say. You got that?"

Langford paled before their eyes. "Yeah, Bill, no problem."

But when Bill turned his back, Langford shot him. Bill Daughtery fell to the ground. Wade whirled and fired in a single movement. Tom Langford pitched from his horse. Rowdy aimed his weapon at Rufus, but the big man held up his hands. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Pa, Pa!" She ran to him and knelt beside him. Blood oozed from the wound in his chest. His eyes glazed over. "No, no," she sobbed. "Pa, don't die on me." Rowdy and Wade joined her, their faces drawn.

Trey knelt beside her and put his arm around her.

"Lawman, you love my little girl?"

Trey locked gazes with her. "Yes sir, I do."

"You take care of her, you hear?"

"I will."

"Rowdy, you and Wade make a run for it. Get to Mexico."

"Yeah, Pa."

Trey put his hand on Rowdy's arm. "I can't let you do it."

Rowdy moved his arm. "You can't stop us. You don't have a gun."

"I'll have to come after you."

"Trey, please," she clutched Trey's arm. "Let them go."

When he didn't answer, she turned to her brothers. "Get moving. Now."

They vaulted into their saddles and rode hell bent for leather from the clearing. Rufus followed on their heels. She turned back to her father. He was dead. A sob tore from her throat. He'd come after her—he did care.

Trey wrapped his arms around her, and she leaned into him, drawing on his strength. Great sobs racked her body, and she wept until she had no more

tears.

"Come on, honey. We'll take him back to town and give him a decent burial."

"Okay."

Charlie held Marissa's baby boy and crooned soft words to him. She glanced up at the proud papa. "He's a beautiful baby, Quinn. Isn't he, Trey?"

"That he is. Good thing he looks like Marissa." Quinn punched him in the arm, and Trey laughed.

"About time you settled down, Trey, and made some babies."

"I'm looking forward to it," Trey sent a smoldering glance in her direction. "But let us get married first, okay?"

"We got a preacher here in Dry Gulch," Marissa said as Charlie handed the baby to her. "What do you say, Charlie? I got a wedding dress that'd just about fit you."

Charlie locked gazes with Trey. Oh how, she loved him. "I don't know.... Only if he's sure. He may change his mind."

"Never. You are the most important thing in my life." He walked over to where she sat and knelt at her feet. "Charlene Daughtery, will you marry me today?"

"No."

His jaw gaped open. "No?"

"No?" Quinn asked.

"No?" Marissa stared at her.

"Why not?" Trey asked. "I thought you loved me—"

"Oh, I do love you, silly. But since my pa and brothers are...gone, I want Stumpy and Martha at my wedding. I consider them family."

Trey wiped his hand across his brow. "Whew! You had me worried there. I'll send for Stumpy and Martha right away. They should be here in a couple

days. I feel like I've been waiting for you my whole life, so I guess I can wait a couple of more days. Okay, let's do this again. When they get here, will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes and yes." She leaned forward and kissed him. "It's kind of ironic, isn't it? I was the outlaw's daughter, and now I'm going to be the lawman's wife. And I'm looking forward to it."

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