



THE Jane Toombs
OUTLAWS

The Outlaws

By

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Chapter 1

Mark Halloran swung into the saddle and left the line camp behind. His sorrel snorted, the horse's breath misty in the chill morning air. To the east, across the river, the sun hadn't risen high enough to touch the ice-choked water of the Pecos. Thin, rosy-tinted clouds lay above the distant caprock of the Staked Plains.

There was something about dawn that took a man out of himself.

Two years ago Mark had seen an Apache standing on a faraway bluff with his arms raised to greet the rising sun. He'd felt a flash of kinship with him, though that hadn't kept Mark from making sure the same Indian wasn't trailing him with a night ambush in mind.

He hadn't ridden line since he'd begun as a cowhand, five years ago, wouldn't be riding it now if Hank Hendricks hadn't gotten himself knifed in a San Patricio cantina in a fight over some *senorita de la noche*.

Mark didn't mind line-riding, checking for stray Dolan calves and turning them back before they strayed onto Chisum land. This was a welcome break from riding herd on that new bunch of drifters his boss, Jim Dolan, had hired. They were a lot handier with Colts than with cows. Dolan surely must be expecting trouble.

He headed west, away from the Pecos and its straggle of leafless cottonwoods. Across the rolling brown plains to the north, Capitan Peak's snowy dome glowed red. It was going to be a fine day—cold but sunny, with no snow except in the mountains. Maybe he'd scare up a turkey. He was getting a mite tired of chewing jerky.

The faint notes of a bird drifted on the dawn breeze. Mark listened, then reined in the sorrel. Not a bird. A man, whistling. One of Chisum's hands? The sound came from somewhere beyond the clump of cotton woods to his right, on Dolan land.

The whistler could be anyone as Dolan and Chisum land abutted along here. A year ago he might have hailed the cowboy, no matter who he worked for, and talked a few minutes, but Chisum, like Dolan, had been hiring gunmen lately. Mark wasn't looking for trouble.

He started to urge the sorrel on when he smelled wood smoke. His eyes narrowed. Could be breakfast campfire, or could be another kind of fire altogether. His fingers touched the stock of the Winchester in its saddle scabbard. The whistling continued, clear and plaintive, and triggered a memory from last summer's round-up.

Riding with a teen-aged hand named Billy Bonney, flushing cows from the salt-cedar tangle, he'd listened to the same damn melody. "Silver Threads Among The Gold."

"My ma's favorite song," Bonney had told him. "She died young."

If Bonney was his name. Dolan had said Billy's last name might be Antrim or maybe McCart, but in the New Mexico Territory you called a man by whatever name he chose to give you.

Which was one reason Mark was here. Billy had quit Dolan to ride for John Tunstall, a newcomer from England who was a friend of Chisum's. Mark turned the sorrel and headed north, keeping to the cover of an outcropping of rock near the trees. If Billy was boiling coffee, he'd join him for a cup. If he'd lit the fire for a different reason, Mark's visit wouldn't be so friendly.

He dismounted and tied the sorrel to a cotton wood sapling. Carrying his Winchester, he eased his way among the rocks, snaked his way through until he could see beyond them but still remain

concealed.

~~—A slight young man crouched beside a tiny fire with his back to Mark. A branding iron heated in the flames. A gray horse stood some yards away with a rifle still in the scabbard. A yearling lay beside the fire, its legs roped together and topside rump carrying the Dolan brand. It looked like Billy was aiming to change that.~~

Mark had never caught a brand-blotter in the act before. He raised the Winchester and sighted through the rocks. Shoot now; ask questions later. He lined up Billy's head, shifted down to his back.

Mark lowered the rifle. Damn it, he'd never shot a man. He sure as hell wasn't going to start by shooting one in the back. He climbed through the rocks into the open and swung the Winchester up again.

"Hey, Kid," he shouted.

The man whirled around, reaching for his Colt. Still Mark held his fire. For a moment neither of them moved; then Billy flashed his bucktoothed grin, took his hand from the Colt and waved.

"Hey, Mark," he called. "Ain't seen you for a spell. Come and jaw a bit."

Just as though he wasn't caught with a hot iron and another man's calf, Mark thought in amazement. Just as though I didn't have the drop on him. He sighted on Billy's chest and found he couldn't pull the trigger.

Hell. How was a man going to throw down on a buck-toothed youngster he'd ridden the trail with? The Kid had been a fine companero, whose cheerfulness and good spirits more than made up for his youth.

What in God's name was he going to do now? He plain didn't trust the Kid, for he remembered damn well what Billy had once told him,

'Did you ever shoot a man?' Billy had asked one evening by the campfire.

Mark shook his head and Billy's blue eyes had narrowed.

"You never forget the first one," he'd said, "but if I had to, I'd do it again. Billy Bonney don't take insults from any man alive."

Mark said nothing. He'd heard Billy had shot a man in Arizona and maybe a couple more in Mexico before coming to work for Dolan, but that was his business. It wasn't wise to ask many questions in the Territory.

"I was in Arizona working for this blacksmith named Cahill," Billy had gone on. "Big man. Hardly ever see a smith that ain't. Anyway, he made fun of me right along, and one day he called me a pimp and I had enough, so I jumped him. I didn't have much of a chance after he got me down—I must have weighed two-fifty. He was bound and determined to beat the hell out of me, so I just up and grabbed his Colt from his holster and shot him."

Mark stared through the sights of his Winchester at Billy. Would the Kid trail him if he made Billy free the calf and let him go? All Billy had to do was pick the right moment and Mark Halloran would be as dead as the blacksmith.

He lifted his head. Billy had stopped smiling. Make up your mind, Mark told himself.

As he began to lower the gun, hair-raising shrieks froze him in position. A rifle cracked off to the south.

"Apaches!" Billy yelled

Mark had no need to be told. A man never forgot an Apache war cry.

Billy ran to the tied calf, his knife flashed, and the freed animal struggled to its feet as Billy leaped onto his horse. Mark raced back around the rocks to where his sorrel was tied.

Mark kicked his horse into a gallop, heading south toward a flat-topped hill. Before he reached its base, Billy's gray tore out of the cottonwoods and headed in the same direction. Mark checked Billy's guns. Holstered. He slowed, letting the gray catch up.

More shots from behind the hill. Rifles. A pistol—a Colt .45, by the sound.

—Billy grinned at Mark as they galloped up the slope. “Knew you wouldn’t shoot me,” he said.

They reined in and dismounted below the crest. Mark hesitated only a moment before handing Billy the reins of his horse. It could be a trick. Billy might throw down on him as he climbed to the top. Mark shrugged off the notion.

He thought if the brand-blotting had been reversed, Billy wouldn’t have pulled the trigger either. Not that he’d ever throw a big loop over another man’s dogie. The Judge had knocked that kind of nonsense out of him when he was a boy back in St. Louis.

Mark dropped to his knees near the summit, crawled the last few feet on his elbows, then lay flat and wiggled across the level top of the hill until he could see below.

He swore under his breath.

One canvas-topped wagon. Four mules in harness, one down. Six mounted Mescalero Apaches circling mules and wagon, whooping and hollering. Snapping off a shot now and then. One brave using arrows. Looked to be a body slumped on the wagon seat. A puff of smoke ballooned behind the body as a Colt roared—meaning someone was still alive in there.

Mark slid back down to Billy. “Wagon. Six Apaches.” As he swung onto the sorrel, he reached for his Winchester.

“Whoeee,” Billy cried, mounting his horse. “Let’s go turn those Mescaleros into good Indians.”

* * *

Tessa Nesbitt pushed back a strand of her blond hair and, raising her father’s big Colt .45, did her best to aim at the galloping Indian before she pulled the trigger.

Damn. Missed again.

She heard the crack of Ezra’s rifle from the back of the wagon. An Apache jerked backward then slammed to the ground. The others yelled louder.

“Damn you! Damn you!” She screamed at them.

Seven-year-old Jules clutched at her dress, whimpering, trying to bury his head in her lap. She thrust him away and aimed over the body slumped across the wagon seat. Her father’s body. A bullet zinging past her, hit a metal pot with a clang.

Tessa fired. Aimed. Fired. Behind her Ezra had stopped shooting. She glanced back. No, not wounded, just taking his time aiming. He fired.

An Indian pony stumbled, pitched forward to its knees. His rider leaped off. She fired and the Apache faltered. Recovered. Jumped onto a pony behind another Apache.

“You winged him, Ezra called. “Jolly good, Tess.”

Tessa wished she could shoot as well as her fourteen-year-old brother—something that hadn’t seemed important before.

She winced as a bullet jerked her father’s body. Bullets couldn’t hurt him. He was dead, she was certain of it. Yet she couldn’t believe it.

“Tess!” Jules’ voice quavered in terror, but she had no time to comfort her little brother.

If Jules wasn’t killed by a bullet before the end, the Indians might let him live. She’d heard the Apaches sometimes spared little children, carried them to their camps and raised them as Indians. A bullet for herself, she’d die fighting. Make them kill her as if she were a man. No Apache was going to turn her into his squaw!

She aimed at the two braves on the one horse as they returned on the other side of the wagon. Fired. They swept past unharmed. Ezra’s rifle cracked. A pony staggered but recovered to gallop on.

Amid the stink of powder she smelled the acrid scent of burning wool, glanced around, saw a thin tendril of smoke rising from the blankets on the wagon bed.

Tessa bit her lip as she eased her father's canteen from under his body, unfastened it from his belt. She darted back and dumped the water onto the smoldering hole. Hurrying back to the front of the wagon, she checked the Colt, reached for the cartridges she'd taken from her father's belt. Her heart sank. Only three left.

She'd been shooting too fast, too wildly. There were still five Indians. All of the bullets would have to count.

A spurt of dust to her right caught Tessa's eye. Two horsemen were plunging down a hill. "Ezra!" she cried. "More coming. Look!" "Change places with me," he called.

Tessa stumbled to the back of the wagon, pulling Jules with her, his hands clenched onto her skirts. Ezra passed her as he headed for the front.

"Only got two more bullets," he muttered.

Tessa stared at an Apache galloping toward the tailboard of the wagon, knelt and snapped off a quick shot. Missed. He veered away, firing as he went. His bullet thudded into the wooden chest next to her.

"The new ones ain't Indians," Ezra shouted.

For a moment Tessa couldn't make out what he meant.

"They're white men," Ezra cried jubilantly.

An Apache tumbled from his horse to sprawl unmoving in the dirt. Tessa stared, then realized one of the oncoming men had shot him. The roar of the Colt had temporarily deafened her so she hadn't heard the rifle crack.

The remaining Apaches bunched together, facing the riders pounding toward them. Ezra squeezed off a shot and one of the Indian ponies stumbled.

"Damn," Ezra mumbled. "Missed."

Tessa held her breath, afraid to hope. She eased toward the front of the wagon, Jules still clinging to her skirts. Ezra had but one shot left. She had two.

The hat of the rider on the gray flew off. He crouched lower on his horse, but kept coming. The man on the sorrel aimed his rifle. Smoke puffed. An Apache veered off to the left and galloped off without wheeling. Wounded? Or fleeing? Either way he was out of the fight.

Ezra fired his last bullet. She felt Jules trembling against her side, put her arm around him and drew him close. His thin body shook with tearless sobbing.

The last three Apaches suddenly turned their ponies sharply to the right and galloped south. The two men stared after them, then reined in and dismounted. She saw smoke puff from their rifles.

"Licked 'em!" Ezra cried.

The Colt in Tessa's right hand felt too heavy to hold and she laid it aside. "There now," she murmured to Jules. "We're all right."

Her eyes rested on the limp body of her father, shot through the head by an Apache before he had time to draw his pistol. Tears burned in her eyes.

"Papa's dead," Ezra said, his hazel eyes no longer sparkling with the excitement of battle.

Tessa reached for his hand and gripped it hard as they watched the two white men remount and lope toward the wagon. The one on the gray had fair hair and looked to be scarcely older than Ezra. The rider on the sorrel was older, taller and very dark, with a high-cheek-boned face. He was better looking than any man she'd met in Texas—or in England, for that matter.

"Hello the wagon," he called as he neared.

Tessa handed Jules to Ezra. She couldn't bring herself to climb over her father's body, so she went to the back and slid off the tailboard, then walked around to meet the riders.

"I'm Tessa Nesbitt," she said. "Thank God you came."

—Mark couldn't find any words as he stared at the young woman standing in front of him. He dismounted, his eyes fixed on her pretty, dirt-smudged face. Her blonde hair glinted like gold in the sunlight and tears brightened her gray-blue eyes. He was transfixed by her beauty.

"The Apaches killed my father," she said, her voice quivering.

Mark's urge was to take her in his arms and comfort her as he would a child, but he held himself back, knowing he must not. The pleasing curves outlined by her brown dress showed she was no child.

He took off his hat, "I'm sorry," he managed to say. "My name's Mark Halloran." He glanced behind him, seeing the Kid jump from his gray and saunter toward them. "And this is Billy Bonney," he added.

"Too bad about your father, miss," Billy said.

A boy about Billy's size came around the wagon carrying a younger boy. "These are my brothers," Tessa said, "Ezra and Jules."

"How about your mother, Miss Nesbitt?", Mark asked.

Tessa bit her lip. "She died when Jules was born."

"You hit that Apache through the heart," Mr. Bonney," Ezra said, staring at Billy. "Awful good shooting from a horse."

Billy grinned. "Some call me Billy and some call me Kid, but no one calls me mister. If I can say Ezra, I reckon you can say Billy. You don't sound like you're from these parts." "We were on our way from Texas to the town of Lincoln." Tessa told him. Billy shook his head. "Don't much like some Texans either." "We came from England eight years ago," Ezra said.

Mark strode to the mules. The three survivors looked to be in pretty fair shape. He used his knife to cut the harness off the dead mule.

Billy hastened to help him. As they dragged the mule's body to one side, Billy muttered, "What about him, nodded toward the dead man on the wagon seat.

"Do you have a blanket we can use, Miss Nesbitt?" Mark asked

Tessa disappeared into the wagon, returning with a tattered brown blanket. Mark spread it on the ground. He and Billy eased Nesbitt's body from the seat onto the blanket and wrapped it around him, then lifted him over the tail into the bed of the wagon.

Tessa, meanwhile, had spread another blanket, equally worn, over the bloodstained wagon seat. Ezra handed Jules to her and climbed up to the seat himself. Tessa took the reins.

"Why not let your brother drive the mules?" Mark asked, alarmed at how pale she looked.

Tessa shook her head. "I've been told the Indians always come back for their dead. Ezra will hold the Colt. He's a better shot than I am."

A bright girl. Practical and plucky as well as pretty. He'd never met one quite like Tessa Nesbitt.

"You have a point," he told her. "We'd all best get moving." He glanced at Billy and raised his eyebrows.

"Be a privilege for me and my amigo to escort you into town," Billy said to Tessa, giving her his buck-toothed grin,

Tessa managed a ghost of a smile that touched Mark's heart. "We were heading for John Tunstall's place. Do you know him?"

"He's my boss," Billy answered.

Mark's mouth tightened. "We'll see you safely there," he said.

"Reckon they knew Tunstall back in England?" Billy asked once they were riding alongside the wagon.

“That’s where he’s from.”

“I haven’t met Tunstall,” Mark said.

Billy jerked his head toward the wagon. “Pretty girl. And that Ezra’s a good shot. Picked one of those Mescaleros before we got there. Not much in the wagon. If that’s all they own, they ain’t got shucks.” He shook his head. “The little boy was scared silly. I’d like to wipe those red devils off the face of the earth.”

Billy snorted. “Only way to civilize any Apache is with this.” He patted the stock of his Winchester.

“That reminds me.” Mark’s voice hardened. “Steer clear of Dolan calves, Billy.”

Billy shrugged. “Hell, if I’d known you were out line-riding, amigo, I’d’ve kept my rope hung on the saddle.”

Mark opened his mouth, but bit the words back. He was glad he hadn’t shot the Kid. Dolan hated Chisum and Tunstall, but that didn’t mean he had to dislike Billy.

As for the brand-blotting, it was common practice. That didn’t make it right, but law in the New Mexico Territory was looser than back home in St. Louis where the Judge’s strict ideas of right and wrong had been passed on to Mark for all time. Here stray calves wound up belonging to the first man who found and branded them. Or re-branded. It wasn’t worth killing a man over.

“I’ll pick you for riding with against the Apaches anytime,” Mark said, giving Billy a reluctant grin.

Glancing up at the sky Mark saw the thin morning clouds were gone and the sun’s warmth chased the chill of the December day. Tessa’s eyes weren’t as bright a blue as the winter sky. They were a softer color—like the gray-blue of early evening.

Tunstall wasn’t married. A wealthy man, Mark had heard. How well did she know him? Was it possible they had an understanding? Mark’s hand tightened on the reins. He forced himself to relax. What was the matter with him? *Too much imagination, the Judge had always said. Painting mirrors pictures of what’s going to happen when you don’t know beans is what makes a man out to be a damn fool.*

It would be easy to be a damn fool over Tessa Nesbitt.

* * *

“What’ll happen to us if Mr. Tunstall won’t let us stay?” Ezra asked Tessa.

“I’m certain he will,” she assured him.

She was anything but sure. Papa had rambled on about going to school with John Tunstall’s cousin, about how Englishmen should stick together in a strange land. He’d urged her to make herself a new dress, blind to the fact she’d used up all of her mother’s old gowns and there was no money for a new cloth.

“He comes of fine stock, Tessa, this John Henry Tunstall,” Papa had told her. “A moneyed family. I have to think of your future, child.”

That’s when she realized Papa planned to marry her off to this Englishman none of them had ever met. She’d protested, unhappy with the idea, but there was nothing for it but to go along with the trip to New Mexico Territory. There was nothing else to do.

Their money was gone, their cattle sold or stolen. Even her small stock of canned vegetables had been eaten. Foggy London seemed like Eden compared to Texas.

She glanced right and left at the countryside. This New Mexico valley along the Pecos River was brown with winter, like the bare branches of cottonwoods and willows. A mountain peak to the north was white with snow and the hills in the distance were green with pines. Perhaps everything

didn't turn brown and dusty here as spring gave way to summer, the way it did in Texas.

—Where else did she have to go? It was humiliating to ask help from a stranger, but there was no choice but to swallow her pride and do it. She dreaded the moment she'd have to face John Tunstall and beg him to take her and her brothers in.

Tessa didn't blame Papa for any of it. She blinked back tears, thinking of him lying dead behind her in the wagon, wrapped in one of their old blankets. She couldn't cry now. Ezra would get upset and frighten poor Jules all over again.

Poor Papa. He'd tried hard, but he wasn't fit for the life of a Texas rancher. Grandfather had been a minister and Papa ought to have followed in his footsteps. He'd've been happy enough in some country parish in England.

Even then, though, they'd have made it through another year and maybe things would have gotten better if it hadn't been for the range war. Papa didn't want to be on either side, but when the shooting started he'd had to choose and he chose wrong. There wasn't much left when the smoke cleared.

Tessa heard Billy laugh and looked over at him, then at Mark Halloran. How handsome Mark was. Was he married? Her face flushed as she realized where her thoughts were leading. If John Tunstall were Mark she wouldn't mind a bit going to live in his house.

"Do you think Billy was joking when he said people called him Kid?" Ezra asked. I don't like being called that, even if I am only fourteen. But he's old enough to be a cowboy, so why would anyone call him Kid?"

"He looks young," Tessa said, her mind still on Mark.

"Billy's a keen shot. Do you think he'd mind if I asked him to show me how he does it? Papa tried to teach me, but..." Ezra's words trailed away and she saw him clench his jaw.

Papa hadn't been a very good marksman, but what did that matter? He'd always tried to do his best, had always been there to depend on. Now he lay dead, killed by an Apache bullet. They were alone.

Tessa swallowed. She mustn't let Ezra know how frightened she was. "Billy seems friendly," she said. "I think he'll be glad to help you. But, Ezra, there's more to being a man than shooting. You know Papa wanted you to have schooling and..." "I know how to read and write and do sums. What more do I need?" Ezra shifted the Colt so it rested on one knee. He gazed steadily at the two men riding alongside the wagon.

"I won't ever call him Kid," Ezra said.

Chapter 2

Tessa stood on the riverbank in back of John Tunstall's store. Behind and below her the Rio Bonito was crusted with ice. She wore a black silk gown and a black wool coat borrowed from Susan McSween. The minister's words swept over her father's rough-planked coffin and blew past her on a keen north wind. Tessa closed her eyes momentarily as they lowered the coffin.

"Ezra said Papa was inside that box," Jules cried accusingly. "Don't let them put Papa in a hole."

Tessa crouched and put an arm around her little brother. "Papa's dead," she told him.

"His soul is in heaven."

Jules began to cry with his face turned against her breast. Around her she heard sympathetic murmurs from the small group that had gathered to watch this stranger's burial.

Poor Papa. Laid to rest in a town he'd never seen, so far from the green countryside of home.

native Kent.

~~—Tessa felt John Tunstall's hand pat her shoulder and glanced gratefully up at him. He'd taken charge from the moment Mark and Billy had brought her and her brothers into Tunstall's store and bank.~~

John's English speech was like an echo of their dead father and both boys had taken to him right away. Tessa liked him immensely. Though he was slight and fair with a boyish face, his air of authority gave her confidence.

He'd immediately taken the Nesbitt's to the McSween house next door to his store, telling Tessa he feared her reputation would suffer if she came to live at his ranch with no other woman there except his Mexican cook.

Alex and Susie McSween seemed delighted to have Tessa and the boys to stay with them, although the Shield family—father, mother and five children—already lived in the east wing of the large adobe house, along with Elizabeth Shield, Susie's sister.

Susie was young and attractive with curly red hair. Her nose might be considered a trifle large for true beauty, but her sparkle and vivaciousness made her irresistible.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to talk to an educated woman," Susie enthused. "It's true to have Elizabeth, but she's so busy with the children. There are so few women in the Territory, and almost none of them have had schooling."

Her lawyer husband, Alex, was somewhat older than she, with dark hair and a drooping black mustache. He was as friendly as Susie. Their expensively furnished house seemed like a dream come true. There was even a piano. Tessa hadn't seen one since she'd left England.

The McSween's were at the graveside, standing next to John Tunstall. Susie had introduced Tessa to the other men who made up the little group, but she couldn't remember who they all were—Southerner named Calvin Rutledge and several men who worked for John. Bill Bonney was the only one she knew.

Clouds slid over the sun and Tessa shivered. She hoped the howling, bone-freezing blizzard northeaster that swept down from the Arctic to Texas didn't do the same here in New Mexico.

The day was nothing like the hot and dusty afternoon seven-and-a-half years ago when she buried her mother. She'd scarcely cried then, worried about the tiny baby boy temporarily left in the care of the minister's wife. Tessa, twelve, would now be responsible for her baby brother and she was terrified.

She took a deep breath, wiped Jules' face with her handkerchief and stood, holding him against her side. Somehow she'd managed to raise Jules, but now, with Papa gone, she was responsible for both boys. At least they had temporary shelter, thanks to the McSween's. When she could think straight, she'd find a way to manage again.

Beside her Ezra shook with sobs. Her own eyes were dry, her crying done. Last night, after she'd climbed into the almost forgotten luxury of a featherbed, she'd heard Susie at the piano playing "Home Sweet Home," and she'd wept for her father and the loss of all that had meant home to her.

"Dolan's man," someone whispered behind her.

Tessa looked up and her breath caught. Mark Halloran walked toward her. I knew he'd come, she told herself. He stopped near the minister and looked across the grave, his compassionate gaze warming her.

She liked and trusted John, but the sight of Mark triggered a quite different emotion. Tingling all over, Tessa lowered her eyes. She'd never felt like this before and it frightened her.

Mark wished he could take John Tunstall's place beside Tessa. She looked so pale and fragile in her black coat that he longed to put his arm about her, to comfort her.

The minister concluded the prayer and walked around the grave to Tessa and her brother. ~~Mark hesitated, then finally followed him, ignoring the mutters of Tunstall's men. He wasn't looking for trouble, but, damn it, nobody was going to stop him from attending a funeral if he chose.~~

Mark caught Billy's eye and they nodded to each other, Billy smiling. His companion glowered, especially a tall man in a black frockcoat and black silk cravat. His trim goatee and mustache made him look like an affluent river-boat gambler. He was new to town and Mark didn't know him.

Mark passed the men and stopped beside the minister, where he waited for him to finish consoling Tessa.

"Mr. Halloran."

Mark turned to face John Tunstall.

"Mr. Halloran," Tunstall said once again. "I didn't have a chance yesterday to tell you I think you're a hell of a brave man, rescuing the Nesbitt's from those Apaches."

Mark smiled wryly. "A brave man rode beside me. That always helps."

"Billy Bonney. Yes, Billy's a good hand. Loyal." Tunstall smiled. "As a matter of fact, I could use another like him"

"I have a job," Mark said.

Tunstall nodded. "Keep my offer in mind."

"Oh, John, is this the man who saved poor Tessa?" Susie McSween advanced on them, holding out her hand to Mark.

Tunstall introduced Mark and Susie clasped Mark's hand between both of hers, holding tightly. Looking over her black bonnet, Mark saw the minister move on. Tessa glanced toward him.

Mark tried to withdraw his hand, but Susie held him and continued chattering away.

"Maybe I shouldn't be talking to a member of the opposition," she said with a roguish toss of her head.

"I'm not in opposition to you, ma'am," Mark replied, finally able to ease his hand from hers.

"But you work for that awful Mr. Dolan!" Susie cried.

Alex McSween was talking to Tessa now. The tall man in the black frockcoat had left the other men and was striding toward Mark with an angry frown.

Mark tensed. Except for McSween, who was well known to be a Bible-thumper who never toted iron, every man here was armed.

"I'm sure I don't know why anyone would want to be associated in any way with Mr. Dolan," Susie went on. "Do you know he's been accusing poor Alex of simply unspeakable--?"

"Excuse me, ma'am," Mark interrupted. "I'd like to pay my respects to Miss Nesbitt before my head back to camp."

Mark took three steps toward Tessa when the goateed man cut across his path and blocked it. When Mark attempted to veer around him, the man shifted to intercept him.

"You're not welcome here," he drawled. "I suggest you leave. Now."

"Get out of my way," Mark growled. Who the hell did this Southern bastard think he was ordering him around?

"You heard what I said." The Southerner didn't move. "I'm not telling you again. Get out of my way!"

The Southerner sneered.

Mark walked straight at him. The Southerner grabbed at his shirt-front. Mark seized his arm and crouched. With a quick twist he flipped the man into a somersault. He thudded onto his back on the ground.

Would the bastard draw? Instead, the Southerner's hand slid along the side of his boot.

“What have you done to Mr. Rutledge?”

~~—Mark spun around at the sound of Tessa’s voice. She walked past him to offer a helping hand to Rutledge.~~

“Are you all right?” she asked Rutledge as he scrambled to his feet.

Mark caught a glimpse of a boot with a specially designed pocket made, he knew, for either knives or derringers. Sneaky bastard.

Rutledge nodded to Tessa. “Don’t worry your pretty little head over me, Miss Nesbitt. I’m fine.” He dusted off his coat.

She turned to Mark. “I’m surprised, Mr. Halloran.” The hurt in her gray-blue eyes fueled his anger at the Rutledge, who’d managed to put Mark in the wrong.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Tessa. How could he explain why he’d become involved in a fight at his father’s funeral?

“You ought to apologize to Mr. Rutledge, not to me.”

“No.”

Her eyes widened.

Before Mark could explain, Alex McSween and Tunstall hurried up to flank Tessa.

Rutledge shrugged. “I’m afraid the gentleman misunderstood me and took offense.

Dolan’s hands aren’t noted for courtesy.”

Mark clenched his fists.

McSween raised his hands, palms up. “Now, lads, if we all obeyed the law of God rather than the law of the jungle, life on earth would be a prelude to heaven instead of a preview of hell.

Don’t you agree, Mr. Halloran?”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Mark said as evenly as he could.

“If I could persuade every man in Lincoln County to do as I do,” McSween went on, “to put aside their weapons and not bear arms, we’d soon have no need for Sheriff Brady. Nor for the hangman either.”

“I’m afraid that would take some tall persuading, Mr. McSween,” Mark said. “Most men in the Territory are pretty attached to their Colts. But I do regret upsetting Miss Nesbitt.”

Tunstall offered Tessa his arm. Without another look at Mark, she took it, giving Tunstall a little smile. Mark gritted his teeth. A glance at Rutledge gave him the dubious satisfaction of knowing the Southerner didn’t like to see Tessa walking off with Tunstall any better than Mark did.

I can’t let her leave this way, he told himself.

“Miss Nesbitt!” he called. Tessa looked back at him.

“I’ll come by and see you in a week or so,” he said. “If you don’t mind.”

“If you like,” she said coolly, turning away and continuing on with Tunstall and McSween.

“I suggest you keep away from the young lady,” Rutledge said softly.

“You can go to hell,” Mark told him.

“You’ve been warned,” Rutledge said.

The two men eyed one another.

Mark wanted to walk away, but he didn’t trust the Southerner enough to turn his back on him.

“There you are, Calvin,” Susie McSween called. She waved.

Without another word, Rutledge stalked off to join Susie. As Mark watched her take his arm and smile flirtatiously up into his face, he thought fleetingly that McSween seemed oblivious to his wife’s coquettishness. Maybe not being jealous went along with his peace-on-earth preaching.

Not that Mark wouldn’t like to see Lincoln County a tad more peaceable. But the way he saw it, laying aside weapons would just get the decent men shot first.

Two weeks before Christmas, Mark rode into town from Dolan's ranch. A Yule tree stood in the center of the plaza, a pinon pine from the hills. Red ribbons tied to its branches fluttered in the wind and reminded him of festive St. Louis Christmases of years past.

The Judge wouldn't have allowed a skinny pinon pine inside—and now probably not me either, Mark thought ruefully. That wasn't today's problem. What troubled him was whether McSween would let him in his house so that Mark could see Tessa.

When he reached the U-shaped McSween adobe, Mark tied his sorrel to the post and squared his shoulders before walking up the steps to thump the iron knocker against the front door.

He waited for someone to answer the door. He knocked again. At last it opened. Little Jules peered up at him.

"Hello, Jules," Mark said. "Is your sister at home?"

The boy nodded. Behind him Mark saw the brown face of McSween's cook. "Quien es?" the woman asked.

"Mark Halloran. To see Senorita Nesbitt."

"Entrez, Senor." She pointed to the left and hurried away.

Mark closed the door behind him and stepped around Jules, who tagged after him into the parlor.

Mark perched uneasily on the leather seat of a wooden chair while Jules sat on the piano stool and stared at him. Trying to think of something to say to the boy, Mark came up with "where's your big brother?"

"He went off to Mr. Tunstall's with Billy." Jules' lower lip pushed out. "Ezra never takes me. Says I'm too little. I'm not!" He swiveled on the piano stool until his back was to Mark. He hit middle C on the keyboard.

"Can you play the piano?" Mark asked.

In answer Jules ran the fingers of his right hand up and down the scale.

"Very good."

Jules spoke with his back to Mark. "Mr. McSween's teaching me. But Ezra says I need to learn how to shoot and that men don't play the piano."

Mark got up and walked to the piano, spinning the stool so Jules faced him. "Every man needs to know how to shoot. That doesn't mean a man can't also play the piano. I'm sure Mr. McSween knows how to shoot and he plays the piano, doesn't he?"

Jules gave a reluctant nod. "But Ezra says boys who play the piano are sissies. That only girls play."

"Do I look like a girl?" Jules shook his head.

"Well, I took piano lessons when I was a boy and I can play."

Jules slid off the stool. "Show me."

Mark glanced over his shoulder. Damn. Now he'd done it. Reluctantly, he sat on the stool and poised his hands over the keys. He didn't want to play. Not only because he was at the McSween piano without their permission, but because he didn't want to be reminded of the past. He saw Jules' mouth tighten, saw doubt gather in his eyes, eyes grayer than Tessa's, but black-lashed the same as hers. Behind Jules he noticed a fat red candle flickering in a silver holder on the mantel.

It was the Christmas season.

Mark brought his fingers down on the keys for the first chorus of "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen." As he played he was aware of Jules getting closer until finally the boy leaned against him. When the last notes died away, the boy straightened.

“I know that song,” he said. “Papa used to sing it at Christmas. Will you teach me to play it?”

~~Mark nodded and offered the stool to the boy. Soon Jules was picking out the melody with one hand.~~

“You’ve got a good ear for music,” Mark told him.

“I heard you playing.” Tessa’s voice came from behind them.

Mark whirled around. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. I hope my playing won’t upset Mrs. McSween.”

Tessa smiled. “If I know Jules, he wheedled you into it.”

His heart leaped at her smile. She looked especially lovely in a high-necked cream-colored wool dress with a hint of bustle. He was about to tell her so when Susie swept into the room. She wore a gown of bright green, pointing up the red of her hair. It had an elaborate train over the bustle and the neckline dipped to show the tops of her breasts--a stunning woman.

“Why Mr., Halloran, she exclaimed, taking his hand, “you’re a man of hidden talent, aren’t you?”

Still holding his hand, she turned to Tessa. “Be a dear and ask Rosalita to bring in some wine and cake.”

As Tessa left the room, Susie said to Jules, “Run along now. You’ve practiced enough for one day. Rosalita will give you your cake in the kitchen.” “He’s a dear boy,” she said after Jules hurried away. “But children can be tiring. My sister has five and I swear I don’t know how she manages. “ Susie drew Mark toward a settee, seated herself and patted the place beside her. “Right here. We can have a cozy little chat.”

Mark sat down, but protested, “I came to see Tessa--that is, Miss Nesbitt.”

“Of course. But Tessa simply insists on helping Rosalita—she’s so concerned about paying her way—so we might as well talk until she returns.” Susie leaned toward Mark, her bodice gaping slightly so that he could almost see her nipples.

The scent of jasmine surrounded him. Susie looked up at him through her lashes. “It’s a shame we didn’t meet before now,” she murmured as her hand brushed along his thigh, as if by accident.

Mark swallowed. He’d been a long time without a woman; Susie might be obvious, but she was tempting. He wondered how much was teasing and how much she meant.

“I only hope you’ll stop by to see me after we return from St. Louis,” she said. “We’re going there for Christmas. You and I have music in common already.” She ran her tongue along her lips. “I wonder what else we might find to share an interest in?”

Damn it, her nearness was having its effect. He smiled at her. “I’ll keep your invitation in mind.”

“See that you do.” Her voice was husky.

I’ve got to move away from her. He looked up.

Tessa stood in the archway to the foyer with a tray in her hands, staring at Susie and him.

* * *

A knot tightened in Tessa’s stomach as she carried the loaded tray to the table at the far end of the room. She knew Susie liked to flirt, and if Alex didn’t mind, it was certainly none of Tessa’s business. But Mark didn’t have to sit so close to Susie with such a silly smile on his face. What was the matter with him? He knew perfectly well Susie was a married woman. Maybe he’d really come to see Susie instead of her. The knot inside Tessa twisted.

“May I help you?” Mark’s voice asked, close to her.

“No, thank you. I wouldn’t think of troubling you.” He stood beside her, but she didn’t look

him.

“You’re angry.” He spoke softly, almost in her ear.

Susie began to play “Joy To The World,” with frills and flourishes.

Tessa turned toward Mark. “I am not angry.” She spit the words through her teeth. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you since the first time we met,” he said.

“That’s hardly my fault.”

“This was my first chance to get into town. I’ve thought of you all the time. Worried about you.”

Tessa looked into his eyes, eyes as deep and rich a brown as an English chestnut. The knot in her stomach dissolved as a tingling warmth shot through her. She wished he would touch her and yet at the same time feared he would, for she didn’t know what would happen if he did. Nothing in her entire life had prepared her for the way Mark affected her.

“Tessa,” he said. “Tessa.”

She felt as though she couldn’t breathe.

Susie finished the carol with a thundering chord and turned on the stool. All the gaiety had drained from her face.

“Isn’t there something you can do to persuade Mr. Dolan to stop persecuting Alex?” she asked Mark.

“Persecuting him, ma’am?”

“Oh, don’t call me that. I’m Susie. But, yes, it’s obvious his intention is to force poor Alex to leave Lincoln. Alex is so kind. A God-fearing man. He wouldn’t harm anyone. Yet the man you work for makes him out to be a criminal and threatens to have him put in jail. I’m quite beside myself.”

“Susie and Alex are making a trip to St. Louis in a few days,” Tessa put in.

“Alex insists. He knows how nervous all this makes me.” Susie raised her chin. “But I’ll be back. My duty is to remain at Alex’s side. “I’m afraid I’m not in Mr. Dolan’s confidence when it comes to his personal affairs,” Mark said. “I’m just the ranch foreman.

“Your employer is a devious man.”

“That’s as may be, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that!” Susie’s voice rose almost to a shriek as she got up abruptly from the piano stool.

She was upset. When she’d seen Susie flirting with Mark, she’d thought Susie had quite forgotten all the problems Alex shared with her.

Tessa didn’t exactly understand, except it seemed Mr. Dolan claimed Alex had kept insurance money he should have paid out to Mr. Murphy, who was Mr. Dolan’s partner. It was somewhat confusing.

“I’m sorry,” Mark said. “Susie.”

“That’s better.” Susie smiled at him but it was plain to see her heart wasn’t in it. “I find I’m more tired than I thought, so if you’ll excuse--”

The front door opened. Alex strode in, followed by John Tunstall. Alex went on past them, and Susie trailed after him. John advanced on Tessa, ignoring Mark.

“I’ve come to persuade you to go east with Alex and Susie,” he said. “Until this affair with Dolan blows over.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” Tessa said. “I’m staying here with my brothers.”

John eyed Mark, frowning, before turning again to Tessa. “You could bring Jules with you. Ezra can stay on my ranch. He and Billy Bonney get along famously.”

Tessa shook her head. “That’s kind of you but no.” She felt panicky at the notion of separating the family. Besides, she was already obligated to the McSween’s and wouldn’t dream of having them

pay her fare from the railhead at Trinidad, Colorado, to St. Louis. "I'm certain Mr. Dolan isn't going to harm me," she added

"Not directly perhaps," John said. He looked at Mark. "It's hard to understand why a decent sort of chap, as you appear to be, would continue to work for such a conniving and unscrupulous man."

Mark scowled. "I don't think I need to explain myself to you or anyone else."

"No?" John took a step closer to him. "The way things stand, neither Alex nor myself can trust any man who works for Dolan."

"But, John," Tessa said, "he came here to see me,"

"Did he? Or was he sent as a spy?"

Tessa saw Mark clench his fists. Not another fight! she thought in dismay. "Maybe you'd better leave, Mark," she said hastily.

"And I suggest you don't return," John added.

Mark brushed past John, picked up his hat and jacket. At the door he turned to look at Tessa. "I'll come back if you want me to," he said.

She bit her lip. Glancing from him to John. She was staying with the McSween's, so she mustn't cause trouble for them. She wanted to see Mark again, but... "It's obvious you're embarrassing the lady," John said.

Mark nodded his head in farewell and went out. Tessa took a quick step toward the door but stopped when John spoke.

"You're better off without that chap, my dear," he said.

She smiled uncertainly at him. Her head told her John was right, but her heart ached all the same.

Chapter 3

A northeaster swept in the second week in February, the icy winds piling the snow in drifts and no one left their firesides unless they had to.

Alex McSween, who'd wound up spending Christmas in a Las Vegas jail, had been released on eight thousand dollar bail was back home. He sat with Jules by the fireplace, telling him stories from the Bible, while Tessa sewed.

Susie was still in St. Louis. Once he'd gotten out of jail, he'd seen her safely there but came back to Lincoln early in January. He'd traveled to Mesilla, on the Rio Grande, the first of February for a court hearing and had just gotten back to Lincoln before the northeaster blew in.

Tessa rather enjoyed the coziness of being shut in. It reminded her of when Papa was alive. Ezra, though, grew restless after the third day.

"I could make it to Tunstall's ranch," he said after she'd left the fireside to polish silver in the dining room.

"It's Mr. Tunstall."

"Aw, nobody says mister when he's talking about a fella." "Your father tried hard to teach you good manners," she said.

"English manners." Ezra looked at her defiantly. "I'm not English now, I'm American."

"Whatever you think you are, you're not to try riding to the ranch in this weather. You spend too much time there as it is, You mustn't presume on Mr. Tunstall's kindness."

"I do chores for him."

Tessa raised her eyebrows. "In the winter? With all the hands he employs? I can't believe even half of them keep busy this time of the year."

“Well, I did do chores before Christmas. Besides, Billy says when a man’s practicing his shooting, he ought not to miss a day. I have to get better so I can protect Tunstall, because Dolan threatened to get him soon.”

Tessa frowned. “Did Billy tell you that?”

“Everybody knows about how Dolan and Jesse Evans and his gang threatened McSween and Tunstall on the way back from Mesilla last week.”

“I didn’t know it.”

“Dolan threw down on Tunstall, but some deputy stopped him. “How terrible!”

“So you see I have to practice with Billy. He’s the best shot Tunstall’s got.”

“I realize he’s an excellent shot. I’ve never forgotten he and Mark saved our lives. But, Ezra, I don’t think it’s good to tag after Billy all the time. You need to make friends your own age, too. What about Ira Fowler, here in town? He’s fourteen and I thought he was a nice boy.” “Yeah, he’s okay,” Ezra’s tone lacked enthusiasm.

“Okay? What kind of a word is that?”

“You know what it means. I’m going to talk like I want to.”

Tessa felt helpless as she looked at her brother. He’d grown so these past couple of months John had given Ezra some of his old clothes and already they were almost too small for him. He was going to be a big man, like their father. He’d be a good-looking man, too, she thought, surprised, for she’d never considered him as a man.

“You just want to keep me away from Billy!” Ezra burst out. “You’d rather I acted like Halloran, I suppose. Playing the piano. Keeping company with liars and thieves like Dolan’s hires.” “Ezra!”

He spun away from her and flung out of the dining room, stomping off to the east wing where he shared a room with Jules.

Tessa sighed. What was she going to do with Ezra? So far he hadn’t openly disobeyed her, but she sensed he soon would. Then what? He needed a man’s influence. Not Billy, who was only three years older than Ezra and, according to what she’d heard, wild and wise beyond his years.

Ezra liked John, Maybe if she talked to John about him, John would be able to help.

There was Calvin Rutledge, too. Ezra didn’t know him well, but she’d been seeing a great deal of Calvin since Christmas and he struck her as an upright man.

Alex quoted Bible verses to the boys in lieu of discipline. He’d asked both of them to call him Uncle Alex, and that’s what he seemed to be, a benevolent uncle to them. Too easy-going.

Resolutely she kept her thoughts from Mark. She hadn’t seen him since his December visit. Even though she’d asked him to leave that time, she’d thought he’d come again.

Tessa couldn’t believe Mark was a liar. She wanted to believe he’d come to the house that day to see her and for no other reason. But she’d seen him flirting with Susie and it surely was a coincidence he’d picked the day before McSween’s left town.

And then Alex had been arrested, on Dolan’s order, on Christmas Eve. How could Mark have had anything to do with that?

If only she could prevent herself from dreaming about Mark--strange unsettling dreams where he held her in his arms, his hands caressing her until her entire body throbbed with delicious pulsations. Shameful dreams.

For the next week Ezra obeyed her order to keep away from the Tunstall ranch, although he moped sullenly about the house until she longed to shake him. But on the eighteenth, when he didn’t appear for breakfast and when she went to call him, he was gone.

Tessa ran back to the west wing and into the kitchen where Jules sat at the scrubbed pine table eating one of Rosalita’s tortillas. As soon as he saw her, he ducked his head.

“Where’s Ezra?” she asked.

“He left,” Jules mumbled.

“When?”

“I don’t know. It was still kind of dark.”

“Jules, why didn’t you come and tell me?”

“Ezra said not to. Said I’d be a tattler and no one likes tattletales.” Tessa sighed. “Did he tell you where he was going?” Jules shook his head.

Tessa knew where Ezra had gone. To John’s ranch. I’ll ride after him, she decided. And while I’m there, I’ll see that John understands what the problem is.

If I let Ezra get away with this, I’ll never be able to control him again.

* * *

Mark swung on his heel and strode away from the men near the corral. Damn it, this stunk worse than a Pecos catfish three days dead. No sheriff in his right mind would deputize Jesse Evans or Buck Morton, even if they were the last men left in the Territory.

Months ago Mark had protested to Dolan when he hired Evans and Morton, but Dolan had insisted he needed a couple of tough gunslingers for protection. Protection was one thing. This was another.

I’m heading into town to talk to Sheriff Brady, he decided. Dolan, too, if I can locate him. Why isn’t Brady leading this posse? And why so many? Why eighteen when four or five could do the job? Gunmen, every last one. The real trouble had started on Christmas Eve when McSween was arrested in Las Vegas. Dolan had filed suit against him, saying McSween had embezzled money from an insurance claim. Then, in January, Brady had attached McSween’s cows, and now that posse was heading out to drive in some of Tunstall’s stock, claiming that the two men were partners and that Dolan had the right.

Gunslingers instead of cowboys. Mark mounted his sorrel and urged him into a fast lope. The day was sunny and cool, the snow gone. A gray and white bird called from the bare branches of a cottonwood.

Just before noon he passed the abandoned adobe casita beside a frozen stream that was his mark for the halfway point between Dolan’s spread and Lincoln. In warmer weather he often stopped there to eat and water the horse. The sorrel slowed, remembering, and Mark kneed him on. He topped a rise and quickly reined in.

Below him, on the trail to Tunstall’s ranch, a lone rider trotted. Could be Tunstall. Since December, Mark had no desire to ever meet him again, but, damn it, if the rider was Tunstall, he was going to have to warn him. He had no real grudge against the Englishman, and he’d hate to see any man come up against that crowd Brady had deputized for his posse.

He rode down the hill to intercept the rider. As he drew closer, Mark frowned. It wasn’t Tunstall. In fact, it wasn’t a man. The woman rode astride, wearing men’s pants under her skirts, but that wasn’t as unusual as the fact she was alone. And that was dangerous as hell in this country. She turned her head and caught sight of him.

Mark drew in his breath. Tessa Nesbitt!

She slowed her gray horse, waiting for him. He pounded up to her and pulled alongside. “You shouldn’t be out here alone,” he growled at her, breaking into her greeting. “Where are you headed?”

Tessa blinked, then touched the Colt in the gun belt buckled around her waist. “I’m armed. It’s any of your business what I do, Mr. Halloran, I’m headed for the Tunstall ranch

“You didn’t pull that pistol when you spotted me coming. A Colt’s not much use holstered.”

“For heaven’s sake, I recognized you!”

—“Another thing, you didn’t spot me soon enough. I’d have had the drop on you before you had chance.”

Tessa put one hand on her hip and glared at Mark. “Stop lecturing me as though I were Jules’ age.”

“You ought to get your older brother to ride with you if none of the men has time. Ezra’s good shot.”

“As far as I’m concerned, Ezra is in disgrace at the moment.”

“One more thing. It’s not a good idea to be heading for Tunstall’s ranch today. You’d best turn around. I’m going into town and I’ll be glad to escort you back.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have no intention of returning to Lincoln.”

Her eyes were like thunderclouds when she was angry, Mark thought, almost completely gray. Even in the man’s hat she wore—one of her father’s, he suspected—and the pants, Tessa looked so pretty he found it hard to breathe.

“There may be trouble at Tunstall’s,” he said. “I’m going in to talk to the sheriff about it. And you’re coming with me.”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

“Some deputies are on their way to attach Tunstall’s stock,” He said reluctantly, certain she’d be even angrier.

“Dolan!” She spat the word out. “He’s behind it; he’s out to destroy John like he’s tried to destroy Alex. How can you go on working for such a monstrous person?”

“You’ve got the wrong idea about Dolan. Besides, who I work for is my own business. Come on, we’re heading back.” He reached for the bridle of her horse.

Mark heard the slither of metal against leather, an ominous click. He dropped the bridle and twisted his head to stare at Tessa.

Her Colt was cocked and pointed straight at his chest. “Turn your horse and ride for town,” she ordered. “You go your way and I go mine.”

“You’re not going to shoot,” he told her. “Put the damn gun away.”

“If I can shoot an Apache, I can shoot you,” she snapped. “Do as I say.”

Mark shrugged, started to wheel his horse away from her, then suddenly whipped the sorrel’s head back around, kicked free of this stirrups and leaped out of the saddle at Tessa. His weight and momentum flung then both off the far side of her horse. The Colt barked as they slammed to the ground. Both horses bolted.

Mark scrambled to his feet. He knelt beside Tessa, relieved when he saw she’d only had the breath knocked out of her.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She raised herself on one elbow. Her hat was on the ground some distance away and her golden hair glistened in the sun. “You--you ruffian!” she gasped.

Mark rose and retrieved her gun, emptied the chambers and stuck it under his belt. He reached a hand to her and pulled her to her feet. When he looked around neither horse was in sight.

“Thanks to your foolishness,” he said, “we’ve got a long hike ahead of us.”

Tess stopped brushing dirt from her skirt. “My foolishness!”

“You pulled the gun, not me.”

She put both hands on her hips, glaring up at him. “You come riding at me out of nowhere and order me to go back to town, try to force me to return when I refuse, then get upset because I tried to free myself by using my Colt. I hate you, Mark Halloran. I wish I had shot you.”

She was so damn unreasonable. And so damn pretty. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and

hold her safely there for the rest of time.

~~—A flicker of motion on the hill to his right made him look up. He caught a glimpse of the sorrow disappearing over the top.~~

“Maybe we won’t have to walk,” he told her. “I sometimes stop at a place just over that hill and my horse is used to it. I think he’s headed there now. Let’s go see.”

Tessa glanced at the hill, then looked at the trail heading south to Tunstall’s ranch, north to Lincoln. There was no sign of her horse. She sighed. “I suppose I have no choice.”

They walked in silence until they reached the hill. As they began to climb, Tessa said, “Jules asks about you all the time.”

Mark smiled. “He’s a fine boy. Looks a lot like you.”

“He does?”

“Well, his eyes are lighter and his hair’s darker, but his face is like yours. There’s no doubtin’ you’re kin. I’m sorry things worked out so I couldn’t come back to see Jules again. To see you again.”

She said nothing.

“Seems as though I’m forever telling you I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish ...” He paused.

“What do you wish?”

He waved a hand. “Oh, that things were different. You’re a friend of the McSween’s and I work for Dolan. We’re on opposite sides and their feuding prevents us from being friends.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.” Her voice was softer.

He caught her hand in his and helped her climb the last few feet to a rock shelf on the crest of the hill where they stopped to rest.

“We could try to be friends anyway,” he said.

Tessa pulled her hand from his and pointed down at the abandoned casita.

“Is that the place you meant? She asked. “I don’t see your horse.”

“That’s it. Might as well go on down and wait around a bit. Got a hunch he’ll show up there rather than travel all the way back to Dolan’s ranch.”

She glanced in the direction of Lincoln, maybe a four hour walk to the north, then toward Tunstall’s ranch, even farther to the south. “We may as well, I suppose,” she said finally.

At the bottom of the hill Tessa examined the inside of the adobe. “Look, there’s wood in the fireplace. Does someone actually live here? It seems so dilapidated.”

“Never seen anyone. Could be the herders use it sometimes. I’ll start a fire if you’re cold.”

“We won’t be here very long, will we?” Mark heard a twinge of apprehension and something else he couldn’t identify.

He shrugged and knelt to the hearth, struck a match and touched it to the pine kindling underneath the logs. They caught fire and soon licked up along the logs.

Going back out the sagging open door, Mark cut some branches from one of the pinon pines behind the casita. Returning, he laid them near the fire. Tessa picked up one, using it as a broom to sweep away the accumulated dirt debris from the ground in front of the fire. She arranged the rest of the boughs over the cleaned space, sat on them and held her hands out to the fire.

Mark smiled as he watched her busying herself like a wife at her own hearth. He sat beside her saying, “The heat feels good.”

“Yes.”

He glanced at her, wondering if he imagined the quiver in her voice. She was gazing at him. She turned her face away quickly and color rose to her cheeks. Her hat was off and her hair lay over her shoulders in glorious disarray. Desire stirred in him.

He leaned toward her, raised a hand to her face and, with gentle fingers on her chin, turned back toward him. “I can’t stop looking at you,” he said softly. “You’re so beautiful. I’ve never seen

woman so beautiful.”

“Not even Susie?” The words came out breathlessly.

He blinked. “Susie McQueen?”

Tessa nodded.

“She doesn’t compare to you!”

She lowered her gaze. “You seemed to like her.”

He had to admit Susie’s flirting had aroused him--she was a handsome woman. But Tessa stirred more than his body. What he felt for her was more complicated than simple desire.

“I like Susie,” he said. “But you’re different. I don’t know how to tell you.” He stroked her cheek, traced the curve of her lips with his forefinger, his heart beating faster and faster. Her lips parted.

The blood roared in Mark’s ears. He tried to warn himself he must stop this now, before he went out of control. Tessa wasn’t the kind of woman a man took for his pleasure and then forgot.

He gazed into her eyes. In their gray-blue depths he could see a glow that warmed him more than the flames of the fire. He bent his head and kissed her.

At first her mouth was soft under his, the innocent lips of a girl not used to a man’s kisses. But as he wrapped his arms about her, drawing her close, he felt the answering pressure of her mouth, felt her arms on his shoulders, holding him to her.

His need for her drove every other thought from his mind. He unbuttoned her coat, slid his hands along her breasts, soft under the cloth of her dress, Tessa drew in her breath and started to pull away.

He dropped his hands to her waist, holding her as he kissed her throat, feeling her relax again against him. He undid one button of her high-necked gown, then another and another, his lips traveling along her skin as he bared it.

“Mark,” she murmured. “Please...”

He couldn’t tell if the plea was to go on or to stop, but since she didn’t try to pull away, he was driven on and soon the dress was down about her waist. He removed her camisole and her pink-peaked breasts sprang free, the nipples taut with desire. As his fingers caressed first one breast, then the other, she made little moaning sounds.

His world narrowed to the woman in his arms. “Tessa,” he whispered against her ear. “So lovely.”

He bent his head to her breasts, his tongue circling the nipples. Tessa held him to her. Her fresh, sweet scent mingling with the fragrance of the pine excited him so much that his hands trembled as he laid her back among the boughs and pushed her gown lower, then unbuckled the belt of the pants she wore. He drew off her pants and gown and then her undergarments.

He threw off his clothes as fast as he could, then lay on his side next to her. She gazed at him with passion-darkened eyes. Gently he drew her to him and kissed her.

The feel of her bare flesh against his made him groan, but he forced himself to wait, stroking the velvet-soft skin of her hip, her thigh, until his fingers trailed between her thighs exploring and caressing.

“Mark,” she breathed. “Oh, Mark, I don’t know what’s happening to me. I feel so--”

He stopped her words with his mouth, pressed her over onto her back and raised himself above her. Easing her legs apart, he lowered himself until his sex touched the welcoming warmth of her womanhood. He thrust into her as gently as he could, but she gave a little cry of pain and tried to pull away.

Mark couldn’t halt. He was beyond reason, she was his, he’d never wanted any woman so much, he had to have her. He thrust hard once, twice, felt her tightness give and then he was dead.

inside her.

“I’m afraid,” she cried. “Please...”

“It’s all right, love.” he murmured. “It’s all right.”

He forced himself to slow, then to cease moving altogether, although he was on fire with need. He stayed within her as he kissed her lips, her breasts, tasting the sweetness of her skin.

His tongue probed her mouth again and soon she was clinging to him, gasping. He began to thrust again, very slowly. Tessa started to writhe underneath him, arching up against him, moaning, calling his name. Still he held back.

Tessa moved wildly, pushing her hips against him, her fingers digging into his back. He matched her rhythm as pulses of pleasure throbbed through him.

Tess cried out, hugging him to her, The sound of her passionate release shot through him and he groaned, thrusting faster and faster, feeling her pulsating, and it flashed through his mind that he had never been like this before, never before. He was truly making love to Tessa, not only with his body, but with all of him.

A flash of yellow and red shot across his eyelids and he seemed to rocket sky high before exploding into a thousand shards of pleasure.

He dressed quickly, once again noticing the chill of the February afternoon creeping through the heat of the dying fire. Tessa was already clothed when he finished and stood before the fire, her back to him. Mark moved to her and turned her to face him. She met his eyes shyly.

“Tessa,” he said. “Tessa.” He wanted to tell her he loved her, but the words refused to leave his heart. What did he have to offer her? Marriage? To ask her to be Mrs. Halloran would be the worst kind of lie.

A horse snorted outside the adobe and Mark turned toward the door. “Looks like my horse is here,” he said.

Once he had her in front of him on the sorrel, heading for Lincoln and holding her close, Mark felt desire rise in him again. His arms tightened until she made a sound of protest and twisted to look into his face.

Damn it, he thought, I’ll have to tell her, even if she hates me afterward. I want things cleared between us. He took a deep breath, trying to think how to start.

With what happened in St. Louis, of course, but where to begin?

With the Judge? Or with the sordid details of the triangle of hate and passion that had made him an outcast?

“Tessa,” he began, “I grew up in St. Louis...”

Before he could say another word, a rifle cracked to the south of them. Another gunshot echoed among the hills. Then a third.

Mark kicked the sorrel into a gallop. All he could think of was that he had to get Tessa back to Lincoln before anything happened to her. He was very much afraid that a shooting war had broken out between the two sides and that they may be caught in the crossfire.

Chapter 4

Ezra’s urging kept the pinto galloping south. Tessa might never forgive him, but she was a woman and they didn’t understand men’s business. It’d be late afternoon by the time he reached Tunstall’s ranch on the Feliz. He’d taken the trail over the hills around San Patricio. The main road was better but longer.

This part of Lincoln County was pretty with its hills and pines and canyons. A lot nicer than

where they'd been in Texas.

—Papa had always talked of how close together everything was in England, where a man might ride clear across the entire country in a day and a night if he'd a mind to. Ezra couldn't remember much at all about England or even crossing the Atlantic Ocean. His memory of his mother was only a faint recollection of someone holding and rocking him.

Tessa was one who'd mothered him. And Texas was the country he remembered. He hadn't wanted to leave, but now he liked the New Mexico Territory.

"Best country in the world," Billy had said and Ezra couldn't help but agree.

Tunstall needed Billy and right now he could use Ezra. Not for chores, but because he was a pretty good shot and getting better all the time. Not that Tunstall wanted a shooting war.

"I won't sacrifice the life of a single man to keep my cattle," he'd insisted more than once since the trouble started.

Ezra scowled. It was a cinch Dolan didn't feel the same.

"I know some of those boys Dolan hired to tote iron for him," Billy had told Ezra the month before. "Jesse Evans would soon as kill a man as pass the time of day. And I heard that son-of-a-bitch Morton say he was sharpening his scalping knife. He don't mean to use it on Mescaleros."

"What do you aim to do about it, Billy?" Ezra asked.

Billy grinned. "Why I mean to turn you into a crack shot, Ez. Then the two of us'll go for the bastards,"

Ezra's jaw dropped and Billy laughed outright. After a moment Ezra grinned sheepishly. Billy liked to joke and it seemed like Ezra never could catch on when he was and when he wasn't.

"You can count on me when you go after them" he told Billy. "Even if it does turn out there's only the two of us."

Billy had nodded. "Keep practicing, Ez. Don't forget what I told you. You got to say to yourself, I'm pointing my finger, before you aim the Colt. Never fails to send the bullet true."

Ezra slowed the pinto a little as he began to climb. The land over toward the Pecos was more like Texas with its grassy high plains and only a few cottonwoods and willows by the streams, maybe a tangle of salt cedar. Around Lincoln, though, there has got to be real mountains with snow on the peaks and pines covering the sides. He'd heard there was arid and desolate country to the west, but he hadn't yet seen it.

This trail he rode to Tunstall's was over Pajarito Mountain, not so high as some of the other ones but not a hill either. Today he wished the going was easier and quicker.

Lincoln itself was a little town of several hundred people with the usual Mexican plaza in the center. Most every building was of adobe bricks. When you entered from the east, you came to the jail and the courthouse and the little San Juan church before you got to Tunstall's store and the bank. Then came the McSween house.

If you came in from the west you passed Dolan's store, still called the "House of Murphy," and right across was the town's largest hotel, Whortley's.

Lincoln was built along the south bank of the Rio Bonita right where the canyon opened up. There were lots of cottonwoods scattered between the buildings. Right now they didn't have any leaves, but Ezra thought it must be nice and shady in the hot summers.

He glanced back toward Lincoln. Tessa ought to be safe enough without him in the house. True, McSween didn't carry a gun, but Shield did and he lived right there in the east wing. Besides, with two women and six children in the McSween house, Dolan wouldn't have the nerve to start any trouble.

Or would he?

Ezra slowed the pinto. Maybe he ought to head back. He felt Tessa and Jules were h

responsibility since papa died. If only Tessa and Tunstall would get married. Next to Billy, Ezra admired Tunstall most of any man in the Territory. Tessa liked him too, Ezra could tell. But she also seemed to like that smooth-talking Rutledge. And Halloran.

Billy said Halloran was okay, but Ezra didn't think any man who worked for Dolan could be trusted.

You couldn't even trust Sheriff Brady. When Dolan said jump, Brady only asked how high. Ezra sighed. He couldn't take any chances. He'd better go back. As he started to wheel his horse, he saw a rider come into sight over the hill ahead of him. Ezra's hand rested near his Colt as he reined in.

The rider drew closer and Ezra relaxed. The man was a Negro ex-cavalryman named George Washington who worked part-time for McSween as well as playing the fiddle when anyone had a dance. He seemed to be everyone's friend. If you wanted to know what was going on just about anywhere in the county, Washington was the man to ask.

Ezra raised his hand, hailing the black man.

"Heard tell there's a sheriff's posse after Tunstall," Washington told him as he drew up.

"Said they was gonna settle accounts once and forever."

Ezra tensed. "How many men?"

"I was told about two dozen, give or take a couple. They started off this morning from Dolan's place. Bound to be trouble. 'Specially since Brady ain't even with them."

"Does Tunstall know?"

Washington shook his head. "Don't rightly think so, I'm heading in to let Mr. McSween know what's going on."

Ezra watched Washington trot on toward Lincoln, then turned to look down the road leading to Tunstall's ranch. The news killed any plan to return home. He had to get to Tunstall, so he'd have to ride like hell to try to get to the ranch in time to warn him. He'd take the shortcut Billie once showed him.

As he turned off the trail and kicked the pinto into a gallop, excitement pounded through Ezra. Maybe there'd be shooting. He'd grab the chance to stand with Tunstall against Dolan's men.

The snow on the high peaks to the west glistened in the sunlight, the pines on the lower slopes green against the white. A crisp, chill day, good for riding. Ezra slowed his horse to pull his Colt, spinning the chamber. All full. When the pistol was back in its holster, he yanked Papa's old Winchester from the saddle scabbard and checked it. The rifle was loaded and ready.

Ezra Nesbitt was ready, too.

His fervor flagged as the day edged into afternoon. He'd finished the tortilla wrapped around the beef and beans he'd gotten from Rosalita and he was still hungry. Damn it, he should have taken more food. The pinto was tiring, besides, and needed to be paced, slowing Ezra.

All of a sudden three turkeys flew up from under the horse's hooves. The pinto shied violently to one side and stumbled. Ezra grabbed the saddle horn to stay mounted. He heard the turkeys scurrying into the underbrush of a canyon off to the right as he fought to steady the startled horse.

As the pinto quieted, Ezra swore. The horse limped. He dismounted to check the off foreleg. Nothing was broken, but when he remounted, the pinto continued to favor the leg and couldn't be urged faster than a walk.

He'd lost any chance of reaching Tunstall's before Dolan's posse. He'd be lucky to get there before dark as this rough trail would be hard on a lame horse.

Ezra sighed. On the one hand, he ought to offer to stand with Tunstall against Dolan's men—except now he'd probably get there after it was all settled.

On the other hand, Sheriff Brady was still in town and might be fixing to arrest McSween again. This'd leave the women and children without any man between them and whatever Dolan planned

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