

Prologue

Sarah Solomon hefted the poisoned beef in her hand and wondered if strychnine could be absorbed through human skin. If so, she'd pay with her life -- a suitable penance considering the magnitude of the grievous sin she was about to commit. But if Butcher didn't die, she would.

Making sure she was downwind, she crept toward his shed. In the night quiet, the former chicken coop stood in a corner of the yard like a sentry with a slanted head. Above it curled a scrap of moon that cast few shadows. She'd chosen tonight for that reason.

Because of the bone-chilling cold, she wore every piece of clothing she owned--chemise, drawers and petticoat, two calico blouses, a sweater, her work skirt and Sunday best, even the gray wool gown from her mother's funeral. Although she wasn't allowed to wear gloves, she had a warm sheepskin coat. A stocking cap covered her bound-up hair.

Freezing mud sucked at the gaps in her knit wool stockings. Tonight, her first act of defiance had been to throw her clumsy wooden clogs into the fireplace. Not only would the clogs slow her down, they'd leave a distinctive tread, one every member of the Community would recognize. First thing she'd do when she reached a town was find some comfortable shoes, maybe even a pair of those rubber-soled ones with wavy designs on the sides. She'd seen pictures of them in a magazine filched from the truck of the county's visiting nurse.

A cloud passed over the thin moon and she groped blindly for the shed. Rough weathered boards scraped her fingers. She followed her way around to the shed door, holding her breath the whole time, approaching from downwind. She needed to take Butcher by surprise. If he heard her or picked up her scent too soon, all hell would break loose.

Butcher was the pride of Cal Solomon's life. He had bred the dog for trail sense and brute strength, crossing his best hound bitch with a pit bull he'd gotten from an animal shelter in Great Falls. Once the puppies were born, Call had picked the biggest male in the litter, shot the stud and drowned the remaining pups so Butcher would have no rivals, no peers.

A year later, the dog didn't. Broader in the head and chest than the hounds, Butcher could track with the best of them. But when it came time for the kill, he had no parallel. Sarah had seen the remains of the coyotes he'd torn apart. She'd have little enough chance of escape with the hounds on her trail. She'd have none if Butcher was sicced on her.

In the dark silence, the clink of shifting chains drifted through the door. Vicious though he was, Sarah felt a stab of pity. She knew what it was like to be chained. She hadn't been privy to the rest of Cal's disciplinary methods because he'd trained the dog secretly, during

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renewal prayers. But she could well enough imagine what he'd done to make the tiny bundle of fur she'd cradled at birth turn into a ruthless killer. Maybe God would forgive this selfish act, for Butcher would be put out of his misery, too.

In one quick motion, she yanked open the door and tossed the meat inside. Butcher barked, the sound wolfish and frenzied. Sarah darted around a corner and peered back at the main house, covering her ears because of the din. Sure enough, the uncertain flame from a wooden match wavered from Cal's window. Then came a halo from a candle. The window flew open and Cal stuck his head outside, shotgun in hand, his thick beard ruffling in the wind. "Who's there?" he bellowed.

She froze even though he couldn't see her, not crouched in the shadows. The slightest movement, however, would draw his attention. If he spotted something, he'd shoot now and ask questions later. Over the winter, vandals had struck a number of other ranches in the Community. Cal had made his feelings known then as he did now.

"Man's got a right to protect his own property!"

At the commanding sound of his master's voice, Butcher stopped barking. Metal clanked against wood. The dog snuffled along the baseboard and whined long and loud, puzzled, Sarah was sure, to find her scent close to the shed. She hadn't been this close to him in months. Cal must have heard the whining because he swore.

"Damn dog," he muttered. "Waking me up for no good reason."

The candle glow vanished. Sarah let out the breath she'd been holding. Butcher's chain dragged heavily, then silence. He'd found the meat. She bit her lip, remorse already eating away at her resolve. To keep from charging into the shed like an avenging angel, she dug her nails into her palm and told herself the pain was nothing compared to what the dog would inflict.

She made out the shadowy outline of the barn and headed there, stopping only to dip her bloodied hand from the meat into the horse trough. A thin coat of ice floated across the top, numbing her fingers. If only her conscience could be assuaged as easily.

The odor of manure from the cattle pens reached her, touched by the clean scent of budding trees. It reminded her of her purpose: to find a new life outside the Community, a better life, free of the constraints she'd endured for too long. She spared a glance at the cabin. All quiet.

She smelled the barn before she reached it, a combination of musty hay, pungent horse and well-fed cows, pleasant to her and familiar. Feeling for the latch, she slid the door open enough to slip inside and closed it carefully because of the squeaky hinges. The absence of

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light was such that she couldn't make out the hand she held in front of her face. She used the stall wall on her right as a guide and whispered into the darkness.

"Twinkleberry?"

The horse nickered and Sarah heard his hooves stomping. The air moved before a velvet nose butted her shoulder. She reached with her arms, her face already wet with tears and hugged the gelding's thick neck.

"Goodbye," she said.

Planks creaked as more barn animals wakened. Sarah wound her arms around the neck of the other Percheron gelding, Old Brown. Then came the thinner neck of Nutkin, Cal's buckskin saddle horse. She had considered riding him to escape but Cal would launch a never-ending pursuit if she stole something as valuable as his horse. Besides, she hadn't ridden in some eight years since she was sixteen, ever since her mother had married Cal and he'd become her stepfather.

At the rear of the barn, she found the ladder leading to the hayloft. Climbing the first four rungs, she stretched and felt under the straw heaped on the second floor. Her fist closed around a cotton bundle. She knotted the loose top of it, once a pillowcase, and let it drop to the ground. The makeshift sack clunked heavily as she descended.

She jumped to the floor, untied the knot and plunged her hand inside. Pushing past her lighter provisions, she felt for the heavy metal cylinder that lay at the bottom. She'd discovered the flashlight a week ago under a loosened brick while cleaning the main hearth. After examining the long chrome tube and unblinking clear plastic eye, she'd managed to turn it on and immediately realized what power she held. Light without fuel. She wouldn't have to carry candles or an oil lamp. The flashlight would make all the difference in her escape.

To Sarah, it was a sign from God.

The squeak of the barn door brought her head up sharply. A man's silhouette stood at the threshold of the barn, backed by the ruddy light of a coal oil lantern. She heard the ratchet sound of a shotgun being cocked.

"Lessen you want to die," Cal said, "Show yourself."

Sarah shrank back into the dark and held the sack behind her, searching for the rear door of the barn. At best, she had only a few seconds to find a way out. Her spine flattened against the wall. She gripped the sack in one hand and spread the other one out, despair blinding her more than the dark. Even if she found the door, it led into the cattle pens,

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occupied at this time of year by heifers and newborn calves. She'd risk losing a few toes going out there in her stocking feet. The animals would make noise, too.

Cal shoved the door aside with his hip, opening it fully, letting more light in from his lamp. Reflected flame reddened the oily skin above his beard and blotted out his eyes, making holes in his wide face. His denim overalls were snapped on one side, exposing the red-buttoned front of his faded union suit. He paced forward, sending shadows leaping along the walls. The horses shifted nervously.

Holding the sack behind her skirt, Sarah stepped from the shadows. "Hello, Cal."

Suspicion narrowed his eyes. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Heard Butcher barking," she said, lapsing into the colloquial English used by most people of the Community, especially Cal. The tactic had saved her a beating more than once.

"Thought I'd best see what got him all riled up. Ain't found nothing, though."

"You check the outhouse?"

"First thing I done. Empty as a corncrib in August. I thought to check the cattle pens next. Them newborns sure make easy pickings." She turned, trying to keep the look of her arms natural as she kept the pillowcase hidden at her side.

"Nope," Cal said, catching her arm. "You git back to the house. Ain't right for a woman to be out wandering around in the middle of the night."

Sarah nodded, afraid the sudden hope she felt might be betrayed in her voice. If Cal stayed behind, that would give her the few minutes she needed to run to the south pasture. She'd spent an hour crisscrossing it yesterday evening, laying down many trails of her scent. Forging the river would give her extra insurance once Cal discovered her gone and released the hounds. With luck and the cover of darkness, she'd make it to the highway by daybreak.

She scooted by him and made it outside. He'd set a lantern in the middle of the yard between the house and barn. Ahead was Butcher's shed. It was the only thing between her and freedom. When she got near it, she began to run.

A fierce barking tailed into the wind, the likes of which she'd thought to never hear again. Sarah staggered in disbelief. Butcher was alive.

The pillowcase slipped from her hands and cartwheeled to the ground, spilling the contents. She dropped to her knees, grabbing matches, lye soap, beef jerky, a sack of beans, and saw the flashlight rolling beyond her reach. Above the sound of barking, she heard Cal bellow.

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"Sarah!"

He came out of the barn and was advancing on her, shotgun in hand, his gaze taking in the scatter of provisions littering the ground. She knew the exact moment he spotted the flashlight. A look of murderous rage changed his face.

Sarah jumped and ran. The crack of gun fire ripped the air. She zigzagged and Butcher's incessant baying covered her crash against the shed. Beyond terrorized, she hunkered down and clutched dirt, searching for a stick, rock, anything.

Suddenly the collar of her coat was grabbed. Cal picked her up and slammed her body against the wall. Splinters bit into her cheek. Sarah gritted her teeth to keep from whimpering. If nothing else, she was through whimpering.

Cal barked a short guttural command to Butcher. The dog stopped howling. Cal grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. "Did you really think you could get away from me?"

Sarah didn't answer. She was through answering, too.

"Got a beau waiting out here, don't you?"

She raised her chin at the familiar accusation.

He prodded her with the barrel of the rifle. "Answer me!"

"There's no beau. You never let me stop working long enough to find one."

His blow to her head sent her spinning across the yard. She sprawled in the icy mud. Something hard and cylindrical pressed into her belly. The flashlight. She wrapped her hand around it, gathering courage and resolve. He'd killed her mother's spirit. God forbid, she wasn't going to let him kill hers.

He stomped over to her. She curled into a ball to make herself a smaller target and watched his feet, readying herself. He drew his leg back to kick her and she turned enough to take the kick in the belly where it was better absorbed by her clothes.

Reaching up, she hooked an arm around his leg. Grunting in surprise, he lashed out with the butt of the gun but her intention had not been to throw him off balance but to use his leg as leverage. She rammed the flashlight directly into his groin.

He screamed and bent over double. She drew the flashlight back and arced it forward, smashing it into the side of his head. The flashlight's eyepiece shattered. Cal fell forward, landing on top of her.

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With a shudder of revulsion, she squirmed out from underneath him. Sarah scrambled to her feet, the broken flashlight held at the ready, her gasps fogging in the cold air. He didn't move. She snatched the shotgun, her other arm still wound up to swing again, afraid he would somehow spring to life.

Blood trickled from a bruise growing on the side of his head. She backed up and tripped over something solid. Balancing the gun in the crook of her arm, she scooped up her pillowcase and stuffed the rest of her provisions inside it.

She had to get moving. Time was a wasting.

She used rope from the barn to tie Cal's hands and feet, then hefted the gun. It was heavy, too heavy for her to carry and run at the same time. She had no ammunition and wasn't about to spare the time to return to the cabin to search for some. She glanced at Butcher's shed and realized what she had to do. Once Cal came to his senses, he'd come after her with a vengeance. And he'd use Butcher to do it.

Sarah unlatched the shed door and, with the tip of the gun barrel, pushed open the door. A low growl caused the hairs at the back of her neck to stand on end. She aimed toward the sound before shifting sideways to let light in from the lantern outside. The glow was enough to pick up the shine of raw meat lying untouched on the dirt floor and the gleam of canine teeth, clenched in a snarl. Above the white fangs glowered eyes red with warning.

Sarah hesitated. Another shotgun blast might alert the neighbors or worse, wake Cal. She hadn't gotten a good look at Butcher in eleven months time, since she'd had charge of the whelping pen. If it wasn't for the short length of chain that linked his leather collar to a bolt sticking out of the ground, her throat would undoubtedly have been torn out by now.

Keeping the gun aimed in his direction, she inched her foot out and nudged the meat closer to him. He stopped growling and licked his chops, focusing on the meat. Saliva dripped from his glistening jowls.

"Eat," she commanded.

He looked at her and actually wagged his stub of a tail. But he didn't eat.

"What do I have to do? Feed you myself?"

He sniffed the air between them and his muzzle wrinkled, showing scars from numerous critter fights. Careful to keep good grip on the gun, she picked up the meat with her other hand and held it out.

"Come on, boy. Come and get it."

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Butcher regarded her with interest but it didn't appear to be food-related. He sat back on his haunches and cocked his head, chastened but alert, the pose of a good dog. Except Sarah knew he was far from that.

"Last chance," she said and tossed the meat between his front paws.

He stayed like a statue, gaze fixed on her, his flanks quivering with tension, showing every rib. Why wouldn't he eat? He was obviously starving, drooling. Just looking at him brought tears to her eyes. Furious at her foolishness, she swiped them away, for her future depended on destroying him. The gun was loaded. All she had to do was pull the trigger. It would be an easy kill. He was chained. He couldn't run, couldn't hide.

Her conscience told her neither could she.

Very slowly, Sarah knelt. Using one of the filthy rags from his bedding, she scooped up the meat and laid the gun on the floor. She couldn't kill him, not face to face, in cold blood.

With a shiver, she tossed the meat into a bucket of scum in the corner of the shed. Butcher pricked his ears at the plopping sound, so far out of reach. She gazed at him, feeling her heart pound in her throat.

"Didn't he give you decent water?" Her voice broke. "Butch?"

His head lowered and his body curled, wiggling. He moved forward, dragging the chain, belly low, begging with his eyes. He wriggled harder, sending a clear message. Scarcely believing, Sarah backed up a step. He came to the end of his chain and tried to roll over but there wasn't enough room. He lay on his side and eyed her, short tail thumping.

She extended her hand. He pawed the air and tipped up his heavy jaw, exposing his throat. She bend down, barely within reach. His cold, wet nose met her fingers. Frightened, she jerked her hand back.

He wheezed, straining forward against the chain closing around his throat. With a shaky thumb, she grazed the top of his head and stroked it once, twice. His tail thumped harder.

Sarah crept closer so he wouldn't have to strain against the leather closing around his throat and petted his furrowed brow with her whole hand, then scratched his ears in the way he used to love. He still loved it. Shuddering in ecstasy, he whimpered.

"Butcher?" she asked. "Do you really remember?"

He yelped, the sound both happy and mournful. Swallowing back the lump in her throat, Sarah reached for his collar. He leapt to his feet, trembling with anticipation.

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"If you come with me, I can't promise a steady supply of food. But I can promise you won't be chained again, ever. And you'll always have fresh water."

She unhooked the heavy link chain from his collar. He streaked by her out the door. Sarah chucked the rifle beneath his bedding and followed.

Cal hadn't moved. The wind rushed through the trees. Just underneath, she heard a more insidious noise. In the lantern light, she saw Butcher licking the blood from Cal's slack face.

Squaring her shoulders, she picked up the pillowcase and plunged across the field. Butcher could come or go as he pleased. What mattered was her journey. It had begun. She would find her own place in the world.

A belonging place.

Chapter One

Zach Masterson didn't like the sight that greeted him when he stepped outside the trailer. Last night when he'd arrived at the Bar M in the wee hours of the morning, it had been too dark to see much more than the outlines of the various ranch buildings. Now, in the full light of day, Zach spent a moment studying exactly what he'd missed.

Junk littered the yard. Most of it was farm machinery, pieces of tractors, combines, even the rusting hood from an old Chevy pickup. Whole sections of the corral next to the main barn were missing and the barbed wire fence along the lane leading to the road sagged like the back of an old mule. The tack shed looked ready to collapse while the little two stall barn where his mother used to keep a milk cow already had. The roof on the main barn was pretty much gone, caved in places or shingles ripped away by wind. Obviously, there hadn't been money spent on capital improvements to the ranch in years.

He veered left and came to a stop beneath one of the giant cottonwoods that ringed the yard. The main house still stood, rising in all its three-story Victorian glory. It was easily in the best shape of all the ranch buildings, despite the boarded up windows and peeling paint.

Zach wished he had bulldozed it ten years ago when his father died and he'd had the chance.

He pivoted on his heel and headed toward the main barn, stirring puffs of dust with every step he took. His mind skipped ahead to what he had to accomplish over the course of the next few weeks. Before arriving at the Bar M, he'd been certain he could make short work of selling the place. The Masterson Ranch was famous for its picturesque setting and spring-fed pastures, a rarity amid the semi-arid foothills of Colorado's Front Range. Once the hay fields were harvested and the cattle rounded up and sold, getting rid of everything else figured to be a cinch. But no one in their right mind would want to buy the place as is, not as a working ranch, which was the only way the rest of his blasted family was willing to sell.

He paused next to the old corn silo pocked with rust and calculated how much it would cost to fix things up, both in time and money. He'd told his South American partner, Manuelo, he'd only be away from their guide business, Amazon Explorations, for a week or two, a month at most. If he ended up staying here longer than that, he'd lose money, not to mention his sanity.

Already he missed Rio Negro and the cover of broad green leaves, of shade so deep it felt like night, of the constant humming of jungle life. Here, the blinding sun bothered him,

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used though he was to its heat. Everything was so open in Colorado and in the summer-like heat of late September, the rolling landscape of the ranch tended to be so dry it took on an silvery hue.

Zach heard male voices and changed direction. He could stand anything if it had a foreseeable end. He would make sure it took no more than a month to get the ranch in shape and ready to sell. Jackson, the ranch foreman, was a goner for letting things get this bad. With the cooperation of the rest of the Bar M ranch hands, he would get out of here by the end of October. Tops.

Zach reached the fence and acknowledged the four men gathered there with a brisk nod. His motives would be suspect if he appeared too friendly. Three of the men had never set eyes on him before and Ty Coburn, the old-timer of the bunch, hadn't seen Zach show his stuff since he'd left the ranch for good after high school, thirteen years ago.

Coburn looked him over, a yellow, tobacco-stained grin on his lean and leathery face, shadowed by his cowboy hat. These days, more silver than gold threaded the droopy mustache. "Pretty fancy duds you got on there, boss."

Zach didn't bother to glance down at his black t-shirt and camouflage fatigues, scrounged years ago from an army surplus store. The only concession he'd made to the cattle country uniform were his cowboy boots, bought during the long trip from South America. The Vibram soles of his jungle boots were too thick to fit into a stirrup.

"Do I pass inspection?" he asked.

"You're missing something."

"What might that be?"

Ty flicked the brim of his Stetson. "Can't be a self-respecting cattleman without a hat."

"I'll never be a cattleman, self-respecting or otherwise." Just because he needed their cooperation didn't mean he should give them a false impression about why he was here.

"How about a cowboy, short and simple?"

Zach squinted into the sun, appearing to consider the question. He knew the word cowboy, overused by the urban population, had become a derogatory term to these men. Deadpan, he said. "Not since I was knee-high to a grasshopper and my daddy gave me lessons in mutton bustin'."

Ty shook his head. "You haven't changed much by the sound of it. Still poking fun at what you always been best at."

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"Eating grasshoppers?"

Along with Ty's rueful grin, the other three men cracked smiles. Zach used the moment to study all four faces, shaded by the ever present hats. These were tough and range-hardened men and at this particular moment in time, despite any appreciation they might show for his wit, he hadn't earned the respect of any of them. Respect went out the window if a man felt like his job was at stake.

"Jackson tell any of you why I came back to the Bar M?"

The men stopped smiling and the feeling of camaraderie abruptly ended.

"Nope. Been lots of rumors, though," Ty replied evenly.

"My family has decided to sell the ranch," Zach said bluntly, unwilling to waste their time on hemming and hawing. "Any questions?"

He expected their sullen silence and let it build while he pulled out a pair of roping gloves from his back pocket, all the while eyeing each man directly. No point in pulling punches, not when he was talking about their future. "This ranch hasn't been home to anyone in the Masterson family for a long time. That's why we're selling."

"What about Bram?" Ty asked. "Not long ago he told me as the oldest in the family, he'd made sure the Bar M never got sold."

"Bram's married now, with a child on the way. He and his wife have their own place and other things to worry about than the running of the Bar M. No one else in the family wants to hold onto it. Bram was overruled."

"Four to one?" Ty asked, making reference to the all five Masterson siblings.

Zach nodded. "I've been lobbying for this the longest, so I got elected to oversee the sale."

"What about us? How soon will you be laying us off?"

The question came from one of the middle-aged ranch hands. From Ty's description during the ride in from the airport, Zach recalled his name as Jason Miller. Beneath the straw brim, his peppered hair was trimmed and his jaw closely shaven. Even before Zach checked out the ring finger on the man's left hand, he guessed what Miller's problem was. Job security was number one when a man had a family to support.

"You'll be paid through the time of sale, plus two weeks severance after the new owners take over. Whether they keep you on or not, I can't make promises."

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He studied the rugged faces, looking for telltale signs of resentment. Better to air such feelings out now rather than let them fester. He'd led various expeditions for years and learned that truth with his employees was best, especially if you wanted your crew to work hard without complaint.

"The family is determined to sell this place in one piece and keep it a working ranch. I mean to get top dollar for it. Right now, that means some major fixing up, which means hard work and long hours for each of you. If you want to quit and draw your wages now, I'll understand and give you a good reference. But if you stay, I'll expect you to see the job through until the ranch is sold." He looked directly at Ty. "You staying, Coburn?"

"Reckon I will, boss."

Zach nodded. "As of today, you're the ranch foreman. If Jackson gives you a hard time, tell him not to bother cashing this week's paycheck. It won't be good."

"Right, boss."

"You men know what needs doing around here. Make a list and let Coburn know what skills you can bring to the job of cleaning out and fixing things. Whatever's left, I'll take on. Meanwhile, I'm going to check out more of the place."

Zach scanned the dozen horses in the only corral that was in good repair. He didn't plan to ride long, just hard, seeking something from speed that he hadn't been able to find anywhere else since he'd gotten here.

He chose a buckskin mare, the best of the lot brought in from the back pasture. These were a mix of the younger and the oldest horses, either part broke or ready to retire. Coburn mentioned the buckskin was particularly high-strung, which only made her more attractive to Zach. He loved to challenge himself. In less than fifteen minutes, he had her roped, brushed, saddled, bridled and tied outside the corral.

"Still got the touch," Coburn said. "It's like you never left."

"Too bad horses don't mix with life on the Amazon." Zach winked at Coburn. "Too many jaguars and piranha."

Coburn went to the head of the buckskin and held the bridle so Zach could mount. He gave her a minute to smell and eye him, then took the reins and grabbed a good hunk of black mane. She quivered and stomped her hooves.

"You sure about this, boss? She's green and mean."

"Then stay out of the way. If she has the room, she'll run." Zach swung on.

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The buckskin took off at a dead gallop which suited him just fine. He gave her her head and she headed west where the land stretched in ever-rising hills, each one higher than the one before it. Once, all of them had been part of the Masterson range. Soon, none of them would be.

At the thought, he jerked the reins and steered the buckskin sideways, cutting upward to the top of the nearest ridge. Despite the steep grade, the mare obeyed without protest, although Zach sensed she was prone to shy if he should suddenly decide to change direction.

When he topped the ridge, the wind blowing in his face held the smell of burning wood. Pinon, he guessed, judging from the tang. Unexplained fire was always reason for concern. He scanned the small valley on the other side. The land was rocky, cut by the remnants of what had once been a good sized river. Now all that remained was a wide but shallow ribbon of water that snaked its way along the bottom of the valley.

The creek was a magnet for all types of creatures, including people. Zach had a hunch some hikers had set up house, complete with campfire. His jaw tightened. With public hiking trails available on the western border of his property, trespassing was inexcusable.

A wisp of rising smoke led his eye to a grove of golden leafed aspen. He spurred the buckskin into a slow ascent, careful of his approach. He steered the horse into the creek to mask the sound of plodding hooves. Poachers were always a possibility. He wanted to be absolutely sure of what he was getting into before he rode in.

This time of year the creek ran fast and low, fueled by early snow in the mountains to the west and the steep slope of the ridge. Cottonwoods, aspen, willows and scrub oak grew on either side of the water, screening what lay ahead. He rounded a bend and spotted a flash of solid white, unnatural against the shifting view of trees and water. Zack reined in, taking shelter under the shade of a giant willow overhanging the bank.

Whoever it was, she faced away from him. At least he thought the slight figure belonged to a she. Behind her, sunshine sparkled on the fast-moving water. Dressed in something long, white and flowing, the full extent of her build was hidden by wavy hair that fell past her hips. She was fairly tall, but with her back to him, it was hard to tell her age from this far away.

She waded into the creek and the current took her skirt, sending the hem swirling around her legs. The undertow must have been strong, for she swayed and held out her arms for balance. Her hair swung like a curtain over one shoulder, revealing a gap between her skirt and her short blouse. Her waist was narrow and well-defined. Delicate hollows marked her spine. Hips flared in subtly provocative curves.

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Woman. Definitely a woman.

Poised like a dragonfly above the water, she stepped cautiously, intent with purpose. Zach squinted, trying to figure out what she was doing. Fishing? She should be wearing pants and waders. This time of year, the water was freezing.

He steered the buckskin to the very edge of the concealing shade, closing the distance to twenty feet. If she turned, she would see him but looking at her graceful shape, it was a gamble he was willing to take.

She reached a knee high boulder in the middle of the creek and placed a hand on top, using it for support. Against the speckled granite, he saw she clutched a gnarled brown root. She stooped and fished a good sized stone up from the creek bottom, then dunked the root before laying it out on the boulder and pounding it with the stone. White suds began to appear.

Zach sniffed the sifting breeze. Clean. When mixed with water, mashed yucca root had a fresh scent and made a pretty good soap. He himself had used it in a pinch.

She bent forward and splashed water upward with her hands, drenching both her hair and clothes. Sunlight angled through the sodden fabric, revealing the outline of long, slender legs. Straightening, she gathered suds from the boulder and dumped them on her head. The froth of white raced down her hair. Flexing her fingers, she worked the lather in and tilted back to bask her face in the sun. Her neat profile angled into a lovely neck, supple and strong. Remnants of foam dripped down her chemise, molding it to her body.

Zach studied the willowy torso with an appreciative eye. The fluid arms, the elegant points of her shoulders, the athletic extension of a body honed and fit drew him like nothing else could. His first lover had been a ballet dancer and this woman had the same nimble deftness that came with extreme discipline. A rock climber, maybe, come down from Longs Peak?

She bent low and rinsed her hair, efficient with grace. He wished she'd remove her clothes. They were superfluous given this remote setting. And judging by how wet she was already, it would make her life easier, not to mention his. Just the thought of seeing her naked made him unbearably hard. Sitting astride the horse didn't help. Neither did the buckskin. When he shifted in the saddle, she shied and danced forward, splashing.

Sarah heard the rapid pattern of skipping hooves coming fast. Dear God, she thought in panic. Cal had finally found her.

She straightened like a shot. Her hair sailed through the air, spraying droplets in a high, flying arc. The buckskin neighed in fear and reared in the face of this sudden threat.

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Thrown forward, Zach jerked the reins short, keeping the horse's head up so she wouldn't buck.

Terrified, Sarah raised her hands to ward off a blow. How like Cal to ambush her in broad daylight, when she'd least expect it.

Staggering, her bare feet floundered on the rocky creek bed. Her arms pin wheeled and she lost her balance, landing hard on her backside. The breath went clean out of her. She heard the thrashing grunt of a frightened horse and a man's voice, low and calm.

"Whoa, girl. Easy."

Sarah sat up and shook the hair from her eyes. The wild-eyed horse was tan in color, with black markings, just like Nutkin. But larger. Much larger. And the man on top did not look familiar in the least.

She rose slowly, noting the expert way he settled his mount. He hooked the frightened horse in a neat circle under a tight, uncompromising rein, showing off the bronzed biceps of an experienced wrangler. Horse and rider halted a few feet away.

"You okay?" he asked.

Still breathless, Sarah didn't answer. He sat his horse easy, with his hands relaxed and his stomach concave in that deceptive slouch all expert cowboys employed. Yet he was without the wide-brimmed she'd come to expect. Black shaggy hair brushed a jaw shadowed by whisker stubble. Black cotton stretched tight across the front of his broad chest. Called a t-shirt because of its distinctive shape, Sarah decided the shirt was a clear V, for while his shoulders were wide, the rest of him tapered to a cougar-like leanness. Instead of blue jeans, which in her experience was the attire of choice for most men in cattle country, he wore trousers splotted with earthen colors--brown, green, tan. Most surprising of all, his pointy-toed cowboy boots looked brand-spanking new.

Sarah wrung out the hem of her petticoat, eyeing him warily. In spite of his unusual clothing, he had the face of a cowboy, sun-browned, rugged and inordinately appealing.

"You always creep up on a body like that?" she asked.

The crow's feet around his blue eyes crinkled in amusement. "Only ones like yours."

Sarah had heard enough ribald comments in the past few months to recognize a come-on when she heard one. Oddly disappointed in him, she raised her chin a notch.

He dropped the reins and placed both hands upon his heart in mock pain. "If looks could kill. Hey, I didn't mean to offend you. Give me a smile and tell me I'm forgiven."

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

Charmed by his rueful manner, Sarah hesitated, drawn in despite her better judgment. There was an air of offhand authority about him that invited trust. This was a man of the land, tested by the rigors of sun and wind. She could see it in the confident way he held himself. Yet she would do well to remain wary, for the newspapers and TV shows were full of sinister stories of what happened when trust was given too easily. Besides, he definitely had the look of a renegade about him. It was in his clothes and the unruly hair, and especially, the hunger in his eyes when he looked at her.

"I'm really not such a bad guy once you get to know me. How about I help you out of there and we start over?" Zach extended his hand.

She took a stiff step backwards, which wasn't exactly the response Zach had been hoping for, and shaded her face against the glare of the sun. Her eyes were the deep brown of old pennies, large and arresting, especially when surrounded by a thick fringe of black lashes made spiky by the water. In contrast, her complexion was fine, like smooth sand-colored clay. There was no makeup that he could see, just the tan from the late summer season.

Zach reined in the buckskin with one hand while doing his best to maintain his Gene Autry imitation with the other. She didn't seem to be buying it, though. Retreating, she stepped onto the bank without taking her eyes off him. Suspicious little thing, wasn't she?

When she reached dry ground, she combed her fingers through her wet hair, holding it away from her shoulder to keep the heavy mass from dripping on her clothes. The attempt was in vain. The material of her chemise was saturated, clearly delineating her high, rounded breasts. The water must have been very cold, for her erect nipples showed through the flimsy fabric.

He couldn't help but smile. Maybe she was right to be suspicious of him. He was not a man adverse to taking what was freely offered, free being the operative word. Time for his most original line. "My name is Zach Masterson. What's yours?"

She shook her head. Her refusal to answer irritated him, especially since her teeth were chattering and she should be worrying more about that than him. Well, hell, he thought. There was more than one way to communicate. He wrapped the reins around the saddle horn, pulled off his shirt and offered it to her with a grand flourish. The buckskin got a little spooked by the move but Zach held her in check. "Even if I don't know your name, I can't resist a damsel in distress."

Appalled by his boldness, Sarah's gaze traveled up his corded arm to the sinewy muscles of his naked chest. Most cowboys had tans that ended at the necks and sleeves of their snap-button shirts. He was deeply tanned all over, a sight she'd rarely seen in the flesh. Certainly, she'd never seen it this close.

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

"Don't stand there with your mouth open. Take it," he urged, dangling the shirt in front of her nose.

Her mouth had indeed been open. Sarah snapped it shut and felt the red blush of awareness creep up her cheeks. Worse, there were other physical manifestations of her flustered feeling of attraction. Not only was she blushing, her stomach felt queer, like she'd swallowed a dozen butterflies.

"Come on, use my shirt and put it on. No cooties, I promise. I can't let you stand there shivering to death. You're practically naked."

"N-naked?" she sputtered.

"She speaks. I was beginning to wonder if I'd been hearing things and had a deaf-mute on my hands."

"I'm hardly naked," she announced and planted her hands on her hips, amazed at his audacity. Did he think her so brazen as to wash in full daylight without a stitch on?"

"The face of an angel, the body of Venus and the voice of a siren. Can you sing, too?" he asked, taking one last stab at winning a smile from her.

Sarah glanced down at herself, wondering if he was making fun of her. It wouldn't be the first time since she'd left the Community that someone had commented on her clothes. Her chemise lay plastered to her skin, revealing every outline of her breasts and belly. Mortified, she frantically arranged her hair in front to cover herself.

You need something a little more substantial than that. Not that I'm complaining or anything, but I figured the least I could do is offer you the shirt off my back." Grinning, he tossed the shirt at her.

On reflex, Sarah caught it. Remnants of his body heat warmed her fingers. Even his scent reached her, earthy and male. She dropped the shirt as though burned and crossed her arms over her chest, effectively shielding her breasts. "Stop gawking at me!"

"If you don't want me to stare, put on some clothes."

"These are clothes! Unmentionables they may be, but clothes all the same. Certainly they cover far more skin than what the vast majority of people out here wear."

"Unmentionables?"

"Perfectly decent unmentionables," she said, biting off each word.

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

Zach was struck by her old-fashioned choice of words. She also had a slight accent, one he couldn't place. That was unusual, for he'd traveled all over the world and could speak a smattering of phrases in a dozen different languages. "That accent...is it German?"

Stunned by the accuracy of his perception, Sarah could only blink in surprise. Some founders of the community, her mother among them, had been Mennonites, descended from German immigrants. Pennsylvania Dutch had been a second language in the home of her youth.

"You don't look German. Not with the dark eyes and tanned skin."

"I have some Native American blood. Crow, on my father's side," wondering why she'd admitted to that much. Ever since she'd run away, she'd been very circumspect about telling anyone about her background. Shivering anew, she turned her back on him and hurriedly tugged wet material away from her skin.

"The view's not bad from here, either," he said, laughter underpinning his voice.

"If you possessed a speck of decency, you'd turn around yourself," Sarah flung over her shoulder.

"And miss the show? You're the one who said you're wearing clothes."

"And to think I thought you were a gentleman."

"I sacrificed my shirt, didn't I? Don't you recognize a chivalrous gesture when you see one?"

"A true gentleman does not make sport of another's choice in clothing. Nor would he sneak up on a lady while she's washing her hair."

"He might feel justified if the lady was on his land."

"Rest assured, I'll be off it by nightfall." Shoulders rigid, she leapt to higher ground, snagged a blanket laid out on the grass and flung it around her shoulders.

Several articles of clothing were draped over the chokecherry bushes that grew along the bank. There were a couple of long-sleeved blouses, a full-length skirt, and a heavy-looking gray dress with a high neck and, again, a long, full skirt. The impractical style of the clothes bothered him. What kind of camping trip was she on?

"Laundry day?" he asked.

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

Clutching the blanket like a shawl, she marched to a propylene tarp spread out nearby. The hem of her unmentionable skirt trailed the ground, tattered at the hem. Zach also noted the blanket was ragged from use.

Wiping her bare feet, she slid them into a battered pair of Nike sneakers, complete with the wave logo. The shoes had seen better days. The laces were frayed and the tongues hung out, looking incongruous next to her trim ankles. She wore no socks.

Could she be a runaway? From experience, Zach recognized the signs of both poverty and pride. But she looked like she was in her mid-20's and judging by her speech, she was educated. He recalled the taut but generous curves of her body hidden by the blanket. Weighing that fact, he was willing to bet she was well over the age of consent.

Zach checked the clearing behind her, looking for evidence of a boyfriend. Maybe that would explain the chilly reception he was receiving. Certainly she wouldn't be out here camping by herself..

The area near the tarp had been cleared of brush but there was little in the way of equipment. He didn't see a tent or sleeping bags, although a backpack hung from a low cottonwood branch. It was hardly big enough to carry ten pounds of gear, much less enough food for two.

Next to the pack were several bunches of dried greens, tied upside down. A plastic water jug was also strung up. Underneath, stacked deadwood partially covered by a garbage bag indicated she planned to stay awhile, although he couldn't imagine why. She had no shelter.

"Are you lost?" he asked.

She made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort and headed toward a small campfire. Surrounded by fist-size rocks, it was covered by a blackened grate. A varied collection of tin cans sat on top, wisping steam. Whatever was simmering smelled of sage.

"What's cooking?" he asked, trying a more innocuous subject.

She rubbed the wet ends of her hair smartly between the two sides of the blanket. Zach raised an eyebrow at the continued silent treatment and spurred the buckskin up the bank, halting short of the tarp where she'd taken refuge. The corners were held down by a small black Bible and a thick paperback dictionary. Not exactly your regular campsite reading material. Other personal items were arranged in a neat row along one side. She didn't have much. Toothpaste, toothbrush, comb, eating utensils, a straw hat held down by a pocketknife on the ragged brim, and wooden matches.

"These are logical questions," he said.

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

The blanket snapped, emphasizing the silence.

"Then it must be you who smells good enough to eat."

She glared at him. He returned the look, wondering what else he could do to break the ice. She secured the blanket by knotting it around her shoulders and picked up the comb. Zach considered his options as she worked the tangles from her hair, sorting through various gambits designed to get a rise out of her. He settled on the most obvious.

"Where's your boyfriend?"

Her hands stilled.

"He won't like finding me here, will he? Not that I can blame him."

Her gaze went directly to his. "Who are you talking about?"

"You know. The guy you're camping with."

He said it casually but her reaction was so out-sized, he knew his assumption was off. Way off. She stopped fooling with her hair and shoved all her belongings into the middle of the tarp, gathering it up.

He nudged the buckskin closer to her. "Was it something I said?"

"I must go."

"What happened? You two have a fight or something?" Zach asked, shifting to dismount.

In a flash, she dropped her things and clutched his leg, forcing him to stay in the saddle. Startled, the buckskin jerked sideways. Zach put pressure on the reins without taking his eyes off the woman's terrified face. Whoever this guy was, he had her good and scared.

"Don't leave your horse," she said. "He'll be even angrier if he finds you here." She glanced over her shoulder, searching among the trees. "Where did you see him?"

Zach reached down and gripped her arm, forcing her to look at him. "Did he hurt you?"

She let go of his leg, resisting the contact. "Psalms 17:13. Deliver me from the wicked, oh Lord, from men whose portion in life is of the world."

Zach was unfamiliar with The Bible. When he was a kid, he'd managed to get kicked out of every school he'd been in, including Sunday School. He kept his gaze steady, studying the defiance in her dark eyes. "Not all men are wicked. No one deserves to be hurt, especially at the hand of another."

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

She went very still. "My worldly father used to say the same thing."

"Your father was a wise man. Did he give you a name? Mine's Zach."

After a long pause, she nodded. "Sarah."

"Sarah what?"

"Sarah ... Smith?"

Zach filed the pause between her last name and first for future reference. Sarah was a pretty bad liar. He released his hold on her and extended his hand in clear welcome, the tips of his fingers close to her face. "You are not among the wicked here, Sarah."

He kept his expression carefully neutral, allowing her to come to a decision in her own good time. After what seemed like a year, her hand snaked out from the blanket, clasped his hand and shook it. At least she had knowledge of the most rudimentary of social skills. He was beginning to wonder.

"Pleased to meet you, Zacharias," she said gravely.

"It's Zach."

"Zach," she repeated, inclining her head.

"Sarah," he said, savoring the sound. It reminded him of a spring breeze, fresh with promise. He noticed the rough ridge on her palm but resisted the urge to investigate, vowing to save that for later. And there would be a later. She was both a mystery and a challenge, his two favorite pursuits in life.

"Who's this guy you're so afraid of?" he asked.

"You mustn't concern yourself. Go and I promise to be off your land by nightfall."

"When I rode in, I didn't see anyone here but you."

Puzzlement creased her brow. "You said you saw him."

"No, I simply asked about the whereabouts of your boyfriend."

"Oh." She looked straight at him. "Well, as you can see, I am a woman alone."

She said it baldly, a statement of fact, and again he wondered at her odd way of putting things. "There's nothing wrong with that."

She stroked the buckskin's shoulder. "She reminds me of another horse I know. What's her name?"

Excerpt: A MAN OF THE LAND by Carol Devine

What's the name of the other horse?"

"Nutkin."

"What a coincidence. Her name is Nutkin, too."

Sarah smiled at him for the first time. Two of her front teeth were slightly crooked. The small imperfection only heightened her appeal. He despised artifice and hadn't met a woman yet who didn't practice it in some form. Maybe the lovely Sarah would prove the exception.

Sure of his welcome, he withdrew his boot from the stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle. In his concentration on the horse, he didn't see the streak of brown hurtling from the screen of trees in front of him. But he heard Sarah's yell and felt the buckskin lurch as the dog attacked.

"No, Butcher!"

The buckskin reared, squealing in surprise and pain. Off balance, Zach fell across the saddle, his stomach ramming the saddle horn. The reins snaked from his hands and struck the frightened horse in the face, sending her into a spin. Zach grabbed her mane, fighting to regain his seat. He barely managed, made dizzy by the dog darting around the buckskin's nervously prancing feet. A howling, snapping, angry dog.

The dog barked and darted like a dervish. The buckskin bolted into the creek, kicking up water, scaring herself even more. Zach hung on, hoping to avoid mowing Sarah down in the chaos but the dog never let up. Barking madly, it lunged around the horse's hocks like a dangerous bee, driving her wild.

The buckskin jumped, twisting in mid-air, throwing Zach off. He somersaulted through the air. The surface of the water rippled white, glinting the rays of the sun. He threw out his hands to break his fall.

The last thing Zach saw was rocks. Lots of rocks.