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Wyoming Woman

Elizabeth Lane



Vintage Historical

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«HarperCollins»

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She Hated Him On Sight Cattleman's daughter Rachel Tolliver believed that sheep ranchers like Luke Vincente had no business out on the open range. Yet despite his troubled past, he was an honorable man, driven by a passion for the West—and for her. But the range war brewing would surely forbid any declaration of their wildfire love! Luke Vincente had little use for rich men's daughters, and Rachel Tolliver's blood ran royal blue with cattle-baron cash. And yet, for all she was «the enemy,» he could see them taking on all comers...together. But could she truly make the hard choice to face an uncertain future in his arms?

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**His gaze sent an oddly sensual quiver
through every nerve in her body.**

“You’ve no right to be running sheep in this part of the state,” she said. “This is cattle country.”

A dangerous smile tugged at a corner of his mouth, underscored by the dance of lightning in the dark sky behind him. “This is open range. And only a cattleman’s woman would talk like that.”

Rachel had to raise her voice to be heard above the echoing thunder. “A cattleman’s daughter!” she snapped. “And if you so much as lay a finger on me—”

His cold, bitter laughter interrupted her. “I’m aware of who your father is, Miss Tolliver. I’ve even heard a few tales about his spoiled, redheaded hellion of a daughter. Believe me, I’d just as soon pick up a live rattlesnake as lay a finger or anything else on you...!”

Acclaim for Elizabeth Lane's latest books

Bride on the Run

“Enjoyable and satisfying all around, *Bride on the Run* is an excellent Western romance you won't want to miss!”

—Romance Reviews Today (romrevtoday.com)

Shawnee Bride

“A fascinating, realistic story.”

—Rendezvous

Apache Fire

“Enemies, lovers, raw passion, taut sexual tension, murder and revenge—Indian romance fans are in for a treat with Elizabeth Lane's sizzling tale of forbidden love that will hook you until the last moment.”

—Romantic Times

Wyoming Woman
Elizabeth Lane



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For Barbara

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Chapter One

Wyoming, May 24, 1901

The wagon road that cut south from Sheridan was little more than a rutted cow path meandering between clumps of sage and rabbit brush, skirting boulders and dipping through gullies as it wound its way toward the horizon. Its washboard surface jarred every bone in Rachel Tolliver's body as she balanced on the seat of the buggy she had rented at the railroad depot. Her gloved hands gripped the leather reins as she struggled to slow the headstrong mule. Her trunks, bags and hat boxes bounced and rattled on the floorboards as every bump threatened to send them flying into the sagebrush.

She had been in the East too long, Rachel thought. Three years ago, she would not have given the mule, the rickety buggy or the dusty, rutted road a second thought. But her time at art school in Philadelphia had spoiled her. She had become accustomed to paved roads and well-mannered horses, and had even ridden in an automobile. Wyoming was a wild, rough, different world. But it was home, and despite the bumpy ride, her heart sang with happiness.

Slamming the wheel brake forward, she swerved to miss a jutting boulder. The buggy lurched like a drunkard, almost throwing her across the patched leather seat, but the mule, who had evidently learned that a brisk pace meant a swift return to the barn, did not even slow its careening trot.

Using her legs to grip the seat, Rachel repinned her chic straw hat atop her upswept, red-gold hair and braced herself for the next washed-out section of road. She was beginning to wish she'd wired her family at the ranch and let them know she was coming a week early. They could have met the afternoon train and given her a pleasant ride home in the big, lumbering wagon they used to haul supplies. Instead she had decided to surprise them.

What in heaven's name had she been thinking?

Rachel had traveled this road countless times by horse and wagon, and she knew every rutted, bumpy, wandering foot of it. Just ahead lay the long, steep hill that marked the halfway point between Sheridan and the sprawling cattle ranch where her family lived. Once she made it over the top, the most tedious part of the trip would be over. She would be able to fly down the switchbacks on the other side, then enjoy the level stretch that cut across the open plain.

She could just imagine her family's reaction when she drove the buggy in through the ranch gate. Her mother would be overjoyed to see her but would fuss over the fact that she'd made the long drive alone. Her half Shoshone father, a loving but undemonstrative man, would give her a restrained hug, ask her about school and return to his chores. Her twin brothers, Jacob and Josh, would be clamoring to see the presents she'd brought them—a collection of the silly little mechanical toys they loved and had never outgrown, even in their late teens. They would be racing the small wind-up automobiles up and down the upstairs hallway, laughing and whooping like young savages. The sound of that laughter, Rachel thought, would be music to her ears.

Three years at art school had fulfilled a lifelong wish for her, but time had taught her that she would never be content in the city. Her heart belonged to the windswept plains and towering peaks of Wyoming, and she wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her life here.

A prairie chicken exploded from the roadside as Rachel settled herself for the long climb up the hill. As the road wound upward, the mule, which had been tearing along like a juggernaut, gradually slowed its pace to a plodding walk. To encourage the animal, Rachel slapped its haunches with the long reins and began to sing at the top of her lungs.

“In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine, dwelt a miner, forty-niner and his daughter, Clementine...”

Despite her encouragement, she could feel the mule begin to flag as they neared the crest. Slapping the reins down hard on its dusty rump, Rachel sang louder.

“Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine, thou art lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine.”

The buggy crowned the hill and began to level out. Relieved of the buggy’s heavy drag, the mule broke into a determined trot once more. Suddenly Rachel found herself on the downward side, going fast. Too fast.

A knot of fear jerked tight in her stomach as she thrust the brake forward. There was a grinding sound, then the sickening sense of nothing happening. The brake was gone, and the mule, with the careening buggy pushing from behind, was not going to slow down.

Sawing helplessly on the reins, she gasped as the buggy swung around the first sharp curve with a force that slammed her across the seat and almost tipped the vehicle onto its side. Clawing her way upright, Rachel got a grip on the seat just in time for the next switchback. The buggy was rolling downhill at break-neck speed, but the steepest part of the road was behind her now. If she could hold on for the two remaining turns, the slope would level out and the buggy would slow down on its own.

Clenching her teeth, she braced herself for the next hairpin turn. The wheels plowed sideways into the loose gravel with a force that threatened to snap the axle, but, miraculously, the buggy held the road.

Hat gone, hair flying, Rachel gripped the reins and braced her feet for the final curve. It would be all right, she told herself. The grade was already leveling off, and her speed was slowing. She and the accursed mule were going to make it. Two hours from now she would be home, regaling her family with the story of her wild ride.

She was in position for the turn when the wheels hit a sudden dip. Launched upward, the buggy became airborne for a heart-stopping instant. Then it hit the road with a jolt that Rachel felt to the roots of her teeth. The impact lifted her inches off the seat, but she clung doggedly to the reins. This wasn’t her day to die! She had too much living left to do. Too many pictures to paint, too many horses to break, cattle to brand and people to love! She’d be damned if she was going to let go now!

Hanging on with every last ounce of strength, she wrestled the buggy around the last curve. The vehicle rocked dangerously, then, counterbalanced by Rachel’s own weight, settled back onto four wheels. Rachel felt herself begin to breathe again. She had made it down the hill in one piece. She was going to be all right.

Then she saw them.

Sheep.

They spread like a lumpy white flood across the road, a scant seventy yards ahead of her. There were hundreds of them—ewes and rams, plump with un-shorn wool, and tiny lambs scampering among their legs. She could hear their piercing bleats, hear the clanging of their bells as they ambled along with their noses in the dust, so bland and stupid that they didn’t even have enough sense to get out of her way.

She was going to plow right into the herd.

Frantic, Rachel jerked the reins and shouted at the top of her lungs, but the sound that emerged from her mouth was lost amid the bleating of the sheep. The brainless creatures did not even raise their heads. What in heaven’s name were they doing here anyway? Where was their herder?

She flung her weight backward in the desperate hope that the mule would stop. But the buggy kept moving, like a reaper headed into a stand of wheat. It would mow down the sheep, leaving a swath of dead and injured animals until the resistance of their bodies finally stopped its motion.

There was only one thing she could do, and, with time ticking down to a split second, Rachel did it.

Wrenching the reins to the right, she swerved off the road. The mule was ripping along in a blind panic now. There was no time to choose a good spot or even to look where she was going. The buggy lurched over clumps of sage, bounded off a saddle-sized rock and careened down the side of a wash. The mule screamed and pitched onto its side as the buggy rolled, scattering trunks and boxes

and throwing Rachel forward, over the dash. Like a rag doll tossed by an uncaring child, she tumbled onto the sand, moaned and lay still.

Luke Vincente heard his dogs barking as he came over the rise. The sound put him on instant alert. The two Scotch border collies tended to work the sheep quietly, uttering soft little yips as they worried the flanks of the stragglers. The clamor he heard now could have only one meaning—something was wrong.

Luke's eyes scanned the herd as he urged the rangy buckskin gelding down the slope. The sheep were ambling along at their usual pace, showing no sign that anything was amiss. But Luke could not see either of the dogs. Maybe they'd cornered a badger or come across a den of coyote pups. Or maybe they'd even found a rattler. A snake-bit dog was the last thing he wanted.

A shallow wash, etched by spring floods, cut down the side of the hill and zigzagged across the flat. That would be where the dogs were, Luke calculated. Otherwise he'd be able to see them. Anxious now, he spurred the buckskin to a trot.

Luke had come to Wyoming seeking the peace and solitude of open spaces. But he'd had enough trouble here to last him the rest of his life, especially in the past few weeks. Just this morning Luke had found three of his best purebred merino ewes shot dead around a watering hole. The cattlemen who'd done it hadn't even bothered to hide their tracks. Why should they, when the law turned a blind eye to any crime committed against people who raised sheep?

But that wasn't the worst of it. Three nights ago, his best herder, an old Spaniard who wouldn't hurt a fly, had narrowly escaped death when masked raiders had torched the sheep wagon where he slept. When the old man had stumbled outside, the masked men had beaten him to a bloody pulp and left him for dead.

Luke had no doubt that the raiders had come from neighboring ranches whose owners wanted him, his sheep and his herders off the open range. The fact that they had every right to be there only made the cattlemen more determined to drive him off.

Luke had had a bellyful of trouble over the past week. He could only hope he wasn't about to stumble into more.

The barking grew louder as he neared the wash. Now, through the tall sage, he could see a stark, black shape jutting above the rim. Luke swore under his breath as he realized what it was. What kind of damned fool would drive a buggy fast enough to run it off the road in this country?

His heart sank as he realized he was about to find out.

Luke swung out of the saddle and looped the buckskin's reins over a dead cedar bush. As he strode down into the wash the dogs bounded out from behind the buggy to greet him, their tongues lolling, their feathery black-and-white tails wagging, as if to say, "Look what we've found!"

With a low whistle and a swift hand sign that the dogs had been trained to obey, Luke sent them back to tend the herd. As they frisked up the slope of the wash, he turned and walked cautiously toward the buggy.

Its front wheels were buried axle deep in sand. One rear wheel, tipped clear of the ground, was still spinning. Either the wind was playing tricks, or the accident had only just happened.

He looked for a horse or mule, but found only the broken traces and a set of large, shod hoofprints leading up the side of the wash. Judging from the trail it had left, the animal wasn't badly hurt. Luke hoped the driver of the buggy had been as fortunate, but as he gazed at the wreckage, he knew that wasn't likely.

The buggy had been going fast when it shot over the edge of the wash, he surmised. Fast enough, most likely, to throw the driver over the dash and break his fool neck, or maybe smash his head on a rock. Either way, he wasn't going to be a pretty sight.

Luke was a half-dozen paces from the buggy when a flicker of movement beyond the far side of it caught his eye. Something was blowing in the wind—something white and lacy that looked like a petticoat. And he could see now that the debris scattered around the wreck included two hat

boxes and a trunk that had burst open on impact and bounced down the wash, spilling a trail of frilly undergarments along its sandy bed.

Luke swore out loud. It was bad enough that the driver had endangered himself. That he'd been driving like a lunatic with a woman aboard was more than stupid. It was downright criminal.

As he sprinted around the buggy, Luke caught sight of crumpled petticoats and a fluttering blue skirt. For an instant he hoped it might be a heap of clothing. But the sleek little high-button boots thrusting from beneath a ruffle of ecru lace told him otherwise.

She lay on her back, amber curls spilling like a tangled skein of silk embroidery floss over the rocky gray sand. Her eyes were closed, the lashes like the soft, dark vane of a quail's feather against ivory cheeks. Her features were as perfect as a doll's, her periwinkle-blue traveling suit so well-tailored and immaculate that she looked as if she had just been lifted out of a tissue-lined box before being flung onto the ground.

She was somebody's rich, spoiled baby, that was for sure. The same kind of rich, spoiled baby who'd cost him four precious years of his life.

Her breasts were small and taut beneath the snug-fitting jacket. Their even rise and fall confirmed that she was breathing. A touch of his fingertip to her warm throat told Luke her pulse was strong and steady. His first impulse was to lift her head and try to get some water down her. But she could have fractured bones or even a broken neck, he cautioned himself. It would be best not to move her until she could tell him what was hurting. He would give her a few minutes to awaken on her own. Meanwhile, he needed to find out what had happened to the driver.

Luke glanced around and saw no sign of another person, nor could he spot any tracks leading away from the wreckage. He scanned the buggy and the area around it, then, rising to his feet, made a hasty search of the surrounding rocks and brush. Unless the driver had been snatched directly into heaven, there was only one conclusion to be made. The damn-fool woman had been driving the buggy herself.

For the space of a long breath, Luke stood gazing at the thick black clouds that were spilling over the Big Horn Mountains to the west. The afternoon breeze smelled of rain—a welcome sign. Here on the open range where sheep and cattle competed for every bite of grass, water was more precious than gold. But mountain storms could also trigger flash floods that sent mud and water boiling down washes just like this one, drowning unwary stock and burying anything that couldn't be swept away.

As if echoing his thoughts, sheet lightning flashed above the peaks, followed by the rumbling boom of thunder. This wash was no place to be stuck in a storm, especially with an unconscious female on his hands. Injured or not, he needed to get her to safe ground.

He was turning back toward her when something caught his eye—a glittering flash of blue, lodged behind one half-buried front wheel. Drawn by curiosity, he dropped to a crouch and worked the object free. It was a small, beaded reticule, fashioned of the same fabric as the periwinkle-blue traveling suit. Luke glared down at it, where it lay clutched in his big, callused hands. The little piece of frippery had probably cost enough to feed a starving family for a month. And this pampered, pretty creature probably hadn't given the money a second's thought.

Only as he was about to toss it away in disgust did it occur to him that he should open the reticule and look inside. He might find something with a name or address on it—a letter, a calling card, even an embroidered handkerchief that might tell him her name or furnish some clue about who to contact, should she need more help than he could give her.

His fingers fumbled with the small, ornate clasp. Frustrated by its intricacy, Luke cursed under his breath. For two cents he would draw his knife and cut the damned thing open like a—

“Hold it right there, sheep man!”

The taut little voice raked Luke's senses. “Drop the bag, raise your hands and turn around slowly. No tricks, or I'll blow you to kingdom come!”

Luke's rifle was on the horse and, in any case, he knew better than to make a rash move before sizing up the situation. Cursing himself for getting into this predicament, he dropped the reticule, raised his hands and slowly turned around.

The woman lay propped on one elbow. Her striking blue-green eyes blazed with raw fury. Her free hand gripped a tiny but evil-looking derringer that was pointed straight at Luke's chest.

Chapter Two

Rachel gripped the miniature one-shot pistol she'd taken from her pocket, willing her fingers not to tremble. Her temples were throbbing, and her left shoulder felt as if it had been kicked by a mule, but there was nothing missing from her memory. The recollection of swerving off the road to miss the sheep, then careening into the wash, was crystal-clear in her mind—as clear as the image of the bastard she'd just caught trying to rob her.

“Are you sure you know how to use that little toy, lady?” He spoke with a hint of southern drawl, his voice as deep and rich as blackstrap molasses.

“You don't want to find out the hard way.” She glared up at him, feeling small and helpless despite the cold weight of the gun in her hand. The derringer was cocked and loaded, the man close enough to provide an easy target. But something in the lithe, easy way he stood, hands relaxed, dark eyes narrowed like a wolf's, whispered danger. Fear crept upward into her throat—a fear that she masked with spitting fury.

“Are these your sheep?” she sputtered. She took his silence for a yes. “I could have been killed! Look at this buggy! It's ruined, and the mule's run off to heaven knows where! What were those fool animals doing in the road anyway? If I hadn't swerved, I'd have crashed right into them!”

“The last I heard, there was no law against herding stock across a road,” he replied icily. “Sheep and cattle have the right-of-way in this country. If you were going too fast to make the turn, that's nobody's fault but your own. Now put that silly little gun away before somebody gets hurt.”

“So you can finish going through my things? Don't waste your time. I don't have enough money in that bag to be worth your trouble.”

His lip curled in a sneer of contempt, and Rachel sensed at once that she had said the wrong thing. The stranger's fierce pride showed in the erect stance of his lean, muscular body, the set of his aquiline head and the unruly spill of blue-black hair over his brow. His face was more compelling than handsome, with features that could have been hewn from raw granite. His dark, hooded eyes were as sharp and alert as a hawk's. He was a disturbing man, an unsettling man whose gaze sent an oddly sensual quiver through every nerve in her body. But Rachel's instincts told her he was too proud to steal, especially from a woman.

All the same, she would be foolish to lower her guard. Gripping the derringer's tiny stock, she glared up at him. From beyond the rim of the wash, she could hear the brassy jangle of sheep's bells and the bleating of the ewes and lambs. “You've no right to be running sheep in this part of the state,” she said. “This is cattle country.”

A dangerous smile tugged at a corner of his mouth, underscored by the dance of lightning in the dark sky behind him. “This is open range. And only a cattleman's woman would talk like that.”

Rachel had to raise her voice to be heard above the echoing thunder. “A cattleman's daughter!” she snapped, throwing discretion to the winds. “My name is Rachel Tolliver. My father owns the biggest cattle ranch in this county. And if you so much as lay a finger on me—”

His laughter interrupted her—cold, bitter laughter that did nothing to settle her edginess. “I'm aware of who your father is, Miss Tolliver. I've even heard a few tales about his spoiled, redheaded hellion of a daughter. Believe me, I'd just as soon pick up a live rattlesnake as lay a finger or anything else on you. Now, if you don't mind putting that gun away, my arms are getting tired.”

Rachel hesitated. She'd grown up hearing that sheep men were worse than bandits. Their wretched, woolly animals fouled the water holes and destroyed good range land by nipping off every blade of grass so short that there was nothing left for the cattle to eat. Shepherders who worked for wages tended to be Mexicans or Spanish Basques—quaint little men who lived in their hutlike wagons and kept to themselves. But this tall, insolent stranger was clearly not of that stripe.

“What do you plan to do with me, Rachel Tolliver?” he taunted her. “Shoot me? Send me packing? Either way, you’ll be out here alone with a storm coming and your buggy wrecked in a wash. Like it or not, I’m the only help you’ve got. You’ve no choice except to trust me.”

“I’d just as soon trust a coyote as a sheep man!” Rachel retorted, but she was beginning to see that he was right. Like it or not, unless she wanted to walk twenty miles in the rain—

The rest of her thoughts took flight at the sound of a low growl behind her. She glanced back over her shoulder to see a middle-sized dog with a shaggy black-and-white coat crouched a half-dozen paces away. Its sharp yellow fangs were bared in a threatening snarl.

“Oh—” Caught off guard, Rachel was unprepared for what happened next. With the speed of a pouncing cat, the stranger was on her. His strong hands caught her wrist and wrenched the derringer out of her grasp. The next thing she knew, she was lying flat on her back, staring up at him where he stood over her. From the ground, with thunderheads rolling in behind him, he looked as big as a mountain.

Scowling, he released the hammer and slipped the miniature pistol into his vest. Rachel was bracing for a fight when he reached down, seized her wrists and jerked her roughly to her feet. Frightened and angry, she tried to twist away from him. He released her so abruptly that she lost her balance, stumbled backward and slammed against the side of the buggy.

“Your call, Miss Rachel Tolliver,” he growled, making no further move to touch her. “You can ask for my help, or I can ride off and leave you here alone with your spilled baggage. Either way, it’s up to you. I don’t give a damn what you decide.”

He glanced down at the dog, which had moved to stand protectively at his side. At a slight motion of its master’s hand and a spoken command that was no more than a whisper, the animal wheeled and raced up the side of the wash in the direction of the sheep.

Rachel flinched as the first raindrop splashed against the end of her nose. With a clatter that began like pearls falling from a broken string and grew to a solid rush of pelting rain, the storm swept down from the mountains to engulf everything in its path. Rain peppered the sand in the wash and blasted the dust from the buggy’s shiny black body. Rachel felt its weight soaking her hair, its wet chill penetrating layers of clothing to reach her skin.

“Well, which will it be?” Water streamed off the sheep man’s hair and beaded on his eyebrows, but he had not moved from where he stood. “Make up your mind, Miss Tolliver. I haven’t got all day.”

“All right. Yes, I need your help!” Rachel had lived too long in this country not to know what would happen to anything that remained in the wash. “Please! Hurry! The important things—my paints and canvases—are in the back! And we really need to get the buggy out. Otherwise my father will have to pay Finnegan’s Livery for the loss of it.”

“There’s a rope on my saddle. I’ll get the horse.” He turned away and strode up the side of the wash, his boots leaving muddy gouges that swiftly filled with water and crumbled away. Rachel watched his tall figure disappear through the gray curtain of rain. Then, with no more time to spare, she turned and raced to gather her scattered, soaking possessions.

Luke left her scrambling for her things and strode back through the brush to get the horse. Morgan Tolliver’s daughter. He cursed under his breath. For two cents he would ride away and leave the little hellcat to the storm. He owed no favors to cattle ranchers and their kin, nor did he expect any in return. All he really wanted was to be left alone.

The buckskin was waiting beside the cedar bush. It nickered and shook its rain-soaked hide as he freed its bridle from the dead branch. A quick glance up the slope confirmed that Mick and Shep, the two collies, were doing their job, herding the sheep into a tight circle where the lambs would be protected from the worst of the storm. The precious animals would be safe enough until he could pull the buggy out of the wash and, he hoped to heaven, get the snooty Miss Tolliver on her way. She was a wild beauty, with those sea-colored eyes, that untamed mop of red-gold curls and a figure that

would tempt the devil himself. But a cattleman's daughter... Luke shook his head and swore as he led the horse toward the wash. Her kind of trouble was the last thing he needed.

The Tolliver Ranch was the biggest spread in the county, and likely one of the biggest in the state of Wyoming. A remote corner of it butted onto Luke's modest parcel of land at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains. Luke had only a passing acquaintance with the ranch's owner. But a cattleman was a cattleman, and if there was anything the cattle ranchers hated more than sheep it was the men who allowed them to graze on public land.

Had Morgan Tolliver and his twin sons been among the raiders that had nearly burned poor old Miguel alive in his wagon and then beat him senseless? Had a Tolliver gun shot the three purebred ewes that were the best of Luke's herd—the herd he had labored for five miserable, backbreaking years in the Rock Springs coal mines to buy?

The answer to those questions made no difference. Luke had nothing that would stand as proof against the Tollivers and their kind. Even if he were to find such proof, there'd be nothing he could do except sell out and run for his life. And he would die, Luke swore, before he let the bastards drive him off his land.

Through the pelting rain, he could see the edge of the wash and the water-soaked heap that Morgan Tolliver's daughter had made of her rescued baggage. Hauling the buggy out of the wash would be a tough job. And even if they could salvage it, how was she going to get home with no mule to pull it? He would be stuck with her.

For the space of a breath, Luke hesitated. Why should he be helping the woman at all? Rachel Tolliver had held a gun on him, accused him of thievery and, in general, behaved like the spoiled brat she was. It would serve her right, maybe even teach her a lesson, if he rode off and left her on her own. Surely she would not be alone for long. Her family was bound to miss her and come looking for her.

But no—the image of Rachel shivering in the rain like a lost puppy was more than his conscience could bear. It had been a long time since he'd considered himself a gentleman, but he had not sunk so far that he would ride away and leave a woman in a dangerous situation.

He found her hunkered beside the buggy, digging around one mired wheel with a twisted sage root. Her hair hung around her face in dripping, curly strings, and her once-elegant blue suit was soaked with muddy water. She looked up in ill-disguised relief as Luke slogged his way down the bank with a coil of rope.

"I thought you'd turned tail and left," she said, raising her voice to be heard above the rain.

Ignoring the taunt, Luke found the middle of the rope and looped it around the rear axle of the buggy to make a tight slipknot.

Still kneeling, she glared up at him. Her eyes flashed like a tiger's through the dripping tendrils of her hair. "No lectures, sheep man. Just get the buggy out of the wash. I'll see that you're paid for your time."

Rankled, Luke shot her a contemptuous glance. "My name is Luke Vincente. And I don't want your money—or your father's."

She scrambled to her feet, her wet jacket outlining her small, high breasts and cold-puckered nipples. "I think you're too proud for your own good," she said, a scowl deepening the cleft in her determined chin. "But then, since the accident was mostly your fault, I shouldn't expect to pay you for helping me."

"My fault?" He glared at her.

"Well the problem with the brake wasn't your fault. I suppose Mr. Finnegan at the livery should take the blame for that, since he should have fixed it. But as for the rest—"

"The brake?" He stared at her. "You mean you were ripping down that hill with no way to stop?"

She flashed him a withering look. "I would have been fine. Everything was under control, and I was planning to coast to a stop at the bottom. Unfortunately, your stupid sheep—" Her muddy fists

clenched into knots. “Don’t think you’re doing me any favors, Luke Vincente. This mess is your fault, not mine. You owe me—”

“Then let’s get this over with,” he snapped, playing out the rope as he moved up the bank to the waiting horse. “The job’s going to take both of us. You can guide the horse, or you can stay in the wash and try to free the wheels. It’s up to you.”

She gazed up at the buckskin, her eyes slitted against the driving rain. “He’s your horse. You’ll get more out of him than I will. I’ll stay with the buggy.”

“Suit yourself.” Luke had hoped she would leave him to free the wheels, but he was in no mood to argue. Not with the rain coming down harder by the minute. As he mounted the bank of the wash, he saw that she had found her digging stick and was scraping away the sand that trapped the left front wheel. A cattleman’s spoiled brat she might be. But Rachel Tolliver had grit. He would credit her that much.

Tying the rope to the saddle horn, he swung onto the buckskin. Lightning snaked across the sky. “Get to the front,” he shouted. “When I say push, give it everything you’ve got.”

The only reply was a shattering crack of thunder. The horse danced nervously, tossing its head.

“Rachel?” He held his breath. An eternity seemed to pass before he heard her speak.

“I’m ready when you are.” Her voice sounded thin and distant.

“Then...push!” He jabbed the horse with his knees. The buckskin was a powerful animal and the buggy wasn’t heavy. One good, hard pull should be enough to break it loose, he calculated as the doubled rope strained tight.

But Luke hadn’t counted on the sucking grip of the sand on the front wheels. He was just beginning to feel some give when he heard Rachel scream, “Stop!”

Only then did he realize what was happening. The front wheels were so firmly stuck that the pull of the horse was threatening to rip them loose from the axle.

Turning, Luke saw that Rachel had fallen to her knees and was slumped against the dash, one hand massaging her left shoulder. “We’ll have to dig the wheels free,” she said between clenched teeth. “Don’t you have a shovel?”

Did the woman think he kept a blasted tool chest on the horse? “Hold on, I’ll find something,” Luke muttered, sliding out of the saddle. The rain was coming down in torrents and he was getting worried about the sheep. If the skittish animals panicked, even the dogs wouldn’t be able to hold them.

The ground had become a sea of spattering mud that concealed any stick or rock that might be used for digging. Luke was twisting at a dead clump of sage, try to break it loose, when he heard a distant rushing sound—so faint at first that it was barely distinguishable from the drone of the rain. Only as it neared and grew did he realize, with blood-chilling certainty, what it was.

“Flood!” he shouted, wheeling back toward the wash. “Get the hell out of there!” He raced for the bank, ready to grab her hands and help her climb the muddy slope.

“No!” she shouted, clinging stubbornly to the frame of the buggy. “Get back to your horse! The water will wash the wheels loose! If we time it right, we can pull the buggy out! It’s our only chance!”

“Don’t be a fool! Come on!” Luke plunged down the bank, seized her left arm and wrenched her toward him. Rachel yelped in sudden agony. Only then did he realize she was hurt.

With a muttered curse, he scooped her up in his arms and charged for the bank—too late. The flash flood slammed into them like a buffalo stampede. Luke fought to keep his footing as muddy water, thick with silt and debris, swirled chest-deep around them.

Glancing uphill, Luke saw a gnarled tree trunk sweeping downstream at murderous speed, its sharp roots thrusting toward them like tangled daggers. Rachel gasped as he swung her into the protecting lee of the buggy. The tree trunk hurtled past, missing them by inches. But their safety was short-lived. Lifted free by the water, the buggy began to move downstream.

From the bank of the wash, the horse screamed in terror as the moving vehicle's momentum dragged it toward the torrent below. Luke's heart sank as he saw what was happening. "Hang on tight!" he shouted at Rachel.

Her uninjured arm locked around his neck, freeing his hand to yank the hunting knife from the sheath that hung at his belt. With the strength of desperation, Luke hacked at the rope. One by one the tough fibers parted—slowly, too slowly. Weakened by the flood, the rim of the wash was already crumbling beneath the buckskin's rear hooves. The horse squealed as its hindquarters went down. Then, with one last cut, the rope separated and the animal was free. Its forefeet found solid earth, and it wrenched itself upward to safety.

With the last of his strength, Luke shoved Rachel clear of the moving buggy. The buggy washed away from them and went crashing downstream. It wouldn't go far, Luke knew. But by the time the flood passed, the rented vehicle would be nothing but a battered, waterlogged piece of junk.

He wondered if the fool woman knew how lucky she was to be alive.

The brunt of the storm had already passed over the mountains. Ebbing now, the floodwater gushed between the banks in a waist-high, taffy-colored stream.

Rachel groaned as Luke Vincente heaved her onto the bank and scrambled for his own foothold on the muddy, crumbling slope. Fifty yards downstream she could see the buggy. It was sharply tilted out of the water as if it had run up on some high object, perhaps a boulder.

"There it is!" she cried, pointing. "We can still get it out! Hurry!"

"No."

Rachel stared up at him. He had gained the bank, and now he loomed above her, coated with mud from head to toe. His face was an expressionless stone mask.

"No?" she asked incredulously.

"You heard me." His lip curled in a contemptuous snarl. "Hasn't anybody ever said that word to you before, Miss Rachel Tolliver? If you want the damned buggy back, get it yourself, or send some moonstruck cowboy from the ranch to fetch it for you. I've got sheep to move."

Without another word, he turned his back and walked away from her, toward his waiting horse. Rachel glared at his arrogant back, her temper igniting like kerosene spilled on a red-hot stove.

"Come back here!" She ground out the words between clenched teeth. "This was your fault! If your blasted sheep hadn't been in the road, I'd be on my way home!"

Luke Vincente did not even glance back at her. He had set out to be a gentleman, but Rachel Tolliver had pushed him beyond his limits. She could wait for her family to come, or she could damned well walk home. Either way, he was washing his hands of her.

"I'm all alone out here!" she stormed. "I have nothing to eat, no shelter, no dry clothes! What's more, my shoulder hurts! You can't just walk away and leave me!"

This time he paused and looked back at her. His dark eyes glinted like chips of granite. "I can and I will," he said. "Unless, of course, you want to come with me."

"Come where?" Rachel struggled to her feet. "Take me home, and I'll see that my father rewards you."

"I told you, I don't want your father's money," he said coldly. "I've got sheep to get back to my ranch for shearing. Once we're safely there, if you want to hang around, we'll see about getting you warmed up and fed. Then we'll talk about taking you home. That's the best I can offer you, Rachel Tolliver. Take it or leave it."

Torn, she watched him walk away. Pride demanded that she let him go. But once he left her, she would be stranded. Her family was not expecting her at the ranch for another week. No one would miss her. No one would come looking for her.

"Luke!" Her voice stopped him. It was the first time she had called him by name. Slowly he turned around.

"I'll take it," she said. "Your offer, I mean. After all, I can hardly stay out here alone."

His expression did not even flicker. “Climb aboard then,” he said, indicating the horse with a nod of his head. “We’ve got sheep to move.”

Chapter Three

Rachel sat behind the saddle, her legs straddling the buckskin's slippery rump. Her waterlogged skirts were bunched above her knees, showing mud-streaked silk stockings and soaked, misshapen kidskin boots. Her gabardine suit was stained with floodwater, and her tangled hair hung down her back like a filthy string mop.

But Rachel was long past the point of caring about appearances. What she wanted most right now was a solid meal and a steaming, gardenia-scented bath. And then she wanted the blasted buggy back on the road, loaded with the bags she had so carefully packed for her journey west.

Most of her clothes would be ruined. That in itself was a crying shame, but at least clothes could be replaced. It was her precious supply of paints, brushes and canvases that worried Rachel most. She had persuaded Luke to help her carry the trunk that contained her painting supplies into some rocks above the wash, where people passing on the road would not see it, but everything else remained stacked near the mired buggy, at the mercy of weather and thieves. Rachel could only hope it would be safe until she could send someone to bring everything safely back to the ranch.

Her arms tightened around the sheep man's ribs as the horse swerved to avoid a badger hole. At the sudden pressure, Luke's sinewy body went taut with resistance. In the hour they had been riding together, he had scarcely linked one syllable with another. His silence told her in no uncertain terms that he was not pleased to have her along. Well, fine. She wasn't exactly happy to be here, herself. By rights she should be at home with her family, sitting down to a mouth-watering banquet prepared by Chang, the Tolliver ranch's aging cook who was a true artist in the kitchen. When she closed her eyes, Rachel could almost taste the garlic-seasoned roast beef, the mashed potatoes dripping with gravy, the carrots drenched in herbed butter and the flakiest buttermilk biscuits this side of heaven. A lusty growl quivered in the pit of her stomach. She willed herself to ignore the unladylike sound. Why should she care whether Luke had heard? His opinion of her was already so low that nothing she did could make him think any worse of her!

Hungry as she was, Rachel knew better than to ask Luke when they were going to stop and eat. The wretched man did not appear to have brought any food with him; and in any case, she was not about to give him the satisfaction of hearing her complain—not about her empty belly or the chill of the spring wind through her wet clothes or the darts of pain that lanced her shoulder with every bounce of the trotting horse. The shoulder did not seem to be broken—if it were, she knew she would be in agony. But it hurt enough to tell her that something was wrong.

Struggling to ignore her discomfort, Rachel gazed across the scrub-dotted foothills, toward the place where the land sloped downward to end in a sheer cliff that dropped sixty feet to the prairie below. Years ago, her father had told her, the Cheyenne and Sioux had used this place, and others like it, for driving buffalo. It had been a brutally efficient means of hunting. The warriors had only to surround a herd, stampede the terrified animals over the cliff and butcher their broken bodies at the bottom. The meat and hides from such a slaughter could supply a band for an entire season.

The buffalo were gone now, and the children of the hunters had long since been pushed onto reservations. But now, as her eyes traced the line of the cliff, Rachel could almost see the hurtling bodies, hear the death shrieks and smell the stench of fear and blood. With a shudder, she turned her gaze away. This was not a good day for such black thoughts. Not when she had problems of her own to deal with.

With the storm rolling eastward across the prairie, the sky above the Big Horns had begun to clear. Fingers of light from the slanting, late-afternoon sun brushed the snowy peaks with a golden radiance, as if heaven itself lay just beyond the thinning veil of clouds, and all a mortal needed to do was reach out and touch it.

Heaven was far beyond her reach today, Rachel mused wryly. With the buggy wrecked, her belongings scattered, her hair and clothes a sodden mess and this dark, brooding sheep man holding her a virtual prisoner, her current predicament seemed more like the place that was heaven's opposite.

But it was no use crying over spilled milk, that's what her mother would say. Time was too valuable to waste fretting over what could no longer be helped.

Rachel missed her lively, practical mother. She missed her father's quiet strength and the high-spirited antics of the twin brothers she adored. She wanted desperately to go home. But the stubborn, irascible stranger who guided the horse had made it clear that his precious sheep came first. She would not be reunited with her family until the miserable creatures were safely in the shearing pens on his own small ranch.

The sheep, about three hundred head of them not counting the lambs, spread over the landscape like a plague of ravenous gray-white caterpillars. Rachel had never cared for the dull-witted creatures. True, the baby lambs were cute and lively, but they soon grew up to be brainless eating machines that stripped the grass from every inch of open range they crossed. Rachel despised the sight of them, the sound of them, the sour, dusty smell of them.

The dogs, however, were a different matter.

She watched in fascination as the two border collies darted among the sheep, nipping at the flanks of the stragglers, keeping the whole herd moving along together. Sometimes Luke spoke to them in a low voice or commanded them with simple hand gestures. For the most part, however, the dogs seemed to know exactly what they were doing and needed no direction. Rachel had always liked dogs, and these two alert, intelligent animals were as fine a pair as she had ever seen.

"Your dogs are magnificent," she said, watching the darker of the two chase a straying lamb back toward its mother. "Did you train them yourself?"

"Shep and Mick came with the sheep when I bought them," Luke said tersely. "I was the one who had to be trained."

It was a civil enough answer, but there was a dark undertone in Luke's voice, a hidden tension in his muscular body, as if something were lurking below the surface of everything he said and did. She had held a gun on him, Rachel reminded herself. She had treated Luke Vincente with as much contempt as he had treated her. But there was more at work here, she sensed, than simple animosity. There were things she didn't know, things she needed to understand for her own safety.

Rachel held her tongue for a time, hoping Luke would volunteer more. But when he did not speak again, her impatience got the better of her.

"I've been at school in Philadelphia for the past three years," she said. "You and your sheep certainly weren't around before I left."

He sighed, as if resigning himself to a conversation he did not want to have. "I came here two years ago. My property butts onto the northwest corner of your family's ranch, where those reddish foothills jut out onto the prairie."

"In that case, I'm surprised my father hasn't tried to buy you out," Rachel said. "At a fair price, of course."

Luke shrugged. "He has. Not in person, but through that little weasel of a land agent who comes sniffing around my place every few months."

"Mr. Connell is a good man," Rachel said. "My father has been dealing with him for years, and he's never cheated us out of a penny...even though he does look a bit like a weasel." She suppressed an impish smile. "What did you tell him when he made an offer on your land?"

"That I wouldn't sell. Not even for a fair price."

The edge in his reply was not lost on Rachel. "But why not?" she demanded. "You could run sheep in Nevada, or Colorado, or New Mexico, and nobody would care a fig! Why set up a sheep ranch smack in the middle of cattle country, where three-quarters of the people you meet are going to hate you?"

“Maybe because there’s no law that says I can’t.” He spoke in a flat voice that defied her to argue with him. “Do you play poker, Miss Rachel Tolliver?”

“Some.”

“I won my land in a poker game while you were probably still in pigtails,” he said. “Some rough years came and went before I was able to live on it. But it was my own piece of the earth. Whatever happened to me, it was always there, like a beacon to get me through the bad times.”

Rachel wondered about those bad times, but she knew better than to ask too many personal questions. Luke Vincente, she sensed, was a very private man who would not show his scars to unsympathetic eyes.

How old was he? she found herself wondering. He had the flat-bellied, lean-hipped body of a man in his early thirties and his hair carried only a light touch of silver. But his creased, windburned face had a hard set to it, as if his eyes had seen more than his mind wanted to remember.

“I understand how you must feel about the land,” she said.

“Do you?” he asked, clearly implying that Rachel would not know what it was like to get anything the hard way. She bridled, then willed herself to ignore the barb.

“But why raise sheep, for heaven’s sake?” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “Why not cattle, like the rest of us? Why make enemies of your neighbors?”

Luke’s gaze traced the spiraling flight of a red-tailed hawk against the sky. “You’ve never had to set up a cattle operation,” he said. “It takes big money these days, usually from some rich investor. And you need a whole crew of cowboys to take care of your herd—cowboys who have to be fed and housed and paid. And even if you get your cattle through the season and to the railhead in good shape, you can still lose your shirt if the market’s bad.”

Rachel gazed past his shoulder at the flowing mass of sheep and the darting figures of the two dogs. Everything Luke had said was true. Cattle raising was an expensive business. The old days, when a man could buy a cheap piece of land, drive a herd of longhorns north from Mexico and have himself a working ranch were long gone.

“Sheep, even purebreds like these, are cheaper to buy than cattle,” Luke said. “Sheep tend to multiply faster than cattle, and they can survive in country where cows would starve. With well-trained dogs, one or two men can handle a good-sized herd. Wool is easy to store, haul and ship, and the wool market is a hell of a lot more stable than the beef market. Does that answer your question?”

Rachel studied the dark diamond of perspiration that had soaked through the back of Luke’s faded chambray work shirt, outlining the taut muscles beneath the fabric. “I suppose it does answer my question,” she said slowly, although, in truth, it did not. She had set out to uncover the reasons behind his blazing hostility. Instead, his answers had revealed a man of burning ambitions, fierce loyalties and buried secrets. The things he had told her only served to deepen the puzzle that was Luke Vincente.

Rachel cleared her throat. “I still don’t—”

“Ssh!” She felt his body go rigid beneath her hands. “Listen!”

For the space of a breath, Rachel heard nothing but the rhythmic thud of the horse’s hooves against the damp earth. Then the sound reached her ears from beyond the next rise—the plaintive, terrified cry of a small animal in pain.

One of the dogs began to bark as Luke urged the horse to a canter. They came over the top of the rise to see a lamb, so small and white that it couldn’t have been more than a few days old, caught beneath a big clump of sagebrush. The little creature was dangling pitifully from one hind leg. It jerked and twisted, its eyes wild with terror. The dog hovered nearby, whining anxiously.

Luke swore as he halted the horse. Behind him, Rachel jumped to the ground, allowing him to swing out of the saddle. Reaching the lamb ahead of him, she gathered the squalling baby into her arms. That was when she saw the thin wire snare that had twisted around its hind leg. The lamb’s struggles had worked the wire into its tender flesh.

“There...you’re all right.” Rachel felt the unexpected sting of tears as she stroked the small, velvety head. She had no love for sheep, but this one was so tiny and helpless that its pain tore at her heart.

“Hold him still.” Luke had brought a pair of wire cutters. His eyes glittered with fury as he cut the lamb loose and, with gentle hands, untwisted the wire from its bleeding leg. “Damn the bastards,” he muttered under his breath. “Damn them all to hell!”

Rachel’s lips parted as she stared at him. Until now she’d assumed that the lamb had stumbled into a trap meant for rabbits or coyotes. But Luke’s face told her another story—a story that chilled the blood in her veins.

“Does this happen often?” She choked out the words.

Luke’s mouth tightened in a grim line. “This lamb was lucky. Most of them we find dead, or so far gone they have to be put out of their misery. The coyotes and eagles usually get to them before we do. I’ve lost more than two dozen animals to these hellish wire snares.”

Rachel gripped the struggling lamb as Luke cleaned its wounds. His big, weathered hands were callused and nicked with a myriad of scars—the kind of hands that had worked, fought, loved, maybe even killed. Where had those hands been, Rachel found herself wondering. What stories would those fingers tell if they could speak?

His knuckle brushed her breast through the damp fabric of her jacket. The accidental touch triggered a freshet of sensation that puckered her nipple and sent a jolt of liquid heat shimmering downward through her body. Rachel stifled a gasp, then forced herself to speak.

“You’re saying someone’s setting these snares just to catch your sheep?” she asked.

Luke had opened a pocket-sized tin of salve. His fingers rubbed the greasy mixture into the deep wire cuts in the lamb’s leg. He did not speak, but his grim silence was enough to answer Rachel’s question.

“But that’s monstrous!” she burst out. “Who would do such a thing?”

His eyes flickered toward her. Rachel felt their cold hatred as if shards of ice had penetrated her flesh. Her lips parted, but no words emerged from her dry mouth. The questions in her mind would remain un-asked. She did not want to hear Luke’s answers.

A frantic longing seized her—to be home, to be safe on the Tolliver Ranch, with this miserable after noon blotted from time as if it had never happened. She wanted to forget the buggy accident. She wanted to forget the helpless pain of the injured lamb. Most of all she wanted to forget this gruff, disturbing man who, through no fault of her own, had chosen to hate her on sight.

The dog that had found the sheep hovered close, brushing against Luke with its tail and looking up at Rachel with intelligent golden eyes. “What’s the matter, boy?” Rachel murmured. “Are you worried about your little lamb? He’ll be all right. We’ll fix him up as good as new.”

Luke’s stormy gaze flickered toward her, then shifted to the dog. “Go, Mick,” he commanded in a soft voice. “Back to the sheep.”

Tail high, the dog wheeled and bounded back down the slope in the direction of the herd. But it had only gone a few yards when, abruptly, it halted in its tracks, ears up, nose to the wind. Rachel saw the hair rise and bristle along the back of its neck. A nervous growl quivered in its throat.

Luke glanced up from doctoring the lamb, his body tense and wary. Rachel held her breath, holding the lamb close as she strained to catch the danger the dog had sensed.

Luke’s expression darkened. “Get out of sight!” he hissed, shoving her up the slope toward an outcrop of boulders. “Stay behind those rocks and don’t make a move until I tell you it’s safe!”

Only then did Rachel hear what had alarmed the dog. Faintly at first, but growing rapidly louder, the ominous cadence of galloping hoofbeats rumbled from the far side of the hill. Whoever the riders were, they were moving fast. Seconds from now they would be in sight.

With the lamb still clasped in her arms, she plunged toward the outcrop. If the mounted men proved to be friends, she could always show herself. But until she knew who they were and what they wanted, it made more sense to stay hidden.

By the time she reached the rocks, Luke was in the saddle. He spurred the horse toward the herd. The dog shot ahead of him, a dark blur of motion against the pale green slope.

Ignoring the pain in her shoulder, Rachel pressed herself into a low spot between two jutting boulders. The lamb squirmed against her. Rachel's grip tightened around the warm little body as she edged into a spot where she could look down on what was happening.

Four mounted cowboys appeared over the crest of the hill, riding hard. Just below the ridge they halted for a moment, their attention fixed on the broad, open slope and the slowly moving sheep below. Rachel's breath caught painfully as she realized that, beneath their broad-brimmed Stetsons, their neckerchiefs were pulled up to cover the lower parts of their faces. Everything was masked except their eyes.

One of the men jerked his pistol out of its holster. "Let's get 'em, boys!" he shouted, firing into the air.

Whooping like savages, the four men charged down the hill toward Luke's herd. All of them had their pistols drawn now, and for a heart-stopping moment Rachel expected them to start firing at the sheep, or even at Luke. But that was clearly not their intent. As they fanned out, shrieking wildly and shooting into the air, she realized they meant to stampede the sheep and drive them over the ledge, as the Indians had once driven buffalo.

Their plan was working all too well. As panic swept through the herd, the frantically bleating sheep began to mill in circles. A ram wheeled and bolted in dumb terror toward the unseen ledge. Others followed, and suddenly the whole herd was plunging blindly through the scrub, headed for certain destruction.

Rachel had lost sight of Luke. Now, suddenly, she saw him, racing his buckskin horse full out along the rim of the ledge. One of the dogs dashed ahead of him. The other was already tearing along the forefront of the herd, lunging at the leaders, snapping and biting as it dodged their butting heads and flying hooves.

A man, a horse and two small dogs. Could they head off three hundred stampeding sheep and scores of lambs in time to save them? Rachel pressed forward between the rocks, almost forgetting to breathe as she strained to see what was happening.

The four masked men were keeping to the rear of the herd, aiming their shots well above the sheep. Clearly they had no wish to be recognized, nor to do anything that would force the hand of the law against them. In order to file any complaint, Luke would need proof that the stampede had not been an accident. A bullet in a sheep or dog would provide that proof. But the marauders knew better than to give him that advantage. As things stood, Luke would have nothing but his own word. And Rachel knew that would not be enough.

Not unless he could produce another reliable witness to the crime.

Catching the scent of fear, the lamb in Rachel's arms began to struggle and bleat. Rachel clasped the little creature close, stroking its quivering body and praying that the plaintive racket it made would not give her away. If the riders discovered her presence, any number of things could happen, all of them ugly.

The sheep were no more than a stone's throw from the precipice and still running full out. Rachel's heart crept into her throat as she watched Luke's frantic efforts to turn them aside. He was leaning forward, almost standing in the stirrups as his horse thundered along the top of the ledge. As he rode, he shouted and flailed the air with his hat. The dogs, saved only by their lightning quickness, darted like thrusting rapiers into the herd, snarling, nipping, retreating to attack another charging animal.

Despite her feelings about sheep and their owners, Rachel caught herself praying aloud. “Please, God...don’t let them go over. Let them turn...let them turn...”

On the brink of the ledge, Luke was running out of maneuvering room. With nowhere to go, he was pressing his mount into the forefront of the stampeding herd, risking horse and sheep and man. The terrified buckskin snorted, trying to rear above the milling herd while Luke fought to keep the animal under control. If the horse lost its footing, he would be swept over the precipice with the sheep. Even now, Rachel realized, his only chance of escape lay in plowing straight back through his own herd. But that would mean abandoning the sheep to their own destruction—something, she sensed, Luke would never do. She was watching a man fight for his dream. He would defend that dream with his life.

The dogs tore in and out among the sheep, snarling and biting in a frantic effort to head the leaders away from the precipice. Rachel swallowed a scream as the buckskin reared and staggered backward. The big gelding shrieked as one rear hoof slipped over the crumbling ledge. For a breathless instant, horse and rider teetered between life and death. Then, with a desperate lunge, they regained solid ground.

Spooked, perhaps, by the rearing horse, the sheep began to turn. The leaders swung hard to the right, and the rest followed, allowing the dogs to drive them away from the edge of the cliff. Like a woolly gray-white river, they flowed down the long slope of the hill toward the plain below.

Luke had paused to rest his gasping horse. His eyes glared across the distance as the four cowboys hung back, watching. For a moment Rachel feared they would fire at Luke or try to stampede the herd again, but it seemed they’d had their fill of mischief for the day.

“We’ll be back, sheep man!” the leader crowed at Luke. “Next time you won’t be so lucky!”

Luke kept his proud silence, refusing to give them the satisfaction of a reply. Rachel studied the defiant set of his shoulders, wondering how many times men like these had hurt and humiliated him. No wonder he hated cattlemen. No wonder he hated her.

Swearing and hooting with laughter, the cowboys holstered their guns, wheeled their mounts and cantered back up the hill. Only then did Rachel realize her own danger. The four riders were headed in a direction that would take them right past the rocks where she was hiding.

By now the lamb in her arms had begun to miss its mother. It squirmed and bleated in Rachel’s arms, butting its head against her breasts with a force that was so painful it made her wince. Rachel’s heart sank as she realized the little creature was hungry and looking for a place to nurse. The noise it was making had been lost amid the clamor of the stampede, but now that things had quieted down, its bleating was loud enough to lead the cowhands right to her.

She should let the miserable little creature go, she thought. But the herd was too far down the slope for the lamb to catch up easily. More than likely, the poor thing would be grabbed by one of the cowhands and end the day with its carcass roasting on a spit. Much as she disliked sheep, she could not wish such a cruel fate on this trusting, innocent baby.

But neither could she let the lamb give away her hiding place. By now, she had seen far too much for her own good; and even if the four cowhands recognized her and did her no harm, she had no wish to explain why Morgan Tolliver’s daughter was hiding out with a sheep man.

In desperation, Rachel thrust her finger into the lamb’s warm, wet mouth. The lamb smacked down eagerly and began to suck, its eyes closed, its tail switching like a metronome gone berserk.

Rachel allowed herself a long exhalation. All quiet for now. But the riders were galloping closer; and at any moment now, the lamb would discover there was no milk coming from her finger. Even a lamb should be smart enough to figure that out. When it did, it would start complaining again.

Wriggling deeper behind the rocks, she clutched the troublesome little creature against her chest, held her breath and waited.

The riders were coming up the hill, approaching fast. Rachel could hear the deep, chesty breathing of horses and the jingle of bridles. When she craned her neck at the right angle, she could

see the men through a narrow opening between the rocks. Their faces were still hidden by their neckerchiefs, but all four of them were lithe and slender, and they sat their horses with the careless ease of youth. Had harassing the sheep man been their own idea, she wondered, or had they been set on this errand by someone with more age and power and more to gain?

By now the riders were so near that she could have hit them with the toss of a pebble. The tallest and huskiest of the four was cursing their failure to drive the sheep over the ledge. “Told you we shoulda shot those damned dogs,” he growled. “That, or snuck in and poisoned the buggers first. That woulda fixed that sheep man’s wagon!”

The others, still masked, were silent. Their shadows, cast long by the low western sun, fell across the rocks where Rachel crouched with the lamb’s head cradled below her breasts. She remained perfectly, agonizingly motionless, scarcely daring to breathe as they reached the rocks, then turned their mounts aside to head up the hill.

The last rider to pass her hiding place was small and wiry, younger, perhaps, than the others. As he came into Rachel’s full view, one mahogany brown hand tugged at his bandana, pulling it down to reveal a lean, dark, familiar face.

Rachel stifled a cry as she realized she was looking up at one of her own brothers.

Chapter Four

By the time the riders crested the ridge, the lamb had given up on sucking Rachel's finger and burst into ravenous bleating. Its piercing baby cries echoed across the rain-soaked hillside, but if the four young men had heard, they paid no attention.

Numb with shock, Rachel stared after the defiant figure of her younger brother. Had it been Jacob or Josh? In their growing-up years, she'd never had any trouble telling the twins apart—Jacob had a cowlick in his ebony hair, and Josh had a dimple in his left cheek. This time she had felt no surge of recognition. But the boys would have grown older since her last sight of them, she reminded herself. And the glimpse of that youthful, unmasked face beneath the Stetson had been so brief, the expression on the sharp young features so hardened that the shock of it had left her breathless.

The lamb struggled free and scampered away, unheeded, as Rachel watched the riders vanish over the top of the hill. Only one of her brothers had been with them, she surmised. None of the other three had matched his wiry build. But she was hard put to imagine either of the gentle, lively boys she remembered taking part in something as brutal as the driving of three hundred sheep to their deaths.

Things had clearly changed in the time she had been away from the ranch. People, it seemed, had changed, too. It was as if she had suddenly awakened in a war zone, with land mines hidden all around her.

And right now, she was clearly on the wrong side.

"Rachel? Are you there?" Luke's voice, coming from below the rocks, startled her. Straining forward, she saw him striding toward her through the grass with the lamb clutched in his arms. The horse stood behind him, its sleek buff coat flecked with foam.

Legs quivering, Rachel rose to her feet. Relief flickered like passing sunlight across his leathery features; then his expression soured. "I thought maybe you'd taken off with your cowboy friends," he said.

"They're not my friends!" Rachel was not about to make matters worse by telling him that one of the marauders had been her brother. "But I must say I'm surprised to see you back here," she said, deliberately changing the subject. "I thought you might just ride off with your precious sheep and leave me to walk home by myself."

Luke's eyes narrowed. "I had to come back for the lamb," he said brusquely. "If you're coming with me, get down here and let's get moving. I have to get the sheep home before anything else goes wrong."

He turned away and strode to his horse without a backward glance, leaving Rachel to scramble down the rocks alone. By the time she reached the horse, he was already in the saddle, cradling the lamb across his lap. Without a word, he reached down, caught her arm and swung her none too gently up behind him. Rachel clambered across the buckskin's rump, feeling damp and sticky and cross. She had barely regained her seat when he kned the horse to a brisk trot. The sudden motion flung her off balance, throwing her to one side, so that she had to grab his waist to keep from sliding to the ground.

"Blast it, this isn't my fault!" she muttered, her face pressed against his sweat-soaked shirt. "Stop treating me as if I were to blame for your troubles!"

His body was like stone to the touch, his muscles tense, his spine rigid. His skin smelled of sage and leather and salty male perspiration. The odor teased at her senses, triggering an odd tingle where her knees pressed the backs of his legs. The sensation crept upward to pool at the joining of her thighs. Rachel stared past Luke's shoulder, struggling to fix her thoughts elsewhere.

"You're one of them," he said. "You told me as much the first time you opened that pretty mouth of yours. I didn't invite you to be here, Rachel Tolliver, and as far as I'm concerned, the sooner I'm rid of you the better."

“Well, at least we agree on something,” she said tartly. “How often do you get social calls like the one you had this afternoon?”

“Depends on what you call a social call.” His voice was flat, guarded. “This is the first time they’ve tried to run the sheep over a cliff. But having animals trapped, shot, even poisoned—that’s just business as usual.”

Rachel waited, expecting him to go on. Instead he gathered up the lamb, twisted in the saddle and thrust the squirming baby into her arms. “We’re wasting time,” he muttered, spurring the horse to a canter. “Hang on.”

At once the lamb, which had lain quietly across Luke’s knees, began to struggle and bleat. Rachel locked one arm around the wretched little creature, bracing it against her chest. Her other arm gripped Luke’s waist as she struggled to keep from bouncing off the horse’s slick rump. If she made it home safely, she vowed, she would never again have anything to do with these cursed sheep or with their sullen, arrogant, mule-headed owner. If Luke Vincente wanted to pit himself against the whole civilized world, that was his problem. She’d be damned if she was about to make it hers.

The sheep milled at the foot of the slope, under the brow of the ledge where they’d come so near to their death plunge. The tireless dogs darted along the fringes of the herd, lunging and yipping to keep their charges in line.

Sensing its kind, the lamb renewed its struggles, digging its sharp hooves into Rachel’s ribs and bleating like a miniature steam calliope. A fly settled on Rachel’s matted hair. She shook it away, her temper growing shorter by the second.

Luke had slowed the horse to a trot as they neared the herd, but Rachel was still bouncing behind the saddle, her buttocks miserably sore and her bladder threatening to burst. When the lamb’s hoof jabbed her breast hard enough to bruise, her last thread of patience snapped. “Enough!” she yelled. “Either we stop right here and let this little monster find its mother, or I start screaming loud enough to be heard across three counties!”

“Anything to please a lady.” Luke’s voice dripped sarcasm as he reined the horse to a halt. Shoving the wretched animal toward him, she slid off the back of the horse and dropped wearily to the ground. For a moment she glared up at him, scrambling for a comeback that would put him in his place. But nothing came to mind except the awareness that she was sore and miserable and badly in need of a bush.

“Wait right here, and keep your back turned.” Rachel spun away from the horse and, with as much dignity as she could muster, stalked off toward a clump of tall sage that grew at the foot of the slope. She had spent enough time on the range that going to the bushes in the open was nothing new. But something about this disturbing man’s presence made her burn with self-consciousness.

“Watch out for rattlesnakes,” he said. “They’re bad in these parts.”

Rachel ignored the remark, but her face blazed with heat as she ducked behind the sage. Growing up alongside brothers and cowboys had given her a natural ease with the male sex. At school, the boys had flocked around her, and she’d never wanted for escorts or dancing partners. In the past year alone, she’d rejected three proposals of marriage. Once she had fancied herself in love, but even for that brief time she had kept a cautious rein on her heart so that when the infatuation passed she was able to walk away without regret.

Always, in her relationships with men, Rachel had insisted on being the one in control. So why now, of all times, did she find herself hot and flustered and blushing like a schoolgirl? Luke Vincente was not one of her conquests. He was too old, too proud, with too many shadows lurking about his tall, dark person. Worse, he was a sheep man, with a hatred for her kind that ran bone-deep in both directions.

Why in heaven’s name hadn’t she called out to her brother as he rode past her hiding place? Surely she could have smoothed over the awkwardness, perhaps even lessened the tension by explaining how Luke had rescued her after the accident with the buggy.

If she had played her cards more sensibly, she might be headed for the ranch right now on the back of her brother's horse. Luke would be rid of her; she would be rid of him; everybody would be happier. So why hadn't she spoken?

But Rachel knew why. The horror she had witnessed, coupled with the shock of recognizing her adored brother, had left her mute.

As she gazed back toward the hilltop where the four riders had disappeared, a sense of pervading blackness crept over her. For months she had looked forward to home—to the grand sweep of mountain peaks and prairie sky and the smell of coffee on the crisp morning air; to friends and family, to sunny days filled with hard work and laughter and love. But home had changed, Rachel realized. And something told her it would never again be the carefree place she remembered.

Luke lowered the lamb to the ground, then stood back to watch as it tottered toward its anxious mother. A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips as it butted for her teat, clamped on and lost itself in the bliss of nursing. This one, at least, would be all right for now. But how many others would be maimed by those bloody snares? How many precious animals would he lose before the summer was over? This range war was not of his making. But each day of it was chipping away at his livelihood and slowly draining his spirit. He had never asked for anything except to be left alone. Even that simple wish, it appeared, was not to be granted.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Rachel had emerged from the sagebrush and was making her way down the slope toward him. Water and mud had plastered her clothes against her skin, outlining every delicious curve and hollow of her voluptuous little body. Her wind-tangled hair blazed like fire in the fading light. Filthy, disheveled and undoubtedly sore, Rachel Tolliver still walked as if the whole world were gathered at her feet, awaiting her pleasure.

For a long moment, Luke allowed his eyes to feast on her proud beauty. Then, still reluctant, he tore his gaze away. She was a cattleman's daughter. Worse, she was a rich cattleman's daughter, as strong-willed and demanding as she was beautiful. He would wager that the proper Miss Tolliver believed the sun, the moon and the stars revolved around her pretty little head, and that anything she wanted could be had by batting those lush golden eyelashes at the right man.

Luke knew about such women. He knew far more than he wanted to remember. Some things, in fact, he would give almost anything to forget.

The memory of Cynthia's luscious face and lying words came back to haunt him now, just as they had haunted him for the four years he had spent in the hellhole of the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

...I'm so frightened, Luke. The way he looks at me, the way he brushes against me...my own father! He's come after me before, and he'll do it again. You have to help me, Luke. Somehow you have to stop him... Then we can be together for the rest of our lives....

Lord, what a gullible fool he had been!

"Oh, will you look at that!" Rachel had come up alongside him. Her muddy hands clasped in delight as she watched the frantically nursing lamb. She had an infectious smile that crinkled her eyes at the corners, deepened the dimples in her cheeks and showed her small, pearl-like teeth. A smile like that could get a woman anything she wanted, he thought. Anything.

"Look at his tail go!" she exclaimed, laughing. "It's whipping around like a little windmill! How on earth did you manage to find his mother?"

"They found each other. I just hung on to the lamb and followed my ears." Luke kept his voice flat, resisting the temptation to return her smile. She was one of the enemy, he reminded himself. Worse, she was everything he had grown to despise in a woman. Even for this brief time, he could not let himself warm to her.

"Will he be able to walk the rest of the way with his mother?" she asked, still watching the lamb.

“He’s too weak for that. We’ll need to take him on the horse again. Sorry.” The last word came out sounding more like a barb than an apology. The truth was, the thought of pampered Rachel holding the muddy, squirming lamb in her arms gave him an odd feeling of pleasure.

“As long as you let him finish eating, that’s fine. Since he figured out that fingers don’t give milk, he’s been impossible!”

She arched like a languorous cat, reaching backward to massage her weary spine. The motion strained the buttons of her form-fitting jacket, pulling the fabric tightly against her breasts, outlining her taut nipples.

Luke stifled a groan and averted his eyes. The little minx knew exactly what she was doing, he told himself. To such a woman, seductive behavior would be an instinct, as natural as breathing. No matter that the only man in sight was one she would spit on under most circumstances—a man so far below her in class as to be unworthy of notice. She would enjoy arousing him, making him want her, then walking away with a toss of her fiery little head and leaving him with the devil’s own fire between his legs.

Well, let her do her worst, he thought. He would not give Miss Rachel Tolliver the satisfaction of knowing the effect she had on him. Soon their journey would be finished. He would give her a quick bite to eat, then send her off on old Henry, a horse that would return home as soon as she let it go. With luck, they would never cross paths again.

“How much longer?” She ended her stretch with a light shake of her shoulders. “I don’t like the look of those clouds.”

Luke followed her gaze to the west, where a bank of slate-colored clouds was spilling in over the Big Horns. He sighed, biting back a curse. He’d assumed the weather would stay clear. The last thing he’d counted on was a second storm moving in before nightfall. Anxious as he was to get rid of Rachel, he could hardly send her home in a downpour.

A scowl passed across his face as another thought struck him—one that suddenly made everything worse.

“What is it?” She was studying him, her expression so open and earnest that it caught Luke off guard.

“Your family,” he said. “What will they do if you don’t show up? They’re bound to be out looking for you.” He did not add that, from what he’d heard, any man caught trifling with Morgan Tolliver’s precious daughter would do well to make his peace with heaven.

Rachel did not answer his question. Her gaze flickered away from his, then dropped to her hands, as if she were weighing the consequences of lying to him.

“Rachel?”

Still she was silent. He stared at her for the space of a long breath, then exhaled with mixed relief as the truth sank home. “They’re not expecting you, are they?” he said. “You were driving that rented buggy home from Sheridan to surprise them. That’s why you chose to come with me instead of waiting by the wash. You’d have been stranded if you’d stayed.”

She looked up at him again, and he saw the flash of anxiety in her beautiful blue-green eyes. He was an untrusted stranger, and he had just discovered that no one would be searching for her or riding to her rescue. For better or for worse, she was at his mercy, and she knew it.

“Tell me I’m right, Rachel,” he said.

Her expression hardened. Only the white-knuckled clasp of her hands betrayed her. “You’re wrong,” she said. “If I’m not back at the ranch before dark, there’ll be two dozen armed men out looking for me, including my father and brothers. They won’t rest until they know I’m safe.”

The first glimpse of her vulnerability had moved him. Now it angered him. “Damn it, woman, what do you take me for?” he exploded. “Do you think I’d be crazy enough to touch one hair of your precious Tolliver head? Do you think I’d even want to?” He glowered at the sky, where the darkening

clouds mirrored his emotions. “If you’re so all-fired worried, why didn’t you take your chances back there, with those four cowboy friends of yours? You could be halfway home by now.”

Without waiting for an answer, Luke swung his gaze back toward her. She looked even more frayed than she had before, her eyes too large in a face that seemed too small and pale.

“Did you know them, Rachel?” he demanded, resolving to show her no mercy. “Is that why you didn’t show yourself?”

She glanced away, hesitating a second too long before she shook her head. “They were masked. I couldn’t see their faces. And I didn’t know what they’d do if they found me.”

“So you decided you’d be safer with a sheep man.” Luke made no effort to keep the edge from his voice. “Should I be flattered?”

“Stop it!” The worn thread of her patience snapped. “Can’t you understand that none of this mess is my doing? I’ve been away at school. Except for a few days at Christmas, I haven’t lived in Wyoming for almost three years!”

“That doesn’t change who you are, Rachel,” Luke said quietly.

Her head went up sharply, nostrils flaring like a blooded mare’s. “I’m proud of who I am,” she said. “I love my family and I love this land. But today...” The words trailed off as she studied the boiling clouds. “Today I feel as if I’ve wandered into somebody else’s nightmare and can’t find my way out.”

“And I’m your bogeyman.” He spoke without emotion.

She shook her head. “It’s not just you. It’s everything. I want to wake up. I want to open my eyes and find this place the same as it was three years ago, before you came here.”

“You’re saying I should leave so you can have your nice, peaceful life back.”

Either she’d missed the irony in his voice or she was choosing to ignore it. “My father would gladly buy you out, Luke. You could go somewhere else, with plenty of money to make a new start.”

“Just like that.” Luke would have laughed at her naiveté if he hadn’t been choking on his own fury. “You’ve never had to fight for anything in your pampered little life have you, Miss Rachel Tolliver? You can’t even imagine what it’s like to want something so much that you’d spill your own blood to get it, and to hold onto it.”

She raked her hair back from her face with restless fingers. “Maybe not,” she said in a taut voice. “But I know enough to recognize a stubborn fool when I see one.”

“And I know enough to recognize a woman who thinks she can rearrange the people around her like furniture, to suit her own pleasure. Anyone who’s spoiling her pretty view will be shown the door. Well, this time it’s not going to work.”

“Especially not with a man who’s bent on self-destruction!”

Without waiting for his response, she stalked down the slope to where the lamb had finished nursing and was tottering away from the ewe on uncertain legs. Bending down, Rachel caught the small creature around its chest and scooped it into her arms. As she turned back to face him, a ray of amber sunlight slanted through the clouds to touch her windblown hair. For an instant her face was haloed by living, moving flame. Luke was no artist, but if he could have taken brush to canvas he would have chosen to paint her exactly as he saw her now—as a rescuing angel with blazing hair and a wounded lamb cradled in her arms.

But Rachel Tolliver was no angel, he reminded himself. She was a willful, self-centered minx who demanded life on her own terms and gave no quarter to anyone else’s point of view. The sooner she was off his hands and back with her own kind, the better for them both.

The vision dissolved as she moved, striding back up the hill toward him. “Let’s go,” she said. “I’ve had enough rain for one day.”

Luke mounted and reached down for her. She passed him the lamb, then seized his free arm and allowed him to swing her up behind him. She was light and strong, like lifting a bird, he thought

as she scrambled into place on the horse's withers. Light and strong and tough. And while she'd been pushy and temperamental and annoying, not once had he heard her whine.

Passing her the lamb, he whistled to the dogs and urged the buckskin to a trot. Overhead the skies darkened and rumbled, showing a thin streak of red above the mountains, like a bed of glowing coals glimpsed through the grate of an iron stove. The sheep were moving fast now, driven by the pressing dogs and by a sense of urgency that seemed to hover in the air around them all. Luke felt it, too, and he pushed the animals harder. He had been away from the ranch too long. There was evil afoot, his instincts shrilled. He needed to get back home before it was too late.

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