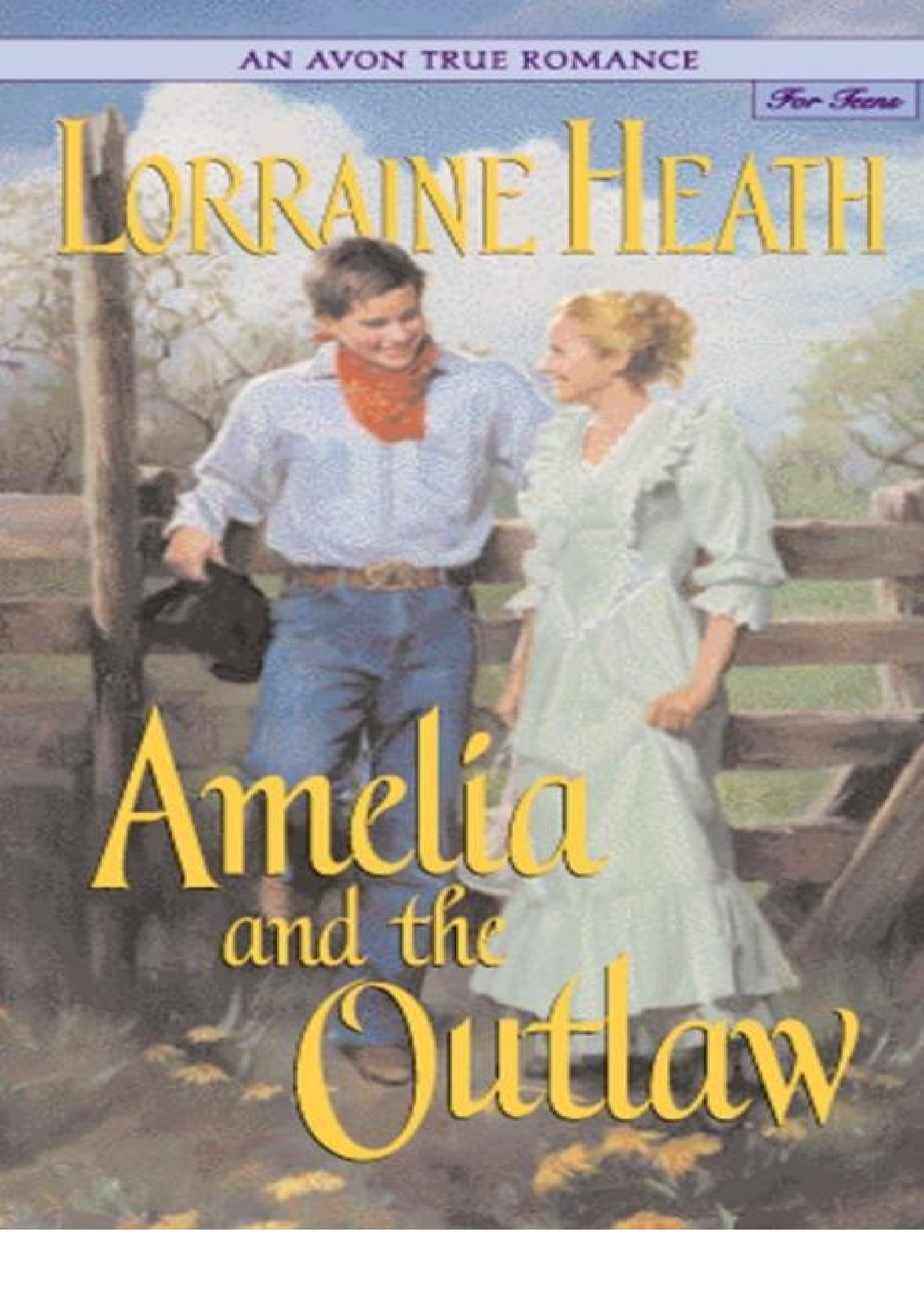


AN AVON TRUE ROMANCE

For Fans

LORRAINE HEATH

A man and a woman are walking together in a field. The man is on the left, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt, a red bandana around his neck, and blue jeans. He is holding a black hat. The woman is on the right, wearing a light blue, long-sleeved dress with ruffles. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background shows a wooden fence and trees under a blue sky.

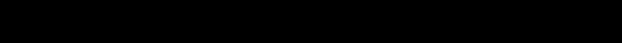
Amelia
and the
Outlaw

AN AVON TRUE ROMANCE

For Aunt

LORRAINE HEATH

Amelia
and the
Outlaw



AN AVON TRUE ROMANCE

AN AVON TRUE ROMANCE

 HarperCollins e-books

For Aunt Tack

with love

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Amelia told herself that anyone who committed a crime deserved harsh treatment. Still, this young man intrigued her. She wondered why he'd ridden with the notorious Nightriders gang.

Was it the excitement? The money? The danger?

Disrespect for the law?

Certainly only someone who held no respect for the law would dare break it. Although Jesse Lawton didn't appear to be disrespectful, she figured prison could beat respect into a mangy dog.

But another reason for his unexpected politeness at the depot nagged at her. Perhaps someone had made a mistake. Perhaps Jesse Lawton was truly innocent.

The outlaw sliced his gaze over to her, and trepidation slithered through her. He didn't look at all innocent.

He looked downright dangerous.

=

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Fort Worth, Texas

May 1881

The first thing Jesse Lawton noticed when the train pulled into the station was the girl standing on the platform.

She was the prettiest thing he'd seen in five years.

Her blond hair was tucked up neatly beneath a frilly bonnet decorated with ribbons and bows. The tips of her black leather shoes peeked out from beneath the hem of her spring-green dress.

He thought her eyes were blue, but he couldn't be certain—not from this distance, not peering through the dirty train window.

The girl jutted her bottom lip into a little pout that caused his insides to tighten. Her mouth reminded him of the plump strawberries he'd tasted at the beginning of a long-ago summer. He'd snatched them out of a garden that grew beside a house with gingham curtains fluttering in the windows and a white picket fence.

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He'd convinced himself the pain in his gut was a result of being hungry—not the longing for all the comforts the folks inside the house took for granted. He'd forced himself to gobble down the juicy berries and not think about soft beds or clean clothes or a warm bath.

The girl rocked back and forth on her heels, twirling her little green reticule as if she were waiting on somebody.

He couldn't take his eyes off her—which was a blessing. Looking at her prevented him from having to acknowledge the stares of the passengers making their way off the train. He kept his hands tucked between his thighs, so the shackles on his wrists weren't quite as visible.

But people noticed them anyway. He could tell when they did, because he'd hear them gasp or whisper harshly to their traveling companion that a criminal had been sitting in their midst.

“Hey, mister, are you an outlaw?” a boy suddenly asked loudly.

Flinching inwardly, Jesse focused his attention more intently on the girl. She was tapping her foot now, her growing impatience apparent.

“Run along, son,” the man sitting beside him said.

Jesse didn't know his name. His guard hadn't bothered with introductions when he'd slapped on the irons.

“Is he an outlaw?” the kid asked again, his excitement

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echoing around the small compartment. “Is he?”

“Used to be,” the man said. “Ain't no more. Now he's a prisoner of the state.”

Jesse felt as though he'd been a prisoner of the state for most of his life. His mother had left him on somebody's doorstep, wrapped in a tattered blanket with a note that simply said, *Please love him*.

No one had bothered to comply with her request.

He'd been passed around from person to person, never feeling as though anyone truly wanted him. At least not until he'd joined up with the Nightriders gang. Under the leadership of Sometimes-One-Eye Pete, for a time, at least, he'd thought he'd discovered where he belonged.

But the bungled bank robbery had found him sentenced to spend ten years at Huntsville Prison. He'd already survived five in that wretched hole. Now he had a chance to serve his remaining time beneath the blue Texas sky. He didn't intend to lose this opportunity—

no matter what the cost.

The guard stood. "Let's go, boy."

Jesse unfolded his body, moved into the aisle, and headed for the door. The guard trailed behind him with his rifle held at the ready in the crook of his arm. Jesse knew the man would just as soon shoot him as see him get off the train, so he kept his strides short, slow, nonthreatening.

He walked through the door and to the steps that led to the platform. Placing one hand on the railing

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forced him to put both there because of the way his hands were linked together. He climbed down carefully, awkwardly.

He didn't dare look for the pretty girl now. He prayed she'd moved on and wouldn't catch sight of him with the humiliating chains jangling between his wrists.

With the butt of his rifle, the guard shoved him forward. "Keep going. Judge Harper is standing right over there."

Even if the guard hadn't pointed him out, Jesse would have recognized Judge Harper. He'd lost track of the number of days that had passed since he'd been escorted to the warden's office, where he'd meet the judge for the first time.

Judge Harper had only recently replaced Judge Gray, better known as the Hanging judge—the man who had sentenced Jesse to ten years of hard time. Jesse hadn't been able to work up a spark of pity when word had traveled through the prison that the Hanging Judge had met his maker.

Judge Harper had been reviewing Judge Gray's records. Apparently the previous judge had kept detailed accounts on every criminal who'd appeared in his courtroom and every sentence he'd handed down.

"I don't like doubting my predecessor," Judge Harper had said, "but I think he might have been a bit harsh when he sentenced you."

A bit harsh? Jesse thought that was an understatement.

The man had been downright mean, with a steely glare that had made Jesse fear the Hanging Judge was going to live up to his reputation and sentence Jesse to dance in the wind from the nearest oak tree.

“I’m not willing to commute your sentence,” Judge Harper continued, “but I’m willing to let you serve out your time under less desolate conditions.”

So here Jesse was, his mouth suddenly as dry as a west Texas wind, walking toward the man who held his freedom in his hands. Judge Harper had looked imposing and ominous when he’d met with Jesse at Huntsville.

He was even more so now, standing on the platform in black trousers, a black jacket, and a black hat with his dark eyes roaming over Jesse, taking in every little detail of his existence. Jesse was nearly as tall as the judge, but held under his intense scrutiny, he felt remarkably smaller.

Judge Harper pressed his lips into a hard line of dis-approval, and Jesse figured he was going to be getting right back on the train and heading toward Huntsville before the sun set.

“Did he give you trouble?” Judge Harper asked.

“No, sir,” the guard said. “I just wasn’t willing to take any chances with a convict.”

Judge Harper narrowed his eyes, and Jesse wondered if the man was striving to search his soul.

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“Are you planning to cause any trouble?” Judge Harper asked.

“No, sir,” Jesse answered.

The judge nodded. “Get the shackles off him.”

“With all due respect, Judge, if he was to escape—”

“My boys will track him down,” Judge Harper interrupted.

Jesse noticed the two men standing on either side of the judge. With their dark hair and similar stances, they looked enough like Judge Harper that he figured they were his sons.

“And he’ll regret the day he was born,” Judge Harper finished.

Jesse didn't figure the judge or his sons could make him regret that day any more than he already did.

He cringed when the guard inserted the key into the lock and the grinding of metal echoed around him.

Anyone who hadn't noticed his chains before was sure to notice them now. He suspected the guard deliberately made as much commotion as possible.

As soon as the shackles fell away, Jesse dropped his arms to his sides, refusing to rub his aching wrists and give his guard any satisfaction from knowing the dis-comfort he'd caused. He fought to hold the judge's gaze when he desperately wanted to look away.

"Thanks, Thaddeus, you can go now," the judge said to the guard.

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"But if he escapes—"

"Are you going to try to escape?" Judge Harper asked.

"No, sir."

They had a deal, and although the judge had no reason to believe otherwise, Jesse had never broken his word.

Broken the law, yes, but never gone back on his word.

The judge nodded, and Jesse almost thought he saw a softening in those dark eyes. "That'll be all, Thaddeus."

"Yes, sir."

Leaning near Jesse, the guard whispered in a low voice, "Keep your nose clean, boy. You don't want to end up back in my prison."

If that wasn't the gosh-darned truth, Jesse didn't know what was. After the guard climbed back on the train, some of Jesse's tension eased away.

The judge gave Jesse another slow perusal before saying, "These are my sons. Robert and David."

Both men gave him a nod. Neither dared to lie and say he was pleased to meet Jesse. They appeared to be a little older than Jesse's nineteen years.

"We've got several things to discuss," Judge Harper said, "but we can do it back at the ranch. The wagon's over here. Amelia?"

At the click of approaching footsteps, Jesse turned his head . . . and there she was, the pretty girl he'd been staring at while he'd sat on the train. His stomach dropped clear down to his boots. She'd seen

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down the steps, heard the awful clang of his shackles, and had to know of his crimes.

“This is my daughter, Amelia,” the judge said.

Up close she was even lovelier than she’d appeared from a distance. Her eyes were green, not blue. Green like a patch of clover he’d once napped in.

He snatched his hat from his head and crushed the brim with his hands.

“Ma’am.” His voice sounded as though he hadn’t used it in at least a dozen years.

Her eyes twinkled and her lips curled up slightly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lawton.”

Unlike her brothers, she apparently had no qualms about stretching the truth, although he had a difficult time believing a voice as lyrical as hers could ever utter a lie. She was a dainty little thing, but she also gave off an air of confidence that came from knowing she belonged.

“I didn’t much like that guard,” she said. “He seemed mean-spirited.”

Jesse stared at her. He’d never heard anyone except fellow prisoners say something unflattering about a guard.

“It’s his job to be harsh,” David Harper said.

“Otherwise convicts would be escaping all over the place.”

“Papa’s harsh,” she said. “But he’s not mean. There’s a difference. Don’t you agree, Mr. Lawton?”

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Jesse couldn’t think of a single thing to say as she held his gaze.

“Cat got your tongue?” she asked.

“That’ll be enough now, Amelia,” Judge Harper said.

“You see,” she said. “Harsh but not mean.”

Her mouth blossomed into a smile that stole his breath as surely as he’d stolen money from a half dozen banks. He wanted to tuck that smile into his pocket so he could take it out and look at it from time to time.

The judge cleared his throat, and Jesse dropped his gaze to his well-worn boots. He figured if the judge thought he had an interest in his daughter, he'd put him right back on the train.

And that wouldn't do at all. The last place Jesse ever wanted to go again was prison.

As the wagon rumbled over the dirt road, Amelia Harper sat on the bench seat beside her father while her brothers huddled in the back with the outlaw.

The outlaw.

Jesse Lawton certainly didn't look like a criminal to her. His cheeks had actually flushed when he'd removed his hat upon being introduced to her. She'd never seen a man blush before, and she'd spent time around a lot of men: her father, her brothers, and all the cowboys who worked her father's ranch.

But it was the outlaw's blue eyes that had captured *10*

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and held her attention. Weary. As though he'd seen too much of life and didn't care to see much more.

"Papa, how old did you say Jesse was?" she asked quietly, hoping the squeaking of the wagon and the clip-clop of the horses' hooves would keep her voice from traveling to the outlaw's ears.

"Nineteen," her father said in an equally low voice.

"He looks older than Robert's twenty-four years,"

she said.

"He's had a hard life. Judge Gray didn't make it any easier." He looked askance at her. "You're not to flirt with him. He's not one of the cowhands you can wrap around your finger."

Jesse had furrows in his brow, as though he worried often. He had no laugh lines around his mouth to indicate he ever smiled. Although she could well imagine he had little to smile about.

"I simply wanted to reassure him that your bark is worse than your bite," she explained.

"Until I get a true measure of the young man," her father said quietly, "let's let him think my bite is something to worry about."

Most people did see her father as gruff and uncompromising. She knew it was just his way. But sometimes he could be downright intimidating.

She stared straight ahead, picturing in her mind her first impressions of the outlaw.

A M E L I A A N D T H E O U T L A W

Her brothers were dressed much as her father was: neatly pressed white shirt, black jacket, black string tie, and black trousers. They represented with no mistake exactly what they were: the successful sons of a successful man.

Jesse Lawton, on the other hand, looked as though he was a complete stranger to success.

His clothes were bedraggled, giving the impression that someone had scrounged them out of the bottom of an abandoned box. Amelia thought the state was supposed to provide released prisoners with new clothes, but then Jesse Lawton wasn't truly being set free.

His britches were worn, his boots even more so. His hat looked as though it had been stuffed into a trunk somewhere. It suddenly occurred to her that it probably had been. She didn't think they let prisoners hold on to their personal possessions.

His hair—the black of a moonless night—was in desperate need of trimming. She was surprised to discover she had a desire to cut it, and more, she wanted to take a razor to the bristles shadowing his face. But she didn't think either action would soften the ruggedness that seemed to be such a part of him.

Almost as tall as her father and Robert, a little taller than David, he had wide shoulders and a broad chest that spoke of hard labor. Yet he also possessed a wiriness that reminded her of a starving coyote she'd once seen *12*

A N A V O N T R U E R O M A N C E

attack the herd. His clothes fairly hung off his body as though no one had bothered to measure him before replacing his prison uniform with an outfit that would prevent him from standing out in the crowd.

Still, he had stood out. Not so much because of the awful shackles he'd been wearing, but because of the wariness that emanated from him. As though he didn't expect trust and wouldn't be disappointed he didn't receive it.

She imagined prison life wasn't easy.

As a matter of fact, its very harshness had haunted her father when he'd discovered that Judge Gray had sent a fourteen-year-old boy to prison. Two weeks ago her father called a family meeting to discuss his plan to put a convicted man within their midst—before he'd approached Jesse Lawton with his offer.

He could serve his remaining five years under the judge's supervision, working at his ranch. The labor would be as hard as or harder than the work he did in prison, but as long as he didn't cause trouble he'd have a semblance of freedom. In five years' time, he could go or stay. The choice would be his.

Amelia imagined he'd hightail it to the far corners of the state faster than a cat with its tail on fire. Not that she could blame him. She knew a little about not having freedom.

Ten days shy of seventeen, she thought she was old A M E L I A A N D T H E O U T L A W

enough to make her own decisions, but her father seldom agreed. Since her mother had passed away when Amelia was twelve, Amelia had no other parent to appeal to. Her father's words were the law of the family. Some principles he simply wouldn't compromise.

Amelia wanted to wear britches when she rode around the ranch. He insisted she wear a split skirt.

She wanted to read dime novels; he insisted she read Shakespeare.

She wanted a beau. He forbade her from having gentlemen callers until her birthday—as though ten more days made a world of difference between her being a girl and a young woman.

Sighing with frustration at the reminder of her limitations, Amelia shifted her gaze back toward her father.

She loved him dearly. She only wished he'd grant her as much freedom as he planned to give this outlaw. But her father was in the habit of laying down rules and having them obeyed unconditionally.

She'd overheard him tell the outlaw that they had things to discuss. She knew just what he'd say in his res-onant, booming voice: Don't do this and don't do that.

He'd used the same tone when he'd explained she was to never, ever put herself in a situation that would leave her alone with Jesse Lawton. She knew it was simply her father's way, to issue orders like some general command-ing troops. Probably a habit he'd developed during the 14

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War Between the States when he *had* commanded troops.

Still, she resented all the rules and the fact that she had to find ways around them in order to have any fun.

Finding a way around his order to steer clear of Jesse would be a real challenge. She understood her father's precaution regarding the outlaw. She truly did, but she'd never been around anyone who'd broken the law, anyone who'd been sent to prison. Jesse fascinated her as much as the law did.

While her father had been establishing his ranch, he'd also worked as a lawyer in Fort Worth. He'd watched the town change from a military outpost into one of the most prosperous and progressive cities in the state. Lawyers had benefited from its rapid growth.

Amelia had often listened to her father explaining various aspects of the law to her brothers. She'd even questioned him about some matters, wanting more information than he provided.

He'd answered her questions with an indulgent smile.

Then he'd say, "It's a shame you're not a boy. You have a sharp mind and more interest in the law than your brothers."

She didn't think it was a *shame* that she was a girl. She simply thought it was unfair that people thought girls should be interested only in taking care of a house, getting married, and raising children. Amelia was interested in so much more.

AMELIA AND THE OUTLAW

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She was contemplating becoming a lawyer. She'd even begun studying her father's law books.

She also welcomed the idea of perhaps following in her father's footsteps and eventually becoming a judge.

But she couldn't help but wonder if she had it within her to sentence a man to prison. To take away his freedom when she so valued hers.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jesse.

With one leg stretched out, he dangled a scarred wrist across the knee he'd raised.

She didn't want to think about the shackles he'd been wearing when he'd clambered off the train, or how many times before today he might have been forced to wear them. They'd sounded heavy when the guard had removed them. Heavy and uncomfortable.

She told herself that anyone who committed a crime deserved harsh treatment. Still, this young man intrigued her. She wondered why he'd ridden with the notorious Nightriders gang.

Was it the excitement? The money? The danger?

Disrespect for the law?

Certainly only someone who held no respect for the law would dare break it. Although Jesse Lawton didn't appear to be disrespectful, she figured prison could beat respect into a mangy dog.

But another reason for his unexpected politeness at the depot nagged at her. Perhaps someone had made a *16*

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mistake. Perhaps Jesse Lawton was truly innocent.

The outlaw sliced his gaze over to her, and trepidation slithered through her. He didn't look at all innocent.

He looked downright dangerous.

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CHAPTER TWO

Twilight was easing over the land by the time the judge pulled the wagon to a halt in front of a large brick house.

It stood two stories tall, larger than anything Jesse had ever seen. A huge porch supported by white columns welcomed visitors.

A man with hair the color of a muddy river sat on the porch. He slowly came to his feet as everyone climbed out of the wagon.

Jesse's feet hit the dirt path, sending up a plume of dust.

For a moment he stood mesmerized, watching as the judge helped his daughter. She placed her delicate hands on his shoulders while he wrapped his around her waist. He lifted her down as though she weighed no more than a wispy cloud.

Jesse had caught her watching him several times during the journey. Every time he'd given her a hard glare, expecting her to look away. Instead she'd defiantly held his gaze, tilting up that cute chin of hers until *he'd* finally looked away, embarrassed that she knew where he'd spent the last five years of his life.

The man who'd been sitting on the porch approached.

"Judge."

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The judge gave him a curt nod before turning to Jesse.

"Jesse, this is Tanner, my foreman."

The wind and sun had practically turned Tanner's face into leather, but his gray eyes held kindness. He stuck out his hand. "Welcome to the Lazy H, but you'll discover soon enough that we're anything but lazy around here."

Jesse wasn't exactly sure what to do. He'd seen the gesture a thousand times as he'd ridden through towns, whenever men on the boardwalk stopped to talk to those they knew. But he'd never placed his hand in another's.

He could feel Amelia watching him, studying him, as the seconds ticked by and his unease with the situation grew.

"The custom of shaking a hand in greeting was started during the medieval period," Amelia said softly, as though understanding his hesitation. "A knight extended his hand to show that he wasn't holding a weapon."

Jesse jerked his attention to her. "I don't have a gun."

"Of course you don't. I didn't mean that you did. I was just explaining—"

"An old wives' tale," David interrupted. "Just shake Tanner's hand."

With reluctance, Jesse wiped his sweating palm on his britches before taking Tanner's hand. Tanner gave Jesse's hand a quick shake and released his hold. Jesse didn't understand how that little action told a man that the other wasn't carrying a weapon. After all, a man had two hands.

AMELIA AND THE OUTLAW

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"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Amelia asked.

Before Jesse could answer, the judge said, "I think we've done all the talking out here that we need to do. Let's get up to the house."

Jesse was hoping that order didn't include him, but when everyone else started up the steps, leaving him rooted in the dust, he had a feeling it did. He was torn between going inside and staying where he was.

He'd never been inside a house that looked like this one.

Oh, for a while when he was small he'd lived with a widow who'd kept her house as clean as she'd kept him, scrubbing his body with the same brush she'd used for the floors.

But he'd never been inside a building that housed a family.

As uncomfortable as he felt about following them, he was equally curious and desperate to know what other people possessed.

"Jesse?"

Jesse jumped at the judge's insistent voice. The man waited in the doorway.

Jesse trudged up the steps and entered the house. The scent of flowers greeted him. He'd never been in a place that smelled like a field of wildflowers in spring. For the most part, when he'd stayed indoors before prison, he'd usually stayed in storage rooms or barns.

"We'll talk in my library," the judge said, indicating a room off to the side.

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Jesse followed him inside and came to an abrupt halt.

He'd never seen so many books in his entire life. They lined the shelves on two walls, from the floor to the ceiling. He wondered if the judge had read them all. He wondered even more how so many different stories could exist.

He shifted his attention to the judge's daughter. With her hands folded on her lap, she sat elegantly in a chair off to the side. Her gaze roamed over him in a leisurely fashion that caused the heat of embarrassment to build within him.

He'd never cared much about his appearance, but right now he felt as though every aspect of his person were sorely lacking. He watched her watching him, wondering if she would find anything about him that pleased her.

Wondering more why he cared whether she did or not.

She seemed completely at ease here, as though she knew she was safe, knew she would always be so. She'd probably never had a day of sadness in her life. Strangely, he didn't envy her that fact. Rather he was glad.

He wouldn't wish his life on his worst enemy.

The judge cleared his throat, and Jesse snapped his attention around to the man wearing a scowl of disapproval. Obviously showing any interest at all in the judge's daughter was not a good idea.

The judge sat in a large leather chair behind a massive mahogany desk, presiding over the room as he no doubt did his courtroom. His sons propped themselves on either corner of the desk, like sentinels who thought it was their

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job to protect their father. With his arms crossed over his chest, Tanner stood behind the judge and off to the side, close to the fireplace.

To the right of Tanner, nestled in a corner, was a large safe. Jesse had opened a half dozen like it in his time. It was too large and heavy to be moved—probably the reason Judge Harper didn't bother to hide it. Its contents were well protected unless a man had dynamite or sensitive fingertips and sharp hearing. Jesse possessed the latter.

"I may own this land," Judge Harper began, once again capturing Jesse's attention, "but Tanner runs things for me.

You'll take your orders from him. He's not going to cut you any slack. You disobey him once, and you'll find yourself back at Huntsville. Understand?"

So much for Jesse's hope that life here would be different from life in prison.

Still he answered, "Yes, sir."

"If my sons give you an order, you follow without question. Understand?"

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re to stay away from my daughter.” Judge Harper practically sliced Jesse in two with his gaze. “Understand?”

Jesse fought not to shift his gaze over to Amelia. “Yes, sir.”

Judge Harper sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“You’re free to move about the ranch as long as you let Tanner or my sons know where you’re going. You don’t tell 22

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them, and you’re back at Huntsville. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Try to escape and you’re back at Huntsville. You’ll notice I said ‘try,’ because I give you my word that my sons are fine trackers. Understand?”

Jesse was beginning to sound like an echo. “Yes, sir.”

“No drinking, no gambling, no fighting, no cussing.

Those are my rules. Break one of them, and you’re back at Huntsville. Understand?”

He decided he’d be lucky to last through the night.

Still, he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“All right, then, Tanner will take you to the bunkhouse and introduce you to the men. I have no tolerance for law-breakers. I’m giving you a chance here to prove that Judge Gray’s judgment regarding you was wrong. Don’t squander this opportunity to better your life.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tanner uncrossed his arms, stepped away from his exalted position behind the judge, and rounded the desk.

“Let’s go.”

Jesse wondered if he should say something to Judge Harper before leaving, but he couldn’t think of anything that might be appropriate. The man’s good intentions were welcome . . . even if they came with a lot of rules. But he couldn’t quite bring himself to thank the man. As far as Jesse was concerned, one judge wasn’t that much different from any other.

A M E L I A A N D T H E O U T L A W

So Jesse simply nodded and fell into step behind the foreman as he walked out of the room. He was eager to get away from the judge's sons, who'd been boring their gazes into him as though they'd wanted to drill clear into his soul.

And he definitely wanted to get away from the judge's daughter, because *not* looking at her was about the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

As they stepped onto the porch, Jesse took comfort in the dimming twilight. It signaled one less day he had to serve for his crimes.

He followed Tanner as he headed toward a wood-framed building in the distance, past the barn. Jesse cast a longing glance at the horses prancing within the nearby corral. With one of them beneath him, he could hightail it—

“You know any other words besides ‘yes, sir’?” Tanner asked, interrupting Jesse's thoughts of escape.

Jesse tore his gaze from the corral and focused it on the man walking beside him, walking as though he wasn't in any hurry to be anywhere.

“Yes, sir,” he responded dryly.

Prison had taught him to say as little as possible in order to survive. Never tell a man more than he needed to know. Never reveal what the world couldn't see on its own.

Tanner didn't break his stride while he looked at Jesse as though measuring him. “I know Judge Harper seems like a hard man, but he's risked a lot bringing you here. His 24

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reputation, his business, his family. He has a right to set down rules. Perhaps even an obligation to do so.”

Jesse was growing weary of the reminders that his freedom was only an illusion. They all worried about what it was costing the judge. No one seemed concerned with what it was costing him—to see all the things he'd never possessed. And never would.

He wasn't thinking about the fancy knickknacks that decorated the small tables or the pretty pictures hanging on the walls. He was thinking about the solidarity and familiarity that emanated from the folks in that room.

Everyone seemed secure in their place, knew where they belonged. Jesse couldn't imagine the satisfaction that might come from filling up the empty places in his soul with those emotions.

Tanner stopped short of the bunkhouse door. “I'll be honest with you, Jesse. A lot of the men aren't comfortable with the idea of having you around. You just steer clear of them, and I don't think we'll have any problems.”

Jesse narrowed his eyes. One more rule to follow.

“Me, I think every man deserves a second chance, but I’ll be watching you closely,” Tanner continued. “Like Judge Harper said, disobey one of his rules and you’ll find yourself back at Huntsville.”

Jesse heard a cacophony of sounds emanating from inside the bunkhouse: deep voices, laughter, the scraping of chairs over a floor, and footsteps. He didn’t much welcome A M E L I A A N D T H E O T L A W

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the prospect of facing a new bunch of strangers, but his whole life had been filled with nothing but strangers. He should have been accustomed to it by now, but his stomach knotted up, his mouth grew dry, and his palms got sweaty.

He swallowed hard and fought not to show his apprehension. “You gonna jaw all night or get on with this?”

A corner of Tanner’s mouth tilted up. “Reckon I’ll get on with it. If you have any problems, though, you come see me.”

Right. Jesse was certain that somewhere in both the judge’s and Tanner’s words resided the unspoken warning that if he complained he’d be back at Huntsville. He understood that fact without its being said directly.

Tanner opened the door and stepped inside. Jesse followed. A hush fell over the room. The fellas who were playing poker at a table no longer looked at the cards they held in their hands. Instead they narrowed their eyes and stared at Jesse.

Men who’d been lying in bunks slowly sat up as though to challenge him.

“This here’s Jesse, the new hand Judge Harper spoke to you about,” Tanner announced, his voice booming to the distant corners. “I don’t want any trouble, Jesse doesn’t want any trouble, and I guarantee the judge doesn’t want any. If you’ve got any problems with this situation, you come see me.”

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Tanner jerked his head to the side. “That’ll be your bed. Far corner, upper bunk.”

Jesse gave a curt nod before wending his way among tables, chairs, and outstretched legs. He met the gaze of every man who dared him to look away. He’d learned in prison never to show fear even if he was quaking in his boots. Survival depended on being the first one to set up defenses.

The fella sitting on the lower bed below Jesse’s slowly stood, his fists bunched at his sides, his eyes never straying from Jesse.

Ignoring him, Jesse planted his foot on the bottom bed and hoisted himself onto the bed up top. ~~Stretching out, he folded his arms beneath his head and stared at the knotholes in the ceiling.~~

He'd done a quick tally and counted ten double bunks, so he figured the ranch probably had close to twenty work-ers. He felt distrust and hatred emanating from each one of them. The hard truth hit him painfully.

Living here wasn't going to be much different from being in prison after all.

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CHAPTER THREE

"Amelia, stop picking at your food," her father ordered.

When in the world is he going to stop treating me like a child and allow me to do as I please? If I'm not in the mood to eat, why do I have to eat?

Turning her attention away from the slice of lamb resting on her plate that she'd been poking with her fork, Amelia met her father's gaze where he sat at the head of the table. Robert and David sat on either side of him. She had the dubious honor of sitting beside David.

"I can't seem to stop thinking about that outlaw,"

she admitted. She'd felt sorry for him, standing in front of her father as he'd listed the conditions under which Jesse could stay at the ranch.

"He won't hurt you," her father assured her.

"I'm not afraid of him," she said. At least, she didn't want to be afraid of him. "I was just wondering if it was really necessary to give him so many rules to follow."

"I simply didn't want any misunderstandings to arise," he stated flatly.

She didn't think there was much chance of that 27

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happening. Her father was a man governed by the law, but sometimes she thought he took his dedication to it to the extreme.

"Why do you think he did it?" Amelia asked. "Robbed the bank, I mean."

"A lazy man looking for easy money," Robert said.

"Only he wasn't a *man*," she pointed out. "He was still a boy, a child really."

“Fourteen is old enough to be considered a man,”

David said. “We’ve had cowboys who weren’t much older than that working for us when we’ve driven cattle north.”

She truly wasn’t interested in her brothers’ opinions.

They didn’t know any more about Jesse Lawton than she did. Her father, on the other hand, had read Judge Gray’s account of the case.

“Papa, why do you think he did it?” she repeated.

“I suspect Robert hit the nail on the head. The boy was looking for an easy way out.”

“Prison doesn’t seem like an easy way to me,” she told him.

“He didn’t plan on getting caught, Amelia,” David said, as though she didn’t possess a lick of sense.

Sometimes her brothers were an irritating nuisance.

Just because they were older didn’t mean they were smarter.

She moved her carrots from one side of her plate to the other. Watching Jesse get off the train, she’d felt a

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whole range of emotions. She’d originally been frightened at the sight of his shackles, thinking he must be dangerous if he had to be restrained.

But as she’d approached him and seen the loneliness in his eyes, she’d felt a strong urge to comfort him.

Until he’d given her a look from the back of the wagon that had reminded her of a hungry wolf. Strangely, rather than making her wary, he’d only served to pique her curiosity and to confuse her.

“I thought he’d look mean,” she murmured.

How did Jesse manage to look dangerous without appearing to be terrifying? She’d always associated fear with danger. But what she felt now wasn’t a scary sensation, but more of an exciting allure.

“Don’t be fooled, Amelia,” Robert said. “Judge Gray didn’t send him to prison without good reason.”

She gnawed on her lower lip. “If Papa believed that, he wouldn’t have brought Jesse here.” She turned to her father. “You think Judge Gray was wrong, don’t you?”

Her father sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t like second-guessing another judge. Jesse was involved in an armed bank robbery during a time when crime in Fort Worth was escalating. A man was shot. He didn’t die, but he came close. I suppose Judge Gray wanted to make an example of Jesse. I don’t fault

him for that. I just thought the sentence seemed a bit harsh for a fourteen-year-old.”

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“For all we know, maybe it wasn’t harsh enough,”

David said. “I just hope we don’t all come to regret your good intentions.”

Her father shoved his plate away, as though by doing so he could bring an end to the conversation. “Until we can get a good measure of the young man, I want you to watch him closely, but give him some slack.”

“He’ll just hang himself with it,” Robert said.

Her brothers usually weren’t negative, but then they normally didn’t have an outlaw walking among them.

“It’ll be his choice if he does,” her father said.

“What do you know about him?” Amelia asked.

“Other than the fact that he’s an outlaw, I mean.”

“Not much,” her father admitted. “Judge Gray wrote more about the crime than he did the offender.”

“Jesse seems polite enough,” she offered.

“I reckon prison can beat politeness into you,”

David said.

Amelia hated to admit she’d thought the same thing earlier. It wasn’t often she and David agreed on anything—except for their enjoyment of dime novels. He had so many books that she could always snatch one out of his bedroom without his noticing.

Her father shook his head slightly, furrowing his brow. “He was short on words, but polite when I visited him in prison. That’s the reason I decided it was safe to take a chance and let him serve out his time.”

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here.” He pointed his finger toward her. “But you, young lady, are to stay away from him.”

Amelia decided that task would be easier said than done. She was fascinated with the outlaw and his deep blue eyes that reflected a sadness she didn’t think she could even begin to imagine.

Since entering the bunkhouse, Jesse hadn’t spoken a single word to anyone, and no one had spoken to

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