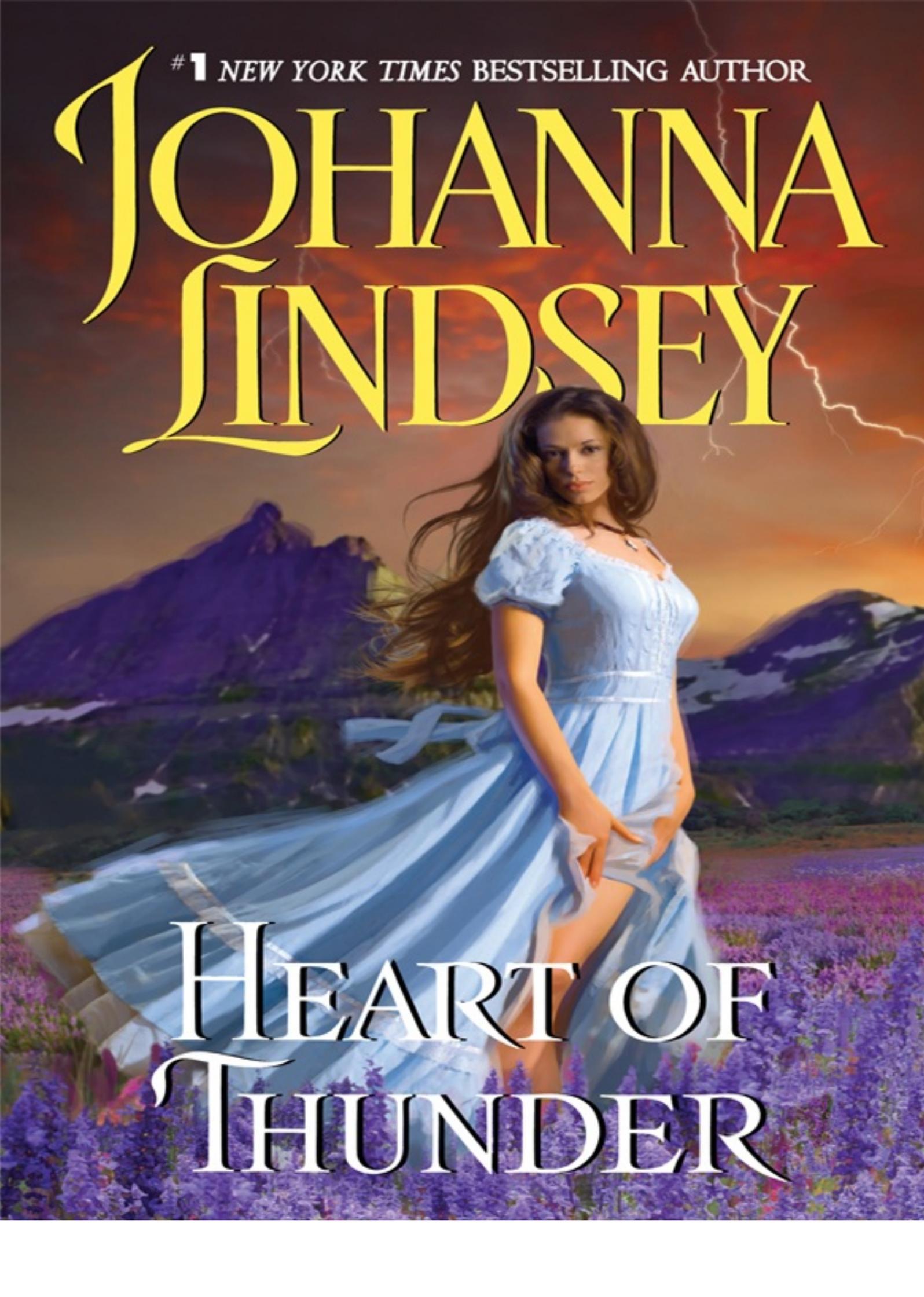


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHANNA LINDSEY



HEART OF
THUNDER

Johanna Lindsey

Heart of Thunder



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Chapter 1

February 8, 1870, Denver, Colorado

SAMANTHA stopped pacing as she caught sight of herself in the large oval mirror over the fireplace. She was standing across the room, far enough away from the mirror to see almost a full view of herself. Samantha's eyes glittered. She didn't see how provocative she looked in the stylish two-piece dark-green-taffeta suit trimmed with black velvet. All she could see was that her hair, which she had spent an hour arranging artfully, had fallen into complete disarray because of her furious pacing. Two of her silken auburn locks hung all the way to her slim waist.

Samantha gritted her teeth and stomped across the large hotel suite she was sharing with her friend, Jeannette Allston. Jeannette was not at home, but even if she had been, Samantha wouldn't have tried to hide her anger. Usually, she did keep her temper in check around the petite blonde girl, but just then she was too furious. *Furious*.

She halted her angry stride and stood directly in front of the oval mirror, hands on hips, glaring at herself. Large emerald eyes flashed back at her.

"See what you've done now, Samantha Blackstone Kingsley?" she hissed at the mirror. "You've gone and let him upset you again. Look at you! *Estúpida!*" She often cursed in Spanish because she knew it as well as she knew English.

Viciously she poked the loose curls back into place, not really caring anymore how she looked. Her green velvet hat would hide the coiffure anyway. She would put it on just before leaving. *If* she left. *If* Adrien ever got there to escort her to the restaurant.

An hour late—an hour! Her stomach growled with hunger, and that increased her fury. Why had she told Jeannette she would wait there for Jeannette's brother? She should have left with Jeannette. But, no, Samantha wanted the chance to be alone with Adrien. It seemed she was never alone with him.

She loved Adrien, she adored him, and how could she let him know it unless she could get him alone for just a little while? But Adrien was late. He was always late, and this time she was furious about it.

This one time she had had a chance to have Adrien all to herself, but he had spoiled it by being late, and he had put her in a temper because of it. When he came, *if* he came, she was just mad enough to let Adrien Allston know what she thought of him! The nerve!

Why had she chosen *him* to fall in love with? Sophisticated Adrien. Handsome—no, beautiful. He was simply beautiful. Not too tall, but so muscular, so virile looking.

He was going to be her husband. Of course, Adrien didn't know that yet. But Samantha had known it from the moment she met him, two years before. He was the man for her. And Samantha always got what she wanted. Ever since she had come to live with her father ten years before, when she was only nine, she had had everything her way. She was used to getting what she wanted.

And Samantha wanted Adrien. So she would get him, one way or another—if she didn't alienate him completely today.

She really had to calm down, because she couldn't afford to vent her anger on Adrien. He wouldn't expect it at all. She had always managed to be the sweet, gentle lady he thought she was. From the moment Jeannette had confessed that her brother couldn't tolerate emotional disturbances of

any kind, Samantha had never raised her voice in his presence. She was always calm, even demure. What an effort! She who was always so quick to fly into a rage, so temperamental.

Spoiled, her tutor had called her, spoiled and selfish and willful. But he didn't understand what she had gone through during her first nine years, living with her grandmother in England. So he didn't know that, once she had tasted freedom, she couldn't get enough of it. She was determined to forget the rigidity of those first nine years, determined to do whatever she wanted. And if she had to show a little temper at times to get her way, and if she was spoiled, what of it? She got her way. Always.

Maria, the Kingsleys' housekeeper, who was the closest thing to a mother Samantha had ever had, was more kind than the tutor. Maria called her *pequeña zorra*—little fox. "You are wily like *la zorra, niña*," Maria would scold whenever she saw that determined gleam in Samantha's eyes. And one day she had added, "You are wise enough to handle your papa, but someday you will meet a man you cannot handle. Then what will you do, *niña*?"

But Samantha had scoffed and replied confidently, "I will have nothing to do with a man I can't handle. Why should I? I'm not ever giving up my freedom."

That had been...how long ago? Nearly three years. Right before she went East to finishing school. But she still felt the same way. And she would be able to handle Adrien, she was sure of it. Sure enough to marry him.

But he didn't know about her plans. Why, Adrien hardly knew she was alive. It was a wound to her vanity, for if Samantha was anything, she was beautiful. It was her good fortune, yet she took it for granted and had never given it much thought—until recently. Because, for all her effort, for all her endeavoring to improve what the good Lord had given her, Adrien still didn't notice.

Hers was almost a classical beauty, and she had vivid coloring, hair that gleamed almost crimson in certain light, and eyes like the brightest of emeralds. A fine, slim figure. And remarkable features that demanded more than one look from anyone. But did Adrien look? He seemed to see right through her, to look, yet not to be looking at all. It was maddening.

Samantha's belly grumbled embarrassingly loudly and shook her out of her reverie. She glared at herself in the mirror once more and then suddenly, in a fit of temper, ripped out the pins she had taken such pains with and let the bright reddish-brown locks fall over her shoulders and back in an abundance of unruly waves and curls.

"That settles that," she said petulantly, spiting herself and her gnawing hunger. "Now I can't go even if you *do* show up, Adrien."

Too late, she realized she was hurting no one but herself. Adrien wouldn't care. In his typical emotionless way, he would serenely ignore the possibility that she might be angry because of his tardiness. Then again, he might not show up at all. The lunch hour was long past. Was Jeannette still waiting for them in the restaurant with the chatty widow they had met on the bumpy stagecoach ride from Cheyenne to Denver? Mrs. Bane had taken it upon herself to be the girls' unofficial chaperone. Or had Adrien gone straight to the restaurant because it was late? Had he just forgotten about their luncheon engagement?

"Damn him," she swore softly. She was alone, and no one would hear the shocking breach of etiquette. "If I didn't love him, I'd kill him."

The knock on the door startled her. Her eyes narrowed, then widened in dismay as she remembered what she had done to her hair. Oh, why couldn't he have come five minutes sooner, before she gave in to her temper?

"Go away, Adrien," Samantha called reluctantly. "I have decided to forgo lunch today." Would he be disappointed?

The knock sounded again, and she frowned as she started toward the door. "Didn't you hear me?" "Yeah, I heard you, Miss Kingsley, but why don't you open up anyway?"

Samantha stopped. It wasn't Adrien. She would recognize that voice anywhere, though. Tom... Tom... She couldn't remember his last name, but the man had been at the stage depot last week when they arrived. He had taken an instant liking to her—a disagreeable liking at that. The man was downright rude. He was ignorant, as well, for he had followed her around all week, talked to her whenever he could, and would not accept her hints that she was not interested in him.

He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. A young man, he was prospecting in Denver, trying to strike silver, like so many others. Gold had dwindled in the Pikes Peak region, but silver had only just been discovered the year before.

But Tom held no interest for her. In fact, he'd begun to frighten her, with the intimate way he spoke to her when no one else could hear, and the way his eyes roamed over her, as if he were trying to imagine what lay beneath her clothes and was doing a good job of imagining. But what disturbed her the most, what angered her, was that the man actually believed she was attracted to him despite her having gone out of her way to show him otherwise. The last time she had passed him in the hotel lobby, refusing even to glance his way, he had pulled her aside and warned her to stop playing hard to get! He had said he was running out of patience. She had been so shocked that she hadn't known what to say when Jeannette asked what was wrong.

And now he was at her door. *Why?*

He had the audacity to pound then, a loud and insistent pounding. "Come on now, Miss Kingsley, open up the door for me."

"Get away from my door, do you hear?" she ordered angrily. "I'm not going to open it, so just leave."

It was quiet for a moment, quiet enough to hear the doorknob turning. Samantha gasped. The nerve! Worse, the door was not locked. It opened slowly, and the tall young man stepped into the room. He grinned, quickly closing the door behind him.

Samantha was speechless—but only for a moment. "Are you crazy?" she demanded, her voice rising on each word. "Get out of my room!"

He just shook his head, amused. "I aim to stay, Missy, least till we've had a little talk."

She threw up her hands. "Lord, you *are* crazy." And then she drew herself up stiffly and attempted a calm approach. "Look, Mr.... whatever your—"

He cut her off with a narrowed look and said sharply, "Don't pretend. You know my name. Tom Peesley."

Samantha shrugged. She had never heard the name before, but she seemed to remember everything else he had ever said to her. It was because of him, and the way he stalked her, that she wouldn't leave the hotel alone. He was always in the lobby, always, as though waiting for her.

"I don't care. Can't you understand? Why won't you leave me alone?"

"I hear what you're sayin', Miss Kingsley, but I know better. When are you gonna stop pretendin'?"

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean," he growled. "You like me, but you gotta keep pretendin'."

Samantha held her tongue. Was he angry? So far he had been a very exasperating man, hardheaded, persistent, but not really threatening. Yet he was huge, tall, and brawny, with enormous arms and shoulders, hard-muscled from working in other men's mines when he wasn't looking for his own stake. She remembered him telling her about that, that and the reason he stayed in Denver. He liked the excitement of a large city, and Denver was large, almost Eastern in its prosperity. Unlike most towns that had started with the gold rush, Denver had survived, and the town continued to grow.

"Well, Missy?"

"What?"

“You didn’t answer me.” He ran a large hand through reddish-gold hair in a show of impatience and then pinned her with light brown eyes. “When are you gonna stop pretendin’ so we can get down to some serious courtin’? It’s time for some honest talk ’tween you and me.”

“You and me?” she snapped. “There *is* no you and me. Why can’t you get that through your head?”

“Stop it, woman!” he shouted. “I warned you this mornin’ that I was runnin’ out of patience. You either start actin’ more friendly, or I ain’t gonna be responsible for my temper.”

Samantha stared, aghast, but held her tongue. His outburst made her wary. He was such a large man. He made her feel much smaller than her five feet four inches. And she could well believe he was capable of violence. What chance would she have of defending herself against him? And what on earth had she ever done to make this man think she wanted to court?

He was glowering at her, waiting for her to answer him. She frowned. How could she get rid of him? Oh, Lord, why didn’t Adrien come? He could stop this.

“Mr. Peesley—Tom—why don’t we discuss this on the way down to the lobby?” Samantha smiled warmly, hoping he would not be suspicious of her sudden change in attitude. “You can escort me to the restaurant where my friend, Miss Allston, is waiting for me.”

But he shook his head stubbornly. “We’re stayin’ right here until we get this settled.”

His obstinacy infuriated her, and she forgot to be wary. “How can we settle anything when you won’t *listen*?” she asked heatedly. “The plain truth is that I don’t like you. In fact, you have pestered me so much that I’m actually beginning to *dislike* you intensely. Is that clear enough for you, Mr. Peesley?”

In two long strides he was towering over her. Samantha gasped as he grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Her head flew back, and she found herself staring up into his angry eyes.

“You’re lyin’,” he growled ominously, and shook her again. “I know you’re lyin’. Why?”

Tears stung her eyes. “Please. You’re hurting me.”

He didn’t loosen his hold. “It’s your own damn fault.”

He brought his face close to hers, and she thought he was going to kiss her. But he just looked into her eyes, shining then with tears. He seemed to be willing her to say what he wanted to hear.

Less harshly, he said, “Why can’t you admit you feel the same way I do? I knew you were for me the moment I saw you. I’ve had my women and left ’em. I never wanted to marry any until I saw you. Is that what you’ve been waitin’ to hear, that I want to marry you?”

“I…” She started to deny it, but thought better of her temper—and his. She pushed at him, struggling to get out of his grip, but he didn’t budge. “Let go of me!” she demanded.

“Not until you answer me.”

Samantha wanted to scream, to swear, but ladies didn’t swear. That had been drummed into her during the last few years. Ladies might swear in their minds, or, if they were alone and it was absolutely necessary, they could utter a mild curse. But never, ever in public. It was a pity, because Samantha had a few choice names for this oaf. She knew some pretty shocking words, words she had picked up from her father’s *vaqueros* on the ranch. They had spoken freely, unaware that the English miss was quickly learning Spanish.

Most of their words had meant nothing at her young age. Once she had asked Maria what a *puta* was, and Maria had slapped her. She hadn’t spoken to Maria for a week after that, and she never asked her the meaning of a word again.

Later, she went to an Eastern school, where the girls talked openly and descriptively about sex and men, when an adult was not around. They were quick to answer all her questions and not at all shocked—well, maybe only a little—by Samantha’s vocabulary of words forbidden to ladies.

This man was making it very difficult to remember that she was a lady. She would give anything

for a gun, she told herself. But her derringer, which was in her purse on the writing desk, would do no good. ~~With only one bullet, it was suitable for city travel, where a single shot would bring help.~~ No, she needed the gun in her bedroom—her six shooter.

“I’m waitin’, Missy, and I’m gettin’ damn tired of waitin’,” Tom growled.

Samantha took a deep breath to keep from shouting. “You want answers, then you give me one first. Whatever did I do to make you *assume* I cared for you?”

He frowned. “That’s a fool question.”

“Humor me.”

“What?”

“Just tell me!” Samantha said, exasperated.

“Well...you know. The moment you seen me you was all smiles, battin’ those pretty green eyes at me. You were the most beautiful gal I’d ever seen. I knew right then you were for me.”

Samantha sighed. Lord, she would never smile politely at another man again.

“Mr. Peesley, a smile does not necessarily indicate affection,” she said. “I smiled at everyone that day, simply because I was overjoyed not to have to look at another stagecoach for at least a few weeks. I was delighted that the journey was over. I smiled at *everyone*. Do you understand?”

“But your smile for me was special,” he protested doggedly. “I could tell.”

Damn. She would have to be blunt.

“I’m sorry,” she said tightly. “But you were mistaken, Mr. Peesley.”

“Call me Tom.”

“No, I won’t,” she snapped. “How can I make you understand? I have no wish to know you. I am in love with someone else, the man I came here with. Mr. Allston. *That* is who I am going to marry. *Now* will you let go of me and leave?”

Instead of being outraged, Tom Peesley laughed. “Now I know you’re lyin’. I’ve seen you with him. He pays more attention to his sister than he does to you.”

That hurt, for it was absolutely true. “That is none of your business. It is him I love.”

Her insistence was making him angry. “I’d kill him if I really believed that.”

And then, finally, came the kiss. Samantha was unprepared for the brutal assault. Crushed in his arms, she tasted her own blood where he bruised her lips against her teeth. The scream of outrage that tore from her was trapped in her throat.

And then he suddenly set her free, but for a moment she was too numb to realize it.

His tone was icy. “I can be a tender lover, or I can make you suffer. I almost killed a gal once who got me riled. And that’s what you’re doin’, Missy. You’re gettin’ me riled with your teasin’.”

She should have been frightened, but she wasn’t. She was furious. She had never been treated that way before, and she would not stand for it any longer. She slapped him, using enough force to send a lighter person flying across the room. It didn’t move Tom Peesley, but it did stun him. It was the last thing he had expected, and it left him standing there open-mouthed with shock as she whirled around and ran into her bedroom.

Samantha slammed the door. There was no lock, though, and she didn’t know whether Tom Peesley would give up or follow her. Dashing to her dresser, she dug through the top drawer for her revolver. In a moment, with the pearl-handled weapon gripped firmly in her right hand, she felt herself in control at long last.

She could use the gun. Oh, how she could use it. Manuel Ramirez had made certain of that. The oldest of her father’s *vaqueros*, and Maria’s husband, Manuel was stubborn—often reminding Samantha of herself. When, at twelve, she had insisted that she no longer needed an escort, that she could ride the range alone, no one had been able to persuade her otherwise—except Manuel. He had threatened to shoot her beautiful white mustang if she dared go out alone without first learning to

shoot. So she had learned to shoot, not only a handgun but a rifle, as well, and she became expert at both. ~~After that, no one worried when she took off for a whole day, or even spent the night on the range.~~ They knew she had all the protection she needed in her swift horse and the Colt she wore strapped to her hip.

Unfortunately for Tom Peesley, he had decided to follow Samantha. He opened the bedroom door, and his eyes widened at the sight of the Colt revolver pointed at his chest.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re gonna do with that, Missy?”

“Force you to leave.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it, Mr. Peesley,” she said very calmly. “In fact, I can swear to it.”

She grinned for the first time. She was in charge again, and it felt wonderful.

Only Tom Peesley didn’t know it yet. “I’m only gonna tell you once, gal. Put that gun down.”

She laughed, moving the gun playfully, flexing her wrist so that the barrel made several half-circles, drawing a wide target from his left shoulder, down his belly, up to his right shoulder, and back again. Her laughter echoed in the large room.

“I am quite a good shot.” Samantha’s eyes were bright with laughter. “After what you’ve put me through, I really would like to show you.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said with total confidence.

Her amusement faded. “Why not? I should shoot you for mauling me. Or for being in my room without an invitation. But I won’t. I’m going to advise you nicely just to leave. Of course...if you don’t *take* my advice, then I’m going to take a chunk of skin off your inner right thigh.”

Her matter-of-fact tone threw Tom Peesley into a rage, and he took a step toward her. But he got only as far as that one step before the gun exploded.

He bent to clutch at his inner right thigh, just inches from his groin. Blood squeezed through his fingers. The bullet had struck right where she said it would, going through him to imbed itself in the door. He stared at her in disbelief, then lifted his hand to stare at the blood.

“Do you need another demonstration before you leave?” Samantha asked softly.

Acrid smoke burned her eyes, but she held her gun steady, pointing it at Peesley. He hadn’t moved from his aggressive stance.

“Perhaps your left thigh now, only a little higher?” Samantha continued.

“You god damn—”

The weapon cracked again, and Tom howled with pain as the bullet tore the tender flesh high on his left thigh.

“Do you understand that I am quite serious, Mr. Peesley? I want you out of my room. And out of my life. Or would you rather bleed more first? Maybe you would like to keep one of my bullets as a memento? Say, in your right shoulder?”

He glared at her as blood poured down both his legs, spreading darkly over his light gray pants and down into his boots. She could see he burned to get his hands on her, and thought he would probably kill her if he did.

“I’m losing patience, Mr. Peesley,” she said coldly.

“I’m goin’,” he replied gruffly, and turned away. He left the bedroom, stopping at the door to the hallway. She followed him from a safe distance, the gun trained on his limping form. When he continued to stand in the doorway, she said, “Do I have to escort you out of the building?”

His back squared stubbornly as she spoke, and he swung around to face her. Bullet number three slammed into his right shoulder and threw him back against the door.

“Now!” Samantha shouted above the echo. Her eyes were running with tears from the smoke, and she was furious that he had made her go so far. “Go!”

He did. Finally he was ready to retreat. Samantha followed him down the hallway, oblivious to the commotion there. ~~Guests had gathered at the sounds of gunshots. She marched behind Peesley,~~ past the guests, to the back of the hotel. The back stairs were on the outside of the building. She waited impatiently for him to open the door, and while he fumbled with it, she got too close to him. As he started down the stairs, he swung his left arm backward and tried to knock her down. But before his fist could touch her, she put her fourth bullet through the thick muscles of his upper arm.

Though the rest of his face was contorted with pain, there was black rage in his eyes. His hand stretched out toward her, blood dripping on the wooden landing. There was no strength in the wounded arm, but the fingers still reached for her.

Samantha grimaced and stepped back. “You’re *loco!*” she gasped, her stomach turning at the sight of all the blood seeping from his arm, his shoulder, his legs. He stood there, a big ox who didn’t have sense enough to give up.

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” she whispered urgently. “All you had to do was *leave me alone*. Damn you! Will you go? Will you just go!” she pleaded.

But the stubborn fool took another step toward her and his outstretched fingers touched the front of her taffeta jacket. Her gun exploded once more, and she choked back a sob. The fifth bullet entered his shin. She didn’t know whether she had been able to miss the bone or not, her hands were trembling so by then. He stumbled backward, then lost his balance on the edge of the stairs and tumbled down the long flight.

Samantha stood at the top of the stairs and looked down at Tom Peesley as he landed in the dirt. She held her breath, waiting. Would he move? She didn’t want him dead. She had never killed anyone and she dreaded the notion.

He moved. He even managed to pull himself to his feet and stand up, wavering a little and staring up at her. He knew as well as she did that there was only one bullet left. Was he wondering whether he could stand another bullet? Would he follow her back into the hotel and try to kill her? She guessed what he was thinking.

“You fool!” she yelled down. “Don’t you know I could have killed you at any time? With only one bullet left, I will be forced to. This last bullet is for your heart. Don’t make me use it!”

He stood there for an eternity, debating. Finally he turned and limped away along the back of the buildings.

Samantha didn’t know how long she waited there after he was gone from sight. Though it was not cold, she began to tremble. At last she stepped back into the hallway, turning red when she saw all the people facing her at the end of the corridor. With a small cry of shame, she ran back to her suite, slamming the door on their curiosity.

She rushed into her bedroom and threw herself on the bed, pouring out her frustration. “Damn you, Tom Peesley. I hope you bleed to death!” she cried, completely forgetting that she didn’t really want him to die.

But Samantha would have been even more mortified had she known that a tall, dark stranger had witnessed the scene on the landing.

Chapter 2

THE hotel where Samantha Kingsley had her suite was in a new part of Denver, on the edge of the city, where constant expansion was the rule. At the front of the hotel was a street crowded with stores, several saloons, two restaurants, two smaller hotels, a meat market, a bank, and even one of the new theaters. But at the back of Samantha's hotel was open country, land still waiting for Denver to claim it.

Hank Chavez rode slowly toward the hotel from the south, hoping that the size of the building did not mean the rooms were expensive. He wanted to stay there rather than search farther for his lodging.

He had pulled up his mount under a cottonwood tree when he saw a man and a young woman step out onto the landing behind the hotel. In the bright afternoon light he could see that the man was bleeding. Wounded by the young lady holding the gun? It was hard to believe, yet Hank grimaced as the man reached for the woman and the gun was fired.

Hank stared in rapt fascination. The woman—no, she could be no more than a girl, seventeen or eighteen—was very lovely. A young girl, but she had a woman's body. Lovely hair floated down her back and shoulders, dark hair that shone fiery red in the sunlight.

Leaning forward, Hank rested his forearms on the pommel of his saddle and watched the scene. He would have given anything to know what they were saying, but he was too far away to hear. Soon the man fell down the stairs and then limped away. Hank's dark gray eyes flew back to the girl, staring at her intently, willing her to look his way so that he could see all of her face. Was she as lovely as she seemed?

But she did not turn toward him. And after a moment she was gone, back into the hotel, and as quickly as his desire to meet her had come to him, it was gone, as well. The lady with the gun. No, he did not want to meet her. He had important business here, perhaps even killing business, and no time for getting entangled with vixens.

It had taken months to get to Denver from Dallas, months of pushing himself, of getting lost, of backtracking, always avoiding towns where he might be tempted to rest. He might have caught up with Pat McClure, who had left Dallas only a few days before Hank had found he was gone. But after reading Pat's note, Hank had been so furious that he had wrecked his hotel room, proceeded to the nearest saloon, and wrecked that, too. Unable to pay for the damages, he had gone to jail for a month.

He might have got the money from Bradford Maitland. After all, Hank had once saved Maitland's life, and Maitland was rich. But Hank had been too proud to ask. Maitland had won the woman Hank had wanted, and while Hank had conceded graciously, there was still a resentment deep inside. After all, she was the only woman Hank had ever asked to share his life. But he had never really had a chance with Angela. When Hank had met her, she had already belonged to Maitland, body and soul. Of course, Maitland had been too pigheaded to know that. If only he had continued to be pigheaded, Hank thought again wistfully.

No, he would never ask Maitland to help him, or Angela, who had her own wealth. He had already taken money from her, actually taken it, when he had robbed the stagecoach she was traveling on.

That was how he had met Angela Sherrington. Hank hadn't been able to forget her, and he had gone to find her and give back half of what he had stolen from her. She had been furious of course—oh, such fury—until she saw the jewels he was returning. Later he had used the excuse of returning her money in order to seek her out again. But, by that time, Maitland had come.

Hank had asked Angela to go with him to Mexico. She had refused. She was a woman who would

love only one man in all her life, and that man was Bradford Maitland. Hank admired that. Yet he had waited in Dallas for her to change her mind, hoping Maitland's cruel treatment would kill her love. She was a woman well worth having, even if she had loved before. But when Maitland had come to her senses, Hank had known he had lost her forever.

His partner, Pat McClure, had joined him in Dallas, willing to go to Mexico with him to help Hank get back his family estates. But Pat had found a pretty little *señorita* and had moved into her adobe house on the outskirts of town, while Hank stayed at the hotel. So Hank had been unaware that Pat had left for Denver until he finally had gone to find him and the *señorita* had given him Pat's cryptic note, the note that told Hank nothing and everything. Hank could have killed Patrick McClure right then, no matter how close they had been. For Pat had taken not only his own money, but the money he had been holding for Hank, as well, the money meant to buy back Hank's family's *hacienda* in Mexico.

All Hank Chavez had lived for those many years was that dream. Since the day in '59 when a band of Juárez irregulars had come to the *hacienda* and massacred his family, Hank had dreamed of vengeance. The men were bandits, indulging in killing and pillage for profit, using the revolution as their cover.

The leader of this band had claimed the Chavez lands were church property, which everyone knew to be untrue. But that hadn't mattered. Since Juárez had declared that the church was to be stripped of its property because of its support of the conservatives, "church property" had been a ready excuse for plundering anything in Mexico.

Hank could never forget seeing *vaqueros* he had grown up with shot for resisting conscription into the army. Their wives and daughters had been raped. His grandmother had died from a heart attack after watching her son, Hank's father, killed for trying to bar the gang from their home.

There had been survivors. Though a few women had died fighting rape, most had survived, as had their children and the old men not useful to the army. Hank, seventeen, had survived, though many times later he had wished he had not.

After the horrors he had seen, he had been struck from behind and had woken up to find himself in the army, forced to serve or to die. He had been told that his lands were no longer his, that they would be sold to help the revolution.

All that had been in the name of revolution—but, hell, it had been all for private profit. And there had been nothing Hank could do. He couldn't even blame Juárez, blame the revolution, blame an oppressed people trying only to better themselves. He could do nothing except try to get back what was his.

For a year and a half, Hank had fought for the liberals, fought bitterly, unable to reach Juárez to demand justice and unable to escape. It had been a galling, bitter time, and he had become obsessed with getting his land back.

Two others of his family had survived, only because they had been away from home at the time of the attack. His grandfather, Don Victoriano, had taken Hank's sister Dorotea to Spain to meet the Vega side of the family, and they had stayed on when Don Victoriano became ill. Word had reached Hank that his grandfather was dying, and he had rebelled at being prevented from going to him. He had spent almost two years in prison because of that rebellion. While he was in that stinking prison, his grandfather had died and his home had been sold. He could not have hoped to buy it back, not even when he escaped from prison. He was poor.

No one knew his true name was Enrique Antonio de Vega y Chavez. The many *gringos* in prison had called him Hank.

After his escape, he had left Mexico. There was always the chance that he might have been hauled into the army again. He had worked in Texas until he had had enough money to get to Spain, t

his sister. But his sister was no longer in Spain. She had married an Englishman and was living in England. So Hank had gone to England. But Dorotea, who had her own family, did not really need Hank anymore. He had felt useless. And there had been that terrible desire to reclaim the family land. For that, he needed money, a lot of money, money he didn't have. He had returned to North America late in 1864. He had been educated very well in his youth, and there were many things he could do, but none would bring him the kind of money he needed.

Then he had met Patrick McClure and some other men who were making money easily. They were stealing it.

Becoming an outlaw had gone against everything he believed in, and he had compromised by robbing only people who could afford to lose a little. He would not steal from the miners in the Midwest, as Patrick and his gang had been doing, for those men worked hard for their gold and what they carried was usually all they had. Nor would he rob banks, which meant taking the savings of innocent people. But he had robbed the stagecoaches that crossed Texas. Passengers on stages did not carry all their money on them. It had been important to Hank that he not leave a man destitute. He had even returned money a few times, when someone convinced him that what he was taking was all he had.

His new profession had been profitable if not likable. Amassing money took a long time because a single stage did not produce a great deal and everything had been split with the other men. But after five years, much, much sooner than it would have taken otherwise, Hank had had enough to return to Mexico and buy back his land.

He ought to have been there now, his dream realized, he thought bitterly. Instead he had had to ride hundreds of miles to track down his partner. He could only pray that he wasn't too late, that Pat hadn't spent all his money. If he had, he'd kill Pat, so help him he would.

A quick word at the desk in the large lobby and Hank knew he'd have to find other lodgings. He had only ten dollars left, and that would not even give him one night in the fancy hotel.

He found a stable for his horse, then moved on down the street looking for a cheaper hotel or a boarding house. He hoped for a bath, too. His clothes were no longer black but brown, they were so covered with trail dust. And he needed to see a barber. He'd grown a full black beard in the last months, and his coal-black hair was several inches past his shoulders, making him look like a saddle bum.

Hank passed a barbershop, made note of its location, then moved on past a restaurant and an ice cream parlor. Then he saw the sign, MRS. HAUGE'S BOARDING HOUSE. On plain white paper tacked on the bottom was the word VACANCY. He got the room for a dollar a day or five by the week, taking it by the day. He wasn't planning to stay long. His saddlebags slung over his shoulder, he declined Mrs. Hauge's offer to show him to his room and just asked for directions.

It was a new two-story house, and his room was upstairs, at the end of a long hallway, on the right. As Hank moved down the hall, he found himself following a trail of blood, blood still wet. He heard voices coming from a room where the door stood open. The path of blood ended there at the door. As he drew nearer, the voices became distinct.

"I'm just glad your new house ain't finished yet, Doc, so you're still here. I don't think I could've made it any farther than this."

"Nonsense," came a crackly reply. "You've lost a lot of blood, but you aren't that bad off, Tom. Now lie still."

"How the hell can you say that? I'm dyin'."

"You are not dying," was the firm reply.

"Well, it sure feels like I am," the deeper voice grumbled. "I'm hurtin' all over."

"*That* I don't doubt."

Hank moved to the open doorway and peered inside. Tom was stretched out on a long, narrow table. A short, older fellow stood by his feet holding a knife. Neither man noticed Hank. He forgot his fatigue and watched as the Doc cut away Tom's pant leg and began examining one of the wounds.

"I've never seen anything like this, Tom. How did you get so shot up?"

"I tol' you, this fellow jumped me by Cherry Creek," Tom replied testily. "And don't ask me why again, 'cause I just don't know. He just kept firin' and firin', and I couldn't get out of his way in time. He was crazy."

The doctor shook his head as if he didn't believe a word. Hank wanted to laugh. He supposed Tom didn't want to admit the truth, and he sympathized.

"It's those two wounds between your legs that have me puzzled," the Doc continued thoughtfully. "They're mighty close to you-know-what."

"I *know* how close they are!" Tom snapped, his face reddening.

"I just don't understand. If your legs were closed, and a single bullet sliced between them, that would have been a strange shot. But the two wounds aren't from one shot. You were shot twice there. The wounds are identical, an inch of flesh out of both thighs. The fellow was an expert shot. For Christ's sake, Tom, were you just standing there letting him use you for target practice?"

"Will you stop yammering and get me fixed up?"

"I can only work so fast," the doctor grumbled. He moved alongside the table, studying each wound in turn. "That lower leg wound is as clean as the one in your arm. The shoulder is the only one I'll have to dig into."

"Yeah, she—he—said he'd leave me a bullet as a memento," Tom muttered.

The Doc raised a brow. "You said 'she.'"

"Did I?" Tom stammered. "Well...the guy had a woman with him. The green-eyed bitch enjoyed every minute of it!"

The doctor handed Tom a bottle of whiskey, shaking his head. "Enough talk. Drink some of that before I take the bullet out. You realize, don't you, that you won't be able to go back to the mines for some time? Neither arm is going to be much use to you for a while."

"Hell," Tom growled, and took a drink.

"I wouldn't complain. You count your blessings instead, Tom. It's remarkable, but not one of your wounds is really serious. No bone is shattered, not even in the shoulder. Out of five wounds, you've just got a lot of torn muscle and cartilage. You're damned lucky, young man. If that fellow was an excellent shot, then he didn't mean to do you any permanent damage." The doctor ran his eyes over the length of his patient. "I just don't understand it," he said softly.

Hank moved on to his room, still unnoticed. His curiosity was thoroughly aroused again, yet he knew that Tom would never admit to being shot five times by a slip of a girl. Ah, well, it wasn't Hank's business. And he was not fool enough to question the girl. He would ask no questions of a lady who could shoot so well—or so badly. And it might have been either one. Either she had aimed way off while trying to hurt Tom, or she'd been a superb shot. Hank shrugged. He'd probably never know which it was.

Chapter 3

SAMANTHA was still crying into her pillow when a deputy of the law knocked on her door. She wasn't at all prepared for Mr. Floyd Ruger, not in her emotional state. A man with a much-too-serious face, he threw one question after another at her without giving her a chance to think before she answered.

"Your name, Miss?"

"Samantha Blackstone Kingsley."

"That's an unusual middle name."

"Well, it was my mother's family name. I didn't even know my father's name until—"

"It doesn't matter," he interrupted. "Where are you from?"

"Back East."

"Where?"

"Is that any of your business?" Having been rebuffed, Samantha wasn't going to offer any more information.

Without batting an eye, Ruger repeated, "Where?"

She sighed. "I was attending school in Philadelphia, if you must know."

"Philadelphia is your home?"

"No. I only went to school there."

Ruger sighed pointedly in turn. "Your home is where, then?"

"Northern Mexico."

He raised a brow. "But you're not Mexican." He seemed startled.

"You noticed, did you?"

He ignored her sarcasm and asked, "Will you be staying in Denver?"

"No, Mr. Ruger, I'm just passing through on my way home," she replied impatiently. "And I don't see the need for all these questions."

Again he ignored her. "It's been reported that you shot a man. Is that true?"

Samantha's eyes narrowed. She had known what he was there for.

"I don't think I'll tell you."

Floyd Ruger gazed at her intently. "You don't think you'll tell me? Now see here, Miss Kingsley—"

"No, *you* see here!" she snapped. "I haven't committed any crime. And I'm in no mood to answer ridiculous questions. I would like it very much if you would leave, Mr. Ruger."

At that moment, Jeannette Allston walked into their suite, followed closely by Adrien. Jeannette had a look of concern about her, but Adrien simply looked shocked. Samantha had known he would be there.

It infuriated her, and she glared at him. "So! You finally decided to get here."

"They said downstairs that you have shot a man," Adrien said, incredulous. "Is this true?"

She could see Mr. Ruger watching her keenly. It was too much. It really was.

"I'll explain later," Samantha said stiffly to Adrien. "As for you, Mr. Ruger, I have no more answers. If the man I am supposed to have shot dies, then I will be happy to answer your questions."

"I insist on his name, Miss Kingsley, at the very least," Ruger returned.

"Who says I know him? Perhaps he was a stranger."

"Or a close friend," Ruger insinuated.

Samantha's eyes flashed emerald fire. "I don't shoot my friends, Mr. Ruger. If it will put an end to this, I will tell you that the man forced his way in here and wouldn't leave me alone. I was

protecting myself. I was all alone.”

“Protecting yourself by shooting him five times?”

“Five!” Adrien gasped and fell into a chair.

Samantha shouted at the deputy. “I’ve had enough! You have no business here. Good day!”

After Floyd Ruger left, there was utter silence. Samantha stared at Adrien. He seemed to be in shock. What kind of man was he to react that way? He was ridiculous. He should be comforting her, she thought, not sitting there looking like he needed comforting himself.

“Ah, *chérie*, what you must have gone through,” Jeannette said gently as she put her arm around Samantha and led her to the sofa.

Samantha thanked God for Jeannette. She and her brother were both decidedly French, though born in America. Their mother was French, and their American father had died when they were children. The father had left them comfortably well off. Their mother had not married again, so they had had no influence except hers. Perhaps Adrien had needed a man’s influence. Lord, he was acting like a faint-hearted woman.

“Did you really shoot someone five times?” Jeannette asked.

Samantha sighed. “Yes,” she answered simply.

“How terrible!”

“For him,” Samantha said bitterly.

“You are not upset?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was so furious. I still am. The man just wouldn’t *leave*, not even after I got my gun. I guess he didn’t think I would use it.”

“But after you shot him the first time, surely—”

Samantha laughed shortly, cutting her off. “You would think he’d have gone, wouldn’t you? But after that first shot he was mad, and he wanted to get his hands on me. He would have killed me if I had given him a chance.”

“*Mon Dieu!* So you were only protecting yourself, just as you said.”

“Yes. I finally got him out of the room and made sure he left the hotel by the back stairs. But even then he wouldn’t give up. He tried to knock me down, so I shot him again.”

“How could the man live after all that?” Adrien broke in suddenly.

“I didn’t mean to kill him, Adrien. I knew what I was doing. I gave him five harmless wounds.”

“Harmless? Harmless!” Adrien gasped. “You can talk so calmly of shooting a man! I thought I knew you. I have traveled across this country with you, but I do not know you.”

Samantha was enraged. “What was I supposed to do, let him hurt me? He had already attacked me before I finally got hold of my gun. And he *was* able to walk away. He will live, I’m sure of that. And I would like to point out that none of this would have happened if *you* had got here when *you* were supposed to. Where were you, Adrien? Did you forget we had a luncheon engagement?”

Adrien nodded his head. She had deftly turned the tables on him. But Samantha got no satisfaction from his weak answer.

“I did forget.”

“Oh, Adrien, how could you?” Jeannette said the very words Samantha had been about to say, though Samantha’s tone wouldn’t have held mere disappointment.

“Do not look at me so, Jean,” Adrien replied with a little more gumption, his shock lessening. “I simply forgot. I made an important decision this morning and acted on it promptly. I only just finished.”

“Only just finished what?” Jeannette asked with sudden surprise.

“Buying supplies,” he said almost defensively. “I am going to Elizabethtown.”

Samantha frowned. She hadn’t expected Adrien to leave Denver. She had assumed she would

have at least another month in Denver to work on him. In a month she would leave for Santa Fe to meet her escort from the *hacienda*.

“Elizabethtown? Why?” asked Jeannette.

“To find gold, of course.”

The girls gasped. Jeannette spoke first. “But why, Adrien? You came here to open a law office.”

“Others are getting rich here, Jean. I never dreamed what it would be like,” Adrien replied, excited now. “We shall be rich, too, and own one of those fine mansions like the wealthy miners are building.”

Samantha laughed suddenly as the realization struck her. “He’s got gold fever!”

Jeannette looked from Samantha to her brother, thoroughly bewildered. “But why go all the way to Elizabethtown? There is silver here—tons of it, if the reports are true.”

“I agree, Adrien,” Samantha added soberly. “You could stake a claim right here. There’s no need to go running off to New Mexico. Haven’t you heard of the Indian trouble they’re having there?”

“Ah, that is nothing.” Adrien waved a dismissal.

“You’ve never seen an Apache, Adrien. You don’t know what you’re saying if you can scoff at the danger of fighting Indians.”

“That is beside the point. If I could mine silver here, I would. But I cannot do that until I can afford to buy equipment for reducing ore. Panning for gold is much easier.”

“Oh, Lord.” Samantha sighed in disgust. “You’re going to pan for gold there in order to come back here and mine silver? That’s ridiculous, Adrien.”

“I have made my decision,” Adrien replied stubbornly. “And it is not ridiculous. I am not the only one who cannot afford the equipment it takes to mine the silver. There are many others going to Elizabethtown. Gold can be picked up off the ground. Silver must be refined. I have bought a very good mine already. I need only a smelter.”

“You bought a mine!” Jeannette cried in growing alarm. “What did it cost?”

He shrugged. “It was very reasonable, since the owner was faced with the same problem as I—no smelter.”

“How much?”

“Only a few hundred.”

“Adrien!” she gasped. “We could not afford to spend a few hundred!”

“We could not afford to let this opportunity go by. In a year we will be able to afford anything.”

Samantha was embarrassed. She had thought the Allstons did not have to worry about money, as she did not.

“How much would it cost for this device to process the silver?” Samantha offered.

Adrien turned to her hopefully, but Jeannette snapped, “We are not reduced to borrowing, Adrien. If you must do this thing, you will do it yourself.”

“I was thinking of it as an investment,” Samantha said quickly. “Not as a loan.”

Adrien shook his head. “Thank you, Samantha, but no. Little Jean is right. We must do this ourselves.”

“Very well. When did you plan to leave? We might as well all go together, since I must go south anyway.”

“The day after tomorrow,” he said readily, glad that Jeannette had made no further fuss. “We wait only for the stage.”

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